

"The Ties That Bind"

Chapter 1

A communiqué from Bajor in the middle of the night wasn't unheard of, especially recently, but having Minister Jolorn Ramee at the other end was unexpected. Hearing what he had to say was even more so. Kira stared at the viewscreen, blinking, almost convinced she'd misheard his words.

"The Cardassians want to set up an embassy on Bajor?" she asked in disbelief, pushing sleep-tousled auburn hair back from her forehead. "Is this really a good time? The demonstrations last week in Ilvia were too well timed to be coincidence. I would think we should wait until things are a little more settled—"

"Actually, the embassy will not be on Bajor itself." His tongue flicked out to lick his upper lip. "We're going to set it on the station."

"What?" She shook herself. "Minister, you mean to tell me the Council of Ministers has decided to put a Cardassian embassy here on Deep Space Nine?"

The defense minister shifted. "That's correct. With First Minister Shakaar's hearty support."

"But...."

"Colonel, this is an honor, and it will be the beginning of a larger, more prestigious role for the station, and incidentally for you, in Bajoran involvement not just with the rest of the sector, but with the anticipated expansion into the Gamma Quadrant."

"But ... for the good of Bajor ... wouldn't it be more appropriate to have the embassy on Bajor itself?" Kira found herself stuttering, trying to contain her irritation and edge of panic. Her brain still felt fuzzy from being wakened; was he not hearing her? "Where the ministers would have more direct contact with the ambassador and ... the ambassador have more with them?"

"With more trade and political contacts in the Gamma Quadrant over the coming years, I fully expect the Cardassians will want an ambassador closer to the Celes ... to the Wormhole," Jolorn countered.

"Closer to.... Minister, we're still the front line if anything else comes through the Wormhole — that's why we're building the relay station on the other side!" Kira scrambled. "We can't be sure it'll be safe here, not for an official embassy!"

Minister Jolorn scowled back at her. "We can't guarantee the safety of a Cardassian embassy on Bajor," he reluctantly admitted.

"You can't guarantee.... Then how do you expect me to?" she shot back. She was wide-awake now.

"You've got Starfleet security personnel there. People who are used to dealing with beings from other planets, even enemies. People who don't have the intimate personal background with Cardassians. And according to Vedek Ungtae," the minister continued darkly, "we won't have to worry about your security chief's beliefs getting in the way of protecting a Cardassian ambassador."

"Some of our Federation personnel have plenty of personal history with the Cardassians! And just because the constable ... because her faith isn't ... strong, doesn't mean she's not Bajoran, or that she's forgotten what the Cardassians did to us! And Ungtae's opinion may not have the greatest authority anymore! Minister, just think of all the refugee traffic we're still handling here—"

"Kira—"

A week of stress found an outlet. "Minister, the Emissary once told me the Federation had created a form of

paradise, and you can have saints in paradise, but that's not what we have here. And when people lose paradise—"

"What has that to do with having a Cardassian ambassador on the station?" he interrupted impatiently.

"The Dominion War ended the illusion of paradise for a lot of people in the Federation, as well as in their colony worlds along the border. And many of these people see their personal tragedies and current situation as Cardassia's fault! They *do* see it as personal! As many of our people do! And they're not saints," she railed. "What's going to happen when they hear this? They're tired, they're angry, they've lost everything they had, they're still dealing with the aftereffects of the war and with rebuilding. They're the ones who—"

"Colonel," he interrupted again, "you know what's been happening on Bajor—"

"Oh, I do!" she interrupted in return. "I know the vedeks can't stop arguing long enough to elect a new kai. I know the ministers are too busy elbowing for position to notice our people are fragmenting back into our ethnic identities. I know military units are demonstrating more loyalty to individual officers and regions than to Bajor. I know there are isolationists who'd just as soon kick every non-Bajoran — and every Bajoran who doesn't honor the Prophets in the way they think best — out of our entire system and shut down the Wormhole again. I know there have been demonstrations, riots, vandalism and violence against ministers and public buildings — even against members of religious orders. I know Shakaar's been—"

"You didn't raise these arguments against that Ferengi government in exile there!"

"That's not the same, we don't have the history, and Rom's wife is Bajoran!"

"Kira!" Jolorn cut her off sharply. Then his shoulders sagged, and he continued bluntly. "Colonel, you may be the only Bajoran officer who can make this work."

She was taken aback. "What?"

