To Have and to Hold

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To Have and to Hold

by PerseShow

Summary

I love you, Nerys. I've always loved you.

For Odo, his counterpart's words changed everything—and nothing.

But what rocked his world, long after that timeline was erased, was the sight of Kira lying in her grave.

--

My retelling of DS9 from "Children of Time" to "Tears of the Prophets," the way I think it *should* have gone.

Notes

"To Have and to Hold" is Part 1 of the prequel to my *Dauntless* series, which will be a massive serial story taking place 800 years after DS9.

The first chapter is fully canon-compliant and serves to establish important themes I'm pulling on and building on from the show. Chapters 2-5 are canon-compatible, in that only small details are changed. Chapter 6 and onward are canon-divergent.

If I skip over a scene (or a whole episode), you can assume it happens the same way it does in canon!

Season 7 will be covered in Part 2, "For Better or for Worse"!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Odo's Link with his Gaia counterpart sends him reeling.

Chapter Notes

Canon-compliant

Continuity: "Children of Time" through "Blaze of Glory"

No changes to "Empok Nor."

At least in this chapter, a change in the ones place of a stardate means a single day difference. So, between stardate 50820.7 and 50821.7, exactly one day passes.

“I love you, Nerys. I’ve always loved you.”

The words were as familiar as they were foreign, spoken by a man he had never been, in a life he had never lived. And yet, he could see it all, clear as yesterday through the Link—clear as if he were seeing through his own eyes.

“Is it so hard to believe?”

Her smile was as bright as he remembered, perhaps brighter. She couldn’t possibly know what it was like to see her here, now—alive, vital.

—she lay motionless on the biobed, pale, lifeless—

“Constable?”

He almost didn’t hear the captain’s voice, fixated as he was on the body of the woman he loved. But the beckon repeated, drawing him from his spiraling panic, from the horror that shrouded his thoughts.

“What happened?” he croaked.

As the captain explained Kira’s fate—explained the *crew’s* fate, the *Defiant’s* crash—the words swirled around Odo, refusing to land, his matrix threatening to lose all cohesion.

"You appear to be on your feet," the captain said. *"I thought the barrier…"*

Odo swiveled his head. *"Barrier?"*

"There's an energy barrier of some kind surrounding this planet. I'm told it was interfering with your ability to take humanoid form."

"Ah. I…seem to have managed to counteract it."

He barely heard his own words. When the captain informed him that it had been *weeks*, that he'd missed Kira by a *day*, he stumbled and barely caught himself against the edge of the biobed.

Within the Link, time swirled; now Kira stood before him, vibrant, *real*.

"…Gaia is a very beautiful place. I'd love to show it to you…"

And it *was* beautiful—from the hills that stretched to the horizon, to the bright blue sky dotted with clouds. But to him, it was immaterial as his world collapsed around him, as all he'd ever dared to hope for faded before his eyes in a cloud of smoke.

—he gathered her in his arms, cupped her head to his chest, lowered his face so as to hide the grief that was plainly written across his unfinished features, even as his matrix itself threatened to shake apart—

Odo fought against the Link, tried to pull free from his counterpart's mind, from the whirlwind of his thoughts—but his matrix wouldn't respond. He was trapped, locked into the Link, forced to watch—

"…praying over your own grave. That's gotta be a new one…"

—again and again, his shovel struck the ground as the sun set over the distant hills, as she lay motionless upon the soil, pale, lost—

The *Defiant* was a wreck, lost to salvage. Kira was gone. His job was over, his pursuit of justice rendered meaningless. It was a brutal irony—that he should find himself stranded in the Gamma Quadrant, on the correct side of the wormhole should he decide to return to the only Link he had left, and he had no way to so much as escape this planet's gravity well.

—as he laid her body in its grave, as his knees pressed into the dirt and the soil stained his hands, he had never wished more fervently that he could believe in her Prophets, that he could find some meaning in it all—

Stop! Futilely, he railed against the Link. *Let me go!*

"…we're all given one destiny, one path…"

And his was empty, with little choice but to resign himself to the future that stretched out before him. Upon the captain's request, he soared over the hillsides in search of better terrain, better resources, better *anything*—

"…I lost you two hundred years ago…"

One by one, death and illness took the crew; he watched as a nearby valley transformed into a burial ground. The rains came and drowned the first crops. Malnutrition took its toll. Depression reigned. And through it all, the captain stood firm, the crew's rock amidst hopelessness despite all he had lost, despite losing his *son*. It was for him that Odo stayed, for that last shred of duty, of obligation, of respect, of sentiment.

"…but for the other Odo, up on the ship, it changes everything…"

Seasons passed, crops grew, and hopes began to rise. The settlement survived, flourished. Still, Odo stayed, despite the monotony that slowly encroached on his life, despite the gloom that seemed to gather like fog and choke him. He withdrew, kept to himself, and few questioned it; how could they guess this was different from his usual solitary nature?

"…I had to see it again, so I could be sure…"

Dax questioned his retreat. Of *course* she questioned it. She saw, and she *reached*. But Odo couldn't find it within himself to reach in return. He'd lost his chance with Kira. He'd been too much of a coward. To open himself up to another, when he'd already failed *her*, seemed wrong somehow.

"…this is where I belong. The path the Prophets laid out for me ends here…"

The captain fought him. But orders were empty, the uniform Odo still wore meaningless, his commission nothing but a distant echo from a life that would never again be his. He was drifting, even his sense of duty lost to oblivion. And a day came when he realized there was nothing left for him here but pain and loss. Nothing left but the certainty that even as the colony thrived, everyone he knew would be lost to the passage of time. But one Link remained for him—his abilities, his heritage. And, in two hundred years' time, Kira herself would return.

He slipped away in broad daylight. No one looked twice at the snake that slithered away in the underbrush; no one guessed that it wasn't a snake at all.

Within the Link, Odo's substance trembled as his counterpart's thoughts snapped into agonizing focus. Kira stood before his eyes, real as yesterday—real as if the sight of her lying in her grave weren't burned irrevocably into his memory.

"This isn't about me. This is about the eight thousand people down on that planet, their children and their grandchildren."

How was it that every cell of his being *reached* for her, even as her words shattered him? How was it that even as she insisted upon her own death, the ferocity in her eyes made him fall in love with her all over again?

He clutched her hands in his, as he had never dared before. *"If you'd known how I felt about you—if I'd said something years ago—do you think things might have been different?"*

It was the look in her eyes as she answered—that wonder for a future that could never be. Or maybe it was the way her fingers squeezed his, or her earnest tone, or that bittersweet kiss he'd never dared imagine he'd feel against his lips. Or maybe it was the way all his years of cynicism and doubt and his reluctance to hope and his certainty that *she could never love him* evaporated in the face of one word—

"Maybe."

*

Stardate: 50815.7

"There's something you should know."

It would have been easier to sweep it all away. To let them both forget about what had happened on the planet. But she was alive now, and still a part of his life. He couldn't build forward on a lie. And the fact of the matter was, *he* couldn't forget.

He had no choice but to inform her of his Link with his counterpart.

"Now…I know everything that happened."

He could see the confusion and grief that swam within her, despite the brave, steady front that made him love her even more. It made him wish he had any other option than to stand here before her, once again the bearer of her pain. But honor demanded that she know the truth.

The *whole* truth.

"There's something else the other Odo wanted you to know."

She straightened, bracing herself, and he forced the confession past his lips.

"He was responsible for changing the *Defiant's* flight plan."

He watched, helpless, as that steady front gave way to horror, as she begged of him—"*Why?*"

"So that you wouldn't have to die."

He could *see* the exact moment her horror turned on him. The moment he and his counterpart became one and the same in her eyes.

But…*were* they truly separate?

Could he argue that *he* was any better—when he found himself defending his counterpart's actions?

When he himself struggled to see the current timeline as *wrong*?

How could he feel anything but relief, when he had watched as the crew died, when the sight of Kira lying in her grave had haunted him for two hundred years?

She was *alive*. How could that be anything but good?

In some corner of his mind, he knew it was the epitome of selfishness—that the world didn't revolve around her, and there was no reality where one life was worth eight thousand. And even if it were, the fire in her eyes was answer enough. He had disregarded her faith and her wishes. Had he saved her life out of love…or for *himself*?

Still—he *needed* her to understand. Needed her to see him—see his counterpart?—as something other than a monster.

"He did it for you, Nerys. He loved you."

"That makes it *right*?"

"I don't know." He should have, but he didn't. "He thought so."

How hope still unfurled within him, even as he retreated from her quarters, he'd never know. But somehow, despite knowing he could get no clearer a rejection, some traitorous part of him still *believed*.

She was angry with him. He'd broken her trust. But she was *alive*.

And in the future his other self had aborted—the future where she lay, deathly cold, in a grave—she *certainly* couldn't love him.

Her last word to him—to the other him—fueled him.

"Maybe."

*

Stardate: 50817.2

Surreptitiously, Odo glanced up from his PADD, surveying the promenade beyond his office doors.

No sign of Kira.

Yet.

The day was still young.

He returned his eyes to his PADD.

He could avoid her, if he wanted. He was perfectly capable of filling up his schedule and making himself unavailable. He'd done so more than a year ago, when her relationship with Shakaar was still a fresh wound. But that *wasn't* what he wanted.

That single word still rang in his mind, lingering from the Link—

“Maybe.”

He’d already canceled his briefing with the new head of Starfleet’s security attachment, who had overseen things in his absence. He could just as easily catch up on what he’d missed from the week’s criminal activities report.

Not that he was currently absorbing a word.

*

Stardate: 50820.7

Day after day, he waited.

They needed *time*, he’d said. He’d even believed himself when he’d said it. Believed in that word that had become fainter in his memory with each passing hour—

“Maybe.”

She was hurting. He knew that. Once again, he’d brought her pain—just as he had when it was his duty to report the deaths of her Resistance cell members. But this time, it was different. This time, they were in this together. He was reeling as much as she was, stuck playing the images from the Link on repeat.

—again and again, his shovel struck the ground—

Hissing in a breath, he shook himself, forced himself to focus on the PADD in front of him.

—his knees pressed into the dirt as he laid her body in its grave—

He growled under his breath and jolted, spinning to face the console behind his desk, rapidly tapping at the panels as he called up the day’s schedules and communiques and reports.

Work. Focus on work.

Why wouldn’t she come to him? She always had before.

He might even take the opportunity to open up in return. After all, she knew of his feelings. He had nothing to hide from her anymore.

*

Stardate: 50822.5

Odo was certain that, to the station’s inhabitants, nothing seemed amiss.

If there was one thing he excelled at—more so than he even had a choice in, thanks to his unfinished face—it was putting on a mask.

He hadn’t faltered in his duty. But beneath his form’s thin veneer, his very substance trembled.

“…this is where I belong. The path the Prophets laid out for me ends here…”

Kira’s faith was *everything* to her.

How had his counterpart forgotten that?

It was bad enough that he had disregarded her wishes, practically spat in the face of her faith. It wasn’t an act of love. It was a desperate act of—of *possession*. A moment of arrogance Odo would never have thought himself capable of.

But his crime was worse than that. He’d erased *eight thousand lives*.

Where was the justice in that?

Worse—was that potential still a part of him?

He’d made that choice in another life, a life that had never been. But he was still teasing apart his voice from that of his counterpart, still sifting through the Link, still wondering, over and over, what had driven him to *defend* that choice.

“He did it for you, Nerys. He loved you.”

“That makes it right?”

“I don’t know. He thought so.”

How had he believed, even for a moment, that his counterpart had been in the right?

A shudder passed through his form, visible only in the shaky breath that rustled through his facsimile lungs.

It was no wonder Kira had yet to come to him.

*

Stardate: 50824.5

Odo could remember the way his mind had worked as a Solid—just as distractible as it was focused, so easily sidetracked by hunger or exhaustion or, Prophets forbid, *memories*.

Thank goodness he wasn’t a Solid now. He wouldn’t stand a chance at his job.

—the soil of her grave stained his hands—

His substance churned, and he sucked in a deep breath; his eyes briefly fluttered closed.

When he’d found his homeworld and experienced the Link for the first time, it had been the most incredible sensation he’d ever known. So…relaxing. Comforting. Pleasurable, in a way

he hadn’t realized he could experience. And he’d thought, then, that that was the way the Link *was*.

Then, a year later, one of his people had commandeered the *Defiant*. All too clearly, he could recall the moment the other Changeling had plunged his arm into Odo’s substance, shaking his matrix from the ground up.

That had been anything but relaxing.

Now, his counterpart’s memories hounded him, swirling through his form, persistent, invasive. His cells tightened and churned. His matrix itself trembled.

The other Odo hadn’t *meant* for that to be a simple memory transfer. Hardly just a sharing of thought and form, idea and sensation.

No, that was meant to hurt.

To burrow into him.

To consume him.

To *change* him.

To remake him from the ground up—to discard his doubts and hesitations and leave him with nothing but *resolve*. To overtake his fundamental respect for Kira and rebrand it as an excuse not to pursue her. To transform him, all in the name of that single word—

“Maybe.”

He had never wished more fervently that she would come to him. Not to pursue her, but to bask in her light, in that undying fire in her eyes that never ceased to inspire him. To take comfort in her strength and her determination.

All he wanted was to be her *friend* again.

Then his combadge chirped.

“Neyen to Odo.”

One of his deputies. He straightened. “Here.”

“There’s been a disturbance in Quark’s…”

*

Odo strode into the infirmary, Kira at his back.

“Did you catch him?” Quark asked.

“We caught him,” Odo said. “Or rather, I should say Major *Kira* caught him.”

In that moment, Odo didn’t care that Quark was whining about getting hit with a barstool. He didn’t care why Morn had fled into the Bajoran shrine, stark-naked, crying out to the Prophets for protection. And he didn’t dare think about why Kira had been there, meditating —didn’t dare wonder if Gaia had induced a crisis of faith.

All he cared about was that Kira was standing at his side, giving Quark hell. So he threw himself into his usual part—*anything* to support her, to reclaim their old rhythm.

And still, a traitorous part of his mind whispered—

Maybe.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Odo and Kira contend with the Dominion's occupational forces.

Chapter Notes

Canon-compatible — by which I mean I did change some minor details, but nothing that has a domino effect on the plot.

Continuity: "Call to Arms," "A Time to Stand," "Rocks and Shoals," "Sons and Daughters"

We're skipping over "In the Cards" because I didn't feel it needed changing at all. You can assume the original episode is "canon" to this fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 50973.8

"*Yamok* sauce," Kira muttered as she inspected a cargo container. "Who would bother to smuggle in ten thousand wrappages of Cardassian *yamok* sauce?"

A second later, it hit her.

"Oh. Quark," she said. "That little worm. He thinks the Cardassians are going to retake the station!"

Dax shrugged. "He's a Ferengi. You can't blame him for hedging his bets."

Kira sighed, focusing on her tricorder.

"But it *is* a lot of *yamok* sauce," Dax admitted. "What is a *yamok*, anyway?"

A gruff voice came from behind her. "What would you like me to do with it?"

Odo.

Kira's stomach tightened. She couldn't bring herself to look his way.

“Major?” Dax prompted.

Kira glanced up. “I don’t care, you decide.”

“Dump it,” Dax said.

“Very good,” Odo muttered.

His footsteps retreated.

Kira hated the way her stomach loosened the moment he was out of earshot. He was her *friend*. He didn’t deserve her cold shoulder.

She could accept that his counterpart’s actions belonged in another timeline.

That *her* Odo had never erased eight thousand lives.

Had never disregarded her beliefs.

Had he?

But those words rang in her mind—

I love you, Nerys.

Now that his feelings were out in the open, would he press for more?

How would she even respond?

She didn’t feel the way he did—*did she?*

And—dare she wonder—

Was *he* capable of what his counterpart had done? Did that potential lie buried within him?

He was so closed off, kept so much to himself.

How could she know for sure?

She only knew one thing: loving her was *not* reason enough to erase eight thousand. And her Odo had seemed almost to defend it.

“I don’t know,” he’d said. *“He thought so.”*

Dax’s voice cut into her thoughts. “Would you mind telling me what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“You and Odo!” Dax said. “You’ve been avoiding each other for weeks.”

“Oh, it’s a long story,” Kira said as she continued her scan of the cargo bay.

“Those are the best kind.”

Kira rounded a row of barrels, sighing. “Odo has…feelings for me.”

“What kind of feelings?”

Kira glanced up. “The kind that aren’t easy to talk about?”

“Since when?”

“Since, I don’t know—years,” Kira said. “I just found out about it last month.”

Dax was silent for a beat. Then, “That explains a lot.”

“It does?”

“From my zhian’tara,” Dax said. “Curzon retained memories of some of Odo’s experiences. Like shapeshifting. But there was something else, something nebulous. Something I could never quite figure out.”

Kira frowned. “Oh?”

“I can see now.” A wistful smile teased Dax’s face. “It was love. Forbidden love.”

Kira stared at her.

“…Sorry,” Dax said, contrite. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Can we just focus on the cargo scan?”

Dax pressed her lips together. “Yep.”

*

“You wanted to see me, Constable?”

Tension radiated off Kira as she entered his office and clutched the crest of the guest chair. Tension that Odo would do just about anything to banish.

It had been over a month since the events of Gaia. He’d wondered, inexperienced as he was with humanoid relationships, if she were waiting for him to make the next expected move in a courtship. If that were the case, perhaps a dinner invitation could break the thickening ice between them. Was it possible she seemed so uncomfortable *because* he was failing in his mimicry of humanoid behaviors?

More likely, because she didn’t return his feelings.

And how could she? He knew the truth. His counterpart on Gaia had twisted the Link against him; that *maybe* had only ever been an illusion. He was undeserving of her love. And the worst of it was, ultimately, Gaia didn’t even make a difference.

The Founder had put it plainly, back on that moon in the Badlands: he was a Changeling.

He needed to let her off the hook.

Duty first, Odo, he reminded himself. *Feelings later.*

“Major,” he said, “I’d like your permission to terminate all outgoing subspace communications.”

“You really think that’s necessary?”

“This is no time for security leaks…”

It was almost easier, focusing on duty, on their jobs.

Almost.

He was practiced at using duty as a shield. But still, he could have cut the air between them with a knife. She was tiptoeing around him, her hesitation bleeding into her professionalism. In the cargo bay earlier, her discomfort with him had very nearly interfered with station business.

For that matter, *he* wasn’t much more focused than she was. He was just better at hiding it.

She turned to leave.

“Major,” he called, just as she faced his office doors.

She didn’t turn, at first. When she did, reluctantly, she kept her eyes trained on the deck plating.

He rounded his desk. “There’s something you ought to know.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve been thinking about…asking you out…to dinner.”

Finally, she met his eyes. She walked toward him, her chin held steady, looking as if she were bracing herself for a court martial.

Was the notion of his love really so terrible?

Of course it is.

“I’ve been expecting something like this,” she said.

“I could tell,” Odo said. “You’ve looked a little uncomfortable around me lately.”

“You’ve looked a little uncomfortable yourself.”

He sighed. “Which is why I wanted you to know I’m not going to do it. No dinner invitations, no flowers, no attempts at changing the nature of our relationship. Until the current crisis has passed, we both need our minds to be clear—to be free of any unnecessary distractions.”

To his relief, her whole face relaxed.

“Well, that’s probably a good idea.” She sank down into the guest chair—*her* chair. “So for now, all we need to concern ourselves with is deploying the minefield, maintaining station security, and…preparing ourselves for a possible invasion.”

The tension in Odo’s matrix released.

How was it that an invasion sounded more surmountable than navigating his relationship with one Bajoran major?

“Well, I don’t know about you,” he said, “but I feel more comfortable already.”

As he settled against the edge of his desk, a smile bloomed across her face, bright and vibrant. He couldn’t help his own soft, fond smile.

He’d thought he’d never see her smile at him again.

*

Bajor

“Is this it?”

The Jem’Hadar troops froze. The First turned, saw her, and promptly dropped to its knees.

“Founder,” it gasped.

“Answer the question.”

“Yes, Founder.”

A small, satisfied smile graced her mouth as she surveyed the cavern in which she stood. There was no fire, of course; the writings that the Bajorans called religious texts were nothing but primitive superstition. But there *was* a presence here. She could feel it as distinctly as she could feel the mind of any Solid she chose to impersonate.

“You’re certain these creatures can be engineered?” she asked.

“They will be,” the First declared. “Or else we will die trying.”

Tiresome Jem’Hadar posturing. Still, she couldn’t fault it for obeying its programming. That “victory or death” attitude made for efficient fighting machines and effective enforcement of Dominion rule.

“Good,” she said. “See that it’s done.”

Perhaps the Changeling who had briefly replaced the Federation doctor had not died needlessly after all.

*

Stardate: 50975.5 | Deep Space Nine

The station shuddered under weapon fire as Odo marched into Ops at Kira’s side.

“The *Defiant’s* away,” he reported from tactical.

“Contact the Dominion fleet.” Kira’s shoulders were squared, tense but strong. “Tell them… the Bajoran government welcomes them to Deep Space Nine.”

“Message acknowledged.”

“Good,” she said. “That’s the last message this station will be sending out for a while. Computer, initiate program Sisko-1-9-7.”

There was something oddly satisfying about watching every console in Ops overload. A statement. A stand. But best of all was the set of Kira’s jaw as she stood beside him, steel in her eyes.

“Dukat wanted the station back?” she said as they made for the turbolift. “He can have it.”

*

Three years ago, Odo would never have believed this moment would come.

Nor would he have felt even close to the sense of duty, of loyalty, that he did now.

The Federation was in retreat. Gul Dukat stood before him on the promenade, here to reclaim Deep Space Nine, the Dominion at his back. But Odo stood at *Kira’s* back, and—circumstances aside—there was no place he’d rather be.

“Gentlemen,” Kira said, “on behalf of the Bajoran government—”

“—and the Promenade Merchants’ Association,” Quark cut in, next to them.

“—I officially welcome you to Deep Space Nine,” Kira finished.

Dukat tilted his head. “You mean…*Terok Nor*, don’t you?”

Tension spread through Odo’s matrix, twisting and clenching his cells. Nevertheless, he stood motionless, his face the impassive mask he knew it needed to be, his hands clasped behind his back. He could deal with Dukat. He’d done it before.

What set him on edge, though, was Weyoun’s supplicant posturing.

The reminder that his own people were behind this war.

That his people had engineered both the Vorta and the Jem'Hadar, stripped them of their independent wills, enslaved them as servants.

That Weyoun saw *him* as a Founder.

As a *god*.

He couldn't shake the feeling that it made him complicit in his people's crimes.

"I'm not here as a Founder," Odo groused. "I'm the station's chief of security."

"Whatever you say," Weyoun said. "Nevertheless, having a…*god* walk amongst us is most gratifying."

"I agree." An oily smile slithered across Dukat's face. "You…me…the Major…together again? It should be most interesting."

He shouldered his way between them as he headed down the promenade.

Three months into the Dominion Occupation, Odo found himself sitting with Kira in—of all places—Quark's bar.

How had *that* become their go-to spot?

"Weyoun asked me about you," Kira was saying. "He seemed very concerned with what you thought of him."

Odo scoffed. "I try *not* to think of him."

"He'd be hurt to hear you say that," she said. "I'll have to mention it to him."

An unlikely smile teased her mouth, warming him from the inside out.

"I'm glad you can still smile," he said.

She sighed. "Only when I'm with you."

Shock crystallized through his matrix.

She…*what*?

He made her smile?

More than that—he made it *possible* for her to smile? After everything he'd put her through?

Surely this was just a platitude?

"That's kind of you to say," he said.

“No, it’s true,” she insisted. “When I talk to you, things don’t seem as bad.”

He could hardly believe his ears.

All he knew was that he would do absolutely everything in his power not to lose her confidence again.

*

If he’d had blood, Odo was certain it would be boiling.

As it was, he was thankful he didn’t. Thankful that his Changeling nature made it so much easier to maintain a calm facade.

Kira paced before his desk, fresh from an encounter with Dukat. “You should have seen the arrogant, smug look on his face. He was in control, and there was *nothing* I could do about it!”

Odo hated seeing her like this.

Hated seeing Dukat slither under her skin, rile her up.

He didn’t mind handling Dukat, not if he could do it at Kira’s side. But if he had anything to say about it, Dukat would live to regret the day he’d ever looked Kira’s way.

Kira rounded on him. “The war isn’t over yet, but as far as Dukat is concerned, he’s already won. I would *love* to show him that he’s wrong!”

“Well, for the moment, at least, I’m afraid he *has* won,” Odo muttered. “Look at me!” He spread his hands uselessly. “I don’t know why I bother to sit here every day. I don’t even have a security force to patrol the promenade!”

“Then ask for one,” Kira said. “Demand that they reinstate your Bajoran deputies.”

He shook his head. “Dukat will never agree to that.”

“Forget about Dukat! Go to Weyoun, he’ll listen to you!” She planted her palms on his desk. “As far as he’s concerned, you are a god, and that gives you power!”

Odo looked away.

He would *not* treat his people’s supplicants the same way the Founders did. He would *not* be like them.

“But what good is power if you’re not willing to use it?”

Inevitably, his eyes found hers.

Funny, that she was demanding that he use his power over the Vorta; he was power*less* before the intensity in her eyes.

*

“Forgive the interruption,” Damar said as Odo stepped over the threshold of the wardroom behind him, “but he insisted on seeing you immediately.”

Weyoun’s entire face changed. He approached Odo, his hands already spread to either side as he lowered his eyes.

Odo’s matrix twisted in on itself. Nevertheless, he drew his back straight, bracing himself.

If Kira asked it of him…

“Founder,” Weyoun murmured. “I’m honored by your visit. Is there some way I can be of service?”

Honored.

Odo had done nothing to earn that.

“I want my Bajoran security officers reinstated,” he said.

“Consider it done.”

“From now on, they’ll be responsible for security on the promenade.”

At least Weyoun was looking him in the eye. “I don’t see any problem with that.”

“I *do*,” Dukat interjected.

Weyoun wheeled. “This is between me and Odo! I’ll thank you to keep out of it.”

Dukat said nothing, only glanced Damar’s way.

Odo followed his gaze. “I’ll have my officers report to the armory within the hour.”

Weyoun lowered his eyes in deference, and Odo turned to go. But he had barely gotten two steps before Weyoun spoke again.

“Now that I’ve done something for you,” he said, “perhaps there’s something you’d consent to do for me.”

Odo’s eyes widened slightly.

Were those the words of a supplicant Vorta?

And yet…how could he refuse to respect whatever shred of free will was left in his people’s servants?

*

Once again, Odo found himself in Quark's, the only place on this occupied station where he and Kira could speak freely.

Odd, how times had changed.

"A member of the station's ruling council?" Kira repeated. "You?"

Odo nodded. "Along with Weyoun and Dukat. Now *I'll* have a voice in station policy."

He couldn't quite parse why Weyoun had asked this of him. Because it pained the Vorta to see his god without a position of power, even if it undermined his own? Or did he have some ulterior motive?

"You sure this is a good idea?" Kira asked.

"Dukat thought it was a terrible idea." Which was, in Odo's opinion, almost reason enough to accept. "You should've seen his face when Weyoun offered me the position."

"But don't you see that Weyoun is using you?" Kira said. "Your presence on the council validates the Dominion control of the station."

"I thought *we* were using *him*."

Kira sighed.

"I know the danger, Major," Odo said. "I've had to—to walk this line before, during the Cardassian occupation. I can do it again, but this time, I won't be alone. I'll have *you* to help me."

He offered his hand, and was rewarded when she clasped it. "That's right, you will."

He managed a smile, hoping Kira would mirror it. "Then this is a victory after all."

"I suppose it is," she murmured. She dropped his hand. "But for some reason, it just doesn't feel like one."

He tilted his head, taking in her features, wishing he could ease the worry from her face.

He didn't relish the prospect of walking this line again, either. His tenure as chief of security on Terok Nor was a dark time in his life he'd rather not repeat. But Weyoun had offered him an opportunity he couldn't pass up, not if it gave him some leverage over this occupation.

And with Kira at his side, it wouldn't be so bad.

For her, he'd play Weyoun's game—and swallow down his shame.

Reporters, Odo was fairly certain, were not supposed to have an agenda of their own. At least, not *Federation* reporters.

Jake Sisko clearly had one.

“I understand that a decision’s been made to send four thousand Dominion facilitators down to Bajor,” he said. “Would you care to elaborate?”

Where did he even *get* his information?

Kira, it seemed, was right on the same page. “It’s only four hundred, and how did you hear about that? The official announcement isn’t scheduled until tomorrow.”

“I hear things,” Jake said, not for the first time. “So, could you elaborate? My readers want to know what’s going on.”

“You don’t have any readers,” Odo said. “Weyoun is still blocking the transmission of your stories.”

“For now,” Jake said. “But what if he changes his mind? Don’t you want to explain what’s going on here to the outside world?”

Odo and Kira exchanged a glance.

Finally, Kira sighed. “Ever since the war started, Bajor’s been completely cut off from all outside trade. We’ve had nowhere to turn for things like spare parts or medical supplies, nowhere—except the Dominion.”

Odo couldn’t restrain his wince. The Dominion held Bajor in the palm of its hand. Only the nonaggression pact held it back from a full-scale invasion.

“So,” Kira continued, “a group of facilitators is going to Bajor for a few months to provide some technical assistance.”

Jake tapped at his PADD. “How do you respond to critics like Vedek Yassim who say that by welcoming a group of Vorta to Bajor, you’re taking the first step towards Dominion occupation?”

First step? Odo thought. The *first step* had been when the Dominion overtook the station.

But his priority was to maintain order and keep Bajor unscathed by violence. He couldn’t have Jake spreading stories that stoked fear or encouraged dissent.

He folded his arms. “I have been assured that the facilitators will be unarmed and unaccompanied by any Jem’Hadar soldiers.”

“Odo,” Jake said, “do you have any concerns that by joining the ruling council here on the station, you’re validating the occupation?”

Just what he needed—a guilt trip.

“The Dominion doesn’t need my validation,” he said. “They’re here, and they’re not leaving—not without a fight, at least.”

That was what he kept telling himself, anyway.

“You finished?” Kira asked.

“Almost, almost,” Jake said.

Kira sighed.

“Will either of you be attending the demonstration tomorrow?”

Odo startled. He looked to Kira with alarm.

“The what?” Kira said.

“Vedek Yassim has organized a demonstration on the promenade tomorrow afternoon,” Jake said. “To protest the Dominion occupation of the station.”

Oh, for the Prophets’ sake.

“That’s all the excuse Dukat will need to order a new security crackdown,” Odo muttered.

Kira rubbed her eye. “I’ll talk to Yassim.”

“So, you’re going to abolish the right to protest here on the station?” Jake asked.

Odo squinted at him.

“Hey, I’m not trying to accuse you personally of anything,” Jake said, smiling awkwardly. “I’m just asking questions.”

“I think this interview is over,” Kira said, standing.

Odo favored Jake with a look. “I couldn’t agree more.”

*

The next afternoon found Odo standing watch at the Bajoran shrine, waiting to see if Yassim would turn up to cause trouble. So far, all was quiet.

Kira soon joined him, and Jake shortly turned up as well, PADD in hand.

“Don’t think there’s going to be any story here for you today, Jake,” Kira said.

“You sure?” Jake asked. “I got a message from Vedek Yassim saying the protest was starting at exactly 1400.”

“It certainly doesn’t look like it,” Kira said.

But a commotion on the promenade was niggling at Odo’s attention.

“What’s she doing?” someone called out.

In a flash, Odo looked up—to find Vedek Yassim herself grasping the balustrade of the second level, a noose around her neck.

“Evil must be opposed!” she cried.

Time seemed to move in slow motion. There was nothing Odo could do but watch as Yassim stepped off the edge and plummeted; as Kira started forward, and he reached for her automatically, grasping her by the arm. He heard the snap of Yassim’s neck as her hat dropped to the floor.

His other hand had found Kira’s shoulder, but he was aware of little else but Vedek Yassim’s body, suspended on a rope.

*

Odo found Kira on the second level, standing in the very spot where Yassim had the day before.

“Damar has been trying to contact you for the past five hours,” he said quietly.

She opened her hand, revealing her combadge resting in her palm.

“I keep going over it and over it in my mind,” she said. “And I can’t believe that…that I stood there…ready to use force to stop a protest against the Dominion. Me. When I was in the Resistance, I *despised* people like me.”

She turned, looked at him.

“I’m a collaborator, Odo.”

“That’s not true,” Odo said. “You’re doing exactly what Captain Sisko wanted you and the rest of Bajor to do—remain neutral and stay *out* of the fighting.”

But she wasn’t listening.

“We used to have a saying in the Resistance,” she said. “If you’re not fighting them, you’re helping them.”

Odo sighed.

“Half the Alpha Quadrant is out there right now, fighting for my freedom, but not me,” she said. “What am I doing? Eating a full meal every day, sleeping in a soft bed—I even write reports for the murderers who run this station.”

“These are difficult times for everyone.” He drew in a trembling breath. “Do you think it’s easy for me to sit down with Dukat and Weyoun every day while they plot the destruction of the Federation?”

His shame had become a routine, a holding pattern. But he would bear it, for her.

“*Odo.*” She turned, grasping his arms; he couldn’t help but be drawn to her eyes. “I’m not pointing a finger at you. I’m the one who told you to get more involved in the first place. No, this is about *me*.” She released him, looking back over the promenade below. “This is about being able to get up in the morning and look in the mirror and not feel nauseated by what I see.”

Well, he could certainly understand that. More than she even knew.

“Yassim was right,” she murmured. “I have to do something. I have to start to fight back.”

“That would be a mistake,” Odo said. “Active resistance will trigger a crackdown—”

“Odo.” She caught his gaze. “I don’t want to end up fighting you, too…but if I have to, I will.”

A shudder coursed through his substance.

Did she have any *idea* of the power she held over him?

Of the lengths he would go to for her?

Of the pain he would gladly endure, if it meant supporting her, seeing her smile, hearing her laugh again?

If she triggered a crackdown, he couldn’t protect her. But she’d drawn her terms, and there was no universe where Odo could stand for her to fight him.

He glanced warily to either side. “Alright. But let’s find a more discreet place to plan the new resistance?”

They were in Quark’s. Again.

How had that Ferengi’s bar become the most secure location on the station—excepting either of their quarters, of course—to discuss plans for the resistance?

“The next thing we need,” Kira said, “is a secure way to communicate with our contacts on Bajor.”

Odo sighed, shaking his head. “The Cardassians are extremely adept at locating the source of any illicit subspace transmission.”

He would know. He had worked for them before—properly. Not as Kira’s friend walking the line, but as a law enforcement officer with no loyalties.

He’d rather not think about how many illicit subspace transmissions he’d tracked down himself.

“Well, we’ll just have to be smarter than they are,” Kira said.

Odo sighed again.

“Hi,” Jake suddenly said, walking up to their table. He plopped straight down onto a chair. “Mind if I join you?”

“You already have,” Odo said.

“I want in,” Jake said.

“In on what?” Odo asked.

“Your resistance cell.”

“What cell?” Kira asked.

“Come on, Major,” Jake said. “I have my sources.”

“How reassuring,” Odo said.

“I can help,” Jake insisted.

“*How?*” Odo asked.

“As a reporter, I hear things,” Jake said. “People talk to me.”

“About what?” Kira asked.

“Major,” Jake said, “all I’m asking for is a chance.”

Odo glanced over at Kira. He was following her lead, avoiding *her* ire—the decision would be hers. But he’d be lying if he said he harbored no reservations about involving Captain Sisko’s son in resistance activities.

Jake might be an irritating reporter, but Odo had watched that boy grow up.

Before Kira could answer, Quark approached. “It’s time, Major.”

Kira sighed. “Already?”

“1457 hours,” Quark said. “The shuttle will be docking in three minutes.”

“I better get going,” Kira muttered. “Don’t want to keep him waiting.”

She pushed up from the table.

“I see Gul Dukat’s still having you meet him every time he returns to the station,” Jake said.

Kira just *looked* at him.

Jake shrugged a little. “Like I said, I hear things.”

Odo shook his head, defeated.

He was *really* getting tired of hearing that. It was doing him no favors when it came to his anxieties over maintaining order—which, he was sure, Kira was soon to render nearly impossible.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, peeps…*why* was the FC on the wrong side of the wormhole when Sisko deployed the minefield? Yeah, you could argue it was just war business, but I think my little scene with her makes things more interesting ;)

On that note, notice what I slipped in, in the FC's POV? That Changelings can feel the mind of any Solid they choose to impersonate?

Yeah…honestly, peeps, how the heck was the Bashir Changeling able to emulate the right personality and avoid suspicion???

You could argue that maybe they research personnel records or personality profiles, but I think the FC's said it from the beginning: "To become a thing is to know a thing." And the Founders are way too secure in their superiority to spend time on *research*.

Which leads into my interpretation that the FC is *not* the naive victim Odo sees her as. It's heartbreaking. He just wants to see the best in his people, and he's completely unaware of how shamelessly she manipulates him. She doesn't "misunderstand" the Solids. She's taken their form. (You could argue a technicality that her form emulates an imperfect face like Odo's, not a real humanoid, but she's impersonated Kira before, so it's moot. Also, I have my own headcanon about that unfinished face, which you'll learn later in *Dauntless*!) The FC already knows everything Odo wants to teach her about humanoids, and she's decided what she *believes* about them.

You'll see my interpretation there weave into the next chapter… ;)

Also, about the yamok sauce conversation in the beginning — I've always headcanoned that Dax had *some* idea about Odo's love for Kira through her zhian'tara, especially given the obvious (but unacknowledged) parallels between Odo and Curzon. There are enough discontinuous dialogue references in canon that I felt this was a pretty simple fix!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Behind Federation lines, the *Enterprise* crew deals with blood screenings. On Terok Nor, the Female Changeling tempts Odo with the Link.

Chapter Notes

Canon-compatible

Continuity: "Behind the Lines," part 1

This episode is so critical to this fic — and to setting up themes that will follow Odo long into the *Dauntless* main action — that I split it into two chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51145.3 | Starbase 375

Admiral Ross was in his office, reading the report of Starfleet's latest defeat, when his console chimed with an incoming transmission.

It was the *Enterprise*.

Ross sighed. "On screen."

Captain Picard appeared, speaking from his ready room. Behind him stood Commander Riker.

"Captain," Ross greeted.

"Admiral," Picard said, *"have you had a chance to reconsider—"*

"Your orders stand."

Picard frowned. *"Admiral, you need more ships."*

"*One* ship won't make a difference, Captain."

“All due respect, Admiral,” Picard said, *“we have had no engagements with the Dominion within twenty light-years of Earth. You could use a Sovereign-class starship on the front lines. We’ll still have the third and fifth fleets defending Sector 001.”*

Ross raised a brow. “Is that really what you’re concerned about? Bringing a Sovereign-class to bear against the Dominion?”

“Admiral—” Picard started.

“Captain,” Ross said, “I’m well aware that during the Borg attack last year, Starfleet judged you unfit to face the collective, and instead ordered you to the Romulan Neutral Zone. Now you’re worried that you’re being shut out of the action again.”

“Well,” Picard admitted, *“the thought had crossed my mind.”*

“I’m also aware,” Ross said, “that you defied orders, took command of the fleet, destroyed the Borg cube, pursued and destroyed the sphere it launched, and—subsequently—the *Enterprise* singlehandedly saved the Earth.”

Picard frowned. *“Admiral?”*

“My point is, Jean-Luc, I need you on the home front,” Ross said. “I assure you, I have every confidence in the *Enterprise*, her crew, *and* her captain. You command the most advanced starship in the fleet, and if the Dominion breaks through our lines to Sector 001, there’s no one I trust more to save the Earth again.”

Picard nodded. *“Understood.”*

Behind him, Riker shifted on his feet, but said nothing. Well, Ross couldn’t blame him for getting a little antsy.

“What *is* the situation in the Sol system, gentlemen?” he asked.

“Still all quiet,” Riker said.

“No sign of infiltration?” Ross asked.

“Not since Admiral Leyton’s coup.”

Ross nodded. “When was your last round of blood screenings?”

“Last week,” Picard said.

“Better order another,” Ross said. “Make sure they’re randomized.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep me posted. Ross out.”

*

“Your turn, Captain,” Dr. Crusher said.

Captain Picard held still as she pressed the hypo to his upper arm. It seemed as if the air itself held its breath.

She detached the sample tube and held it up.

Data waited.

The blood remained blood.

Once again, the senior staff breathed a collective sigh of relief—including Data.

It was a…curious sensation. And, now that he was more accustomed to the effects of the emotion chip, an altogether pleasant one. Probably his favorite part, though, was that he could finally understand the nuances that surrounded him. The relieved smile that twitched on Dr. Crusher’s lips. The breath Geordi let out. The way Counselor Troi’s face relaxed minutely.

Data was no longer limited to simply *observing* the room, to noting his friends’ reactions as “intriguing.” He was *part* of it.

“Geordi?” Dr. Crusher asked.

Geordi nodded.

As the blood drew, Data’s breath hitched, and he found himself caught between anxiety and fascination.

Anxiety, because in the space of a second, thousands of permutations of events played out in his processors—Geordi being abducted, held in a Dominion prison, tortured by Jem’Hadar, while Data sat here, oblivious to his best friend’s replacement.

Fascination, because he was *able* to experience such anxiety at all.

Dr. Crusher held up the sample tube.

The blood remained blood.

Data sighed.

Then Dr. Crusher’s eyes turned on him.

“Now you, Data.”

Data sucked in a deep breath.

This was the one part of the blood screenings that he hated. Because, for him, it *wasn’t* a blood screening.

Geordi rose from his seat. “You ready?”

“Yes, Geordi.”

Geordi knelt at his side, grasped his forearm, and *twisted*.

There was nothing quite so unsettling as watching as his forearm was removed from his body, feeling all electrical impulses cut off at his elbow.

It had been his own suggestion—one year, ten months, and four days ago, when the blood screenings had begun. When the question had first been posed as to how to test the identity of an android.

“Captain,” he’d said, *“if a part of a Changeling is separated from the whole, it reverts to a gelatinous state. Is that not the logic behind the blood screenings?”*

Picard had leaned one elbow on his desk with interest. *“Yes…?”*

Data’s brows had twitched up. *“A part* can *be separated from my whole.”*

Presently, Geordi held up the detached arm.

Of course, it remained an arm.

Data’s eyes flicked across the room—from Captain Picard’s thinly veiled relief, to Riker’s sigh, to the way Counselor Troi sagged in her seat.

Geordi reattached the arm with a *click*.

Data’s eyes fell shut.

“Alright,” Dr. Crusher said with forced levity. “Done.”

Everyone filed out of the observation lounge. Everyone except Geordi—and Counselor Troi.

“You alright, Data?” Geordi asked.

Data glanced up at him. “I will be fine.”

Nodding, Geordi followed the others.

Then, as usual, Data felt the counselor’s hand on his shoulder. “Data?”

“Counselor.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“There is nothing to talk about,” Data replied. “The Dominion threat necessitates the procedure. I am not offended.”

“Data,” she said, “I don’t think that’s the issue.”

Data sighed.

“If you want to talk,” she said, “you know where to find me.”

Then she, too, left the room.

Data, however, remained in his seat. He spread and flexed his fingers. Wrapped his other hand around his newly attached wrist.

This was *human*, was it not? The range of emotions, no matter how unpleasant?

Then why didn’t *this* sensation fascinate him?

*

Terok Nor

Odo paced behind his desk, his matrix coiled tight as his substance churned.

—again and again, his shovel struck the ground—

Growling, he shook his head hard.

What had Kira been *thinking*, starting a brawl like that?

He’d warned her. He’d *told* her it was a bad idea. He could stomach some resistance; he had little choice. But pitting the Cardassians and the Jem’Hadar against one another? Seeding utter *chaos* on the station?

How was he supposed to do his duty? How was he supposed to protect Bajor under Dukat’s watchful eye? Protect *her*?

He had buried her once. He’d laid her body in the ground. He’d pressed his fingers to her cold skin, looked into her pale face. He could *not* do that again.

Did she have *any* respect for the narrow line he was walking?

Dare he hope he was wrong—that she had more sense than that, that she had his back, that she hadn’t been responsible for that brawl after all?

His office doors slid open, heralding her arrival.

He straightened, waiting.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked.

“Well?” he said. “Don’t you have something to say to me?”

“About what happened at Quark’s?”

He nodded.

“It worked better than I expected,” she said.

And oh, if that guiltless satisfaction on her face didn’t drive his frustration to a boil.

He huffed. “I *knew* you were behind it!”

“Of course you did,” Kira said. “We discussed it at our last resistance meeting.”

“And *I* said it was a bad idea!”

“Yes, you did,” she said. “And then you walked out of the room like there was nothing left to say. But Rom and Jake stayed and we discussed it, and you know what? I decided it was a *good* idea.”

He stared at her. “So you went ahead and did it behind my back?”

Kira peered at him. “Why are you taking this so personally?”

“How do you expect me to take it?” he cried. “I spend my days sitting on the council with Dukat and Weyoun, doing whatever I can to make sure that Bajor survives this war intact. The *last* thing I need is to have you running around causing mayhem! Do you have *any* idea what Dukat would do if he found out you were behind it? It’s *all* the excuse he would need to throw every Bajoran off this station!”

“The Federation is losing this war,” Kira said. “We can’t sit by and do nothing!”

“There are *limits* to what we can do.”

“I’m beginning to think you shouldn’t have agreed to sit on that council,” she said. He reeled back, incensed, but the fire in her eyes blazed ever hotter. “It’s as if you’re so invested in making sure the station runs smoothly, you’ve forgotten there’s a war going on!”

Cold fury trickled through his matrix.

How could she?

“Are you questioning my loyalties, Major?”

“I need you, Odo!” she said. “The resistance *needs* you!”

“Answer me!” He rounded his desk. “Are you questioning my loyalties?”

“Oh, of course not,” Kira said. “That’s not what this is about—”

His doors opened again, cutting her off—and in walked the last person he’d ever expected, or wanted, to see.

The Founder.

His one-time mentor. His judge and jury. The entity who had stripped him of everything he was and flung him into the Solid world without a care for what happened to him.

“Hello, Odo,” she said. “It’s good to see you again.”

*

“Leave us,” the Founder told Kira, without so much as looking in her direction. “I need to speak with Odo.”

To her credit, Kira didn’t move. “Do you?”

Odo glanced her way. Took in the square of her shoulders, the hard set of her features.

She was defending him.

Maybe she still had his back, after all.

“It’s alright, Nerys.” He could think of no other way to extend his own olive branch, not while in the Founder’s company. “I may as well hear what she has to say.”

“Are you sure?” Kira asked.

He gave her a short nod. But as she left his office, he was already beginning to regret his decision.

Are you questioning my loyalties?

His matrix churned.

Her absence *ached*—made all the worse by the way they had left things. His anger with her was fading like slipping through quicksand; all he wanted was to have her back by his side.

But instead, the Founder stood before him, and Kira was gone.

“You called her ‘Nerys,’” the Founder said.

“What of it?”

“Well, you used to call her ‘Major,’” the Founder said. “Using the name of a Solid denotes intimacy.”

Not very likely.

Unwilling to linger the subject, Odo moved behind his desk to put some distance between them. “You’re a long way from home. Here to keep an eye on the war effort?”

“I’m content to leave the details of the war to the Vorta,” she replied.

He folded his arms. “Then…what brings you to Deep Space Nine?”

