

"The Ties That Bind"

Chapter 4

The door to the once-prefect's office swished open. A figure sidled in.

"Security deputy Tarrn Raloru, reporting as ordered, sir," the woman announced tentatively.

Kira studied the Bajoran woman closely. Middle aged. Average height. Stocky, solid build. A thin crown of fine sandy-brown hair above a rather ruddy complexion. Light brown eyes looking rather nervous.

Tarrn shifted her stance. "Constable Emyrn said you wanted to see me, Colonel?"

"Come in, Deputy Tarrn."

"I wouldn't have—"

Kira cut her off. "I understand Nilom, the Cardassian artist, has been rather pleased with you as her guard."

The woman's already flushed cheeks flamed even brighter. "I hoped so. I tried to make sure she was kept safe and under a close eye. Being a Cardassian and all. I wanted to keep her preoccupied and talking, too, maybe feeling like she had someone she could confide in." Tarrn seemed to be just getting warmed up, apparently oblivious to Kira's frown. "She seemed a little lost and out of place here, and not a lot of people wanted to talk to her, at first. I understand completely, her being here on DS9, but since I didn't want her to—"

"Tarrn!"

"Colonel?"

"I want to know exactly what you told her — and I want to know what she told you. And then we're going to have a *short* talk about discretion."

Tarrn objected, "I understand discretion, sir—"

"You just don't seem to practice it."

Tarrn took on an injured, puzzled expression, but had the sense not to defend herself.

"Now, let's go over your conversations with Nilom. The *short* version, if you don't mind."

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The engineering briefing was indeed brief — Alden preferred to keep the briefings quick, small, and to the point. Just himself, Chief of Operations Nog, and Ensign Kuhlman.

"So, Lieutenant, you've got your instructions?"

Nog looked up at the executive officer. "Commander, it feels like we've got a quarter of the Romulan fleet here for repairs, all the supplies and workers for the Gamma Quadrant station are coming through here, and I've just found out I'm going to have an embassy to build. When am I going to find time to upgrade our runabouts?" he protested.

"Sorry, Nog, but Starfleet feels the new shield generators and software upgrades are a priority, and I have to

agree. Let the Bajoran staff handle more of the work on their Eyes of the Prophet, or whatever name they've come up with for the Gamma station. And the Romulans can wait. Focus on our runabouts," Alden said briskly. "And how about you, Davey boy?"

Kuhlman looked startled. "Wha...? You've been talking to Vic!"

"Don't we all?" he asked, smirking. "You've got Miss Wani comfortably settled by now, I presume?"

"You should know, you were the one who gave me the assignment! Sir."

Alden chuckled. "Of course I did. You said the Colonel wanted me to make sure I gave it to somebody who could handle it. I knew you wouldn't mess it up, or the Colonel would have both our hides. So ... are things looking ... well, in that department?"

The ensign looked a little embarrassed. "I don't think it's going to work," Kuhlman confessed.

"Not going to.... You're breaking up with her?" Nog interrupted, astounded. "It's only been eight days. How can you want to break up with somebody after only eight days?"

"How can you think after eight days you've got a relationship that needs to break up?" Alden cracked.

"We just don't seem to have much in common."

"Have you had enough time to know?"

"All she wants to talk about is how it must have been when Captain Sisko was here!" he protested. "And how great Colonel Kira is!"

"Oh. Yeah, I can see where that would drive a person crazy," Alden concurred in heartfelt tones.

"But she likes to play baseball," Nog offered helpfully. "She even wants to join the Niners. She wasn't even interested in you until she found out you played — and then she nearly killed you."

The ensign's expression turned frustrated. "Yeah, I know. She likes baseball. But mostly she likes to analyze the meaning of life from it, and have deep philosophical conversations about it, and talk about Sisko connecting with the Prophets through it, and try to come up with artistic and evocative renditions of it within the Bajoran aesthetic." He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "I just like to play ball!"

"Women. Relationships." Alden sighed and shook his head. "No rhyme or reason to any of 'em."

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Kira doubted the stern lecture with Tarrn would make much difference. The woman was competent at her job, but she was simply too thoughtlessly outgoing to watch her tongue. She would never have survived in the resistance, where silence and secrecy were essential, and neither, Kira feared, would any of her cell members. Tarrn was, however, amiable and remarkably even-tempered, quick to forgive slights, if she even noticed them, and she had no real enemies.