"The First Minister was clear with me." His voice unexpectedly turned entreating. "You worked with the Emissary. You can invoke his name and our people will still listen. You haven't been tainted by the politics or ideologies here over the last year. Our people know nobody here owns you. They know you played a role in the liberation of Bajor, twice, in driving out the Cardassians and the Dominion. They know you were the one who dared to rescue Li Nalas. They know your role in ending the Dominion war by going down the throat of the enemy on Cardassia itself. Nobody has grounds to doubt your beliefs or your loyalty. Many believe you have been touched by the Prophets — if any could speak for them, it would be you."

"Not you, too!" she cut in, exasperated.

"You know things are ... unsettled here. And there are rumors it's going to get worse." Jolorn took a deep breath. "It's been decided. The embassy will be on the station. Kira, you have to make it work. Or the isolationists may win. And Bajor will lose."

"I have to go, Colonel. Good night."

"But Minister—"

The screen darkened as he cut the link.

The weight of a world — her world — fell on Kira's shoulders.

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Lt. Kaoron paced slowly around the clear, force-shielded container with precise steps, each stride precisely seventy-six centimeters from heel to heel.

"Commander," he began thoughtfully, "I note...." Kaoron paused, and glanced around the lab. He was alone. "Commander Alden?"

One slanted eyebrow raised, he returned to his seat before the computer console and resumed his study of the debris. Alden had a disconcerting way of disappearing and reappearing at times. No doubt he would return with as little fanfare as he had vanished. And in the meantime—

A rich contralto interrupted his thoughts. "Kaoron."

"Dr. Alex," he acknowledged, preoccupied.

The statuesque human joined him at the console. "I expected you would be enjoying our visitors with everyone else. Have you seen Syrlynor's work? It's simply exquisite!"

"I am familiar with his work, though I find it somewhat lacking in ... spirit," Kaoron acknowledged. "But I have been finding it very useful to continue my studies of the debris we salvaged from the *Xhosa* attack and the Orion Syndicate vessel."

"I thought Federation security had taken the Syndicate vessel."

"They have," he acknowledged. "However, we still have copies of the engineering and computer data from our preliminary work with it."

"Mmm. Have you confirmed the origin of the salvaged ship?"

"The ship itself, no. The alloys we've identified are used for ship construction in this sector by a number of races, at times including the Breen, but they are more commonly used by the Cardassians, the Klingons, and several mercenaries and independent coalitions. However, we can be certain of some of the occupants...." He gestured at his console.

Monrow frowned intently, leaning in to review the results more closely. "Breen. Exactly as we suspected. From the organic residue, if our information on Breen biochemistry is accurate, it appears we have DNA from at least six different individuals."

"Yes. Although that in itself does not confirm who was in command of the vessel, or its purpose. Of additional interest, there is also Bajoran DNA among the organic residue, from two or perhaps three individuals," he noted.

"Bajoran? Are you certain — never mind, silly question. Of course you're certain," she interrupted herself, tracing rows of data with her finger. "Hmm. Yes, definitely Bajoran DNA, and three different sets, in my estimation." She glanced at the science officer. "Anything else you've figured out?"

"Not yet. Without more information or ship designs, we would merely be speculating. And unfortunately, purely from the available data, we can't determine if the Bajorans were crew, passengers, or prisoners. The same question cannot be answered with certainty about the Breen, although thus far we have not isolated any other species among the organic traces in the debris."

Monrow's expression grew more somber. "Prisoners.... From what we saw, it didn't seem as though whoever-it-was intended to take prisoners from Captain Yates' ship."

Kaoron shrugged. "Unless we can reconstruct some of their ship's computer databanks or logs, we will not be able to determine their plans for the *Xhosa* crew."

"I suppose. Did the Klingons provide any additional information from the vessels in the Dozaria system?"

His expression was somewhat frustrated. "It is my understanding there was not much left to study by the time the Klingons had finished ... target practice."

"Mmm, yes, that sounds like—"

Chirp.

"Kaoron here," the science officer replied, just a hint of annoyance in his tones at being interrupted.

"*You are due in Ops in twenty minutes,*" stated a brisk computer voice, oblivious to his tone.

"Thank you," he replied automatically, then looked to the doctor. "It appears we must cut our discussion short."

"You programmed your combadge to remind you when it's time to go on duty?" Monrow questioned, amused.

He nodded slowly. "I have a tendency to become absorbed in my activities and lose track of time. Programming a reminder into my combadge seemed as reasonable as programming a wake-up call in my quarters." He glanced at the shards of metal, ceramics, and bits of less-certain composition. "If Commander Alden returns, please inform him I will return at the end of my shift."