“You.”

He couldn’t believe it—she actually looked *eager*.

He dared not look too closely at the way something deep within him jumped in response.

“I was trapped in the Alpha Quadrant when Captain Sisko mined the entrance to the wormhole,” she said. “I have spent too much time with Solids. I came because I felt the need to be with one of my own.”

And just like that, all his resentment came flooding back.

“Well, that’s ironic,” he said. “Considering what happened the last time we crossed paths.”

“You caused the death of a fellow Changeling, Odo,” the Founder said. “Turning you into a Solid was the only punishment severe enough for your crime.”

He peered at her. “And now that I’m a Changeling again, you come here as though nothing ever happened?”

She spread her hands to her sides. “We have forgiven you.”

“Well, *I* haven’t forgiven *you*!”

“It is time to put the past behind us, Odo.”

So she got to decide when it was time to move on? When to offer forgiveness, when to withhold it? Did she *enjoy* the power she held over him—the power to alter his very nature, strip him of everything he was, force him to come crawling back to her for salvation?

“And what about the present?” he said. “You’re waging a war against my home!”

“This is not your home!” the Founder said. “You belong with your own kind, as part of the Great Link!”

Odo glared at her. “I’m quite content here, thank you.”

“You say that because you don’t know what you’re capable of becoming!”

Despite himself, he glanced at her tentatively.

Whether he liked it or not, she *did* hold the key to understanding his origins. A key he hadn’t had access to since he’d first discovered his homeworld.

“Perhaps if we spent some time together,” she said, “you might begin to understand.”

Without another word, she turned and left his office.

*

Odo’s matrix seemed to be in a permanent state of tension.

He hadn’t resolved things with Kira. He *still* dreaded what she would get herself into. And now Dukat and Weyoun were tripping over themselves trying to impress the Founder.

Even after they both left the wardroom, Odo couldn't relax.

The *Founder* was still there.

"Do they always compete with one another like that?" she asked.

He sighed. "As a matter of fact, they do."

"You have to interact with them often," she said. "It must be trying for you."

"It hasn't been easy," he admitted. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some work to do in my quarters."

He had just stepped toward the door when she spoke up.

"May I walk with you?"

He hesitated.

Turned.

Took in those unfinished features that mirrored his, her identical hair. The features that branded him as a Changeling in this Solid world.

She was like him. And no one else was.

He dipped his head in a nod and gestured ahead.

*

"To become a thing is to know a thing," Odo said.

The Founder ran her hand along the bark of a gnarled tree branch in his quarters.

"To assume its form," she finished, "is to begin to understand its existence."

"You tried to teach me that when I visited our homeworld."

She hummed in reply. "I remember."

He wasn't getting his work done. But, he found as she drifted toward the arched structure and passed her hand along its curved edge, he didn't entirely mind.

She knew far more about how to be a Changeling than he did.

He *wanted* her to be proud of how he'd arranged his quarters, of his solitary attempt to take her lessons to heart.

"I didn't understand what you meant by it at first," Odo said. "So when I returned to the station, I requested quarters for the first time, and filled them with these objects."

Absently, he ran his own hand along the nearest arch of the central structure.

“I’ve assumed every shape in this room,” he said. “I suppose if it weren’t for you, I never would’ve known the simple pleasure of spending time existing as a stone or a branch.”

The Founder had made a circuit of the structure, and now stood behind him. “I’m glad you learned something from your visit.”

At her approval, some of his tension eased.

“Your arrival was a time of great joy for the Link,” she said. She wandered past him. “And your departure, a time of great sadness. If only you had stayed with us, Odo.”

He stiffened. “I couldn’t.”

“You chose the Solids.”

He drew his hands behind his back. “And I haven’t regretted it.”

“Not even a little?”

“I do…think about the Link from time to time,” he admitted.

“It’s there for you,” she said.

Odo shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Why?” she asked. “Because of Kira?”

He looked away.

“You still have feelings for her, don’t you?” the Founder said. “But she doesn’t share them.”

There was no sense denying it. But he couldn’t meet her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” the Founder said.

Odo looked at her, surprised. “Aren’t you going to tell me I shouldn’t waste my time with a Solid?”

“You *love* her!”

She said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Which, to him, it was.

Her words loosened something deep inside him, something that had been coiled tight for longer than he had been aware. Perhaps ever since Kira had learned of his feelings for her—and subsequently proved just how right he had been to keep them a secret.

But it *hurt*.

He had tried to deny it—but his love for her was part of what he was, as much a part of him as his Changeling abilities.

A part of himself he had to constantly restrain.

A source of shame.

Of *pain*.

“I wish I didn’t,” he whispered. “I’m so vulnerable to her. All she has to do is smile at me and I’m happy beyond reason. A minor disagreement between us and I’m devastated…it’s absurd!” His breath shook. “Sometimes I wish I could reach inside myself and tear out my feelings for her. But I can’t.”

“Poor Odo,” the Founder said, behind him.

“I don’t want your pity,” he snapped.

“I’m not offering pity.”

He sucked in a breath that shuddered through his form. “What I need is some peace.”

“What you need,” the Founder said, “is clarity.”

Her words caught his attention. Slowly, he turned, tentative hope taking root in his matrix.

“I can give you that,” she said.

And she offered her hand.

The Link.

His gaze fixed on her hand, powerless to tear his eyes away as his own hand moved without his conscious permission. He could *feel* its pull—memories reawakening, shifting gently through his substance, reminding him of the last time he had felt that perfect, pure connection.

It was more than any Solid—than *Kira*—could offer him.

He placed his hand in hers. Her fingers turned liquid against his palm, and his instinctively followed suit, his eyes slipping shut as utter contentment washed over him.

Distantly, he registered her voice. “Do you want me to stop?”

No. No, he didn’t. How could he *ever* want her to stop? How could anything compare to the pleasure that tingled through his substance, washing through him and over him like waves, drawing him to bask in her gentle sea?

The Link deepened, and he reached for her other hand; he could *feel* her matching him, feel the peace of her being, the utter smoothness and order of her mind, her clarity of purpose,

her *calm*.

He’d *missed* this.

Yearned for it.

Needed it, like Solids needed to breathe.

He’d suffocated himself for three years, gasped on land like a fish out of water for all his existence before that, and only now, as her substance mingled with his and quested through his being and joined with him in such perfect synchrony, could he draw breath.

How could he *ever* want this to end?

Chapter End Notes

Anyone notice that in "The Abandoned," it's pretty clear Odo's getting his own quarters for the first time, and before that, it was clear that Odo slept in a bucket in *his office*...but in "Behind the Lines," he tells the FC that he "got rid of all the furniture" he used to have in his quarters and replaced it with "these objects"? Yeah...canon seems to have erred on that detail, lol. I tweaked his line and fixed it XD

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Odo struggles with the call of the Link.

Chapter Notes

Canon-compatible

Continuity: "Behind the Lines," part 2

Long after the Founder left, Odo gazed out the window of his quarters, searching the distant stars.

There had been times, before he had learned the terrible truth of his people and *chosen* his colleagues on Deep Space Nine, when this station had felt impossibly constricting. Once, it had been an escape from Bajor. A way out of Dr. Mora's laboratory. But any place in the Solid world was the same. He was still, inevitably, alone.

That old sensation stirred within him now. The sense of the station's hull locked around him, constraining him. The niggling feeling that belonging and acceptance were just beyond his reach. That he could only find what he searched for among all those distant stars.

He knew now, though, that it wasn't the stars that drew him.

It was the *Link*.

That was the only place he could ever truly belong.

So lost was he among those stars that he almost missed his door chime. A second delayed, he called, "Come in."

The door slid open and shut, barely on the edge of his awareness.

"Odo?"

Kira.

As he looked into her face, he could almost believe that he could find what he needed *here*, too. That she could be enough. That his love wouldn't cost him too much.

He *wanted* it to be enough.

“Nerys,” he said.

“I dropped by your office and Damar told me you were here,” Kira said. “With her.”

“She was here,” Odo said. “But she’s gone now.”

“You alright?” Tentatively, Kira walked toward him. “What did she want?”

“She didn’t *want* anything.”

“Then…what was she doing here?”

Odo let out a patient sigh. “I know how you feel about her, Major. But there’s no reason to be concerned.”

“You don’t know how much I wish I could believe that,” Kira said. “You didn’t Link with her, did you?”

Odo bristled slightly. He folded his arms. “Actually, I did.”

“You did?”

He nodded.

She paced before him. “*What* were you thinking?”

Odo wandered a few paces, shaking his head. “She didn’t find out about the resistance, if that’s why you’re worried.”

“It’s not!”

“The Link isn’t about exchanging information,” Odo said. “It’s about merging thought and form, idea and sensation.”

“That sounds like a *perfect* way to manipulate someone.”

Odo waved a hand in dismissal. “She’s not manipulating me.”

Kira followed him across the room. “Ever since the day you two crossed paths, she has lied to you, tricked you, stood in judgment of you. I don’t trust her. I don’t see how you *can*!”

“I *Linked* with her,” Odo said, turning to face her. “If she had any hidden motive, I would’ve sensed it. She’s just trying…to *teach* me about myself—about what I’m capable of becoming.”

“An intergalactic warlord, maybe?” Kira said. “Because *that’s* what she is.”

“Who knows?” Odo said. “By Linking with her, I might be able to make her understand that the Federation doesn’t pose a threat to her people.”

“You *believe* you can convince her to…call off the war?”

Kira’s voice dripped with skepticism. But Odo knew he had to be patient with her. She wasn’t a Changeling. She couldn’t know the Link. She couldn’t feel the euphoria that still rippled through his matrix, long after the Founder had gone. It wasn’t her fault she didn’t understand.

“If you could experience the Link,” he murmured, “you’d understand the effect it has on my people.” He wandered back toward the window, toward those distant stars. “You’d realize that anything is possible.” He turned, earnest. “I’m…only *beginning* to understand it all myself. I still have so many questions. Now that she’s here, I have a chance to find some answers.”

“Odo, this isn’t the time to go off on some personal quest,” Kira said. “There’s too much at stake! After the war is over, you—do whatever you need to do, if you feel you need to go and join the Great Link, I’m—I’m not gonna stop you. But for right now, I *need* you, here, *focused*. Please, promise me that you’re not gonna Link with her again. Not until this is over!”

Odo’s substance churned.

Did she even know what she was *asking*?

It probably sounded so reasonable, to her. Wait until after the war. But the Link was part of what he *was*.

He needed it *now*.

Still, as he took in the pleading look in her eyes, he couldn’t deny her.

He never could.

“Alright.” He nodded. “I won’t. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get to work.” When tension lingered in her features, he added, “I’ll see you at the resistance meeting.”

With a slight nod, Kira left, and his door slid closed behind her.

He really did have work to do. The Founder had occupied him for far longer than he’d planned—long enough that, at one time, the disruption in his schedule would have set him on edge.

Now, he only felt the lingering calm of the Link.

The Link…

No. He’d made a promise.

Damn it, Kira.

He turned back to face the window. Wasn’t there something he needed to do? A reason he’d prompted her to leave?

No matter.

His gaze drifted out to the stars.

*

He needed the Link.

Jake was saying something about bad blood between Cardassians and Jem’Hadar, but Odo couldn’t quite bring himself to focus.

There was a strange tightness spreading through his substance, steadily erasing the effects of the Link.

The Link…the Link…

“What do you think, Odo?”

Kira’s voice drew him from his thoughts. It took a moment to latch onto reality, to call his senses back to attention, to remember what she was asking him about.

Right. They were talking about Cardassians and Jem’Hadar, weren’t they?

What *did* he think, anyway? It seemed so immaterial.

His own words floated to the surface of his thoughts, distant, as if spoken by someone else.

“…and I said it was a bad idea…”

He could fall back on that.

“I’m…not sure it’s a good idea,” he said.

“Then we’ll do something else,” Kira said.

Jake protested, but Odo had already stopped listening. His cells were tightening, constricting, his matrix coiling, the calm of the Link slipping away.

Need the Link…

“Brother!”

Rom’s voice. Odo glanced up to find Quark in the doorway.

His surroundings drifted again.

All he could focus on was the tension in his substance. The tension that only the Link could ease.

Quark was complaining about…something. Odo managed a weak eye roll. That was the way he usually acted with Quark, right? When he could bring himself to care?

The others' voices washed over him, immaterial.

"…a way to deactivate the mines…"

Odo startled.

The mines?

Rom's mines?

That mattered.

"…field tests…"

Focus!

"…something about the station's…defector," Quark was saying.

Odo leaned forward. "Defector?"

"That's impossible," Kira said. "The only person on the station who knows anything about the mines is…"

"…me," Rom said.

"Defector…that doesn't sound right," Quark said. "Maybe it was…deflector?" He paused. "Yeah. Yeah, that's it. He said something about using the station's…deflector array."

"What do you think, Rom?" Kira asked.

"I'm glad it wasn't me!"

"About the *deflector array*!"

Odo lost track of Rom's technobabble—something about self-replication and anti-graviton beams. Then Kira's voice penetrated the fog.

"Alright, let's do it."

Do what?

"But there's no way to *get* to the EPS feed," Rom said. "It's in a secured conduit rigged with alarms."

Ahh. The EPS feed. Security alarms. *Now* Odo was on board.

"Odo," Kira said, "can you disable those alarms?"

"I can take them off-line for about five minutes if I run a security diagnostic," he said.

"Will that give you enough time?" Kira asked Rom.

“I think so!”

“I’ll run the diagnostic as soon as I get to my office in the morning,” Odo said.

On Kira’s request, he agreed to begin the diagnostic at exactly 0800 hours. With the details hammered out, they adjourned for the evening. Odo’s matrix was already loosening.

No mayhem, no chaos, no brawls on the promenade.

This, he could do.

*

In the morning, *she* returned to his quarters.

But it wasn’t 0800 yet.

If he wanted to spend time with one of his people—one who could give him not only acceptance but *answers*—during his own free time before he went on duty, that was no one’s business but his own.

She was order. Calm. Peace. Serenity.

Clarity.

Exactly what he needed right now.

His mind was bursting with questions—all the ones he had never had the opportunity to ask before. He would have, on his homeworld three years ago. But he’d barely been there for long when he’d learned the truth. When their treatment of his friends had forced a choice, far too soon.

He lost track of time as the Founder indulged him.

Have we always been shapeshifters?

No, there was once a time when they were like the Solids—their liquid nature was an evolved form.

On the homeworld, are we always in the Link?

Sometimes, their people took Solid form, but they preferred the Link.

More and more, Odo was coming to understand just how important the Link was to his people—and what Kira was asking him to give up.

It would be like asking her not to talk to anyone. Or maybe even to avoid praying, or going to the shrine.

“How many of us are there?” he asked.

The Founder sighed, shaking her head at him. “So many questions, Odo.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But there’s still so much that isn’t clear to me yet.”

“If you Link with me again,” she said, “everything will be made clear to you.”

The Link…

His cells lurched at the temptation. At the memory of that perfect calm.

What right did Kira have to deny him clarity? To deny him such an integral part of his nature —something that *she* couldn’t give him?

But he’d made a promise.

A promise he was beginning to regret.

“You have to understand,” he tried, “that the Link is very overwhelming for me.” In all the best ways, but he didn’t need to voice that. “Right now, it’s easier to talk.” Easier than letting Kira down.

“But words are so clumsy!” the Founder protested. “So imprecise.”

“Even so.”

She sighed. “As you wish.”

His substance clenched. Part of him had *hoped* that she would press the issue, give him a reason to capitulate.

He paced around her, only to turn suddenly.

“You haven’t told me your name!” he realized.

“What use would I have for a name?”

“To differentiate yourself from the others,” he said.

She shook her head. “I don’t.”

“But…you *are* a separate being, aren’t you?”

A cryptic nod. “In a sense.”

Curiosity rippled through Odo’s matrix. He was on the verge of something important here— he could feel it.

“When you return to the Link,” he said, “what will become of the entity I’m talking to right now?”

She spread her hands. “The drop becomes the ocean.”

“And…if you choose to take solid form again?”

She brought her hands together. “The ocean becomes a drop.”

“*Ahh.*” It was all crystallizing. “Yes…I think I’m beginning to understand!”

“Then you can answer your own question,” the Founder said. “How many of us are there?”

“One,” he said. “And many! It depends on how you look at it.”

“Very good!” she said. “You *are* beginning to understand.”

He let out a relieved sigh.

He’d spent his entire life trying to fit in amongst the Solids, learning to anticipate and mimic their behaviors, molding himself into the right shape to exist in their world. But he’d longed for nothing more than to understand *why* he was so different, why he was so alien.

How could the Solids understand what it was like to question one’s very nature? To wonder, not *who* you are, but *what* you are?

How could *Kira* understand?

The Founder approached him. “But there’s so much you don’t know.”

He turned, faced her. “Tell me?”

“Oh, words are insufficient.” She offered her hands. “Link with me again. It is the only way I can give you the understanding you seek.”

He broke her gaze. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I promised Kira.”

“She is a Solid,” the Founder replied. “This has nothing to do with her. This is about *you*. About what *you* want!”

There it was.

The impetus he needed.

Besides—Kira cared about him, didn’t she? If she knew how badly he *needed* this, would she really deny him?

He wasn’t *really* breaking his word.

The Founder reached out. His hesitations melted away as his hand moved of its own accord, as his fingers met hers, as she liquefied against him, prompting his own cells to do the same.

It was even better than before.

Worlds better.

Pleasure tingled through his matrix. Light danced across his senses. Gentle waves rolled through him, over him, soothing the tension in his substance, washing his worries away. His head tipped back as euphoria more wonderful than anything he'd ever known enveloped him.

Some distant corner of his mind registered that it was probably nearing 0800, that he needed to report to his office, that Kira was depending on him.

The Link washed those thoughts away.

How could *anything* else matter in the face of this perfect clarity?

What need did he have to seek Kira's approval, to brave the fire in her eyes, to stand steadfastly by her side even as she rejected his feelings, ignored his struggles, remained oblivious to his pain?

Why should he withstand her ire when he could stay *here*, afloat in the Link, awash in the purest pleasure he'd ever known?

Why should he be so *vulnerable* to her?

Why should she wield such power over him?

"Kira to Odo," his combadge chirped. *"Please respond."*

Her voice was meaningless, immaterial.

"Kira to Odo! Odo, answer me!"

His combadge melted away, and he was subsumed.

*

Awareness returned in stages.

Slowly, the Founder's substance withdrew from his.

Don't go, he thought he said, but he wasn't sure his mouth formed the words.

"Major Kira is coming this way," the Founder soothed. "I'll join you again in a moment."

She slipped away.

Odo's eyes fluttered open—and his mouth opened in a silent gasp.

The world was *aglow*. The floor, the walls, his shapeshifting structures. Everything had a faint aura around it. Even the air itself seemed to quiver with light.

“Is it always like this?” he murmured.

“If you take your place in the Great Link,” the Founder said, from afar, “it will be.”

A contented sigh rustled through his substance. He could still feel the overwhelming pleasure of the Link washing through him, rhythmic, in and out, in and out, like smooth waves upon a beach on a clear day.

This was *incredible*.

His door chimed once, twice. He had little idea if he answered; then Kira stormed in, all fire and steel.

And she had an aura of her own, brighter than the rest. It was as if his love for her had taken physical form, as if the light of her existence had manifested before him.

She was *beautiful*.

But she was also a Solid. How could he have overlooked that before?

“What the hell happened?” she demanded. “Why didn’t you disable that alarm?”

“It’s difficult to explain,” he said.

Fury burned in her eyes. “Rom is sitting in a holding cell being interrogated! He was counting on you! *I* was counting on you!”

Odo nodded, indulgent. “I know.”

“You *know*?” she repeated. “Do you realize what you just did? You just *handed* the Alpha Quadrant to the Dominion!”

“I was in the Link.”

“Are you saying you *forgot*?”

“I didn’t forget,” he said, shaking his head. “It just…didn’t seem to matter.”

“A lot of people are going to *die*!” she cried. “Don’t you care?”

Her words seemed to *plink* lightly against him before slipping away, immaterial.

“It has *nothing* to do with me,” he said.

She stared at him. “How can you say that?”

He sighed. He couldn’t blame her for not understanding. “If you could experience the Link, you’d know why nothing else matters.”

“The last five years,” she said. “Your life here, our friendship—none of that matters?”

“It did, once,” he assured her. “I wish I could make you understand. But you can’t. You’re not a Changeling.”

“You’re right,” Kira said. “I’m a Solid.”

Odo nodded gently.

She withdrew from him; he watched her go, drawn to the light that surrounded her before the door to his quarters shut behind her.

Oh, *this* was peace.

The freedom to love her without pain.

To bask in her light without being bound to her will.

To know that only the Link mattered. To float within this paradise, freed from the pressures of the Solid world.

To enjoy his feelings for her, without being so vulnerable to her.

To abandon the internal tug-of-war that had plagued him since he’d discovered his people—to know, *finally*, where he belonged. To fully accept his own nature, and know that no lures from the Solid world could drive him to question it.

To know that nothing here mattered. Not the duty he had so stubbornly clung to, not his former loyalties, *nothing*.

The Founder’s footsteps approached behind him.

“You look troubled, Odo,” she said. “Did she upset you?”

Odo tilted his head. Once, he knew, she would have. That fire in Kira’s eyes would’ve scalded him, and he would’ve moved mountains, sacrificed anything, if it meant seeing her smile again.

But now, that pressure was absent.

“No,” he murmured. “Not really.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> While Starfleet and its Klingon allies prepare to retake Deep Space Nine, Odo wrestles with the effects of the Link.

Chapter Notes

> Canon-compatible
>
> Continuity: "Favor the Bold"

Stardate: 51149.3 | USS Defiant

The *Defiant* was dead in space—for the moment.

“Cadet?” Dax prompted.

“Continuing to emit distress signals on all frequencies, sir,” Nog reported.

“Chief?”

“We’re still venting plasma,” O’Brien said. “Any ship within a hundred million kilometers will know we’re here—and that we’re not going anywhere.”

“We have company, Captain,” Nog said. “Two Dominion ships heading this way, bearing 197 mark 135.”

“They’ll have us in weapons range in twenty-two seconds,” said the Chief.

“Shields?” Dax checked.

“Shields at thirty percent,” Nog said.

“Phaser banks?”

“The entire weapons array is off-line,” the Chief said.

Good, Dax thought. “Now we find something to hold on to.”

As she braced herself against the arms of the captain's chair, the *Defiant* shuddered under phaser fire. Sparks flew; the computer bleeped alarms.

"Shields are down to twenty percent!" Nog reported.

Come on, Worf…

Not a minute too soon, the *Rotarran* decloaked ahead and fired. One of the Jem'Hadar ships blew.

"Now?" asked the Chief.

"Now," Dax said. "Shields up. Engines at full impulse. Power to main phasers!"

"Target locked!" the Chief reported.

"Fire!"

The remaining Jem'Hadar ship exploded in a brilliant fireball. The *Defiant* peeled away.

"Cadet," Dax checked, "are there any other Dominion ships out there?"

"None that I can see!"

Excellent.

Dax stood. "This is the captain speaking. All hands, stand down. Good job, people."

Now *that* was how this was done.

"We're being hailed by the *Rotarran*," Nog reported. "Commander Worf wants to speak to you."

"On screen."

"Well done, Captain," Worf said from the viewscreen. *"You were a very effective decoy."*

"How about next time we switch roles?" Dax teased. "That way, I can rescue *you*."

"You may have to wait a while, Captain," O'Brien reported. "We've just received orders from Starfleet Command. All ships in this sector to pull back to Starbase 375."

Dax sighed. "Fall back again."

"Engage, retreat," O'Brien muttered. "Engage, retreat. I tell you, that's becoming our favorite tune."

Julian spoke up from across the bridge. "Well, we better think of a new tune fast, or the only song we're going to be singing is 'Hail the Conquering Dominion'."

“I wouldn’t start learning those lyrics just yet, Doctor,” Dax said. To the viewscreen, “Worf, we’ll see you at Starbase 375.”

“I will be waiting,” Worf answered, and ended the transmission.

Dax tapped the coordinates for Starbase 375 into the helm. “Set a course for these coordinates. Warp seven.”

She could remember the days when she had flown the *Defiant* under Benjamin’s command, and *he* hadn’t been happy to retreat then, either.

But now he was stationed behind a desk at Starbase 375, giving the orders.

What the hell was he thinking?

*

Starbase 375

Dax strode into Benjamin’s office to find him sitting behind his desk, PADD in hand. He looked up as she entered.

“I don’t know what all you brass hats in Starfleet Command are thinking,” she said, “but take it from a simple field officer—we’re not going to win this war by running away from the enemy!”

Benjamin set down his PADD. “I know that.”

“Benjamin, troop morale is at an all-time low,” Dax said. “Even the Klingons are starting to wonder if we can defeat the Dominion! We need a victory—a *big* victory—and we need it *soon*.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.”

“Then *do* something about it!”

“I already have,” he said. “In fact, I’m presenting a plan to Starfleet Command at 0800 tomorrow.”

“What plan?” Dax asked.

He stood and rounded his desk to approach the tactical display on his wall, where Deep Space Nine itself was displayed, overlaid with fleet movements. “We’re going to retake Deep Space Nine.”

Dax smiled.

So, planning fleet movements from a cushy office hadn’t corrupted her old friend after all.

*

Kira strode clear of the turbolift, just behind Quark. They marched down the corridor of the habitat ring.

“I keep telling myself that Odo never meant to have Rom arrested,” Quark said. “It was all a mistake—bad timing, bad luck.”

“I thought that too at first,” Kira said.

“I have known Odo a long time,” Quark said. “He’s not a collaborator.”

“Then why is your brother still in a holding cell?”

Quark’s silence was answer enough.

Months ago—before the Dominion had taken the station, when she was still reeling from the events of Gaia—she’d wondered how separate Odo really was from his counterpart. Wondered if *he* was capable of the same horror.

Capable of erasing eight thousand lives in a heartbeat.

She’d denied it. Chosen to believe he was the same man she’d known since the days of the Cardassian occupation, the man she’d trusted with her life on countless occasions, the man she came to when her head was spinning. The firm wall at her back. Her rock. Her best friend.

But now, it seemed, she had her answer.

Eight thousand lives were a drop in a bucket—no irony intended—compared to the entire Alpha Quadrant.

They rounded the corner, bringing Odo’s door into view—as well as two security officers, one Bajoran and one Jem’Hadar, who stood guard.

Here goes nothing.

“We’re here to see Odo,” Quark said.

“The Founders are not to be disturbed,” the Jem’Hadar intoned.

Founders.

Plural.

Including Odo.

“*Odo* will make an exception for us,” Quark said.

“There are no exceptions.”

Kira lifted her chin. “I’d like to hear that from Odo.”

“I’m sorry, Major, but you’re wasting your time,” the Bajoran deputy said. “His orders were quite clear. He doesn’t want to see anyone—not until his guest has left.”

Kira’s mind reeled back to the time, three years ago, when Odo had first moved into his own quarters on the station. When he had, in his usual dour way, discouraged company from most of the senior staff—but he had, as always, made an exception for her. He’d been *warm*.

“You’re always welcome here, Major.”

Not anymore, apparently.

Now, as she faced down his deputy, those three years may as well have been a lifetime.

“And how long has his guest been visiting?” she asked.

“As far as I know,” the deputy said, “the female Changeling has not left his quarters for three days.”

Three days.

Ever since the morning of Rom’s arrest.

The morning Odo had told her, in no uncertain terms, just how little she mattered to him.

“I wish I could make you understand. But you can’t. You’re not a Changeling.”

“You’re right. I’m a Solid.”

His serene, detached nod was burned into her memory.

Suddenly, Quark tried to rush the door—only for the Jem’Hadar guard to grab him. “Step away from the door, Ferengi!”

Kira stepped in, shouting, but the deputy stopped her.

“Perhaps it would be best if you left,” he said. “My…colleague here takes his duties very seriously. I…promise to tell Odo you were here.”

Not that it would do any good.

“Let’s go, Quark,” Kira said quietly.

They had their answer.

*

Odo’s matrix felt like it was frozen solid.

Not *tense*, but glacial.

Cold.

Empty.

“So,” the Founder said, “that is how the Solids experience intimacy.”

He sat with his back to her on the other side of the bed.

The bed.

He hadn’t even *had* a bed in his quarters before tonight. He’d had to have it beamed in.

She had asked him to show her what he knew of intimacy, from the Solid world. To help her understand him, meet him on familiar ground.

It had been *terrible*.

“Not all Solids,” he heard himself say. “Humans…Bajorans…”

Kira…

“I really must thank you, Odo,” the Founder said, drawing him from his thoughts.

“For what?”

“For giving me new insight into the Solids,” she said.

“And what have you learned?”

“That what they consider intimacy,” she said, slipping off the bed to walk toward him, “is only a shadow of what we experience in the Great Link.”

He couldn’t look at her.

He’d enjoyed this before, with Arissa—and it had seemed perfectly fulfilling, then.

With the Founder, it had been empty.

Wrong.

If he ever were to experience this again, it should’ve been with—

“You don’t agree?” the Founder asked.

“I…didn’t say that.”

Maybe that *was* what was wrong. Maybe it had felt so empty *because* it wasn’t the Link.

The Link…

The Founder sat down next to him. “You have done this before?”

“Not often.”

“But when you have, you enjoyed it?”

“…Yes.”

“And you regret not having experienced it with Major Kira?”

Kira.

Her name sent a sudden, sharp pang through his matrix. “I’d…rather not discuss Major Kira.”

“I don’t see why not,” the Founder replied. “When we Link, your feelings for her are made very clear.”

“Then…why do you insist that we *talk* about it?”

She hadn’t Linked with him in…how long? He wasn’t sure. But it felt like an eternity. The euphoria of the Link had long since slipped away, leaving emptiness in its wake. His matrix felt so slow and sluggish, like he’d become molasses. But he was still in humanoid form.

“Because talking is still very important to you,” the Founder said. “But one day it won’t be. One day, the Link will be all that you need. And that day is coming soon.”

Something leaped within his substance; his eyes found hers. “Is it?”

“It’s amazing that you have survived this long without it,” the Founder said. “It’s only now, after I’ve been away from the Great Link myself, that I understand how painful it must have been for you!”

“It hasn’t always been easy,” Odo admitted.

“Odo,” the Founder said softly, “you never have to be alone again.”

Then why did he feel more alone now than ever?

“Well,” he said, pushing to his feet, “I’d better be going. There’s a meeting of the station’s ruling council. Dukat and Weyoun are expecting me.”

“That meeting was held three days ago,” the Founder said.

Odo whirled.

“*Three days?*” He consulted a PADD; it agreed with the Founder. “Three days…” He paced toward his window. “How could I have lost track of that much time?”

“Does that bother you?”

He hesitated.

Felt the way his matrix coiled with anxiety.

“Yes!” he hissed. “It does!”

He wandered toward his window, drawn again by those distant stars—even though one of his people was here, standing behind him, and by all rights, he should want for little else.

“Well, don’t let it,” the Founder soothed. “You’ve been living with the Solids’ concept of time for too long.”

She walked up behind him.

“Let them worry about their meetings, their schedules, their obligations,” she said. “None of that has anything to do with you. You are a Changeling.”

Gently, she took his hand.

“You are timeless,” she said softly.

He turned, his gaze drawn to the hand that held his. She offered her other.

“As am I,” she murmured.

Slowly, sluggishly, he placed his other hand in hers.

Maybe the Link could relieve his sluggishness, his cold emptiness.

He only knew one thing: there was nothing left for him in the Solid world.

He’d abandoned it all.

“If you could experience the Link, you’d know why nothing else matters…”

“…your life here, our friendship—none of that matters?”

“…I wish I could make you understand. But you can’t. You’re not a Changeling…”

“You’re right. I’m a Solid.”

His only hope rested with the Link. With that perfect euphoria he hadn’t felt in far too long.

The Founder lifted their hands between them; he was captivated, his gaze locked on their joined fingers. On his only chance at washing the emptiness away.

Then her fingers liquefied against his, and he was lost.

*

“A week?” Kira hissed. “Are you sure about that?”

“That’s what he said,” Quark said. He poured a drink, studiously not looking at her lest they draw attention. “Believe me, this was no idle boast.”

A week.

One week before the minefield detonated.

Before Dominion reinforcements came pouring through the wormhole.

Before the Alpha Quadrant was as good as doomed.

“We have to stop them,” Kira said.

“And end up in a holding cell like my brother?” Quark asked. “No thanks.” He set another drink down on the counter. “If we could only get to Odo…make him see what’s going on… then maybe he could help us.”

“Forget about Odo.” His betrayal *ached*, and that was not a wound Kira was willing to prod. “First, we can’t get to him. Second, even if we did, he wouldn’t help us.”

“Then what we have to do,” Quark said, leaning down and lowering his voice, “is warn Starfleet.”

“And how do you suggest we get a message to *them*?”

“You’re asking *me*?” Quark said. “You’re the terrorist. I’m just a bartender.”

“There you are,” Jake suddenly said, walking up behind her.

Kira barely glanced his way.

Jake leaned into their huddle. “From the look on your faces, I can see you haven’t had much luck getting Rom out of jail.”

“And the news just keeps getting worse,” Quark muttered.

“It’s not *all* bad,” Jake said.

“Trust us, Jake,” Kira said, “it is.”

“Not for me,” Jake said, smiling. “I’m getting a message out to my dad.”

Kira exchanged a look with Quark.

Was this her chance?

*

Starbase 375

“Are you sure this is reliable?”

Sisko studied the tactical display in his office; Admiral Ross, behind him, scanned the message Morn had delivered from Deep Space Nine.

“I’ve known the courier for five years,” Sisko said. “I trust him.”

“Then we have a problem,” Ross said. “According to this, the minefield’s coming down in three days. The Ninth Fleet won’t be here for at least four.”

Sisko turned. “Then I suggest we go without them.”

“What about the Klingons?”

“Looks like we go without them, too,” Sisko said. “We’ve run out of time, Admiral.”

“If those Dominion reinforcements come through the wormhole,” Ross said, “we’ll have lost everything.”

“Then we take the ships we have,” Sisko said, “fight our way to Deep Space Nine, and destroy the anti-graviton emitter. It’s our *only* hope.”

“Do it.”

*

In his office, Ross called up the *Enterprise* on his viewer.

“Admiral,” Picard greeted, standing from the captain’s chair and tugging his uniform hem.

Benjamin Sisko was an excellent strategist and a daring risk-taker—qualities that Starfleet desperately needed right now. But even so, the math just didn’t add up.

The Dominion would send a large fleet to Bajor.

Starfleet didn’t have enough ships.

But Ross did have one potential ace in the hole: the Federation flagship. The most advanced starship in the fleet, and brand-new—capable of pushing its engines, and maybe, just *maybe* making it in time. Not to mention, helmed by an android.

If there was any way to flip the odds in their favor, Ross had no doubt that Lt. Commander Data could find it.

“Captain,” Ross addressed Picard, “you still want to join us on the front lines?”

Picard exchanged a glance with Riker. *“I take it you no longer want the* Enterprise *defending the home front?”*

“Circumstances have changed,” Ross said. “We need the *Enterprise*, and we need her now. I need you at Deep Space Nine in three days. Can you do it?”

“Commander?” Picard prompted.

Data glanced over his shoulder. *"It will require some engine modifications, but—"*

"Data," Picard pressed.

Data's brows twitched up. *"We will make it happen."*

"Good," Ross said. "I'll transmit a situation briefing within the hour. Ross out."

*

Terok Nor

The promenade looked…different.

Odo couldn't explain it. As he stood on one of the crossover bridges of the second level, it was as if he were detached from the world, a specter, the activity below registering on his senses just a moment too slow.

That glacial cold still spread through his matrix, curling its icy fingers around him.

"It's odd," he mused. "I've stood here countless times and yet, somehow it all looks different."

"It's the Solids," the Founder said. "They look small, don't they? Insignificant."

"It's not their fault," Odo murmured.

The Founder glanced at him. "I'm not placing blame."

"They're trapped," Odo said.

"Confined to a single shape."

"A single…perspective."

She shuddered. "It's so limiting."

Odo tilted his head slightly as he observed the people below. "I feel sorry for them."

"They need our guidance, Odo," the Founder said. "Not our pity."

She wandered around him, trailed her hand along the balustrade.

"They cherish their freedom," Odo said.

"We'll have to break them of that."

Odo startled. For the first time in—was it three days now? Four?—something in his matrix *jolted*.

"Break them?" he repeated.

“In a manner of speaking,” the Founder said as she walked along the second level. “Oh, this language of the Solids—it’s so imprecise!”

Odo followed her, frowning.

Had her words been imprecise?

“What exactly do you plan to do?” he asked.

“The Solids are no longer your concern, Odo.” She turned, facing him. “What must be done, will be done. It’s as simple as that.”

That wasn’t an answer. But before he could press the issue, Weyoun approached, hands spread in deference.

“Forgive me for intruding,” he said, “but I have important news about the war.”

“Why don’t you return to your quarters, Odo?” the Founder said. “I’ll join you there shortly.”

He hesitated.

And then, gently, she touched his shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” she soothed. “Everything will be fine.”

His eyes searched hers.

“I promise,” she said.

Odo gave her a short nod before walking away.

He had to trust her, didn’t he?

She was one of his own. A Changeling. The only entity in this Solid world who could understand him, accept him, wash away his pain.

But what about the chill that had taken its place?

Could she wash that away, too?

Lost in his thoughts, he descended to the first level. He had just made for the nearest turbolift when something caught his eye through the promenade throng.

A flash of red.

Kira.

He didn’t think. His substance lurched, and his feet moved of their own accord. He pushed past Cardassians and Jem’Hadar, chased her to a turbolift—

“Major!” he called.

The doors closed in his face.

No matter.

He darted for the next turbolift.

*

"Kira!" Odo caught her just around the corner of a corridor. "Kira, wait, please!"

She didn't even slow down. "I have nothing to say to you."

"I understand that you're angry."

"Oh, you bet I am angry." She turned, only to catch him in that fierce Kira Nerys gaze. "Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"Yes…somewhat," he managed. "I've been…occupied."

"Ah. Dukat is bringing down the minefield, the Federation is about to be overrun by the Dominion reinforcements, and Weyoun has ordered Rom's execution—and you have been *occupied*!"

She stormed off, but Odo followed her. "This is so difficult to explain—"

"If you're gonna talk to me about the Link, don't bother. I'm a Solid, remember? I won't understand!"

"Nerys!"

Desperate, he caught her arm. She tore it away.

"I'm *sorry*," he said.

"Sorry?" Kira repeated. "That's what you wanted to tell me? You're *sorry*?"

"*Yes.*"

"Well, let me tell you something, Odo," Kira said. "We are way, *way* past 'sorry'."

She stalked away. This time, Odo didn't follow her.

What had he expected?

What had possessed him to believe that *Kira*, of all people—someone he loved for her fire as much as her heart—would let him apologize?

If he'd ever had a place in the Solid world, it was gone now.

He'd destroyed it himself.

His people—the Link—were all he had left. Which made returning to the Founder all the more appealing.

She had washed away this pain before.

She could do it again.

*

Stardate: 51156.2 | USS Enterprise-E

The Dominion fleet filled the screen.

Twelve hundred and fifty-four ships. Twice the size of the Federation fleet.

In the space of a second, thousands of permutations of events flitted through Data's neural net. Automatically, he calculated the odds.

A thirteen percent chance of destroying the anti-graviton beam.

A seventeen percent chance they would survive this fight—only to be annihilated when the Dominion reinforcements arrived.

An eighty-four percent chance of heavy casualties, a crippled fleet, and the fall of the Alpha Quadrant.

It wasn't Data's first time in combat. He'd fought the Borg just last year. And, unlike his friends, he had an advantage: he could carry out programmed battle tactics much more accurately with far less direct experience.

Still, the sight of the fleet produced an odd sensation. Was this what humans called "a shiver down one's spine?"

He *could* temporarily deactivate the chip. But his friends couldn't just turn off their emotions.

He'd be missing out on human experience.

"Shields up," Riker ordered. "Red alert!"

The light on the bridge dimmed, flashed red.

"To all ships," sounded the comm, *"this is Captain Sisko. Assume attack formation delta-two."*

The helm complied.

"There's an old saying," Sisko said. *"Fortune favors the bold. Well…I guess we're about to find out."*

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

As the Emissary of the Prophets stands against the Dominion fleet, Odo fights the Link's pull.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Sacrifice of Angels"

Every chapter will be canon-divergent from here on out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Odo stared out the window of his quarters, unseeing.

Even the stars seemed too faint, now.

And somewhere out there, among those stars, his former colleagues were fighting the Dominion. Sisko. Dax. Bashir. O’Brien.

They were Solids, weren’t they? None of his concern?

Did it matter that they wouldn’t be out there in the first place if it weren’t for him—if Rom had successfully disabled the deflector array?

Wasn’t this his place—where he had always belonged?

He should never have concerned himself with matters of the Solid world—should he have?

The Link was all that mattered.

Loyalty to these people—people he could do nothing to help—would bring him nothing but pain.

His door slid open behind him, and the Founder entered.

He turned.

She would ease his worries, wouldn't she? Remind him of what mattered?

"I have news, Odo," she said, walking up behind him. "Our battle with the Federation fleet is going well."

He sucked in a shaky breath. "There are people out there fighting…dying…people who used to be my friends."

"They're Solids, Odo," the Founder said. "You must remember that."

"I know," he said. "But they still mean something to me."

"The Link means more."

Odo sighed. "That's what I keep telling myself. But somehow I can't quite believe it."

He paced toward his arched structure. His substance was pulled tight, clenching and unclenching, his matrix twisting into knots.

"You asked me for clarity, Odo," the Founder said. "I gave it to you. Now, you must accept it."

He was trying. Oh, how he was trying.

The Founder had offered him what he'd sought all his life. She'd settled the war inside of him, knocked away those false obligations he'd *thought* were important. She was teaching him what it meant to be a Changeling. Offering him the chance to fully accept what he was—at any cost.

Cost.

Kira's voice rang in his ears. *"I have nothing to say to you!"*

The Founder approached him. "It's Major Kira, isn't it? You still have strong feelings for her."

Odo couldn't answer.

Of all the misplaced obligations he'd torn out of himself—of all the loyalties he'd learned to toss aside—why was *she* still so stubbornly rooted?

Why couldn't he stop wanting to see her smile?

"…we are way, way past sorry…"

"She doesn't deserve your loyalty, Odo," the Founder said. "You cannot allow a Solid to deny you your rightful place in the Great Link. I couldn't permit it!"

Odo looked up sharply. "What are you saying?"

"The Major has been arrested."

“On what charge?”

“That hardly matters,” the Founder said. “What matters is she will be found guilty and sentenced to death.”

—she lay motionless upon the soil—

“*No,*” Odo gasped.

“Her death is your salvation!” the Founder said. She offered her hands. “Link with me, Odo. Embrace the clarity. It is the only thing that will give you peace!”

Sentenced to death— “No!”

He turned his back, but the Founder’s voice still pelted him. “You cannot help her, Odo. You cannot help any of the Solids, no matter how much you may want to. It’s too late for them.”

Too late…

Was this his fault?

Would this be happening if he’d just done his—

Stop!

He couldn’t start thinking about duty, could he?

He’d *lost* all of that.

No, not lost—cast away. Weeded out. He’d shed the meaningless burdens he’d imposed on himself in this Solid world. He’d embraced his own nature, finally.

Then why couldn’t he shake the sense that he’d let *everyone* down?

*

USS Enterprise-E

The bridge was shaking apart.

Data’s hands flew with lightning speed over his Ops console. The helmsman lay dead on the deck plating; Data had transferred helm control to his station and was now focused on fighting his way though the Dominion lines.

“Status!” Picard ordered.

“Shields at ten percent,” Lt. Daniels reported from Tactical. “Comms are down. Phaser banks off-line.”

On Data’s readout, a squadron of Jem’Hadar warships moved in to close the gap ahead.

“Captain,” Data said, “we cannot maneuver through their lines.”

The *Enterprise* was simply too big. There was no way they could fit.

“Emergency power to shields,” Riker ordered. He tapped his comm panel. “Geordi, we need phasers!”

“Torpedoes incoming!” Daniels reported.

The ship shuddered with the impact. Consoles blew. The bridge filled with smoke.

Data focused intently on his Ops console, his hands darting across the controls as he rerouted power, worked the helm, executed evasive maneuvers, calculated the time to minefield detonation, searched for a gap he could navigate through—

There were more enemy ships closing.

Phasers struck.

The bridge exploded.

*

Terok Nor

“I know you’re confused, Odo,” the Founder said. “But you don’t have to be. All the answers you seek are in the Link.”

The Link…

Oh, how he wanted to believe her.

To seek the Link’s solace, clarity, calm.

“…you just handed the Alpha Quadrant to the Dominion…”

Odo clutched his arched structure for stability, sucked in a deep breath that shuddered through his substance.

“…a lot of people are going to die…”

And they were. Right now, not far from here.

“Don’t you care?”

His door chime dragged him from his thoughts. “Come in.”

Weyoun entered, accompanied by Jem’Hadar guards.

“Forgive the intrusion,” the Vorta said, arms spread, “but Major Kira, the Ferengi saboteur, and the rest of their terrorist group have escaped from the holding cells.”

Odo whirled.

Escaped?

“For your own protection,” Weyoun continued, “I must ask you to come with me.”

“I want them caught,” the Founder ordered.

“They will be,” Weyoun said. “But in the meantime, you’ll both be safer in Ops.”

Safer in Ops.

Safe from…*Kira*?

Since when wasn’t he safe from her?

Odo’s gaze darted around the room—from the Founder he spent nearly all his time with, to the Vorta currently offering them both protection, to the Jem’Hadar who stood watch outside.

The reality crashed down on him with agonizing clarity.

And Kira had been worried about being a collaborator. Forget *collaborating* with the Dominion—he’d defected entirely.

“Very well.” The Founder stepped forward, turned to look into Odo’s eyes. “Odo?”

“I’ll be fine here,” he replied.

“You’re sure?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

More than fine.

Kira had escaped.

She was *alive*.

He could help her *stay* alive.

Hope unfurled in his matrix—a sensation he hadn’t felt since before the Dominion war. Since his priorities had been clear.

No matter what the Founder said, he had a *chance*.

It was worth the pain.

Kira was worth…everything.

As the Founder left his quarters, followed shortly by Weyoun and the Jem’Hadar, it occurred to Odo that he had a distinct—and ironic—advantage.

His defection to the Dominion was horrifyingly complete. But it meant the Founder had every reason to expect he would stay put in his quarters, awaiting her return.

She would never expect him to help Kira.

*

Kira was cornered.

She sank down behind a stack of barrels, disruptor in hand, distantly aware that Rom had one hand cupped to his ear as phaser fire scorched the cargo bay.

“Do you hear that?” Rom said. “That’s Bajoran phaser fire.”

Kira listened, but she didn’t hear much of a difference. Then again, she wasn’t a Ferengi. “Why would Dominion troops be using Bajoran weapons?”

She could, however, hear the thuds as bodies fell to the deck plating. And then, seconds later, the phaser fire stopped.

Cautiously, she stood, then peered around the barrels.

The floor was strewn with Jem’Hadar bodies. And then a very familiar pair of beige boots stepped through them, toward her.

Odo.

“Never underestimate the element of surprise,” he said.