Unlike her. Kira knew she had a temper, and held grudges, and had spoken her mind far too freely at times over the years. She'd learned to control both temper and tongue, of necessity, although she still had a reputation for them, and there were still moments when both tongue and temper escaped her. Not recently, though, especially not in her dealings with Bajoran ministers and Starfleet admirals.

Maybe self-control was her current mistake — if she'd raised more of a fuss about the festival, at least made a few sharp comments, instead of biting her tongue and not protesting, maybe the ministers would have been less

quick to assume she would meekly accept a Cardassian embassy on the station, and less eager to cast her in the heroic role Li Nalas had been born to fill, before he'd sacrificed his life to save the Emissary.

Had Li Nalas been prepared for his role? Of course he had, she told herself. He'd been prepared for every role and responsibility Bajor had needed and asked of him.

She shook her head, sighing, and tried to focus.

"Colonel?" the voice interrupted her thoughts.

Kira looked up with a start from the personnel report. "Yes, Pryn?"

"Yurusi Nilom states she has another appointment with you?"

She blinked, and almost refused to see the Cardassian. Then she recollected her role at the moment was to make sure the assorted artists enjoyed their time on the station, as well as being enjoyed by the Bajoran citizens. And there was always the possibility Nilom would camp at her door until Kira saw her again anyway. Might as well get it over with.

"Of course. Send her in."

Kira stood as Nilom entered her office.

"What have you learned?" the Cardassian began without preamble.

Kira decided she might as well be just as blunt.

"Using the information from your brother's service record as a starting point, we located a Jasso Rahl who was born and lived in Jalanda on the Southern Continent during the correct time period. She worked as a janitor in the administrator's office for over four years, two of them while your brother was stationed with the Cardassian garrison there. City hospital records indicate that at age twenty-three she gave birth to a son who was noted to be of mixed genetic heritage, who she named Taban."

Nilom's dark eyes grew strangely luminous. "You found them!"

"Well...."

"Where are they?" The woman's hands were shaking.

"Her. We found *her*," Kira corrected.

"Explain."

"Thereafter, Jasso Rahl trained in the local medical clinic, and then worked as a nurse. She vanished from Jalanda records when she was twenty-five and the boy was two."

"Your people lost track of them?" Nilom burst out. "What kind of record keepers are you Bajorans?"

Kira ignored the outburst. "Jasso Rahl next appeared at Kran-Tobal about two years later. There is no record of a child with her."

"No record...." The Cardassian sat down heavily, her gray complexion turning pale. "But what did she do with the boy? What happened to him?"

Kira decided to enlighten her. "There are several possibilities. Many Bajoran children died of sickness, hunger,

and violence during the occupation," she said coolly. "There were a number of diseases sweeping through the Southern Continent during those years, and medicine was not always available, even to doctors and hospitals. The child could have been injured somehow. A Bajoran woman, alone with a child and on the run, might have been afraid to seek help for fear the Cardassian prefect was still looking for her." A beat. "She and the child might have been seen as easy victims by thieves or roaming predators of ... several types. A child with Cardassian blood might have been deliberately targeted by those who had lost their own family members or friends in the occupation." Another beat. "Or, maybe, she found somewhere to leave the boy, while she tried to make a safe new life for them both. But we don't have any record of where that might have been, or with whom."

"But...." Nilom stared at the floor. "Where is this woman now?" she asked flatly. "I need to talk to her."

After a long silence, Kira spoke softly. "I guess she was afraid working at a medical clinic might lead Dukat to her. But it appears she helped one of the local resistance cells. She wasn't a member, but she secretly provided medical care when they had wounded. They got her a job on a fishery craft. The local glinn tracked several members of the cell to the ship she worked on. He sank it, with all hands."

Nilom looked up, apparently uncomprehending.

"If you want to talk to Jasso Rahl, go stand on the shore at Kran-Tobal and shout at the sea."

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"Lieutenant Nog?"

The Ferengi engineer looked up at the almost-familiar tone. "Jord," he greeted the young art student. "How are you today?"

"I was hoping there would be a baseball game this afternoon, and that you would continue to explain the Emissary's game to me."

"There's a baseball game going constantly in my uncle Quark's holosuites," Nog assured him, grinning. "I'd be glad to go to one of them with you. How about after I finish the repair rosters? Shouldn't be more than a few hours. And it'll give me an excuse to take a break, for entertaining our guests."

