

"The Ties That Bind"

Chapter 6

Kaoron was in one of the science labs reviewing updates on the station's stellar cartography database when he felt eyes on him. He looked up.

"Dax," he greeted.

"Kaoron."

"Has something occurred?" The young officer's blue eyes were ... perturbed, he decided.

Dax rubbed her hands together as she slowly circled the console. "Did you know Nilom, the Cardassian water sculptor, identified one of Vedek Nane's students as the son of her deceased brother?"

"I had heard something of that," he admitted neutrally. While his Vulcan hearing had always stood Kaoron in good stead, there were those occasionally irritated when they thought he heard too much.

"Julian's genetic test results are positive — they are related."

"Indeed."

"Jord doesn't seem to be taking it well."

"That is ... unfortunate," he acknowledged.

"He doesn't seem to want to talk to anyone about it. Even Vedek Nane. Or me. Especially me."

"It is understandable this is a shock to him."

"I thought maybe he would benefit from your wisdom and experience."

An eyebrow lifted curiously. "My wisdom and experience?"

"You're the product of two peoples who have been ... enemies for generations. You've found your own course between them, your own life. I felt you might be uniquely able to advise Jord."

Kaoron studied his fingers for a moment. "Has he requested contact with me?"

"At this moment, I doubt he's capable of realizing he might benefit from it." She swallowed. "But I hope that won't stop you from offering it."

"Very well. I will speak to him, if he will listen to me."

"I expect you'll find him at the shrine. But..." She hesitated. "I'd recommend not wearing a uniform....."

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As Dax had suggested, Kaoron first changed to civilian clothes. He found Jord at the station shrine, standing motionless before the mandala, lost in thought or prayer.

"Jord, may I speak with you?" Kaoron asked with quiet dignity.

"This is a spiritual place for Bajorans. You should not be here."

"What of those with Cardassian blood?"

Jord whirled on him. "I reject that blood! I am Bajoran!"

"You are part Cardassian," Kaoron said firmly, "and Nilom shares your blood."

"You want to convince me I should welcome this Cardassian as family?" the youth demanded bitterly, the psychological chip on his shoulder all but toppling him sideways.

"Welcome?" Kaoron mused. "I would not go so far as that. I would, however, urge you to acknowledge her as such."

"You don't understand, you can't understand—"

"I am certain I cannot understand your feelings," Kaoron agreed. "But in some ways, we are similar, and I may understand more than you think."

The youth shook his head impatiently, but Kaoron continued.

"We are each born of two peoples, two cultures. I am of Vulcan and Romulan parentage; you are of Bajoran and Cardassian blood. For each of us, our existence was rejected by our fathers' peoples and questioned by our mothers'. We were raised solely in our mothers' worlds, and have found our roles there. But still we miss the time and experiences we did not have of both our parents."

"I do not miss or wish to know my father!" Jord objected.

"Have you truly convinced yourself of that? When you gaze in the mirror, when you see the looks in the eyes of your friends? There is part of our father showing in each of us — the evidence of the Cardassian heritage in your face, the Romulan genes and passions in mine. We cannot hide this from the world we live in, whether we wish to or not. And that alienness to those around us, sometimes leaves us ... apart."

Jord was still upset, but at least he was listening.

"Our heritage is mixed. That is the fact of our birth. We choose who we want to be, now, how we will use our talents and skills. But we cannot be whole without recognizing and acknowledging all parts of ourselves. Nothing prevents us from choosing the best parts of both our heritages, those parts enabling us to best create the life we wish to lead."

"But—"

"This has been suddenly thrust upon you. I can understand how response would be difficult."

"I will never respond differently! I hate Cardassia and all things Cardassian!"

"If I understand correctly, your mother came to love at least two things Cardassian."

The youth's head jerked as if to deny it. "She had no choice! We know how the Cardassians treated Bajorans...."

"She had you."

Jord closed his eyes.

"In my experience, one can try to reject what one is, but one cannot prevent who we are from surfacing."

"I have learned from living with the monks all my life — Prylar Jord and Vedek Nane have taught me what it means to be Bajoran — and that is what I choose to be." Jord turned decisively back to the mandala, raising

his hands in prayer.

A monk passed through the shrine. Kaoron waited until they were alone again before continuing.

"Does Vedek Nane not teach you about the artistic styles and histories of other worlds?"