Kira took in his features. She could almost imagine there was warmth in his expression—a far cry from the cold, detached facade that had faced her the day he’d betrayed her.

“…it has nothing to do with me…”

She couldn’t trust that warmth.

Couldn’t take that risk.

But right here, right now, he *was* her best chance at getting to the central core intact.

*

Kira was back at his side.

Together, they darted though the corridors, Rom and several Bajoran deputies right on their heels.

Odo was under no illusions that she had forgiven him, or even that she would ever trust him again. He had probably forfeited any chance of seeing her smile.

But she *was* here.

There was no universe where the simple privilege of standing next to her wouldn't set his matrix alight.

"You have less than forty minutes to shut down the main computer," he said.

"I hope that's enough time," Rom said.

"It'll have to be." Kira glanced both ways before they rounded a corner. "Can you keep the Dominion patrols off our backs?"

"I'll head down to Security," Odo said. "Create enough false alarms to keep them occupied." They'd arrived at the access panel. "Any questions?"

Kira faced him. "I could ask why."

Where could he begin?

Because she threatened your life.

Because I can't let you die.

—he gathered her in his arms, cupped her head to his chest—

"I…don't think there's time to explain it," he managed. "Besides, I think you know the answer."

Because I love you.

He couldn't tear out those feelings—and, now, he barely even wanted to try.

Rom had removed the access panel and climbed inside; Kira ducked in after him. Then she stopped, turning back.

"What about the Link?"

"The Link…was paradise," Odo admitted. "But…the cost was too high."

Kira didn't answer.

Her clear distrust speared him, but there wasn't time for a conversation—or even for his own self-recrimination. There was only time to disable the station and prevent the anti-graviton beam from detonating the minefield.

If that.

They were cutting it close—which was, he knew, no one's fault but his own.

He reached for the access panel. "Good luck."

"You too," Kira said.

He shut the panel behind her.

*

USS Defiant

Dax watched in horror as the minefield detonated before her eyes.

How could that be it?

Everything they'd fought for, all their engagements with the Dominion—and it was all over in a split second of terrible luck?

She couldn't believe it.

Refused to believe it.

They'd fight. They'd keep on fighting, until they couldn't fight anymore. Right up until their fleets were swarmed and obliterated, and the Jem'Hadar overtook the Alpha Quadrant.

"What do we do now, Captain?" she asked.

"Sir!" Nog said. "We have an incoming transmission. Audio only. It's the *Enterprise*."

"Put it on," Sisko ordered.

*

USS Enterprise-E

Comms were restored. But that was all.

Bright sparks and emergency lighting revealed a bridge littered with fallen conduits and filled with smoke. They were dead in space, and only alive thanks to the Klingons' fortuitous arrival.

"What's your status, Enterprise*?"* Sisko asked over the comm.

"Adrift," Picard reported. "Yours?"

"The minefield's been detonated."

Picard sucked in a sharp breath. "I hope you have a backup plan."

"I'm going to take the Defiant *into the wormhole."*

Picard frowned. "And face the Dominion fleet alone?"

Silence over the comm line.

"Captain," Data said, turning, "I may have a suggestion."

Sisko answered. *"Let's hear it."*

"I believe the *Defiant's* warp field could be modified to produce a subspace inversion wave," Data said. "If produced within the wormhole, it would create a cascade reaction in every warp core and detonate the Dominion fleet."

"Dax?" Sisko asked.

"It could *work,"* one of his officers reported. *"But there's no margin for error. If our calculations are even slightly off—"*

"I will transmit the necessary information," Data said.

"How soon could it work?" Sisko asked.

"I could complete the modifications in three minutes," Data said. "However, I cannot do so from the *Enterprise*. I estimate an organic lifeform would take…approximately fifteen."

"Too long."

"And there is another problem," Data added. "If a significant number of warp cores detonate within the wormhole simultaneously, there is an eighty-six percent chance it will produce a shockwave that will destroy everything within…five light-years."

"Benjamin," the same officer said. *"That includes Bajor."*

"That is correct," Data replied.

For a brief moment, the comm was silent.

"The risk is too high," Sisko finally said. *"But that does give me an idea. Stand by,* Enterprise. Defiant *out."*

*

USS Defiant

"Take us into the wormhole," Sisko ordered.

"What the hell," O'Brien muttered. "We're only going to meet a couple of thousand Dominion ships."

"One ship against an entire fleet?" Dax asked. "That's a hell of a Plan B."

"We're not going against the fleet," Sisko said.

Dax frowned at him.

"We're forgetting," Sisko said. "This isn't just a wormhole to Dominion territory—this is the Celestial Temple of the Prophets, and *I* am their Emissary. I intend to ask the Prophets for a miracle."

He could see the skepticism on Dax's face. But he didn't have time to second-guess himself now, or to wonder whether he was letting his status as the Emissary interfere with his Starfleet duty.

"Take us into the wormhole, Dax," he repeated quietly.

She turned back to the helm. "Yes, sir."

The *Defiant* altered course, and the wormhole bloomed open before him. Dax took them in.

"Full stop," Sisko ordered. "Chief, divert all power to forward shields."

Until the Prophets answered, they needed all the protection they could get.

"Captain," Dax reported, "I'm reading multiple warp signatures ahead."

"On screen. Maximum magnification."

The fleet appeared before him, surrounded by the wormhole's rippling eddies.

"Now," Sisko said, "we wait."

*

He didn't have to wait long.

Familiar light eclipsed his surroundings; his heart beat like a drum in the wormhole's silence.

"Are you there?" he called. "Show yourselves!"

The light took on an eerie, dreamlike quality, and Sisko found himself standing just outside Odo's office doors. Or, what *looked* like Odo's office doors.

A Prophet appeared, taking on Odo's appearance. "The Sisko has returned to us."

"He arrives with questions," Jake said, from behind Quark's bar.

Kira's image appeared—now, in Ops. "There are always questions."

Then, Dukat, sitting in the Prefect's office, playing with Sisko's baseball. "You desire to end the game."

"What game?" Sisko protested. "I don't understand!"

"You seek to shed your corporeal existence," Weyoun said in the wardroom.

"…and that of Bajor," added the Kira-Prophet.

"That cannot be allowed," Damar said from the *Defiant's* bridge.

Back to Odo, outside Security. "The game must not end."

“The game,” Sisko repeated. “You mean my life? And Bajor’s future?”

“The game must continue,” the Dukat-Prophet replied.

“You are the Sisko,” said Weyoun.

“You are of *Bajor*,” added Kira.

“That’s why I’m here,” Sisko said. “I’ve run out of options. I don’t want to see Bajor destroyed, but I *must* stop the Dominion from conquering the Alpha Quadrant!”

“You…are the Sisko,” Damar said.

“Yes,” Sisko said. “And you chose me as your Emissary. Why?”

“You are of Bajor,” said Jake.

“*We* are of Bajor,” Kira added.

They appeared around the Ops situation table, silent, all eyes trained on him.

“Bajor cannot be destroyed,” Kira said.

“Then do something about those Dominion reinforcements!” Sisko said.

“That is a corporeal matter,” the Odo-Prophet said.

“Corporeal matters do not concern us,” said Dukat.

“The hell they don’t!” Sisko said. “What about Bajor? You can’t tell me Bajor doesn’t concern you! You’ve sent the Bajorans orbs and emissaries. You’ve even encouraged them to create an entire religion around you! You even say you’re *of* Bajor. So don’t you tell me you’re not concerned with corporeal matters!”

“Bajor *does* concern us,” Kira said.

“It is part of our existence,” said the Odo-Prophet.

“And it’s part of mine,” Sisko said. “But if you don’t stop those Dominion ships, it will be destroyed, and there is nothing I can do to stop it!”

The Dukat-Prophet turned to the others. “Then Bajor will be…lost.”

“Lost?” asked Damar.

“Linear entities,” Odo said, turning to Sisko, “cannot go back to get something they have left behind.”

“That’s right,” Sisko said. “We can’t.”

“Bajor must not be lost,” Kira said.

“The game must not end,” said Dukat.

“Then help me!” Sisko cried. “You want to be gods? Then *be* gods! I need a miracle. *Bajor* needs a miracle! Stop those ships!”

“We are of Bajor,” Weyoun replied.

Light flashed, and Sisko found himself back on the bridge of the *Defiant*.

“Forward shields at one hundred percent,” Nog reported.

“Here they come,” Dax said.

Sisko watched the viewscreen.

Waited.

“There must be thousands of them!” Nog said.

“And half of them have locked targets on us,” Garak said.

“Steady, people,” Sisko said. “I believe we will get an answer.”

“Benjamin,” Dax said suddenly.

Something was happening in the wormhole. Eddies flickering and flashing, light playing across the viewscreen. Ripples emanated around the Dominion ships.

And then…they were gone.

“Where did they go?” Nog asked.

“Dax,” Sisko said, “scan for neutrino emissions. I want to be sure they haven’t cloaked.”

Dax shook her head. “Scan negative.”

“Then…it worked?” Bashir asked from the rear of the bridge.

“It appears so,” Sisko said.

O’Brien gave a light huff, his brows raised. “Some miracle.”

*

Terok Nor

“Out of the way, out of the way,” Weyoun ordered. “Step aside. Make way for the Founder.”

The Cardassians and Jem’Hadar troops filling the docking ring corridor parted like the sea, allowing the Founder to step up to the airlock.

“What about Odo?” Weyoun asked. “Is he coming with us?”

“No,” the Founder replied. “But he will join us, one day. It’s only a matter of time.”

With a last look at her Vorta, she retreated into the airlock.

She had underestimated the strength of Odo’s loyalty to that Solid. But it didn’t matter.

Long ago, the Great Link had planted the directive to return home in Odo’s matrix—and all the other hundred infants they had sent out. And over the last several days, *she* had planted a directive of her own.

One day, soon, Odo would be offered the Link again, and he would not refuse it.

He would have no choice.

*

Deep Space Nine

The airlock rolled open to claps and cheers, and Sisko stepped onto the promenade for the first time in months.

Far too long.

Jake immediately found him, and Sisko pulled his son into a hug. “Ah, Jake.”

“Captain!”

He looked up just as Kira approached from across the promenade.

“Welcome back,” she said, smiling.

“Good to see you, Major,” Sisko said. He took in the promenade’s bustling activity—activity he had *missed*. “It’s good to see you all!”

Martok arrived and ceded their bloodwine bet; Sisko was distantly aware of the rest of his crew reuniting, catching up.

But one of his officers had yet to appear…

“Really missed you,” Jake said. “It’s good to have you back, Dad.”

“So,” Sisko said, clasping Jake’s arms, “where’s Odo?”

Jake looked Kira’s way.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kira said. There was something odd in her expression, something veiled. “I haven’t seen him since…”

She trailed off, her eyes clouding over.

Then her combadge chirped. *"Neyen to Kira."*

Kira tapped it. "This is Kira."

"Major, we've found Dukat in the docking ring."

"Well, bring him to Security," Kira said. "Why didn't you contact Odo?"

"He's not answering his comm."

Kira's lips pressed together.

"Major, Dukat's in…quite a state," Neyen reported. *"He's…collapsed over Ziyal's body."*

The color drained from Kira's face. "Ziyal's…body?"

"Yes, Major."

A second later, she found her composure, and her eyes turned steely. "Bring Dukat to Security. And bring Ziyal to the infirmary. Call in extra deputies if you have to."

"Aye, sir."

"Major?" Sisko asked.

"I'll be in the infirmary, Captain," she said. "If you'll excuse me."

She headed across the promenade, followed by a concerned Garak who had just melted out of the crowd.

No sooner had she gone than a Vulcan woman—gold uniform, lieutenant commander—walked up to Sisko. "Captain Sisko?"

"Yes," he said.

"Lt. Commander T'Sorra," she said. "Reporting for duty."

T'Sorra.

"Ah." Sisko remembered the communique. "You're the new head of Starfleet's security attachment here."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen Odo?"

"No, sir," T'Sorra replied. "I was on my way to the security office to introduce myself." She glanced across the promenade to the office in question. "He doesn't appear to be on duty."

"Strange," Sisko murmured. "Major Kira hasn't seen him, either."

T’Sorra drew her hands behind her back. “Sir, with your permission, I’ll take temporary charge of security.”

Sisko nodded. “Of course.” He paused, considering; he knew exactly what Odo’s concerns would be. “You understand the command structure?”

“My orders are to report directly to you,” T’Sorra said. “And to Starfleet.”

“You’ll report directly to *Odo*,” Sisko said. “He’s the station’s chief of security. In any matters involving Starfleet, you’ll serve in an advising capacity—*unless* the situation calls for more direct oversight.”

T’Sorra nodded. “Understood, sir. Permission to begin my duties?”

“Granted.”

T’Sorra had just headed for the security office doors when a trio of Bajoran deputies approached…dragging a *very* disoriented Dukat.

The one-time prefect of Bajor was slumped in their grasp, his legs very nearly dragging on the floor, his gaze distant and unseeing.

“We’ll go back to Cardassia, Ziyal,” he mumbled. “We’ll be safe there.” A wistful smile teased his mouth, looking terribly out of place on his face. “You’ll live with me…”

Neyen, the lead of the three deputies, stepped toward Sisko. “Sir, we found him in the docking ring. Apparently, he didn’t evacuate with the rest of the occupational forces.”

Out the corner of Sisko’s eye, Dukat’s gaze briefly zeroed onto his.

“What’s happened to him?” Sisko asked.

“We’re…not sure.” Neyen was visibly discomfited; Sisko didn’t blame her. “We also found this.” She held up his baseball. “Dukat had it. It rolled from his grasp when we hauled him up.”

“Thanks.” Sisko took the baseball, spun it in his fingers. “Put him in a cell for now. Maybe Dr. Bashir can do something for him.”

“Captain,” T’Sorra spoke up.

“Ah.” Sisko turned. “Neyen, this is Lt. Commander T’Sorra, the new head of Starfleet’s security attachment. She’ll be taking temporary charge of security until we’ve located Odo.”

Neyen nodded. “Understood.”

She and the other two deputies dragged a still-mumbling Dukat through the security doors.

T’Sorra, however, stayed behind.

“Something else, Commander?” Sisko asked.

“Yes, sir.” T’Sorra drew her back straight. “Captain, as head of Starfleet security, I’d like to officially recommend that Odo be relieved of duty.”

Sisko frowned. “For how long?”

“Indefinitely.”

“You better have a damn good reason.”

“I do, sir,” T’Sorra said. “He is conspicuously absent. He could be a Founder.”

“Commander, Odo is *not* a Founder,” Sisko said. “He’s chosen his life here time and time again—”

“Respectfully, sir, I understand that,” T’Sorra said. “I fully understand that there is a difference between a Founder and a Changeling, and that Odo is the latter. However, there is no test that can distinguish that difference, and with the minefield destroyed, the risk of Changelings entering the Alpha Quadrant is high. I do not believe it is prudent for an entity whose identity we cannot establish to maintain charge of security on such a critical post as Deep Space Nine.”

Sisko’s brow twitched. “Well. You’ve certainly thought this through.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sisko paused in thought.

T’Sorra *did* have a point—and he hated it.

But the fact remained that Odo was the best law enforcement officer Sisko had ever known. This wasn’t just about sentiment for a friend. As Kira had once said over three years ago, Odo got the job done.

“I am not prepared to relieve Odo of duty just yet,” Sisko replied. “But I’ll take your request under advisement.”

“Thank you, sir.”

T’Sorra started for the security office, but stopped again just outside the doors.

“Captain,” she said, “I have also been briefed on certain security breaches that—”

“I have every confidence in the constable.”

T’Sorra tilted her head. “Then where is he?”

*

Odo felt as if his matrix were shaking apart.

He huddled in the dark of his quarters, slumped against one beam of his arched structure, every cell in his body quaking. Shudders tore through his substance; he could barely draw breath, let alone find his feet.

But it was no trouble at all to hold humanoid form.

His matrix *wasn't* losing cohesion.

This was nothing like the time, just over a year ago, when his people had forced him to return home and face judgment. He wasn't losing his ability to maintain his shape.

He just couldn't *think.*

Well, he could.

The Link…the Link…the Link…

He needed it.

Now.

His matrix would shake apart without it.

He needed that calm, that serenity, that clarity, that peace. That perfect, blissful connection. That pure pleasure.

But he wasn't going to get it.

Not anymore.

Suddenly, the door chimed, just on the edge of his awareness.

Odo sucked in a sharp breath, tried to steady his voice. "Who is it?"

"It's Sisko."

The captain.

The captain was back.

Starfleet was back.

The Federation was back. The occupation was over. The Dominion was in retreat.

But no thanks to him.

He'd been too late.

"Odo?"

Grasping at his arched structure, Odo hauled himself to his feet, struggling to keep his purchase on the floor. He hunched, gripping the structure for dear life. When he was reasonably sure he wasn't going to immediately collapse, he croaked, "Come in."

His door slid open, and Sisko entered.

Odo watched the captain's eyes search the dim light of his quarters. Saw the moment they landed on *him*.

Sisko's brows furrowed. "Constable? Are you alright?"

"…No."

"I've been wondering where you were," Sisko said. "Kira hasn't seen you. Neither have your deputies."

"I've been…here," Odo croaked.

"What's wrong?"

Odo's breath hitched, shuddered through his facsimile lungs. His legs trembled. He clutched at the arched structure's nearest joint.

"Constable—"

"Captain, I request to be relieved of duty," Odo said. "Temporarily."

"Why?"

"To be perfectly honest, Captain, I'd rather not discuss it."

"Constable, you've been conspicuously absent today," Sisko said. "Nearly derelict in your duty—your deputies say you haven't been answering your comm! And as if that weren't enough, the new head of Starfleet's security attachment has asked me to relieve you of duty *indefinitely*. At this point, I'm inclined to consider it."

Odo's head jolted up. "The…*new* head? Not Shriv?"

Shriv, an Andorian, had been Eddington's replacement.

"No, he's been reassigned," Sisko said. "I've placed Lt. Commander T'Sorra temporarily in charge of security."

Odo managed a shaky nod. "Ah."

"Odo, *what* is going on?" Sisko demanded. "Why haven't you been answering your comm? Why are you hiding here in the dark?"

Odo sighed. "Computer, lights."

He winced as light flooded his quarters, pressing at his matrix, irritating his cells.

Sisko frowned as, for the first time, he got a good look at Odo's state. Odo bore his gaze, doing his best to keep his head lifted even as tremors wracked his substance.

"You don't look well," Sisko said.

"I'm…not."

"Talk to me, Constable."

Odo shuddered. "It's…the Link."

"The Link?"

"I…*need* it," Odo admitted. "Like you need to talk and socialize. Living without it…I believe it would be akin to solitary confinement."

"But you look *physically* unwell," Sisko said.

A shudder jolted Odo's matrix; a strangled sound escaped him. "I don't know, Captain! I have direct control over my matrix—maybe that explains it."

Sisko studied him.

"Constable," he said, "if we weren't at war—"

"I wouldn't go," Odo said. "I *won't* go."

"And if the problem gets worse? If it turns out you *need* your people's intervention?"

Odo stared the captain down. "I. Won't. Go."

Sisko sighed.

"My place is here, Captain." Forcibly, Odo drew himself as straight as he could. "But I can't be effective at my job like this. Please, sir—I just need some time."

"Are you sure?"

Odo scoffed, a pained sound. "No."

For a long moment, Sisko was quiet. Odo tightened his hold on the arched structure to a death grip.

"You must have several months of leave saved up," Sisko finally said. "Why don't you take some of it?"

Odo sighed. "Captain—"

"Constable, I can't just pull you from your post for an indeterminate period of time," Sisko said. "But if you go through official channels…"

Odo managed a nod. “Understood, sir.”

“Take a few weeks,” Sisko said. “Go down to Bajor if you like. You’ve held the fort here for more than five years without a break. I’d say you’ve earned a vacation.”

“…Thank you, sir.”

“Well,” Sisko said. “I’ll leave you be.”

The captain retreated from his quarters. The moment the door slid shut behind him, Odo released his grip and shuddered to the floor, ragged gasps tearing through his substance.

The Link…the Link…

No!

He would bear this.

He would resist.

He would *never* again turn his back on Kira—or his friends.

Chapter End Notes

I *love* "Sacrifice of Angels. But the Prophets' deus ex machina bugs me, and so does the fact that they're retaking *the* most strategic base in the Alpha Quadrant, and the Federation flagship is nowhere to be seen.

But here's the thing. Sisko's role as the Emissary will be absolutely *critical* to the *Dauntless* main action, so it felt right to me to emphasize its importance that much earlier in the show. And if seeking the Prophets' help is a deliberate choice on Sisko's part, it doesn't feel quite so "deus ex machina" to me.

Data helped too, kinda solving two problems at once. I could keep the element of desperation — Sisko not knowing how he's gonna solve this until it's almost too late — without making the Prophets swoop in outta nowhere. *And* it meant bringing in the *Enterprise*!

Also, about Odo's line in canon..."The Link...was paradise. But...it appears I'm not ready for paradise." Sorry, but that line just feels so...I dunno...kinda empty to me? Like, Odo, what do you even *mean* by that? I'm not sure the *writers* knew how to succinctly explain why he turned his back on the Link — heck, they backed out of *writing* any reconciliation conversations entirely (closet scene, I'm looking at you), and I've read speculation from fans that the writers just didn't know how to believably move forward from here. It's almost as if they wrote themselves into a corner with Odo's choices regarding the Link. Well...I think I fixed it! The advantage of written prose — rather

than on-screen TV — is that I had internal narration to fall back on. I'd already spent chapters 2-5 exploring through that narration what the *heck* was going on in Odo's head during this time, so I could draw on that for succinct dialogue.

Beyond those changes, this chapter was fun because I finally got to introduce T'Sorra! Boy do I have plans for her...just you wait! 😏

Last but not least...you know the interaction on the promenade when Sisko first sets foot on DS9? I changed *so* much in that sequence. Originally, *Odo* greets him right off the bat — with *enthusiasm*. Not only did I feel that's out of character considering the weight of Odo's defection, it doesn't work for the effect the Link has on him in my canon. Also, originally, Odo has already arrested Dukat and he's mumbling in a holding cell when Sisko sees him. Odo helps him up, and as they pass, Dukat hands Sisko back the baseball he's been toying with throughout the Occupation — "I forgive you, too." That moment just makes no sense to me, considering how far off the deep end of villainy the rest of the show takes Dukat.

Fixing that promenade sequence involved a lot of balance, and I'm particularly proud of it, lol. I had to change a lot of basic stage direction — rearranging the characters' movements — to make sure I kept the rhythm of the scene, and that Garak still overhears that Ziyal is (or in my case, will be) in the infirmary.

I switched things so *Kira* is the first to greet Sisko — because Odo is conspicuously absent, Dukat has not been found, so she wouldn't be in the infirmary with Ziyal yet. How do I deliver the information about Ziyal? Since Odo's not answering his comm, I can have Neyen need to contact Kira instead, which now opens up a dialogue opportunity to show Kira's lingering distrust of him. Garak overhears and follows Kira to the infirmary to await Ziyal; there's *that* aspect of stage direction squared away. Now, Neyen will be bringing Dukat to Security, but it'll take her a little bit to get there, so I have time to introduce T'Sorra. When Neyen does arrive, I can use some of Dukat's lines from canon...and then employ a little figurative device. I *love* the notion of the baseball just rolling out of Dukat's hand when Neyen hauls him up. Like, he's been toying with it nonstop during the Occupation — symbolizing toying with *Sisko* — but now, as he collapses over Ziyal's body, it just rolls from his grasp. And he definitely doesn't tell Sisko "I forgive you." That directly contradicts his actions later in canon, when he blames Sisko for Ziyal's death.

Anyway, point being, that scene involved some significant rearranging, and I really love what I did with it while still keeping the rhythm of the original! 😀

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

While Dax plans her wedding, Odo and Kira grapple with the aftermath of the Occupation.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "You Are Cordially Invited"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51241.5

Sisko watched from the promenade second level as three flags unfurled over the bustling throng below: Klingon, Federation, and Bajoran.

It was a welcome sight, indeed.

The war wasn't over. The Dominion had retreated to Cardassian territory, where they were no doubt rebuilding their fleets. And Deep Space Nine, now the designated headquarters for the Ninth Fleet, remained one of the most tempting targets in the Alpha Quadrant.

But for now, at least, the war seemed very far away.

T'Sorra joined him on the crossover bridge, her hands clasped behind her back as usual. "Captain."

"Commander," Sisko greeted with a nod. "Enjoying the view?"

T'Sorra cocked an eyebrow. "I am a Vulcan, Captain."

"Ah." Sisko smiled. "My mistake."

"But I do, of course, appreciate the current…atmosphere of celebration," T'Sorra allowed.

Sisko chuckled. "Do you?"

“It deters crime,” T’Sorra said. She lifted her chin. “As acting chief of security, it is logical to hope this mood continues.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Sisko said.

He sighed. T’Sorra had only been on the job for a day. Though so far, he liked her just fine, it was a bit strange not to have Odo in charge of security.

Still—the station could survive without the constable for a few weeks. Sisko could think of no one more overdue for a vacation.

He just hoped Odo *would* return.

*

It took three days—three miserable days—for Odo's tremors to subside.

He had requested three weeks’ leave shortly after the captain left his quarters. Or, that was, as soon as he could drag himself to his computer console. He’d made his request with shaking hands, one button press at a time.

While at his console, he’d discovered a message waiting for him.

Kira: Have you told anyone about what happened during the Dominion occupation?

His eyes had widened.

There could be little doubt of what she was referring to.

Odo: Not yet.

He had been…indisposed, to say the least.

Kira: Good. Don’t. I’m leaving it out of my report.

Odo: Why?

While he’d waited for a reply, a tremor had very nearly knocked him from his seat; he’d succumbed, slipping into liquid form to pool across his floor. He’d spent the next three days that way. Every cell in his body still quaked, but it was better than quivering on the floor in full uniform.

At 0800 on the fourth day, he tentatively drew himself up into humanoid form. He waited, bracing himself.

But, it seemed, the tremors had finally gone.

Apparently, he hadn’t needed three weeks after all.

A quick check of his console revealed a reply from Kira, sent a full day after his question.

Kira: I don’t want you court-martialed. Let’s leave it at that.

He couldn’t fathom why she would defend him. But he would abide by her wishes. He owed her that much.

Odo: As you wish, Major.

*

Odo froze on the threshold to Ops, just short of exiting the turbolift.

Kira was at the situation table.

He hesitated, a beat too long.

She looked his way.

It was too late to fashion his usual impassive mask; Odo was sure all his hopes and fears were playing out in plain view on his face.

His hope that things between them could be mended. That he could spend the rest of his days standing at her side—even just as her friend.

I don’t want you court-martialed…

Did that mean he had a chance?

His fear that she could never forgive him, that she could never look at him without seeing a traitor, a collaborator, a *defector*. That whatever they built from here, it would never be as strong as before.

That they *wouldn’t* build from here.

Kira broke his gaze, returning her focus to the situation table.

Odo hurried past her.

He ascended the steps to the captain’s office. At his press of the door chime, the doors slid open.

Sisko looked up from his desk. “Constable?”

“Captain,” Odo greeted, lacing his hands behind his back.

“You’re looking better,” Sisko said.

“Yes,” Odo said. “My…affliction…seems to have subsided.”

“That’s good to hear,” Sisko said. “Is there something you need?”

Odo stepped fully into the office, letting the doors shut behind him. “I wanted to let you know that I’m ready to report for duty.”

“Well, then,” Sisko said, leaning back and folding his arms, “we have a problem.”

“Sir?”

“As of three days ago,” Sisko said, “you’re officially on leave.” He tossed up his hands, grinning. “You’re off the roster!”

Odo frowned.

“Constable,” Sisko said, serious now, “you’re on *vacation*. Enjoy it.” He paused, smiled. “That’s an order.”

Odo shot him a sideways look. “If I’m not mistaken, by your own argument, you *can’t* give me orders right now.”

“Well, if you want to be miserable for the next two and a half weeks, that’s your prerogative.” Sisko toyed with his baseball. “Now, since we have no station business to discuss…please leave my office.”

Nonplussed, Odo turned to leave. But he stopped just as the doors slid open.

He hadn’t just betrayed Kira. He’d betrayed *everyone*. Sisko. Dax. Bashir. O’Brien. The entire Alpha Quadrant.

Didn’t Sisko deserve to know the truth?

“Something wrong, Constable?”

Odo hesitated.

There’s something you should know…

The words were just on the tip of his tongue. A phrase he was henceforth and hereafter banning from his vocabulary.

But before he could say a word, Kira glanced up from the situation table.

It was as if his entire world narrowed, and he was aware of nothing else but the strength in her features, the fire in her eyes.

He’d betrayed *her* the most. She’d asked him not to Link with the Founder, and he’d *promised*.

He could never break his word with her again.

“No, Captain,” he replied, and let the captain’s office doors shut behind him.

When he next glanced her way, Kira was focused on her work. Odo wasted no time in hurrying for the turbolift.

“Habitat ring,” he ordered.

But as it descended, he found himself oddly…discomfited.

What was he supposed to do with a *vacation*?

*

As the turbolift descended out of view, Kira snuck one last glance in Odo’s direction.

It was the first she’d seen of him since he’d helped her get to the central core intact.

Since he’d stopped answering his comm.

His exchange with the captain, just before Sisko’s office doors had shut, echoed in her mind.

“You’re looking better.”

“Yes. My…affliction…seems to have subsided.”

Affliction?

Was he okay?

She quickly shut down that thought. Things between them were too complicated right now; worrying about him just *hurt*.

*

Stardate: 51244.5

“So, uh, that’s why you’re letting him make the plans for the wedding?” Kira asked as she and Dax exited the turbolift.

She’d been concerned at first that this wedding was all about what Worf wanted—that Dax’s desires and Trill heritage weren’t being included. But Dax seemed perfectly happy with it.

“Mostly,” Dax said. “But the truth is, I’ve already been through five Trill ceremonies—three as a bride, two as a groom—and I’m a little bored with it.”

Kira squeezed her shoulder. “As long as you’re happy, Jadzia.”

Dax smiled. “Thanks.”

*

Stardate: 51247.5

“Hey, Major!”

Kira’s face brightened as Jake dashed up to her on the promenade.

“Is it true Dax is having a party tomorrow night?” he asked.

Kira smiled. “Ah, news travels fast!”

“Well, is it by invitation or…?”

“I’m sure you’re welcome,” Kira said. “And you can tell Nog the same goes for him, too.”

Jake clapped his hands together. “Great!”

“Oh, I understand congratulations are in order,” she added, “to our newest published author?”

Jake grinned, chuckling. “Thank you.”

At that moment, a distinctive trio in Klingon ceremonial garb passed by on their way to Quark’s—the captain, the Chief, and Dr. Bashir, all with stalwart, straight faces.

“There they go,” she nodded.

Jake turned.

“They look so serious,” Kira said, brows pinching slightly.

“It’s all an act.” Jake set his hands on his hips, one brow quirking up in skepticism. “They don’t want the rest of us to know what kind of debauchery they’re up to.”

“Like what?”

Jake made a face and leaned close, even as Kira watched the trio disappear into Quark’s. “It’s a Klingon bachelor party,” he said as if it were obvious. “Use your imagination!”

Squinting at him, Kira went on her way down the promenade, shaking her head.

Some things, she probably *didn’t* want to know.

*

Stardate: 51248.9

It wasn’t often that Kira indulged herself. Let the pressures of her responsibilities fall from her shoulders, immersed herself in *fun*.

But this was a good party.

Leeta was dancing on a tabletop. Morn and a Bolian were having a blast bouncing off each other’s chests—not twenty minutes after they’d come to blows. Nog was pulling dance

moves Kira would never previously have *thought* were dance moves. And through it all, a unique drumbeat unlike any musical styles from Bajor filled the room.

Dax danced her way, glass in hand; as Nog started poising his fingers like claws and doing a ridiculous impression of a *hara* cat, Kira couldn't help but laugh out loud.

With a broad grin across her face and the music thrumming through her veins, she could almost forget her worries.

Almost.

The door swished open, revealing Lt. Commander T'Sorra and a pair of Odo's deputies.

Kira sighed. She couldn't decide if she was bracing herself for another encounter with T'Sorra…or glad that it wasn't *Odo*.

"Major," T'Sorra nodded, hands clasped primly behind her back.

"Commander," Kira said.

"I must inform you that several occupants of the surrounding quarters have logged noise complaints," T'Sorra said. "This activity has exceeded eighty-seven decibels."

Kira shot her a mild glance. "Has it?"

"That is in violation of station regulations," T'Sorra said. "I would be within my right to order this party to cease."

"Well," Kira said, "as first officer of this station, I'm ordering this party to continue." She paused. "And I'm ordering *you* to leave the premises."

T'Sorra cocked an eyebrow.

Kira raised her own. "Now, Commander."

"Very well," T'Sorra said.

She stepped back through the doors, but not without a prim lift of her chin.

Kira blew out a frustrated breath.

There was *something* about this new Vulcan security officer that drove her up the wall. That prim attitude. The way she seemed to *love* quoting station regulations—in a superior way completely unlike Odo's dour demeanor.

But at least she *wasn't* Odo.

At least Kira didn't have to deal with *him*.

Right?

Right?

*

Odo sat at the computer console in his quarters, idly scanning the few reports available to him on station activities.

His security access had been cut off a week ago, when his leave had officially begun. He knew why, of course. He *understood*. Deep Space Nine was a crucial port, and beyond the celebratory atmosphere that still permeated its hull, the Federation was at war. Odo couldn't access secure files and transmissions while off-duty.

Still, it had him wrong-footed.

A light huff escaped him. Here he was, on leave for another two weeks—on *vacation*—and still, all he could think to do with his time was *pretend* he was on duty, reading station reports.

He honestly wasn't sure what to make of the idea of a vacation. He'd never taken one before. Never indulged in having a *life* outside of his work.

But maybe that needed to change.

Maybe he needed to cultivate more ties to this Solid world. Immerse himself. *Choose* this place, fully.

Choose the people here, his friends.

Choose *Bajor*.

After all, he wasn't going home.

He scowled at himself. Still, after all these years, after the Dominion had waged a war that had already cost millions of lives, after his people had very nearly cost *him* everything he'd ever cared about, he automatically thought of the Great Link as home. Still thought of the Link. Still yearned for it.

The Link…the Link…

His eyes fell shut briefly; a sigh traveled through his substance.

Then he opened them again.

Nodded.

"Computer," Odo said, "display all Bajoran…"

He paused.

All *what*? All…cultural centers? Nature preserves? Museums? Farming provinces?

Oh, what did it matter? He may have renounced his people and the Dominion, may have chosen Bajor and Deep Space Nine, but he was still a Changeling. Capable of exploring the Bajoran hillsides in whatever form he chose. He didn't need conventional transportation, accommodations, or travel plans of any sort.

"Display all transports leaving for Bajor within the next two days," he ordered.

*

Stardate: 51249.7

"With fire and steel," Sirella spoke, "did the gods forge the Klingon heart…"

Kira had never understood Klingons. But if there was one thing about them she could appreciate, it was the spirituality inherent in their rituals. It was common ground that she had come to accept she would never find with the Federation.

Beyond that, it was wonderful just to see the smile that split Jadzia's face as she walked up the aisle to stand with Worf.

"Worf," Sirella said, "son of Mogh, does your heart beat only for this woman?"

"Yes."

His answer prompted another smile from Jadzia.

"And will you swear to join with her and stand with her against all who oppose you?"

"I swear."

"Jadzia," Sirella said, "daughter of Kela, does your heart beat only for this man?"

"Yes," Jadzia replied.

"And do you swear to join with him and stand with him against all who would oppose you?"

"I swear."

"Then let all present here today," Sirella announced, "know that this man and this woman… are married."

As Jadzia and Worf kissed and applause rose in the audience, Kira couldn't help her own smile.

There was still a war. Kira spent every day helping Sisko coordinate traffic around the station —especially movements from the Ninth Fleet. But right here, right now, she got to watch her friend find happiness.

It was only after the ceremony, as the audience began to disperse, that Kira spotted Odo slipping surreptitiously out of Quark's.

She turned, following him. “Odo—”

But he had already disappeared across the promenade.

“Major?” Sisko asked, behind her.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said.

“If you want to catch him, you’d better go now,” Sisko said. “I understand he’s on the passenger list for a transport leaving for Bajor in ten minutes.”

Kira’s eyes widened. “Leaving?”

Sisko smiled. “I believe you’ll find him at airlock three.”

Kira didn’t think.

She dashed for the nearest turbolift.

*

“Odo!”

She caught him in the docking ring, just around the bend from the crowd of passengers already congregating at the airlock.

He stopped in his tracks. When he turned and saw her, a flash of—*something*—crossed his face.

He drew his hands behind his back. “Major.”

“Odo,” she nodded.

Now that she was here, she had no idea what to say.

What *could* she say?

Why was he even still here?

After he’d turned from her—why hadn’t he left with the Dominion?

And how, after all the *years* he’d been her closest friend, was that even a question?

How had everything between them crumbled?

How could she trust him again?

But…how could she *lose* him?

Odo cleared his throat, dragging her from her thoughts. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“You’re off-duty,” Kira heard herself say.

“I am.”

Kira drew herself straight. Best stand on ceremony; she could fall back on that. “I understand you’re due back on duty in two weeks?”

“That’s right.”

“So…” She searched his gaze. “You *are* coming back?”

She could’ve sworn his expression softened minutely. “Yes, Major.”

Kira jerked a nod. “Good.”

“But…I expect to return from Bajor before that,” Odo added. “With…your permission, Major.”

Kira nodded again.

“Well.” Odo cleared his throat again. “Permission to disembark?”

Kira’s voice wouldn’t work.

He didn’t need her *permission* to leave. Not right now. He was on leave.

Still—

“Granted, Constable,” she replied.

Odo jerked a nod, then turned and strode toward the airlock. Kira watched him go, feeling as if the air had been punched out of her chest.

She couldn’t *lose* him.

But it hurt to keep him, too.

Chapter End Notes

> Obviously, it’s easier to make something new happen than to cut a scene. Generally, my strategy is to write *around* the scene, bookending it to show that it doesn’t happen. So, in the scene for stardate 51244.5, Kira’s dialogue with Dax clearly skips over the moment when she would’ve countered Odo in the corridor.
>
> The same goes for their awkward encounter on the promenade. Where before, Kira noted Sisko, O’Brien, and Bashir as an excuse to avoid Odo, now she sees them without ever running into him.

On another note, you guys know what bugs the crap out of me?

Why doesn't canon address the fact that TECHNICALLY, Odo's a turncoat?

Like, there are extenuating circumstances...but why doesn't the concept of court-martial even come up at all? There are even hints much later in Season 7, when Bashir uncovers Section 31's conspiracy to infect Odo with the morphogenic disease, that the DS9 crew is distantly aware that Odo Linked with a Founder during the Dominion Occupation.

So why don't any official questions of loyalty come up???

This seems even more egregious to me than keeping Odo and Kira's reconciliation entirely off-camera. It's a massive, gaping plot hole. There's no fallout whatsoever from Odo's *defection to the enemy*?!

Which is why, every time I tackle this part of DS9, the question of *who else knows* inevitably gets tackled. In my canon-compliant rendition of the "closet scene" (Love, Understanding, and Surprises), Kira explicitly tells Odo that she's told no one, she's left it all out of her report, this is between *them*. Same deal here. They don't get to talk immediately because I don't do a "closet scene," but Kira still covers her bases, *messaging* Odo to confirm that this is staying between them.

In short, in this fic, everything stays between Odo and Kira, and there's no official record...until shit hits the fan with the morphogenic virus.

Yeah...when that's discovered, there are going to be some uncomfortable questions...and I'll leave it at that for now 😉

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Kira copes with Odo's betrayal.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: “Resurrection”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51256.5

“What about…Captain Boday?” Dax asked.

“Captain Boday?” Kira repeated. “You want me to bring Captain Boday to your quarters for dinner?”

The notion was *laughably* bad.

“It’s just a suggestion,” Dax said.

Kira tapped the call button for the turbolift. “Well, it’s a bad suggestion! Number one, *you* used to go out with Captain Boday. Number two, Worf hates him. And number three—and we have discussed this *many* times—Captain Boday has a transparent skull.”

“And you don’t like to see a man’s brains,” Dax rolled her eyes as they entered the turbolift.

“Ops,” Kira ordered, one hand on her hip.

“What about Dr. Trag’tok?” Dax suggested. “He’s intelligent, he has a good physique…and he has a very opaque cranium.”

“True,” Kira said. “But his eye bothers me.”

“Which one?”

Kira shot Dax a look. “The *middle* one?”

Dax sighed. “Oh, really. You are so obsessed with appearances.”

“And sometimes your taste in men frightens me,” Kira shot back as she exited the turbolift.

Dax followed her. “I’ll make sure to tell Worf you said so!”

“Tell me what?” Worf asked, at tactical.

“Don’t be so nosy,” Dax said.

Kira ignored them both, making for the replicator across Ops.

And then Dax uttered the *last* words she wanted to hear. “What about Odo? Isn’t he back from Bajor?”

“Not happening,” Kira said.

They stopped at the replicator.

“Kira,” Dax asked before she could order, “did something happen between you two?”

Kira winced.

What *hadn’t* happened?

“…it has nothing to do with me…”

And to think, before the Dominion occupation had reduced their entire friendship to ashes, he had confessed his *love*.

Well, *he* hadn’t.

His counterpart on Gaia had.

Kira had never actually heard those words from *her* Odo’s mouth. And she wasn’t sure she wanted to.

How could they be true?

If he loved her, how could he have *betrayed* her? How could he have broken his word about Linking with the Founder—and, as a result, practically handed the Alpha Quadrant to the Dominion?

She couldn’t wrap her mind around *any* of his actions, could barely understand why he was still *here*, behind Federation lines.

The last thing she needed to hear from him was a lie. Or a truth so twisted it was just as terrible.

“Nerys?” Dax pressed, drawing her from her thoughts.

“Sorry.” Kira shook herself. To the replicator, “Two *raktajinos*, extra-strong, and a *kavaroll*.” Back to Dax, “I’m coming to dinner *alone*—got it?”

Dax sighed. “I got it. Three place settings.” She paused, her gaze searching. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

Kira pressed her lips together. “Nope.”

Maybe she never would.

She reported to her station, the better to focus on duty rather than the thoughts spiraling in her mind. The hopes and fears she couldn’t tease apart.

“Captain,” O’Brien suddenly said from his console, “you’d better get out here.”

Kira set down her *raktajino* and looked up, just as Sisko exited his office.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’m showing a power buildup in the transporter buffer,” O’Brien reported.

“Someone’s attempting to beam into Ops,” Dax said.

“From where?” Sisko asked.

“I don’t know,” Dax said. “There are no ships within transporter range.”

Tentatively, Kira approached the transporter pad, just as there was an electronic hum of active transport. A man materialized, dressed in a battered coat and boots, hunched with his back to her.

Kira walked around to his other side, leaned in. “Are you hurt?”

He whipped around, aiming a Bajoran phaser. “No. But you’ll be, unless you do exactly what I say.”

But all Kira could focus on was the utter familiarity of his features. Those warm brown eyes, the lines around his mouth. Features she had known so well—and *lost*—almost three years ago.

Bareil.

“It can’t be,” she whispered.

*

His arm was tight around her middle…and a phaser was wedged into her spine.

This was *not* her Bareil.

Which meant he was either a very close lookalike—maybe a clone, or even a Changeling—or from the mirror universe.

“What do you want?” Sisko asked.

Bareil shuffled her a step forward. “A fast ship would be nice.”

Sisko and Worf exchanged a glance.

“Security,” Sisko said, “we have a hostage situation. Clear a path to Landing Pad A. Authorization: Sisko-7-1-green.”

T’Sorra’s voice came over the comm. *“Affirmative, sir. 7-1-green.”*

“Your runabout’s waiting,” Sisko told Bareil.

“Let’s go,” Bareil said.

“If you hurt her,” Sisko warned, “you will never leave this station! I promise you that!”

“Follow me, and she dies,” Bareil retorted. “I promise *you* that.”

And then he did the strangest thing—with a muttered, “Hold it,” he reached for her abandoned *kavaroll* and stuffed it in his mouth.

Definitely not Bareil.

As he walked her past the turbolift, Kira started for it, only for his arm to tighten around her middle.

“Ah-ah,” he said. “Not the turbolift. Someone might cut the power, and we’d be trapped inside.”

“Then we walk,” Kira said quietly, her eyes never leaving Sisko’s.

*

“Here we are,” Kira said, stopping before the airlock. “Landing Pad A.”

Bareil—*mirror* Bareil, she knew, from his reference to the Alliance—was downright out of breath. And threatening her with a useless phaser.

“Open it,” he panted, gesturing to the airlock.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Kira said. “Why don’t you hand over that phaser?”

“Oh,” Bareil lamented, “you’ve been so cooperative up to now. I’d *hate* to have to kill you.”

Kira shook her head, smiling a little. “You’re not going to kill me.”

“Oh, you sure of that?”

“You’re not gonna kill *anyone*,” Kira said. “Not with *that* phaser. Power cell’s cracked.”

Bareil sighed, shutting his eyes. Then he squinted at her. “How long have you known?”

“Since we left Ops,” Kira admitted.

She was a soldier and an ex-resistance fighter. She knew a broken phaser when she saw one.

“Then…why did you come with me?”

“I needed the exercise,” she said, blandly.

Truthfully, she couldn’t quite explain why she had humored him. Maybe *because* she knew his plan would fail—Sisko’s 7-1-green authorization meant that security would be waiting on the runabout.

“And I have to get away,” Bareil said.

He moved to strike her, and that was it. She blocked his blow; an elbow to his side and a throw to the floor, and he was dispatched. Reflex.

She stood over him, staring down at that oh-so-familiar face.

Maybe *that* was why she hadn’t stopped him.

The airlock rolled open, and a pair of black Starfleet-issue boots stepped into view.

“Major?” T’Sorra asked.

“Yes?”

She still couldn’t tear her eyes away from that face.

“Do you know him?”

Kira shook herself. Looked up to meet T’Sorra’s eyes.

“No,” she said, more or less truthfully. It *wasn’t* her Bareil, after all. “Definitely not.”

“Then, with your permission, I’ll bring him to Security,” T’Sorra said.

Kira nodded.

T’Sorra motioned for the deputies behind her to haul Bareil to his feet. Kira, meanwhile, tapped her combadge.

“Kira to Bashir.”

“Bashir here.”

“Doctor, meet me in Security,” Kira said. “Bring a blood testing kit.”

“On my way.”

She was reasonably sure this Bareil was from the mirror universe, and she honestly doubted a Founder would be so sloppy as to replace someone who’d died *years* ago. But in these times of war, it was better to be safe than sorry.

*

The shrine’s soft music and lighting was balm on Kira’s *pagh*.

Everything was so twisted.

Odo was back from Bajor—something she barely wanted to think about, lest she look too closely at the hopes and fears that warred within her. The urge to lock him out of her life, to barricade herself against all the hurt that came with thinking of him—just barely restrained by a fear that was somehow even stronger.

That if she didn’t act soon, if she kept stalling, she would *lose* him.

How her *pagh* wasn’t already convinced that she’d lost him, that he’d turned his back on her, that he’d shown her way back during the events of Gaia just how little he respected her faith, she didn’t know.

And now *Bareil* was back.

Except he wasn’t.

