Friendship Conquers All

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Friendship Conquers All

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Summary

An AU, set post-"His Way" in Season 6, in which the Founders realize that the only way to convince Odo to return home is to destroy his connection to Major Kira and force him permanently into female form. Uncomfortable in her own skin, Odo begins to reconsider everything she values. Will love conquer all this time?

Notes

This was one of my earliest fics, written waaaaay back in 2016.

My style has changed, as has my interpretation of the characters, but I thought I'd put it up here all the same!

Chapter 1

Odo felt completely *wrong*. He crouched on the shore of the Great Link, his palms digging large welts into the orange sand, willing his shape to stay the way it was supposed to be. If he could only convince his shape to stay the same, then maybe his mind would follow. He was too confused to think, his mind too preoccupied with conflicting images of his friends and, most predominantly, Kira.

He turned back to face the Link and almost lost his balance, his body wanting to turn on a different center of gravity than he was used to. Traitors. How could they do this to him? How dare they muddle his identity as if he were a marionette dangling from strings they held, merely a toy for their amusement? They must take some perverse pleasure in his misery, he reasoned. Either that, or they simply didn't care what he thought of them, only that they got what they wanted.

But inside, Odo knew that wasn't true. The Great Link didn't understand Solids, and they certainly didn't understand how much like the Solids he had become. They lived in a world where gender was assigned completely by chance, where an individual could leave them one day as a female and the next as a male. They had no concept of Solid life, in which each sentient was assigned a gender he or she lived with for the rest of his or her life, assuming no cosmetic alterations. And even then, the genetics were still the same.

Odo looked down at his suddenly foreign body. For the first time in his memory, the thought of his own nature repulsed him. He used to consider humanoid bodies repulsive. He used to think the efforts humanoids had to take to keep their bodies in working condition were unnecessary distractions in one's day. He used to think of his Changeling nature as invulnerable and controlled, with no hint of the disorder he faced daily in his line of work. He'd never expected his molecular structure to be used against him. He'd never expected to leave his people with his entire identity misaligned, with all of his friendships held in question.

He'd come with a clear goal. War was brewing between his chosen family and his people, and Starfleet wanted every edge on the Founders they could possibly get. They wanted intelligence. Of course, if Odo was completely honest with himself, he'd had his own personal reasons for taking this opportunity to return to his home planet, but he'd always intended to return to his friends. Now, his future was not nearly so certain. Did he belong here, with the ones who had such power over him that they could change every atom of his being and knock his world out from under him with a simple wave of the hand? Did he even have a choice?

For the first time in his life as a Changeling, he knew without a shadow of a doubt why humanoids cried.

With a reluctant sigh, Odo struggled to his feet, resting a hand on the nearest boulder for balance when a wave of dizziness washed over him. He stood still for a count of five seconds, willing deep breaths through his facsimile lungs. He looked down at his chest and

forced his eyes to stay there, forced himself—herself? —not to cringe. The reality could not be denied any longer. He'd been stripped of the identity he'd so carefully cultivated over the past thirty-some years. There on his chest, where nothing had previously been before, was a pair of feminine breasts.

He—she? —supposed she could be grateful the Founders had altered the fit of her security uniform, as well. Nothing felt tight or constraining. But it still seemed as if everything fit *wrong*. She supposed Garak would have a thing or two to say about the Founders' tailoring talent, but at the moment, she couldn't care less that she wore a uniform of the same fit as the major's. Once, years ago, she'd undergone the struggle of integrating her Changeling senses with those she'd developed through her humanoid form. Now, she was back to square one.

She took a step forward, over the orange sand, getting used to her realigned balance. She closed her eyes for an instant, concentrating on her individual cells. She made one last stand of defiance, one last attempt at what she'd been trying to do for the past eternity she'd been sitting here on the edge of the Changeling ocean. *Enough of this,* she told her body. *Stay in control! Form the shape that has always come naturally!*

No such luck. Odo took a deep breath. How was it that she had spent her entire conscious life taking on different shapes, experimenting with life now as a rock, now as a pillow, now as a volume of Bajoran dirt, ordering her cells to take on every manner of shapes, and now she couldn't even fix her own gender? The humanoid template came as naturally to her as breathing did to humanoids, she had practiced it for so long. And it took no practice at all to assume this new, female form. Why wouldn't her old, male shape come back to her? Why couldn't she remember?

She ran her hand over the nearest rock. Texture. Form. Composition. Unfamiliar silicates. Her Changeling senses were undoubtedly in charge. She closed her eyes and called forth her humanoid senses. Now she could feel the softness, the comforting feel of the dusty coating of the rock. Odo snatched her hand back, startled. What was that? She'd never felt a rock like that before. But it wasn't the rock that had changed, she realized. Her male perception was drifting away, out of her reach, and was being replaced with these new sensations.

What had happened to her? It was a cruel trick. These last few years, since Odo had found her people, she'd wanted nothing more than to get to know them better. She'd wanted to understand her own nature from the beginning, but her knowledge of her origins had given her someplace to begin. Just recently, Starfleet had sent her to find answers. For once, her own secret longings had been in accord with Starfleet, even if the answers they sought were of a different nature. And now, all she had were questions.

She didn't even have the fundamental reflexes that had allowed her to coexist with her friends and colleagues up until now. Every social convention she had ever learned was tailored for male behavior. Every friendship she'd ever formed—every romance, for that matter—was based on her identification as a man.

What would Kira think of her now? Odo could barely stand the thought. The major, despite all odds, had fallen in love with her at last. Odo imagined Kira looking at her now with shock. Then revulsion. Then disgust. Odo could see it in her mind, could see the woman she

had loved for as long as she could remember curling her mouth downward in a frown, pressing her lips together so as not to say aloud the dreaded words.

This changes everything, Odo. I can't love you anymore.

Odo sighed again and dropped down onto a seat-height boulder. Her body moved more gracefully than she was used to. Without thinking, her shoulders slumped. Odo lifted her hands to her face, staring at the thin, graceful fingers, willing them to change into the hands she'd always formed every day, the hands that didn't find it strangely pleasing to run their fingers through soft soil. But, as had happened every time she'd tried to change herself back, her body didn't respond. She scrubbed those infernal hands over her face, blocking out the rest of the world, shutting the dim orange-red light of the sun from her vision. This could not be happening. It was…impossible.

No. Not impossible. They'd altered her at the molecular level before. They'd transformed her into a human. All things considered, that was a far more complicated transformation than simply realigning her gender. And, Odo had to admit, far simpler to adjust to.

Kira wouldn't have hesitated like this. Kira would have plowed ahead, determined not to let one single windfall knock her off her feet. Odo closed her eyes and tried to remember the major back when things had still been normal. She could still vividly recall Kira's beaming smile, her steadfast courage, her biting fire…all things that had conspired to make Odo fall in love with her. Yes, she still loved her. More than anything, she loved her. But try as she might, she couldn't seem to work up a romantic attraction to her. Changelings had little use, Odo knew, for gender, besides mating and reproduction. There was no individual love in the Link. There was no reason for a female Changeling to fall in love with another female.

Haze filled Odo's mind. What was Kira, a lover or a friend? Her Changeling mind didn't seem to want to think of Kira as the former. And yet, the side of herself Odo had cultivated from her long life among humanoids demanded that things pick up how they had been before.

She dragged her hands away from her face and sighed.

Perhaps the simplest option was to stay here, in the Great Link. Odo had no doubt her people had done this to cut her connections to the Solid world. They wanted her to stay here, with them, and accept her Changeling heritage. And no doubt they had a solution and were prepared to help her adjust to this new reality.

No. She could not abandon her friends, especially not in this time of war. The *Rio Grande* was in orbit of the Changeling homeworld right now. Ah, yes. Now she was beginning to remember. What with the war currently unfolding, they'd debated taking the *Defiant* because of its extra defenses, but they'd ultimately decided that a runabout would be much less provocative. Besides, if Odo were to arrive on her homeworld via runabout, they could preserve the illusion that she was there to return home.

When she'd beamed down from the *Rio Grande*, her mission had been clear in her mind. She was there to speak to the Link, to learn from her people…no, that wasn't it. Starfleet would never have asked her to learn from them. Starfleet wanted her to learn their secrets. To infiltrate them. But the moment she'd materialized on the surface, she'd been accosted by *her*.

The female Changeling, their spokesperson. She had convinced Odo to join the Link before she was ready. Odo had asked for a moment, for just a few minutes to herself before her return to them—she'd wanted time to plan, to gather her wits before deceiving her people—but the Founder had taken her hand and had drawn her deep into the ocean that was their home.

And Odo had been expelled onto their shoreline, confused and shivering, her mind in a muddle, with no idea of how long she'd spent engaged with her people. It could have been hours. It could have been weeks. But the time didn't matter, not this time. She had failed. Her people must have read her mind through the Link and guessed her intentions. They must have discovered her true motives. And they'd changed her. Again. They'd used her weaknesses, her attachment to the Solids, to their own advantage. Yet again.

