

"The Ties That Bind"

Chapter 3

"...And we're going to need to stock up on Cardassian medical supplies," Bashir finished, ticking off the last item on his list. "Unless the ambassadorial staff is going to include their own physician and supplies?"

Kira shrugged. "I have no idea. So far, all I've been told—"

"Colonel?"

Interrupted, Kira touched a control. "What is it?"

"Colonel, Yurusi Nilom of the Cardassian art delegation is here in Ops, and would like to meet privately in your office, if you're available."

"Oh." A beat. Kira set down her PADD. "Yes, I'll see her." She sent an apologetic glance at Bashir. "I'm sorry, doctor, our ... current guests have priority over our future ones. It looks like we'll have to finish this discussion later."

"Of course, I understand completely." Bashir stood up to leave.

"Let me know if you need anything more," she told him. "I'll keep you in the loop as much as I can, just right now I don't know much yet."

He smiled briefly, obviously gratified. "Thank you."

The door slid open; Bashir stood aside for the Cardassian to enter, nodding a polite greeting as he exited.

"Good morning, Nilom. I trust you're having a pleasant visit."

She ignored him, her attention fully on Kira. Sending a sympathetic look in Kira's direction, Bashir left.

The Cardassian woman was of medium height, and moved with grace. She had dark eyes and dark hair, liberally streaked with silver, which was piled up on her head and woven through several apparently-latinum hairclips. Her distinctively tear-shaped forehead ridge and bilateral scaled neck ridges were artfully daubed with the currently popular blue cosmetics. She was plump in a way esteemed on Cardassia as evidence of having reached middle age and continuing to live a comfortable life without want. Her clothing was modestly fashioned and of a dark, rich fabric, although Kira noted there was some evidence of wear.

Nilom looked around suspiciously, as if expecting security to be standing by.

"Good morning, Nilom. You're up early. Is there a problem?" Kira asked politely. She assumed Nilom was there to complain about Tarrn talking too much, as the Andorian holophotographer had. Outgoing and good-hearted as the security deputy was, she didn't seem to realize there were times it was better to hold her tongue. "Is there something wrong with your quarters or Promenade location? Your security escort?"

"My quarters and location are quite adequate. And Tarrn has been exceptional as companion, guide, and security."

Kira's eyes widened. "Really? But.... Oh, good, excellent," she covered. "So what's wrong? Uh, how can we make your visit here more enjoyable?"

"I have been denied access to the Bajoran database from my quarters."

Kira stared, then blinked. "What?"

"Specifically, to the Bajoran population census information."

After a second, Kira replied, "Well of course you were denied access, it requires Bajoran security or military clearance to access those records! That kind of data isn't available to just anybody!"

The Cardassian woman's eyes flashed. "I had been led to believe Bajor claimed to be a more open society!"

"Compared to Cardassia, I suspect a locked cage is a more open society!" Kira shot back, then all but bit her tongue. "I'm ... sorry, that was ... uncalled for," she said with a clenched jaw. She took a deep breath to calm down before she said something she'd really regret. "May I ask what information you were looking for? If it's not classified or a security issue, perhaps one of our technicians can retrieve it for you."

"It's personal," Nilom said coldly.

Affronted, Kira could only stare for a second.

"Then it appears I won't be able to help you," she finally replied.

"But you must! Tarrn said—" The woman clamped her mouth shut; her lips tightened to a short thin line.

"Tarrn said what?" Kira asked quietly. The tone demanded an answer.

They matched glares. Kira held her ground, figuring Nilom was the one who wanted something, and even if she complained to Minister Lizin, security concerns would be paramount. She doubted anyone would object to her denying an evasive Cardassian access to their computer banks.

Nilom broke first. "Tarrn said you were beside Legate Damar when he fought and died to free Cardassia."

There was no point in denying it. "Yes, I was."

"And you were with him before that for months, training his men, and you mourned with him when he discovered the Dominion had wiped out his family."

"I—I suppose so." As Kira recalled it, she had first thrown the murders into his face as a reminder of what his people had done to so many families on Bajor. Not the most supportive. And only then had she offered continuing training in how to fight a guerrilla war. If there had been moments of offered sympathy, they had been few and private, and certainly were not common knowledge here.

