

"The Ties That Bind"

Chapter One

Scene 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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Scene 2:

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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Scene 3:

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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Scene 4:

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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Chapter Two

Scene 5:

There was a buzz of excited conversation and tension at the central ops table when Kaoron arrived. He spotted Colonel Kira and Lieutenant Commander Alden, studiously managing to not quite look at each other, with Lieutenant Nog sitting between them. Constable Eryn stood beside the colonel, looking like she was thinking fast, with a pair of her deputies flanking her. The higher-ranking Bajoran station officers were also present, along with several of the engineering operations staff.

Kaoron quietly took his position at the science table, observing the discussion.

"I am assured by Minister Jolorn this is a positive step for Bajor and for the station," Kira continued with whatever she was saying. Her tone suggested she didn't entirely believe it herself. "If Cardassia recognizes Bajor's important enough to establish a formal embassy—"

"Might just mean they recognize how unimportant they've become," one of the security officers muttered snidely.

"Brilgar!" Eryn hushed her deputy sharply.

Kira's eyes flashed, but Alden just barely hid amusement.

A Cardassian embassy on the station? That would indeed be a change.

"They can't be trusted," one of the engineers, Pryn Benu, interjected aggressively. "They haven't wanted to set up an embassy in eight years — why now?"

"It's a first step. They're worming their way back onto our world," another suggested.

"I'm sure I don't need to mention there are Cardassian embassies on every major world in the Federation, and have been for years," Alden said smoothly. "And they have not succeeded in taking over the Federation."

Kira looked surprised but gratified at the support, and had just opened her mouth when Kuhlman interrupted from across Ops.

"Colonel?"

"What is it, Ensign?"

"We have an incoming message. It's the Federation starship *Mal'kom*. ETA thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes! I wasn't aware of any scheduled starship arrivals today!"

"They acknowledge being unscheduled, Colonel."

"Why are they here?"

"They didn't say. But they do want to talk with you, privately."

Kira looked even more irritated. "I'll take it in my office." She left the table. The door to the command office seemed to close behind her with a decidedly annoyed swish.

Kaoron couldn't help being thoughtful. "Indeed," he mused aloud. "I wonder as well what that ship is doing here."

Alden must have overheard. "What's so significant about the *Mal'kom*?"

Seeing he had everyone's attention, Kaoron reported evenly, "Admiral T'Lara of Vulcan often travels aboard that vessel."

Several of the crew exchanged looks.

"So?" Alden prompted impatiently. "What's significant about this admiral?"

It was Nog who answered. "Admiral T'Lara is with the Starfleet JAG office. The last time she was here, she presided over an extradition hearing for a Starfleet officer. If she's coming to Deep Space Nine, somebody's in trouble."

"Extradition! To who?"

"The Klingons."

Alden's expression hardened.

"There's no reports of anybody ... having done anything..." Pryen asked apprehensively.

"No." Emyrn shook her head. "Nothing that's been forwarded through my office." She glanced at each of the Starfleet officers around the table in turn.

"You don't suppose Admiral T'Lara just wants to talk to Shakaar about our relay station on the other side of the Celestial Temple, do you?" Pryen continued, turning to Nog.

He shrugged helplessly — his own involvement in the relay station was minimal.

"I do not believe the admiral would be involved in any discussion or negotiation regarding the relay station," Kaoron offered. "It is not within her jurisdiction."

"So what is her jurisdiction?"

"Briefly, jurisdiction itself," he explained evenly. "The admiral tends to be involved in judicial matters both within Starfleet and between Federation planets and other worlds. Including extradition, as Lieutenant Nog noted."

Alden was still studying Kaoron. "How do you know so much about this admiral?"

Kaoron met his gaze steadily. "I have had opportunity to become acquainted with Admiral T'Lara." To their questioning expressions, he added, "However, speculation may be premature. We do not at this time know if the admiral is aboard. The vessel does occasionally handle other missions than transporting flag officers. It may simply be another arrival for the artists' gathering on the station."

Kaoron calmly turned his attention to his station.

The commanding officer's door swished open and Kira stepped out. "We have a guest arriving." She studied the Ops personnel appraisingly, then made a decision. "Lieutenant Kaoron, you're with me."

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Scene 6:

The *Mal'kom* docked without incident, and the admiral disembarked. The Vulcan was a formidable looking woman. The formal white military uniform only accentuated her dark brown, sharply cut hair and sallow complexion. Her piercing blue eyes and narrow, tight mouth struck Kira as stern and somehow critical.

"Admiral T'Lara," Kira greeted the Vulcan officer respectfully. "Welcome back to Deep Space Nine."

"Thank you, Colonel," the admiral replied in a polite but detached tone.

Kira gestured at Kaoron. "This is Lieutenant Kaoron, the Starfleet science officer assigned to the station."

With no change in expression, T'Lara nodded briefly. "Lieutenant."

"Admiral."

"As you requested, Admiral," Kira continued after an awkward second, "I've contacted Bajor for a courier ship to transport you. I'm afraid, however ... due to very hectic current schedules and events, an incoming ship won't arrive for several days." At least, that was the excuse they'd given her; Kira wasn't sure she believed it, or the admiral would accept it.

However: "I appreciate the prompt arrangements, Colonel. And I assure you, a brief layover on your station will not be an imposition. As you may recall, it has been some time since I last visited here. It will be interesting to see what changes have occurred."

"We do have a ... cultural gathering aboard the station at the moment. A number of painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, and such, displaying their various talents and creations." For the first time, Kira was actually glad of the visitors; it might save her from having to entertain the admiral for the next few days. "I believe there are several musical performances scheduled for this evening as well, and dancing tomorrow, along with other events."

She thought she saw a glimmer of enthusiasm in T'Lara's eyes. "I look forward to it. There is much we can learn about other cultures from what they value in art, dance, and music."

Kira was happy to feed into the interest. "We have guests from several Federation worlds and colonies, Bajor of course, the Romulan Empire, Cardassia, even an Aldean."

"Indeed. An Aldean sun weaver?"

"I believe so. I've been given to understand this is somewhat remarkable, that the Aldeans seldom leave their world."

The admiral nodded. "Yes, despite the clamor and curiosity of those who have heard the ancient tales of that people and their creations. I look forward to a closer observation of their legendary highest art form. It

appears a most unique fusion of light and sound."

"I haven't had opportunity to see it myself yet," the colonel had to admit, irrationally feeling guilty. "Things have been rather hectic on the station."

"Of course."

"Syrlynor of Vulcan is also among the visiting artists," Kaoron stated quietly.

T'Lara looked at him. "It has been long since I encountered Syrlynor. He is a gifted mathematician and artist. His work is quite precise and logical." She turned her attention back to Kira. "I presume you have arranged quarters for my stay here."

"Yes, although probably not to your usual standard — with so many guests here, we're a little cramped just now...." Kira apologized.

"I quite understand, Colonel. But I assure you, I do not expect to spend much time there, and my needs are simple. I am sure you have many additional responsibilities today, especially with so many visitors. Perhaps your lieutenant can show me to my quarters, and you can return to your duties."

Feeling dismissed, Kira nodded. "Certainly, Admiral."