Odo pressed her hands against her knees and clenched them into fists. *Control,* she told herself. *Remember…control…*

With an effort, she pushed her emotions back into a small corner of her mind. She lifted her head and forced rigidity into her back. Good. She could still sit straight. She pushed to her feet and stood as tall as she could, casting her gaze about the red-orange world. She could remember the first time she'd come to meet her people, Kira at her side, instincts unknown to her driving her closer to her place of origin. She could vividly remember her hurt, her sense of betrayal, that the people she'd sought after for as long as she could remember were in fact the Founders of the Dominion. They had lied to her and excluded her. Instead of attempting to understand her, they had dismissed her as a product of Solid upbringing. Just as they were dismissing her feelings for the Solids now.

Odo let out a final, shuddering sigh. The glance she cast about her homeworld was her last. The caress she gave the nearest boulder, she knew, was her last.

She tapped her combadge with a brisk certainty she didn't feel. "Odo to *Rio Grande*. One to beam up."

Chapter 2

"Any sign of him yet?" Kira Nerys asked impatiently from the pilot's seat of the *Rio Grande*.

They had been in orbit of the Founders' homeworld for days now, but there seemed to be some sort of interference set up. They hadn't been able to detect a single life sign on the surface since Odo had beamed down three days ago.

Three days. With the Founders. Kira cringed at the thought. Nothing was so frustrating as the mystery of Odo's people. The hold they had over him, his drive to return to them no matter what wrongs they committed, frightened her. Even before she'd known of his feelings for her, she'd been afraid the Founders would one day take him away from her. And now…

Starfleet had no right to ask this of him. And Kira knew that Odo felt little obligation to Starfleet. The only reason he had agreed to this intelligence mission was because of the slim opportunity it offered. Maybe, by learning more about his people for Starfleet's benefit, he could come to understand his own nature. Kira understood that desire more than she'd ever admit. She, after all, felt a similar connection to her own people. But her people weren't the rulers of a vast, interplanetary dictatorship. Her people couldn't assume any form they chose or infiltrate the Solid world at will, and they had no desire to enslave those who opposed them. And her people didn't attempt to hypnotize and manipulate, like the Founders did to Odo.

And now, so soon after she'd finally stopped wasting time and had fallen in love with him, they were going to take him away from her.

"No sign yet," Dax answered her with a worried shake of her head.

Kira sighed and impatiently tapped the arm of her seat. He had to be down there somewhere. She had the visceral sense that something was going wrong. If the Founders were concealing what was going on, then something told Kira that the situation wasn't working out according to Starfleet's plans.

Take that, Starfleet, she thought. *Where's your intelligence now?*

"Major," Dax said a moment later, "we're getting a transmission from the surface. Weak. It's Odo's frequency."

Kira jumped forward in her seat. "Put him on!"

The crackle of combadge static suddenly poured from the cockpit's speakers. The voice that spoke was female and unfamiliar. "Odo to *Rio Grande*. One to beam up."

"Odo?" Kira paused. That certainly hadn't sounded like Odo. The comm wasn't clear, but she was sure she'd know his voice anywhere.

The woman's voice was broken and uncertain, but Kira was sure she detected a trace of resignation. "Yes, it's me. I suppose."

"Who is this?" Kira demanded. She briefly wondered if a Founder was impersonating him, but immediately rejected the idea. A Founder would know to duplicate his voice, as well.

"It's…it's Odo. That much, I'm certain of. They've…they've changed me again, Nerys. Kira. Major. I apologize, I…oh, let me just explain to you in person."

Kira's brow furrowed. They'd *changed* him again? Her head snapped up and she met Dax's eyes, her eyebrows raised in a question. "Do you think they…?"

Dax, always quick on the uptake, shrugged. "It's possible."

Had they made him humanoid again? Or…

The woman's voice, the only logical conclusion, suddenly gelled in her mind. Was it possible…?

"Odo?" she murmured.

"Please, Major. Beam me up. I…I don't want to stay down here any longer."

The situation fell into place in Kira's mind. She straightened in her seat with a new sense of urgency. "Go on, Dax. Beam him up!"

Dax turned back to her station and manipulated the controls. A moment later, the transporter shimmered behind Kira. She swiveled around on her chair and watched as the effect dissipated. Standing there in the *Rio Grande's* cockpit was a woman she didn't recognize. Wait, no. Kira realized she *did* recognize the strange figure. Her hair was the same, her face was distinctly based off of her male form, and her eyes…

Kira's breath caught in her throat. Those eyes. Odo had never been particularly expressive, but she swore everything he ever felt shone in those eyes. Now, they were filled with the greatest despair she had ever seen.

"Odo…what have they done to you?"

"This. Isn't it obvious?" Odo gestured at herself. "They've destroyed me."

"Odo, no…" Kira began, painfully aware that she had no idea what she meant to say, no idea how to help the man—woman? —she loved. "They haven't destroyed you, they just changed…"

She didn't finish. How did she know how much they had altered him? Maybe he was right, and he was no longer the man she knew. Maybe…

She shoved those thoughts out of her mind. "Odo, we can work through this."

He—she—tilted her head. Her eyes now wore that knowing, sardonic look, that expression of loneliness and resignation. She clasped her hands behind her back. "Really, Major? I can see the doubt in your eyes."

Kira opened her mouth. "Odo—I—"

Odo shook her head. "Please, Major. Don't trouble yourself. We don't have to work through this…if you don't want to. I…" She trailed off.

Kira clenched her teeth. No. She'd only just fallen in love with him. They'd only just begun their time together. "Constable, don't you dare walk out on us."

Odo closed her eyes and sighed. "How long until we reach Deep Space Nine?"

"A few days," Kira said. "That'll give us some time to talk, don't you think?"

"Major…"

Kira's warning look stopped Odo in her tracks.

"I…" Odo fumbled for a long moment. "I'll be in the back of the runabout." Almost as a second thought, she added, "Regenerating."

"Tired?" Kira asked, forcing a small smile.

Odo's head fell forward in assent, releasing a breath that sounded like relief. "Beyond believe." With an awkward nod, she said, "If you'll excuse me."

With that, Odo left the cockpit.

With a whoosh of air she hadn't realized she'd been holding, Kira swiveled her chair back around. Her eyes hesitantly slid over to meet Dax's.

"Major…" Dax began.

Kira held up her hand. "Don't you start. He'll come around."

Dax sighed. "Kira, just promise me one thing."

Kira met her eyes challengingly. "What's that?"

"Don't rush into this one," Dax said. "He's—*she's*—just undergone a major physical alteration, and…"

"Rush into this one?" Kira repeated. "If I don't try to restore what we had, he's going to think I don't care for him anymore. He'll retreat back into himself and we both know he won't have the courage to approach me again. I am going to be there for him, Jadzia. I am going to help him through this even if he shrugs me off."

Dax pressed her lips together. "Well, alright. We both know I can't stop you." She shook her head. "Poor Odo."

Chapter 3

The back room of the runabout was too small and too temporary to bring along a full-length mirror like the one Odo kept in her quarters on the station. Instead, she fashioned one out of her own hand and held it out in front of her, tilting it first one way and then another so that she could see all parts of herself.

Becoming a mirror was somewhat of an accomplishment for her. She could still remember the time, back on Bajor, when she'd first managed to form such a flawless, reflective surface. At first, she'd only become small, handheld mirrors. But as her shape shifting abilities had improved, she'd gradually learned to form larger, heavier mirrors. And eventually, she'd learned how to make one an extension of her own hand, as if she was actually holding it. It had become a point of pride for her. But as she'd looked into its surface for the first time, she'd realized just how *wrong* her body's proportions were.

She'd had trouble with her shape back then. Her shoulders were always too wide, her limbs too narrow. Dr. Mora had once said that she looked like a caricature of herself, or perhaps an unseemly cartoon. And whenever she'd tried to correct for those problems, she'd ended up overcorrecting. Suddenly, her body was too narrow and her limbs too thick. Her balance had been off because her arms were too primitive and ape-like, and they swung too much with every step she took.

Now, as she stared into that mirror, she heard Dr. Mora's voice in her head. *Too slender. Too elegant. What's happened to your male form? If your intention is to appear female, is this* really *your best attempt?*

Not again. She was back to square one.

She elongated her arm so as to hold the mirror far enough away that she could see herself from head to foot. It was all right, she decided. It was all right. Dr. Mora's voice in her head was just a voice. There was nothing altogether wrong with the proportions of this form, at least not that she could tell from her day-to-day experience with female humanoids. The problem was, it was so *strange*. So *different*. It wasn't the body she was used to. The uniform was the same, but it was the only thing that hadn't changed. Everything else was gone. Wiped away. Destroyed. Her formerly masculine form was a mere memory, a transient image in her mind. And the face that stared back at her…

It wasn't hers. It couldn't be. But it was. There was an added…softness to her features, a curvature that hadn't been there before. A set of well-defined lips graced her mouth, and her cheekbones were softer, slimmer, higher. But even with all of its minute adjustments, it was the same unfinished mask. Her people hadn't seen fit to teach her how to form a more humanoid face. *We don't care about you,* they seemed to say. *But you are powerless before us. Don't ever forget that.*

Not likely, after this change of shape.