He *looked* like Bareil—the man whose faith had been even stronger than hers, who had devoted his life to the Prophets, who had become a vedek. Who, despite their disagreements over his interpretation of prophecy, she had no doubts about sharing her faith with.

But *this* man, this counterpart from the mirror universe, wasn’t a vedek. He laughed at the notion. Refused to join her at the service.

She didn’t mind. Really, she didn’t. He *wasn’t* her Bareil. It wasn’t fair of her to look into his face and see someone else. It wasn’t his fault that his counterpart in another universe had chosen a very different life—and loved *her*.

Kira kept her eyes on the altar at the front of the shrine, let the music wash over her *pagh*.

Then the woman kneeling next to her shuffled forward into the empty spot in front of her, and none other than Bareil—*mirror* Bareil—slipped in next to Kira.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed.

“I figured I could use a little spiritual guidance.”

Was he being *sarcastic*? “That’s not funny.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“I plan on making a new life for myself here,” Bareil whispered. “I’m gonna need all the help I can get.”

The music changed tone, and Ranjen Esho began speaking in Bajoran. Kira let the familiar syllables wash over her as she focused on opening her *pagh* to the Prophets.

If she put herself in their hands, they would guide her. Here in the shrine, she needn’t worry about the messiness of her life.

A small procession walked in, carrying the orb currently on the station, the ranjen in the lead playing a solemn tune on a Bajoran flute.

“With humility and gratitude,” Esho intoned, “we accept this gift.”

“What’s in the box?” Bareil hissed as the procession passed.

“The Orb of Prophecy and Change,” Kira whispered back.

“Orb?”

“A gift from the Prophets,” she said. “It can foresee the future or…a possible future, anyway.”

“Who are the Prophets?”

She smiled softly. “Our gods.” Then she shot him a look out the corner of her eye. “You *do* have gods, don’t you?”

“Of course we do,” Bareil whispered.

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“That’s because I leave them alone, they leave me alone.”

“Shh!” someone hissed.

Kira startled into silence, surprised at herself.

She wasn’t normally one to whisper through services. She preferred to immerse herself in the sermons and teachings of the Prophets. But she’d never had a chance to teach someone else about her faith before—even with *her* Bareil. After all, he was a *vedek*.

And certainly not with Odo.

He’d always been a skeptic. Even before Gaia, he would never have been the first person it occurred to her to talk about faith with. But now, she knew that was something she could never share with him.

Prophets—why did she even *want* to? Why was she still *thinking* about it? Wasn't it clear what he was to her—that caring for him could only bring pain?

But that was just it, wasn't it?

It *wasn't* clear.

He'd betrayed her. But he'd also *saved* her. And they hadn't talked since.

Those thoughts didn't belong in the shrine.

Letting the music wash over her, Kira lost herself to the ceremony. To the peace the Prophets offered.

*

"So?" Kira asked as they stepped back out onto the promenade. "What'd you think?"

"I'm not sure," Bareil said. "It…was an interesting ceremony, but…"

"But what?"

"Everybody seemed to take it so seriously."

"What's wrong with that?" Kira asked.

Bareil glanced at her, an equivocal smile teasing his face. "I suppose it must be nice to have that kind of faith."

It was. To Kira, there was no doubt of that.

"I've always preferred to believe in nothing," he added. "That way, I'm never disappointed."

"Oh, that doesn't sound like much of a life," she said.

Bareil chuckled. "Maybe not…but it's all mine."

Kira laughed a little.

He had some charm; she could admit that. Not the same as *her* Bareil, thank goodness. It was getting harder to transpose them, the longer *this* Bareil favored her with that roguish sense of humor. Her Bareil had been much more serene.

"Anyway," he said, "I'm glad I had this chance to see you again. It was…very enlightening."

He held her gaze, and she couldn't help but be drawn to the rare—for *him*—down-to-earth look in his eyes.

After a moment, he added, "Thank you, Major."

He walked away down the promenade. And for a whole second, Kira almost let him go.

Getting close to him might be a monumentally bad idea. But she always had led with her heart. And she'd much rather think about him than *Odo*.

"Bareil!" she called.

He turned.

"Do you like Klingon food?"

He smiled, and Kira's grin spread across her face.

It looked like Dax would be setting four place settings after all.

*

In Ops the next morning, Dax followed Kira to the situation table, an incorrigible smile on her face.

"Are you seeing him tonight?"

Kira smiled. "At the Bajoran shrine."

Dax made a face. "That doesn't sound very romantic."

"He's going to have his first Orb experience," Kira said.

"Your idea, I suppose?"

"No, actually, it was his," Kira said. "He's curious about Bajoran spirituality. It's a new concept for him."

"Well," Dax said, "it's not a midnight swim in the holosuites, but…" She smiled. "If it makes you happy."

She clasped Kira's shoulder affectionately on her way back to her station, and Kira couldn't help her broad smile.

Oh, it did. It *did* make her happy.

It was wonderful to be able to share her faith with someone.

*

Kira was in a cargo bay, inventorying the latest supply shipment, when Quark turned up.

"Major," he said, "any idea where they put my shipment of Saurian brandy?"

As he spoke, two of his Ferengi waiters walked up with an anti-grav unit.

"Over there," Kira said, thumbing over her shoulder without looking up from her PADD.

“You heard her,” Quark told his waiters.

Kira offered her PADD for his thumb print.

“Your new boyfriend came into my bar today,” Quark said as he completed the transaction.

“Oh, did he?”

“He’s…a little different, isn’t he?”

“From what?”

“From some of your previous choices,” Quark said.

Momentarily, Kira glanced up from her inventory to favor him with a look.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Quark continued as she moved along down a row of containers, “I had nothing against Vedek Bareil or Shakaar, but they were a little too controlled—a little too controlling. They lacked fire, excitement.”

Kira sighed, paying him the bare minimum of attention as she noted items down on her PADD.

“But this Bareil—he’s different,” Quark said. “He’s full of surprises.”

“Oh, so I take it you *like* him,” Kira said.

She moved to the next stack of containers.

“Let’s just say,” Quark said, “I like the idea of you *with* him.”

Why she was bothering to listen to this—to humor Quark’s opinions of her love life—Kira had no idea.

“But let me tell you something, Major,” Quark added. “You’d better brace yourself. You’re in for a rough ride.”

“Oh, what are you talking about?” she scoffed.

“I’ve been a bartender for a long time,” Quark said. “I’ve seen all sorts of customers—sad ones, happy ones, complicated ones.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, tapping again at her PADD. “And Bareil—where does he fit in?”

Quark walked up behind her. “He’s one of the tormented ones.”

“Tormented?” Kira turned. “No, I don’t think so. Quark—you’ve had an Orb experience. You know what it’s like.”

Quark hummed. “He had an orb experience. Interesting.”

Kira spun to face him. “Meaning what?”

“After he left the bar,” Quark said, “I saw him hanging around the Bajoran shrine. He must have been there a couple of hours.”

“Well, he has a lot on his mind,” Kira said. “He probably went there to think things over.”

“Either that,” Quark said, “or he was figuring out a way to rob the place.”

At that moment, Quark’s waiters stopped nearby, their anti-grav unit full.

“What’s this, a union meeting?” Quark called. He waved them off. “Let’s get going.” To Kira, “Nice chatting with you, Major. I hope you two…are very happy together.”

He retreated from the cargo bay, leaving Kira lost in thought.

The irony of *Quark* bringing her a cynical observation, warning her as a friend, didn’t escape her. For most of her time on this station, it would’ve been Odo doing that. Always the firm wall at her back. And she would never have tolerated Quark, of all people, butting into her personal life.

But it was Quark, not Odo, who’d had her back during the last days of the Dominion Occupation.

Which left her with the question—had she misread Bareil?

Led with her heart, and forgotten her head?

*

Kira entered the shrine, phaser in hand, to find Bareil standing in the Orb’s archway, forcefield disengaged, hands placed on the corners of the Orb’s ark.

So, Quark was right.

“What’s that old saying?” she asked. “Once a thief…?”

Bareil glanced over his shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

“The question is,” she said, “what are *you* doing here?”

“Nerys?” he said softly.

Kira’s brows pinched slightly. He said her name as if he hadn’t realized it was her.

He turned. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t,” Kira said. She walked toward him. “You had me completely fooled. The thief in search of redemption.” She smiled emptily. “Who could resist that? Obviously not me.”

How could she have been so blind?

So eager to share her faith, that she ignored the warning signs? Sisko's warning, when Bareil had first been put in a cell, that she not get attached to this man? Her own misgivings—she *knew* what that other universe was like, how had she believed someone she could love could come from that place?

"Luckily," Kira said, "Quark didn't fall for your little act. Now step away from the altar."

She aimed her phaser.

"I wish I could," Bareil said. "But I can't. I've come too far."

"Then you came a long way for nothing."

There was a voice from the shrine entrance. "Nerys!"

Oh, that voice was familiar.

Too familiar—in all the wrong ways.

It was her own.

Well, that explained how Bareil had seemed not to realize it was *her* at first.

Her own mirror universe counterpart strode over, holding an identical phaser and dressed in an identical Militia uniform. Her circlet and leather ensemble were gone; her earring matched Kira's. *That* explained how in the hell she had managed to walk through the station without attracting attention.

Well, sort of. If she'd *acted* the way she usually did, then Kira might have some explaining to do.

"Oh, you look as *beautiful* as ever," the Intendant simpered.

Calmly, Bareil approached and took Kira's phaser.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" Kira said.

Quark had told her as much.

What he hadn't known, was that Bareil was working for the *Intendant*.

*

"I'm a thief," Bareil said with light shrug of his head. "I belong with *her*."

He nodded to the Intendant, slumped on the floor from his phaser blast.

Kira had thought, when he'd phasered the Intendant, that she might have been right about him after all—that she and Quark were *both* right. He was planning to steal the Orb, and he *was* tormented—because he was *changing*.

But, in the end, he chose his own universe. Chose not to change. Chose not to believe.

Maybe he’d been right, moments before. Maybe it *was* for the best.

He wasn’t her Bareil. He didn’t belong here.

“Then you should go,” Kira said.

He crouched over the Intendant and took the transporter control from her hand. Kira watched as the transporter effect shimmered and they both disappeared before her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I get that it was probably omitted for time—I'm honestly really impressed that these episodes always come out to exactly 45 minutes long—but I can't believe no one thought to make certain Mirror Bareil isn't a Changeling. They're at war. Changeling infiltrators are a serious risk, as evidenced by the scene *in this episode* when Mirror Kira is pressed for her security clearance and can't just get into a secure area by *looking* like the Major.

Well, I'm not held to the same time constraints as the show! So I fixed it! 😁

About the Intendant’s role here…I just cringe so hard, watching that security officer’s bafflement when she asks for a shoulder rub. Like, imagine Prime Kira’s next interaction with that officer?

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Odo returns to duty. Meanwhile, the Dominion makes use of a familiar adversary.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Statistical Probabilities" through "Waltz"

We're skipping "The Magnificent Ferengi." No changes there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kira wouldn’t look at him.

She sat more or less across from Odo around the captain’s common-room table, rigid, tense. Throughout dinner, she’d been all too eager to make eye contact with the others whenever someone else spoke.

Seated next to her was T’Sorra, the acting chief of security. The captain had invited her as a courtesy; after all, they would be working with her as closely as they once had with Eddington. It was Odo’s first time meeting her. It would still be a few days before he reported to relieve her of duty.

“So, Constable,” Sisko said suddenly, “how was Bajor?”

Odo gave a start. “I’m sorry?”

“You spent the last week there, didn’t you?” Sisko asked. “You must have a few stories.”

“Maybe,” Odo allowed, “but I’m not much of a storyteller.”

He winced at his own words.

Why was it so hard to push himself a little? He couldn’t stay curled up in the same shell of isolation all his life—that was precisely what had driven him to the Link.

“Did you get to see the new historical center in Musilla?” Sisko asked.

Against all odds, Kira perked up slightly.

Odo managed a smile. “Actually, I did.”

“Really?” Dax asked. “Is it true they’re creating an accurate holo-representation of an ancient Bajoran city?”

Odo nodded. “I found it…impressively realistic.” He tilted his head in a shrug. “Though, of course, I can’t judge how *accurate* it is. I’m no archaeologist.”

“It’s an incredible undertaking,” Dax said. “The original site is miles across.”

“The researchers there are…very determined,” Odo said. He chuckled. “Not to mention *excited*. The guide I spoke with was quite…bubbly. Not that I blame her.”

Kira snuck a glance at him from across the table. He couldn’t quite parse the expression on her face—somewhere between curiosity and surprise.

Seeming to catch herself, she bit her lip and cut her gaze to the side.

Sisko then asked Dr. Bashir about his guests staying in one of the cargo bays.

Odo was immediately drawn in. “Why weren’t they assigned guest quarters?”

“They are a potential security risk,” T’Sorra stated. “Genetically resequenced. They cannot be allowed standard access to station systems.”

Odo nodded slowly. He could see the need for caution. But as Bashir described how difficult these people were to work with, a distinctly uncomfortable sensation settled in Odo’s matrix.

“All I kept thinking was,” Bashir said, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

“How do you mean?” Dax asked.

“My parents managed to find a decent doctor to perform the DNA resequencing on me,” Bashir said. “These four weren’t so lucky. They all suffered unintended side effects, and by the time they were five or six, their parents were forced to come forward and admit they’d broken the law so that their children could get treatment.”

He took a steadying sip of his drink.

“Hmm,” Sisko said. “Perhaps they waited too long.”

Bashir nodded. “Yeah. There was nothing the doctors at the Institute could do for them.”

Odo frowned. “Institute?”

Bashir’s eyes flicked up to meet his. “The Daystrom Institute.”

Odo’s frown deepened. “These people grew up in a…laboratory? On Earth?”

He was familiar with Federation attitudes being a bit less accepting in actuality than they were on the surface, but he'd never quite heard of such a blatant injustice—on *Earth* of all places.

"Well, not quite a laboratory," Bashir said, squirming a little in his seat. "They were *patients*, not test subjects. But these cases are so rare…there's no standard treatment."

"I can't imagine it was a very stimulating environment for them," Kira said.

"Hmph," Odo agreed. "Not to mention isolating."

The others turned to him in question.

"Well, I'm not surprised they're poorly adjusted," Odo explained. "An upbringing in a science institute doesn't offer many opportunities for social integration."

He would know.

A surprised light entered Bashir's eyes. "You have a point."

"There is little choice in the matter," T'Sorra said. "Earth has no facilities designed for them. The Daystrom Institute *is* equipped to handle unique cases."

"No one's equipped to help *these* people," Bashir said. "It's part of why Dr. Loews got permission to separate them from the other residents so that she could work with them."

"Why did she bring them here?" Dax asked.

"She thought they might respond to meeting someone like them," Bashir said, a bitter edge in his voice, "who was leading a normal life."

"What purpose will that serve?" Odo asked. "Except, perhaps, to show them what they can't have?"

Bashir squinted at him. "I didn't expect you to empathize so strongly, Constable."

Odo sighed. "Let's just say they're not the only ones who spent their formative years in a science institute."

The mood around the table was suddenly stifling.

"Dr. Loews also hoped," Bashir added into the silence, "that one day they might be able to live on their own and be productive."

O'Brien chuckled weakly. "Well, let's hope they don't become *too* productive. Might make the rest of us look bad."

Dax managed a light laugh.

“It is not a laughing matter,” Worf said, setting down his drink. “If people like them are allowed to compete freely, then parents would feel pressured to have their children enhanced so they could keep up.”

“Commander Worf is correct,” T’Sorra said. “The Federation cannot risk increased demand for such enhancement.”

Bashir shook his head, leaning forward to refill his glass. “Giving them a chance to contribute doesn’t necessarily mean sanctioning what was done to them. They didn’t ask to have their DNA tampered with. They were only children! And why should they be excluded just because their *parents* broke the law?”

“That’s true,” Odo said. “And people like them are treated as outsiders—even feared. I can imagine how these four feel.”

“Yes,” T’Sorra said, her gaze oddly sharp. “I’m sure you can.”

Odo’s matrix tightened.

“I agree it’s not quite fair,” Sisko said. “But even so, it seemed like a good way to discourage genetic tampering.”

“Besides,” O’Brien added, “it’s not as if we’re trying to *exclude* them from anything. We’re just…talking about…you know, limiting what they’re allowed to do.”

“I fail to see the distinction, Chief,” Odo said.

This time, his comment drew a number of uncomfortable looks from the senior staff.

“Constable,” Bashir said, “are you saying you think they *should* be allowed to do the same things that others are?”

And now *Odo* found himself in an awkward spot.

“I’m…not sure there is a solution that’s completely fair to them,” he allowed. “I’m also aware…that the Federation has good reasons to fear widespread genetic resequencing.”

He didn’t need to mention the Eugenics Wars—and he didn’t care to. The notion of these outsiders—people born centuries after that devastation—being feared as a harbinger for world war hit a bit too close to home for him.

“Which is why,” T’Sorra said, “such people cannot be allowed to join Starfleet.”

“Exactly,” Worf said.

Bashir turned to them. “Are you saying I shouldn’t be allowed to wear this uniform?”

“Well, you are an exception,” Worf said, as if it were obvious.

“Ah, an exception,” Bashir sighed. “I should be used to that. I’ve been one all my life—first because of the DNA resequencing, and now, because I’ve been *allowed* to join Starfleet.”

Worf shifted in his seat. “Perhaps I should not have said anything.”

“No,” Bashir said, shaking his head. “No, it’s alright.”

Silence fell over the room.

“Well,” Sisko said, “does anyone care to speculate about what Gul Damar is going to say in his speech?”

Gul Damar.

The Dominion’s new puppet.

Odo’s matrix tightened, at the same moment that Kira’s gaze glued to the floor.

“Nothing we’re going to like, I’ll bet,” O’Brien said.

Dax sighed. “If he’s going to announce another new battle offensive, it’s going to spoil dessert.”

“It should be starting any minute,” Kira muttered.

Then a voice Odo didn’t recognize piped though Bashir’s combadge.

“Can you hear me? H-Hello, calling Dr. Bashir.”

Bashir heaved a weary sigh. “Jack.”

One of his genetically engineered guests.

“Hello. Anybody there? Hm? Hm?”

“Doctor,” T’Sorra said, “your guests should not have access to the comm system.”

“I know,” Bashir muttered, over Jack’s voice. “They must have broken in somehow.” He groaned, tipped back the last of his drink, and pushed to his feet. “I’d love to stay and chat about our impending doom, but…”

Grimacing, he made his exit.

T’Sorra, meanwhile, tapped her combadge. “T’Sorra to Vademm.”

“Vademm here.”

“Run a security sweep of the comm system,” she said. “Check for unauthorized access and update security protocols.”

“Understood, sir.”

T’Sorra exchanged a nod with the captain.

“Well.” Sisko clasped his knees. “Shall we move to the screen?”

“Works for me,” Kira said, standing.

As the others relocated to get a better view of Sisko’s wall monitor, Odo stayed a pace behind, maintaining his distance from Kira so as not to make her uncomfortable. He waited until she was seated before finding a perch on the very edge of the couch, positioning both Dax and O’Brien between them.

Sisko activated the monitor. As the UFP symbol appeared, Odo’s instincts prickled—and he turned to find T’Sorra’s eyes on him.

She was peering at him in the same way *he* watched potential threats.

“Can I help you, Commander?” he asked.

The others turned his way.

“Not as yet,” T’Sorra replied.

“Commander?” Sisko asked. “Is there a problem?”

“I have briefed you on my concerns, Captain,” T’Sorra said. “I do not believe it prudent to discuss them here.”

Sisko’s brow twitched. “Hmm.”

Odo frowned. She wasn’t out of line—he *was* still on leave, at least for another few days, and Vulcans were renowned for their adherence to protocol.

But why did it seem like *he* was her concern?

Suddenly, O’Brien’s combadge chirped. *“Bashir to O’Brien.”*

The Chief tapped it. “O’Brien here.”

“I need you in the cargo bay immediately. Bring a toolkit.”

O’Brien’s brows shot up, but he stood. “On my way.”

He made his exit, leaving only Dax seated between Odo and Kira.

It was several minutes before the UFP symbol on the wall monitor gave way to the Cardassian emblem—and then to Damar, standing at a podium.

“Fellow citizens,” Damar spoke, *“these are great days for Cardassia.”*

Were it not for Odo’s fine-tuned instincts, he might have missed T’Sorra’s glance.

“Together with our Dominion allies, we have given our enemies cause to fear us once more. The war with the Federation accomplished our goals. Cardassia is strong again, an empire to be feared…”

Damar’s posturing was familiar, at least. Typical Cardassian bluster, not Dominion subterfuge.

Then his tone shifted slightly. *“…we are poised to take another bold step that will ensure our future.”*

He paused dramatically.

“Peace.”

Odo squinted.

“It is time to bring an end to this war with the Federation,” he went on. *“It is time for us to rebuild…”*

On he went, about Cardassian bloodshed and sacrifice, honoring the memory of those lost, preserving gains. His voice was vehement, but there was *something* about his delivery—something that didn’t seem quite right.

“I challenge the Federation to answer my call for peace,” Damar said.

Then, as Odo watched, his expression fell flat.

“I am ready at any time to meet with its representatives to discuss how we can put an end to hostilities.” He blustered on for a bit about protecting Cardassia before declaring, *“This I vow with my life’s blood! For my sons…for* all *our sons!”*

The transmission ended, reverting to the Cardassian emblem.

“Well,” Sisko said into the gathering silence, “what do you think?”

“I don’t believe it for a minute,” Kira said.

“Agreed,” Worf said. “The Dominion currently occupies a position of strength. This *must* be a diversionary tactic.”

“Odo?” T’Sorra asked. “What do *you* think?”

Odo peered at her.

T’Sorra merely cocked a brow.

“I…think we just heard a lot of Cardassian bluster,” Odo said. “Damar’s putting a *lot* of effort into making his call for peace sound Cardassian. But I doubt it was his idea.”

Sisko hummed in thought.

“Then it must be Weyoun’s,” Kira said.

Dax frowned. “But why would the Dominion call for peace?”

“I’m not sure,” Odo said. “But this seems targeted.”

“Targeted?” T’Sorra asked.

“Well, peace is the Federation’s goal, not the Dominion’s,” Odo said. “The Federation *stands* for peace as a matter of principle. It’s always more eager to negotiate than to fight. That makes it predictable.”

“You think we’re being baited,” Sisko said.

“I do,” Odo said. “And I think that if we take that bait, we’ll be playing straight into the Dominion’s hands.”

Sisko sighed. “Not a comforting thought.”

The room lapsed into silence.

Then Dax said brightly, “How about dessert?”

*

Stardate: 50394.7

Damar paced the cargo bay. “Where are they?”

“They’ll be here,” said Weyoun.

“This is ridiculous,” Damar muttered. “Sneaking into a storage bay for a secret meeting.” He glared at Weyoun. “I’m not some agent of the Obsidian Order. I’m the leader of the Cardassian Empire!”

Weyoun turned. “Don’t let it go to your head! You serve only at the Dominion’s pleasure.”

Damar stiffened.

“Besides,” Weyoun said, “I think it’s exciting.”

Across the bay, a door slid open.

Weyoun sobered quickly. “They’re here.”

He crept around the corner of a stack of crates, a suspicious Damar close on his heels. But it wasn’t a trio of genetically resequenced civilians who entered the cargo bay; it was a Vulcan security officer, her chin lifted, her hands clasped behind her back.

“Your presence here is unauthorized,” T’Sorra asked.

Weyoun's gaze darted about. "We…seem to have gotten ourselves lost."

"Then you were *not* intending to meet someone claiming to offer sensitive information?"

For the briefest of moments, Weyoun's expression froze.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Damar said.

T'Sorra cocked a brow. "I am to escort you to your accommodations."

Weyoun's ingratiating, diplomatic smile was in full force as he followed her.

Stardate: 51404.5 | USS Honshu

"Lower the forcefield."

The security officer on duty complied. At the sound of the forcefield disengaging, Dukat looked up, and a familiar, false smile slithered across his face.

The Changeling known as Dr. Cox approached, hypospray in hand.

"That time again?" Dukat said.

"Same time every day," said Dr. Cox, affecting a cheerful smile.

Human bedside manner was so…tiresome. But, ultimately, a small price to pay as Dukat offered his arm without complaint.

The hypospray hissed.

"There we go," Dr. Cox said. "How are we feeling today?"

"*We* are feeling fine," Dukat said, shooting him a sideways glance. "No need to patronize me, Doctor."

Back and forth they went. Dr. Cox asked questions designed to test Dukat's cognizance of reality; Dukat answered perfectly, with only the slightest edge of impatience in his voice. He'd mellowed quite nicely. Succumbed to Dr. Cox's care. But there was still that glint of danger in his eyes—a glint that told Dr. Cox that the Vorta had, indeed, found the right choice of vessel for this experiment.

A glint that could be tapped into at any moment.

It wasn't *medicine* that Dr. Cox was administering with that hypospray.

*

Stardate: 51408.2 | Deep Space Nine

When Odo returned to his office to report for duty, Lt. Commander T'Sorra was waiting for him.

She sat behind his desk, occupying his chair.

She looked up as he entered, her expression as mild as any Vulcan. "You're here to resume your post."

"That's right."

T'Sorra cocked an eyebrow, scanning him from head to toe.

"Is there a problem, Commander?" Odo asked.

She hesitated a beat. Then, "Not to my knowledge."

Odo peered at her.

T'Sorra stood, the moment seemingly forgotten. "I stand relieved."

She rounded his desk, and he took her place, settling into that familiar chair.

Then T'Sorra faced him, hands clasped behind her back, chin lifted. "I now report for duty as head of Starfleet's security attachment."

Odo squinted, leaned forward. "You're reporting to *me*?"

"Captain Sisko's orders, sir," T'Sorra said.

Odo nodded slowly. He'd have to thank the captain, later—when Sisko returned from Dukat's arraignment. "Very good. Carry on."

"Sir," T'Sorra acknowledged.

She turned to leave. But she stopped just as she reached the doors.

"Sir," she said, turning again, "there is something I'd like you to clarify."

"What's that?"

T'Sorra looked him dead in the eye. "How does the Link function?"

Odo stiffened. "I beg your pardon?"

"I wish to understand what is shared during a Link," T'Sorra said. "In the interests of station security."

Station security?

Did she *know*?

Had Kira included his defection in her report, after all?

But…then he wouldn't have been allowed to resume his post, would he have? He'd be facing court-martial.

Odo kept his expression carefully neutral. "What do *you* know about the Link?"

"Very little," T'Sorra said. "Hence my concern."

Odo studied her. But T'Sorra's expression was almost as unreadable as his own.

"Perhaps if you noted down any pertinent information in a report," she finally said. "I will give it due diligence."

"Dismissed, Commander," Odo replied.

A flash of *something* crossed T'Sorra's face, far too brief for Odo to discern. Then, with a perfunctory nod, she left his office.

Odo watched her go, his matrix coiling tight.

The Link…the Link…

He shook himself.

It wasn't something he wanted to think about. And he was *not* describing it in a report for Starfleet's eyes.

It was none of Starfleet's business.

Then his combadge chirped. *"Kira to Odo."*

He tapped it. "Here."

"I need to see you in Ops."

*

Stardate: 51408.6

There was no time to enjoy the privilege of standing at Kira's side, or even for shame to grip him when she struggled to meet his eyes.

The captain was missing.

Possibly dead.

His chances diminished with each passing hour.

"It's confirmed," Kira announced to the senior staff as she emerged from the captain's office. "USS *Honshu* was destroyed this morning at 1030 hours by an attack wing of Cardassian

destroyers."

She walked up to the situation table; Odo followed, quickly putting as much distance between them as was reasonable.

"Starfleet *has* picked up the distress beacons from three escape pods and one shuttlecraft," Kira said. "So, there are survivors."

Odo indicated a region on the displayed star chart. "The signals are coming from this area. The last reported position of the *Honshu* was here"—he pointed—"which means there could be survivors in any of these adjacent star systems."

"That's a pretty large area," O'Brien said. "How many ships in the search party?"

"Two," Odo replied. "The *Constellation* and the *Defiant* ."

"Two?" Dax repeated. "It could take days!"

"With all the Dominion activity along the border," Kira said, "it's all Starfleet can spare at the moment." She sucked in a deep breath. "And the *Defiant* has another appointment."

She handed Worf a PADD.

"In fifty-two hours," she said, "you need to be at this rendezvous point outside the Badlands. You are the escort for a Federation troop convoy."

Worf tapped at the PADD. "It will take twelve hours just to arrive at the coordinates where the *Honshu* was destroyed."

"And twelve more to reach the Bandlands, I know," Kira said. "But this convoy is completely unprotected. They've been using the plasma fields in the Badlands to hide their movements. When they emerge, they're helpless without the *Defiant*."

"Can't they delay the convoy?" Bashir asked. "I mean, if Captain Sisko is still alive, we have to give him every chance—"

"I raised the same objection myself," Kira said, "and the orders still stand."

Ops was quiet as her words landed.

"Now," Kira said, "every minute spent arguing here is one less minute spent searching for the captain."

"Prepare for immediate departure," Worf ordered.

At his words, Dax, Bashir, and O'Brien made for the turbolift, Worf close behind.

"Worf," Kira said.

He stopped.

“There are over thirty thousand Federation troops in that convoy,” Kira said. “You have fifty-two hours, not one second longer. Understood?”

“Understood,” Worf replied.

He joined the others in the turbolift, and it descended out of view.

Kira’s back was to Odo; he couldn’t see her face, but he could see the tense angle of her shoulders, the stiff line of her back. And he could *feel* every inch that separated them.

He knew what it cost her to stand strong now. To prioritize the burdens of command over her Emissary.

Every cell of his being ached to go to her—to stand at her side, to offer her reassurance, to support her in any way he could.

“Kira—” he started.

Her chin dipped. “Not now, Constable.”

So he retreated to the turbolift.

*

Stardate: 51409.9

The captain’s doors slid open.

It was possible this was a monumentally bad idea. Odo shouldn’t intrude on Kira’s space. He didn’t *have* to be here.

But he needed to see her.

Kira was sitting in the captain’s chair. She looked up as he entered. “Odo.”

“Major.” He handed her a PADD. “My report on yesterday’s security operations.”

Kira frowned. “You didn’t have to deliver that personally.”

“…No.”

For a long moment, she was quiet. Odo was rooted to the spot.

“Worried about the captain?” she asked.

Odo sighed. “No news yet, I take it?”

Kira shook her head.

Odo sucked in a deep breath that shuddered through his form. Kira’s eyes darted back down to the desk surface; one finger tapped at its edge.

He turned to leave.

“Odo.”

He stopped. She was looking up at him now, a strange hesitance in her eyes—of a sort he would never have expected from Kira Nerys, resistance fighter.

“We never got a chance to talk,” she said. “Did we?”

Odo remained silent, awaiting her cue.

“The Dominion retreats, and the next thing I know, you’re on leave,” Kira said. She looked at him questioningly. “I’ve never known you to take a vacation.”

“It wasn’t by choice,” Odo admitted. “At first.”

“How in the hell do you get forced on *vacation*?”

“I was…ill, at first,” Odo said, haltingly. “I didn’t know how long it would last, and I couldn’t be effective at my duty.”

“Ill?” Kira repeated. “You?”

“Strange as it sounds.”

“Is…*that* why you stopped answering your comm?”

Odo sighed. “I was…indisposed, to say the least. I could barely keep my voice steady. I… didn’t want to be seen like that. Or heard.”

“What was wrong?” Kira hesitated. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“It…doesn’t matter.” Odo did *not* want to think about the Link. “It seemed to resolve itself after a few days, and I tried to return to duty. The captain took inordinate delight in reminding me that I was, quote, ‘off the roster.’”

Kira chuckled. “So…how was it?”

Odo frowned. “How was what?”

“Your vacation!”

Odo peered at her. “You really want to talk about…my vacation?”

Kira shrugged, spread her hands. “Why not?”

Odo hesitated.

“But let’s sit down,” she said, nodding toward the little lounge in the back of the office.

Warily, Odo followed her. She settled onto the couch; he perched on the edge of the chair opposite her, ready to move the second she no longer tolerated his presence.

“So, you told us about the historical center in Musilla,” she said. “What else did you see?”

“Well,” Odo said slowly, “I visited a number of cultural centers…”

“Tell me.”

So, he delved into his time exploring Musilla and then Ilvian, immersing himself in the sights and sounds, the ebb and flow of Bajoran society. As she listened, the most unlikely of smiles teasing her face, his caution eased, and he brought up the nature preserves he’d toured—but not in humanoid form.

“I figured I’d get closer to the animals if I were one of them,” he said. “Get a better view, without scaring them off.”

Kira’s face clouded over.

He didn’t even know what he’d said, but clearly, his luck had run out.

“I’m sorry, Major.” He made to stand. “I’ll—”

“No, Odo—” She reached to stop him, only to abort the movement. “Stay.”

He settled uncomfortably in his seat. “As you wish.”

“I just…wondered.” She kept her eyes glued to the couch cushion. “*Why* did you go? To Bajor, I mean?”

Odo sighed.

She glanced up. “Talk to me, Odo.”

Briefly, Odo’s eyes fell shut.

“The truth is,” he said quietly, “I don’t think I’d…*chosen* it, before. I had isolated myself. Devoted myself to my duty. But that’s not enough, Major. Not enough to stay here.”

Her eyes met his. “Why *did* you stay?”

His breath hitched.

She held his gaze.

Odo looked away. “You know why.”

“No, I don’t!” Kira straightened. “You broke your word! You Linked with her! You *chose* her! You told me nothing but the Link mattered!”

“…it has nothing to do with me…”

Odo sighed. “I know.”

“*Why?*” Kira demanded. “After everything we’ve been through—”

“Because she offered me clarity, Major,” Odo said. “She offered me *peace*.”

The Link…the Link…

“Peace from *what*?”

The Link…the Link…the Link…the Link…

His matrix churned.

He *needed* it.

Still.

Time had dulled the pain, and the tremors had stopped—but every cell of his being still lurched at the thought of it, still *strained* for a connection that wasn’t there.

“Odo!” Kira pressed. “Answer me! Peace from *what*?”

He shut his eyes. “From this Solid world.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Odo’s eyes flicked up to meet hers. “She offered me my *people*, Kira. Belonging. Contentment. How could I turn away from that?”

Kira’s jaw hung open.

“Kira, you have a luxury that I do not,” he said. “You’re *humanoid*. Bajor is your home. And it’s on the right side of this war. What if I asked you to turn your back on your people? On your faith itself? What if you had to live in a world where *no one* was like you? What if you had to fight for acceptance all your life, to pass yourself off as something you’re not? What if accepting what you are meant turning your back on *everything* you’ve ever cared about?”

Kira’s jaw worked. “Odo…”

“I *need* the Link, Kira,” Odo said. “Like you need to *pray*. It’s part of what I am. And day after day, I choose *you* instead.”

She sucked in a sharp breath, and he knew he’d struck too close to home.

“But you *didn’t* choose me,” she said.

Odo shuddered.

She was right…and he still couldn’t explain it.

Even his need for the Link couldn't explain the way the Founder had reeled him in, muddied his thoughts, swayed him to her side.

"I should have," Odo whispered. "I—I don't know why—"

"You told me that this war had nothing to do with you," Kira said. "You nearly got Rom executed. You practically *handed* the Alpha Quadrant to the Dominion!"

"I know."

"You *know*?" Kira repeated. "Is that all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" Odo cried. "You think it makes sense to me? You think I haven't wondered over and over how I could *possibly* have lost my way?"

Kira's mouth tightened.

"I've gone over it all a million times," Odo said. "And all I can come up with is that…that my ties here weren't strong enough. That I was so isolated, so—so alone, that I jumped at the chance for connection. That the second I felt the Link again, it was as if I'd come home, and that is a feeling I have *always* yearned for—since before I knew what I was."

Kira's hands fidgeted in her lap. "That's why you went to Bajor?"

"Yes. Well…mostly." Odo looked her dead in the eye. "Major, if there is *one* thing I know, it's that I can never let you down again. No other pain could compare—even my longing for my people, even my need for the Link. Because I've lost you before, and I—" He cut himself off. "I tried running from that pain, ran straight to the Link—and it didn't work. I—I can't tear out my—my *feelings* for you." He sucked in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry, Kira, I know it makes you uncomfortable, but I can't stop *loving* you."

Kira winced, but he couldn't stop.

"I can't leave you again," he said. His breath hitched. "I can't—it doesn't matter if you never forgive me, if our friendship is over—I'll *still* always be devoted to you. *You* are the reason I went to Bajor. I had to choose this place as my home. Because I'm not going back to the Great Link, Kira. I never am—no matter how much it hurts."

"You—" Kira stopped. "You mean that?"

He managed a pained nod.

She was quiet for a moment.

"I don't think I ever realized what it cost you to stay here," she whispered. "To turn your back on your own people. The Founders…they're so alien to me, it's easy now to see them as the enemy. I never considered…"

Odo glanced up at her, his gaze dark.

…so alien to me…

Did it even occur to her that *he* was, too?

He would not push his luck by pointing that out.

“I’ve been blind,” Kira whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I, Kira,” Odo said. “For everything.”

Kira’s gaze latched onto his. “You’d really turn your back on them? Choose never to return to the Great Link?”

“Yes.”

“But…they’re your people,” she said. “Even if they *are* the enemy in this war—”

“It doesn’t matter,” he gritted out. “It hurts, Kira. I won’t deny that. But it doesn’t matter.” A sigh shuddered through his substance. “*You* matter the most.”

Kira bit her lip. “Odo…”

He forced himself to meet her gaze.

“I…I didn’t know if I wanted to hear it,” she said. “From you, I mean. What your counterpart on Gaia told me.”

Odo’s eyes widened.

“It all seemed so twisted,” Kira murmured. “You betrayed me. Betrayed us all. How could you…*love* me? I wondered…if you could say that to me—I mean, the other you—did you even know what love *was*?”

Odo couldn’t have torn his gaze from her if he’d tried. He was rooted to the spot, his substance aquiver.

“I still don’t know if I want to hear it,” she said quietly. “I…I don’t know how this could work. But…it doesn’t seem so twisted anymore.”

Hope spread through Odo’s matrix, bright and warm.

“Can we…” She hesitated, then barreled on. “Can we be friends again?”

“Kira,” Odo said, “believe me when I say that I don’t *need* anything more than that. I’ve been your friend for five years and enjoyed every minute of it. I’d give anything just to stand at your side.”

A tentative smile tugged at Kira’s face. “Good.”

*

Dominion Headquarters | Cardassia

The Cox Changeling entered the laboratory to the sound of the Vorta Rivun's chuckle.

Rivun stood at the main console, wearing a viewer headset. An amused smile twitched on his lips as he watched some unseen display.

"What have you to report?" the Changeling asked.

At the sound of his voice, Rivun sobered quickly—almost guiltily.

"Initial experiments are having a somewhat…" He suppressed a snicker. "…*unintended* effect."

"Oh?"

"We're stimulating certain neural pathways in Dukat's brain," Rivun said. "He's… hallucinating."

Rivun's lips twitched again.

The Changeling held out his hand for the viewer. "Let me see."

"As you wish."

He handed over the viewer, and the Changeling put it on, then activated the feed.

It was linked to a surveillance device planted in Dukat's brain stem, showing what Dukat himself saw—including all that wasn't real.

Including a Solid, dressed in a red Bajoran Militia uniform, cackling madly as she mocked him.

The Changeling suppressed a shudder. Solids were so pathetic. So limited. So ignorant to the world. And so dangerous, with their insistence upon their own superiority and their inability to tolerate anything that didn't look like them. They were a blight upon the galaxy.

The Solid in question appeared right up in Dukat's face, challenging him. *" 'You were a soldier and you had to carry out your orders,' "* she spat. *"He doesn't believe that lame excuse any more than I do!"*

"This is growing tiresome*!"* Dukat growled.

"Oh, tiresome?" she laughed. *"How do you think he feels about* you*? You're pathetic! Begging him for absolution as if you're not the most monstrous creature to haunt this universe?"*

A sharp voice cut in. *"Dukat!"*

That was real. Captain Benjamin Sisko—Dukat's target, and the single most dangerous Solid this side of the galaxy. The one that would stop at nothing to see the Dominion wiped from the face of the universe, the Great Link itself reduced to ashes.

"I thought you wanted to talk to me*,"* Sisko said, pointing at himself.

But what the Changeling zeroed in on was the cast on his arm. His disheveled uniform, scorched down the left side with plasma burns.

Excellent.

The Changeling removed the viewer. "I've seen enough."

Rivun spread his hands, bowing his head. "Does it please you?"

The Changeling smiled. "Well done, Rivun. Those 'unintended effects' of yours are… tolerable."

Rivun took back the headset. "Thank you, Founder."

"Continue your work," the Changeling ordered. "There is still much to do before the Alpha Quadrant is ours."

Chapter End Notes

I actually *like* the scene when Odo meets Weyoun and Damar in the cargo bay. His sarcasm is hilarious. But the timing didn't work with his leave in my canon, and this gave me a chance to put T'Sorra in that situation instead and contrast her with Odo.

Another thing: it took me a bit to figure out why that dinner scene in the beginning of "Statistical Probabilities" bothers me. And then I realized that Odo's lines could've been reassigned to just about anyone. He sounds completely flat. The only time he says anything remotely interesting, he's standing for rule of law, which would make sense for his character...under different circumstances.

They're talking about a handful of poorly adjusted people who grew up in a science institute, are treated as outsiders, and are feared as harbingers of world war.

Odo was poorly adjusted in the beginning, spent his formative years in a science institute, has been treated as an outsider all his life...and people beyond the hull of Deep Space Nine struggle to distinguish him from the Founders of the Dominion.

There is *no freaking way* he'd be toeing the Starfleet party line on this matter. He's spent a good deal of his time in canon not even *liking* Starfleet. Sisko and the others eventually earn his respect, but it's not as if he has a lofty opinion of Starfleet in general.

He's too much of a cynic for that. I think he often sees them as a bit naive compared to other humanoids. Their philosophy is sound, but not always functional in practice.

However, *my* canon brings in some extra nuance. Odo coped with his guilt over betraying his friends to the Dominion by renouncing his people entirely and *choosing* Bajor and Deep Space Nine as his home. Earth's history with genetic resequencing means that his defense of these patients begins to tread too closely to a defense of the Eugenics Wars. Given the parallels, he *has* to back up to the Starfleet party line.

I just *loved* rewriting that scene. Especially inserting T'Sorra for extra tension (and the chance to characterize her)!

Beyond that...I hope you guys like what I did differently with "Waltz" and the Dominion's plans for Dukat?

As a side note...I sure hope my characterization of Dukat is working. I wrote a few original lines for him in the scene aboard the *Honshu*, and I'd never written him before at all. Before the end of this fic, I'll have taken Dukat completely off the original canon's rails, so this was a bit of an exercise for me.

I'm also hoping that the Cox Changeling and Rivun are working. I have...plans...for them. 😏

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Odo and Kira build forward. Meanwhile, Sisko contends with the ugliness of war.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Who Mourns for Morn" and "Far Beyond the Stars"

We also have some between-episode intermission action.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51412.8 | Deep Space Nine

Odo was seated at the console in his quarters, absorbed in a *Mike Hammer* novel, when his combadge chirped.

“Dax to Odo.”

He tapped it. “Odo here.”

“Could you meet me in Quark’s?”

Odo frowned. He was off-duty, but— “Has something happened?”

“No, don’t worry. There’s something I want to show you.”

Odo shifted upright, curious despite himself.

Coming from Dax, what he would find was anyone’s guess. But he *had* wanted to immerse himself fully in this life, hadn’t he? Cultivate more connections?

“On my way,” Odo said.

*

He arrived at Quark’s to find the entire senior staff—sans Sisko and Worf—gathered around a table.

Dax saw him immediately and waved him over. “Odo!”

Odo approached cautiously, unsure what he was getting himself into.

Dax pulled out a chair—which just happened to be between her and Kira. “Have a seat.”

Tentatively, Odo acquiesced, taking the moment to observe the others. Bashir and O’Brien were seated across from him, both leaning back, relaxed. Kira, leaning forward with her elbows on the table, shot him a tiny smile.

“What’s all this about?” Odo asked.

Dax held up a holorod. “I figured we could all use a diversion.”

“You didn’t invite the captain?” O’Brien asked.

“Or Worf?” Bashir added.

“Benjamin’s busy with Kasidy,” Dax said, smirking. “And when I told Worf what program it was, he said he had a sparring appointment with Morn.”

Odo narrowed his eyes at the holorod. “That had better not be the Hoobishan Baths.”

Dax rolled her eyes in exasperation. “What is wrong with the Hoobishan Baths?”

Kira hid a smile. “There’s such a thing as too much indulgence, Jadzia.”

“It’s not the Hoobishan Baths,” Dax said.

Odo breathed a tiny sigh of relief.

“Well?” Bashir quirked a smug smile. “What program is it, then?”

Dax’s eyes twinkled. “Risa.”

“*Risa?*” Odo repeated.

“Jadzia,” Kira said, “I’m not sure—”

“Oh, come on, Nerys,” Dax said. “An hour on Risa isn’t going to kill you.”

“But that’s just it,” Kira said. “We *won’t* be on Risa.”

Dax shot her a withering look.

“It sounds good to me,” Bashir said, smiling widely.

“Me too,” O’Brien added.

Dax looked to Kira. “Nerys?”

Kira sighed. “Oh, fine.”

“Odo?”

Odo hesitated.

Risa was not his idea of time well spent.

But then he caught Kira sneaking a glance at him, despite her averted profile. The look in her eyes was veiled, but…curious?

Oh, what was the harm? If *Kira* was going…

“Well,” Odo said, “it’s not exactly shooting the rapids, but…”

“The rapids?” Kira asked.

Odo tensed. “Never mind.”

“Does that mean you’re in?” Dax asked.

Odo sighed. “I’m in.”

*

As the holosuite doors closed, Odo found himself standing amid a lush meadow, shaded with trees and scattered with lawn chairs. Not far away, gentle waves washed up against a stretch of white beach.

He watched as Kira scanned the place, a reluctant smile already blooming on her face.

Dax noticed. “Not so bad after all?”

“Well, it’s just,” Kira said, “I was expecting more…well, more…”

“Nudity?” Dax asked.

“Well…” Kira hesitated. “Yes.”

Dax grinned. “I’ll admit, Risa’s reputation is well-earned. But it’s not *just* a pleasure planet. People come to the Temtibi Lagoon for the blue skies, the sunlight, the beach…the quiet.”

“It’s…” Kira looked around, smiling broadly. “Not bad!”

Odo couldn’t help his own fond smile.

“What about you, Odo?” Dax asked. “You’re not going to walk out on us, are you?”

Odo shifted awkwardly. “Not…yet.”

Kira hid a smile.

“Well,” Dax said, “I don’t know about all of you, but *I’m* going to go find myself a spot in the shade.”

“Lead the way,” Bashir said.

The others moved off, leaving Odo alone with Kira. She was still grinning as she took in their surroundings.

Oh, how he had longed to see that smile again.

“So, Odo,” she said, “how’d Dax talk you into joining us?”

“She didn’t…*talk* me into anything,” Odo admitted. “She asked me to meet her in Quark’s, and I wasn’t busy.”

“I thought you were always busy.”

“Not anymore,” Odo said.

Kira smiled. Their eyes locked.

“Want to take a walk?” she offered.

He gestured ahead.