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Scene 7:

Kaoron led T'Lara toward the habitat ring. The first few moments passed with unremarkable small talk, including comments on some of the current visitors to DS9, and how the station had come to play host to them. Then:

"I have read your report on the incident with the Wormhole closure," the admiral remarked after a brief lull in the conversation. "I must agree with your assessment the Romulans' primary goal was not scientific research."

"May I inquire, Admiral, if any additional information has come to light on that issue?"

"It would be better if you did not."

"Then my inquiry is withdrawn."

"That is appreciated."

They walked on.

Kaoron couldn't resist his curiosity. "Does your visit to Bajor suggest Federation concerns about potential Romulan intelligence activity in this sector?"

Annoyance showed only in the slightest tightening of the admiral's mouth. "Lieutenant, your ... interest in the Romulans is understandable, in light of your heritage, and I do not begrudge it. However, you do not have the necessary clearance level to discuss this matter."

"My apologies, Admiral." A second later, he paused before a door. "If they are satisfactory, these will be your quarters for the duration of your stay on the station." The door slid open.

"I am sure they will be." The admiral glanced inside.

"However, I must advise you, these quarters are very near those assigned to several of the visitors for the arts festival."

She turned back to him. "In what manner is that a concern?"

"It may perhaps be ... uncomfortable. Colonel Kira thought you might wish to be located near the Vulcan artists. Syrylnor's quarters are three doors down, on the right."

The admiral stared thoughtfully down the corridor, but made no response.

"I thought you should know." Kaoron bowed his head. "I am due back in Ops. I will arrange for your personal gear to be transported here. If you have no plans for dinner this evening, I can recommend several restaurants on the Promenade. Or perhaps you will dine with Colonel Kira and the senior officers, or other dignitaries on the station?"

"No, I will eat in my quarters this evening. I have matters to review. I assume the replicators are operational? But I anticipate attending several events tomorrow. And I also wish to speak with you again. There is a matter we must discuss."

"As you wish." A stirring of uneasiness in his thoughts, Kaoron returned to Ops.

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Scene 8:

His sleep had been unsettled, and he woke early. With several hours before he was due on duty, Kaoron elected to spend time at the science lab, hoping to glean a few more tidbits of useful information from what he'd come to consider "his" debris. His expression set and focused, the lieutenant lowered himself onto his heels to peer through the force screen at the magnified fracture patterns of the thick metal panel.

"A rather unusual alloy, in a Breen ship," he murmured to himself. "And yet if...."

He heard steps entering the lab. The pacing was measured and familiar.

"Admiral," he greeted, rising.

"Lieutenant." She sounded reproofing.

"After your long trip, I expected you would want to rest this morning, or I would have stopped earlier."

"I am accustomed to rising early, as you may recall. Sixty-five years in Starfleet have served to hone my personal discipline," the admiral replied with no hint of boasting in her neutral tone. "And I had hoped to encounter and speak with you privately."

"I am of course at your disposal. Do you wish to speak here, or perhaps over breakfast? Or do you begin your day with athletic activity?"

"I find early activity increasingly beneficial as the impact of age becomes more pronounced," she observed, "and I doubt you have failed to recognize my apparel."

"You have not yet reached ninety years of age, Admiral," Kaoron said. "I'm sure the impacts are not yet so pronounced."

"Attempts at flattery are illogical," T'Lara said dryly. "And I would have expected, as we have privacy and are obviously off the record, we could address one another other than by rank."

Kaoron bowed, his lips twitching slightly. "Of course, mother. What is your current preferred morning exercise? I will certainly join you."

"Whether familiar or not?" She sounded both approving and exasperated at the same sound — Kaoron had

never understood how she could manage that.

"I am willing to attempt most activities, once."

"So I have noted. But we have a serious matter to discuss, my son."

He raised an eyebrow.

"A family matter."

There was a long silence.

"I shall change into more appropriate attire and join you," he said evenly.

* * * *

Chapter Three

Scene 9:

"...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?"

* * * *

Scene 10:

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.

* * * *

Chapter Four

Scene 11:

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."

* * * *

Scene 12:

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."

* * * *

Scene 13:

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."

* * * *

Scene 14:

"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.

* * * *

Scene 15:

"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.

* * * *

Scene 16:

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." T'Lara 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. T'Pril was almost ten years old, the child of his first *pon farr*. The normal Vulcan biological cycle was seven years. He and T'Kalee 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."

* * * *

Chapter Five

Scene 17:

Kira first contacted Bashir to advise him of the situation. The doctor stated he would of course make his facility and staff available for the necessary tests, and could meet them there immediately. Kira next called the constable and asked her to invite Jord to the infirmary, politely. She then personally escorted Nilom there.

Constable Emyr and her charge arrived about ten minutes after Kira and Nilom. Ranjen Shayl and Vedek Nane accompanied young Jord. The two clerics appeared calm; the youth was obviously nervous.

"Ranjen Shayl and Vedek Nane were discussing various of the art pieces," Emyr informed her in a low voice. "Jord was listening intently, in my observation. When I asked him to come along, he became alarmed, and they immediately insisted on accompanying us."

Kira nodded, replying equally *sotto voce*. "Probably expected he was in some kind of trouble. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you to be the one who brought him here."

Emyr shrugged. "They're here."

"What is it you wish to discuss with Jord?" the dignified vedek asked before anyone else could ask, belying his apparent tranquility. "Is it the incident in the holosuite?" He spotted Nilom. "Or has there been some difficulty with another of the station guests? I assure you, if any of my students have misbehaved or broken any station rules, it will be addressed promptly."

"Oh, no, no one's done anything wrong." Kira nodded politely back at Nilom. "Nilom has raised some questions...."

"Do they have to be here?" Nilom interrupted querulously, pointing at the clerics. "This is none of their concern."

"I am his vedek and his guardian," Nane replied directly. "If it involves my student, it is my concern."

The Cardassian's mouth tightened, and she glanced at Shayl.

The ranjen focused on Nane. "I will return to the Promenade," he said smoothly, and bowed his departure to the vedek before leaving.

After an uncomfortable moment, Kira continued, mentally growling to herself. "There is apparently some chance Jord and Nilom are.... Nilom is looking for a relative. Her brother was a soldier. He served at Jalanda, where he ... knew a woman. They had a child. It was about the time you were born. He ... lost contact with his son and the boy's mother." She looked directly at the youth. "Nilom asked if you would be willing to undergo a genetic test to confirm or refute the possibility that you are her brother's son. Dr. Bashir, here, can perform the test right now."

Jord stared at the Cardassian woman, stunned.

"It's quite simple and absolutely painless," Bashir interjected soothingly. "We can have the results in less than an hour."

"Why...." Jord swallowed hard. "Why would I want to know if I'm related to her?"

"What?" Nilom bristled. "I am entitled to know if you are my brother's child!"

"But...." Jord turned an alarmed expression on the vedek. "Must I?"

"Colonel Kira!" Nilom's expression was outraged.

"Dr. Bashir," the colonel interjected hastily, all but shoving the heavysset Cardassian woman toward Bashir, "why don't you start with Nilom, while we talk with Jord. This has been very unexpected for him and obviously a shock. He's never had a biological family. Let's give him a few minutes to absorb the situation."

"He—"

Bashir hastily steered Nilom into the diagnostic chamber.

"Jord—"

"Must I do this?" Jord again asked point blank of the vedek, ignoring Kira. He crowded close to Nane as if to hide behind him. His stocky body towered over and framed the smaller, wiry form of the vedek. Nonetheless, it was as though the elderly man's own aura provided a shield over the youth.