Her gaze trailed down from her face. Her neck was more slender. Her shoulders were smaller, less muscular. That was odd. It seemed her mass as a whole had changed, had shrunk down. Shape shifting would be a whole new challenge now that her mass was thrown off. Everything was so much *smaller*. Well, except for her chest. The breasts were new…and they were throwing off her balance.

Farther down. Her stomach wasn't as tight. And then her waist. More slender, more curved. A wider pelvis. How were humanoids always describing females—as hourglass-shaped? Yes, that was it. She was hourglass-shaped now. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about being compared to a device made of glass and sand. But then, hourglasses were used to keep time, and that was a skill on which Odo prided herself. So maybe being hourglass-shaped wasn't all that bad.

Her legs…more slender. Her feet…smaller. How was it that she was trapped in this body? Was she simply imagining the drastic changes? She turned her head to the side, examined her gentler profile. Even her nose was smaller! She ran a hand down her cheek, over the softer skin. No, she definitely wasn't seeing things. She could feel the changes, too. Disgust slowly fell away to horror. No! She'd spent so long on her male form! She'd spent years learning it, practicing it, editing it, perfecting it—she'd become as familiar with it as, to use a humanoid phrase, the back of her hand—and now what? *This* was what she got for her efforts to understand her people and who she was! *This* was the shape she'd inhabit for the rest of her life! *This* was the shape whose quirks she'd have to learn, whose movements she'd have to adjust to, whose balance she'd have to develop—

And she'd thought she'd gotten past this part!

A slight gasp escaped her, and her hand slowly fell from her face, tracing along her body until it once again hung stiffly at her side. Her eyes widened in panic. It couldn't be. This could not be happening to her.

A light knock on the forward door startled her from her thoughts.

"Odo?"

Kira. No. Not yet, not now! Odo whipped around to face the voice, afraid that her former girlfriend would consider herself welcome and simply walk in. But the door remained closed. Odo breathed a sigh of relief.

"Odo? It's Nerys. Can I come in?"

No. Not yet. Odo's mouth hung open, unable to voice the words. She caught her expression in the mirror she still held. She'd never seen herself so afraid.

That was the biggest problem, she realized. This face was so…expressive. Everything she felt was written there, on her fuller mouth and in her wide eyes. Her entire face had changed, had become more revealing. There was nothing she could hide, no inner insecurity she could keep private. Not until she learned the quirks and workings of her face.

Outside the door, Kira's footsteps retreated. Odo nearly called out to stop her and had to slap a hand over her mouth. What was she thinking?

She heard voices outside the door. Kira and Dax. She wondered what they were talking about. She wondered if they were discussing her—why wouldn't they be? —but she didn't want to find out. She didn't want to see the hurt and fear cross Kira's face, only to be hidden behind that firm wall of determination. She didn't want to see the genuine concern in Dax's eyes. She didn't want that mind-reading Trill to take a single glance at her expression. She didn't want anyone to see the undisguised pain there.

Her old face had one advantage. As ridiculous as it had appeared, it had kept her secrets hidden. Her features had left her at the mercy of prejudice, but at least they had helped defend her privacy. She'd even come to appreciate the impenetrable cover they offered for her innermost thoughts. Over the course of her life on the station, the worst of the prejudice had died away, replaced with a strange sort of respect, and she'd almost forgotten how different she looked. She was only reminded when she double-checked her form every morning.

The mirror dissolved in Odo's hand. Both hands came up to cover her face, to shield herself against all judgement. To pretend to herself that the featureless façade she'd worn as a male hadn't changed. She hadn't lost her only means of protecting herself from the universe. She hadn't lost her talent for acting impassive, for hiding her emotions, for burying all that threatened her beneath that calm mask. She hadn't…

But with the fingers covering her eyes, Odo felt what she couldn't see. She had lost everything. And as the need to regenerate tugged at her, made her aware of each individual cell, she could feel the differences in her form. She could feel the slenderness of her arms and body. She could feel the impending slump of her shoulders that she so carefully held at bay. Her lungs struggled for air, seemed to fight against existence itself. She sucked in one shaky breath after another, her entire form trembling as weakly as a leaf in the wind.

It was time to let go. Her cells were tired. She'd held this shape for too long. She needed to rest.

With a sigh, Odo let herself dissolve into her natural state. Maybe the Founders meant this as a temporary punishment, more of a shock than anything else, and her body would be restored to rights in the morning.

Chapter 4

"My god," Bashir said as he examined Odo's medical readout. "They've completely repolarized your morphogenic matrix. Though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. The Founders have proven themselves remarkably capable of defying science as we know it."

"Don't remind me," Odo muttered, eyes downcast.

Kira found that Odo's voice as a female sounded remarkably similar to that of hers as a male when it was growled from deep in her throat. Odo was sitting on an infirmary biobed, face angled down, arms braced against its edges and slender legs dangling off of it. She was completely uniformed as usual, her combadge back in working order, her back straight and her composure repaired. But Kira had known Odo long enough to see through the guise.

Kira herself paced anxiously off to the side, nervously chewing on her lower lip.

"Well, there's some good news," Bashir smiled. "It seems they haven't altered your temperament. You're still the same old constable."

"That's a relief," Odo grunted.

Bashir's smile evaporated. "I'm sure it'll take some getting used to," he said. "But the fact is, Constable, I don't know what I can possibly do for you. The Founders have done it again. This is an incredible feat of genetics!"

"Are you finished with me, Doctor?" Odo grated, raising her voice to a pitch that sounded distinctly more musical. It startled Kira a little, but she shoved down that little voice of fear.

Bashir sighed. "I suppose I am."

A distinctively deep voice suddenly spoke from the doorway. "Constable? What's going on?"

Kira glanced up and nodded to the captain in greeting. "Captain."

"Captain," Odo said in turn, but didn't turn around.

"Captain, come in," Bashir said. "It appears the Founders have exacted another punishment on Odo. Last time, they made him human. And now…"

Sisko walked into the infirmary and paused to absorb Odo's transformation. "I take it this isn't just a temporary change of shape."

"Believe me, Captain, I've tried looking like a male," Odo said. "It didn't work, or I wouldn't be in this ridiculous body right now." She paused and added quietly, "I'm no longer certain I *want* anything to change."

Kira whipped around to face Odo, stricken.

"I see," Sisko nodded. "Do you have any idea why they did this to you?"

"I have a very good idea," Odo said. She shot Kira a penetrating look.

Kira jumped in surprise. "Me?" she asked incredulously.

"Indeed," Odo nodded. She seemed to regain her stride now that she had an opportunity to focus on the problem objectively. She turned back to the captain, and Kira found herself missing that bright-eyed gaze. "Remember, Captain, the Founders want me to return home to them above all else. They don't care about Solid ways of living. As far as they're concerned, I belong with them, and they will do *anything* to bring me back."

"I'm afraid you've lost me," Sisko said. "How is this supposed to make you want to return to them?"

Odo grimaced. "I had the same thought, Captain. This only makes me want to stay as far away from them as possible. But they still believe that the only link I have to the Solids is Major Kira." Kira flinched at Odo's use of her title. "They thought that in making me female, I would no longer want a romantic relationship with her, and that I would return to them."

"I take it that's not going to happen," Sisko said.

"Not until there's drought on Ferenginar," Odo snorted.

"Odo," Kira said softly, before she could stop herself.

Odo looked up at her, but Odo's eyes held none of their usual tenderness. There was no sympathetic softening of her features or relaxing of her shoulders. If anything, she only tensed further upon seeing Kira.

"Were they right?" Kira asked. She knew it was dangerous territory, but she had to know.

Odo's eyes softened sadly. "About our relationship, you mean?"

Kira forced herself to nod. It was far too late to back out.

Odo stared at her for a long moment. Finally, she dropped her gaze. "Major, I don't know. I… I never expected this to happen. I just…I need some time."

"Odo," Kira said, stopping her. "I understand." She knew this was it. Odo wouldn't tell her so, but this was it. Their relationship was over. Whether or not Odo still loved her, Kira had no idea, but she wouldn't dare ask Odo now.

Kira started to leave the infirmary, but she turned around at the last second. "You can still call me Nerys, you know," she said. "My friends call me Nerys. It wouldn't mean anything."

"You know that it would, Major," Odo said.

Kira jerked a nod and that time, she left the infirmary. She plodded blindly across the promenade, her vision a haze of frustration. She understood, in a way—she remembered all

too well her horror at being cosmetically altered to look like a Cardassian years ago, and how difficult the adjustment would have been if the change had been permanent. Kira was sure Odo was getting sick of her people altering her without her consent. She knew Odo was feeling betrayed.

Or was she?