"I thought spending some time with our people, under those circumstances, would have given you some understanding of our culture and our people, and why this would be important to me," the woman said bitterly.

"I don't even know what you're asking for, how could I understand why it would be important?"

The Cardassian was obviously at war in her thoughts. Kira waited silently, making mental connections of her own. *Population information, census data. Understanding culture and people. Wiped out families....*

Kira caught her breath. "Do you have family on Bajor?" she asked bluntly.

Nilom looked away, her mouth still tightly pursed.

"Did you have a brother here? Some other family?" A rock settled in her stomach. "Obsidian Order, maybe? An undercover agent? I'm surprised you didn't just have your government ask for the information directly."

"My brother was a soldier, not a spy!" Nilom shot back. "But yes, he was stationed on Bajor for over six years. He met ... there was a Bajoran woman."

Kira's voice was cold. "A comfort woman?"

"A what?"

"A Bajoran woman conscripted into servicing Cardassian soldiers, to make their stay here as conquerors more bearable," she replied icily. "You think one of those women, if she's still alive and has made a life for herself in spite of what happened to her, wants anything to do with the family of one of the soldiers who ... who made her a collaborator and a whore?"

"Oh, one of *them*." Nilom waved it off with vague contempt. "No, she wasn't one of them. My brother thought it wasn't honorable to spend time with those women."

"He just went up in my estimation!"

"It was worse. He met a Bajoran. He fancied himself in love with her. He ... he sired a child on her." The very thought was obviously repugnant to Nilom. She started pacing like a trapped animal; Kira watched the middle-aged woman's every step.

"So when he left, he abandoned them here to go home to his real family on Cardassia?" Kira couldn't help the sarcasm.

"He never took a wife." Nilom snorted in repugnance. "He ended his engagement to a woman he'd known all his life. He wanted to bring that Bajoran back home with him! My parents were quite clear — they would disown him if he even mentioned that woman's name, or admitted to our neighbors he had fathered a half-Bajoran child!"

"So he left her here." Kira felt a brief wave of sadness — the man hadn't been strong enough to brave his society and his family's displeasure. For a Cardassian, she knew that would result in being ostracized — but if he had truly loved the woman, and she him, there would have been other options.

"Our parents contacted his commanding officer, privately." Nilom kept pacing, continuing to speak. "He understood. He said it happened to some young soldiers, far away from home and families, surrounded by aliens. He told them it was all right, they didn't need to worry about any disgrace. No one would find out. He would take care of the situation."

"Take care of...?" Kira repeated softly, dreading what might mean.

"We thought the matter resolved. My brother came home quietly, told our parents the woman had disappeared, and never mentioned her again. But we were close, as children. He told me." She ground one fist into the other. "He found out what Dukat had ordered—"

"Dukat!" The colonel couldn't help snorting incredulously.

"Yes, Dukat! Obviously, that was before our people found out about his debaucheries." Nilom shuddered in disgust. "But my brother ... somehow, he found out. He sent the woman and her boy away, into hiding. That's what he meant when he told us she'd disappeared."

Nilom whirled on her, glaring. "He wanted her and the brat taken care of! He wanted me to know, he wanted me to promise if anything happened.... He was killed a few months later, somewhere on Bajor. It might not have been an accident, we didn't dare ask...."

At the sight of tears on Nilom's cheeks, Kira finally lowered her eyes.

"My brother has been dead for almost fifteen years."

"You waited a long time to search for the woman."

"I had to! How could I have done that to our family, to his memory?" She sounded helpless and angry, caught between a youthful promise she despised and the Cardassian primary obligations to one's family and culture.

After a moment of watching Nilom resume pacing, Kira asked, as neutrally as possible, "I assume your family ... did not survive the war?"

"My family lived in Lakarian City ... my daughter ... my grandfather, my parents ... my sisters and their families ... all died when the Dominion struck there. My husband and other brother were soldiers too, in the final battle.... If I have any family left in this universe, it is this woman's child, my brother's child...." Nilom's pained voice finally died away, and she stopped pacing.

Kira couldn't help feeling sympathy at the litany of the dead. "Your government wouldn't help?"