"She came here to find her brother's child," Kira said, though none of the others were looking at her. "She's determined, and desperate, I think. I doubt she'll simply walk away if Jord refuses to undergo the genetic testing. She may petition the Bajoran government for help."

"He is of age. The authorities won't force him to undergo any test."

"I know." She couldn't help a welling of sympathy for Nilom in the face of the youth's balking — stubbornness might be another family trait. "She has no other family left. Would it be so terrible for an orphan and a woman alone to discover they're family?"

Nane nodded briefly. "It will do no harm, Jord. I believe it is important to have connections," he told the youth quietly. "If you are related to Nilom, you will have found family and half your heritage. And if you are not, you both will have the peace of mind of knowing."

From her previous experience with Nane, Kira understood the irony in his comment.

"Why would I care to know which of ten thousand Cardassian soldiers abused a nameless Bajoran woman and walked away from her?" he cried.

"There is something else to think about," Kira added. "She's not nameless. If you are Nilom's brother's son, we know who your mother is, and what happened to her. If the test is positive, you will know who you are as a Bajoran as well as a Cardassian. It will give you all of your family."

Near-hunger flared in the youth's dark eyes. But: "You have been my family for four years, and the Order before that, almost as long as I can remember—"

"Do you think we would ever walk away from you?" Nane asked protectively, resting a delicately-veined hand on the youth's broad shoulder.

After a second's searching gaze, Jord dropped his eyes and shook his head.

"So, Taban?" the vedek asked.

"All right. If you think it's a good thing," he said to Nane. Standing up straighter, Jord lifted his chin. "I'll endure this test."

* * * *

Scene 18:

Unable to concentrate on his work, Kaoron found himself again on the Promenade, mingling with station personnel and visitors, but keeping quietly distant, not joining any conversations. After a time, he found himself observing Syrlynor, who was explaining the inspirations for certain of his better-known works.

"I had not expected to see you here."

"Ranjen Shayl," Kaoron greeted the orange-clad monk.

"Lieutenant." The Bajoran joined him.

"Do you really find it surprising a person of my heritage would be observing the work of a Vulcan artist?"

Shayl cocked his head, studying Kaoron, his sharp gaze penetrating even the attempt at Vulcan aloofness. "Actually, no. But I had the impression this type of art would be less interesting to you than that of most of our other visitors."

"In that, you are correct," Kaoron admitted. "But in any event, I am here. What are your thoughts on Syrlynor's work?"

The ranjen gave a chuckle, an odd little sound from deep in his throat, then he studied the displayed pieces for a moment, craning his neck to get another angle on the three-dimensional works. "Colorful," he said thoughtfully. "Very precise. Quite attractive and eye-catching. Almost a maze for the mind, requiring active contemplation."

"That seems an apt description," he acknowledged. "I believe Syrlynor would be pleased to hear his work described as useful for meditation."

"I've noticed you seem particularly interested in Syrlynor's presentation, but I haven't seen you actually look at his works," Shayl remarked.

"I am familiar with his works; they are not new to me. It is more interesting to me to see the reactions of others to them."

"My impression is you were watching him, not us."

"It would be most impolite to ignore Syrlynor when he speaks," Kaoron chastised. "And Syrlynor is similarly offended when one shows the discourtesy of observing him when he would rather not be ... observed."

"I have noted he seems ... less social than his peers."

They watched silently as the artist finished his prepared remarks, then moved on as observers closed in with their own questions and observations. The artist now seemed almost ill-at-ease, surrounded by personnel and visitors, responding to comments. He quickly excused himself, leaving his assistants to deal with the crowd.

The ranjen stuck with Kaoron as he moved off through the Promenade crowd.

"You seem troubled. For a Vulcan."

"Indeed? But you forget, I am also part Romulan." Kaoron couldn't help some light teasing. "Am I troubled for a Romulan?"

Shayl peered intently at him for a moment. "No, you're not."

"How can you tell?"

"You aren't destroying anything."

"That sounds more like a celebrating Klingon!"

Shayl laughed out loud. But after a moment, he noted conversationally, "Many Bajorans come to me for spiritual guidance. Some also tell me of events in their lives, and ask for advice."

"I have observed that about you. Your people have a great deal of respect for your words."

"One of the officers here once referred to me as filling a 'father-confessor' role for him, despite not being of his race or his beliefs." The Bajoran stayed in pace with him as they left the crowds behind for a quieter section of the station. "I would hope you also would feel you could speak to me in confidence, if need be."

"Are you offering guidance?"

"You seem troubled, as though you could use guidance." The ranjen smiled briefly. "If you want to discuss anything, I would hope you would not be put off by the fact I am Bajoran and look to the Prophets for my spirituality and understanding of existence."

Several tentative minutes passed as Kaoron weighed the matter.

"I will consider it. Thank you."

Shayl bowed his head once in acceptance. "You know where I can be found."

* * * *

Scene 19:

Vedek Nane and his young art student left the infirmary as soon as Bashir had taken his readings.

Nilom remained, anxious for the results, pacing the infirmary the same way she'd paced Kira's office.

Kira found herself half-wondering how the woman ever calmed down enough to work on her water sculptures. It almost wore her out just watching. The colonel had remained in the infirmary, politely trying to keep the Cardassian artist company, as she supposed she was expected to. Nilom, however wasn't in the mood to talk, and her occasional comments were more rhetorical than conversational. Several times, Kira considered calling Tarrn and ordering her to the infirmary to resume her guard duty.

It seemed like days to Kira, but it was less than an hour before the doctor reappeared.

"Well?" Nilom demanded before he could even speak, drawing herself up in front of the human.

Bashir glanced around first, to see if Jord was still around, before announcing, "The results are positive. My tests confirm you and Jord Taban are very closely related, genetically." He gestured. "Now, without your brother to test, I can't say with one hundred percent certainty he is Jord's father — but unless another male member of your immediate family was on Bajor at that time, he would be the most likely ... candidate. You have found family."

Fierce elation flooded the Cardassian woman's face. "My brother's son...."

Bashir turned to Kira. "We'll need to apprise Jord of the results."

She nodded. "I'll talk to Vedek Nane, and to Jord. Unless you think you should tell him, in case he has questions...?"

"I suspect you'll be able to answer any questions he might have, much better than I," the doctor deferred.

Kira was sure he was right. All the same, thinking about it, she thought she'd take Ezri along for that conversation.

"Colonel," Nilom caught their attention.

"Yes?"

"This will of course be kept confidential, I trust?"

"Confidential? What do you mean?"

"Well, I certainly don't want this to be public knowledge! My family may be dead, but I still have their reputations to maintain!"

Kira closed her eyes in disgust.

* * * *

Scene 20:

Kaoron found a message waiting in his quarters.

"So she is your mother."

Five simple words on the screen. An unsigned message that erased itself five seconds after he read it.

A conversation overheard? His personnel file accessed? It didn't really matter. He knew whence the message came and what it meant. It was an accusation.

He had never boasted of his mother's identity, but neither had he hidden it.

Ten years ago, T'Lara had presided over the court martial of Lt. Ro for the events on Garon II. The relationship between T'Lara and Kaoron had not been mentioned.