Jord looked over his shoulder. "Of course! How could we appreciate artistry and create something with meaning without understanding how others define it?"

"And do you not learn to work in other mediums, including those of other worlds — such as Cardassia?"

"Only to be well-rounded and able to deal with other peoples, not to claim them as family!" Jord retorted obstinately.

Kaoron very much doubted those were the sole reasons, but let it pass. "Surely there is something to appreciate about Cardassia?"

"No."

"Not even one of its people? I have heard of another of Vedek Nane's students, a young woman named Tora Ziyal. She, too, was of joint heritages."

"I remember Ziyal," Jord muttered. His hands slowly dropped and his gaze fell to the floor. The tone of his voice told Kaoron that Jord remembered her very well, had looked up to her, perhaps even had carried a romantic torch for her.

"She found her place. I believe she spent some time on Cardassia?"

"A little. But she wasn't accepted there either."

"Still, she was open to learning of her father and his world, even knowing who he was."

"Until she was murdered by one of her Cardassian father's officers."

"Yes, sadly. I understand a great talent was lost with her death. I heard her work was accepted for an exhibit of new artists at the Cardassian Institute of Art. Quite an achievement for one with Bajoran blood."

"Yes...."

"Imagine what she might have done, with time and a respected Cardassian artist as a sponsor."

Jord whirled, throwing visual daggers at the science officer. "I am not interested in being 'sponsored' by that Cardassian!"

"I am certain not." Kaoron cast a sidelong look at the youth. "But I believe if I keep talking long enough, I will come up with a reason you will not be able to refute, simply to acknowledge you share blood with 'that Cardassian,' as you refer to her."

"I don't think so!"

Kaoron shrugged a little. "I know she is not pleased her brother chose to commit to a Bajoran woman rather than a good Cardassian wife, and the result was you. Perhaps publicly acknowledging her as family will be the most disconcerting thing you could do to that Cardassian."

Jord stared at him in utter disbelief. "Are you joking?"

"I hoped it would be taken so."

"I heard Vulcans don't joke!"

"Ah, but Romulans do." A slight smile crinkled Kaoron's face. "Accept you are of two heritages, Jord. Allow that bereaved Cardassian woman to know she still has living family. Perhaps you will both benefit. Perhaps not. But at least you will *know*. And you can be as Bajoran as you wish to be, or as you can be." He thought he sensed a slight relaxing in the set of the younger man's shoulders. "Come, let me take you back to your vedek."

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Kaoron escorted Jord back to Vedek Nane's quarters. Walking alone through the habitat ring, he considered how Dax had known to ask him to talk to the boy. For all her youth and obvious personal difficulties of her own, the Trill counselor had a rare and quick understanding, he reflected.

At the moment, he thought, he could use someone to talk to himself. For a second, he impulsively considered going to Ranjen Shayl, as he'd been invited to, but pushed the thought aside.

I am a Starfleet officer, of Vulcan blood, Kaoron reminded himself. There are many things I can discuss with a Bajoran and a friend, but not the ways of my people.

His footsteps slowed, then halted. Chance or subconscious intent had brought him here in spite of himself. The quarters of Ezri Dax, station counselor. A fellow Starfleet officer who knew his background. A Trill. And, he recalled, the carrier of the Dax symbiont — the heir to Curzon Dax.

The door swished open in front of him.

"Oh!" Dax all but jumped back. "Kaoron! I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you! Were you able to talk to Jord?"

"There is no need to apologize," he assured her. "Yes, I found him in the shrine, as you anticipated."

She perked up. "Come on in." She gestured into her quarters. "How did he take it?"

"He will need time," Kaoron replied, entering. "But I believe I have given him some thoughts to consider."

He heard her sigh with relief, and maybe a little wistfulness. "That's a start."

For a moment neither of them said anything. Kaoron had never been in Dax's personal quarters before. Standard issue for the station, but made comfortable with personal touches. He found himself studying the contents of a shelf — a collection of medals, several statues and outdated scientific instruments, some books, a bat'leth and d'ktahg blade, a few pieces of jewelry, all of varying ages and cultures of origin. Mementos of the previous lives of Dax, he concluded.

"Counselor," he began slowly, "may we speak on ... a related but separate matter?"

Her eyes widened slightly. "Certainly." A beat. "Would you like to sit down? Have something to drink?"

"Not necessary." He thought for a moment more before beginning. "You are ... aware of the Vulcan custom of arranged marriages?"