“So,” Kira said as they meandered down a dirt path, “what did you mean about shooting the rapids?”

Her question threw him. “Rapids?”

“Back at the table,” Kira said. “When you agreed to Risa.”

“Ah.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “Chief O’Brien has a kayaking program. River rapids. Occasionally, he invites me to join him.”

Kira’s brows shot up. “How long has *this* been going on?”

“About…three years,” Odo said.

Kira snuck a glance his way. She stifled a laugh.

“What?”

“Sorry,” Kira said, pressing her lips together. “I’m just trying to imagine the two of you in a boat.”

Odo stopped in his tracks.

This conversation was familiar—too familiar.

“Odo?” Tentatively, she touched his shoulder. “You alright?”

Odo’s breath hitched.

“Well done, Odo. You really are quite a skillful investigator.”

“And you’re quite a skillful Changeling.”

“…tell me where Major Kira is…”

“Odo?”

…she will never love you…

“Odo!”

He jolted. “Yes?”

“Talk to me,” Kira said. “What’s wrong?”

Odo looked into her face, her worried eyes—and for a terrifying moment, he couldn’t be sure if it was *her* next to him, or the Founder.

But then she squeezed his shoulder, and he had no doubt.

If she were the Founder, he’d feel the tingle of her substance against his. The call of the Link.

The Link…

“Kira,” Odo whispered.

Her eyes held his, unwavering.

Before the war, before Gaia, he would have clammed up. Shared nothing. Told her he was fine, kept to himself, drew up his walls.

That wasn’t going to work anymore.

“It’s just…” He sucked in a shaky breath. “Those words. I’ve heard them before.”

“What words?”

“About…trying to imagine the Chief and me in a boat,” Odo said. “I’ve…had this whole conversation before. With you. Except…it wasn’t you. It was the Founder.”

Kira’s eyes widened. “During—?”

“Not the occupation,” Odo said quickly. “Years before.”

“Where?”

“In the Badlands,” Odo said. “On that moon.”

It took Kira a moment. “You mean…the time she impersonated me?”

Odo nodded.

She peered at him. He tried not to squirm beneath her gaze.

“What else happened?” she asked.

He hesitated.

“Odo,” she murmured. “Talk to me.”

“It’s just…it’s as if…she stole something from me,” Odo said. “From us. I thought I was opening up to *you*. Sharing anecdotes, taking your mind off of—you know—being slowly, excruciatingly enveloped in crystal. But it was her all along.”

“I’m sorry,” Kira whispered.

His habitual response was right on the tip of his tongue—that he didn’t want pity.

But that wasn’t pity in her eyes.

That was sympathy.

Warmth.

It made him nearly tempted to tell her the rest. How the Founder had coerced a love confession. How *she* had been the first to hear those words—not Kira.

How she had used Kira’s face, Kira’s voice, and told him she was in love with him too.

It was the moment he’d known it was all a lie.

Kira would *never* say that to him.

He had just opened his mouth when Kira spoke again. “You told me about what she did…but you never said how much it hurt you.”

Odo sighed. “I was good at masking my feelings.”

“But not now?”

He risked looking into her eyes, letting her see. “Now…I’m trying not to.”

The smile that worked its way across Kira’s features was…different. Soft. Tender. Caring.

It wasn’t as if he’d previously believed she *didn’t* care for him. But she’d never looked at him quite like that before. Like her world had narrowed, and for a moment, she wasn’t seeing the grass or the trees that surrounded them—she was seeing *him*.

“Good,” Kira said. “I’m glad.”

*

Some time later, Odo found himself reclined near the water’s edge, Kira’s voice washing over him as the waves washed in and out.

Who knew that sound could be so…relaxing?

It was tempting—*so* tempting—to morph into water himself and slip into the lagoon, mingle until his form was indistinguishable from the surrounding liquid.

It was probably the closest to Linking he would ever get.

“…so then Jadzia—”

Suddenly, Kira stopped.

“Odo?” she asked. “Are you listening?”

Odo startled. Cracked open an eye.

Kira was propped up on one elbow as she leaned over him, studying him. There was a strange expression on her face.

“You haven’t heard a word I’ve said, have you?”

Odo’s substance twinged. “I’m sorry, Kira. I…suppose I zoned out.”

“Zoned out?” Kira’s brows pinched, even as a smile teased her face. “You?”

He shifted. “Apparently.”

Why his answer prompted a *grin* to spread across her face, he couldn’t fathom. Shouldn’t she be upset that he hadn’t been listening to her?

Well, he’d take what he could get.

“Hey!” Dax’s voice suddenly called from up the beach. “Nerys! Odo! Reservation’s almost over.”

Odo bolted upright. “Has it been an hour?”

“Apparently so.” Kira’s eyes twinkled. “We’d better go, before Quark finds an excuse to overcharge.”

Odo sighed. His gaze drifted back to the lagoon, half tempted to extend the reservation.

“Odo?” Kira asked.

At the sound of her voice, his gaze was drawn back to hers.

“You alright?” she asked.

Pull yourself together, Odo.

Spending time with Kira was one thing. He could get used to spending some time in the holosuites, letting down his guard, if it meant he could keep seeing her smile.

But he did *not* want to think about the Link. Didn’t want to be tempted.

“I’m fine,” he said, pushing to his feet.

Kira’s brows pinched as she looked up at him. “You sure?”

“Yes.” He would be. He *had* to be. “Shall we?”

The slightest trace of disappointment crossed her face. But she followed suit, standing and heading up the beach to join the others.

“Computer,” Dax called, “exit.”

Odo stepped back out into the real world, Kira at his side.

Stardate: 51415.7

Kira found Odo on the promenade, amid the crowd headed for Morn’s wake.

“Odo,” she said, joining him.

A soft smile crossed his face. “Kira.”

It occurred to her that she wasn’t sure when he’d started calling her that. Using her name, not her rank. Even if it wasn’t her given name.

She recalled his words in the holosuite the other day, about masking his feelings.

“Now…I’m trying not to.”

And she could tell.

“Headed for Morn’s wake?” she asked.

He nodded.

Then, as they passed an arguing Dax and Worf, she noticed the object he was holding.

“Is that a bottle opener?” she asked.

He hummed an affirmative. “For Morn. I thought it might come in handy.”

She smiled a little. “Very thoughtful.”

He chuckled.

Together, they meandered their way into Quark's and found a spot near one of the support struts. Odo was maintaining a scan of the room, but he seemed considerably more relaxed than he once would have—none of the usual folded arms and suspicious glare.

Bashir and O'Brien approached the bar, thanking Quark for hosting the wake.

"It's the least I could do," Quark said. "I'll miss him." He seemed almost to choke up, then managed a weak, "Sorry."

Kira frowned. Leaning close to Odo, she whispered, "That's not an act, is it?"

Odo's only answer was an acknowledging glance. He left her side, carefully slipping through the crowd to approach Quark from behind.

"Can I get you anything?" O'Brien asked Quark.

Quark took a steadying breath. "I don't ordinarily imbibe on the job, but…maybe a Yridian ale." He nodded in the direction of a case on the bar. "It was Morn's favorite."

"Oh," O'Brien said, brows raised. "Well, perfect."

Quark held up a Ferengi PADD. O'Brien pressed his thumb print.

Bashir patted Quark's shoulder as they left. Then Kira watched as Quark turned around—and nearly smacked into the wall of Odo's chest.

Kira stifled her smile.

Odo peered down at Quark, his arms folded.

"What are you looking at?" Quark said.

Odo's voice dripped with mock sympathy. "Your respect for the dead is *heartwarming*."

"I'll have you know," Quark said, "Morn died without paying this month's bar tab."

"Oh," Odo said, "how *inconsiderate* of him."

"We're talking about a *lot* of money!" Quark said. "The man had quite an appetite. You know he had two stomachs to fill." He sighed. "Ever watch him eat? It was a beautiful thing."

"Well, sometimes you don't truly appreciate what you have until it's gone," Odo said.

Quark glared at him. "It's nice to know you're so worried about my welfare."

"You should be worried, too," Odo said, smirking. "Now that your mascot's gone, business will suffer."

"We'll see," Quark said. "You might be surprised."

As the last of the wake's attendees trickled in and Quark addressed the crowd, Odo maneuvered back to Kira's side, an odd look on his face.

The longer Quark spoke, the less convinced Kira became that he was feigning his tears purely for profit.

"Some of you might be thinking this place won't be the same without him," Quark said. "And it won't!"

Kira exchanged a glance with Odo.

"But this was his home," Quark said, barely restraining the quaver in his voice. "And wherever he is, I'm sure he'd want to know that his favorite bar still echoed with the laughter of his dear friends."

Quark urged a befuddled-looking Bajoran man to sit in Morn's chair, keep it warm. And while parts of Quark's speech *did* seem like a ploy to ensure profit, Kira couldn't deny that it also seemed heartfelt. By the time Quark choked up completely and then just clapped to end his speech, Kira was thoroughly amazed.

She clapped a few times herself, then leaned Odo's way. "Every now and then…Quark really surprises me."

Odo nodded thoughtfully. "Me too…"

Stardate: 51445.7

"The *Defiant* searched the area for almost six hours," Kira said. "We couldn't find *any* sign of survivors."

She handed Sisko a PADD; he added it to the growing pile spread across his desk.

Sisko was about one second away from burying his head in his hands.

"The *Cortez* was a good ship," he said.

Kira sighed. "You knew Captain Swofford a long time."

"I introduced him to his wife!"

"Patrolling Cardassian borders is getting more and more dangerous," Kira said. "You never know when you'll run into a squadron of Jem'Hadar fighters."

Sisko folded his hands. "I guess we popped the champagne cork too soon, huh?"

Kira peered at him.

"Everyone thought the war was over when we retook the station," Sisko said, "and pushed the Dominion back into Cardassian space."

“I never believed that,” Kira said. “And neither did you.”

“A lot of good that did the four hundred people on the *Cortez*.”

He was losing his composure. He knew he was. It was his job to present a strong front, so that his crew could go on fighting another day. He was the captain. The burdens of his command were his to bear alone—and *usually*, that didn’t feel so impossible.

But the longer this war dragged on, the more ships they lost, the more *people* Sisko saw in casualty reports, the more it wore away at him.

*

Even as Sisko joined his dad on the sofa, his mind was a million miles away.

He’d never known the Prophets to give him such a…detailed vision. It had been as if he were *there*, in Manhattan, in the 1950s. None of the light that usually eclipsed his reality, or the dreamlike quality of the images the Prophets showed him.

And, in a way, it *had* been real.

Not physically real. It was a vision. But it was the Prophets’ way of putting his burdens in a different perspective, putting him in the shoes of a man who couldn’t escape a difficult fight any more than he could. A man who *lived* that fight, because of the color of his skin.

And Sisko was living his own fight. The life of a Starfleet officer in a time of war. Not only that—the life of a Starfleet captain at the mouth of the Celestial Temple, shouldering the burdens of command.

Burdens he *must* bear.

If Benny Russell could—and, in every way that mattered, in his spirit, in his *pagh*, he *was* Benny Russell—then Sisko could, too.

“Transport leaves at eight in the morning,” his dad was saying.

“I wish you could stay longer,” Sisko said.

His dad smiled, shaking his head. “I’ve got to get back to the restaurant. My customers have never gone this long without me.”

Sisko sipped his *raktajino*.

“The question is,” his dad said, cocking his head, “what are *you* going to do?”

Sisko drew himself straight. “The only thing I can do. Stay here, and finish the job I started. And if I fail…”

“ ‘I have fought the good fight…I have finished the course…I have kept the faith.’ ”

Sisko turned in surprise. “I’ve never known you to quote from the Bible.”

“I’m full of surprises, aren’t I?” his dad said. “And so are you. Sounds like that dream you had…helped you sort things out.”

“I suppose it did,” Sisko said. “But it wasn’t a dream.”

“Right,” his dad said slowly. “It was a vision, you said. From those Prophets.”

Sisko sighed. “I know what Starfleet believes, I know what you and Jake and Kasidy believe…but they *are* Prophets. They’re looking out for Bajor, and for me.”

His dad still looked a bit skeptical. But Sisko decided not to press the issue.

He could imagine how he’d feel if mysterious, trans-temporal beings tried to mess with *Jake’s* life. It couldn’t be easy to watch your son become a vessel for a purpose you couldn’t understand.

But if there was one thing Sisko understood, it was that the Prophets worked in mysterious ways.

They would guide him. And he had a job to do.

Chapter End Notes

So, you ask, why does Kira have the same reaction to Odo’s kayaking anecdote as the Female Changeling?

My headcanon (briefly narrated via the Female Changeling's POV in Chapter 2) also explains how the heck a Changeling was able to impersonate Bashir without making anyone suspicious: clearly, Changelings are able to form some kind of shallow Link with Solids, enough so that they can get a feel for the necessary personality to emulate.

Odo doesn’t know this. Whether he’s *able* to do this is another matter. *I* know the answer, but it’s spoilers for the *Dauntless* main action beyond this retcon! ☺

Also, about "Far Beyond the Stars" — I absolutely love that episode and didn't want to touch it, but the bit at the end bugs me, when Sisko suggests that Benny Russell is real and DS9 is the dream. Like, I think I get what the writers meant: Sisko is living Benny Russell's dream. But for the purposes of this retcon, the fourth wall breakage bothers me. Like, yes, I know, it's a TV show. You're not supposed to tell me that *in* the show! So, I tweaked his end dialogue a little bit.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Odo works on opening up to Kira.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "One Little Ship" and "Honor Among Thieves"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51480.7

"Odo!"

Odo looked up from his PADD as Kira stepped though his office doors.

"Kira," he greeted, not bothering to suppress his soft smile.

Smiling back, Kira dropped straight down into her chair—as if there had never been a time when she'd felt uncomfortable around him. She leaned back against its crest, shutting her eyes.

"Rough trip?" Odo asked.

She cracked an eye.

"As I understand it," Odo said, tilting his head to watch her face, "this was a purely… scientific mission? Studying a…subspace compression phenomenon?"

Kira groaned. "It was supposed to be."

"Did something happen?"

She sighed. "The *Defiant* was boarded. By Jem'Hadar."

Odo stiffened.

“I’m sure the captain’s report will be crossing your desk any minute,” she added.

Odo didn’t answer right away.

They were at war. He *knew* that. He was painfully aware of that fact—after all, he’d had to give up a great deal to stay here, to choose this place.

Still, the notion that a scientific mission could so easily turn into one of combat sent anxiety trickling through his matrix.

Finally, Odo stood and moved to his office replicator. “Can I get you anything?”

A smile teased Kira’s mouth. “I could go for a *raktajino*.”

“Computer,” Odo said, “one *raktajino*, extra hot, two measures of *kava*.”

By the time he was seated and Kira’s mug was warming her hands, a fond smile was lighting up her face.

“You’ve always remembered that,” she said. “I don’t think I ever even *told* you my *raktajino* order.”

Odo shrugged.

He, of course, remembered the first time he’d heard her order one. He wasn’t even fully aware of his own feelings at the time. But her order had stuck in his mind, and since then, he’d found that remembering it was a small thing he could do to put a smile on her face.

Kira took a careful sip. Then she pulled one knee up so she could rest her mug against it, leaning back in her chair.

“Odo,” she said, “there’s something you might want to know.”

He was immediately on alert.

“These Jem’Hadar,” she said. “They were different. Bred in the Alpha Quadrant, for one. But…”

He tilted his head. “But…?”

“I don’t think the quadrant they’re bred in makes much of a difference,” Kira said. Her eyes found his. “They’re a *new* breed. They seem to have…I don’t know, a different temperament.”

“How so?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Kira said. “They seem…less suspicious. Less strict. Less single-minded. Almost…” She frowned. “Less like automatons.”

Odo frowned. “You’re telling me they have…free will?”

Kira shook her head. “I don’t know, Odo. I’m not sure I’d go that far. But I can tell you that their Second—one of the old guard—was constantly trying to advise the First. And the First was…almost *merciful*. He played straight into the captain’s hands, over the Second’s objections.”

Odo’s mouth opened.

Shut.

It was strange enough to hear of a Jem’Hadar questioning orders. Even stranger to hear of a First being so…malleable.

“I’m not sure what that means,” Kira said, staring into her *raktajino*. “Can we afford to believe that the Jem’Hadar have gotten less dangerous?”

“Doubtful,” Odo said, folding his hands. “We can’t let down our guard.”

He’d only meant it in a tactical sense. But now Kira’s eyes had caught his, seeming to peer straight into his core.

The slightest edge of pain bled into his voice. “What?”

“Nothing.” Kira shook her head. “It’s just…you say that so easily. As if you’ve completely accepted that they’re the enemy.”

Odo jolted. Did she think he—?

“I only meant,” she said, putting up a hand, “I know what you’ve given up.”

He sighed.

“And I appreciate it,” she said. “How difficult it must be for you. I just…want you to know that.”

There was a part of him—a large part—that was tempted to brush off her concern, downplay his pain, ignore his own feelings.

It would be easier.

Or…would it?

Would *anything* make his choice easier? Anything except—possibly—letting Kira stand at his side?

She was what made his choice worthwhile.

Hesitantly, he met her gaze. “Thank you, Kira.”

Stardate: 51509.3

Kira was at the situation table, keeping an eye on the Ninth Fleet's movements, when Odo and Quark simultaneously entered Ops from the doors to either side of the pit.

"Excuse me, Major—"

"Major, I'm sorry—"

Then they both stopped, faced one another, and simultaneously said, "Go ahead."

"There's something—"

"I need a—"

Kira held back her laughter. "Alright…you first," she pointed to Odo, "then you."

Odo nodded in thanks. "I need an engineering crew to run a diagnostic on the internal security sensors. There's been an unusual number of false alarms lately."

"I'll have someone take a look at it as soon as possible," Kira said, nodding. "Now, Quark."

"There's something wrong with the fire-suppression system in the bar," Quark said. "Every time I serve a flaming cocktail, the system engages and snuffs it out."

"I'll put it on the list," Kira said.

"Please do," Quark said. "You have no idea what people are willing to pay for a glass of burning alcohol."

Then Bashir stepped off the nearest turbolift. "Excuse me, Major—"

"Oh, let me guess," she said. "There's a malfunction in the infirmary."

"How did you know?"

She barely even had time to roll her eyes in exasperation before the *other* turbolift rose into Ops—and jolted to a halt with Dax and Worf still knee-deep below the deck.

"Major," Worf said, deadpan, "there is something wrong with the turbolift."

"I can see that," Kira said.

"We seem to be having a lot of system glitches," Dax said, hopping up into Ops and then leaning down to reach for Worf's hand.

"Happens every time Chief O'Brien goes away," Kira said, resigned.

"I do not understand why his staff cannot keep the station running in his absence," Worf said.

"Must have left my idiot brother in charge," Quark muttered.

Kira cut in. "The engineering crew is doing the best they can."

“The problem is,” Dax said, “no one knows how the Chief keeps all this Federation and Cardassian technology working together.”

“We’ve got to do something,” Quark said. “This can’t go on!”

Odo shot him a look. “You’ll survive.”

“Quark,” Kira said, “I’ll send someone as soon as I can, but you know flaming cocktails aren’t my first priority.” Quark started to protest, but Kira raised a finger. “Now, don’t you have someplace else to be?”

Quark shot her an indignant look. Nevertheless, he left Ops in the direction he’d come.

“I think I’ll go talk to the captain,” Bashir said, then crossed to Sisko’s office.

Kira sighed, shaking her head.

“Major?” Odo asked.

Kira glanced his way. There was only the slightest hint of concern in his voice, and she knew his use of her rank was only because they were on duty. He still maintained formality with her when the situation called for it, but the second it was just them, she was “Kira” again.

She could get used to this. Part of her even wished he would call her *Nerys*.

She smiled. “I’m alright, Constable.”

“Well,” he said, nodding, “I’ll head back down to security.”

*

Stardate: 51545.8

Kira’s to-do list remained full until the Chief returned to duty. With the station back in his capable hands, she could finally relax—and she found herself gravitating to, of all places, the security office.

Well, it wasn’t all that strange when her best friend worked there.

She’d been thinking about him all day. About that soft smile that seemed to constantly linger on his face when she was around, about how much he’d relaxed lately. About that rare moment of utter vulnerability the other week, when she’d told Odo about the Jem’Hadar that had commandeered the *Defiant*.

“I appreciate it. How difficult it must be for you. I just…want you to know that.”

For the briefest of moments, she’d thought he would shut down. Instead, he’d held her gaze.

“Thank you, Kira.”

Somehow, in that moment, his use of her name had felt all the more significant. It was the perfect opportunity for him to distance himself from his feelings slightly, to thank her even as he called her *Major*.

But he hadn't. He'd *let* her be there for him. Let her have his back.

She really could get used to this.

So, when she found his office empty, she did the only thing that made sense.

"Computer," she ordered, tapping her combadge, "location of Odo?"

"Security Chief Odo is in his quarters."

Kira hesitated.

She *could* leave him be. She didn't have station business to discuss—quite the opposite. She'd had enough station business for one day. And so far, despite how much he'd relaxed around her, all the time they'd spent together had been in common areas—his office, the replimat, Quark's, even the holosuites.

But something told her he'd welcome her presence all the same.

She tapped her combadge again. "Kira to Odo."

"Here."

"You busy?"

He was silent for a beat.

"Not at all."

A smile warmed her face. "Mind if I stop by?"

"Please do."

*

Odo was uncomfortably aware that he had no furniture in his quarters.

He wasn't a social being. Entertaining people hadn't been anywhere in his plans, when he'd first requested these quarters and begun to transform them into a shapeshifting paradise. And in the years since, he'd never needed to bring in furniture. People just didn't spend time here.

But Kira was different.

She stood near his door, idly surveying the space, and it occurred to Odo distantly that the last time she'd been in here, he'd told her she didn't matter. That only the Link mattered.

His substance clenched.

He needed to overwrite that memory—*quickly* .

“Kira,” he said.

Her gaze found his. He was seated at his console—the only chair in the room. The only one he’d needed, until now.

“You sure I’m not bothering you?” Kira asked.

“Not at all.” He smiled, only to falter. “But…I don’t have any furniture.”

She chuckled. “I can see that.”

Odo started to his feet. “I could have something beamed—”

She put up a hand. “You don’t need to bring in anything extra for me.”

And she settled down against one beam of his arched structure, as if it were the most natural place in the world for her to be. He was so surprised that he almost didn’t notice her pat the floor beside her.

Obliging, he crossed to her and eased to the floor.

“I remember the first time you let me in here,” Kira said quietly, her gaze drifting about the room.

And the first time I shut you out, Odo’s mind traitorously whispered.

Something must have shown on his face, because she zeroed in on him. “Odo?”

“Yes?”

“You *are* okay with me being here, right?”

He couldn’t stand the uncertainty on her face.

“Yes,” he murmured, holding her gaze. “Of course.”

“It’s just…” She hesitated. “You seem a little…uncomfortable.”

He sighed. “Not with you.”

“Then…?”

“I was just…remembering things.”

A tiny furrow appeared in Kira’s brow. “Maybe talking about it would help.”

“Maybe.”

She stayed quiet, waiting. Listening.

But this wasn't at all an easy topic to broach.

"It's about…the occupation," he said.

He kept his eyes on her, watching her face for the slightest change. Ready to shut down this entire conversation, if she needed him to.

But she surprised him. "Go on."

"About…the Founder," he clarified.

Her only sign of discomfort was a marginal tightening of her brow. "Go on."

"Really?"

"Yes." She managed a small smile. "It's behind us, isn't it? And you're my friend. If something's bothering you—"

Odo's head tipped back on a sigh. "If you're sure…"

"*Yes.*"

"Well…" He let his eyes slip shut; somehow, it was easier that way. "When you mentioned… the first time you came in here…"

"Yes?"

"I just thought of…the time I shut you out." A shudder traveled through his form. "When I was with…*her*."

He couldn't see Kira's expression—and he wasn't sure he had the courage to look.

Then, to his surprise, her fingers squeezed his. "Go on."

His matrix tightened; involuntarily, his fingers clenched around hers.

"Odo?" Kira prompted softly.

Just say it.

"I…never told you," he said quietly. "I…slept with her."

Kira's fingers went still.

Cold dread trickled like ice through his matrix. Every cell in his body froze as he awaited her judgment.

Then her fingers relaxed. "You don't sound like you enjoyed it."

"I *didn't*." He sucked in a shaky breath. "And at the time, I barely even understood why. Thought maybe it was because it wasn't the Link. That anything from the Solid world could

only feel pale in comparison."

Kira's only response was another light squeeze of his hand.

"But…" He opened his eyes, found her face. "Kira, it was *awful*. It just—" His breath hitched. "It shouldn't have been with *her*. I shouldn't have…"

"Why did you?" Kira asked.

"I don't know." He sighed. "It's all so hazy now. All a blur. But I think…she asked it of me, and…I just *did*."

Kira didn't answer.

"Afterward, I just felt so…cold," he murmured. Then he reconsidered. "No, that's not quite right—I *didn't* feel. I was drifting, like a ghost. Disembodied. It was more…like a state of being. Like nothing could reach me. Like nothing was *real*." His eyes slipped shut again. "It was almost as bad as the constant anxiety that drove me to her in the first place."

"Anxiety?" Kira asked. "What do you mean?"

He sighed. "My worry about you. My…my shame. Sitting on the ruling council every day, walking that narrow line…"

Kira's fingers squeezed his in reassurance.

"There were times when I wondered if you could *see* me at all," he whispered. "If you realized the position I was in. I…I was so *afraid*, Kira. You—" His head rocked to capture her gaze, desperate. "Bajor signed a nonaggression pact, Kira. The captain wanted Bajor to stay out of the fighting. And *you*—"

Fire crept into Kira's eyes. "Did you really think I could just stand by and do nothing?"

Odo sighed. "No, I—I don't know. Maybe that was a lost cause from the beginning. You're not the type to—and I—" *Love you for it.* "But I buried you once, Kira, and I—"

"Wait, stop." She put up a hand; her fingers slipped from his. "You *what*?"

Odo froze.

I buried you once…

He hadn't meant to say that. Hadn't intended to touch that subject. Had barely wanted to *think* about it. Possibly ever.

"You *buried* me?"

Odo shook his head. "Kira, please—"

"No, talk to me!" Kira said. "What the hell do you mean?"

Odo’s breath trembled.

—again and again, his shovel struck the ground—

“Odo—”

“*No.*” Odo gritted out the word. “Not now, Kira. I *can’t*.”

“Can’t *what*?”

He caught her gaze. “I can’t talk about that, Kira. Please.”

“*Why?*”

“Because it’s too painful!” he cried. “I just can’t. I’ll give you anything else you ask. Any answers, any part of me, anything else you want to know. But not *that*.”

Kira peered at him. And for the first time since he’d begun to let her in, let her see, it *hurt*.

He rocked his head back against the beam. “Please, Kira.”

“…Alright.”

He stilled.

He hadn’t expected her to *agree*.

“I can respect that,” she said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pressure you.”

Odo sighed.

“I suppose I’ve just gotten used to how open you’ve been with me, lately,” she said. “It’s… really nice.”

Odo tipped his head her way. “I endeavor to please, Kira.”

She smiled. “*That’s* nice, too.”

“What is?”

“You, always using my name,” she said. “You used to be so formal.”

Odo managed a tiny smile. “Then I’ll continue.”

Her hand was back, squeezing his fingers. He closed his eyes again, letting himself relax into her touch.

This was more than he’d ever dreamed possible.

Did it really matter that he would never hear those three words from her lips, that he would never utter them himself again? That she couldn’t love him—couldn’t love a Changeling?

This was enough, wasn’t it?

“Kira?” he asked softly.

“Yeah?”

“Will you…stay a while?”

Her fingers squeezed again. “Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

It's so important to me that these two get the slow-burn bonding they deserve. To me personally, that's a critical part of any romance. Romantic love isn't believable to me without *this* closeness. It's why "His Way" bugs me. It's like Odo and Kira just got slapped together with nothing but a vague "moment of clarity" to hint at Kira's feelings. To me, she hadn't fallen in love with him before because he was too private for her to see him deeply enough. Kira, on the other hand, leads with her heart on her sleeve, and was easy for Odo to get to know earlier on.

To me, the first step to fixing their relationship the way I wanted to was to balance them. Odo has to learn to trust her enough to be *vulnerable* with her the way she is with him, and she has to learn to *see* him the way he does her. Then they can develop the deep emotional bond they deserve.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Odo contends with his trauma from Gaia. Meanwhile, T'Sorra questions his identity.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Change of Heart" and "Wrongs Darker than Death or Night"

We also have some between-episode intermission action.

"Change of Heart" just has a minor tie-in to show when it takes place relative to the rest of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51550.2

“Captain,” T’Sorra said, handing Sisko a PADD over his desk. “My report on Starfleet security operations.”

“Ah.” Sisko took the PADD.

T’Sorra drew her hands behind her back.

Vulcans weren’t generally an easily readable people. But in the months since T’Sorra had begun her duties, Sisko had become accustomed to her small tells.

“Something else on your mind, Commander?”

“Yes, sir,” T’Sorra said. “Have you given any more thought to my suggestion when I first took charge of security?”

“About relieving Odo of duty,” Sisko said.

“Yes, sir.”

Sisko sighed. “Commander, do you have *any* evidence that Odo is not who he claims to be?”

“Not as yet.”

“Then I’m not removing an excellent officer from his post,” Sisko said. “I *need* Odo. He knows this station better than anyone else aboard. No one could do the job he does.”

“Sir, I don’t have *evidence*, but I have concerns,” T’Sorra said. “Shortly after the Dominion withdrawal, Odo exhibited certain…behavioral changes.”

Sisko frowned. “Behavioral changes?”

“First,” T’Sorra said, “as I previously observed, he was negligent in his duty. I can find no similar past incident in his record.”

“That concerned me, too,” Sisko said. “But it’s not enough to relieve someone of duty.”

“No, sir,” T’Sorra said. “However, he subsequently took three weeks’ leave—”

“On *my* suggestion,” Sisko said.

“Why, sir?”

“I thought he was due for a vacation.”

T’Sorra cocked a brow. “Immediately after retaking the most strategic base in the Alpha Quadrant?”

Sisko sighed.

It did look strange, he knew. But Odo hadn’t been in any state to perform his duties, at the time. The sight of the formerly dignified constable hunched and trembling wasn’t one that Sisko would soon forget.

T’Sorra seemed to take his silence as ceding her point. “There is more, sir. During his leave, Odo visited Bajor—”

“He holds citizenship there.”

“It is still a behavioral anomaly,” T’Sorra said. “He has never taken a purely recreational visit.”

Sisko rubbed his fingers into his eyes.

“Additionally,” T’Sorra said, “when he returned to Deep Space Nine, he was…different, in a way that is difficult to quantify. He began spending more time with the crew, especially Major Kira. He has even indulged in the holosuites several times.”

“Sounds to me like a man who’s loosening up,” Sisko said. “Getting more comfortable.”

“Or,” T’Sorra said, “a Founder is doing an imperfect job at imitating him.”

“Commander, this is purely circumstantial!”

“Yes, sir, it is,” T’Sorra said. “But I believe it warrants caution. I don’t have to remind you of Deep Space Nine’s strategic location, or of the threat the Founders pose.”

Sisko shook his head. “No Dominion ships have entered the wormhole since their fleet was wiped out.”

“But the number of Founders already in the Alpha Quadrant has never been quantified,” T’Sorra said. “If there were any point to a blood test for a Changeling, we could clear Odo of suspicion immediately. But there *is* no known way to distinguish him from a Founder.”

Sisko grimaced.

T’Sorra tilted her head. “Captain, permission to speak freely?”

“You may as well.”

“Sir,” T’Sorra said, “I believe *you* would be negligent in your duty if you failed to consider the possibility.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I would like permission to monitor Odo’s activities,” T’Sorra said.

Sisko frowned.

“Sir, I am a Starfleet officer,” she said. “I will perform my duties within regulations. He is innocent until proven guilty, and I will not invade his privacy. However, I believe it is prudent for his public activities and his performance of his duty to receive further scrutiny.”

Sisko squinted up at her.

He didn’t *like* this. Odo was a friend, and he liked doubting one of his officers even less. But the near-complete lack of emotion on T’Sorra’s face made it difficult to be irritated with her.

Instead, it drove home the logic of her request.

“Fine,” Sisko said. “Permission granted.”

As soon as T’Sorra left and his office doors closed behind her, Sisko tapped his combadge.

“Sisko to Bashir.”

“Bashir here.”

“Report to my office immediately.”

*

Odo handed his deputy a PADD. “And make sure to screen all arriving passengers at airlock five.”

Novahl gave a short nod. “Yes sir.”

Then, as his deputy departed, Dr. Bashir walked through his doors.

“Something I can do for you, Doctor?” Odo asked.

There was a strange expression on Bashir’s face—something like veiled concern. “You can come with me to the infirmary.”

Odo frowned. “What for?”

“Captain’s orders.”

Now *that* was more than a little odd. “Doctor—”

“Now, please,” Bashir added.

Odo peered at him. “Very well.”

He followed Bashir the short distance across the promenade. Once in the infirmary, Bashir quickly crossed to the medical supply alcove and came back carrying—

Odo’s gaze zeroed onto the object in his hand.

A sample tube, attached to a hypo.

He narrowed his eyes. “Doctor, what’s this about?”

Bashir approached. “I’m to take a sample from you. The captain wants me to study your cellular structure.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Doctor,” Odo said slowly, “I’ve no intention of subjecting myself to experimentation.”

“Then you can take it up with the captain.” Bashir sighed. “I did point out that you wouldn’t take this well. His orders stood. And he seemed quite serious, Constable. I’m sorry.”

Odo squinted.

“So,” Bashir said, “may I?”

Odo sighed.

Well, he may have to comply with this, but he would do it on his own terms. “You won’t need the hypo.”

Bashir frowned. “I’m sorry?”

“Just hold out the sample tube.”

After a moment’s confusion, Bashir detached the sample tube and held it out.

Holding his finger over the tube, Odo released a small drop of his substance from the tip.

Bashir winced. “A little more?”

Sighing again, Odo complied, until the sample filled about half the tube.

“That’ll do,” Bashir said.

“Good!”

Odo wasted no time in crossing to the nearest turbolift.

*

“Captain, may I have a word?”

Sisko sighed. He settled back in his desk chair and looked up to meet Odo’s eyes. He knew *exactly* what was on the constable’s mind.

“Of course.”

“Did you order Dr. Bashir to…*study* me?”

Sisko winced. “I did.”

“Why?”

“I can’t say, yet.”

“Can’t?” Odo asked. “Or won’t?”

There was a world of a difference, Sisko knew. It was *his* command decision. *Can’t* would imply it was orders from above, or a matter of protocol—neither of which were true. And even if they were, the notion of *Sisko’s* superiors interfering in this way was sure to set the constable off even further.

“Odo,” Sisko said, “I’m sorry, but I need you to let this go.”

“Let it *go*?” Odo peered at him. “You didn’t answer my question.”

He should have known Odo wouldn’t let it go voluntarily. But that left only one course available to him.

“That’s an order, Constable.”

He’d seen Odo upset before. But Sisko wasn’t sure he’d ever seen the constable quite so incensed, his eyes burning like the hot blue flames at the heart of a fire.

Odo drew back. “Very well, Captain.”

He turned on his heel and marched clear of Sisko’s office.

Sisko sighed, rubbing his fingers into his eyes. He didn’t like this any more than Odo did. But it was, ultimately, for Odo’s own good. If there were a way to definitively distinguish Odo from another one of his people, Sisko needed to find it.

The problem was, he had no way to compare a sample from Odo to a sample from one of the Founders, and in the meantime—*if* Odo were replaced—it would be a security risk to tip him off.

*

Stardate: 51556.4

Odo paced behind his desk. “She constantly questions my orders. Scrutinizes my reports. I feel like I’m under constant interrogation!”

“What do you mean?” Kira asked.

She was reclined in her chair, one heel hooked over the edge of his desk—just like she used to during their Tuesday morning meetings, seemingly a lifetime ago.

“It’s the questions she asks.” Odo braced his palms on his desk. “She grills me on the details of events. Sometimes on basic security procedure. Sometimes on the exact wording of my reports!” He caught Kira’s gaze. “And she seems inordinately curious about the Dominion.”

“Well, it’s a valid security concern,” Kira allowed. “She probably—”

“Commander T’Sorra does not *investigate* the Dominion,” Odo said. “She questions *me* about it. She asks me what *I* know. The day I relieved her as acting security chief, she even asked me about the Link.”

Kira frowned. “The *Link*?”

“She wanted to know how it functioned.” Odo scoffed. “She specifically asked what sort of information is exchanged.”

Kira sipped her *raktajino*. “That does seem odd.”

“I don’t understand it,” Odo said. “You know the most frustrating thing? She stays *completely* within the bounds of protocol. And she’s virtually impossible to read!” He growled under his breath. “It’s that smug, superior attitude. She’s worse than Eddington ever was!”

Kira peered over the rim of her mug. “Wasn’t your problem with Eddington that you were being replaced as chief of security? Not Eddington himself?”

Odo sighed. He sank into his chair. “True.”

“You’re not being replaced *now*,” Kira said. “T’Sorra reports to you, doesn’t she?”

“A mere technicality.” Odo shook his head. “She takes *every* opportunity to resist my authority. For a Vulcan, she’s remarkably…defiant.”

Kira snorted. “I’ve noticed that too.”

“She doesn’t give *you* trouble, does she?”

“No, it’s…it’s odd.” Kira frowned thoughtfully. “She *does* seem defiant. Pretentious, too. But she knows where to draw the line, and she doesn’t cross it. She’s not insubordinate. She speaks her mind, but she’s a straight-laced Starfleet officer—the kind I would have found infuriating five years ago.”

The corner of Kira’s mouth curled up in a sly smile, and Odo huffed a tiny laugh.

Just like that, his frustrations eased.

How did Kira *do* that? Give him the space to vent, without judgment? Light up his life, ease his doubts, bring his anxieties to rest?

It was moments like this, when he knew without a doubt—she was worth *everything*.

Stardate: 51579.2

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Kira said, “so I’ll get right to it.”

Dax and Worf faced her across Sisko’s desk.

“The last two months,” Kira said, “Starfleet has been receiving military intelligence from a Cardassian operative. That operative has now sent an emergency signal indicating he needs to speak to someone in a face-to-face conversation. In thirteen hours, he’ll beam an encrypted subspace transmission to these coordinates in the Badlands.”

She handed Dax a PADD.

“Who is the operative?” Dax asked.

“Intelligence told me that his name is Lasaran,” Kira said. “But that’s all they’ll say about him.”

Dax’s brows pinched in thought.

“They did emphasize several times,” Kira added, “that he is very important to them and that we should send someone to the Badlands as soon as possible.”

Kira sucked in a sharp breath.

“So,” she said, “with the *Defiant* gone and most of the runabouts off on exercises with the Ninth Fleet…”

Dax nodded. “We just volunteered for a trip to the Badlands.”

“Afraid so,” Kira said. “The *Shenandoah’s* prepped and ready to go on landing pad A. Good luck.”

She didn’t envy them their assignment. Tangling with an operative working under the Dominion’s thumb was bound to be a delicate operation. But Dax and Worf were skilled officers.

They could handle it.

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Stardate: 51601.8

Odo was seated at the console in his quarters when his combadge chirped. *“Kira to Odo.”*

He tapped it. “Here.”

“Mind if I come by?”

Odo smiled to himself. Didn’t she know what his answer would be—what it would *always* be?

“Of course, Kira.”

In the time it took her to arrive at his quarters, he shut down the security trace he’d been working on. It wasn’t anything urgent—just an anomalous request for system data. But it never hurt to be diligent.

His door chimed.

“Come in,” he called.

Somehow, he was unprepared for the tiny rush he got as she stepped over the threshold. There was *something* about her presence in his quarters, something that set his matrix alight.

Then her eyes took in the rest of the room—and landed on the new object in the corner.

Her eyes widened. “You brought in a couch?”

Odo smiled. “It seemed prudent.”

Her smile lit up her face.

It honestly hadn’t been that hard to shift aside the few rocks and tree branches that previously occupied that corner. And it was worth it to make her feel welcome in his space.

Kira gestured ahead. “May I?”

“Please.”

She crossed to the couch, trailing a finger absently over the arched structure as she went, and sank down into the cushions. Her head tipped back against the crest.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

She lifted her head, smiling. “It’ll be better if you join me.”

How could he refuse?

He settled next to her, enjoying the way she relaxed. He knew how tense she always got after a long day, could see it in the way she carried her shoulders. This was just about as satisfying as watching her sigh after her first sip of *raktajino* in the morning.

Then she tensed again, her eyes fixing on the middle distance overhead.

“Kira?” he asked tentatively.

“The *Defiant* just got back,” she said. “The Chief was eager to head straight for the rapids.” She turned to look at him. “It reminded me of what you said, a little over a month ago. Back in the holosuite, about the time the Founder impersonated me?”

“Ah,” Odo said.

Why would she bring *that* up?

“And *that* reminded me,” Kira said, “of what you told me years ago, after it happened. About what tipped you off that it wasn’t me.”

Tension shot though Odo’s matrix.

He’d never expected her to prod him about *that*.

“I just…accepted your explanation at face value at the time,” she said. “A slip of the tongue?”

“Mm,” Odo hummed, unwillingly.

His answer only seemed to encourage her. “But since then, I’ve learned that you were holding back a lot—that incident included. And I don’t want you to think you can’t talk to me.”

Odo’s eyes flicked briefly to hers.

“Was it really just a slip of the tongue?” Kira asked.

He didn’t answer.

“Odo?”

Prophets—why was her voice so *soft*? She wouldn’t be so sympathetic after she knew the truth.

And then her fingers curled around his.

It was his undoing.

His head tipped back on a sigh. “You really want to know, Kira?”

She frowned. “Of course I do.”

He shut his eyes. “I told you that her plan was to let me think you’d died. That she had me watch as you were enveloped in crystal, unable to move as the cavern shook apart around us.”

“Yes…?”

“The tremors kept getting worse,” Odo recalled. “And at one point, she told me to leave. That there was nothing more I could do for—you.”

Kira was silent, listening.

“I refused,” he whispered. “I couldn’t just leave you, Kira. I never could.”

“And…?”

“And…” He sucked in a trembling breath. “She ordered me to go. She pulled rank, and I—I still couldn’t. I told her she could order me all she wanted—I was resigning my commission. She begged me, demanded to know why, and I—” His breath hitched. “I told her.”

Kira held her breath.

“I told her,” Odo said, lifting his head to look her in the eye, “that I was in love with you.”

Kira flinched.

He didn’t know why it hurt. He *knew* how she felt. Knew that she could hardly be expected to love someone—something—like him.

And yet, it struck deep.

Odo’s matrix coiled. “Are my feelings for you really so repulsive?”

Kira blinked.

“Repulsive?” she repeated. “Why the hell would you think they’re *repulsive*?”

Odo shifted upright. “Maybe because of the way you’ve reacted, ever since you learned the truth? The way you avoided me for *weeks*, after Gaia? The way you acted in my office, just

before the Dominion attacked—like the prospect of a dinner invitation was equal to facing a court-martial?"

Kira's gaze hardened to a glare. "Odo, I'm not repulsed! I'm—"

She stopped.

"What?" Odo demanded. "Why can't you *stand* the fact that I'm in love with you?"

"Because you let eight thousand people die!"

Then her mouth snapped shut, her eyes wide, as if she hadn't meant to say it.

But it was too late.

Her words hung between them, and Odo was only vaguely aware of her presence beside him. His matrix was twisting into knots, his substance churning, memories pressing to the surface as if it were yesterday.

—this isn't about me, this is about the eight thousand people down on that planet—

—so that you wouldn't have to die—

—that makes it right?—

—his knees pressed into the soil—

Odo sucked a ragged breath through his facsimile lungs. He couldn't do this. Not now.

Kira, though, was gaining momentum. "And it's not just that. I *told* you what I wanted. I begged you not to make it any harder than it already was."

"You were going to *die*," Odo hissed.

"I don't care!" Kira cried. "You disregarded my wishes! Disregarded my *faith*! You knew what I wanted, and you snatched that choice out of my hands!"

"It wasn't me, Kira," he whispered hoarsely. "It wasn't me."

"Wasn't it?" Kira said. "Tell me you wouldn't make the same choice."

His gaze whipped to hers. "That's not fair!"

"Isn't it?" she said. "How am I supposed to know? You've always been a skeptic! If it meant saving my life—"

"*Kira*," Odo gritted out, "I *love* you. You mean more to me than anything—more than my own people, or don't you know that? You have no idea what it's like for me to be *sorry* for saving your life!"

Kira's jaw stuttered. "I—"

“No.” He put up a hand. “You don’t know what I went through. You don’t know what I’m *still* going through. You don’t know what I see every time I close my eyes. You have *no* idea!”

“Then *tell* me!”

Odo’s breath stuttered.

“Tell me, Odo.” Her eyes blazed. “Tell me, or Prophets help me, I will walk out of here right now.”

A tiny gasp escaped him.

He couldn’t *lose* her.

“You,” he croaked. “In your *grave*.”

Kira blinked.

“In my *what*?”

“Your *grave*,” Odo hissed, with new vehemence. “I buried you, Kira. I held your body in my arms. I looked into your pale face, felt your cold skin. And that image is *burned* into my memory!”

“You…buried me,” Kira said.

Odo shuddered.

“That’s what you meant,” she said. “The other week.”

Odo’s eyes slammed shut. “Yes, that’s what I meant. You see now why I couldn’t talk about it?”

“Odo—” she started. “Why the hell didn’t you say anything? After Gaia—why didn’t you tell me you were hurting?”

“When?” Odo scoffed. “The week you never came into my office? The month you avoided me like the plague?”

Kira flinched.

“I *waited* in my office for you,” he said. “It was fresh, then. We were both reeling. It didn’t feel as—as impossible to touch, then. I thought we could build forward together. Find *comfort* together. Stop both our heads from spinning.”

“You would’ve opened up to me?” Kira said. “Way back then—before the war?”

He huffed humorlessly. “I might’ve. I wanted to.”

Kira was silent.

Cautiously, he cracked open his eyes.

She seemed…distant. Thoughtful. There was a hazy look in her eyes.

“Afterward,” she said, “on the *Defiant*…you seemed to defend his choice.”

Odo sighed. “I know.”

“Why?”

“Because—” He shuddered. “Kira, nothing made sense. He *Linked* with me—remember?”

She nodded.

“I’ve told you before,” he said, miserably. “Linking is a merging of thought and form…idea and sensation.”

Kira waited.

Odo shut his eyes. “What he did, what he felt, what he said—it all feels like *me*. I remember it as if it were me. I remember *feeling* it all as if it were me. He buried you, and it destroyed him—and it destroyed *me*. And in the immediate aftermath, it was even worse. Even more muddled. I could barely disentangle his thoughts from mine. But I could remember you, so clearly, in the grave he’d dug himself—the feel of the dirt on my hands and knees, of every one of the shovel’s impacts with the ground—”

He was reeled back, and suddenly, his quarters were gone—replaced with an all-too-serene vista of rolling hills, its beauty mocking him as he laid the body of the woman he loved in the ground.

Warm fingers squeezed his.

He jolted. His eyes flew open—found her face, her sharp eyes.

She was *alive*.