He doubted Ro or the Maquis knew, however, that T'Lara had recused herself from the deliberation and subsequent sentencing, in the decision to send Ro to the stockade. It had been the proper thing to do.

"Yes, she is my mother. And she was there," he announced aloud, for the benefit of anyone who might be listening, or for his own. "But neither the verdict nor the sentence was her decision."

He hadn't expected an answer, and he didn't get one.

* * * *

Scene 21:

Jord was dazed. "It's true? That Cardassian ... is my ... family? My aunt?"

"Yes," Kira assured him. "According to Dr. Bashir, the genetic testing confirms the two of you are family."

"My ... father's sister?"

"Yes...."

Nane stood silently aside, watching the youth's response. For her part, Kira had dragged Dax along, thinking Jord might need a little help dealing with what he was learning. Or maybe, she admitted to herself, she might need the back-up herself. In any event, she had collected the group of them in the vedek's guest quarters.

The young man looked bewildered. "I barely remember my mother. I never knew my father."

"Your father's name was Crell Komed. He was a simple Cardassian soldier, stationed at Jalanda."

Jord listened, wide-eyed. As if unable to help himself, he leaned closer.

"He was named after a relative who'd been in the military before him. He grew up in Lakarian City on Cardassia. He had a brother and three sisters. They're all dead now, except Nilom." Kira was glad of the additional information she had drawn out of Tarrn from her lengthy conversations with the water sculptor.

"Komed was intelligent and liked to read enigma tales. He came from an artistic family, as you might gather from Nilom, although he didn't think he had much talent himself. He was strong, athletic — he won an inter-unit wrestling competition three years in a row. He also enjoyed racing sand-trackers on Cardassia, and in the Bajoran Outback." She took a deep breath, looking at his face.

"And he loved your mother so much he broke off an engagement to a Cardassian woman and risked his life and career to have you and your mother taken to safety when he knew you were in danger from his commanding officers." A beat. "He died in a transporter accident."

That should be more than enough to whet the youth's appetite to know more. And if it wasn't, well, at least it was something positive to know about his father.

The others waited, watching his response.

After a pause, Jord burst out, "What about my mother?"

Kira nodded. "Your mother's name was Jasso Rahl. She was born and grew up in or near Jalanda. She had no known siblings, and the people we believe to be her parents died at the Elemspur detention camp."

She watched Jord absorb this, blinking.

"With your father's help, your mother was able to train as a medic. When she had to run to escape Cardassian authorities, she went to Kran-Tobal, and worked in a fishery, but used her medical training to help the resistance." A beat. "I found some people who remember her. They say she loved the outdoors and especially loved the sea. She could swim like a zurafish, and could rappel almost sheer rock cliffs." Another beat. "Her favorite color was yellow."

"I remember her wearing yellow. Gleaming like the sun," he murmured slowly, expression far away.

"For what it's worth, her family's *d'jarra* was the arts."

The young man's lip quivered, and he turned blindly toward Vedek Nane. The vedek reached out a hand to steady him.

"She apparently found a way to leave you with the monks at Karnoth while she tried to set up a new life. And then ... she died at sea," Kira finished, skimming over the rest of the story.

"I hate him! I hate them both!" Jord burst out.

"Jord," Kira said seriously, "your father sent you and your mother away to save your lives. Your mother hid you for the same reason."

"To save me from my own father's people," he replied bitterly.

"Yes!" Kira could see she wasn't making much headway. She glanced at Dax, her eyes entreating the Trill counselor to step in and get past the youth's anger and pain.

"They knew your life was in danger," Dax said urgently. "They both wanted you to live. They each sacrificed everything to accomplish that, even their relationship, maybe their lives."

"Why are you defending a Cardassian?" Jord burst out, still focused on Kira. "You're Kira Nerys! How can you justify—"

"Believe me," Kira said strongly, "I'm not defending or justifying anything the Cardassians did. But I don't want you to hate your own father for things he had no control over, but tried to make the best of!" The words were out before she even realized what she meant to say. "And whatever you think of what they did, Nilom wasn't part of it. She may be your only living relative—"

"I don't care! I have no desire to know her or go to Cardassia — why would I want to see that place? Or those people? I won't go with her! I don't want to know her! I don't want anything to do with her!"

He brushed off Nane's arm and rushed blindly out into the corridor.

Nane went after him.

Kira found herself considering Jord's last comments. She found she had no idea what, if anything, Nilom might do with confirmation Jord was her nephew. Maybe Nilom hadn't even thought that far. One thing she was uncomfortably sure of — the woman had no intention of taking the youth back to Cardassia with her.

"I think we'd better go too, Nerys," Dax said, sounding a little subdued. "I suspect he's going to need a little counseling from his vedek before he's interested in talking to anybody else."

"Won't you try and talk to him?"

"Remember when you were his age, Nerys," Dax reminded her. "Before you knew any Starfleet personnel or had any reason to trust us. Would you have listened to one of us about how to relate to a Cardassian, of all people?"

The colonel shook her head and followed her out.

* * * *

Chapter Six

Scene 22:

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....."

* * * *

Scene 23:

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."

* * * *

Scene 24:

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 of 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 Syrlynor 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.

* * * *

Chapter Seven

Scene 25:

It was the last evening of the gathering, the final formal party. One more day of playing host. Tomorrow, artists would begin departing, returning to their home worlds or moving on to their next destinations. By the day after tomorrow, most of the rest would be gone. In two days, the station would be blessedly back to normal, or at least as normal as it could be, for the moment.

Glass in hand, Kira looked around the ward room. This close to the end, she could admit to feeling relief it was almost over, and pleasure that the festival had gone so well.

The fete was another well-organized event. Alden seemed to have a talent for playing host. The food and beverages were impeccable. Musical instruments were arranged in groupings for this gathering, to emphasize the musical portions of the festival, as the previous receptions had emphasized visual arts and the dance. People were clustering around the instruments, and some were even playing.

Kira felt pretty good. No one had killed anybody. Her crew had done well. She felt less enamored of Minister Lizin, who never did come to the station to take part in the festival he'd foisted on her. Thinking about it, he no doubt knew about the plans for the Cardassian embassy, and was afraid to face her until her reaction was known and she'd had time either to settle down or to hash it out with Shakaar. She made a face. That was also likely the reason Jolorn had called her in the middle of the night, when she might be too fuzzy to coherently argue with him.

Kira sighed. She was still unsure what was going to happen with Nilom and Jord. Neither was happy about the other. Would they even speak to each other, now each knew who the other was? Did it really matter, since they'd both be gone in a day or two? She kept her eyes open in case either one showed up at the reception. She'd given Emyr an explanation and the head's-up to stick close, but wasn't sure that would be enough of a deterrent to trouble. The worst she expected was an argument, some yelling, but anything that made the other guests uncomfortable, was unwelcome.

Hopefully Vedek Nane would keep all his young protégés close to hand. Keep Jord out of trouble. Keep an awestruck Wani from hovering. Or maybe Wani could hover around Kuhlman, who was currently playing something with a lively tempo on the piano.

Kira caught a glimpse of a newcomer to the party, standing at the entry, scanning the crowd. It was Admiral T'Lara. Unexpectedly, to Kira, the Vulcan officer was wearing civilian robes. Something about her roving expression suggested she was looking for someone.

She crossed the wardroom. "Admiral."