It struck Kira that she didn't know. Oh, she was sure this would be difficult for Odo. There was no question there. What she didn't know was how this affected Odo's feelings for her people. For all she knew, the Founders had succeeded in weakening Odo's connection to the Solids. If Kira didn't act decisively, show her friend that she still belonged here, then she could lose Odo. For good, this time. No runabout could bring Odo back once her loyalties changed.

Kira entered the nearest turbolift and took it up to Ops with a determined set to her jaw.

Chapter 5

Hours later, Odo found herself behind her desk, watching through her semi-transparent office doors as the promenade crowd milled past. By the time she'd reached her office, she'd gotten used to her shifted center of gravity. Sisko had tried to convince her to stay off duty for a while, but she would have none of it.

"I'm still myself, Captain!" she'd growled. "I may have just undergone a complete switch of molecular programming, but I'm still perfectly capable of doing my job!"

Secretly, Odo had her doubts about just how much she'd remained herself. But there was no way she was going to admit that to the captain—or to anyone. Even to Kira. The most important thing right now was to maintain her authority over the station's inhabitants. It wouldn't be easy, now that she had a completely different body and she couldn't *quite* pitch her voice into a growl, but there were positives to being a female. She could only imagine how easy it would be to manipulate Quark now.

The captain had stubbornly insisted, but Odo had not changed her mind, and in the end it was Bashir who'd told the captain that perhaps it was best to leave well enough alone. "After all," Bashir had said, "it may be best to just let life go on, let things return to normal. Things might right themselves on their own."

Normal. As if anything was at all *normal*. But Odo was grateful for Bashir's support. She could only imagine what it would be like to spend her "adjustment" holed up in her quarters, with only her shape shifting apparatus to keep her company, a mockery of what she'd lost. Or —Prophets forbid—Kira, should she decide it was time to talk and come to corner her.

Odo shook her head. She wasn't even certain of the major's feelings. Kira had seemed accepting enough back in the infirmary, but Odo knew better than anyone how good Kira was at lying to someone who desperately wanted to believe her. Odo wasn't likely to forget Kira's initial reaction to her change, when she had beamed up from the Founders' planet. The shock, the helplessness in her eyes and voice…the way she'd stumbled over her words, for lack of something appropriate to say…

Kira had put forth a valiant effort. And perhaps she could adjust to the new circumstances. But there was no way to really know, except to ask. Odo had managed to avoid that conversation until now, even through four days trapped aboard the *Rio Grande*, and she had no intention of dragging them through a difficult reconciliation, no matter how much she still loved the major. What exactly could she say?

You seem to still love me, and I love you too, but it's as if love doesn't exist anymore. I reach inside myself, and I can't find the spark!

I'm sorry, Nerys. I can't love you—I don't know how.

I don't know myself anymore, Nerys! I can't even love myself! How can you?

How can you possibly love me? Look at what they've done to me! How do I know you're not just pretending? How do I know we're not back to square one? How can I trust you, Nerys?

I am a Changeling! I'm not like you! You can't ever bridge this gap—how can you possibly understand me now?

Each idea was worse than the last. And no matter what Odo chose to say, Kira would be faced with the impossible choice of denying Odo's heritage, or accepting the unfortunate truth of the situation…

No. Odo's priority now was to move on with her life and to assimilate her new perceptions on her own. Kira could wait for another day…perhaps sometime when Odo herself had some idea of where to take their relationship.

Odo sighed and leaned back in her chair as she surveyed the promenade through her closed office doors. She glanced down at the data padd that sat on the corner of her desk. It was her mission report for Starfleet. She picked it up, skimmed it over halfheartedly, and tapped it against the edge of her desk several times before letting out an annoyed harrumph. Starfleet had put her through this trouble—or, at least, had opened its door—and now they wanted her to report exactly what had gone wrong. They wanted to know why they weren't getting their intelligence.

Because you set me up for failure, Odo thought to herself with disgust. *Typical.*

She set the padd back down with a scowl. It would take her hours to hit the right tone, and she herself wasn't entirely sure what she'd done to warrant the consequences. And she was sure that no matter what she told Starfleet, they'd never understand. If she said her weakness had been the mission's failure, it would put her position on DS9 at risk. And then what would her options be, but to return to the Founders?

Hmm. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea.

Odo's scowl deepened and she swiveled her chair sideways. It was time she cut off that train of thought. She was staying here, at least for a few more days, she told herself firmly. She was going to puzzle out just what had happened to her. She was going to assimilate her new thoughts and perception. And she was *going* to make this work. She would not resort to her people, not this time. They could solve her problems, but they'd never understand *her*.

"Odo?"

Odo turned toward the voice. Kira stood in her doorway, the doors open to admit her. *So much for putting this discussion off until later,* Odo thought with a smidgen of annoyance. Once, she would have admired Kira's determination. Now, she only wished that for the Prophets' sake, Kira would just leave her alone.

"You're not gonna hide away in your office all day, are you?" Kira asked, taking a step closer and raising an expectant brow.

Odo turned away. "That was exactly the idea."

"We've hardly spoken since you beamed up from the Founders' planet," Kira said. "I think it's time we talked."

Odo gazed at Kira in a silent appeal. "Kira, I need some time."

Kira tossed up her arms. "That's it? You're just gonna shut me out?"

Odo didn't answer. *Leave,* she silently urged her. *You're not going to get what you came here for.*

Kira paced in front of Odo's desk. "No. *No.* I'm not going to let you do this." She wheeled and faced Odo directly. "How about lunch in the replimat?"

Odo looked up sharply. "The replimat?"

Kira shrugged. "Seems less…assuming…than my quarters."

"I'm on duty," Odo replied.

Kira set her hands on her hips. "Don't give me that!"

Odo sighed. "Major…"

Kira sat in the chair opposite Odo's desk and reached across to squeeze the hand that rested on its surface. "I am *not* letting you walk out on us, Constable."

"That's not what I'm doing." Odo shook her head. "You said you understood."

"I do understand," Kira said, her voice softening. "I'm trying to help."

Odo let out a long-suffering sigh. Kira obviously wasn't about to give up. Maybe it was best if Odo just submitted to it. *As the chief would say,* she thought ruefully, *"'ware the dragon."*

Besides, maybe Kira was right. Maybe spending some time with the major could help clear up her confusion.

Odo looked back up at her. "If you insist, Major."

"Great!"

Kira stood and tugged Odo to her feet, drawing Odo with her out of her office. Odo let Kira drag her across the promenade to the replimat and dropped reluctantly into the seat Kira pulled out for her. Odo watched fondly as she dashed over to the nearest replicator to order her meal.

Odo forced herself to take her eyes off of the major and focus on the rest of the replimat. She was still chief of security, after all. She could take advantage of this situation and use it as an opportunity to observe station goings-on. Her eyes scanned across the replimat, falling on one diner after another, one a man, the next a woman. All peacefully eating, enjoying the company of their friends and family. They had no idea what it was like to have the opposite

gender forced upon them. To have their senses, their tastes, their perception of the world turned entirely on end. Odo's gaze fastened on one couple who each leaned over their side of their table, talking animatedly, sneaking bites in between words. Behind them, a man gestured emphatically, while the woman sitting opposite him nodded thoughtfully, chin resting on her folded hands. Odo stared at one after another, all engaging in their daily life, uninterrupted. For them, the world hadn't turned on end.

Odo shook her head to clear it. None of that mattered. *Ignore them,* she thought. *They have nothing to do with you—don't let them see! Maintain their respect—don't earn their pity!* But before she could stop them, her old fears rose up from nowhere—of being a spectacle, on display, a treat for their eyes, nothing but a specimen demanding study. She could imagine Dr. Bashir ushering her through the infirmary, pouring over the data, composing the paper he would surely write for Starfleet, and then asking Odo for quotes. Or worse, escaping to Bajor, away from the prying eyes of the promenade…only to be accosted by an eager Dr. Mora… her eyes falling on the cytoplasmic separator, the only object in the room…and then widening as she realized—

"Odo? Are you alright?"

Odo snapped back to attention. Kira had returned to their table with her meal and now stood across from Odo, about to set down her tray. Odo was struck by the clear concern in her eyes and felt an irrational stab of anger—at herself. For Kira, nothing had changed. She was doing nothing now but trying to fuel their broken relationship in the only way she knew how. Kira had taken hold of the baton. Now it was Odo who was stalling and delaying, making up excuses to give herself more time. And the most maddening part of it all was that she *knew* how she felt about the major. She cared for Kira more than anyone else in her life. She just couldn't manage to…

"I'm fine," she lied.

Kira set her tray on the table and sat down. Her glance told Odo she wasn't fooled. "If you say so."

Odo fastened her eyes on the tabletop and folded her arms.

"Listen," Kira said, digging into her food with gusto, "we've got to move on from this. If you don't let me in, then this relationship is going to go absolutely nowhere. I want us to be together, Odo. And I'm willing to let you have some time to think. But how are you going to figure out how you feel about me if you never spend any time around me?"