Odo shuddered hard. “When I saw you, afterward—*alive*—all I could feel was relief. And that *killed* me. On some level, I knew that relief was wrong. But I—” He sucked in a sharp breath. “You were *alive*.”

“Odo,” she whispered.

Her voice magnetized him, pulled him into her orbit.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “Breathe. I’m alive. It’s okay.”

He clutched at her fingers.

“I can’t imagine what that must’ve been like,” she said. “I just…”

“I know,” Odo said. “I *know* it was wrong. That started to become clear to me, with time. His thoughts disentangled from mine. He loved you, but he was desperate—practically driven mad. It twisted him. He disrespected you, spat in the face of your faith. And I’ve had to live with that ever since. The *shame* of saving your life.”

She squeezed his hand. “Odo, tell me now—if you were faced with the same choice again—”

“I *wouldn’t*,” he said, rocking his head vehemently against the crest of the couch. “I have to believe I wouldn’t.”

“You don’t sound certain.”

Odo sighed. “Nerys…you mean everything to me. As I am now, as the timeline currently stands, I can’t imagine disrespecting you. In any case, living with *saving* you as a source of shame is awful enough—I can’t do it *twice*.” He sucked in a deep breath. “But in another life, I was capable. And that *scares* me.”

She didn’t answer.

Odo met her eyes. “But I *am* sorry, Kira. For whatever it’s worth, if it means anything to hear it from me instead of him…I’m sorry.”

Kira’s chin trembled. She squeezed her eyes shut.

It killed him inside.

Not only to see her in pain, see her fighting back tears—but to know that *he* was the cause.

Then, against all odds, she opened her eyes. “Odo?”

“Yes?”

“What *was* it, the Founder said?” she asked. “I realize you never actually told me.”

Odo’s breath hitched.

“She…said it back,” he whispered. “That she—*you*—loved me.”

“*That’s* how you knew it was a lie?”

“You wouldn’t say that to me,” Odo said. “You wouldn’t lie to me.”

Kira stared at him.

Odo looked away, thoroughly wrung out—and sorely tempted to ask her to leave. But he didn’t have it within him to turn her away. Not if it would hurt her.

Kira, thankfully, seemed to see through him. Giving his hand one last squeeze, she stood.

“I’d better go,” she said. “It’s late.”

Odo nodded. “Goodnight…Kira.”

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Stardate: 51603.7

Sisko entered the infirmary to find Worf sitting at the console.

“What’s the word?” Sisko asked.

Worf stood.

“She is still in surgery,” he said of his wife, “but Dr. Bashir is hopeful she will make a full recovery.”

Sisko acknowledged that with the smallest of nods.

“Lasaran’s dead,” he said. “Starfleet Intelligence intercepted a transmission saying that he’d been killed trying to reenter the base at Soukara.”

He found himself caught between very real relief…and frustration.

Dax was alive, and that was a reality Sisko could not regret. Nor could he, of all people, blame a married man for saving his wife’s life. But he was a Starfleet captain. His first duty was to safeguard the lives of *millions* of Federation citizens currently threatened by this war, not to sentiment.

Beyond that, Worf had spared no detail in his report—including Lasaran’s offer of intelligence concerning the current locations of Founders in the Alpha Quadrant.

With that intelligence, Sisko could’ve nipped T’Sorra’s investigation right in the bud.

“Could you have made the rendezvous?” he asked Worf.

“Yes,” Worf stated.

“But yet you turned back to save Jadzia.”

“Yes.”

“Were you aware that the information that man had could have saved millions of lives?”

“Yes.”

“So what happened?”

Worf hesitated. “You may not understand.”

“Try me, sir!”

“You were at my wedding,” Worf said. “You heard the story of the first two Klingon hearts and how nothing could stand against them, and how they even destroyed the gods that had created them.”

He sucked in a deep breath.

“I have heard that story since I was a boy,” Worf continued, “but I never understood it—I mean, *really* understood it—until I was standing in the jungle with my heart pounding in my chest, and I found that even I could not stand against my own heart. I had to go back, and it did not matter what Starfleet thought or what the consequences were.”

Internally, Sisko grimaced.

Regardless of his personal sympathy for his officer’s dilemma, that was the *wrong* answer from a Starfleet officer.

“She was my wife,” Worf finished, “and I could not leave her.”

“As your captain,” Sisko replied, “it is my duty to inform you that you made the wrong choice.”

Worf nodded.

“I don’t think Starfleet will file any formal charges,” Sisko added. “Even a secret court-martial would run the risk of revealing too much about their intelligence operations. But this *will* go into your service record. And to be completely honest, you probably won’t be offered a command on your own after this.”

Not if Worf was bound to his heart above his duty—not in times of war.

“I understand,” Worf said.

“I’ve also issued new orders,” Sisko said. “You and Jadzia are not to be assigned to a mission on your own *ever* again.”

He turned to leave, only to stop.

“And one last thing,” he said. “As a man who had a wife…if Jennifer had been lying in that clearing…I wouldn’t have left her, either.”

He didn’t have to imagine. He’d nearly died on the *Saratoga* with her—a moment that had haunted him for three years.

*

Stardate: 51604.5

“Major,” Odo said, handing her a PADD. “The report you asked for.”

Kira accepted it. “Thanks, Constable.”

His glance lingered for only a moment before he retreated to the Ops turbolift, leaving Kira to stare down at the data on the situation table.

They'd barely spoken since that night in his quarters. And it wasn't exactly that they were *avoiding* each other—it had been a busy week, and duty had gotten in the way. But Kira also knew that there *had* been times when she could've squeezed him in, and she hadn't.

Maybe it was the look in his eyes, just before she'd left—exhausted, shuttered, drained. The way he'd looked like he was one second away from shutting her out, if she didn't leave herself.

Or…no.

She knew exactly why she hadn't sought him out.

"I wouldn't," he'd croaked. *"I have to believe I wouldn't."*

But he wasn't certain.

In another life, he'd been capable of disregarding her choices and her faith. And he couldn't reassure her that it would never happen again. No, he was brutally honest, admitting that it *scared* him.

And still, he wasn't retreating from her.

He'd used her *name*, when he'd said goodnight. She didn't need him to tell her the significance. She'd heard the hesitation in his voice. The split second when he'd almost called her *Major*.

What was she supposed to think? How was she supposed to handle this? How was she supposed to go to bed every night remembering the feeling of his hand in hers, and yet worry that he was too much of a skeptic to ever meet her on her wavelength?

He didn't believe in the Prophets, and that had never bothered Kira before—because she had never had cause to doubt his fundamental respect for her.

Until Gaia.

Now, she couldn't help but worry that his skepticism and his bottomless devotion to her made for an ironically terrible combination. A mix of beliefs and feelings that would drive him to disregard her choices and her faith, even erase eight thousand lives, if it meant saving hers.

And yet…

"I could remember you, so clearly…"

"I buried you, Kira. I held your body in my arms…"

"You have no idea what it's like for me to be sorry *for saving your life!"*

He'd said the sight of her lying in her grave was burned into his memory.

His *words*—the utter torment in his voice—were burned into hers.

He'd suffered, on Gaia and afterward. And she hadn't realized it.

What did that say about her?

What kind of friend was she?

How could he always go on loving her, professing his utter devotion? Choosing her over his own people, over the Link? Beaming a damned couch into his quarters that he definitely didn't need and wouldn't be using with anyone else, introvert that he was—just to make her happy?

She couldn't blame him for a damn thing. She just couldn't—

"Major?"

Kira startled.

Sisko was standing atop the stairs to his office, frowning.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I need that personnel report," Sisko reminded.

"Oh. Right." Kira nearly sagged against the situation table. "I'm sorry, Captain—I guess I was distracted."

"I can see that." Sisko quirked a brow. "Everything alright?"

"Oh, it's—" Kira stuttered, unsure what words would even leave her mouth. "It's…it's alright."

It was always a strange feeling, lying to her captain. Her Emissary.

But what was she supposed to do?

Her thoughts were far too muddled to come up with anything coherent. Not on the emotional front, at least.

Best to focus on that personnel report.

Stardate: 51608.8

Odo was working on the console behind his desk, his back to his office doors, when they slid open.

Just as he turned, Kira breezed in.

“Odo,” she said, “I’ve just been informed of the increased criminal activity on the promenade?”

He took in the furrow of her brow, the fire in her eyes.

This wasn’t about increased criminal activity.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds, Major,” he replied, turning back to his rear console. “We’re talking about a few incidents of petty theft. I’ve already assigned two deputies.”

“I’d prefer that you handle the matter yourself.”

Odo looked back up at her. “If you think it’s necessary.”

“I do,” Kira said. “And make sure that you keep me informed of your progress.”

“Of course,” Odo nodded.

He’d seen that look in her eyes before. The look that said she was reeling inside, and needed to be in control.

Odo had weathered times like this before. And honestly, if it made her feel better to seek refuge within duty and responsibility, issuing orders faster than her emotions could drown her, it was a small price for him to pay.

But…maybe it was the tightness of her brow, or the tension in her shoulders, but something told him that this *wasn’t* helping her, right now. Or at least, that it wouldn’t work for long.

Kira hesitated at his desk, her eyes flicking to his for the briefest of moments before heading for his doors.

“Is there something else on your mind?” Odo asked.

She stopped, turned. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning,” he said, “I talked with Dr. Bashir. He told me that you seemed irritable. I see he’s not exaggerating.”

Kira gusted a sigh.

He pressed on. “Would you…care to tell me what’s bothering you?”

Kira stared at him. “After that night a week ago, after the days since—you *still* want me to confide in you?”

Odo softened. That answer, at least, was obvious.

“Of course, Kira.”

Her eyes found his, some nameless emotion swimming in those brown depths. “I…Odo…”

“You don’t *have* to tell me anything,” he added softly. “Not if you don’t want to.”

She tossed up her hands. “I just don’t understand how you do this! How you’re still my rock, even after all these years! After *everything*—”

She stopped, searching his eyes, and he let her see.

He would not utter those words while on duty. But he needed her to see all the same.

“I…” Her jaw worked. “Odo, I…”

He waited.

She sighed. “I…you’re right, there *is* something bothering me. But I don’t think talking about it is gonna help.” Her shoulders drooped. “To tell you the truth…I wouldn’t know how.”

“Sounds serious,” Odo said.

“It is.”

Odo nodded. “Well, if you won’t talk about it…perhaps you should consider *doing* something about it.”

Kira’s eyes held his, pained, fathomless.

“You’re right,” she finally whispered. “Thanks, Odo.”

*

“I’ve always hated collaborators,” Kira said.

She leaned with one hip against Sisko’s office window, her arms folded.

She’d taken Odo’s advice. Asked Sisko, as the Emissary, to allow her access to the Orb of Time. With the Prophets’ blessing, she’d traveled back to learn the truth.

But it was difficult to make sense of what the Prophets had shown her. Even more difficult to accept it.

Her *mother* had been Gul Dukat’s lover. She’d slept in a soft bed, accepted flowers and kisses from the Prefect of Bajor, while thousands of Bajorans died in mines and labor camps.

While Kira herself poisoned her own *pagh* committing acts of violence that were seared onto her memory—all in the name of reclaiming her home, fighting for freedom, fighting for Bajoran independence.

She’d grown up believing her mother had died when she was three, in the Sing’ha refugee camp.

But that was just a lie her father had told.

Her mother was a *collaborator*.

“During the occupation,” she murmured, “if I ever had any doubt about what their fate should be, I would think of my mother, how she gave her life for Bajor. She was a hero. They were traitors. It was that simple.” She set a hand on her hip. “Or so I thought.”

Sisko was quiet for a moment.

“She did what she had to do to save her family,” he said. “To save you.”

“It doesn’t make it right.”

“Maybe not,” Sisko said, “but it was her decision to make.”

Kira’s shoulders slumped. She sagged onto the bench seat beneath the window, staring into the middle distance.

“I did some checking,” she said. “She died in a Cardassian hospital seven years after she met Dukat. *Seven* years.” She faced Sisko. “Do you know how many Bajorans died in the labor camps during that time? Died! While my mother sat sipping *kanar* with Dukat?”

Kira had been there, when her mother was taken from her family. And not as a child, with the hazy memory of a three-year-old—she’d been *there*, through the Orb. She’d seen her mother fight to stay with them. Heard her cry out for her husband, her children.

On the newly-built Terok Nor, Kira had seen Dukat woo her mother with false, gentle words and slithering smiles. She’d watched her mother give in to his carefully crafted charm.

But she’d also seen her mother cry, when she got a recorded message from her husband back on Bajor. She’d seen her mother caress her father’s face through the console screen, as he told his wife that he hoped she could find some silver lining in her life, some joy.

Was that *joy* from sleeping in the same bed with Dukat? Letting him *court* her?

Kira and her siblings had been well-fed during those years, and now she knew why. Knew the true sacrifice—or was it evil?—behind that benevolence.

Had her mother sacrificed for her?

Or had *Kira* enjoyed the fruits of Dukat’s evil?

“Tell me something, Nerys,” Sisko said, drawing her from her thoughts. “If you hate her that much, why did you save her life?”

“Believe me…” Kira swallowed hard. “There’s a part of me that wishes that I hadn’t.”

Her words stuck in her throat.

“But the fact is,” she managed, “no matter what she did…she was still my mother.”

For the first time, Kira thought she understood—*really* understood—how Odo felt about his people. What he had given up for her.

They were waging a brutal and bloody war. But they were still his *people*.

What must it be like for him, to know that *that* was where he came from?

Chapter End Notes

I already had this chapter mostly written and was watching "Wrongs Darker than Death or Night" subtitle by subtitle for the dialogue when the parallels between Kira's mother and Odo's people suddenly hit me. I was like, "Holy crap — she's finding out a terrible truth about someone close to her! Sound familiar?!" And then that last scene happened.

Also...I hope you guys like T'Sorra so far? Like I've said, I've got plans for her...😏

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Kira begins to *see*.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Inquisition" and "In the Pale Moonlight," part 1

I've spread "In the Pale Moonlight" over two chapters because it is *so* critical to the setup for the *Dauntless* main action, after this retcon.

We also have some between-episode intermission action.

This was one of my favorite chapters to write 😍

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51645.7

Sound was…a bit different, to a Changeling.

Even as an inanimate object—a stone, a branch, a metal sheet, a sculpture—Odo had a sense of hearing. After all, sound waves were just vibrations through a medium. He could feel those vibrations no matter what form he was in.

Interpreting them was another matter. Those vibrations traveled differently through each different medium. He was most familiar with sound in his humanoid form and in his natural state, but when he was something else, he sometimes needed to feel the vibrations a couple of times before he could make sense of them.

So, when his door chimed while he was prowling about his quarters as a Bajoran *hara* cat, his pointed ears twitched a few times before the meaning of the sound registered.

Odo drew himself up into humanoid form. Since he wasn't expecting anyone, he went to his door himself and manually keyed it open.

It was Kira.

His substance lurched, every cell in his body straining toward her, drawn by her light.

Then he registered the uncertainty that tightened her features.

“Kira?” he asked.

“I did try your comm,” she said. “Am I bothering you?”

“No,” he said. “Not at all.”

He stepped back from the door, gesturing for her to come inside.

Idly, she scanned his quarters.

“You still have the couch,” she murmured.

“Of course.”

She bit her lip, looking away.

For once in his life, he couldn’t quite parse her expression, her body language. He’d become so attuned to her over the years, he’d gotten quite skilled at reading her moods. Even if she wasn’t looking at him, he could see how she was feeling in her stance, the line of her back, her shoulders. If her face was at the right angle, the set of her jaw.

Now, she was something of a mystery to him.

He fell back on the tried and true. Gesturing to his replicator, he asked, “Can I get you anything?”

“Oh, um…no. Thanks.”

She fell quiet again.

“Kira?” Odo asked. “Is something wrong?”

She hesitated for a beat, then gestured to the couch. “Can we sit?”

“Of course.”

He followed her across the room; he barely even registered sitting down, focused as he was on the way she folded herself onto the cushions. She angled herself to face him, drawing one knee up to her chest, but she still didn’t look at him.

He waited, loath to push her before she was ready. He would wait for her till the universe’s end if she asked it of him.

Finally, she spoke. “Odo…”

“Yes?”

“Remember a few days back, when…I sort of lost my temper? When I didn’t know how to tell you what was wrong? And you suggested that I *do* something about it?”

He nodded.

Kira glanced up at him. “I found out something. Something terrible. About my mother.”

Odo softened, listening.

“I don’t know why I couldn’t tell you,” she murmured. “*You*, of all people.”

“Well,” Odo allowed, “things between us were a little…strained…at the time.”

“Not anymore, I hope,” Kira said.

Odo smiled softly. “Not as far as I’m concerned.”

To his surprise, her hand inched across the couch cushions to meet his.

“The thing is, Odo,” she said, “you’re not just my best friend—if there’s anyone in the world who knows what it’s like to find out something terrible about someone important to you, it’s you.”

Odo’s matrix clenched.

Kira’s fingers squeezed his. “I found out…my mother slept with Dukat. For seven years.”

Odo’s eyes widened.

“She did it to make sure her family was fed,” Kira said softly. “Or, at least, that’s the kindest reason. She was snatched from us and brought to Terok Nor as a…comfort woman. She was told that if she cooperated, her family would be treated well…but if she *didn’t*…”

Kira trailed off.

“A difficult choice,” Odo said.

Kira sighed. “I *hope* it was. But I…I was with her, Odo. I saw the way she interacted with Dukat. She didn’t seem all that miserable. She even told me once that…he was different from what she expected.”

Odo frowned. “Wait. You were…*with* her? How?”

“Through the Orb of Time.”

Odo blinked.

“Sisko helped me get access,” she said. “As the Emissary.”

Odo nodded slowly. “I see…”

Kira tilted her head, peering at him. “Do you?”

“I’m…just a little confused about the logistics,” Odo said. “Why seek the Orb of Time? What made you think…?”

Kira’s gaze fell back to her lap. “Dukat contacted me personally. On my mother’s birthday.”

Odo reeled back. “Why wasn’t I aware of this?”

“I didn’t report it,” Kira said.

“It doesn’t matter if you didn’t report it,” Odo said. “You’re telling me *Gul Dukat* sent an unauthorized transmission to Deep Space Nine, and I didn’t catch it?”

A tiny smile teased Kira’s mouth. “Nothing happened to me, Odo.”

His tension drained.

How did she always manage to disarm him so easily?

“After the Orb,” Kira said, “I went to Sisko—I suppose I thought he’d understand the most. As the Emissary. But then I realized that *you* would understand the most.”

Odo sighed.

“And *then*,” Kira added, squeezing his fingers, “I realized something else.”

He looked up at her. “What’s that?”

She held his gaze. “That *I* understand.”

Odo’s brows pinched.

“What you went through,” she clarified, her eyes never leaving his. “Why you’re so drawn to your people. How much it *hurts* to know who they are.”

Odo’s eyes fell shut.

And then, she did the unexpected.

He wasn’t even sure what was happening at first. Her fingers squeezed his again, and then she was shifting toward him on the cushion, and then he felt her warm touch on his shoulder. And then there was a *line* of warmth pressed up against him, from his shoulder all the way down to his hip and to his knee, even as gentle pressure slipped across his abdomen.

Every cell of his body froze. He dared not draw breath, for fear he’d disturb this fragile reality.

Tentatively, wonderingly, he opened his eyes.

Her chin was resting on his shoulder, her body pressed up against his side, her arm across his middle.

She was *hugging* him.

No, this wasn't a hug. Hugs involved *arms*, and a lot less intimate body contact.

This was…

He didn't know what this was.

All he knew was that he never wanted her to leave.

"*Kira*," he rasped.

When had his voice gone so shaky?

Her only answer was a gentle squeeze—not of his hand, as he had become accustomed to, but of the arm she had around him.

His eyes slipped shut again. His head tipped back against the couch. His substance trembled beneath her, his matrix not so much clenching as quivering—but not in a painful way, not in a way that made him fear for his hold over his shape. More…tension and release. Relief.

Was *this* what humanoids meant by comfort?

He realized, only now, that he'd never quite understood the concept. Oh, he understood it on some level—a surface-level, textbook understanding. One couldn't live amongst such social creatures for nearly three decades, observing their behavior and assimilating into their society, without developing *some* understanding.

But at the end of the day, he was an outsider. Alone. He always had been. Even when he'd found his people, the nature of his existence was inescapable—the Solids didn't understand *what* he was, and his people didn't understand *who* he was.

He had never gotten close enough to anyone to experience comfort. Never known how to let down his guard. And *no one* had ever reached the extra distance it took to see past his unfinished features, his alien nature, and see something of his burdens within *themselves*.

Now, Kira had.

Kira.

Prophets, how he loved her.

He sucked in a hesitant, shaky breath, wary of disturbing the silence. When she still didn't move, he did—tentatively, he covered her hand on his middle with his, and lifted his other arm to wrap around her back.

She *sighed*.

"…*Nerys*," he whispered.

There was no other name that would suit.

"I'm here, Odo," she said quietly. "I'm here."

*

Stardate: 51653.3

"I get it," Kira suddenly said.

Odo blinked in confusion.

They were in his office, him seated behind his desk, her in *her* chair, heel hooked over the edge of his desk, her *raktajino* mug warming her hands. Up till now, he'd merely been enjoying her company in silence as he read the morning's reports.

"Why you were driven to the Founder," Kira clarified.

Odo's eyes widened, almost in alarm.

Where was *this* coming from?

"I was just thinking about what you said…Prophets, it was months ago, now," Kira said. "About being afraid. About the resistance I started during the Dominion occupation."

Odo just stared at her.

"That was when you let slip that you—"

She stopped, pressing her lips shut, her eyes wide with concern.

"—buried you," Odo finished, curt.

"I just mean," Kira said, "you'd lost me once, and I didn't realize how that impacted you. I can't even blame you for getting angry with me, for inciting that brawl. And turning to the Founder…I can see why you'd seek solace." She tipped her head back against the seat crest. "Prophets, I've been so blind."

Odo couldn't find his voice.

When had she started to *see* him so clearly?

How was this…how was this even *possible*?

Kira lifted her head, caught the look on his face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"On the contrary," Odo said softly, "Nerys…you *amaze* me."

Kira’s smile spread across her face like the breaking dawn, and he’d never seen anything more beautiful.

*

Stardate: 51671.7

Kira’s fingers were brushing against his shoulder.

It was an innocent touch. Light. Friendly. Perfectly appropriate for their current setting—settled on the couch in the lounge within the captain’s office, discussing Dr. Bashir’s recent abduction by Section 31.

And yet, Odo was struggling to focus.

She was seated casually, angled toward him, her arm resting on the couch’s crest. But she was seated *just* close enough to him that her fingers grazed the fabric of his facsimile uniform.

Did she even *realize* that she wasn’t touching his clothes—she was touching *him*?

That light graze of her fingers sent shivers tingling down his arm, through his substance.

“…one minute he’s interrogating me under suspicion of being a Dominion spy,” Bashir said, dragging Odo from his thoughts. “The next, he’s trying to recruit me!”

“I’ll say one thing for this fellow, Sloan,” Odo muttered. “He’s clever. He timed your abduction to coincide with your trip to the medical conference. That way you weren’t missed.”

“Yes,” Bashir agreed. “He’s clever.”

The doctor was seated in one of the chairs opposite the couch, slumped slightly against the wall with exhaustion.

“We went over Julian’s quarters,” Kira said, “but we couldn’t find any residual transporter signatures. So, either they got him off the station another way, or they have transporter technology that we can’t detect.”

Odo grimaced. It wasn’t an appealing notion.

“Captain,” Bashir asked, “is there any word from Starfleet about Sloan? Or Section 31?”

Sisko sighed. He had his back turned, hands clasped behind him.

“There’s no record of a Deputy Director Sloan anywhere in Starfleet,” he said. “And as for Section 31, that’s a little more complicated.”

He turned.

“Starfleet Command doesn’t acknowledge its existence,” he said, “but they don’t deny it either. They simply said they’d look into it and get back to me.”

“When?” Bashir asked.

“They didn’t say.”

“That sounds like a cover-up to me,” Kira said.

Bashir shook his head, troubled. “I can’t believe the Federation condones this kind of activity.”

Odo, however, wasn’t surprised at all.

“Personally,” he said, “I find it hard to believe they wouldn’t.”

Bashir frowned at him.

Odo gestured with one hand—the one *not* currently tingling from Kira’s touch on his arm. “Every other great power has a unit like Section 31. The Romulans have the Tal Shiar. The Cardassians had the Obsidian Order.”

Bashir lifted a finger. “But what does that say about us?” He stood, paced. “When push comes to shove, are we willing to sacrifice our principles in order to survive?”

Odo found it oddly relieving to hear a trace of the young, idealistic doctor he’d once known, the one who had irritated him and Kira to no end years ago. Bashir had matured considerably—and become nearly cynical. It didn’t suit him.

“I wish I had an answer for you, Doctor,” Sisko said.

“Maybe we should do some checking,” Kira said. “Try to track down this Sloan ourselves.”

Odo shook his head. “That won’t be easy. If he’s right and Section 31 has existed since the birth of the Federation, they’ve learned to cover their tracks very well.”

“We don’t have to find them,” Sisko said.

Three heads turned his way.

“They’ll come to us.” Sisko approached Bashir. “You said that Sloan tried to recruit you.”

“I turned him down,” Bashir said.

“He doesn’t strike me as a man who takes no for an answer,” Sisko said. “The next time he asks you to join his little group, you will say ‘Yes.’”

“Well,” Odo smirked as he and Kira stood, “congratulations, Doctor. Looks like you’re going to get to play a spy after all. Only this time, for real.”

Kira accompanied him into Ops, then into the turbolift. As soon as they descended out of view, she flashed him a secret smile.

“What?” Odo asked.

Her smile spread. “Nothing. Just…you.”

Odo was sure his own delight was clear as day on his face—and he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Once, seemingly a lifetime ago, he would have squirmed at the thought of being so transparent. Even with her. But how could he feel anything but wonder, when she smiled at him like that on the regular?

How could her affection be anything but good?

Stardate: 51707.2

Odo stood in the corner of the wardroom, his arms folded over his chest, as he watched various crew filter in through the doors and scan the list of names displayed on the monitor.

The list of casualties.

He wasn’t sure why he was here. Beyond the hull of this station, Odo had few ties to the Alpha Quadrant—at least, not *personal* ties. Not *people*. Not names he could find in a casualty report.

And yet, here he stood, week after week. Every Friday morning, when the captain posted those names.

“Odo?”

He looked up at the sound of Kira’s voice. She approached, setting a tentative hand on his shoulder.

“You alright?”

Odo sighed, looking away. “I…don’t know.”

She gave his shoulder a gentle, reassuring squeeze. His substance rippled beneath her fingertips, soothing the churn of his matrix.

On the edge of his awareness, Dax entered the room, Worf at her side. Odo watched as her finger skimmed the list…and stopped on a name near the bottom.

Her shoulders sagged.

Dax meandered toward the couch on the other side of the room, Worf close on her heels. But Odo had already angled his head to peer out the oval window next to him, his gaze drifting

among those distant stars.

Kira's hand traveled down his arm to squeeze his fingers. Odo squeezed back in thanks.

He may not know *what* had his matrix in knots, why he was even *here* in this room, but he appreciated her support.

*

Dax sank onto the couch cushion, grateful for Worf's hand on her shoulder.

Benjamin made his way over. "Who is it, Dax?"

She sighed. "Leslie Wong."

"The skipper of the *Cairo*?"

"She was an instructor at the Academy when I was a sophomore," Dax murmured.

Wong had been a good instructor. Bright, brilliant, cheerful, and always capable of bringing humor into even the driest subjects. A good listener, too. And now she was gone. Just another life among thousands lost in this war, another flame snuffed out.

As Worf's hand migrated to catch hers, Julian approached. "Do you know what happened to the *Cairo*?"

"No," Benjamin said. "Just that she disappeared on patrol in the Romulan Neutral Zone. I'll look into it."

"Don't bother," Dax snapped. "I'm sure it's the same old story. The Jem'Hadar crossed the Romulan border and caught them by surprise. It's only about the hundredth time it's happened!"

There was a near-permanent furrow in Julian's brow. "I can't believe the Romulans allow them to violate their territory so brazenly. Why do they get away with it?"

"The Romulans have a treaty of nonaggression and friendship with the Dominion," Benjamin said. "So they're willing to turn a blind eye to almost *anything* in the name of friendship."

"What we need to do," Julian said, "is bring the Romulans into the war on *our* side. With the combined forces of the Federation, the Klingons, *and* the Romulans, we could finally go on the offensive."

"That's the last thing the Romulans want," Dax said. "Think about it! They're in the perfect position. They get to sit back and watch as their biggest rivals slug it out in a long, bloody war. No one's threatening their interests. Why should they risk their necks?"

Cold fury prickled beneath her skin, even as she registered the somber, downtrodden looks on her friends' faces.

“There’s simply no reason for them to get involved in *our* war,” she said. “No reason at all.”

*

Stardate: 51707.9

It was midnight when Sisko found himself at the Ops situation table, along with Dax, Kira, and Worf.

The Dominion had invaded Betazed.

Kira had woken him over the comm with the news from Starfleet Command.

“According to initial reports,” Sisko said, “the invasion force must have come from somewhere in the Kalandra Sector.”

“Did Starfleet Intelligence know anything about the buildup?” Dax asked.

“No,” Worf replied. “They believed Kalandra was too far from the Dominion supply lines to be a threat.”

“There’s plenty of blame to go around,” Sisko said. He gestured in barely restrained frustration. “The Tenth Fleet was supposed to be protecting Betazed and its outlying colonies, but it was caught out of position on a training exercise. What’s worse—Betazed’s own defense systems are obsolete and undermanned. The planet was theirs in less than ten hours.”

Kira sighed. “With Betazed in the hands of the Jem’Hadar, the Dominion is in a position to threaten Vulcan, Andor, Tellar, Alpha Centauri…”

“If we ever needed a new ally,” Dax said, “it’s right now.”

*

USS Enterprise-E

Deanna Troi knew who was at her door before it slid open. Captain Picard’s mental signature was unique in its blend of passion and discipline—and in the way that, unlike most humans, his emotions didn’t press against her mind. His presence was restrained, easy to filter out as she waded through the myriad mental impressions that surrounded her.

Until now.

His mood was somber. Heavy. There was a deep exhaustion in his presence that went beyond the burdens of his command. And, tonight, sadness.

Sympathy.

A deep, soft sympathy that transcended things like duty, formality, standing on ceremony.

His eyes caught hers, and Deanna clapped a hand over her mouth.

“My mother?” she asked.

“Betazed has fallen to the Dominion,” Picard said. “Your mother’s fate is unknown.”

Deanna sucked in a deep breath, fighting for composure.

In the months since the Dominion had invaded the Alpha Quadrant and plunged the Federation into war, the mood on board the *Enterprise* had become heavy, fearful, oppressive. It had been overwhelming, at first. So much fear and grief pressing against her mind. She’d spent a few days in her quarters, drowning herself in chocolate sundaes and just trying to *breathe*.

But, soon enough, she’d become accustomed to that bombardment. Numbed. She’d learned to filter it out. Composure became easy.

It wasn’t easy anymore.

“What about her child?” Deanna asked. “My baby brother?”

“We don’t know.”

Deanna’s hand clenched over her mouth.

As her own emotions swelled within her, the impressions surrounding her swirled into an amorphous mass, indistinguishable, seeming to merge and mingle with her own mind until she could barely tell where her consciousness ended and the outside world began. Her barriers quivered against the onslaught, seemingly built on pillars of sand.

“Deanna,” Picard said softly.

She sniffled. Forced herself to look him in the eye.

“You’re off the duty roster for the next few days,” he said. “If you need anything…”

If it were anyone else, they’d be offering her useless words. Apologies and condolences and empty platitudes, the sort that got humans through difficult times. The sort that *worked* when emotions were things that stayed in your head, and weren’t touched by everyone else around you.

Captain Picard wasn’t Betazoid. He was, in fact, emotionally minimalist—at least on the surface. But he knew when words were empty.

“Thank you, Captain.” Her voice choked, and she stepped back from the door. “Excuse me.”

Picard nodded. “Get some rest.”

The door slipped shut. But Deanna barely noticed as she sank into her sofa, her head buried in her hands.

*

Stardate: 51708.1 | Deep Space Nine

Odo was pooled across his floor in liquid form when he registered his door chime.

He drew himself up into humanoid form and, as was his habit with unexpected guests, opened the door himself. But the sight of *Kira* across his threshold chased all such reticence from his mind.

“Kira,” he greeted, certain his face was lighting up at the sight of her and not minding in the slightest. “Come in.”

It was only when she stepped inside that he registered the somber sympathy on her face.

“Has something happened?” he asked.

“Yes.” She reached for his hand; his fingers tingled at the feeling. “Let’s sit down.”

She led him to the couch in the corner. As Odo settled next to her, he noticed that her stance remained stiff—both feet on the floor, leaning forward, elbows on her knees.

“Odo,” she said, “we just got word from Starfleet. Betazed has fallen to the Dominion.”

Odo’s breath stuttered.

Betazed.

“Lwaxana…?” he asked.

“We don’t know.”

A shiver passed through his matrix and escaped as a hitch of breath.

He hadn’t *loved* Lwaxana. But he had cared for her, deeply—enough to marry her, in front of all his friends, if it meant helping her escape her husband and keep her child. It was the closest he’d come, before his *choice* to remain here in the occupation’s aftermath, to letting down his guard among his friends.

And as he’d spoken on that dais, as per Tavnian custom, of how much she meant to him, he’d almost convinced himself that his feelings ran deeper.

A warm touch on his shoulder drew him from his thoughts. “Odo?”

“She left because I didn’t love her the way she wanted,” he rasped. “If she’d stayed—”

“—she would’ve evacuated with the rest of the Federation when the Dominion took Deep Space Nine,” Kira said. “This isn’t your fault.”

“*What* isn’t my fault?” Odo asked. “We don’t even know what happened to her! If she’s dead, or—”

Or worse.

When compared to the prospect of life under Dominion rule, death would be merciful.

“I know,” Kira murmured. “I’m sorry.”

Odo’s eyes slipped shut.

“Odo?”

He looked at her.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“I…I know it was a marriage of convenience,” Kira said. “You told us as much, after that impromptu party Quark threw. But…she still meant a lot to you, didn’t she?”

Odo nodded. “She was the first person to accept me as I was. To *enjoy* what I was.”

Kira squeezed his shoulder.

“I *wished* I could love her,” he added quietly. “She was…right there. Available, willing. She *wanted* me. No one had ever wanted me like that before. And you were happy with Shakaar. I thought, why couldn’t I just embrace what she offered? Why couldn’t I just—”

He cut off.

Kira’s fingers stroked lightly over the back of his hand. “You alright?”

He captured her fingers in his. “I’ll…manage.”

If only he could mourn her. If only he could definitively *know* her fate.

Her loss wouldn’t devastate him—not like Kira’s would.

It was the *not knowing* that had his substance quivering beneath Kira’s touch.

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, Betazed's fall feels to me like *such* a missed opportunity. Even if the writers didn't go for a proper crossover with Deanna, *Odo's* right there! And in any case, I'm bringing in the *Enterprise* crew in this fic, so we got a Deanna reaction.

I also had some fun adding some detail with Leslie Wong. It's the little things, ya know? I figure this retcon is my chance to make *all* the little changes I want, bring out all those little details, and I'm not gonna do a halfway job.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Sisko tangles with Senator Vreenak. Meanwhile, Odo struggles with his shame.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "In the Pale Moonlight," part 2

A note on stardates:

This is one place where stardates actually mean something. I calibrated the stardates to the episode's stardate and used my convention of "the ones place counts the days." The episode stardate is 51721.3. Sisko says it's been 2 weeks since the first wardroom scene, when Dax sees Leslie Wong on the casualty list. In Chapter 13, we see Odo in the wardroom for this scene: stardate 51707, exactly 14 days prior by the ones place. The next casualty list scene has to be a Friday, so the one beginning this chapter is 51714, one week later.

The decimal place is important too, and that's a convention I've been able to consistently stick to. It evenly divides the day by ten. 51714.2 is early morning, before duty. 51714.5 would be midday (1300, for Bajoran days). 51714.8 would be late night.

I've calibrated the decimal to Bajoran days to make life easier on myself. I fully acknowledge that the stardate system is universal and probably coordinated to Earth-time (or at least not Bajoran 26-hour days) in-universe, but in this fic, I use it as an easy way to indicate passage of time within the day. If you see the decimal place increase while the rest of the stardate remains the same — which happens twice in this chapter — all events are happening over the course of one day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51714.2

Odo watched, his substance churning, as a young Starfleet lieutenant walked away from the casualty list in tears.

Another friend lost.

Another victim of this war—of his people's war.

Was *that* what had his matrix tangled in knots?

The sense that he was somehow responsible for the atmosphere of grief and doom that hung over the wardroom like cobwebs?

That he was complicit in his people's crimes?

He wouldn't find a name he recognized on that list—and why? He was an outsider. A Changeling. His origins lay with the enemy.

But there was a name *not* on that list. A whole planet of names. All of Betazed wouldn't fit on the screen.

Was he responsible for Lwaxana's fate?

Had he let her down *twice*?

Suddenly, warm fingers slipped into his.

"Kira," Odo whispered.

"You okay?"

A shaky breath quivered through Odo's matrix. Kira peered at him in concern.

"Later," he rasped. "I'll tell you later."

*

Stardate: 51714.3

Sisko's office doors slid open to admit T'Sorra. She stood before his desk, hands drawn primly behind her back.

"Reporting as ordered, sir."

"Commander," Sisko said. "I have new orders for you."

"Yes, sir."

Sisko stood, paced to the front of his desk.

"At 1600 hours," he said, "a Romulan shuttle will be arriving at Runabout Pad C. I want you to clear the surrounding sections of the habitat ring. Assign a security detail to the wardroom."

T'Sorra nodded. "Understood, sir."

“And one more thing, Commander.”

T’Sorra cocked a brow.

“This is a priority Starfleet operation,” Sisko said. “You are *not* to report to Odo on this matter. You will report directly to me. Use only Starfleet personnel.”

“That will not be a problem,” T’Sorra said.

Was it his imagination, or was the tiniest of smiles quirking the corner of her mouth?

“You have your orders, Commander,” Sisko said. “Dismissed.”

“Sir.”

She spun about-face and left his office.

Sisko sighed.

He knew he could count on T’Sorra to keep this matter confined to Starfleet personnel and off the record—a little *too* well. She would be all too eager to conceal her activities from Odo.

If a Vulcan ever *could* be eager.

*

Stardate: 51714.5

“Reporting as ordered,” T’Sorra stated.

Odo swiveled to face her. “Commander, do you mind explaining why there has been a security force assigned to sections 52 Baker through 62 Baker of the habitat ring?”

T’Sorra drew her hands behind her back. “No, sir. I’m not at liberty to discuss that.”

“Not at liberty?” Odo rose from his chair. “Why?”

T’Sorra said nothing.

Odo peered at her, but her face was as unreadable as ever. Rigid, stoic, emotionless.

“Last I checked,” Odo said, “you report to *me*.”

“Not in this matter,” T’Sorra said. “You may take it up with Captain Sisko, but I have my orders.”

Odo sighed.

So, this had something to do with the captain. It certainly wasn’t the first behavioral anomaly Odo had noticed in the last week. Sisko had been spending hours on end with Garak, had

even bribed Quark not to press charges during that unfortunate incident with Grathon Tolar. And now he was overriding Odo's authority on station security.

Sisko had mentioned a matter of Starfleet security. But Odo had never known Starfleet to work with characters like Garak or Tolar.

"Sir?" T'Sorra asked. "Is there anything else?"

"Dismissed, Commander."

She spun and left his office, leaving Odo to sink back down into his seat, growling under his breath.

Maybe he just did his job so well that Sisko didn't realize it, but it wasn't easy to maintain security on such a busy port as Deep Space Nine—especially in the middle of a war.

Not being privy to operational details made his job that much harder.

*

Stardate: 51714.6

"Report," Sisko ordered as he and Garak approached T'Sorra's security contingent.

T'Sorra drew her back straight. "I have secured sections 52 Baker through 62 Baker. Armed guards are posted at every entry point, and I have scanned all compartments for signs of surveillance equipment."

"Very good, Commander," Sisko said.

It wasn't that he expected to find surveillance equipment in the habitat ring. But he needed to control all access to these proceedings. Selling the Romulans a lie to bring them into the war was a *very* delicate business.

"Maintain current security measures until further notice," he ordered. "*No one* is to enter this area except Mr. Garak and myself."

"Understood, sir," T'Sorra said.

*

Stardate: 51714.7

Were the circumstances any less dire, Sisko might have described himself as watching Senator Vreenak with bated breath.

But *everything* depended on selling this lie.

Acting—down to every vocal inflection, every mannerism, every breath—as if the holographic recording before them were the truth.

Convincing the most ardently pro-Dominion voice in the Romulan Senate that the Dominion was planning to break its nonaggression pact with Romulus and attack.

He could not *afford* bated breath.

Romulans were masters at deception. Deceit, subterfuge, political intrigue—all those traits ran strong in Romulan society. Starfleet officers, on the other hand, were known for their honor. Their honesty. Their adherence to Federation values of peace and truth.

Perhaps that reputation was where Sisko's hopes lay. Perhaps Vreenak would judge him to be an honorable man.

But those who were skilled at deception tended to seek it. It took one to know one, and in this case, Sisko feared that Senator Vreenak would know him *too* well.

"And with the Cardassian Fourth Order protecting their flank," Weyoun's holographic facsimile said, "the twenty-third Jem'Hadar division will begin its thrust across the Glintara Sector. They should begin the invasion of Romulus on the following day."

Vreenak was watching the recording closely. Too closely.

"Once we've taken the homeworld," Weyoun's image continued, "organized resistance will crumble when outlying systems and colonies begin looking out for themselves. Consolidation of the entire empire will take three months at most."

Damar's image argued. Suggested that the Romulans would react quickly.

"I place my faith in the Founders," Weyoun's facsimile replied.

The line was easy. Rote. Almost generic—but then again, the Vorta could be predictable when it came to the Founders. It was better than putting a more complex line in Weyoun's mouth.

"I serve the Founders," was Damar's ultimate, reluctant answer.

To Sisko, it seemed real enough.

He could only hope his fears didn't show on his face.

As the "recording" ended and the holograms disappeared, Senator Vreenak looked at Sisko with narrowed eyes. "I'd like to examine…that data rod."

So Sisko took the only course available to him.

He removed the data rod from the console, placed it in its box, and handed it to the senator.

The data rod was genuine. Secure, produced only as needed by the Cardassian government, and virtually unobtainable. Data could only be stored on it once, and after that, never altered. And Sisko had paid a heavy price to obtain it—costing him some of Dr. Bashir's faith in him in the process.

The recording, however, was a lie. Hopefully a flawless one. A forgery created by a criminal among Garak's associates.

As Senator Vreenak left, data rod in hand, all Sisko could do was wait…and worry.

*

Stardate: 51716.8

This time, it was Odo who found himself at Kira's doors, one finger pressed anxiously to the door chime.

"Come in!" she called.

The door slid open, and Odo stepped across the threshold.

"Odo!" Her whole face lit up. "What brings you here?"

"Is this my fault?"

The words cracked from his throat—the only part of him that would move. The rest of him was frozen, rooted to the spot.

"What?" Immediately, Kira's brows furrowed, and she moved toward him from across her quarters. "Is what your fault?"

"Everything," Odo croaked. "This war. The casualty lists every week. Lwaxana—"

Kira seized his hands in hers. "Odo, listen to me. This is *not* your fault. You didn't ask for this. You didn't start this war. You *chose* us, remember? Chose *me*. You turned your back on your people. You're not—"

"But I still—*feel* for them," Odo said. He wasn't even sure where his words were coming from, why it was suddenly so easy to *talk*. "I still want—"

He stopped. Tensed.

The Link…the Link…

"…the Link?" Kira asked.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Kira—I know I shouldn't—"

"And why shouldn't you?" she said. "Want it, I mean?"

Odo blinked.

"It's part of being a Changeling, isn't it?" Kira said. "Of *course* it hurts to go without."

"*Kira,*" Odo rasped.

“But wanting the Link doesn’t make this war your fault.” Kira squeezed his fingers, hard. “It doesn’t make you responsible. It just makes it hurt.”

Odo’s breath hitched. A shudder traveled through his matrix.

“Odo, listen to me,” Kira said. “This is *not* your fault.”

“Kira—”

“Come here.”

And then she was pulling him in, wrapping her arms around him, drawing his head to rest against her shoulder. Her hand cupped the back of his head, stroking gently through his facsimile hair.

“It’s not your fault,” she whispered. “Alright? It’s not your fault.”

Odo shuddered in her arms.

*

Stardate: 51721.2

“No one for me today,” Julian said as he accompanied Dax across wardroom.

Benjamin had just settled on the couch in the corner, a dark look on his face. He’d seemed a bit off all week—as if he were bearing an extraordinary weight on his shoulders.

“I had one,” Dax admitted. “Maria Tatalia. Wounded in action.”

She wasn’t nearly as shaken as she’d been two weeks ago. She’d barely known Maria.

“Friend?” Julian asked.

“Friend of a friend,” Dax said. “Actually, I only met her once. I don’t think she’d remember me.”

“Friend of a friend between the two of us,” Julian muttered. “Well, I know it sounds a bit strange, but I’d say we’re off to a pretty good start today.”

Then Worf approached, brisk.

“Captain,” he said. “We just received word from Starfleet Intelligence that a Romulan shuttlecraft carrying a high-ranking senator has just been destroyed.”

Benjamin’s brow tightened. “Which senator?”

“Senator Vreenak,” Worf said. “He was returning to Romulus from a diplomatic mission to Soukara when his shuttle exploded. The Tal Shiar are investigating, but preliminary reports point to sabotage. They believe that the Dominion is responsible.”

A new light entered Dax's eyes. "The Dominion assassinated a Romulan senator."

"On a diplomatic mission," Julian added.

"That changes everything," Worf said. "It could even bring the Romulans into the war."

But Benjamin didn't look nearly as relieved as Dax would've thought. If anything, he was more tense than before—his shoulders tight, his brow furrowed, his gaze dark.

He pushed to his feet. "Excuse me."

Without another word, he walked out of the wardroom.

Dax watched him go, her brows furrowed.

She knew that, as captain, he bore certain burdens that weren't for her to know. She could remember teaching him that, as Curzon. She knew when not to follow her captain.

Still, she wondered.

*

Sisko strode from the wardroom to the nearest turbolift, then across the promenade, his anger simmering beneath his skin.

"So, while you're entertaining the senator in the wardroom," Garak had said as they walked, *"I'll take the opportunity to make a quick search of his ship's database."*

"For what?"

"Well, for any intelligence information he may have picked up on the Dominion in Soukara."

Why Sisko had believed him—how he'd forgotten the kind of man Garak was for even a moment, when that dark skill was the entire *point* of the last two weeks—he'd never know.

He stormed into Garak's shop—and cracked his fist across Garak's jaw.

It wasn't nearly as satisfying as it should have been to see Garak fly backwards, clattering over his sewing table and to the floor.

"Get up!" Sisko ordered.

Garak got to his feet, one hand cupping his jaw even as a dark glint burned in his eyes.

"You killed him!" Sisko said.

"That's right!"

"That's what you planned to do all along, isn't it?" Sisko said. "You knew the data rod wouldn't hold up to scrutiny! You just wanted to get him on the station so that you could plant a bomb on his shuttle!"