"Colonel. It appears your guests are enjoying themselves."

Kira glanced around. "Yes. It's turned out to be quite a pleasant gathering."

"Quite successful in all respects."

Puzzled, Kira turned back to the admiral. There had been an undertone in her voice. "Yes," she repeated, then hesitated. "Admiral, is there something troubling you?"

"No, Colonel, not at all," the admiral replied calmly.

"I have to admit, I had some concerns about our facility being able to host so many visitors," Kira said, keeping her attention on the admiral, trying to read the enigmatic Vulcan features. "With so many refugees still coming through the station, and the increased numbers of personnel, rebuilding the relay station and strengthening our defensive capabilities — it was quite a change of focus."

"You have done admirably." T'Lara said absently.

Following her gaze, Kira realized the admiral was watching Syrlynor, the Vulcan artist, in the midst of a cluster of personnel. He looked ill at ease, and it was not long before he excused himself and headed for the door.

"Excuse me, Colonel." T'Lara followed him out.

* * * *

Scene 26:

"Syrlynor."

"T'Lara." He did not turn.

"You are failing your commitment," she said bluntly.

Now he faced her, his expression distantly polite. "Unlike some, I am unaware of having failed any commitment in my life," he replied.

A chill swept from her blue eyes, and T'Lara stepped closer. "You are here as an ambassador of good will."

"In what manner have I failed to demonstrate good will?" he said, his tone condescending.

"You have not mingled with the population nor sought out opportunities to demonstrate the value of Federation membership. You have behaved arrogantly with your peers from other worlds as well as the Bajorans. You have not attended receptions beyond the most minimal time possible, to the point of being insulting to this station and its personnel."

"You seem to have incorrectly chosen to style my behavior as the product of emotion. I would expect better of a Vulcan of your years and discipline. But then, perhaps after all it is not to be unexpected, coming from you," he replied with an edge.

"Is it logical to expect one you have insulted to respond favorably to you?"

"The Bajorans rejected Federation membership; they have chosen their path. I have no further obligation to

you, nor you to me. Hence it is irrelevant to me whether the Bajorans, or you, respond favorably to me."

"You should not have come here."

"I was invited." An eyebrow lifted. "Or would you have me suggest a Bajoran invitation is not worth accepting?"

"You have not been concerned with rejecting invitations in the past."

"If you refer to our own history, I had no desire to reside on Earth or to raise children on a starship, surrounded by emotional beings, while my mate focused on other worlds and failed to follow the path of Surak."

"You expected a mate to remain planet-bound so you could define your personal desires as though they were the path of Surak. You refused to accept the path of logic could be followed anywhere but on Vulcan."

"There were options on Vulcan. You chose to reject them."

"To leave was the logical and appropriate choice for me."

"It was not logical to choose a Romulan." The coldly polite words carried an undercurrent of venom.

"Your arrogance towards other species now is retaliation for my marital choice of fifty years ago? That is not logical."

"Arrogance is an emotion to which I do not subscribe. And to trust a Romulan is never logical."

"You delude yourself. Your historical prejudice and personal bitterness belie your claim to logic."

"You are in no position to determine anyone else's path of logic."

"That may be correct. It may well be no Vulcan is in position to pass judgment on another in that respect."

His expression closed down even more than before. There was a long silence, during which T'Lara could tell Syrlynor was mentally repeating the Dictums of the Syrranites. There were shadows of their childhood bonding still lingering in the depths of her mind. Finally, without another word, he nodded an abrupt farewell and walked away.

T'Lara closed her eyes for a moment to school her face to true Vulcan impassivity. Very few non-Vulcans would have noted the difference. When she opened her eyes, she discovered Kaoron standing behind her, looking strangely guilty. She felt a flash of something akin to irritation at that display.

"My apologies, Admiral, it was not my intention to eavesdrop."

"Perhaps it is I who must apologize, Lieutenant," she responded in an even voice. "My personal history with Syrlynor should have not have become a matter for public discussion. We will speak no more of it."

"It appeared to be an argument," he observed.

"Arguments serve no purpose. Our discussion is over. Let us return to the reception."

"Of course, Admiral."

* * * * *

Scene 27:

After the party, Kaoron was returning to his quarters in the habitat ring when he heard a sharp, angry voice, and recognized it. He increased his stride as the voice fell silent. A second later, just around the intersection

of the main habitat corridor and the crossover bridge, he found them.

Vedek Nane and Jord Taban stood together, the elderly cleric protectively between his student and the Cardassian artist, Yurusi Nilom. Deputy Tarrn, the Cardassian's assigned security, hovered near her, looking a little frantic with not knowing whether to intervene or not.

"Greetings," Kaoron said into the thick silence.

Nilom and Nane remained locked in each other's glares. Tarrn jumped. Jord looked relieved, but didn't say anything.

"I would not have expected such a gathering," he noted after a moment, appraising the situation as he looked from face to face.

"We just ran into each other," the vedek said smoothly. His expression was less calm, with a gathering storm in his pale eyes. "And it is late, we should be retiring. Come, Taban."

"I am not going to Cardassia or anywhere else with her," the young man insisted strongly, leaning past the vedek and apparently continuing whatever the discussion had been.

"What?" Nilom stared at him in absolute disbelief. Her lower lip curled in disgust. "Going to Cardassia with me? How could anyone think I wanted to bring you to Cardassia?"

The remark earned shocked stares.

"But you said...", Jord said, sounding sick.

"I said *nothing* about taking you to Cardassia! I want to ensure you *never* come to Cardassia!" Nilom took a step closer.

"Then you suggest ... bribery? To save you from having to acknowledge him?" Nane interjected himself between them again. Cold, unnatural fire glowed from his eyes and showed in his twisted mouth.

"Well, what do you expect?"

His face flushed with anger and humiliation; looking like he was about to throw up, Jord strode away. With a sideways glance at the lieutenant, Nane went after his student, calling his name but receiving no response. Kaoron, Nilom, and Tarrn were left standing.

Kaoron stared at the Cardassian for a long moment, his expression closed down. Then, with dangerous politeness, he stated, "I am puzzled, Nilom, as to why you sought out the young man?"

She looked offended. "What is it to you?"

"He is a friend to me. And you have deliberately hurt him."

"What? How dare—"

"You came to this station determined to locate the son of your brother. Upon doing so, you made no secret of your contempt for his very existence, that he is nothing but an embarrassment to you and you would much rather have found him to be dead, if at all—"

She moved to slap him; he caught her arm effortlessly. Tarrn uttered a single syllable of half-hearted protest; Kaoron silenced her with a cold look from beneath dark brows.

"You made no effort to learn who he was, or what kind of life he led. You offered no relationship, no understanding, no acceptance, no overtures. You dismiss his mother's world and culture as insignificant, and

imply he should want no part of it, but you make it clear you consider him unworthy to participate in yours."

Nilom sputtered incoherently with rage, trying to pull her arm free.

"You sought him out to satisfy your needs. You have no care for his."

"What do you know of my homeworld and needs?" she finally spat out, still struggling to escape. "I made a promise to my brother—"

"Which you have twisted into something hurtful. One's home should be a place to belong, a place every being is entitled to possess or create for himself, a place for family. Yet you seem determined to leave him with no place to consider home, and no family to welcome him."