Odo sighed. Kira's words did have merit. If only Odo could convince the rest of her mind of them.

"You don't understand," Odo said. "It's…it's not you. It's me."

Kira's fork paused halfway to her mouth. "What do you mean?"

Odo shook her head. "It's hard to explain."

"Talk to me, Odo." Kira dropped her fork and leaned across the table in earnest. "I know you don't like talking about what you're feeling, but now is the time." She gripped Odo's hand so fiercely it startled her, and Odo looked up into her intense gaze. "I want to be here for you."

Odo could only sit still, paralyzed under the gaze of the woman she'd once loved. Always loved. Still loved. Dammit, her humanoid self knew how she felt. Why couldn't her Changeling instincts just follow?

"*Please,*" Kira said.

Kira never begged. Odo knew that much. The word startled her out of her daze. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" Kira asked. "Are you apologizing for shutting me out? Or are you deciding not to let me help?"

"*Kira.*" Odo drew the name out into a plea. "I'll ask for your help when I need it. I need some time. My mind's in such a muddle right now…there's nothing you can do for me."

"You're shutting me out again," Kira said.

"No." Odo shook her head. "*No,* I'm not shutting you out, I'm trying to go at my own pace. I'm trying to make sense of the world around me." She sighed and made an empty gesture as she struggled to articulate her thoughts. "Everything I see, everything around me…it's as if I'm perceiving everything I used to know through a different lens. The promenade looks different, the rocks on my homeworld felt different…dammit, even my *office* feels different!"

Kira frowned. "Let me get this straight. The Founders didn't just alter your body. They altered how you see things, too?"

Odo gave her a short, unwilling nod.

"I see." Kira paused. Her fingers tightened around Odo's. Odo waited.

"What about me?" Kira finally asked. "How do you see me?"

Odo looked down at the tabletop. "I don't know."

Silence reigned.

"Maybe…" Kira paused and considered her words. "Maybe it would help if you tried to describe your feelings for me."

"Help whom? You, or me?"

"Both of us, I guess."

"I doubt it would help either of us, Major. I can barely make sense of it myself."

"What exactly is the problem?" Kira asked.

Odo looked away and heaved a sigh. She couldn't figure this out now. "I doubt you would understand." She tore her hand out from underneath Kira's and covered her eyes. "Do you have any idea how afraid I am?"

"No, but I can imagine." Kira softened. "Don't you remember the time I was cosmetically altered to look like a Cardassian?"

She spat out the word like venom. Odo didn't blame her. But she couldn't help feeling that the analogy wasn't accurate.

"You don't understand," Odo whispered. "This is entirely different. It's not like women conquered my homeworld."

"No, not exactly, but I know how it must feel to—"

"No!" Odo's voice rose higher than she'd intended, but she didn't back down. "Kira, I don't understand this myself! How can you expect to—"

"I am *trying*," Kira hissed between clenched teeth, "to understand."

"You're *trying* to push me somewhere I'm not ready to go," Odo retorted.

Kira stood in a flash and loomed up over her. "And when will you be ready, Odo? In a month? In a year?"

"I don't know!"

"And until then?" Kira asked. "What are you going to do? Sit around in your office, pretend to dive into your work, completely ignore me?"

Odo drew herself up straighter. "What do you mean, *pretend* to dive into my work?"

"I mean, pretend!" Kira tossed her hands into the air. "Odo, you don't fool me a bit! Do you think I actually believe all this nonsense about being on duty and not having time for lunch with a friend? Do you think I've *ever* believed that? I don't even think you're capable of concentrating on your job right now. You've just undergone a major alteration and I don't see how you can just plug away at your desk like nothing else matters. It's as if you're only concerned with what the Federation thinks of you. It's like you're prepping for a job interview or something, except you already have a job. Unless…" She trailed off.

"Unless what?" Odo asked suspiciously.

Kira paused for an instant before looking at her with bleak resignation. "Whose side are you on now?"

"What makes you think I've switched sides?" Odo demanded.

"They altered you so that you'd return to them!" Kira said. "You obviously don't want to deal with *me*. How long do I have to wait before I lose you again?"

Odo frowned. "Don't you trust me?"

"Oh, believe me, I want to!" Kira said. "I want to believe you're still my friend, that this relationship can still work. But you've betrayed me before, when the Founders intervened. And that was just *one* of them. What's going to happen now?"

"Nothing at all," Odo growled. "I *love* you, Nerys."

"Then what the hell are we waiting for?"

"For the rest of me to agree!" At Kira's confused look, Odo only sighed. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Hard to do, when you're not making sense yourself!"

Odo sighed. "Let's let the matter rest, Major. Trust me, I am not going to return to them. I want to at least give myself a chance. But *please,* leave me *alone*. I can't—I can't think."

Kira's eyes flashed. "Don't you dare give up on us, Constable!"

"I'm not giving up!" Odo forced herself not to stand in turn and fight for her own ground. "Why do you think I'm trying to go at my own pace? I'm trying to figure out what's going on in my own mind before I have to explain myself to anyone else!"

"*Explain* yourself?" Kira retorted. "I'm not asking you to explain yourself—I'm trying to help you figure this out!"

"And there's no way I can do that," Odo growled, "when you're pushing me to *talk* to you."

"Oh, and what do you expect me to do, Constable?" Kira yelled. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Just pretend that we never met? That we were never friends, that I never fell in love with you? Pretend that we haven't been through too damn much together to just walk out on each other now? Don't you understand, Odo? I love you no matter what shape or form you're in—you're still Odo!"

"But that's exactly the problem, isn't it?" Odo said. "I'm *not* still Odo."

"Odo!"

"Major." Odo's voice held only cold resignation. "What will it take to make you figure out that I'm *not* me anymore? I'm not the man you once loved. He's gone!"

"Don't you dare say that," Kira said. "Don't you *ever* say that. How can you just surrender? How can you just *let* them take you away from me?"

"I'm not surrendering," Odo said. "Major, I'm asking you to *leave me alone*."

Kira's eyes bore into hers. For a moment, Odo thought she might melt under that fierce gaze. Odo, more than anyone, knew the pain that lay beneath Kira's anger. One second more, and

she'd give in. She'd give Kira anything she wanted. She'd even pretend that nothing had changed, if it meant seeing the woman she loved smile again.

But Kira only spun on her heel and stalked away.

Odo remained at the table. She didn't bother to look around herself at the crowd that must have formed, at the eyes that were doubtless glued to the back of her head. She didn't want to know. She remembered the days when she would stand up to the crowd, stare down her haters, and they would fall away in surrender. Now, she wasn't at all sure she could manage a steady glare if she tried.

She should have known.

Kira had always been nothing but generous in their relationship. She was the same obtuse Bajoran Odo knew and loved, but since Kira had fallen in love with her—how that had happened, Odo would never understand—she had always done her best to understand Odo and to give just as much as she got in return. Odo had tried to enjoy it while it lasted. She should have known that Kira would one day reach the breaking point. She should have known that none other than the Founders would force them over the edge of that dark precipice.

Perhaps Kira could one day learn to love this female form. But she'd have to first fall in love with the woman who inhabited it. And to do that, she'd have to accept that the man Odo had once been was gone.

Odo buried her face in her hands, no longer caring who saw her. It was her fault. She was the one who'd accepted the mission to the Gamma Quadrant. She was the one who was forever torn between her people and her love for the major. She was the one who always managed to complicate their relationship. If Kira was afraid of losing her now, if she was tightening her grip to a choke hold, then Odo had no one but herself to blame for messing up Kira's life. And the worst part of it was, there was nothing she could do about it. She could watch Kira pull harder and harder in this tug-of-war Odo had started, right up until the knot broke and Kira fell, and Odo would never know how to stop it.

Odo stared down at the tabletop, at Kira's unfinished meal, and wondered if it wasn't time she considered returning to her people after all.

Chapter 6

"Just what is her condition, Doctor?"

Jadzia Dax frowned at the sound of Benjamin's voice, talking to Julian in the next room. She was sitting on an infirmary biobed, her hair pulled haphazardly out of its tie and nursing a broken arm from her latest activities with Worf. Worf was sitting next to her in similar condition. She suppressed a smirk at the thought.

"…It's been days, Captain," Julian was saying. "Her work isn't below par, but that's exactly the problem. She's thrown herself into it. I haven't seen her this focused on station duty since…"

Julian let the thought hang, but Benjamin picked up his thread. "…Since before she and Major Kira got involved."

"Exactly."

Dax glanced at Worf. "I could be wrong, but it sounds like they're discussing Odo."

"They are responsible adults." Worf didn't mention that there was no one else they could be talking about. "It is not for us to interfere."

Dax sighed and shook her head. "I know. But I'm worried about her. She's completely shoved Kira away…"

"Still, it is their business."

"All the same," Dax said, "I'd like to talk to Odo."

"You will not get far with the constable." Worf paused. "He…*she*…can be very determined to deflect conversation."

"Not this time," Dax said. She tapped her combadge with her good arm. "Computer, location of Constable Odo."