“It wasn’t *quite* that simple!” Garak returned. “I did have hopes that the rod would somehow pass inspection, but I suspected that Tolar may not have been up to the task.”

“And what about Tolar?” Sisko shouted. “Did you kill him, too?”

“Think of them both as tragic victims of war.”

Sisko swung, but Garak blocked—only for Sisko to catch him with his other fist. Garak stumbled back.

A maniacal glint awoke in his eyes as he thrust out a hand. “If you can allow your anger to subside for a moment, you’ll see that they did not die in vain! The Romulans will enter the war!”

“There’s no guarantee of that!”

“Oh, but I think there is,” Garak said. “You see—”

Sisko paced to the side, fuming.

“—when the Tal Shiar finishes examining the wreckage of Vreenak’s shuttle,” Garak said, “they’ll find the burnt remnants of a Cardassian optolythic data rod which somehow miraculously survived the explosion. After painstaking forensic examination, they’ll discover that the rod contains a recording of a high-level Dominion meeting at which the invasion of Romulus was being planned—”

Sisko whipped to face him. “And then they’ll discover that it is a *fraud*!”

“Oh, I don’t think they will!” Garak said. “Because any imperfections in the forgery will appear to be a result of the explosion.”

Sisko paced again.

“So,” Garak said, gesturing with each hand, “with a seemingly legitimate rod in one hand, and a dead senator in the other…” He stepped toward Sisko. “…I ask you, Captain, what conclusion would *you* draw?”

Sisko glowered. “That Vreenak obtained the rod on Soukara and that the Dominion killed him to prevent him from returning to Romulus with it.”

“Precisely!” Garak said. “And the more the Dominion protests its innocence, the more the Romulans will believe they’re guilty—because it’s *exactly* what the Romulans would have done in their place.”

He took another step closer, satisfaction glinting in his eyes.

“That’s why you came to me,” he said, circling behind Sisko. “Isn’t it, Captain? Because you knew I could do those things that you weren’t capable of doing. Well, it worked. And you’ll get what you want—a war between the Romulans and the Dominion. And if your conscience is bothering you, you should soothe it with the knowledge that you may have just saved the

entire Alpha Quadrant—and all it cost was the life of one Romulan senator, one criminal… and the self-respect of one Starfleet officer."

Sisko's gaze shifted, reluctantly, to his.

"I don't know about you," Garak said, "but I'd call *that* a bargain."

*

Stardate: 51721.8

That night, Odo found himself back in the wardroom—but not to guilt himself over casualty reports.

The tide was turning.

The Romulans had officially declared war on the Dominion. They had already attacked several bases along the Cardassian border. And now, the Federation flagship was docked at Deep Space Nine—along with a pair of Romulan senators—to welcome Romulus to the fight.

It was enough to lift Odo's spirits a bit. Enough that the war didn't seem so dismal, so hopeless. He could swallow down the vestiges of shame that even Kira couldn't soothe.

Not that he wasn't still watching the room like a hawk.

Kira sidled up to him. "Alright?"

Odo nodded. "I'm fine."

"You seem tense."

Odo harrumphed lightly, folding his arms. "I'm only doing my job."

Kira laughed. "The Romulans aren't even *here* yet. You don't need to glare at the *Enterprise* crew."

Odo allowed her a tiny smile.

Grinning, Kira squeezed his shoulder briefly before pulling back. "I'd better go greet the others." She shot him a private smile. "You're lucky you can get away with just standing in the corner, watching everyone."

"Hmph," Odo said, but there was no edge to it.

She headed across the room, where Worf was speaking with Captain Picard.

Suddenly, the wardroom doors slid open to admit Dr. Bashir and Chief O'Brien. Bashir's eyes landed immediately on Lt. Commander Data, who was standing with the *Enterprise's* chief engineer, one Geordi La Forge.

“Commander Data!” Bashir called. “Good to see you again.”

Data’s brows twitched up. “Likewise, Doctor.”

“Hey, Chief!” La Forge said. “Come on over.”

Odo watched with mild amusement as the two pairs of friends merged into a group of four. He’d never been a social being, but being an outsider wasn’t always so bad—it afforded some excellent opportunities for people-watching.

“You ever run out of things to fix around here?” La Forge was asking the Chief.

“Oh, he never does,” Bashir answered, clapping O’Brien on the back. “That’s the way he likes it.”

O’Brien coughed a sheepish laugh.

“Chief,” Data cut in, “I have been meaning to ask—”

Next to Odo, a throat cleared.

He turned, to find another one of the *Enterprise* crew standing before him, a polite distance away. Science uniform, three pips on her collar, dark hair—and completely black eyes.

Betazoid.

Ship’s counselor, Deanna Troi.

Lwaxana’s daughter.

Standing at her side was a tall, broad-shouldered man that Odo identified as Commander William Riker, first officer of the *Enterprise*.

“You’re Odo?” Troi asked. “Chief of station security?”

Odo knew formal pretense when he heard it, but he didn’t know her well enough to call her on it. “That’s right.”

“You knew my mother?”

Odo’s gaze flashed to hers in surprise. “Yes.”

“She talked about you,” Troi said. She choked up; Riker’s hand moved to the small of her back. “She loved you.”

Odo shifted his hands behind his back, suddenly out of his depth. How much had Lwaxana shared? Did her daughter know he hadn’t reciprocated? Her loss was greater than his—how was he supposed to navigate this? Would she expect commiseration? Sympathy? Kind words? Condolences?

“I…cared for her, too,” he said. Then, on impulse, “She spoke of you as well.”

Troi drew a deep breath, seemed to collect herself. “I…wanted to thank you for what you did. How you helped her leave Jeyal. She told me how generous you were.”

Odo’s eyes widened.

Generous?

That’s what Lwaxana had thought?

“Then…she really didn’t blame me,” he heard himself say. “For not returning her feelings…the way she wanted.”

Troi smiled, then. “Not according to her letters.”

“Oh, that’s—” Odo faltered. “That’s good to know.”

Troi nodded. She was quiet for a beat. Odo shifted awkwardly, unsure if he should try to fill the silence.

“Thank you,” she finally said. “Truly.”

Odo managed a stiff nod. Troi, thankfully, seemed to notice his discomfort—despite the fact that he knew he was as unreadable to her as he had been to her mother—and retreated across the room.

It took Odo far longer than he would admit to focus back on his surroundings.

“Jadzia!” Bashir was calling. “I want you to meet someone…”

Bashir’s social mingling was inconsequential. Odo turned his attention to the wardroom doors, awaiting the Romulans’ entry.

It would be any minute now.

*

“This is Lt. Commander Data,” Julian said, smiling. “We met…god, how long ago was it?”

“Five years, one month, twenty-four days, and—” Data cut himself off.

Bashir waved him off. “Oh, go on.”

“—seventeen hours ago,” Data finished.

Dax smiled. She knew of Data, of course. It was difficult *not* to know of the only android serving in Starfleet, especially when he also served as second officer on the Federation flagship. But she’d never met him personally.

“Jadzia Dax,” she said, offering her hand.

“Ah.” Data shook it. “You are the science officer on Deep Space Nine.”

“That’s right,” Dax said.

Data’s brows twitched up. “Were you not also involved in the discovery of the Bajoran wormhole?”

Her brows lifted slightly, her eyes lighting up. “Yes.”

“I am curious,” Data said. “How did—”

He was cut off as the wardroom doors slid open and Benjamin entered, closely followed by two Romulan senators and their aides.

All conversation in the room ground to a halt.

“May I introduce senators Lekain and Tamik,” Benjamin said, gesturing to the two in front, a man and a woman. To them, he finished, “May I present my senior staff, and the senior staff of the *Enterprise*.”

Picard crossed to greet the Romulans. “I’m Jean-Luc Picard, captain of the *Enterprise*.”

“Ah, Captain,” Lekain said, peering down his nose. “Your reputation precedes you. Captain of the Federation flagship. Formerly captain of the *Stargazer*. Once known as Locutus of Borg…and the Arbiter of Succession for the Klingons.”

There was a pregnant pause.

“Indeed,” Picard said. Even from her angle behind his back, Dax could hear the forced, diplomatic smile in his voice. “Well—on behalf of Starfleet and the Federation, I’d like to thank the Romulan Empire for joining the fight against the Dominion.”

“Yes,” Tamik said, “I’m sure. It’s quite fortunate for *you* that the Dominion broke their pact when they did.”

Picard straightened his uniform. “I hope that this cooperation between our peoples will usher in a new era of friendship.”

Lekain smirked. “Time will tell.”

*

Soon enough, the atmosphere in the wardroom settled down, and Kira could breathe again.

She made her way to the replicator for a glass of spring wine. As it materialized, she glanced over her shoulder to survey the room.

The captains were conversing with the Romulans over glasses of Romulan ale. Dr. Crusher and Dr. Bashir were swapping medical anecdotes. Dax was chatting up a storm with Commander Riker, while Worf and Counselor Troi stood a bit stiffly at their partners’ sides. O’Brien, Data, and Commander La Forge were catching up—or, at least, Kira *thought* they were. She’d lost track of their engineering shorthand about ten minutes ago.

Which left…Odo.

He stood on the other side of the room, arms still crossed over his chest as he affected an air of stern suspicion.

That crusty exterior of his had fooled her, once. She hadn't seen the deeply sensitive man that lay beneath. She had trusted him completely, sure—considered him her best friend, confided in him when her head was spinning—but it wasn't until recently that she had noticed the way his entire being lit up in her presence. The way his rigid contours softened when she sat close to him or pulled him into her arms.

The way he always, *always*, let her in—whether that was just his quarters, or his heart.

"Can I ask you something?" she'd asked, mere weeks ago.

"Of course."

That was always his answer.

How had she not *seen* him before? Seen how generous he was with her, how warm, how devoted?

She'd never known anyone quite like him. His unique blend of honesty and loyalty, of dry wit and sarcasm, of warmth and softness so expertly concealed. A man of dignity and responsibility, yet capable of such tenderness and love.

A man who loved her so deeply he had given up the impossible.

She would never need to consider turning her back on her own people. Bajor was on the right side of this fight. She could be loyal to her people without guilt or shame, without giving anything up.

Odo didn't have that luxury.

Then, as his gaze panned across the room, their eyes met.

His brightened, and Kira found herself drawn to those sparkling blue depths. She wanted to go to him, to feel his hands in hers, to—

Prophets.

In a single, heart-stopping moment, it was as if the truth reached up and grabbed her by the throat.

She was falling in love with him.

*

Stardate: 51722.3

Kira sat in the chair in Odo's office—the one she had come to think of as hers—one heel hooked loosely over the edge of his desk, her *raktajino* forgotten.

She *loved* him.

That truth was inescapable, now. And yet, it was terrifying in its certainty.

She knew he wasn't the rigid, crusty constable she'd once thought he was. She knew those glimpses of tenderness she'd caught over the years—when she'd come to him, and he'd steadied her, anchored her—were glimpses of his true self, the kindness and vulnerability he hid. She knew that he was devoted to her, wholly, completely, irrevocably.

And that was the problem.

In another life, he'd been so devoted to her that he'd erased eight thousand lives to save hers.

He'd disregarded her wishes.

Disrespected her faith.

She had forgiven him for that. She didn't hold him accountable for his other self's actions—that wasn't the issue. The issue was that even the Odo *she* knew—the one from *this* life—was a skeptic.

If push came to shove, could he respect her faith?

Could he fit into her life, as a partner?

Were they compatible?

She loved him—but could that love be enough?

"Kira?"

She jolted—and nearly kicked her *raktajino* off the edge of his desk. With infinite grace, Odo leaned over and caught it just in time.

Kira's heart was still pounding. "Thanks."

He favored her with a look. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, um…"

His eyes caught hers, and her *I'm fine* died on her lips.

She couldn't lie to him.

But she couldn't move forward, either.

So she found herself in a stalemate, her eyes locked with his, his question unanswered, until he seemed to accept her silence and return his attention to his PADD.

Seemed to.

Odo was far too observant, and too attuned to her, not to be ready to act on the slightest cue from her.

He knew she was troubled. He could read her like a book. But he was also the single most patient man she'd ever known. Never pushing, never pressing—just waiting.

She couldn't take it.

Kira jolted to her feet. As he tracked her movement—Prophets, she'd *known* he was still focused on her—she scrambled for a suitable explanation. Not a lie—but some kind of half truth that could excuse her from his office without hurting him.

Except, she didn't have one.

No destination in mind, no plan.

Just a burning *need* to—

"Kira?"

"Odo." Her voice cracked. "I, uh…something came up. I'll see you later, okay?"

His gaze held hers, endlessly patient, and she just *knew* he'd seen through her.

Something *had* come up—but she could only have meant emotionally, because she hadn't been reading a PADD or gotten a transmission or *anything* that would allow something external to have happened.

But Odo's only answer was a soft, "Of course, Kira."

She dashed clear of his office.

*

"Jadzia?"

Kira stood by her friend's table in the replimat, tray in hand. Jadzia looked up, smiled.

"Can I join you?"

Jadzia nodded to the chair opposite her. "Please."

But as soon as Kira was seated, she very nearly lost her nerve.

How did one even *broach* this conversation?

"Something wrong?" Jadzia asked.

Kira sighed. "You could say that."

“Is it Odo?”

Kira blinked, thrown. “Why would you say that?”

“Oh, come on, Nerys. You two have been getting closer ever since he came back from his leave,” Jadzia said. “Did you think I hadn’t noticed?”

Kira’s face burned.

“So,” Jadzia said, “what is it? Trouble in paradise?”

“Trouble in—*what*?”

“Oops. Sorry.” Jadzia restrained a smile, her eyes sparkling. “It’s a human expression. For strain in relationships.”

“Strain in—” Kira spluttered. “Jadzia! We’re not even—”

“Ahh,” Jadzia nodded. “You haven’t taken the leap.”

Kira squinted at her. “Are you sure you’re not part Betazoid?”

“Nope,” Jadzia grinned. “So…what’s bothering you?”

Kira braced her elbows on the table, biting her lip.

Jadzia looked up, suddenly serious. “Nerys? What’s wrong?”

“How do you and Worf do it?”

Jadzia blinked a few times.

“I just mean,” Kira said, “he’s a Klingon, you’re a Trill. He has Klingon beliefs…you don’t.”

Jadzia studied her. Kira tried not to squirm.

“This is about faith?” Jadzia finally asked.

Kira slumped. “Yes.”

“You’re worried he’s too much of a skeptic?”

“Partly,” Kira said.

The rest, she wouldn’t bring up. That was between her and Odo alone.

Jadzia eyed her, but didn’t push it. “If you’re so worried about that…why hasn’t it held you back from getting so close to him, all these months?”

“Well, because—” Then Kira’s shoulders drooped. “I don’t know.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Completely,” Kira said.

“Do you love him?”

Kira sighed. “Yes.”

Jadzia’s eyes brightened. “Then there’s only one question that really matters.”

“What’s that?”

Jadzia looked her in the eye. “What do *you* want out of a relationship?”

Kira’s pulse stuttered. Her jaw worked.

She wanted comfort and security. Love and devotion. Friendship. Trust. The kind of deep, unshakable loyalty that came from years of understanding. Patience. Humor. Tenderness. Passion. She wanted—

“Him.”

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't believe that the Federation flagship wouldn't dock for that "welcome to the fight" party Sisko mentions at the end of "In the Pale Moonlight." I mean, with such a critical turn of the tide, of *course* Picard's gonna show his face to the Romulan dignitaries present. And technically, it fits canon, since we never see the party on screen. *And* that gave me an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

One: Come the *Dauntless* main action, Data is going to be deeply involved with the Romulans, and the series revolves around Dax (but a future host, Miro), so I *really* wanted Data and Dax to meet under these circumstances, with Romulans involved. And there are other subtleties here that will echo through the centuries. You guys have no idea just how important this will become — and I'm not spoiling it!

Two: Deanna Troi and Odo get to meet and talk about Lwaxana.

The funny thing is, some of these scenes I wrote out *just* to show Sisko employing T'Sorra rather than Worf as Starfleet security. Like, she's basically the new Michael Eddington in terms of functionality — if the show still had a Starfleet security head during this episode, I doubt Worf would have stood in. Not to mention, using T'Sorra gave me more opportunities for friction between her and Odo...which will become important down the line! You'll see! 😏

Also—did you guys notice my little nod to "His Way"? Kira still has a "moment of clarity," and her narration is taken directly from the episode—"the truth reached up and grabbed her by the throat." And she has a conversation with Dax, and essentially a second moment of clarity. But I've slow-burned these two up to this point so we don't need the whole holosuite adventure.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Kira makes her move.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: what's left of "His Way" through "The Reckoning," part 1

Since the Reckoning is *so* important to the themes I'm bringing out in this rewrite, it'll be spread over 3 chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Odo was working at the console in his quarters when his door chimed.

He crossed to his door in a heartbeat. The only person who came by unannounced these days was Kira.

At his press of the lock, the door slid open to admit her.

There was something different about her, this time. After a moment’s hesitation in his doorway, she stepped over the threshold, her eyes smoldering.

Odo’s breath caught.

Her hands found his. “Let’s go to the couch.”

She led him across the room, and Odo was helpless to do anything but follow. Then she sank down onto the cushions, and he settled next to her, aware of little else but her fingers clasping his, her eyes burning with intent.

“Odo?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“You remember what your counterpart said to me?” she asked. “You know…from Gaia?”

“Of course.”

“Will you say it to me now?”

Odo’s eyes widened.

She squeezed his fingers. “I want to hear it from *you*, Odo. In this life, this timeline.”

His breath caught in his throat.

“Please?”

“You—” His voice caught. “You mean that?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes locked with his, and he was magnetized.

“I love you, Nerys,” he whispered. “I’ve always loved you.”

She *smiled*.

That reaction to his confession was already an assault on his senses. But then she scooted toward him. Her free hand reached for his face, caressed his cheek, and she leaned closer, closer, closer—until, in a spark of sensation heretofore unimaginable, she pressed her lips to his.

Every thought in Odo’s mind turned to static.

A brief spark of fear jolted him—could this be a trick? Could the Founder be impersonating her? Could—

No. He’d feel the Founder’s substance against his lips.

Then Kira pulled back, her eyes shining.

“Nerys—”

“I love you,” she said.

Odo blinked.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

Those three impossible words reverberated through his substance, and he could do little else but stare at her in wonder. There was nothing but sincerity in the warm, brown eyes that held his.

"*Nerys,*" Odo rasped.

Her hand was still cupping his cheek, tingling on his skin, as tears slipped down her cheeks.

"I *love* you," she said. "Odo, I *lo*—"

He wrapped her in his arms and crushed his mouth to hers.

Her gasp was music to his ears. Fireworks burst in his matrix as her fingers gripped the nape of his neck, curled into his hair. As her other hand released his fingers only for her arm to wind its way around his back and clutch him to her, as her mouth moved against his, catching and releasing in a silken slide that fulfilled every fantasy he'd ever dared imagine.

He'd thought the Link was paradise.

The Link couldn't compare to the utter *joy* of holding Kira in his arms.

*

Stardate: 51724.7

Vic Fontaine's lounge was like nothing Kira knew from Bajor. The colored lights over the stage, the classy atmosphere, the music style, were all a far cry from the warm, meditative tones of her homeland.

But Kira wasn't complaining. Not when her arm was threaded through Odo's, her chin resting against his shoulder, and she could *feel* him swaying slightly to the music.

"You're nobody…till somebody…looooooves you…" Vic sang.

And then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Odo dipped down to press a kiss to her temple.

Kira's smile bloomed across her face, and she couldn't help releasing his arm to wrap both her arms around him, squeezing him tightly. She swore she felt a shiver ripple across his form in response.

An elbow nudged her side, and Kira reluctantly lifted her head to find Jadzia watching her, brows lifted expectantly.

Kira just raised her brows in turn, shrugged, and listed her chin against Odo's shoulder, closing her eyes.

"…get yourself somebody…." Vic was singing. *"…find yourself somebodyyyyy…somebody… to love."*

The band hit a closing note to claps from the holographic audience. Kira reluctantly separated herself from Odo to join in.

“Thank you!” Vic said into his mic. “Hey, it’s been four hundred years, but that little number still works for me.”

Kira frowned slightly.

Four hundred years…since the Vegas era, on Earth? How could a hologram be aware he was displaced from it?

“Isn’t he terrific?” Julian asked.

“I prefer Klingon opera,” Worf stated, earning himself an elbow from Jadzia.

“C’mon,” Julian said, grinning. “I’ll introduce you.”

Kira blinked. “Uh—to a hologram?”

“Doctor,” Odo asked, “is this really necessary?”

“Trust me,” Julian smirked, “he’s no ordinary hologram.”

As Kira shot a glance Odo’s way, Julian waved Vic down from the stage. “Vic!”

Vic meandered over through the tables.

“You’re terrific,” Julian said, shaking his hand. “Great!”

“Thanks, Doc,” Vic smiled.

Kira squinted. *Doc?*

“Wonderful,” O’Brien said.

“Very nice,” Jadzia added.

Vic adjusted his bowtie. “I know what you’re thinking. He has pretty sweet pipes for a light bulb.”

Jadzia frowned. “Light bulb?”

“That’s what I am, right?” Vic said, spreading his hands even as Julian watched smugly. “A collection of photons and force fields? You know, your basic heuristic, fully interactive hologram?”

Kira blinked.

“He knows he’s a hologram?” O’Brien asked.

“Felix designed him that way,” Julian said. “Thought it would give him the right attitude for the era.”

Now Vic’s comments were starting to make sense.

“If you’re going to work Vegas in the ’60s, you better know the score,” Vic said. “Otherwise, you’re gonna look like a Clyde.”

Kira’s brows pinched. “A Clyde?”

“A Harvey, you know.”

Kira didn’t know. From Odo’s look, neither did he.

“Harvey?” Worf asked.

“A square,” Vic said.

Blank looks from the others.

“You know what a square is, right?” Vic said.

“It’s one side of a cube,” O’Brien tried.

Vic chuckled awkwardly. “Well, I guess that answers my question.” Without missing a beat, he turned to Julian. “Where are your manners, Julian? Aren’t you gonna introduce me to your entourage?”

“I am so sorry,” Julian said. “Commanders Dax and Worf,” he gestured, “this is Vic Fontaine.”

Vic shook hands with them each. “How long have you kids been married?”

Jadzia’s smile froze.

Worf squinted. “How did you know we were married?”

“When you sing in as many joints as I have,” Vic said, “you become a student of the human heart.”

That, at least, sounded like a hologram talking. He didn’t even seem to notice that neither Jadzia nor Worf were human.

Then his attention shifted to O’Brien. “Don’t beat yourself up, pally. Just because you miss your wife doesn’t mean you’ve gone blind.”

“Uh—” O’Brien squinted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Vic said, gesturing around him, “there are a lot of very attractive ladies in the room, and it’s alright to look at them as long as you don’t touch.”

O’Brien coughed an awkward laugh. “He’s good.”

As Julian smiled in knowing agreement, Vic’s gaze landed on Kira herself—and Odo. He looked them over for a split second before a smile lit his face.

“And as for you two,” he said, “I’ve never seen anything more right.”

Kira gave into her own smile. “Well, that makes two of us.”

At her words, Odo’s arm curled tenderly around her waist, drawing her close. Kira didn’t miss Julian’s devilish grin, but she ignored it, tucking her chin back into Odo’s shoulder.

*

She should’ve known Julian Bashir wouldn’t let it go.

He accosted them as soon as they got down the spiral staircase to the promenade floor of Quark’s bar. “Alright, how long has this been going on?”

Odo feigned ignorance—though the hand he still had on the small of Kira’s back ruined the effect. “How long has what been going on?”

“Oh, come on, Odo,” Julian said, grinning. “You and Kira!”

Odo glanced Kira’s way.

Deferring to her.

But then she caught the look in his eyes. The sliver of vulnerability—of fear?—that lurked in those sparkling depths.

She’d have to ask him about it later. But for now—

“Two days,” she said, smiling.

Julian’s gaze was still jumping uncertainly between them.

“And no,” she added, “it’s not a secret.” Her chest tightened, and she looked to Odo. “Unless —?”

“No,” Odo said. “It’s not a secret.”

Grinning, Julian made an immediate beeline for the Chief. Kira caught Odo’s light sigh.

“Odo,” she said, “you didn’t have to—”

“No, Nerys, it’s alright,” Odo said softly. “The others were going to find out sooner or later.”

Kira frowned. “You don’t sound happy about that.”

“It’s not that.” There was a troubled look in his eyes that she couldn’t quite parse. “It’s just…”

He trailed off, his gaze locked on the deck plating.

Kira reached for his hand. His eyes flicked briefly to hers, a tiny smile twitching on his face, but it was nowhere near the reassurance she was hoping for.

Unfortunately, she was due in Ops.

“Hey,” she murmured, squeezing his fingers. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

Odo nodded. “You know where to find me.”

*

They didn’t talk later.

A starship from the Ninth Fleet returned from battle exercises with phaser burns on its hull and a radiation leak, which sent the senior staff scrambling for explanations and repairs. Security was on high alert, keeping Odo glued to his desk with a mountain of reports to file.

It was long past midnight when he returned to his quarters. If Kira contacted him, he didn’t know—his combadge lost cohesion the moment he stepped through his door, and he pooled across his floor, as dead to the world as a Changeling could get.

Kira, for her part, returned to her own quarters, and was out the moment her head hit her pillow.

Stardate: 51728.7

Barely a week later, Kira gathered with the rest of the senior staff in the wardroom as the captain reported on the tactical display.

“The Dominion has solidified its hold in the Kalandra Sector,” he said. “They’re trying to establish a supply line running through Betazoid space into the Argolis Cluster.”

“If they succeed,” Worf said, standing next to him, “they will be able to launch an attack against Vulcan.”

Sisko made for the wardroom table. “Starfleet’s going to try to cut them off near the Tibor Nebula. The Seventh Fleet will be engaging the enemy in the morning.”

As he spoke, the senior staff took their seats. Kira was mildly gratified when Odo chose a seat next to her.

She’d barely gotten a chance to see him over the last few days, busy as she’d been in Ops. And not for lack of trying. But every time she thought she’d found a moment to so much as slip down to the replimat for a bite—and drop by his office while she was at it—something came up that kept her glued to the Ops situation table.

She was starting to wish Ops didn’t have a replicator. Then even duty would have no excuse.

“The Seventh Fleet is still at half-strength,” Dax said. “They took heavy losses at Sybaron.”

“Well,” Sisko said, hands folded over the crest of his chair, “let’s just hope they can get the job done.”

Kira sighed.

“On a happier note,” Sisko added, “I do have a *bit* of good news.”

“That makes a welcome change,” Bashir said.

Sisko’s brows twitched up slightly. “The Romulans have forced the Dominion to retreat from the Benzite system.”

“That *is* good news,” Odo agreed. He leaned forward slightly, folding his hands. “The question is, will the Romulans be willing to leave Benzar after the war is over? Once they capture territory, they very rarely give it up.”

“Right now,” Sisko said, “we need to concentrate on beating the Dominion. We’ll worry about the Romulans later.”

Odo dipped his head, hands spread in acquiescence.

“As some of you already know,” Sisko added, “Major Kira, Jake, and I will be leaving for Bajor at 2200.”

Dax raised a brow Kira’s way. “There’s a war on. This isn’t a time for a vacation.”

Kira smiled. “The archaeologists excavating B’Hala have found something they want the Emissary to see.”

“We’ll be returning tomorrow night,” Sisko said. “That’s all, people.”

At his dismissal, the others dispersed. Odo stood and straightened his uniform, but to Kira’s relief, he merely turned and leaned against the edge of the table, a tiny, hopeful smile gracing his mouth.

“ ‘Will the Romulans leave Benzar?’ ” Kira teased. “You *love* to bring up the worst case scenario in these meetings, don’t you?”

“Somebody has to,” Odo said. “Besides—”

She pulled him down for a kiss.

He relaxed against her, the tension draining from the lines of his body. When she pulled away, he was blinking back at her, his eyes wide with awe.

Kira had to admit, she *loved* putting that look on his face.

“Nerys,” he finally murmured.

“I love you,” she said.

The look in his eyes was impossibly soft as he lifted one hand and traced the backs of his fingers down her cheek. But then something else encroached in that sparkling gaze—something distant.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to hearing that,” he admitted. His fingers trembled against her skin. “Nerys—”

She caught his hand, steadying it. His eyes slipped shut with a sigh.

“There’s a part of this that doesn’t feel real,” he said softly. “Like I’m in a dream. Like any minute now, this bubble will burst, and—”

She stood and pressed close, cutting him off with a finger to his lips.

“It’s real, Odo,” she said. “I’m real.”

“I…I know.” His eyes lowered. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“I have everything I never believed I could have.” Gently, he placed his hands on her waist. “I have *you* in my arms. Those three words—” He cut off with a strangled sound. “I should be happy. I *am* happy. I—I shouldn’t be…panicking.”

Kira caressed his cheek, relishing the way he pressed into her touch and wishing for all the world that they had *time*.

But she had to be at airlock three in half an hour.

She drew him close to lean his forehead against hers. “We’ll find our way through, alright? I promise.”

“I love you,” Odo whispered.

She cupped the nape of his neck and pressed a kiss to his lips. All too soon, though, she forced herself to draw back and put space between them.

“I have to go,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Odo nodded. “Of course, Nerys.”

She allowed herself a parting squeeze of his hand before leaving the wardroom.

*

Bajor

As Sisko’s fingers brushed the stone of the tablet, a familiar dreamlike glow overtook the cavern.

His pulse pounded.

“The Sisko has come,” the ranjen said, behind him.

Sisko whipped around.

“It is time,” said Kira.

Jake approached his other side. “The Reckoning must begin.”

“The Reckoning?” Sisko asked.

“Much will depend on the Sisko,” said Kira’s image.

“He is corporeal,” said the ranjen.

“Limited,” Jake added.

“He is the Sisko.” Kira crossed behind him. “He will not waver.”

“He is of Bajor,” Jake said.

Kira crossed the other way. “He will bring the Reckoning.”

“What is it you expect of me?” Sisko asked.

“It will be the end,” the ranjen said.

“…of Kosst Amojan,” said Kira.

“And its false vessel,” added Jake.

“Bajor,” the ranjen said, “must not fall.”

“I don’t understand!” Sisko cried.

Kira walked up to look into his face. “The Sisko will know.”

Then light eclipsed his mind—just before the world went dark.

*

Deep Space Nine

Dax tapped at her tricorder as she scanned the stone slab. “I had a pretty good idea what this was the minute I laid eyes on it.”

The tricorder beeped a result.

“That confirms it,” she said. “It’s a slab of stone with some writing on it.”

“Dax,” Benjamin groaned.

“What do you want me to say, Benjamin?” Dax paced over to her lab console—not that the analysis there had any answers either. “I’m not picking up any residual energy readings—certainly nothing that would explain how it threw you across the room!”

Benjamin, though, barely seemed to hear her. “I want you to translate the inscriptions.”

Dax sighed. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

He handed her a PADD. “The ranjen’s translation program. It’s not complete, but at least it’s a start.” He looked her in the eye. “Good luck.”

Just to sass him, Dax blew him a kiss.

She held a premier distinction in exoarchaeology. That didn’t mean that translating thirty-thousand-year-old inscriptions would be *easy*.

*

Finally, Kira had a proper lunch break.

But only because she was back from Bajor early. And *that* was because the Emissary had been thrown across the cavern floor and lost consciousness when he tried to touch that tablet.

She hunched over the replimat table, shoulders slumped as she pushed her food listlessly around her plate.

“Nerys?”

At that familiar, gravelly voice, her eyes fell shut. Then she looked up at her partner, mustering a smile.

Hesitantly, Odo settled into the seat across from her, as if he expected her to reject him at any moment. He seemed to deliberate for a moment before reaching across the table for her hand.

Kira took it, twining their fingers together.

“I heard about the captain,” he said softly. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” And she was—Dr. Bashir had cleared the captain shortly after they’d returned. At least, she wasn’t worried about *him*.

Odo was sitting quietly, listening, his eyes never leaving her face.

Normally, she wouldn’t hesitate to confide in him.

But would he understand?

Would the captain’s vision matter to him? Sisko had spoken of a “Reckoning”—would Odo dismiss that as meaningless?

Well…she had to give him a chance, didn't she?

She gave his fingers a gentle squeeze before admitting, "It's not the captain I'm worried about."

"Then what?"

"He had a vision," she said. "The Prophets spoke to him. They said something about a Reckoning."

He tilted his head. "A reckoning?"

"That's all we know," Kira said. She paused. "You know about the tablet we brought back, right?"

They'd brought aboard an object that had essentially attacked the captain. Odo himself hadn't been present, but certain security measures had been taken.

Odo nodded. "Of course."

"It's in the science lab right now," Kira said. "Dax is translating the inscriptions." She sighed. "Nothing against Jadzia, but…it just seems like a cold way to study an ancient artifact."

Odo didn't answer at first. She looked up at him, searching his face—and was surprised to find only tenderness.

"I won't pretend to…fully understand the nuances involved," Odo said softly. "But as far as I'm concerned…if it bothers you, Nerys, that's enough for me."

A smile tugged at Kira's face. But before she could reply, his combadge chirped.

"Neyen to Odo."

His hand slipped from hers; all traces of warmth bled away to formality. "Odo here."

"We've just received word. Kai Winn's shuttle is expected at upper pylon one in an hour."

"Acknowledged," Odo said.

His eyes returned to hers, and Kira swore she could see just a hint of softness in that blue gaze. "Duty calls."

He would need to perform a security sweep of the pylon before any shuttle carrying the Kai could dock.

Kira nodded. "Of course, Constable."

*

"And *then*—" Benjamin's hand smacked the console. "—she contacted Starfleet and lodged a formal protest!"

“Is that why Admiral Ross wanted to talk to you?” Dax asked, at her lab console.

Benjamin shot her a dark look.

“Well, how’d it go?”

“He told me to stop meddling in Bajoran affairs,” Benjamin muttered, “and return the damn tablet.”

Dax sighed. “You know how Starfleet feels about this Emissary thing.” She crossed from her console to the tablet. “It makes them very uncomfortable that you’ve allowed the Bajorans to view you as a religious icon.”

And she couldn’t say she blamed them.

“It used to make *you* uncomfortable, too,” she reminded him.

“Not anymore,” Benjamin said.

Dax settled onto a seat to compare the translations her PADD with a nearby panel.

“I guess the Prophets have spoken to me one too many times,” Benjamin continued.

Dax looked up at him. “I remember when you used to call them ‘wormhole aliens’.”

Benjamin spread his hands in a shrug. “Wormhole aliens or Prophets, it really doesn’t matter.”

As he spoke, Dax kept working on the inscriptions, listening with half an ear.

“The fact is,” he continued, “they exist out of time and over the centuries, they’ve given the Bajorans glimpses of the future. Glimpses that the Bajorans have written down to help them guide succeeding generations.”

Dax glanced up. Benjamin’s attention was on the tablet, gazing at it as if he were hoping it held all the answers.

“If whatever is written here can help me avoid mistakes,” he said, “can help me make the right decisions, then I’d be a fool to ignore it.”

“Fair enough,” Dax said, “but if you don’t mind, I’m going to continue to think of them as wormhole aliens.”

“All I know is,” Benjamin said, “that they have a relationship with Bajor that stretches back over a thousand years. They care what happens to Bajorans. They proved that when they kept the Dominion fleet from coming through the wormhole.”

Dax frowned at him. “Didn’t you have to talk them into it?”

Benjamin shook his head. “No…no. They specifically said, ‘Bajor cannot be destroyed.’ It’s more as if…they didn’t understand what would happen to Bajor. The causal relationships. They don’t experience linear time, Dax. They needed me to remind them that if Bajor were destroyed, it would be *lost*.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of god I’d like to put my faith in,” Dax said.

“Maybe,” Benjamin said. “But maybe…that’s why they made me their Emissary. Because they needed someone to…to be a bridge between them and Bajor.”

Dax hummed in response. “A heavy task for one Starfleet officer.”

“What matters is, they *listened*,” Benjamin said. “And they saved Bajor and the rest of the Alpha Quadrant. Now, they’re asking me for something in return. I don’t know what it is yet, and I’m not going to return the tablet until I do.”

As he spoke, Dax’s monitor beeped with a result.

“It’s the key,” he murmured. “I can feel it!”

Her brows tightened as she read the translation. “I hope you’re wrong about that, Benjamin.”

“What have you got?”

“The computer has translated part of the inscription,” Dax said as he walked up behind her. “It probably lacks the eloquence of the original passage, but…you’ll get the gist of it.” She tapped a few keys. “Here it is in modern Bajoran.”

On the screen, the symbols shifted into the more recognizable shapes of the present-day Bajoran language.

Benjamin read over her shoulder. “ ‘The time of Reckoning is at hand. The Prophets will weep. Their sorrow will consume…’ ”

Dax looked up at him, knowing exactly what would come next.

“ ‘…the Gateway to the Temple,’ ” Benjamin finished.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Dax said, swallowing, “but isn’t the Gateway to the Temple Deep Space Nine?”

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, since I changed the end of "Sacrifice of Angels," Sisko and Dax's dialogue at the end needed to change...but this gave me an opportunity to sneak in one of my interpretations of the Emissary's role that's central to *Dauntless*!

Also, are you guys noticing the changes I'm making to the Reckoning? Namely, the "false vessel"? 😁

All will become clear eventually...! 😏

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Odo and Kira face questions over faith. Meanwhile, the Dominion weaponizes Dukat.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "The Reckoning," part 2

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“ ‘The Prophets will weep’?” Dr. Bashir repeated. “That’s a bit dramatic, isn’t it?”

“I was just telling you what the translation said,” Worf said as they emerged from Quark’s onto the promenade second level. “I did not say I believed it.”

As they found seats at the nearest table, Odo kept silent, unsure whether to voice his own skepticism or to defend Kira’s beliefs.

Things between them were so new. The last thing he wanted was to make a misstep and ruin it.

“Well, I’m not worried,” Bashir said. “If you look hard enough, you’ll find a Bajoran prophecy for just about anything. The ancient texts are a tangle of vague contradictions.”

“Contradictory, yes,” Odo said. “But informed by *real* beings. You and I may not see the Prophets as gods, Doctor, but they do have a unique perspective on events.”

Bashir squinted at him. “Since when do *you* take the Prophets seriously?”

“Since I became involved with a believer,” Odo said.

Bashir’s brow quirked. “I suppose that’s fair.”

Quark brought out their drinks—well, that was, brought out Worf’s and Bashir’s. Odo, meanwhile, fashioned a glass as an extension of his hand and let it fill with a dark liquid.

“You know,” Quark said, “it wouldn’t kill you to just *buy* a drink.”

Odo rolled his eyes.

“Business hasn’t been this slow since the Dominion was here,” Quark muttered. “You know…I feel I have a civic duty to do something about all this doom and gloom.”

“Hmph!” Odo said. “Civic duty?”

Quark glared at him. “I’m a bartender. It’s my job to keep my customers happy.”

Odo snorted.

“Which is why,” Quark said, “I want to tell you that I’ve extended happy hour.”

“Extended it?” Bashir said.

“From now on,” Quark said, “every hour is happy hour. At least until business picks up. Eat, drink, and be merry!”

“For tomorrow, we die,” Bashir quipped.

Quark cocked his head in agreement and turned back toward the bar’s second level.

“So,” Odo asked Worf, “what does the captain say about this prophecy?”

He didn’t miss the way Quark stopped in his tracks to listen in.

“He is reserving judgment until the computer has finished the translation,” Worf replied.

“Who knows?” Bashir said. “The rest of the tablet probably says, ‘Go to Quark’s. It’s happy hour.’”

“I like the way you think, Doctor,” Quark said.

Odo sighed. He may not believe in the Prophets, but it hardly seemed productive of Starfleet officers to openly mock the Bajoran faith—not if they hoped to bring Bajor into the Federation.

“Well, this is ridiculous,” Bashir said. “Nothing’s going to happen. Someday, we’re all going to look back on this and laugh!”

Odo had barely opened his mouth to reply when a low, deep rumble shook the station.

His eyes widening with alarm, he morphed his drink away and tapped his combadge. “Odo to Ops.”

Sisko answered. *“Go ahead, Odo.”*

“Captain, are we under fire?”

“No,” Sisko said. *“There are no ships in range. Dax…?”*

Dax's voice piped over the comm. *"Neutrino levels from the wormhole are off the scale. I've never seen—"*

There was another rumble. Then, across the table, Bashir's gaze was drawn behind Odo to the promenade windows.

Odo followed his gaze—just in time to see the wormhole burst open.

A crowd of Bajorans and Starfleet officers alike had gathered on the second level around the windows in question. Odo crossed the few steps to the balustrade; his fingers wrapped unconsciously around the metal.

The station jolted again—harder, this time. Out the window, the wormhole winked out.

"Captain?" Odo asked. "Have any ships come through?"

Sisko's voice was dark. *"Negative, Constable."*

Bashir came up behind him. "How did that prophecy go, again?"

*

"You don't have to do this, you know," Kira said, stabbing at her plate.

They were seated in the replimat, *finally* having found a proper moment together.

"Don't have to do what?" Odo asked.

"Sit here," Kira said through a bite of fruit. "Watch me eat."

She smiled at him.

"I don't mind," Odo said. "In fact, I rather enjoy it. You eat with such gusto."

Kira raised her brows.

"…most of the time," he amended.

She was eating, yes. But not with her usual enthusiasm. Her mind was clearly somewhere else—and it didn't take much of a leap to guess where.

If only he knew how to navigate this.

Kira sighed, set her fork down. Odo waited.

"I just wish that we knew more about the Reckoning," she said. "It would give us a better idea of what the Prophets want from us."

"It seems to me," Odo said carefully, "if the Prophets want the Bajoran people to follow a given path, they should provide more specific directions."

“It doesn’t work like that,” Kira said.

“Maybe it should.”

She leveled him a look. “The Kai would say that you lack faith.”

“I’m…sorry,” Odo murmured.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Kira said. “I just don’t know how people make it through the day without it.”

“We manage,” Odo said. “Besides…I do have faith in some things.”

“Hmm,” she smiled. “Such as?”

“You.”

His answer clearly caught her by surprise. He watched as a slow, pleased smile warmed her face.

“I’ll try not to disappoint you,” she said.

Odo reached across the table, twining his fingers with hers. Her gaze magnetized to his.

“You couldn’t,” he murmured. “You never will.”

*

That night, Sisko watched out the oval windows in his quarters as the wormhole burst open. The station rumbled beneath his feet, nearly toppling a figurine on the table.

Just as the wormhole winked shut, his door chimed.

“Yes?” he murmured.

His doors slid open, revealing Jake standing in the corridor.

“Jake-o,” Sisko said softly.

Slowly, Jake crossed to him, his eyes never leaving Sisko’s face—as if he feared his father would disappear if he moved too quickly.

“You’re up late,” Jake said.

“Hm, so are you,” Sisko said, affectionately tapping his son’s cheek. “What’s on your mind?”

Jake fidgeted, wrapped his arms around himself.

Sisko had rarely seen his son so…shaken. It brought him back to his earlier days at this post, when Jake was younger—but still old enough to understand far too well that his dad had a dangerous job.

“I don’t know,” Jake mumbled. “I guess I just wanted to see if you’re alright.”

“I’m fine,” Sisko said, folding his arms. “Since when did you become a worrier?”

“I don’t know.” Shaking his head, Jake wandered to the couch. “It’s this Emissary stuff.” He dropped down onto the cushion. “It scares me a little.”

Sisko settled on the arm of the chair, putting an arm around Jake’s shoulders and kissing the top of his head.

“Twice now,” Jake said. “Twice in one year, Dr. Bashir’s called me down to the infirmary to tell me something was wrong with you. And there you were…lying unconscious on a biobed having *visions* or something.”

He looked briefly up at his dad, then went on, his voice small.

“And there…all I could do was just stand there,” he mumbled, “and—and wonder…if you were ever gonna wake up.”

Sisko rubbed his back. “I know it hasn’t been easy, Jake.”

Jake seized his hand where it rested in his lap. “I don’t want it to happen again.”

Sisko was quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“You know,” he said, “I didn’t ask to be the Emissary. But…for better or worse…I guess that’s what I am.”

Jake stared ahead, unseeing.

“Except for being your dad,” Sisko added.

Jake smiled up at him, and Sisko gave his shoulder a light punch, earning a laugh as he pulled his son in for a hug.

Suddenly, there was a stronger rumble, and the lights in his quarters flickered.

Jake lifted his head. “W-what was that?”

“I’ll find out,” Sisko said softly. He tapped his combadge. “Sisko to Ops. Report.”

Worf answered. *“We just experienced a station-wide power drain. We’re attempting to determine the source.”*

“Keep me informed,” Sisko said.

“Aye, sir.”

“Dad?” Jake asked.

But before Sisko could answer, his combadge chirped. *“Odo to Captain Sisko.”*

There was a strange note his voice… “Go ahead.”

“You’d…better come to the promenade, sir.”

“Is there a problem?”

“You could say that.”

Sisko stood, but Jake reached for him. “Dad.”

“It’ll be okay, Jake,” Sisko said softly, despite knowing there was no way he could promise that. “I’ll be back.”

*

Kira was standing in the shrine entrance, lightning flickering at her fingertips.

Her face was pale, her eyes burning blue, and her hair was ruffling in the wind of her power. All around her, the lights on the promenade flickered, energy buzzing in the station’s hull, and the deck plating rumbled beneath her.

“Kira?” Odo croaked.

No answer. She didn’t even seem to hear him.

He approached her, all sense of caution or protocol thrown to the wind. His hand moved of its own accord, reaching for her face, trembling at her cheek. “Nerys?”

She didn’t look at him. There was no emotion in her eyes, no recognition—just raw power.

That *wasn’t* Kira.

Finally, his duty asserted itself. Protocol. He needed to—

“Odo to Captain Sisko.”

“Go ahead.”

“You’d…better come down to the promenade, sir.”

“Is there a problem?”

“You could say that.”

His substance quivered. He barely found the presence of mind to back away from her, focused as he was on maintaining cohesion.

Duty, Odo. Focus on duty.

In his periphery, a set of doors hummed open. Odo’s gaze flashed to the side just as Sisko and the Kai stepped off the nearest turbolift.

“Report,” Sisko said.

Odo sucked in a shaky breath. “I don’t know what’s going on. When I tried to talk to her, she ignored me.”

Then Kira—*not Kira*—turned her head. Her burning gaze was drawn down the promenade as if by some unseen tether—not to him, but to the captain.

Wind whistled in her hair as she stepped down from the shrine. Then she walked across the promenade, steadily, her gaze never wavering. Glass shattered as she passed—light fixtures, comm panels, the various glasses set out on Quark’s bar counter.

Sisko stepped forward. It took every ounce of Odo’s restraint not to follow.

Kira’s chin lifted, and she spoke in an eerie, reverberating voice. “You…are the Sisko.”

A pair of deputies raced forward.

“Keep your hands off your weapons!” Sisko ordered. “It’s a Prophet.”

A Prophet.

Odo was looking into the eyes of one of Nerys’ gods, standing here, in the flesh.

Kira’s flesh.

“Why have you taken this woman’s body?” Sisko demanded.

“This vessel is willing.”

Of course she was.

“The Reckoning,” the Prophet spoke. “It is time.”