The older woman shook her head. "I didn't ask them. Our government is still unsettled — and why would they bother to help a civilian to track down a Bajoran ... mistress? There's dishonor enough in the child's existence, equal disgrace in defeat. My brother did not live to know defeat, and no one else knows of the child. For now, he rests honorably in our family vaults. Our family...." She ran a hand before her eyes. "Why bring disgrace to his memory by making it public knowledge he sired an illegitimate brat on a Bajoran — and wanted to bring them both home as though she were a real wife and family?"

Her ire rose again at Nilom's obvious disregard for the woman she said her brother had loved. "So instead you came here, thinking to get the information from us."

"Yes."

Kira felt incredulous at the blatant arrogance in the simple answer. "You're willing to track down this woman because you have no other family, but you don't want anyone to know about it because it would bring dishonor on your family name?"

"So you do understand."

"It sounds like you're in what Captain Sisko would have called a catch-22."

"A what?"

"You want to find someone you really wish didn't exist," Kira said briskly. It was official, she thought. She had a bona fide reason to dislike this woman. "All right, I'll help you. But it's not for your benefit. If this woman really loved your brother, she deserves to know what happened to him. And if they had a child, the child deserves to know his father at least cared about him a little bit, enough to have saved his life before disappearing from it completely."

"It has nothing to do—"

Kira cut her off. "What are their names? I'll run the search myself. In the interest of your family privacy, of course." She hoped she didn't sound too sarcastic

"My brother's name was Crell Komed."

"And the Bajoran woman?"

"Her name was Rahl."

"Family name?"

"Uhm ... it was Jas or Jasso or something like that. Maybe Jaxo."

Kira exhaled slowly before saying, "Jas and Jasso are both common names on Bajor. Jaxo is a male given name."

Nilom grew defensive. "I only heard her full name once or twice, and our father made me promise to forget it and never speak it again. When my brother spoke privately to me of her, he only called her Rahl. And I never thought I'd have reason—"

"All right, I understand!" Another moment to control her tongue, tapping information into the computer to set up the parameters for the search. "What was her son's name, if you know it?"

"I ... think it was Taban."

Her fingers jerked. "Good name."

"If you say so."

"It was my father's name."

"Oh."

"Do you know where they lived?"

"No."

Kira couldn't help glaring. "You want me to search the entire planet?"

Nilom pulled a data rod from some pocket in her sleeve. "This has my brother's service record," she said woodenly. "It tells where he was stationed, and when. It might help."

Kira reached for it.

"Do you have to take it? Can't you just download the information you need?"

"With just parts of possible names, I don't know yet what information I might need."

With obvious reluctance, Nilom let her have the rod.

Kira studied it for a second. "I have some contacts on Bajor, in the ministry. I'll talk to them too, privately, maybe they'll help run a search." She looked back at the older Cardassian woman. "I'll get back to you as soon as I know anything."

"Can't you do it now?"

"It's the middle of the night in the capital. I have to wait until morning there." Kira all but dared the other woman to suggest she wake them.

Nilom apparently wasn't ready to go that far. "Thank you, Colonel. I'll look forward to hearing from you." More subdued than she'd been in their entire conversation, Nilom turned to the door and left without a further word.

Kira stared down at the rod for a long moment. Then she looked at the baseball on the side of her desk, the silent assurance that Sisko, the Emissary, would return. As if addressing the captain through it, she muttered, "What the hell did I just agree to do?"

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Admiral T'Lara's chosen exercise that morning was essentially a seminar of basic dance movements demonstrated and taught by one of the visiting artists on the station — an incredibly lithe and graceful human

Raks Sharqi dancer. It was a strenuous and demanding session, but also lively and involved. Between the exercise and the crowd, and the admiral's fixed concentration, there was no opportunity to talk.

Afterward, Monrow approached them. She'd also attended the session, and was casually garbed in loose-fitting black trousers and midriff-baring choli.

"Admiral, this is Dr. Alexis Monrow. She's been on temporary assignment here, but was recently given a regular assignment," Kaoron formally introduced them. "Dr. Monrow, Admiral T'Lara."

"I'm pleased to meet you, doctor."