Monrow's expression turned wry. "I'm afraid Alden turns into the invisible man when I'm around, but if I see him, I'll let him know. If you like, I can run some biochemical analyses and DNA comparison tests for you, see if we can isolate any more information. If we're incredibly lucky, maybe we can even learn if any of the Bajoran remains correspond to anyone in our data banks."

"That would be useful. It may help determine if they were captives or crew. And perhaps give answers to the families of missing persons."

"No problem. I'll see you later, then — I definitely want to hear more about this." She waved at the debris in the containment field. "And on a more personal note, I'd like your thoughts on the work of some of our visitors!"

"Until then, Alex." Kaoron left the lab.

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Freshened by a shower and physically revived by the caffeine and sweetener of a double raktajino, but still mentally tired, Kira left her quarters, deep in thought. An embassy on Deep Space Nine. A *Cardassian* embassy.

Focused on the workability and logistics of a Cardassian embassy on the station, Kira found herself at Quark's. She debated with herself whether to eat breakfast, or just start the day by drinking a very early lunch, then began wondering why she had come there at all.

Someone seemed determined to take the decision out of her hands. A glass slid in front of her. Inside the glass, a layer of some green liquid floated atop a deeper layer of something pale orange and bubbly; the orange bubbles drifted up through the viscous green and popped at the surface with a small fizz and a whiff of ginger.

She looked up to see Quark standing beside her table, empty tray in hand, looked rather self-satisfied.

"You look like you could use this," he said.

"Is this alcoholic?"

"As a matter of fact—"

"Do you know what time it is?" she demanded.

His toothy grin widened. "It's never too early for this."

Kira looked into the glass again, then back at the Ferengi. "What is it?"

He shrugged, unable to keep the pride from his expression. "A little something I concocted especially for you."

"Oh?"

"Well, I *am* a bartender!" he reminded her. He gestured at the glass. "I've been waiting for the opportunity to give it to you. I haven't decided what to name it yet. Thought you might have some ideas. After you taste it."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Hi, Quark, hi, Nerys!"

"Ezri!" they both greeted the Trill counselor.

A look from Kira told Quark she didn't want him hovering.

"All right, I'm leaving! Maybe you can get that scowl off her face," Quark muttered at Dax as he passed, glancing back over his shoulder at the colonel.

"I'll do what I can," she murmured back. Taking a seat, Dax asked, "What's wrong?"

"If you tell me you already know Shakaar wants to put a Cardassian embassy on the station, I'm going to kill Quark."

"He wants to do what!?"

"Shh." Kira continued wearily. "He wants to put a Cardassian embassy here on the station. Where they'll be safe. And Jolorn is clear Shakaar and the ministers have decided I'm the one to make it work."

"That's a tall order," Dax observed.

"Shakaar tells me our people will listen to me — but then tells me I have to stay here. If people on Bajor will listen to me, why am I here instead of on Bajor where they can hear me?"

"I presume that's a rhetorical question?"

"Yes." She rubbed her temples. "Ezri, do you remember what we overheard at the reception?"

"Umm, you mean that girl's comments about how you single-handedly saved the Alpha Quadrant from the Dominion? Wani, was it?"

"That's the one," Kira acknowledged. "Just a few hours ago, I all but heard the same from Minister Jolorn."

"Hero worship?"

"Almost."

Dax chortled in disbelief. "That's ridiculous!"

"I can't help but think the ministers are deliberately fostering those rumors," she said quietly, absently reaching out to wrap her fingers halfway around the glass and slowly turn it. Orange bubbles kept breaking through the surface of the green top layer, slowly mingling the liquids.

"What?" Dax stared. "But why?"

"You remember Li Nalas?"

"Yes, of course."

"I'm starting to wonder if the ministers are trying to set me up in that role. A figurehead of some kind."

Dax started in shock. "But ... why?" she repeated.

"They know I'd support Shakaar in anything. Right now, he's having a difficult time trying to maintain our people's unity, without the Emissary and with the vedeks still deliberating over a new kai. The government is struggling. Religious issues. Political issues. Issues with resettlement and reintegration of refugees. You know what's going on. Bajor's in trouble."

"It wasn't so long ago," Dax noted, "it seemed Bajor had come through the war almost unscathed."

Kira nodded. "Now I think the ministers are trying to distract the people rather than solve their problems."

The Trill caught on. "Create a legend to rally the people around," she said, stunned. "Perfect for the role — impeccable credentials. Known for your service to Bajor and your closeness to Ben ... the Emissary. Loyal to Shakaar, no one in the government would question your support for him — although no doubt some of the ministers *don't* consider that a plus. Distant enough not to be mundane or insist on taking a daily role, yet close enough to stay in the public eye. Remember how Shakaar recalled you for the wormhole issue? Nerys, you've become the new Li Nalas!"