"Security Chief Odo is in Quark's."

"Figures," Dax said with a smirk. "She always goes there when she needs some company." Her arm cried out and she grimaced, cradling it more carefully. "Soon as Julian gets us fixed up, I'm going to pay her a visit."

Julian entered a moment later and quickly restored her and Worf's limbs to working order. The moment her arm wasn't screaming in pain, Dax pulled her hair back through its tie and stood. "Thanks, Julian. I'll see you later."

"Where are you going?" Worf asked.

"To Quark's," Dax said.

Worf said nothing, simply watched her as she left.

Dax stepped out onto the promenade and quickly traversed the distance to Quark's. She had an odd affection for the chaos of the place, and especially the bar's proprietor. But now, she reminded herself as she wound through the maze of tables, she wasn't here to socialize or to enjoy a good game of tongo. She was here to find Odo and set a few things to rights.

As she neared the bar counter, Odo's voice drew her attention before Dax could actually see her.

"How generous, Quark," Odo said. "I can only imagine the fun I'll have being…*ogled* at."

The sarcasm practically dripped from her mouth. Dax suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. Odo evidently hadn't changed a bit.

"Odo, open your eyes!" Quark said. "You don't realize what this experience can offer you! Imagine the undercover operations you could complete…"

"All under your nose," Odo returned. "Thank you for the offer, Quark, but I'd rather *not* accept employment at your bar."

Dax slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter. *That* image was an amusing one. She decided not to say so to Odo, though.

She finally emerged from the crowd and spotted Odo sitting on her usual seat. Dax had seen her when she'd first beamed up to the *Rio Grande*, but she hadn't really seen the constable around in days, so the sight surprised her a little. Odo was indeed in female form.

"Ah, Commander," Quark said when he spotted her. "Care to join me for a little… refreshment?"

"Not tonight, Quark," Dax said.

"Suit yourself," Quark said, and moved off down the bar.

Dax approached the seat next to Odo and addressed the constable. "Mind if I join you?"

Odo merely grunted. Dax took that as an invitation and made herself comfortable on the barstool.

Odo didn't look at her. "If you're here to…*comfort* me," she said, "don't bother."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing," Dax said.

"I don't need your advice." Odo's voice, though oddly musical, was still as stiff as ever. She moved to stand. "If you don't mind, Commander, I should be returning to my office."

"Actually, Constable, I do mind," Dax said.

Odo stopped in her tracks. She turned to look at Dax for the first time, her expression radiating displeasure. But Dax sensed something quite willing beneath the reluctance. Some part of Odo *wanted* someone to talk to. And Dax couldn't say she blamed her.

"What makes you think I have any interest in being the subject of your…meddling?" Odo asked.

Dax smiled to herself. Still the same old constable. "Because I'm not here to meddle. I'm just here as a friend."

"Hmph!"

"Besides," Dax said, "I do have some idea of what it's like to change one's gender."

Odo laughed. Actually laughed. It was a light, feminine sound completely unlike her typical hmph-laugh as a male. "I suppose that you do."

Reading Odo had never been Dax's strong suit, but she had enough experience with people in general that she could come pretty close. Odo seemed even easier to read now than usual; perhaps her discomfort over the past few days had broken down her guard. Odo was making a fair attempt at humor, but Dax could sense something hidden within that laugh. She just wasn't sure what.

She decided to try some fishing. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Odo."

"For Trills, maybe," Odo said.

"You know, I don't quite understand what your people did to you," Dax said tentatively. "Changelings don't have gender in general, right? I was under the impression that you had copied your appearance and modeled your male behavior off of Dr. Mora."

"I did," Odo said. She sighed. "I was just lucky he happened to be the right gender for me."

"So your people do have gender," Dax said.

"In a sense, yes." Odo paused. "I don't understand it entirely myself, but as far as I could gather from my…recent time in the Link, gender is assigned at random." She paused and shook her head. "I can't imagine why I'm going on about this. I'm no scientist."

"No," Dax encouraged her. "Go on. Maybe it'll help me understand."

Odo sighed. "Commander, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but…"

"No buts," Dax said. "You and Nerys are about as close as it goes—or, at least, you were. I don't want to see your friendship destroyed, and I'm sure you don't either."

Odo looked away. "That much is true. But I'm still not certain how I feel about her."

"That doesn't matter now." Dax reached out and squeezed Odo's arm. Odo looked at her, startled. "You were friends first. You can think of her as a friend now. You can think of her as

a lover later."

Odo didn't answer, but Dax took her silence as assent.

"Now," Dax said, "I believe you were about to tell me about Changeling gender."

Odo heaved another long-suffering sigh, but she didn't protest again. "The Great Link as a whole is gender-ambiguous. The…gene, to use a humanoid term, that causes gender is present in equal portions as both male and female. As I understand it, when a Changeling withdraws from the Link…"

"…that Changeling has a fifty percent chance of being male or female," Dax said, nodding. "And if that same Changeling returns to the Link and withdraws again…"

"…it might emerge as the opposite gender," Odo finished. "Or, at least, I assume so."

"It makes sense," Dax said. "You've kept your gender identity for all these years because you haven't returned to the Link."

"Well, at least not under the right conditions to exchange gender genes."

"How are you so familiar with genetics?" Dax asked.

"Dr. Mora." The name was an unwilling grunt.

Dax nodded, careful not to linger on the subject. "I see. The Founders must have thought that by forcing you to finally emerge with the opposite gender, they would finally convince you to stay with them."

"But their…interference has had the opposite effect," Odo groused.

Dax considered the circumstances. "You know, the science doesn't really matter."

Odo didn't look at her. "I agree."

"Odo," Dax said softly. "Look at me."

Grudgingly, Odo turned her head and slowly, reluctantly, met Dax's eyes.

"What matters," Dax said, giving Odo's arm another gentle squeeze, "is whether you want to go back to them."

"That's ridiculous," Odo said. "I couldn't—"

"Odo," Dax interrupted, "there's no shame in wanting to return home."

"They're not my home," Odo said in a harsh whisper. "They never have been. They rejected me. They used me for their own aims. They don't care about me, they only try to manipulate me around every turn and use their power over me to try to frighten me."

Dax wondered if Odo would ever have been this open with her if her recent experience hadn't shaken her guard down. Dax resolved to enjoy it while it lasted. "And do they frighten you?"

"Every time," Odo said. "I can't help wondering if one day, this power struggle will end, and they'll do something to me that I can't recover from. Something that takes me away from all of you, and…"

That actually sounded like something the Founders would do, but Dax knew that this wasn't the time to betray her own fear. Letting the constable know how much Dax feared losing her wasn't going to help either of them. "Well," she said, "I suppose in times like these, we have to remember your people's mantra."

"'No Changeling has ever harmed another,'" Odo recited. She lowered her head and added quietly, "Except for me."

"And you think they're still looking to punish you for that?"

"Perhaps," Odo said. "I don't really understand my people all that well. All I know is that they're a group of dictators…"

"I know." Dax paused to gather her thoughts. "But they've already made you human, Odo. And they're obsessed with order, aren't they? Somehow I doubt they'd consider it 'orderly' to exact a punishment again for no reason."

"My people don't understand justice."

Odo's voice was low. Dax felt a pang of compassion for the troubled constable. There had been times, especially in her past lives, when Dax had wondered just how much of a grip the universe had on justice. There had even been times when she'd wondered if she understood the concept herself. She didn't have a belief in a supreme being to comfort her. She preferred to assume that people in general weren't all bad and that their rash actions were a product of circumstances and fear. And she'd met far too many wonderful, respectable people in her lives to declare humanoid existence an experiment gone wrong. But Odo, of course, too often saw the other side of the coin. Her work in security exposed her to all sorts of dangerous characters, and her life before the station—what little of it Dax had been told—hadn't lent her to optimism.

Dax sighed. Odo was watching her with intense interest, as if she considered the conversation more of a debate than a heart to heart. Perhaps Dax hadn't dug far enough. She considered her next words and decided they were necessary. Maybe Odo's *people* didn't understand justice, but…

"But *you* do," she said.

Odo lowered her head again. "I don't know."

"The question," Dax said, "isn't whether your people forgive you. The question is whether you can forgive yourself."

Odo's head snapped up. "Forgive myself for what?"

"I don't know," Dax said. "For killing that Changeling. Or…" She paused. It was time to take this a step further. "…for pushing Nerys away."

"I haven't pushed Nerys away! She's the one who—"

"I know," Dax said, "but you blame yourself, don't you?"

Odo tensed. The constable had always been so tense in the past, a mere stiffening of the shoulders had never been much of a clue to what she was thinking. But now, with her posture so loose and defeated, Dax knew she'd hit a nerve.

"You're disgusted with this body," Dax continued. She hoped she sounded more confident with her analysis than she felt. "You're even afraid of it. Of what it means for you and your relationships. And so you start pointing your finger."

Odo snorted, but Dax could now hear the raw agony underneath. "I don't 'point my finger,' Commander."