"You heard him, he's not interested in me or my world—"

"And why should he be, when you make it so clear he will never be welcome there?" Contempt and anger were breaking through the remaining shreds of his Vulcan reserve. He finally released his grip on her arm, pushing her away with the same movement. "I think your brother would *not* consider you to have satisfied the intent of the promise he asked of you."

She held her arm close, nearly breathless. "You ... Federation...."

"I believe you indicated you were returning to your quarters." As if dismissing the Cardassian, Kaoron turned to Tarrn. "See her safely there."

Nilom's gaze jerked sharply from the science officer to the deputy. "Come," she snapped. "I leave in the morning, it's time to pack!"

The Bajoran blinked, her usual easy nature riled by the exchange she'd witnessed. "I'm your security escort, not your servant!" she replied with umbrage.

The Cardassian stared at Tarrn, then whirled on Kaoron again. "You...."

A tense silence hung over the corridor.

After several seconds of glaring at Kaoron, Nilom turned and all but ran, gesturing at Tarrn to go away. The deputy didn't even hesitate, but followed silently, her mouth set and her expression determined.

It took several minutes for the rage to drain out of him. Taking deep, slow breaths, he finally felt he could contact other beings without feeling the desire to smash them.

Only then did Kaoron realize Vedek Nane had returned, and was watching him intently. He hadn't even heard the man's steps.

"Is Jord all right?" he asked.

Nane breathed a sigh. "He will be."

"Good. Where has he gone?"

"I sent him to pack our things. We will be leaving tomorrow, and I do not think he will be sleeping well tonight."

A moment of silence.

"I am sorry for my loss of control," Kaoron said. "It was inappropriate."

Slowly, the aged vedek smiled. "Very few people have stood up for Taban before, for no reason of their own."

This may be one of the finest things anyone has done for him."

Nane reached for his ear, still smiling as he gripped the Vulcan's earlobe, then let his fingertips trace up to the pointed tip. After a moment of he said, "Your *pagh* is one of courage and honor. It has not always been an easy path for you, nor will your future road be so. But whatever path you take, you will make it the right one."

With a nod, the old man released him and went on his way.

Kaoron could only stare after him.

* * * *

Scene 28:

"You look tired, Ezri." Kira fell into step with the younger woman.

"So do you," the other woman returned wearily.

Kira looked around. "Not waiting for Julian tonight?" she asked lightly.

Dax shook her head, ignoring the teasing. "No, he had something to do back in the infirmary. And since it was with Dr. Monrow, I didn't think I'd be welcome sticking around."

"I don't understand how come you two don't get along," she noted.

"How come you and Endar don't get along?" the Trill countered without thinking.

"Monrow didn't try to blow up my station or kidnap my bartender and almost start an interplanetary war," was Kira's dry response.

"Okay, okay. I don't know why we don't get along either," she admitted. "Hopefully we'll work it out. But not tonight."

They strolled companionably through the habitat ring.

"What did you think of the reception?" the colonel asked after a few moments.

"It was ... good," Dax replied. "Endar did a great job planning it."

"Yes, it looks like he did." Kira seemed to admit it with reluctance. Then she shifted topics. "I noticed Vedek Nane and his student, Jord, stayed very close."

Dax looked down at the deck, concentrating on her footsteps. "I saw that too."

"I suppose you weren't able to talk to him."

"Jord? No."

Kira sighed. "I thought he could use a little counseling, after what he's learned the last few days."

"Sorry, Nerys, but he really didn't seem interested in talking with me." She pasted a smile on her face; she still looked tired. "But I think he was more receptive to Kaoron, and maybe now he'll talk to his vedek."

"Kaoron? Oh. Well, I'm sure Vedek Nane will talk to him, anyway."

Dax decided not to follow that line any further. After a few seconds, she asked instead, "Have you heard anything more from Bajor about the embassy?"

"No, not yet. I tried to contact Shakaar, but he hasn't been available, and neither has Minister Jolorn."

"Think they're dodging you?"

Kira smiled wanly. "Maybe. But I'm sure they're just as busy as I am, and we probably aren't a priority right now."

"Don't they realize that when Kira Nerys calls, there is no greater priority?" Dax teased with mock indignation.

Now Kira groaned. "I don't even want to think about that tonight. Right now my bed is calling and I just want to get some sleep. Here's your door. Good night, Ezri."

"Good night, Nerys."

Feeling a little dispirited, Dax watched Kira walk away before entering her quarters. She half expected and hoped the Bajoran would change her mind and retrace her steps for a late night talk.

Getting ready for bed, alone, she found herself wondering why it bothered her so much that one young Bajoran wouldn't talk to her, and then accepted it was more than just Jord. It was as though some critical inner voice was holding up every challenging patient or potential patient as evidence she couldn't do her job. Padding barefoot across the floor, she wished Julian were there tonight. She could have used somebody to talk to herself.

* * * *

Scene 29:

After the reception, instead of retiring, they had gone to the infirmary to review the test results; now the two doctors hovered over the computer, waiting.

"What do you think?" Monrow asked.

"I have a pretty good idea," Bashir replied intently, absolutely focused on the data. "Computer, run a full genetic marker comparison with that of the last Cardassian prefect of this station, Gul Dukat."

"Dukat!" Monrow looked excited.

It took less than a minute before the computer replied crisply, *"Affirmative. The paternal DNA corresponds with that of the Cardassian, Skrain Dukat."*

"Dukat... Do we you think we can identify the mother?" Monrow peered more intently at the console, as if it would reveal a name.

"Insufficient data at this time."

Bashir leaned back. "We may not know who the Bajoran mother of the person was, or is, but the Cardassian father ... was Dukat. Our records on Dukat are exceptionally detailed. He was prefect here for so long, and we have more information from when he was a prisoner, along with medical data on his daughter, Ziyal, to compare with. I can check with the Bajoran medical databases, but it's entirely possible the mother of this person is long dead, or may have lived in some refugee camp or colony world, and there may be nothing in the databanks for us to find." He glanced at Monrow, his expression thoughtful. "But I'll check. It could tell us more about that ship and its occupants."

Monrow nodded. "I know Kaoron would appreciate that."

She glanced back at Bashir as she walked out. He was still frowning at the screen. She shook her head. It might be difficult, it might even be impossible, but that obviously didn't mean Bashir wasn't going to try to search for more answers.

Scene 30:

Kaoron wandered aimlessly through the station. He was still focused on calming the thrill of rage in his blood. As a Vulcan, he decided, it had been a primitive urge to protect that had resulted in his response to the Cardassian's treatment of Nane's student. As a Romulan, there had been a certain aggressive and even eager elation in intervening. With the logic of cooling distance, he contemplated the vedek's assurances that whatever path he chose would be the right one for him.

"Lieutenant."

"Ranjen," he acknowledged.

"I am surprised to encounter you here, at this hour."

Kaoron realized he stood in front of the Bajoran shrine on the empty Promenade. The ranjen was probably on his way to prepare for the early morning services.

"I did not realize the time."

Shayl's gaze was sharp. "You have much on your mind."

"I have," he admitted.

"Come into the shrine," the ranjen invited. "It will be quiet there, and a good time and place to talk."

Kaoron followed the Bajoran into the shrine. It was quiet, peaceful, empty. A single duranja lamp glowed before the mandala of the Prophets; someone was in mourning.

Shayl began lighting candles and opening a number of incense braziers between the candles..