"I'm honored to meet you, Admiral." She glanced at the dancer, who was now answering questions for several of the station personnel. "It was an enjoyable demonstration, although I think I'm going to have some aching muscles I'd forgotten I had."

"An anatomy lesson for a doctor?" Kaoron remarked, a gleam in his eye.

Monrow chuckled. "You could call it that! I understand Vulcans have a similar dance style?" she directed to the admiral.

"Actually, the style *is* similar to a training regime for Vulcan children. It teaches concentration, discipline, and muscle control," T'Lara noted. "However, it has fewer of the emotional overtones humans seem to find in it. Or perhaps, fewer of the overtones this human suggests we should find in it."

"Hmm. True, I'd have to grant she does enjoy her art," the doctor agreed. "Well, I'm due at the infirmary in half an hour, which just gives me time to freshen up. I look forward to seeing you at some of the other displays today, Admiral — there's an Elaysian null-grav dance performance later, and I'm hoping to meet the dancer afterward."

"I shall certainly be in attendance," the admiral replied.

Leaving in their own direction, they passed several station personnel who were quite animatedly discussing the various painters, sculptors, dancers, and other artists visiting the station.

The lieutenant observed, "The festival would appear to be a success."

"That would be its purpose," the admiral noted.

"It is an intriguing variety of Federation artists who have come to the station."

"Indeed," T'Lara agreed noncommittally.

"To generalize, they seem to be especially outgoing, and of styles and techniques appealing to the Bajorans. And they appear to be going out of their way to socialize with the station personnel. Syrlynor, of course, seems an exception," Kaoron concluded dryly.

"Is there purpose to your speculation?"

"Only that one might ... wonder at the timing and participants."

With a sideways glance, she countered, "Are you speculating in an attempt to draw me into discussion of Federation policies?"

"Why mother, are you avoiding speaking directly of political matters?" he teased.

Her raised eyebrow almost conveyed annoyance. "I will speak of this once, and then not again. I expect you will show discretion regarding what I tell you." An expectant beat, as though she expected a pledge. Then

she continued, low-voiced and serious. "You are aware Bajor petitioned for membership in the Federation, and that petition was granted, just before the Dominion war began."

"Yes," he acknowledged. "I am also aware Bajor withdrew that petition on the very day they were scheduled to sign the articles, on the urging of Captain Benjamin Sisko, the previous Starfleet commander of this station."

"Indeed. During the Dominion occupation of this sector, it appeared a very wise decision. With the Dominion absorption of Cardassia and their initial victories in the war, they would have utterly overwhelmed and annihilated Bajor. We would have been as powerless to protect them as we were to keep the Dominion from Betazed," the admiral acknowledged. "As the war drew to a close, and our victory became a viable possibility, the Federation expected Bajor to reinstate its petition for membership. However, to our surprise, they have declined to do so, despite various invitations."

Kaoron nodded thoughtfully. "I am aware of that. From what I have heard while assigned here, many Bajorans have chosen to believe the recommendation of Captain Sisko was intended to keep them out of the Federation until he could return from wherever they believe he has gone or been taken."

The admiral made a sound suspiciously like a snort.

He continued. "Some Bajorans believe his return will be the signal it is time for them to reconsider their petition for membership. Until then, they intend to hold themselves apart from the Federation."

"A most illogical stance for them to take." She waited a moment before speaking again, allowing them to pass out of hearing of a pair of young Bajorans who likely wouldn't have noticed them anyway, from their rapt attention on each other.

Then T'Lara said, "Being stationed here, you have undoubtedly noted the current stresses upon Bajoran society."

"I have," he said soberly.

"Those stresses must be resolved."

"Of course."

"We are attempting to offer support."

"Hence your visit?"

"Among other initiatives."

He considered. "I understand a visit from such renowned artists as are currently on the station will support the assertion the Federation respects and honors Bajor and its cultures and beliefs, and will hopefully induce Bajorans to desire stronger relationships between our worlds. But the Federation Prime Directive is not to intervene or interfere with the affairs of other worlds. Cultures must be allowed to follow their own paths and make their own choices. Only when they have demonstrated an ability to resolve their internal problems and reach unity, are they considered eligible for Federation membership."