"That's not a role I want to play," Kira replied with feeling.

"I don't think they're giving you a choice."

"I can't see Shakaar and Jolorn acting like Jaro," Kira came back thickly. "Trying to manipulate a hero. I'm not Li, I'm not a hero. I was just one of the tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of ordinary Bajorans who stood up and fought back. And I won't be manipulated now!"

"There's a difference, Nerys," the Trill urged. "Jaro had his own selfish reasons for trying to manipulate a man who had spent ten years in prison. If the first minister thinks Bajor needs you to be its hero, it's for the good of Bajor, not the personal agenda of Shakaar Edon. And," she tried to conclude on a humorous note, "it's quite a change from when they sent you here to get you out of their hair."

Kira just groaned. "They still don't want to listen to me. Oh, Prophets show me the way."

Dax studied her closely, then leaned in. "Nerys, setting up a Cardassian embassy here on the station makes a lot of sense."

"I know it does," the colonel admitted with a sigh. "I just didn't want to be the one to have to carry it out. And I guess I was hoping you'd give me reasons not to."

"Sorry," she apologized.

Kira blew a gusty sigh. "I suppose I'd better get to Ops — this news has to come from me, not Quark."

"That would be better," Dax confirmed. "I doubt it could be kept secret for long anyway. And I suppose I'd better get back to my office, too — almost time for my first counseling appointment."

As the women headed out of the bar, they could hear Quark's plaintive cry. "Hey, what about the drink? You didn't even taste it! No, Morn, you can't—"

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The Promenade was especially interesting these days. Kaoron always enjoyed, if that was the appropriate word, the events and beings to be seen there. There were customs and attire to be studied, interrelationships to be observed, conversations to be overheard. With the current gathering of artists from across the quadrant, the last week had been even more diverse and interesting. Though it was early, there was still a decent crowd spilled across the Promenade.

He paused for just a moment on his way to Ops, observing one of the artists, a human woman, demonstrating sand paintings while explaining the traditional spiritual significance of the designs and colors to her people. It was fascinating to him, on many levels.

Many beings considered the Vulcan people to be devoid of spirituality. He considered that to demonstrate a shallow understanding of both the Vulcan heritage and beliefs, and the nature of spirituality.

He heard light footsteps approach, and pause. "Kaoron."

"Dax," he acknowledged quietly so as not to disturb the artist and her fascinated observers, then gestured down at the woman. "Her work is quite intriguing."

"Yes, it is." The Trill smiled. "Intriguing. That's not a word I expected to hear from a Vulcan."

Kaoron raised an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"It suggests curiosity. I've never met a Vulcan who admits to curiosity as you do," Dax noted, leaning on the railing beside him. Kaoron could feel her gaze fixed on him.

"Curiosity, under the direction of logic, inspires the quest for knowledge. I must confess, however, the Vulcan side of my family has always shaken their collective heads, so to speak, over the extent of that personality trait in me," he admitted.

"And yet the Ferengi have a saying, to be wary of the Vulcan greed for knowledge."

"Ah, yes, their seventy-ninth Rule of Acquisition. How very like a Ferengi, to equate curiosity with greed. It always seemed logical to me for a scientist to be curious, and to acknowledge it."

"What about the Romulan side of your family? How do they feel about your curiosity?"

"I've never met them. When my father defected, relationships between the Federation and the Empire were very poor. To the best of my knowledge, there was not so much as a word exchanged between my father and his family, between his flight and his death."

"Things are better now, since we fought together in the war. Have you thought about contacting your Romulan relatives? They may not even know you exist."

"They are well aware of my existence."

"How do you know?"

"My mother contacted them at my father's death, to ask if they wished to participate in his funerary rituals, under appropriate truce. They were disinclined to do so, and were similarly terse in their response that as far as my father's family was concerned, he had been long dead, and neither he nor I existed."

Dax's eyes widened.

"I was four years old, at the time."

She absorbed that for a moment. "What a cruel thing to tell a child. How sad."

"My mother was not surprised by their position. Nor was I."

"Their feelings may have changed over the years, and with the Federation and the Empire having become allies against the Dominion."

"It is possible," he acknowledged. "However, they have made no effort to contact my mother or me in the intervening time."

"Do you hate them?"

"No. It would serve no purpose. And they are not the only ones to take so illogical a position." He half-turned. "You must excuse me, Dax. I am due in Ops."

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