"Vedek Nane informed me of the ... incident during the evening," he said. "Your support was much appreciated. There is still so much bitterness between Bajor and Cardassia. The child who should be evidence our peoples can be reconciled is instead treated as a mark of shame."

The remark was too close to his own situation. Kaoron simply nodded.

"I also observed the words between Admiral T'Lara and Syrylnor, and then between you and the admiral," Shayl continued. "The bitterness between them will not heal either, I think. If I may ask, what is its source?"

Kaoron found he wasn't really surprised. "It appears far too many people were observing that moment," he noted. "At one time, the admiral and Syrylnor were ... to be married. It did not happen. I doubt either of them would be pleased to know their very private matter is become a matter of public discussion. "

"I am sure not," the ranjen agreed gravely, then hesitated before adding, "Is your relationship to the admiral a similarly private matter?"

"I was aware that had become known," he admitted, sighing. "It was not logical to expect my relationship to remain unknown, though it was not intended to be a secret."

"It is of little concern to most," Shayl assured him. He removed a small, richly-embellished tin from a concealed cabinet in a side niche, and began refilling the braziers, scooping small mounds of dark brown y'rtana incense into them. "How did your parents come to be married, then? Since your father was ... not Vulcan? Was he the reason your mother and Syrylnor did not marry?"

"No. That relationship had already ended. My mother was a Starfleet officer, overseeing security for the

engineering conference during which my father requested asylum. They spent time together during the political battle between governments as to whether the Federation would support his defection. Naturally, the Empire wished him returned."

"Naturally."

"But ultimately, he was permitted to stay. At some point, my parents decided to marry. In time, I was born. And as I have noted, four years after my birth, he succumbed to illness."

"Your mother has not remarried."

"No."

Kaoron saw an odd smile cross the Bajoran's face. "It is not unknown for a parent to focus their attention on their offspring, when they feel something wanting in their own lives."

"So I have heard," he acknowledged.

"The relationship with one's parent is precious. It is worth preserving. But not at any or all costs."

"So I have also heard."

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Chapter Eight

Scene 31:

There was no sunrise on Deep Space Nine. The station was too far from Bajor's star or any other, for a natural day-night cycle. Morning showed in a change of shifts and personnel beginning to move around the station for their own purposes. Kaoron deliberately lingered at the airlock where he knew Vedek Nane and his students would be disembarking.

Vedek Nane and his young protégés arrived on time for their transport to Bajor. Kaoron observed as Nallan and Wani said their good byes, hugging as good friends would before the taller girl waved her farewell and vanished into the crowd.

The sharp-eyed Nane had spotted Kaoron, and held back with Jord, gesturing Nallan to board ahead of them and then pointed Jord in his direction with a stern expression. At first, the student shook his head, but when the vedek repeated the order, Jord turned toward Kaoron and approached slowly. It was obvious Jord hadn't slept well; his dark gray eyes were bloodshot and ringed with red.

"Will you walk with me?" Kaoron asked the youth.

He shook his head. "I can't leave Vedek Nane," he insisted. "We're leaving the station very soon. I don't want to miss my ship."

"Very well," the lieutenant acquiesced. "We'll stand over here, so we can talk, and not be in anyone's way."

He studied Jord's face until the young man fidgeted in discomfort.

"What?" he burst out.

"Are you unhappy you will not see Nilom again?" Kaoron asked.

"Why would I be unhappy about not seeing ... that Cardassian again?"

"I grew up essentially without a father, knowing his family wanted nothing to do with me, with many of my mother's people similarly negative in their attitude toward my father's world," Kaoron continued thoughtfully,

not directly answering the question. "Your life has been similar in many respects. No father present, knowing his people looked down upon your world and your very existence, knowing your mother's people despised and feared your father's people for what they had done. We neither of us have any reason to expect or love anything of our sires' cultures. And yet, I must confess if my paternal family appeared at my door and offered acceptance, I would not reject it."

He rested a hand briefly on the youth's shoulder. "I think," he observed shrewdly, "when you learned Nilom really was family to you, you had subconscious hopes or expectations of her for a relationship beyond what you realized. For some aspect of belonging. It was difficult to see those hopes dashed, from whatever level, however illogical they may have been."

Jord twitched his denial.

"You need not admit it now, to me. But I believe you will benefit from admitting it to yourself," he said in a softer tone. "Continue to speak with your vedek. And if you choose, you may talk to me. I will be here on the station. Come when you wish." He dropped his hand. "Travel safely, Jord Taban."

The younger man scurried quickly back to Nane's side.

Kaoron nodded farewell to both of them, and waited while they joined Nallan in the airlock and boarded. He glimpsed Jord looking back once, and hoped it was a positive sign. The airlock cycled shut, and they were gone.

Kaoron sighed. There were many kinds of rejection, and they worked both ways, he thought to himself.

It was time to talk to his mother.

* * * *

Scene 32:

The Bajoran courier ship had arrived. Admiral T'Lara was scheduled to leave for Bajor within the hour. Since he might not otherwise see her before she returned to Vulcan, and presumably started making wedding plans for him, Kaoron knew he needed to talk to her immediately.

"Admiral," he greeted her at the door to her quarters.

"Lieutenant. I presume you have come to escort me to the airlock?" She gestured inside. "Come in. I will be ready to depart shortly."

Kaoron entered the admiral's quarters. "Yes, that is my assigned duty." He hesitated, then steeled himself to go beyond familial courtesy. "But additionally, mother, I would like to discuss the arrangements you indicated you would be pursuing for my future."

One eyebrow lifted. "They are not complete. I anticipate speaking with T'Bren upon my return to Starfleet Command. I will keep you informed—"

"I am not sure that is necessary."

Both eyebrows shot up. "You interrupt me?"

"My apologies, mother. However, with respect, there is something I must say." A tense few seconds of silence hung between them. Then he repeated, "It is not necessary."

"What?"

"You were free to make your own choice for your second mate. I wish the same freedom to choose."

"You are hesitant to marry again to a woman of my choosing because of T'Kalee and the way your bonding with her ended." Was that a flash of anger?

He considered judiciously. "Perhaps."

"I assure you, I will choose someone more compatible," she said strongly. "You will both be adults, and we will be able to judge your personalities and choices in life."

"Your family did not choose your second mate."

T'Lara's expression was grim for a moment. "True. But not relevant. You are a Vulcan male."

"I am well aware of that fact, mother," he acknowledged. "I am merely surprised one who has demonstrated such willingness to defy our culture in her own marital choices, is determined to enforce its demands upon her child."

For a second, he thought he glimpsed a shock of anguish in her blue eyes, swiftly veiled.

"My son," she said slowly, "it is not just you who have faced rejection from among our people."

He studied her more closely. "I ... have become aware of Syrlynor's response. He was offended for multiple reasons that you did not wish to be joined to him if it meant remaining on Vulcan, but more offended you chose a Romulan."

"He is not alone in his reaction to my choice, for more than personal reasons. Though it has been generations since the first Vulcan took a true mate from another species, there are still those of our people who consider it a failure of logic and a violation of the principles of Surak, to abandon our traditions and choose a mate for any reason but logic and family agreement. And even when such choice can be demonstrated to be logical, there are those who feel the choice of a non-Vulcan spouse is ... inappropriate. Especially when that choice is one who will not even attempt to live by our philosophies."