"That is our policy. However, there are those who fear Bajor hovers upon a precipice and only Federation membership will draw them back from that edge. The system's location, here at the mouth of the only known stable wormhole, makes it vital this world not be allowed to fall into isolation, belligerence, and anarchy. It is one of the reasons for this artists' assembly, and one of the reasons I am going to Bajor at this time."

"The Federation is willing to dispense with certain usual policies and protocols because of Bajor's strategic importance."

"In short, yes."

"Whether Bajor wishes such consideration or not."

She stiffened ever-so-slightly. "Yes."

"What if it results in them seeing us as no better than the Cardassians?" Kaoron began after a moment.

"This discussion is done. I expect you will keep it in confidence, Lieutenant."

After a pause, he replied, "Of course, Admiral."

Another pause. "Mother, you stated last night there were personal matters to discuss. Is this an appropriate time?"

"It is." She seemed relieved to change to change the subject. "I have recently spoken with Ambassador T'Bren."

"How fares my aunt?"

"She is well. She has recently returned to Vulcan, and visited your daughter. She states T'Pril grows well and is progressing rapidly in her intellectual development."

"That is to be expected. Her mother is a strong, intelligent, logical woman, with a tenured and secure position at the History Academy. I have no fears for my daughter's upbringing."

"But you, her father, do not see her."

Kaoron shrugged, uncomfortable with the direction of T'Lara's comments. At times, the expected formalities of Vulcan parent and child, as well as those of Starfleet officers, made communication uneasy. But he had to be honest. "It is T'Kalee's preference."

"What is your preference?"

After a long moment, he replied. "My preferences in her upbringing are irrelevant. T'Kalee is there; I am not. I have dedicated my life to Starfleet. I could not be on Vulcan for T'Pril if I wished to be. So long as she does not restrict T'Pril's contact with my family, I do not object to T'Kalee's decision."

"I believe the child would benefit from a relationship with her father, as do most children."

"I had no relationship with my father, after his death. However, I believe I did well, growing up in the family compound and then traveling so often between your assignments and the household of my aunt the ambassador. I was exposed to a variety of cultures and worlds. There were many relationships from which I believe I benefitted."

"Unlike your father, you are not dead."

"I am aware of that."

"T'Kalee deliberately denies you a relationship with your child. And you accept it."

"T'Kalee and I did not suit well," he replied briefly.

He thought he heard a sigh, but when he looked at his mother, her expression was as stern as ever. "The fault for that may lay with me. I negotiated your betrothal. T'Kalee's family was willing, and their daughter seemed an appropriate and agreeable choice for you."

"Unlike her family, she was not able to overlook the ... complexities of my Romulan siring. But then, they did

not have to live daily with my ... admitted quirks."

T'Lara's expression softened, coming as close to showing fondness as she would ever allow herself. "You are much like your father, when you allow yourself to be."

They had reached the door to the admiral's quarters. T'Lara made no move to enter.

"I am sure his absence has been a great emptiness in your life," Kaoron noted. "Reminders of him must be difficult for you."

Her gaze sharpened. "Do you rebuke me for the years I was not with you?"

"No, mother. Your services to Starfleet have been invaluable. You are an example I continue to follow and aspire to emulate."

"Do you feel I abandoned you? Is that the reason you allow yourself to be banished from your child's life?"

"No, I never felt abandoned when I could not accompany you. Lady T'Bren provided an excellent and intellectually stimulating home at the family compound and at each embassy to which she was posted. She always respected your choice to raise me cognizant of my father's culture and ways, although I must have been a trial for her."

"If I may judge from my family's correspondence, it appeared you were indeed at times ... an emotional influence upon your cousins."

"Perhaps my father's blood ran more quickly than it should."

"I have never asked or expected you to deny your Romulan heritage. Your father was an exceptional and gifted individual, and courageous, to have defected from his people, knowing the cost."

"You would not have chosen him otherwise."

"He chose me as well," she reminded him.

"I believe you both chose well, mother."

"It was a personal disappointment to me I did not choose as well for you."

There wasn't much to say to that.

"I hope to do better for your second marriage."

Kaoron's eyebrows shot up. However, before he could say anything, the admiral turned to her door, and it closed behind her.

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[Chapter 4](#)