Jord's expression brightened. "I will be at the shrine with Vedek Nane — come when you can."

Nog watched for a second as Jord hurried on his way. Thinking about it, the young man, half-Bajoran and half-Cardassian as he was, might not feel like he fit in with most of Bajoran society, however much that society prided itself on the way it took in abandoned or orphaned children. Half-blood children were actually less welcome than Cardassian orphans, living proof, perhaps, of the years of occupation and subjection to alien overlords. Jord must feel awkward, maybe had difficulty making friends.

Much, Nog concluded, as a Ferengi chief of engineering sometimes felt on a Starfleet installation. And another friend was always a good thing.

"You, Ferengi!"

Nog slowly turned at the arrogant voice. It was another of the visiting artists, the Cardassian water sculptor. He tried to paste on a pleasant, questioning expression.

"The young man, who is he?"

Nog reflexively glanced in the direction she was pointing. In the afternoon crowd, he couldn't tell who she was trying to point out. "Which one?"

"The Cardassian. The one you were speaking to."

"Cardassian...? You mean Jord?"

Nilom seemed to deflate. "Jord.... But that's not.... Are you sure that's his name?"

"Yes," he replied, puzzled. "Jord Taban, one of the students who came to the festival with Vedek Nane."

"Jord Taban?" Her eyes lit up again. She watched Jord vanish in the crowd away with a strangely yearning expression. "Yes, it could be, the way he walks, the set of his shoulders.... He is about nineteen years old?"

"I never asked his age, but that sounds about right. Is there ... something wrong?" Nog asked cautiously, unsure how to interpret her questions or expression.

"Nothing that can be undone now. I must speak with Colonel Kira at once...." She hurried away before a bewildered Nog could ask say anything more.

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"Colonel? Nilom is back and wants to talk with you again. Hey! Wait!"

Kira barely had time to set aside the PADD before Nilom charged into her office for the third time.

"I think I've found him!"

"What?"

"I think I found him."

"Found who?"

"Taban. Your doctors must perform a genetic test immediately to verify it." She paced the floor, her expression almost feverish. "They can do that, can't they, these Federation doctors?"

"Of course. So can these Bajoran doctors," she mimicked the tone. "But you haven't explained who you want tested."

"Why, me, of course. And Jord Taban."

"Who?"

"Jord Taban. He's here on the station with one of your ... vedeks, I think you call them."

"Vedek Nane?"

Nilom waved her hand dismissively and kept pacing. "I didn't catch the name. But the youth is here with the vedek. A student, though of what I don't know."

"If it's Vedek Nane, then Jord is an art student, here for the artists' gathering."

The Cardassian laughed nervously. "An artist! Of course! He must take after me. Creativity is in the family blood, you know — my mother was a respected artist too, and my grandfather wrote some of the finest repetitive epics of his time, and *his* grandmother was an officially sanctioned sculptor in the capital." She interrupted herself. "What are you doing?"

Kira looked up from her desk. "I'm checking Jord's biographical data."

"That, you can access immediately?"

"He's here for the festival, he had to be cleared," Kira cut in to forestall any more remarks about Bajoran record-keeping.

A few seconds later, she read aloud, "Jord Taban. Orphan. Mother Bajoran, father Cardassian, names unknown. Left with a monk at the Karnoth monastery by an unidentified woman who claimed the child had been found wandering alone. The only name he could give them was Taban. Remained in their care for nearly twelve years. Jord was the name of one of the prylars there, who cared for their orphans. At estimated age fifteen, he transferred to Nane's order to develop his artistic talent." She looked up. "That was four years ago. He's been a student there since then. And that's all the information there is on him."

"Left at a monastery. You did say the woman probably left him some place secure while she was aiding the terrorists." Nilom frowned. "I suppose it's inevitable he was brought up to believe in those 'prophets' of yours."

It took Kira several seconds to rein in some of the things she wanted to say at the moment, but she managed. "Being raised in a monastery, and taking the name of one of the monks there, it's very possible he does," she finally said.

"We must do the tests at once."

Kira had the sudden conviction she had encountered a Cardassian irresistible force. She could be an immovable object when she chose, but, she realized, there was no reason to be so today.

"We can do them this afternoon. *If* the young man is interested in participating."