She nodded a little. "I've heard most Vulcan marriages are made that way. Planned by the families. One of my previous hosts, Tobin, spent some time on Vulcan. And Curzon, of course. He worked with a number of Vulcan diplomats and personnel, at different times."

"Indeed. Ambassador T'Bren speaks of him with great personal respect."

"Ambassador T'Bren?" Ezri blinked. "You know T'Bren?"

"She is my mother's sister."

The Trill's face lit up. "T'Bren is your aunt? I enjoyed ... Curzon enjoyed working with her at Khitomer — I have to admit, he loved teasing her too.... Wait, if T'Bren's your aunt, that means Admiral T'Lara..... "

"Is my mother," he acknowledged.

"Wow." She was taken aback. "You've got some highly-placed relatives!"

"I do not boast of it," he replied with dignity. "The achievements of a parent do not guarantee the success of their offspring, although they can result in greater opportunities."

"T'Bren ... T'Lara ... so that Romulan defector who was your father, he was Alaxiol?"

"Yes."

"He was a brilliant man."

Kaoron couldn't help a small, pleased smile. "Yes, he was."

"How come I didn't make the connection?" Dax said, more to herself than to him, then shook herself. "But I'm sure you didn't come here for me to remember Curzon's accomplishments and connections. You mentioned Vulcan wedding customs? And arranged marriages?"

"Yes. It is our custom. The issue of choosing mates is deemed far too important to be left to chance. Especially as...." His voice died away.

"As what?" Dax prompted.

"Vulcan biology is not something we boast of," Kaoron explained quietly. With Dax's previous experiences and memories of his people and his family, he found himself speaking more freely than he would have to almost any other person, Vulcan or not. "We pride ourselves on being logical beings. But when our blood burns and instinct commands us, a Vulcan cannot make rational decisions. The fever demands an immediate, ancient response. A time like that ... is no time to make decisions that will have a lifelong impact."

"Such as selection of a husband or wife."

He nodded. "And the provision for children. Far better, for a race like ours, to have created traditions that direct the fever and ensure the partners are appropriate for each other."

"The thought of arranged marriages is abhorrent to many species I've met," Dax remarked neutrally. "In those cultures who do practice arranged marriages, it's usually for economic or socio-political purposes, or at least it originated for those reasons. Is it so ... necessary, for Vulcans?"

"It has preserved Vulcan society, I think. The rituals of the childhood bond are deeper than conscious thought — when the blood burns, when logic fails and instinct takes over, we respond by seeking out the one we subconsciously remember and are bound to."

"Really. Maybe the fever wouldn't burn so fiercely if your people had been forced to learn to control it, rather than having found a way to let it continue to burn."

"Each society creates its own rituals and manners of dealing with its biological imperatives — or it does not advance. This was our way, our answer to our nature. It has ensured our survival for thousands for years." For a second Kaoron was thoughtful.

Dax was following her own line of thought. "Your mother married a Romulan defector," she said tentatively.

"Didn't she have ... an arranged spouse waiting for her?"

"Indeed. His name was Syrlynor."

The Trill did a double take. "The artist? The one who's here?"

"Yes. Syrlynor was my mother's first husband, the bonded mate of her childhood," he admitted.

Dax exhaled sharply. "So he could have been your father."

"I would be very different if I had been born of their bonding!" Kaoron said with a flare of humor and logic both.

"I admit I have been desirous of knowing why their bonding did not suit, and what enabled them to go their separate ways in spite of the bond. My mother has dedicated herself to Starfleet. Syrlynor is dedicated to logic and his art. But he could have followed that path on any world, or on a ship, if he had followed her, as a great number of Starfleet's civilian spouses do. He could even have stayed on Vulcan, with my mother returning there occasionally. Many of our people do so, living apart for extended times, but coming together when they can, and raising families, with the support of their extended clans."

Dax nodded understanding.

"And yet, at their appointed time, my mother and Syrlynor parted rather than completing their joining." Kaoron half-shrugged. "Unlike my wife and I."

"Your wife?" Dax was nonplused.

"My ... former wife. Her name is T'Kalee. We became ... engaged to marry, as it were, telepathically bonded at age six by agreement of our families — negotiated between our parents, as you noted. I understand it seemed an appropriate union. At the appointed time, our joining was completed. She did not challenge, and we were married with the proper ritual."

"Challenge?" she repeated, puzzled.