"If you say so." Dax shrugged. She squeezed Odo's arm reassuringly. "Well, Constable, thank you for an enlightening evening." She stood. Almost as an afterthought, she added, "And Odo? Try not to be too hard on yourself."

She expected a defensive harrumph, but it didn't come. Instead, Odo's eyes merely flicked up to follow her. Dax flashed her a parting smile before weaving back through the tables, towards the bar's entrance.

About halfway there, Quark's hand on her arm stopped her. She turned, surprised.

"Don't bother, Commander," Quark said. "He's—*she's*—about as easy to cheer up as a depressed Breen. Just leave it to me."

There was something about the way Quark's eyes and voice danced around the feminine pronoun that turned Dax's warning lights on. "Don't even think about it, Quark. The last thing Odo needs is *you* complicating her adjustment."

Quark's eyes widened, the picture of innocence. "I wouldn't dream of it, Commander."

Dax rolled her eyes inwardly and smiled. "Good."

She swore she heard him mutter something like, "It would have been fun, though," behind her back as she left the bar.

Chapter 7

Kira paced her quarters from end to end, passing by her prayer mandala every time. It sat there, mocking her, with each pass she made. Kira stopped at one end of her living room and delivered a frustrated punch to the wall. All she got out of it were bruised knuckles. She shook her hand out, wincing at the pain.

Five days. Almost a week had gone by since her argument with Odo, and still she couldn't make sense of it. Since that day, she'd barely seen Odo outside of duty. And even then, the constable had made sure that their encounters were brief. But avoidance couldn't keep Kira from seeing what Odo tried to hide. In the short time they had been together—and perhaps thanks to the years Kira had spent as Odo's friend before that—she had learned to read Odo's every expression, interpret her every gesture. Odo had often insisted that those mannerisms weren't his, that he had merely copied and learned them, but Kira knew better. Odo never said much, but she had a whole language just in the way she tilted her head.

And so Kira could see the fear and despair lurking just beneath Odo's professional exterior. She could even detect a trace of anger, so deeply buried she was surprised she'd managed to find it. Kira found herself wishing the constable would come to her to unload herself. An explosive Odo was safe; it meant she was confronting her rage and letting it flow, letting herself feel the emotion. A cold Odo was much more frightening, because Kira knew that what Odo didn't say, she internalized.

It wasn't fair. She came to Odo for everything. Everything! If she couldn't make up her mind about something, Odo was the one she spoke to, whether it was a matter of personal ethics or a command decision that would affect hundreds. Every problem, no matter how large or small, Odo solved for her. Or, that was, Odo helped Kira see where she was wrong and where she could be more objective.

But when Odo had a problem? When her life was turned upside down and she needed someone to right it? That someone was never Kira. Odo took her own problems upon herself to fix and very rarely came to Kira for advice. There had been times when Odo had sought comfort or solace with her, but Kira had almost never had a hand in her major decisions. Those, she made on her own.

Kira respected Odo's privacy. She always had. But why did she always have to be so damned —

The door chime interrupted Kira's thoughts. Kira swung around, prepared to fire the intruder with a full dose of Kira Nerys flames. "Who is it!"

"It's Dax," said an uncertain voice. "Can I come in?"

"Oh." Kira paused as a wave of uneasiness washed over her. Something told her the Trill wasn't here just to visit. "Come in."

Dax entered, hands behind her back. She stood as straight as usual, but she looked more troubled, more serious, than usual. "Kira," she said, "I've been meaning to talk to you."

Kira turned away, flapping her hands at her sides. "You've been talking to Odo, haven't you."

"Cut her some slack," Dax said. "What if *you* suddenly found yourself in a man's body?"

"Oh, and you're one to talk about shock and adjustment!" Kira said. "Exactly how many times have you switched genders?"

"It's not easy for Trills, you know," Dax said. "We're just trained to recognize it as a possibility. So when we're joined with the opposite gender…" She shrugged.

"I don't suppose you offered your wisdom to Odo," Kira snapped.

"I thought about it," Dax said. "But I thought it had better come from you."

"Me. Why me?" Kira demanded. "It's not like I understand what's going on!"

"Of course not," Dax said. "But you're Odo's *friend*, Nerys."

"I'm his girlfriend," Kira said. "Or, at least, I was—until he started pushing me away!"

"You think she's the one at fault," Dax said.

"He's the one who's not making any sense! I'm not even sure what side he's on now."

"You're afraid she'll leave you?" Dax asked.

"Well, can you blame me?" Kira asked. "This is *Odo* we're talking about, Jadzia. The same guy who practically sold the whole Alpha Quadrant to the Dominion the last time the Founders got to him."

Dax took a step closer. "Do you really believe she'll do that, Nerys? Everything has changed for her, but one thing is certain—she's still in love with you."

Kira shook her head. "No, he isn't. He tells me he is, but he isn't."

"What makes you think that?" Dax asked.

"Common sense." Kira shrugged. "Where I come from, Jadzia, if you're in love with someone, you try to be with them. Odo's not doing that. He's trying to make this work, trying to spare my feelings—but if he still loved me, he'd be trying to stay with me, not pushing me away."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Dax said. "Kahn never stopped loving me, even though she knew we couldn't be together…more than I did, at the time."

"That's different!" Kira said. "You're a Trill, Jadzia. That sort of thing is normal for you, but you have rules preventing you from getting back together."

"Exile for both symbionts," Dax said quietly.

"Exactly." Kira paused. "It's not like that for me. This isn't normal, I don't know how to handle it, and I don't think Odo does either—and to make matters worse, there's no rule saying we can't get back together. So I'm left wondering if he'll ever care for me again, wondering if I should keep pursuing this at all—wondering if we can survive this trial and still be friends…"

She dashed her hand angrily across her eyes. She was not going to cry. She was going to be the strong one for once. She was going to be the glue that held their relationship together.

Dax took a step closer. "You make it sound like it's her fault that she's confused."

"Well…" Kira threw up her arms in exasperation. "It's not as if I can read his mind! And he won't *talk* to me! He won't let me help! He could at least…I don't know, not try to shut me out!"

"Kira," Dax said, "you love Odo, don't you?"

"Of course I do!" Kira cried. "No matter what shape or form he—or she—is in! She's still Odo. At least to me."

"I wonder if that's the problem," Dax said carefully.

Kira blinked. "What? Of course not!"

"Nerys," Dax said, "listen to me. It's very noble of you to insist that nothing has changed. You'll still be here for her, even if her entire form is different. I'll bet you'd stay with her if she became locked into the form of a Tarkalean hawk, and Odo would have no problem with that." She paused. "But this time, Nerys, that isn't true. You have to realize that things *have* changed. What if *you* were locked into the form of a man?"

"I wouldn't be myself," Kira said.

"Exactly. You're asking Odo to hold onto something that simply isn't hers anymore," Dax said. "She's a woman now, Nerys. You can't make the demands you're making."

Kira found herself at a complete loss for words. Her mouth opened and closed several times before she spoke.

"I guess…it's just…I've never been loved like that, Jadzia. Not like he loved me. He…when he came into my life, he filled a hole in my heart that I hadn't even known existed. He showed me what it meant to be cared for, to have someone I could rely on…he was always *there*, Jadzia, never failing me. He…"

Dax frowned. "And now you think she's failing you."

"Well…" Kira sighed. "Not exactly. But it's like he's insisting on being miserable, on keeping our relationship in this state of suspension…and he won't *talk* to me! He won't let me be there for him!"

"As far as I'm aware, she's never been particularly open, even with you," Dax said. "Why would you expect her to open up to you now?"

"I don't know!" Kira cried. "Maybe because I can feel our relationship teetering on the edge of doom? The thing is, it's maddening—it doesn't have to be this way! I *love* him! He doesn't have to fear losing me! I've always had him as a friend…and now as a boyfriend…I just can't believe I should be expected to let go so easily. We only just got together, Jadzia! We've barely spent any time together! And now…"

"And whose fault is that?" Dax asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Think about it, Nerys." Dax took another step closer. "Who was it who procrastinated for months, even after you knew how Odo felt about you? Instead of trying to figure out, there and then, if you loved her back, you let it go. You waited. You stalled. You delayed. You did everything you could to hold her at bay, to make sure you got your sweet time to figure out how you felt."

"And with good reason," Kira said. "He told me he loved me, and then he let eight thousand people die. I didn't understand it."

"But still, you got over that," Dax said. "And it became an excuse. You accused your friend of something she'd never done, something that had only ever been true on another timeline, to justify the fact that you couldn't admit to your feelings for her."

"Sure, and I'm the only guilty party," Kira said. "Who was it who drove us into that infernal planet in the first place?"

"Don't place blame, Nerys," Dax said. "This isn't about me, and it isn't about the people of Gaia either. Ever since Odo told you how she felt about you, you've procrastinated. Why?"

Kira sighed. She sank down onto her couch, her mind spinning. Dax was right. She had procrastinated. But why?