Kaoron thought he detected frustration in her well-modulated tone.

"Such bigotry is not logical and does not speak well of our people, but there are Vulcans who prize tradition to an extent that ceases to be logical, in my perception. They put much pressure on our people to adhere to tradition."

"Infinite diversity in infinite combination," he quoted. "But not in our own homes."

"So it seems."

"You ignored them, in selecting my father."

She spoke quietly. "If I had not been in Starfleet, and residing among aliens far from home, I do not know I would have done so. Indeed, most of the Vulcans who have chosen mates from beyond our species have been in Starfleet, or widely traveled beyond our homeworld."

"Had you not been in Starfleet and residing among aliens, you would not have met my father," Kaoron observed.

"Logical, but irrelevant for my situation. The joining was not welcomed among many of my acquaintances, nor did most of my family approve. You must recall, for many Vulcans at that time, the Romulans were still regarded as little more than violent savages and enemies — death was preferable to the perceived horrors of their passions. Our twined histories suggested to many among our people that marriage with a Romulan was nothing but submission to an enemy."

"I am aware of that facet of our histories," he conceded. "In centuries past, some Romulans delighted in

conquering Vulcans in every way possible, and children were evidence of conquest. For a high-caste Romulan to abandon his people, as father did, and willingly bond to a Vulcan woman, could only have been considered humiliating to his family, and my existence the living proof of his degradation. My being suggested defeat to both peoples."

"You understand the nuances," acknowledged his mother.

"But ultimately it ceased to be an issue, did it not? Your bonding proved true, and the situation has changed between our peoples."

"Only after your father's death, for me, although I did not take another mate. And I am sure I do not need to remind you it was an issue of greater significance to T'Kalee than I and her parents realized."

"So you now demonstrate your adherence to our people's traditions by publicly proving you follow the custom of choosing my mate for me, again, and thereby hope both you and I will be less tainted by your youthful choice of mate."

"You seem determined to attribute this decision to an emotional reaction on my part."

"I can only judge by what I have observed. Do you think choosing my wife for me will cause them to forget you yourself defied that custom, mother? Or forget your son is part Romulan, only half Vulcan?" he asked sincerely.

"Vulcan enough to have burned with the fever."

There were some things he could not ask about his parents' relationship. But: "Do you regret your choice?"

"No," she said more quietly, "though I did not have many years with your father. But the years since then ... have been long. And there have been times I have wondered if it would have been the wiser course to have resisted the illogical attraction I felt to your father." T'Lara's voice sounded weary.

"Mother, I am content as I am." A beat. "I will speak freely. It has been over thirty-five years since my father died. If this decision to select a new mate for me is part of a desire for us both to be more welcome among our homeworld's society, perhaps you should open yourself to the possibility of a new mate. You have rank, position, family name, a reputation for logic and justice. I anticipate there would be many on our world who be greatly honored to be joined to you. A return to ... respectability on Vulcan need not depend solely on my bonding."

"Perhaps," she replied neutrally, but immediately returned to the subject of his future. "But what of you, my son?"

He weighed his thoughts and possibilities, then, setting aside possible regrets and personal feelings, he bowed to what millennia of rigid tradition and filial duty had bred into his blood. This was a cost he had no choice but to pay. "I will honor your offer to seek out a second wife for me. But if you are willing, I hope you ... will not hasten your choice."

After a moment, she said, "I will consider that." She glanced at the bag beside the couch. "For now, I must tend to my duties to the Federation."

He picked up the duffel and slung it over his shoulder. "I will escort you to the airlock, Admiral."

* * * *

Scene 33:

The Promenade seemed incredibly empty. Kaoron knew that, numerically, it was the usual number of station personnel and visitors, but without the many guests of the festival, the space seemed sparsely populated.

He was pleased to encounter Lt. Dax. "Greetings, Lieutenant."

"Hi, Kaoron. It's good to see the station getting back to normal."

"Strange," the Vulcan commented. "In observing how many people have left with the conclusion of the festival, the Promenade had struck me as deviating from the norm. I find myself missing the crowds."

The young Trill chuckled. "Including Admiral T'Lara?"

"Indeed," he agreed amiably.

"Were you able to talk with your mother before she left?"

"I was."

"And are you engaged?" Dax asked carefully.

"Not yet," Kaoron admitted. "But I suspect it will not be long. My mother tends to be very prompt and efficient in her undertakings."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dax commiserated. "Hmm, it feels odd to express regrets when one learns a friend may soon be married."

He allowed himself a wry smile. "It is my obligation."

The woman considered. "She didn't want to consider your uncertain feelings?"

"I believe she considered them, but determined they were not significant enough to overcome the logical reasons she had for her decision. And I have concluded it is logical and of sufficient value to me, to acquiesce to that decision." He pondered. "At times, when my mother and I speak, we use a great many words, but sometimes seem to build an impenetrable wall with them. Perhaps a mind-meld would be easier, with less opportunity for misunderstanding."

"Is there a reason you haven't mind-melded?"

"The timing has never seemed appropriate. And it has been complicated by her being a superior officer, and the security issues of her rank and position. I hope to recognize when the moment is appropriate."

"If I can make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"Don't wait too long. It's easy, for family, to assume the other will always be there and there will always be time to say what you want to say. But you know as well as I do, it doesn't always happen that way, and we're left with regrets we can never undo."

"You have your regrets as well, Ezri Dax?"

"I do," she replied softly.

After a moment's silence, she nodded and forced a smile, then walked away. He watched until she vanished into the turbolift, then went his own way.

* * * *

Scene 34:

That evening, Kaoron found neither his usual distraction nor consolation in reading human poetry. After a

time, he put aside the volume of the human poet Figar.

He couldn't stop thinking of Jord Taban, who had spent so many years never knowing either parent, but convinced his mother had been raped and abused by Cardassians. He hated his father's people for the abuse they inflicted on his mother's people, and for his having been raised as an orphan, utterly rejected by his father's race and treated with suspicion or pity by many of his mother's people.

He and his peoples were both wounded in ways they might not even recognize, by what his existence represented.

Jord's father's culture and people rejected him, just as Kaoron's own father's culture and people had rejected him, but at least he had his mother, Kaoron thought. And while expecting him to follow certain Vulcan customs, such as their marriage rites and practices, his mother had recognized his right to his father's culture, and ensured he would be raised with knowledge of it and access to it. She had been perceptive in recognizing his need for both parts of his blood, and correct in allowing him to thread a course between those heritages.

His mother had been correct about something else — T'Pril's right to know she had a father who was involved in her life, and similarly his right to know his daughter, and his obligation to be there for her. Ten or thirty or a hundred years from now, he did not want her to have the pain of feeling she had been abandoned or rejected by a parent.

Thoughtfully, Kaoron leaned forward, steeping his hands at his chin.

Hopefully his former wife's rejection of their marriage and disdain for his Romulan blood had not turned their child against her own heritage, and against him.

T'Kalee, you are an intelligent and logical woman. I believe you will understand why we must set new parameters to our relationship, for the sake of our child. And if you do not understand, I will have to explain it to you, logically. He smiled briefly. Or perhaps I will have my mother and my aunt explain it to you.

He schooled his features to remove all evidence of emotions, then stated precisely, "Computer, I wish to dictate a letter to T'Pril of Vulcan...."