The Cardassian's incredulous gaze suggested there should be no question of it.

"And if Dr. Bashir is available."

Obviously taking the answer for granted, Nilom resumed pacing, her eyes intent but focused inward as she walked in silence.

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Lt. Kaoron had left Ops after his shift, and was taking a roundabout path through the Promenade on his way back to the science lab, when he heard a voice call his name.

"Kaoron."

"Ah, Alex." He paused for the doctor to catch up with him.

"I was hoping I'd run into you."

"Indeed?"

"I've been reviewing your DNA results from the Breen ship. No individual identification yet, but I was able to sort out that one of the Bajorans ... wasn't."

"Wasn't Bajoran?"

"Not wholly. There's a percentage of Cardassian DNA in the mix. One of those you've identified as a separate individual was part Cardassian."

Kaoron nodded thoughtfully. "That may make it easier to identify that individual, at least."

"So far it hasn't given us an identity, but I'll keep working on it."

"Thank you, Alex. I appreciate your assistance."

"I'll let you know what shows up." She took a step, then paused. "Oh, and one more thing. You are due for an update on your contraceptive injection. Come by later, and we'll take care of that."

"Very well ... doctor."

She did a double take. "Kaoron, I thought—"

His mouth twitched, but he kept his expression composed. "Some things seem more appropriate to discuss with one's physician, than with one's friend."

After a second she nodded and grinned. "True. All right, Lieutenant, we'll see you later at the infirmary." Laughing, Monrow crossed to the spiral staircase and headed down to the main level.

"Lieutenant."

Kaoron turned.

T'Lara was back in uniform, the full dress regalia of a Starfleet admiral representing the Federation at its loftiest. She speculatively watched Monrow descend the staircase and vanish among the crowds on the Promenade.

"The doctor seems ever-present," she noted.

"It is not so large a station. It is inevitable personnel will encounter one another regularly."

A moment of silence.

"Do you have a personal relationship with the human?" she asked abruptly.

Kaoron couldn't conceal astonishment at the blunt, very personal inquiry. "We have been but acquaintances, mother. She has been on the station for several months, but only recently learned she has been formally assigned here."

"Hmmm."

"I assure you, mother, I have not considered her as a potential mate, and I am quite certain she has not considered me so either. She is, in fact, involved in a relationship."

T'Lara nodded.

Reluctantly, he asked, "I must assume, from your comments, you are contemplating arranging a new bonding for me. Is there reason to hasten a decision?"

"There is no reason to delay. An appropriate bonding is not so quickly arranged, my son. And you are not a child with years in which to prepare."

"The war permanently ended many bonds and marriages. I suspect it would not be so difficult, if it were to become suddenly necessary, to find a mate."

"That is logical." TLara sounded approving. "Perhaps a wife from among the Vulcans in Starfleet would be more ... appropriate for you, than another choice of one who has never left our homeworld. Someone who would understand our duty, and who has been exposed to other races and learned to live surrounded by emotions."

"That might indeed be more appropriate, mother," he had to agree. "But I continue to see no urgency in such a decision. I have felt no ... need for such, since ... the first."

"Your words carry respect, but your tone suggests otherwise. Speak openly, my son."

"As you have reminded me, mother, you and father chose one another. I ... hope to have the same privilege. It is common practice, in later years, for one who has lost a spouse, to select a second mate for oneself."

"I would wish such a choice for you as well. That is why I inquired regarding the doctor. I acknowledge the arrangements for your first marriage were less than suitable for either of you. But one must be prepared for probabilities. You are half-Vulcan, you are not 'of later years.' The ... way of our kind has once come upon you. It may come upon you again, perhaps unexpectedly. Should that happen, and your blood burn again in our ancient way, you may not have the luxury of time to choose a proper mate, who would also choose you."

Her level stare was firm. "I do not think you would wish to be ... unprepared for such an eventuality. Nor, I think, would your fellow crew wish to have to deal with you, were you to begin to behave ... inappropriately, of overwhelming biological necessity."

He bowed his head. Those were indeed factors to keep in mind. TPril was almost ten years old, the child of his first *pon farr*. The normal Vulcan biological cycle was seven years. He and TKalee had been divorced for four years, and had lived apart for several years before then.

"As always, mother, your logic is impeccable," he had to admit

"Then I will begin discreet inquiries."

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[Chapter 5](#)