Kaoron almost smiled. "*Koon-ut-kal-if-fee*. The preliminary to the Vulcan marriage ritual is still called 'marriage or challenge.' The only escape during the ritual, according to our tradition, for a woman who does not want to marry her family's chosen spouse. When the blood burns, a woman has the right to choose a champion and force a man to fight for her. It is seldom invoked. And at the time of our bonding, T'Kalee accepted marriage to me rather than challenge."

"And I thought I knew Vulcan customs....," Dax breathed.

"They are very personal matters. While not a secret, we do not ... publicize them."

"So ... what happened?"

"It was not long before T'Kalee declared she could no longer accept our bond." He pondered the floor. "We reached an accommodation, and ultimately ... divorced."

"Where is she now?" the woman couldn't help asking.

"On Vulcan. She is a professor at the Vulcan History Academy."

Kaoron waited while Dax went to her replicator, obviously deep in thought.

"Black hole," she ordered. Glass in hand, she turned back to Kaoron. "You referred to the impact of these arrangements on children. Does that mean," she asked delicately, "you have a child?"

"Our daughter's name is T'Pril. She is ten years old, and lives with her mother."

"Ahh." A moment's silence. Dax took a drink, then made a face. "I hate these things. Why do I order them?" She set the drink down and shook herself, focusing back on Kaoron. "T'Pril. I suppose you don't get to see much of her."

"No," he replied without elaboration.

"Considering her age, is she also ... betrothed?"

"She is. It was our last joint action prior to formalizing our divorce, at our parents' request. I believe we chose well for her," he said thoughtfully. "In any event, we cannot predict the future, and I do not doubt she has the strength of will to reject the joining if it does not suit her."

There was another long, expectant silence.

"Is it the admiral and Syrylnor both being here at the same time that has you ... thinking about your marriage and ... your daughter? Or isn't their mutual presence a coincidence?"

Kaoron realized he'd been avoiding the real issue and was potentially wandering into political and military security territory. He brought the conversation back to his personal concern. "Admiral T'Lara — my mother — proposes it is time to select a new mate for me."

"By Vulcan custom."

"Yes."

"Someone you may not even know."

"Potentially."

"Because your mother thinks she can do better this time."

"So she has stated."

Dax chewed her lower lip. "But you'd rather choose your wife ... your second wife, for yourself."

"Perhaps it is living among aliens for so long, for whom the idea of choosing one's own mate is so significant, but I find myself questioning whether I wish to be committed to a second woman I do not know and have not chosen, who may similarly not have chosen me."

"If your mother didn't marry the man her family chose for her, why does she feel entitled to choose a wife for you?" Dax asked reasonably. "A second time, especially, when her first choice didn't work for you, and it's not what you want?"

"It is our custom."

"So? You've already followed your custom. "

What response could he make to that? "I understand Trill do not have the same customs with respect to marriage. I am aware of my own mother's choices, and that they did not always correspond to the Vulcan way. Perhaps unlike her, I am uncertain I wish to defy my people's tradition," he said thoughtfully. "But ... I am considering it."

"Why?"

"At the moment, I have no other preference to take priority. And should my Vulcan blood burn again," he admitted, remembering the admiral's reasoning, "it may be the wiser choice to be thus prepared."

She looked unconvinced. "It doesn't sound as though you're sure what you want."

"I must admit, I am not certain."

"Is it because this is your people's custom, or because of pressure from your mother?"

"I ... doubt I would be considering marriage at this time, if my mother had not announced her intention to find a new mate for me."

"How do you think your mother would react if you said no to her choice?"

"She is not just my mother, but a superior officer and a member of Starfleet's military judiciary." A pause. "And she is Vulcan. I think she would not be pleased."

"From what I know of Admiral T'Lara, I think you're right," Dax had to agree. "Relationships with parents can be ... difficult at times anyway — I should know. But it's your life, you're the one who has to live it. You have to decide what you prefer, to let her choose a wife, or to insist on making your own choice."

"Indeed. However," he added, "if you should happen to know of any women who would be interested in becoming wife to a Vulcan-Romulan Starfleet officer and son of an admiral, I would appreciate if you would advise me. My mother has indicated she would take it into consideration if I had a specific candidate in mind."

Dax started in shock, until she saw the wry humor in his eyes. Then she laughed. "A specific candidate, huh? I'll keep my eyes open. Sane ones, I presume?"

"Preferably," he agreed.

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