"He's always been there for me," she said. "I guess I assumed he'd always be there."

Dax's face lent no trace of disappointment, but the admonition was in her voice. "And now that she's the one taking her sweet time with your relationship, you don't know what to make of it."

Kira nodded numbly. "I don't know what to do. I love him, Jadzia."

"Nerys." Dax sat down next to her and took Kira's hands in hers. "I advise you to go and talk to her. I'm sure it'll go well now that you know your own motivations. But the first step to showing that you care is to accept the fact that 'he' is a woman."

"I *have* accepted that!" Kira retorted.

"Then why is every pronoun out of your mouth a masculine word?" Dax asked.

"I—well—it's hard to adjust to!"

Dax nodded. "Consider, then, how hard it must be for Odo."

Kira fell silent.

"Listen to her, Kira," Dax said. "Be the friend I know you can be. And remember, friendship comes first. Love will come later."

"I already know I love him," Kira said. "Her, I mean."

"Then be her friend," Dax said. "It's the least you can do."

Kira sighed. Dax was right, as always. Completely and utterly right. "How are you so good at this?" she asked.

"Experience," Dax said. "But I've been wrong at times."

"Sure. Name one."

"The man I met on Meridian."

Kira frowned. "Granted. But you're usually right."

Dax's eyes danced. "And I'm right this time."

Kira sighed. "All right. I'll talk to her." She shook her head. "But I still don't think she'll listen."

Dax nodded in approval. "Good. All that matters is that you try. Then no one can blame you." She stood and headed for the door. "Good luck, Nerys."

Kira watched her go, now with a contemplative look on her face.

Chapter 8

Odo spent the night in her office, regenerating in her back closet just as she had before getting real quarters. It had been her routine for the past few days since her transformation. She wasn't quite ready to face the shape shifting paradise of her quarters, and she certainly wasn't ready to spend the night with Kira. And so, when she arched up out of her bucket and into humanoid form in the morning, determined this time to get the tone of Starfleet's mission report right, she was surprised to see Kira standing in the doorway.

"It's oh-eight-hundred," Kira said. "I hope I didn't bother you."

Caught in the undignified position between her bucket and her chair, Odo sat down awkwardly. She didn't answer the major.

Kira stepped closer and took a deep breath. She seemed about to say something before her eyes suddenly focused on something behind Odo's back. Odo turned. It was her old bucket.

After a moment, Kira looked back at her, a mixture of concern and hurt in her eyes. "You put the plant I gave you in your bucket."

"I retrieved my bucket for the purpose." Odo didn't look at Kira as she said it.

"Oh." Kira's eyes dropped down to the padd on her desk. She picked it up and scanned it for a moment. "Starfleet's mission report?"

"I can't quite hit the right tone," Odo said.

Kira tapped the padd idly against her other hand. "It's overdue."

"Better overdue than incomplete."

Kira sighed and set the padd back down on Odo's desk. "I haven't been much help, have I?"

Odo only dignified that with a grunt.

"Maybe we could work on it together," Kira suggested.

"Why?" Odo asked. "What could you add to it that I don't already know?"

"Well, maybe if we talked…"

"Major, I certainly don't want you to waste your time with Starfleet reports," Odo said. "I'm sure you have better things to do."

Kira sighed. "This isn't about Starfleet reports." She took a deep breath. "I owe you an apology."

For dismissing my fears? Odo wondered. *For accusing me of trying to pull our relationship apart? For ignoring my feelings?*

But she didn't say any of that out loud. Instead, she uttered a noncommittal, "Oh?"

"I've been unfair to you, and I'm sorry," Kira said. She gestured at the chair. *Her* chair. The one that suddenly wasn't hers anymore.

But Odo simply nodded, not in the mood for recrimination. It had been days since they'd last spoken outside of work, and besides, she was curious about what Kira had to say.

"Of course, Major," Odo said.

Kira sat down, but instead of leaning back and hooking a heel over the edge of Odo's desk like she used to, she sat as stiffly as a board. Her shoulders were slumped, her gaze locked somewhere near the floor. She suddenly looked more alone than ever. It was all Odo could do to resist moving over to the replicator to order her a *raktajino*—extra hot, double *kava*, as always. But now would be a bad time to wave the white flag.

"I was just…so focused on how I felt that I didn't bother to think about how you felt." Kira paused. "I couldn't understand how you could love me as much as you say you do, and still say you don't want to be with me."

Odo looked up at her. "You said you understood."

"And I did. Somewhat." Kira's eyes were suddenly glued to the tabletop. "I understood that you wanted time to yourself. You wanted me out of your face, and I didn't exactly give you that. I'm sorry." She paused. "I was just so *angry* with you. It seemed like you'd abandoned us. What I didn't understand was that my anger was selfish. You've been at my side for so long, Odo, I kind of started to take you for granted. I started thinking you would always be there, loving me, and I could have all the time I wanted. I didn't think your side would change."

"I'm sorry, Major."

"Don't you dare apologize," Kira said. "I'm the one at fault here." She looked down at the tabletop again.

Odo waited for her to continue. When she didn't, Odo said, "Go on."

Kira sighed. "This isn't fair to you, but…ever since you found your people, I've been afraid that one day, you'd decide you wanted to live with them instead. And I understood that. But I would have missed you. Prophets, I was so afraid to lose you."

Odo said nothing.

"I was afraid…" Kira looked down, stopped, and started again. "I was afraid they really had destroyed your connection to us this time. I guess I kind of lashed out, and you didn't deserve that. I wanted so badly to keep you here, with me…" She trailed off and shook her head. "Maybe they're right. Maybe you're better off with them. I don't deserve you."

"I could say that I don't deserve you," Odo said softly.

Kira stared at her. "What?"

"Kira, I don't know how I feel," Odo said. "Part of me still loves you, but most of me can't remember how. But I know that if I still knew which way was up and which way was down, everything you're saying right now…would only make me love you more."

Kira held her breath. "So you're saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm sorry we didn't get more time together," Odo said. Her lips quirked into a smile. "Ironic, isn't it? The moment you finally come to love me, I lose sight of my own feelings."

Kira managed a small laugh. "Ironic. But…I didn't come here to talk about us being together, Constable."

Odo gave Kira her full attention. "Oh?"

"I love you," Kira said. "But you loved me for years before I fell in love with you. I can do the same for you. I'll give you time, Constable. All the time you need." She paused. "Just promise me one thing."

"What's that?" Odo asked.

"Don't leave me out," Kira said. She leaned forward, over the desk, and took Odo's hand. "Let me be your friend. That's all I care about. We're strongest as a team, Odo."

A team. Such a simple request. They'd always been a team. For as long as Odo could remember, through good times and bad, no matter what the situation, Kira had validated her existence. Odo provided a rational, listening ear when Kira needed an anchor in the universe; Kira provided something for Odo to believe in during those times when the universe seemed to conspire against her. The foundation of their team lay in friendship. Love had come later.

But…

Odo sighed. "I'm not sure if I believe you, Major. How can you possibly love what I've become?"

"Because love isn't just an emotion," Kira said. "It's a choice. You should know that, Odo. Prophets know how long you've put up with my temper and my obtuseness! Sometimes I wonder how you can possibly still love me, even after all the years of abuse I subjected you to without even knowing it! And yet you go on, slaving away every day for me. You're the one who listens to me ramble when everyone else is walking on eggshells. You're the one who's always made this relationship work. It didn't matter how much you wanted to be with your people, you still chose me. And you could have chosen them this time—I was so afraid you would—but you didn't. You always choose to love me." She paused. "Well, now it's my turn. I'm going to choose to love you, Odo. No matter what happens to you. No matter how

much you change. You can stop loving me, you can never love me again, and I'll still choose to love you. I owe you that much."

Odo glanced down at their joined hands, then up into Kira's eyes. "Kira, what did I ever do to deserve you?"

Kira smiled. "If you don't know that yet, I don't think you ever will. But it doesn't matter. You're stuck with me."

Odo closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair, expelling days of tension in a single breath. "Nerys, have I ever told you that I love you?"

Kira shook her head. "None of that." She straightened in her chair. "Alright, when was that mission report due?"

It took Odo a moment to realize that Kira was talking about the padd that still rested on her desk. "Starfleet wanted it five days ago."

"Well, there was no way you could have made sense of it then." Kira picked up the padd and scanned it again, but this time Odo got the distinct impression that she was giving it her full attention. "How about we finish it now?"

Odo looked up to meet her eyes. "Together?"

"About time we did something as a team," Kira said. "It's been too long. This is as good a place to start as any."

Odo smiled. Really smiled. She couldn't remember the last time she'd smiled. Maybe the last time she'd successfully blackmailed Quark. Of course, that wasn't likely to happen anytime soon, not with him ogling her every chance he got. But this was different. This wasn't a smirk. It wasn't a weak upturn of the corners of her mouth. It was a real smile.

The foundation of their team had been friendship. Love had come later. And maybe, just maybe, it could come again.

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