Odo’s matrix trembled.

“The Reckoning,” Sisko repeated. “What is it?”

“The end,” the Prophet said, “of the false vessel.”

“I don’t understand!” Sisko said.

The Prophet lifted Kira’s chin. “I await Kosst Amojan.”

“The Evil One,” Kai Winn said.

Sisko turned to her in question.

“A Pah-wraith,” Winn said, “banished from the Celestial Temple.”

Sisko turned back to the Prophet. “You’re saying a Pah-wraith will take corporeal form as well?”

“The battle will be joined,” the Prophet said.

“This battle—is it to be fought here?”

“The false vessel will be destroyed,” the Prophet replied. “The Sisko must not falter.”

“What false vessel?” Sisko asked.

“Bajor,” the Prophet said, “must not be destroyed.”

Sisko’s brow furrowed.

The Kai approached. “Forgive my blindness—”

Kira’s back turned.

“Prophet,” Winn tried, “hear me! I am the Kai of Bajor! I offer myself to you as your humble servant.”

The Kai sank to her knees. But the Prophet didn’t turn.

“I await Kosst Amojan,” it said.

“Speak to me!” Winn begged. “Tell me what I should do!”

The Prophet did not reply.

*

Dominion Headquarters | Cardassia

“Wake him.”

Obediently, the Vorta Rivun pressed the hypo to Dukat’s neck. The Changeling waited.

Dukat’s eyes fluttered open.

“Dr. Cox,” he said.

The Changeling smiled. “Not quite.”

Dukat’s eyes narrowed. He shifted upright. But as he opened his mouth—a careful, guarded movement—his gaze landed on Rivun.

Immediately, his gaze darkened to a glower. “Where am I?”

“Dominion Headquarters.”

“And I take it *you* are not really a Federation doctor,” Dukat said, measured, dangerous.

Again, the Changeling smiled. “No.”

Dukat peered at him. Took in the rest of the room with those shifting reptilian eyes—the medical instruments, the walls lined with sample tubes, the lack of any other biobeds.

The forcefield in the corner, within which living flames writhed and jumped in their cage.

“What’s going on?” Dukat rose to his feet, predatory. “Why am I here?”

The Changeling glanced Rivun’s way.

If it were possible, Dukat’s eyes narrowed even further.

“No need to look so suspicious,” Rivun said, charming as always. “We have a common goal.”

“Do we?”

Rivun opened his mouth, but Dukat steamrolled over him.

“Because from where I’m standing,” he said, “it *looks* like I’m in a laboratory.” He glared at the Changeling. “But that’s not possible, is it? After all, your people and mine are *allies*.”

“I assure you,” Rivun said, a warning edge creeping into his tone, “it’s possible.”

Dukat peered at each of them in turn, coiled, ready to strike.

And then he shot to his feet, his fingers gripping Rivun’s throat.

“Tell me what you want from me,” he growled. “*Now.*”

“Put him down,” the Changeling ordered.

Dukat shot a scathing glance over his shoulder. He didn’t release Rivun—even as the Vorta struggled and coughed.

“I said,” the Changeling repeated, “put him down.”

Dukat ignored him. But, then again, the Changeling hardly expected anything different. Instead, he stepped over to a console and tapped a few buttons.

Dukat *spasmed*.

Rivun tumbled from his grip, but the Changeling was more interested in the way Dukat staggered back and collapsed against the biobed, one arm ineffectually clawing at its frame. He was struggling for breath, his body still seizing, flame flickering in his eyes. But through it all, a last vestige of the Prefect of Bajor remained—in the way he glared up at the Changeling from beneath his scaled brow, dark and murderous.

Murderous, but controlled.

The Jem’Hadar were murderous, too. But they would never harm a Founder.

“Now that you have seen what happens if you misbehave,” the Changeling said, dispassionate, “shall we continue?”

Dukat’s only answer was a glare.

Good.

He was dangerous. Cunning. Persistent. He had a personal vendetta against Bajor—a planet of Solids, whose gods had wiped out a Dominion fleet. And he already had their Emissary’s attention.

But he belonged to the Founders now.

He would make the perfect vessel—and the so-called Prophets the Bajorans held so dear would *burn*.

*

Deep Space Nine

Odo didn’t remember how he got to Ops. Nor was he following anything the senior staff said.

—she lay motionless on the biobed—

—her eyes burned blue, wind in her hair—

—he gathered her in his arms, cupped her head to his chest—

—again and again, his shovel struck the ground—

—glass shattered as she walked—

…I await Kosst Amojan.…

“…chroniton radiation,” Dax was saying.

Winn’s voice filtered through. “Are you suggesting that we kill a Prophet?”

Kill.

“I won’t do that,” Sisko said.

“You won’t have to,” Bashir said. “If you ramp up the chroniton levels, slowly, you’ll give the wormhole alien a chance to leave Kira’s body without getting hurt.”

Odo lifted his head.

“We have everything rigged and ready to go,” Dax said. “Just say the word.”

Ops was silent.

Odo's substance churned.

…*chroniton levels.*…

…*leave Kira's body.*…

…*just say the word.*…

He could save her.

They could expel the Prophet that possessed her, without hurting it.

He could *save* her.

"No," Sisko said.

"*Benjamin,*" Dax said.

"Deep Space Nine is critical to the defense of the Federation," Worf said. "We cannot risk destroying it."

"When the Dominion fleet was about to come through the wormhole," Sisko said, "I asked the Prophets for their help. They gave it to me. Now they're asking for my help. They need to fight this battle here, now. I'm not going to jeopardize my crew, but I'm not going to stand in the way of the Prophets, either."

"What if the Prophets lose?" Bashir asked. "Are you willing to sacrifice Kira?"

…*sacrifice.*…

Odo's matrix tightened into knots.

In another life, he would have disregarded her wishes, ignored her beliefs, if it meant saving her life.

He had felt exactly as he did now.

Reeling.

Desperate.

Faced with her loss—and tossed a lifeline. A solution he wanted nothing more than to grasp with all he had. *Anything* to keep her in his life.

He could not let that desire come to pass.

"The Prophet said she was willing to be their instrument," Sisko said.

"And you believe that?" Worf asked.

“I do,” Odo said.

All eyes turned on him. But he couldn’t lift his own from the floor.

He forced out the impossible words.

“I know how important her faith is to her, and…I have no doubt that she would allow the Prophets to use her as their instrument.”

For a long, horrible beat, no one spoke.

“I’ll notify Starfleet that we’re abandoning the station,” Sisko finally said. “Begin the evacuation immediately.”

Sisko retreated to his office. Orders given, the others moved to their stations to attend their duties, silent, somber.

Odo couldn’t move.

Worf suddenly looked up, noticed him. “Constable. You are to—”

“I know my duty,” Odo growled. “I’ll thank you to stay out of it.”

His words drew a few startled looks, but Odo ignored them, retreating to the turbolift and ordering it to take him to the promenade.

He planned to do his duty. He really did. It was his only refuge. But the turbolift deposited him in the very spot he’d stood before, and his gaze caught on the sight of Kira—the woman he loved, who he was very likely about to lose—standing amid the howling wind, blue eyes aglow.

Every cell in his body ached.

He hadn’t been with her, in the end, before.

He’d missed her by a *day*.

He’d lost her once. He’d *buried* her. He’d spent two hundred long years without her, alone. And he was faced with that same existence now.

His place was here, at her side.

As Odo stepped clear of the turbolift, he tapped his combadge. “Odo to T’Sorra.”

“T’Sorra here.”

“Please coordinate evacuation of Deep Space Nine,” Odo said, tonelessly. “Report to the captain.”

“Sir—”

“Those are my orders. Odo out.”

Chapter End Notes

Why the heck, when the station starts rumbling in "The Reckoning," don't *any* of the senior officers at Odo's table contact Ops to find out what's going on???

I mean, it's a minor detail, but I fixed it! Not to mention, gave Odo some better lines in general.

Also...I hope you guys like what I'm doing differently with the Reckoning so far!

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The Reckoning begins.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "The Reckoning," part 3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Report!” Sisko ordered.

Dax swiveled to face him. “We expect to be down to a skeleton crew within the hour.”

“Very well,” Sisko said as he descended the steps from his office.

“What did Starfleet have to say?” Dax asked.

“I managed to convince them that we couldn’t afford to defy the Prophets.”

It had the virtue of being the truth. Since the Prophets had wiped out the Jem’Hadar fleet, no other Dominion ships had come through the wormhole—at least, that they knew of.

“They *are* preventing further Dominion invasion,” Worf agreed.

“The only problem is,” Dax said, “there’s no guarantee the Prophets will win this battle.”

The comm beeped. *“T’Sorra to Captain Sisko.”*

Sisko frowned. “Go ahead.”

“I am having difficulty convincing a group of Bajorans to leave the promenade.”

“Where’s Odo?” Sisko asked.

“With the Prophet.”

Sisko grimaced. “I’d better go. Worf, you have Ops.”

*

Sisko found said group gathered near the possessed Kira, kneeling before Kai Winn as she led them in prayer. Next to the group stood T'Sorra, hands clasped behind her back.

And, standing just a few paces beyond Kira, was the constable himself, his eyes locked on her as if she were the only thing that existed in the universe.

"…*Tera dak embah ihsehelm ran embrah,*" Winn chanted, her arms held up and to her sides.

"…*de-ram ta-meen,*" her followers chanted with her.

"*Tera dak ihsehelm ran embrah…*"

"…*de-ram ta-meen.*"

Sisko approached T'Sorra. "Report."

"The last transports are standing by," T'Sorra said.

"What about Odo?"

T'Sorra's gaze cut to his. "He ordered me to coordinate the evacuation and report to you. He hasn't moved since."

Sisko sighed.

It wasn't like Odo to be negligent in his duty. But first, Sisko needed to deal with the Kai and her followers.

"*Tera dak ihsehelm ran embrah,*" Winn was chanting.

"Eminence," Sisko said, over the answering chant.

"…*ta-meen,*" her followers finished.

Winn's eyes shifted to his. "Emissary."

"These people have to go," Sisko said.

A false smile faltered on her face. "We are offering prayers for the Prophets' victory."

"The Prophets will hear your prayers wherever you are," Sisko said. "It isn't safe here."

"Then why are *you* still here, Emissary?"

"I'm still captain of this station, and I'm going to do everything in my power to save it," Sisko said. "Now, are you going to tell these people to go, or shall I?"

Winn hesitated.

“My children,” she finally said, “the Prophets have heard your prayers. You must go.”

At her words, the Bajorans rose to their feet.

“Take them to the transports,” Sisko ordered T’Sorra.

“And Odo?”

“I’ll talk to him,” Sisko said.

With a sharp nod, T’Sorra turned to usher away the Bajorans.

To Winn, Sisko said, “Excuse me.”

Dipping his head in a nod, he headed past her—and past the Prophet, to Odo.

The constable’s only acknowledgment of his presence was a brief flicker of his eyes in Sisko’s direction.

“Odo,” Sisko said.

“If you’re going to remind me of my duty,” Odo said without looking at him, “don’t bother. Commander T’Sorra is already handling the last of the evacuation.”

“On *your* orders,” Sisko said. “I never relieved you of duty.”

“My place is here, Captain,” Odo said. “At her side.”

“*You* are my chief of security.”

Odo didn’t answer.

“Odo,” Sisko said, “you can’t stay here.”

Odo looked at him, then, and his gaze was hard, unyielding. “You can charge me with insubordination if you like, but I’m not leaving.”

“Odo—”

The lights flickered, interrupting him, and the Prophet spoke. “Kosst Amojan has chosen its vessel.”

She turned and looked up at the second level.

Sisko followed her gaze—and his heart nearly stopped.

Jake was gripping the balustrade, lightning crackling under his hands, his eyes burning red.

*

Distantly, Odo was aware of the Pah-wraith—of *Kosst Amojan*—descending to the first level, one click of Jake's boots on the steps at a time.

Jake.

Was this choice deliberate? Designed to test the captain's faith? To tempt Sisko to put an end to this?

Jake stopped just outside Quark's bar counter, meters from Kira down the promenade. His feet were planted shoulder-width apart, his arms coiled at his sides.

"Leave my son!" Sisko cried. "Take me instead!"

Kosst Amojan smirked, its blood-red eyes never leaving the Prophet. "Your Emissary offers himself to us. His faith wavers."

"The Sisko," the Prophet intoned, "must not falter!"

Jake's head whipped to face Sisko. "You wish to end this?"

Odo could see the conflict on the captain's face.

"Go ahead," said Kosst Amojan. "Implement your plan. *Expel* us!"

"The Sisko must not falter!" the Prophet cried.

Sisko's face was twisted with anguish. He looked from Kosst Amojan, to the Prophet, back to Kosst Amojan. His face crumpled. His mouth opened—

"Captain, don't!" Odo heard himself say.

Shock crystallized across the captain's face. But his jaw tightened all the same.

Hate flickered in Kosst Amojan's eyes. Then Jake's hand lifted—and Odo's feet were torn from the floor as he was thrown clear down the promenade.

He dragged himself to his knees, gasping.

He searched for Kira—then froze.

Beneath the flickering lights and the howling wind, tendrils of blue energy began to wind their way across her body, swirling around her shoulders and waist and gathering at her stomach. Kosst Amojan mirrored her with tendrils of red, and columns of energy burst forth to slam together in the middle ground between them.

Odo scrambled to his feet, only to be knocked into the bulkhead as sparks flew and the station shuddered.

He stood behind Kira; he couldn't see her face, only the tension in her body, the way her arms were locked and stiff at her sides, the way her hair still quivered in the wind. But Jake

was visibly straining, the blood vessels of his face beginning to swell.

Where their energy met, a fireball built between them, swirling and sparking. The station rumbled around them; smoke billowed from exposed conduits.

“Emissary!” Winn cried. “We must go!”

Sisko barely looked at her. His gaze was locked on Jake.

Kira was beginning to pant—Odo could see the rise and fall of her shoulders, her chest. But there was still strength in her stance—and Jake was trembling, grimacing.

Kira bore down and *pushed*, and the fireball inched toward Kosst Amojan.

“This vessel will *die*,” it hissed. “Is that what you want, Emissary?”

“No!” Sisko cried.

“The Sisko must not falter!” cried the Prophet.

And then its burning blue eyes flicked Odo’s way.

Odo’s breath hitched.

That was *Kira*.

Aware.

Willing.

Begging him.

“Captain, don’t,” Odo gritted out. “Whatever you’re—*aargh!*”

An energy blast smacked him square in the chest, sending him reeling back against a market display stand. He scrabbled for purchase on its edge.

“Go on,” Kosst Amojan growled. “Expel us. Save your son!”

“Captain!” Odo gasped.

“The Sisko must not falter!”

Somewhere in Odo’s periphery, a turbolift hummed. The wind howled as energy burst and sparks rained down.

Footsteps rushed. “Benjamin!”

Dax.

“Worf is standing by in Ops!” she said. “He can trigger the chroniton generator at your command! You can still end this, Ben!”

“No!” Sisko cried. “I’ve got to play this thing out!”

“That is your *son* out there!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Sisko cried. “The Prophets will protect him!”

“They’re trying to *kill* him!”

“No!” Sisko said. “They’re trying to destroy the Pah-wraith! The Prophets will not let anything happen to him!”

“How do you know that?” Dax demanded.

“I *know*!”

Energy built and swirled and flashed. Sparks flew. Kira and Jake strained.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Dax said. “According to the sensors, the energy building between them could explode at any second!”

“I’m not going to leave Jake here!”

Sparks burst. The fireball shoved toward Kosst Amojan, and Jake gasped in pain. Sisko lurched toward him, only to abort the movement.

Kira’s shoulders heaved. Odo hauled himself to his feet and staggered toward her.

“Odo, stay back!” Dax cried.

It was all he could do to listen.

“We must go, Emissary!” Winn begged.

“*Benjamin!*”

“Get out of here!” Sisko shouted. “Get off the station! Both of you! That’s an order!”

Winn reached for Dax. “Come, child. We must go.”

Dax took an aborted step, only to grasp Odo’s arm. “Odo—”

He shook her off. “I’m *staying*!”

Winn dragged Dax away.

Energy swelled between Prophet and Pah-wraith, billowing, burning, swirling. Odo’s eyes caught on Kira’s face—her skin still cold, but her face confident, her chin lifted with steady poise.

Oh, Nerys.

If she had anything to do with it, her Prophets *would* be victorious.

Surely, he had never loved her more than he did now.

Jake was straining, blood vessels popping all over his face, his mouth twisted in a grimace of effort. His chest gave a jolt, shoving the fireball—only for Kira to shove it right back. Blood began to run from her nose.

Kira.

Odo lurched for the nearest bulkhead and latched his fingers around its ledge, lest he run for her.

Sparks flew. Smoke billowed from the fireball between them—which was moments from impacting Jake's chest.

Jake winced, jolted, shuddered, convulsed in pain. "End this…Emissary!"

Kira's voice seemed to eclipse the promenade, resonant and powerful. "The Sisko must not falter!"

"Emis…sary…!"

But Kosst Amojan's call went unanswered—until, suddenly, a low whine built around them.

The fireball shrank slightly.

Kira's eyes darted about in panic.

And then a smirk curled Jake's lips. "The Kai falters!"

Kira's teeth gritted. She bore down, her eyes burning, but the fireball only receded further.

The whine's pitch rose steadily.

The fireball dissolved.

"The new vessel will rise!" cried Kosst Amojan. "The Temple will burn! All of time will fall! We *will* have dominion!"

"*No!*" Kira screamed.

Even the energy streaming from their vessels weakened and dispersed, and two wisps of energy—one blue, one red—swirled up to disappear through the ceiling.

Kira's body crumpled to the floor.

Odo raced for her and pulled her into his arms, propped her against one knee, let her head rest in the crook of his elbow.

Her head listed to the side.

“Nerys,” he gasped. “Nerys, please!”

Nothing.

She was limp in his arms.

Odo’s matrix heaved and he crumpled over her, gathering her to his chest, holding her close.

—he gathered her in his arms, cupped her head to his chest, lowered his face so as to hide his grief, as his matrix itself threatened to shake apart—

—he looked into her pale face, pressed his fingers to her cold skin—

—his knees pressed into the dirt as the soil stained his hands—

—again and again, his shovel struck the ground—

No, this wasn’t happening.

Not again.

He couldn’t *lose* her.

Nerys, Nerys, Nerys…

“…Odo?”

His very being ground to a halt.

Shakily, he lifted his head.

Registered her face.

Her eyes were open, blinking up at him.

They were warm.

Brown.

Not burning blue.

“*Nerys,*” he gasped.

Her voice cracked. “*Odo.*”

She reached up with a trembling hand, and he caught it, arresting her movement.

“Odo,” she whispered.

Her eyes slipped shut, but there was still movement in her chest, a gentle rise and fall as she breathed.

Odo gathered her close again, holding her tight as he rocked her.

*

Even as Sisko approached the infirmary archway, he had no idea what he could say to his son.

How to explain choosing his faith in the Prophets.

Letting Jake remain in harm's way.

He encountered Dr. Bashir in the doorway.

"Jake?" he asked.

"He'll be laid up for a few days," Bashir said. "But he'll be alright."

"May I see him?"

"Oh, yes."

Sisko wasn't sure what he would have done if the doctor had told him otherwise.

He slipped past Bashir to the biobed, where Jake lay surrounded by beeping monitors. A sheet covered him up to his chest, and he was lying still, his eyes closed, his head listed to the side.

Sisko's fingertips brushed his son's temple. "Jake…"

His head rolled upright, and a weak smile tugged the corner of his mouth even as Sisko lightly touched his cheek.

"Dad," he murmured.

"How are you feeling?"

A weak chuckle. "Could be worse."

"You'll be up and about in no time," Sisko said, forcing a smile.

But then he faltered.

"I don't know what to say."

Jake's smile was genuine. "Say you're happy to see me."

"You know I am." But that wasn't enough. "I wish I—" His voice cracked. "I want to explain what happened…but I'm not sure that I can."

His heart clenched, and he buried his face in his hands, fighting back tears.

“You don’t have to explain,” Jake said softly. “When the Pah-wraith was inside me…I could feel its hatred.”

Sisko breathed through his hands.

“And I knew,” Jake continued, “that no matter what, it couldn’t be allowed to win. Even if it meant I had to die.”

Sisko heaved a deep breath.

Jake reached for him, clasped his hand. “You did the right thing.”

Sisko’s eyes squeezed shut.

How was this his reality?

He could remember holding Jake in his arms as a baby. Watching his son grow up. Kissing his bruises when he fell. Soothing him when he couldn’t sleep.

When had their positions reversed? When had his son become the one to comfort *him*?

“But…Dad,” Jake said.

Sisko’s eyes blinked open.

“Did you notice the way the Pah-wraith tried to tempt you?” Jake asked. “The way it demanded that you put a stop to this?”

Sisko nodded.

“It was in my head,” Jake whispered. “And I could feel…it was as if…it has some greater purpose. It’s not just *evil*. It has a plan.”

“A *plan*?” Sisko repeated. “Jake, how do you—?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said, and there was fear in his eyes. “But I know that this isn’t over. It’s coming back, Dad.”

Sisko stared at him.

He had stood and watched as Kosst Amojan overtook his son, as gods and demons dueled before his eyes. He’d chosen to believe in the Prophets. Latched onto the hope that they would keep his son safe.

But if Jake was right…if there was more to this than met the eye…

If this wasn’t over…

“Jake,” Sisko whispered, at a loss for words.

Jake reached for him, and Sisko let himself be pulled into his son's arms.

*

The vedek's chanting tones filled the shrine. But Kira was barely listening.

"The Sisko must not falter…"

"The Kai falters!"

"Expel us. Save your son…"

"The Temple will burn!"

"Nerys, Nerys, Nerys…"

She'd never forget the way Odo had fought for her out on the promenade. The way he'd begged the captain not to interfere, even as she was sure his heart was breaking.

What must it have cost him not to intervene himself?

Not to save her life?

No—she knew *exactly* what it had cost him.

He'd told her of Gaia. Told her how his counterpart had suffered—how *he* had suffered.

And he'd respected her faith all the same.

What she *didn't* understand, was why any of this had happened.

Why the Prophets had chosen her as their vessel.

The gravity of that honor spun her mind.

As the prayer service ended, Kira wandered out of the shrine and onto the promenade, her mind still a million miles away.

"Nerys?"

She turned, smiled. "Odo."

He fell into step beside her. "How was the prayer service?"

"To tell you the truth," she said, "I didn't pay that much attention. I'm still trying to make sense out of everything that happened. I mean…of all the people on this station, the Prophets chose *me*. I'm not sure I know why I deserve that honor."

"Perhaps that's why you were chosen," Odo said. "You have faith *and* humility."

Her stomach tightened at the notion.

She had been *chosen*. By one of her *gods*.

No—the idea that she might have earned such a blessing, that something about her made her intrinsically worthy, was not something she wanted to think about. Odo might have no qualms putting her on a pedestal, but Kira was much more comfortable with bowing to her gods.

Instead, she changed the subject, quickly grasping Odo's arm and turning him to face her. "Odo…are *you* alright?"

She caught the brief flicker of pain in his eyes.

"I heard you, on the promenade," she murmured. "The way you begged the captain not to interfere."

"Nerys…"

She squeezed his hand.

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Nerys, I…there's something you need to know."

He winced at his own words.

"What's that?" Kira asked.

"I…" His breath hitched. "I understand, now. What my counterpart felt."

"I thought you already did," Kira said. "That you felt it yourself, through the Link."

"Yes, though the *Link*," Odo stressed. "It may have felt as immediate as if it were me, but it still wasn't in this life. *I* didn't choose to disrespect your faith. I could tell myself that."

"But…you didn't," Kira said. "And you still haven't."

"No, Nerys, you don't understand." Odo's breath trembled. "I've *felt* it, now. In this life. When Dax and Dr. Bashir came up with a way to expel the Prophet, it felt as if I'd been tossed a lifeline. I had a chance to save you. And that's *exactly* what my counterpart felt—when you told me, 'maybe'." He shuddered. "I wondered if that potential was still a part of me. And now I know it is."

Kira frowned. She peered at him, absorbing his words.

"Odo," she said slowly, "you felt all that…but you still chose to respect my faith."

Odo hissed as if in physical pain. "I *wanted* to save you. But I knew I couldn't give in to that."

She squeezed his hand, hard. "And you *didn't*."

From the lost, desperate look in his eyes, he didn't understand.

“Odo,” she said, “I think Gaia was good for us.”

Odo flinched.

“Not for you,” she said quickly. “And not for me. But for *us*. It made you conscious of that potential, so you could make a different choice this time.”

Odo’s eyes slipped shut.

“And,” she added, “it’s how I found out that you loved me. How could I possibly regret that?”

At her words, Odo’s eyes blew wide, latching onto hers.

“Odo,” Kira whispered.

“Nerys?”

“I love you,” she said, just to watch the pure awe that chased away the pain in his eyes.

“I love *you*,” he replied softly.

The pain was still there, she knew. But she’d have to check in with him later—after she attended to her duties.

“I have to take the Kai to her shuttle,” Kira said. “I’ll see you later, alright?”

“Of course, Nerys.”

Offering him a secret smile, she pressed a kiss to Odo’s cheek and headed off down the promenade.

*

Escorting Kai Winn had always been…troubling, for Kira.

Winn was ambitious, power-hungry, and insincere. She was responsible for Bareil’s death. She’d tried to assassinate him even before that. She’d risked civil war on Bajor over a bunch of farming equipment. And through it all, she did it with a smile.

But she was still the *Kai*.

And if her Choosing was the will of the Prophets…

“The Emissary couldn’t escort me himself?” Winn asked as they stepped clear of the pylon turbolift.

“He’s with his *son*,” Kira said.

“I would think he’d want to thank me,” Winn said.

“For what?”

“I prevented the destruction of this station,” Winn said, as if it were obvious. “I saved the Emissary’s life—and the life of his son.”

“Don’t pretend you did it for the captain,” Kira muttered.

“I did it for *Bajor*,” Winn said. “If you haven’t heard, the floodwaters have receded, and the earthquakes have stopped.”

She stepped up to the airlock.

“And you’re going to take credit for that?” Kira said.

Winn turned, slowly, deliberately. “I take it as a sign I did the right thing.”

“You defied the will of the Prophets,” Kira murmured. As she realized the truth of her own words, she gathered strength. “And you did it because you couldn’t *stand* the fact that a human, an infidel, had a stronger faith than you. The Emissary was willing to risk his own son’s life to serve the Prophets.”

Winn smiled, shaking her head. “My faith is as pure as the Emissary’s.”

Kira squinted at her. “I think you’re confusing faith with ambition.”

“I’m not confusing anything, child,” Winn said. A familiar edge entered her voice. “You are. The Prophets chose you as their instrument. That doesn’t mean you can speak for them.”

But, for once, Kira was unwilling to back down.

“Because of your interference,” she said, “the Reckoning was stopped. Do you know what Kosst Amojan said before it was expelled?”

Winn’s glare was barely veiled. “Well, *tell* me, child.”

“It said, ‘The false vessel will rise,’ ” Kira said, her gaze boring into the Kai’s. “ ‘The Temple will burn.’ And I’m not sure if even the Prophets know what that means for Bajor.”

For the first time, Kira thought she caught a glimpse of fear in Winn’s eyes.

The Kai turned and boarded her ship without a reply.

Chapter End Notes

> In the show, it makes total sense for Odo to have to leave. The script specifically says he’s reluctant to leave Kira, but he has to do his job.

My addition of T'Sorra gave me some more options!

Now Odo has a proper security officer — not just Strategic Operations Officer Worf — to delegate his duties to. The way I brought out his trauma post-Gaia in my version, it made perfect sense for him to stick by Kira's side. It was also an opportunity to give T'Sorra's suspicions of him some ammo. And…now I could even tweak *Sisko's* reaction to Jake's possession.

I could make him a bit more reluctant to *immediately* trust the Prophets with his son's life, because that father-son relationship is one of DS9's greatest triumphs and I wasn't sure I believed Sisko's behavior in that scene. Because now that *Odo's* there to make sure the Emissary's faith doesn't waver, I can actually afford to bring out the father-son dynamic without breaking the plot. And I loved the irony of having Odo, a skeptic, be the one to urge Sisko not to falter. To me, it really brought out both the strength of Sisko's fatherly love and the strength of Odo's love for Kira.

Also, I hope you guys noticed the critical changes I made to the Reckoning, specifically the Dominion's involvement in it… ;)

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Odo reels from the Reckoning.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Valiant"

This chapter is *mostly* between-episode intermission action.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Odo worked furiously at the console in his quarters. On one screen, he watched the promenade and various corridors via surveillance footage; on the other, he had several dozen reports displayed as he composed his agenda for the next few weeks.

He was technically off duty. But his matrix was coiled tight as a spring, his substance churning, every cell trembling. His work was the only refuge he knew.

—she lay motionless on the biobed—

He growled under his breath.

—her eyes burned blue, wind in her hair—

He stabbed at his screen. *Duty, duty, focus on duty—*

—he gathered her in his arms, cupped her head to his chest—

—glass shattered as she walked—

“The Sisko must not falter!”

A frustrated sound—almost a cry—ripped from his throat, and he rocketed from his chair to pace his quarters, end to end. Only when he met the bulkhead for the fifth time did he give in to the urge to transform into a Tarkalean hawk and launch up into the air.

His feathered head struck the ceiling.

He squawked with annoyance, diving away and narrowly missing one of the metal props near his wall. Being smaller made his quarters comparatively larger to pace in, but he still couldn't —

"Odo?"

He blinked.

With a twitch of his wings, he spiraled down to alight upon a tree branch and cocked his head toward the door.

The beep of the chime was accompanied by Kira's voice, muffled through the bulkhead. "Odo? Are you alright?"

He morphed back into his customary humanoid form and strode toward the door.

"Odo!" A smile split her face the moment she saw him. But then, apparently noticing something amiss, her brows pinched. "What's wrong?"

Odo stiffened. "What makes you think—"

"Please," Kira said softly, "don't try to pretend with me."

A shaky breath hitched through his facsimile lungs, giving him away.

Kira stepped through the door, grasping his hand. "Why don't you join me on the couch?"

But he shook his head, tearing himself from her and pacing away.

He didn't want to sit down.

Didn't want to be still.

Didn't want to let his memories reach up and choke him.

"Odo?" Kira asked.

Odo sighed, stopping with his back to her, fists clenched at his sides. "I'm sorry, Nerys. I'm not going to be very pleasant company right now."

"But I didn't come for you to keep *me* company," Kira said. "I came for *you*."

Odo shut his eyes.

He knew, by now, that she would listen. That he could let her pull him into her arms and hold him—just as he had before the Romulans had entered the war and turned the tide, when his shame had threatened to suffocate him.

Part of him was even tempted to let her.

But this pain wouldn’t fade. No comfort could ease this ache. No safety existed from this wound. He could only learn to live with it.

“Captain, don’t!”

Against his will, he visibly flinched.

Kira crept up behind him. Tentatively, she placed a hand on the curve of his back. He shuddered at her touch.

“Odo?” Kira asked. “What’s wrong?”

—her shoulders heaved as blood dripped from her nose—

His matrix trembled.

—her body crumpled to the floor—

“Odo?”

—he gathered her in his arms, cupped her head to his chest—

Something squeezed his shoulder. He barely registered it.

—again and again, his shovel struck the ground—

“Odo!”

He jolted back to reality. Spun to face her.

Took in the warm hue of her skin, her brown eyes.

His fingers traced over her cheek. “Nerys…”

“Come with me,” Kira murmured.

She offered her hand.

He stared at it.

Prophets, he’d follow her anywhere, if she’d let him.

He grasped her fingers, and she led him across his quarters to the couch, then eased them both to the cushion. She pulled him against her so his head was resting against her shoulder, both her arms wrapped around him as one hand stroked over his hair.

“Talk to me, Odo,” she murmured.

“I—” His substance quaked. “I *can’t*.”

“Is this about the Reckoning?”

He nodded rapidly.

“About…the battle?” she asked. “On the promenade?”

His head whipped up to catch her eyes. “How did you know?”

Kira smoothed her hand over his hair, encouraging him to set his head back down. “It couldn’t have been easy to see me in danger.”

Odo shuddered.

He hadn’t just *seen* her in danger.

He’d *put* her in danger.

Kept her in danger.

Standing up for her wishes and her faith was one thing. Actively urging the captain not to interfere—not once, but several times—was another.

He’d fought for her death.

And the worst of it was, he’d gotten it *right* this time. He’d rectified his counterpart’s mistakes. He couldn’t promise himself this wouldn’t happen again.

He didn’t realize how badly he was trembling until Kira’s arms wrapped even tighter around him and she began to whisper words of reassurance in his ear. Not that he could make out what she was saying—his own substance was quivering so much he couldn’t separate the vibrations, couldn’t interpret her sounds.

He only knew they felt gentle. That her touch was soft, reassuring. That she was sitting here with him, holding him. That she wasn’t going away.

He managed a ragged gasp of her name.

She shushed him.

Eventually—minutes or hours later, he couldn’t tell—his shudders died down enough that reality could reassert itself.

He stiffened.

Prophets—what was *wrong* with him?

He’d spent their entire relationship so far seeking her comfort, breaking down in her arms.

That was hardly romantic.

How long would she put up with this? How long would her patience last before she realized this was all a mistake, that he had no idea what he was doing, that he couldn’t be the kind of partner she deserved?

Tentatively, shakily, Odo shifted upright on the couch. Kira let him go, but there was still concern in her eyes.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

He squeezed her hand. “I’ll manage.”

Kira peered at him. But masking his pain was a skill Odo prided himself on. He’d gotten a bit rusty at it with her, but he was sure his features were passable.

“…Alright,” Kira said. Her eyes twinkled. “Then…what do you think about catching the springball tournament?”

Odo blinked. “Is there one on?”

She rose from his couch and crossed to his wall monitor. “May I?”

“Please.” Then he tilted his head, considering. “We might want to move the couch.”

He basked in the delighted smile that spread across her face.

*

Their evening of springball transitioned into a night of motion features. Kira was pleasantly surprised when Odo chose a steamy romance—and then seemed positively *hooked*, his eyes glued to the monitor.

She tucked herself into his side and laid her head against his shoulder, sighing with contentment.

She wasn’t entirely sure what had crossed Odo’s mind earlier—why he’d seemed to reject her comfort and retreat. Didn’t he know how much she *loved* being able to support him, especially after all the years she knew he’d suffered without her ever realizing it? Didn’t he realize what a privilege it was to hold him in her arms? It was a gesture of trust—one that she treasured.

But if he wanted a quiet night watching a steamy love story, that was just fine by her, too.

Especially when, halfway through the story, the couple on the monitor came together in a passionate kiss—and Odo’s gaze broke from the screen to fix on hers.

Kira’s breath caught.

His deep-set blue eyes sparkled with bottomless devotion. But there was also hunger in that gaze. Barely restrained passion, of an intensity Kira had never seen before.

She caressed his cheek, and he closed the distance between them and captured her mouth with his.

Kira gasped.

His mouth was insistent yet reverent, passionate yet gentle. His hands were everywhere, roaming across her shoulders and back and neck, his fingers running through her hair. Kira reached for him in turn, running her hands across the expanse of his back, up and down his chest, up to his face.

Eventually, he broke the kiss, tipping his forehead against hers.

“I love you, Nerys,” he whispered.

She pulled his mouth back to hers. The feature played on in the background, forgotten.

Stardate: 51820.9

Quark’s was abuzz with chatter—but not the raucous conversation of happy customers. Quark himself was bustling about nervously.

“This isn’t mine,” muttered a red-uniformed Bajoran man at the end of the bar. “It’s someone else’s!”

Odo jumped slightly as the man slammed down the glass and stormed past.

It filled Odo with glee.

As customers talked over one another, complaints filling the air, Odo planted both hands on the bar, a devious glint in his eye. “Having a bad day?”

“Like you care,” Quark muttered. He whipped out a Ferengi PADD and spoke to one of his waiters. “Fizz, Froth, Flip, Finial, Foam, and Flare. What’s going on at that table, anyway?”

Odo followed his look. “I…take it there’s a problem with your drink replicator?”

“A problem?” Quark planted several glasses on the bar. “No…can’t be. If there were a problem, I would have submitted an emergency maintenance request this morning. And if I had done that—” He poured a pair of drinks. “—Chief O’Brien would’ve assured me that Rom would fix it right away.”

Odo smirked at the distinct note of annoyance in his voice.

“Then, of course,” Quark said, “Rom would’ve promised me that *Nog* would fix it before the end of the day.”

He traded the two bottles he’d just poured for another, throwing Odo a look.

Odo straightened, listening with perhaps a tad too much amusement.

“And since this *is* the end of day,” Quark said, “and there is no Nog in sight”—he poured another drink—“we can only draw one conclusion: that I don’t *have* a problem.”

Suddenly, Dax slid in next to Odo. “Is your drink replicator broken?”

Odo tried his best to school his smile, sensing an opportunity to bait Quark headed his way.

“You’re quick today,” Quark muttered.

Dax’s brows arched. “Do you want me to fix it or not?”

That drew Quark up short. “You?”

“That’s right,” Dax said. “Nog had a chance to take a trip to Ferenginar, and I told him that I would cover for him while he was away.”

The bafflement on Quark’s face was priceless. “Why?”

“Because he did a favor for me last week,” Dax said, shrugging. “So I owe him.”

She slipped around the end of the bar and headed straight for the replicator.

“But—that’s work for a mechanic,” Quark said. “A repairman. A lowly engineer.”

“I’ll tell Chief O’Brien you said that.”

Dax planted her hands onto the mess dripping from the replicator panel and yanked it open.

Quark groaned in disgust. But the bleep of a PADD interrupted whatever protest he’d been about to try next. He headed back to the bar, reading out the order. “A supernova and a Silven surprise…”

He started to grab the necessary ingredients from behind the bar, then stopped, looking back at Dax.

“She can’t do this,” he said.

“Why not?” Odo asked.

“I…” Quark’s hands lifted helplessly. “It-it-it’s not right! She’s above that sort of thing.”

Dax, meanwhile, was peeling blobs of gunk off the replicator’s circuits, completely unfazed.

“Those hands weren’t meant for poking around inside some filthy drink replicator,” Quark said. “They were meant for higher pursuits.”

Bingo.

Odo lowered one elbow to the bar. “You’re in love!”

Quark glanced his way. Shook his head. Yanked a pair of bottles from his stock as cover. “That’s the most ridiculous thing you’ve said this year.”

“Really?” Odo said.

Quark whipped up to face him. “Really!”

Hmph. Odo set his chin on his fist. “It must kill you that she’s married to Worf.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Odo smirked. “Hmm.”

“Don’t pretend *you’re* so high and mighty,” Quark snapped. “How long do you think the Major’s gonna put up with that dour attitude of yours?”

Odo flinched. Just as quickly, he schooled his features.

Quark, though, caught his look.

“You’ll see.” Quark poured a drink. “Before long, you’ll be back to being just as miserable as me.”

Odo straightened, folding his arms. Damn it—Quark had known him too long. He knew he’d scored his hit, and was already bustling down the bar, filling drink after drink as his customers railed at him.

Then Odo’s gaze chanced upon the supposed “Silven surprise” Quark had just poured, and he saw his opportunity to save face.

“By the way,” he said, “that’s not a Silven surprise. That’s a silken sunrise.”

Quark glared up at him.

Before his nemesis could score another hit, Odo retreated from the bar with as much dignity as he could muster. But as he stepped out onto the promenade, his steps slowed.

The rush of satisfaction he always got from seeing Quark so bent out of shape was quickly fading, anxiety taking its place.

How long do you think the Major’s gonna put up with that dour attitude of yours?

Odo grunted in annoyance, shaking his head slightly.

He and Quark traded insults as a matter of course. This one was no different—just an attempt to get a rise out of him.

Then why couldn’t he shake those words from his mind?

Stardate: 51843.3

Odo tapped at his desk console, frowning.

His latest system integrity audit had turned up an odd result. An anomalous request for system data. Nothing that warranted a full security alert, but there was *something* familiar about…

He squinted.

That was a civilian access code, which meant that all identifying details were anonymized. But he'd seen it before—months back, before his miraculous first kiss with Kira, before his entire world had brightened.

He'd been suspicious then, too. He'd started a trace, only to be interrupted when Kira turned up at his quarters.

His eyes fluttered shut.

She'd asked about the Founder. About what had tipped him off, on that moon in the Badlands.

"…I don't want you to think that you can't talk to me…"

He'd told her of his love confession.

She'd *winced*.

The stab of pain he'd felt seemed distant, now—now that her whole face lit up whenever she saw him, and he knew what her lips felt like against his. Now that he could no longer count how many times she'd told him, *I love you.*

Their talk of Gaia, though, was anything but distant.

"You disregarded my wishes! Disregarded my faith!"

"You have no idea what it's like for me to be sorry for saving your life…"

Odo's cells clenched.

"The Sisko must not falter!"

"Captain, don't!"

—her body crumpled to the floor—

…Nerys, Nerys, Nerys…

He shook his head hard, dispelling the images that still churned within his substance.

It was no wonder that, after she'd left his quarters that night, Odo never had gotten back to the security trace he'd been working on. He'd been so wrung out, he'd very nearly asked Kira to leave. *Kira,* the one person he always wanted in his space.

Now, though, another anomalous system request blinked on his screen.

The user data, though anonymized, was identical.

A quick check of the system data accessed turned up nothing particularly unusual—just public records. Still, Odo's instincts were prickling, and they had rarely led him astray.

He began another trace, this time setting it to run continuously and alert him to any further system access, no matter how innocuous.

*

Stardate: 51867.5

Days later, Odo found himself in the replimat, joining Kira for lunch—and, incidentally, Dax and Dr. Bashir.

Dax was talking a mile a minute, regaling them all with a tale of station gossip that Odo had lost track of about ten minutes ago. Instead, he was focused on Kira's smile, the sparkle in her eyes, the way she laughed.

He was allowed to notice, now.

Allowed to let his adoration show on his face.

Allowed to reach for her hand, and enjoy the soft smile Kira flashed his way. The one that was only for him.

Allowed to—

Dax stopped, mid-sentence. She and Bashir were both staring at him.

Odo cleared his throat. "Did I do something wrong?"

Kira squeezed his hand. "Of course not!"

"It's just," Bashir said, "I never would've pictured you as the romantic type, Odo."

Odo frowned. "Romantic type?"

"You know," Bashir said, smiling. "The type who *gazes* into his partner's eyes?"

Odo shifted in his seat.

Dax leaned toward Bashir, feigning surreptitiousness. "I wonder what he's like when we're not around."

Bashir smirked. "Maybe he picks her up with flowers and a tux, takes her dancing in the moonlight?"

Odo blinked rapidly.

Was *that* what was expected of him?

"You do realize we can hear you, right?" Kira said mildly.

Dax’s eyes sparkled, unrepentant. “C’mon, Nerys, give us something.”

Odo froze.

Squeezing his hand, Kira shot Dax a look.

Dax put up her hands. “Alright, alright! Can you blame me for wondering?”

“No,” Kira said. “But I can blame you for asking.”

Her smile took the edge off her words. But it couldn’t soothe the frisson of anxiety that spread through Odo’s substance.

He had virtually no experience with being a romantic partner. *Zero* experience with dating. And romantic intimacy didn’t exactly lend itself to being observed and studied; most of it happened behind closed doors.

Was Quark *right*, for once?

Was it only a matter of time before Kira realized the extent of his inadequacy?

*

Stardate: 51882.2

As the promenade began to fill with its morning civilian traffic, Odo settled into a seat on the second level, PADD in hand.

He had the whole day off.

Well…*technically*.

The nature of his work meant he was never truly off duty. One might best describe his status during off hours such as these as “on call”—which was why he’d chosen a spot overlooking the promenade. If any unsavory characters thought they could take their chance to strike, they would find themselves sorely mistaken.

Most of Odo’s attention, however, was focused on the PADD he held.

And, now, on the distinctive footsteps—a short, rapid stride—that approached from within the bar.

Odo’s gaze flicked up. “*Quark.*”

Quark put up his hands. “Hey, I didn’t do anything!”

“Yet,” Odo said.

“Are you always this grumpy on your day off?”

Odo scowled. “What makes you think—”

“Because it’s 0650,” Quark said, “and you didn’t do your morning patrol.”

“Hmph.” Odo shook his head; it came as no surprise that Quark had his routine memorized, despite his having rearranged it to keep the station’s criminal element on their toes just last week.

“Just don’t let the Major catch you scowling like that,” Quark said.

Odo squinted up at him. “Don’t you have a bar to open?”

“Not for another five minutes,” Quark said, flashing him a snaggle-toothed grin.

Odo growled under his breath, returning his attention to his PADD. Any other day—a day he was on *duty*—he’d be more than willing to trade insults with Quark. Today, however, he had research to do.

“What’ve you got there?”

Before Odo could blink, Quark had snatched the PADD out of his hands.

Odo rose. “Quark—”

“*Romance Rituals of the Bajoran Heart*?” Quark read. Mischievous delight spread across his features. “Odo, are you—”

Footsteps approached. “Quark, return the PADD.”

Odo’s barely-existent brows shot up. He’d never expected rescue to come in the form of Commander T’Sorra.

Quark hesitated, tapping the PADD against one hand.

“*Now,*” Odo growled, holding out his hand.

Sighing, Quark handed it over.

“Return to your bar,” T’Sorra ordered. “Your inventory is due for inspection.”

Quark’s eyes widened. “But I—”

“There will be no delays,” T’Sorra stated.

Quark turned to Odo, who only folded his arms, smirking. “I’m not bailing you out. Commander T’Sorra is on duty today. You’ll answer to *her*.”

Grumbling, Quark retreated.

To T’Sorra, Odo dipped his head in a slight nod. “Commander.”

“Sir.” T’Sorra drew her hands behind her back. “I fail to understand why you waste time… *bantering* with that Ferengi.”

Odo stiffened. “I don’t *banter*.”

T’Sorra cocked a brow.

“And Quark can be quite…useful, sometimes,” Odo added. “As long as you keep him on a tight leash.”

“That does not align with Starfleet procedure.”

“Well,” Odo said, “I’m not in Starfleet, am I?”

T’Sorra’s gaze flashed to his. “Sir, I wish to discuss—”

“Ah!” Odo held up a finger. “I’m off duty.”

“I wish to discuss,” T’Sorra repeated, “the security arrangements for next week’s operation.”

Odo frowned.

She meant the Ninth Fleet’s upcoming battle drill, of course. And she knew full well the promenade was the wrong place to discuss that—she wouldn’t have graduated from Starfleet Academy without such a basic understanding of protocol. She also had to know that if she wished to discuss this in an appropriate setting, she could have easily caught Odo *yesterday*, when he was on duty. Or, for that matter, she could wait until tomorrow.

T’Sorra matched his stare, her gaze inscrutable.

She was testing him.

Again.

“Commander,” Odo said, “the arrangements have been recorded for your access. Now, if you want to discuss them *tomorrow*—”

“Today,” T’Sorra said. “Now.”

“But not here,” Odo said, testing back.

“Sir,” T’Sorra said, “when the USS *Griffin* docks, we will be—”

Now Odo stared at her, hard.

There was no USS *Griffin* in the Ninth Fleet, and she knew that.

She held his gaze.

“Commander T’Sorra,” Odo said, “I am off duty. Leave me, and attend to yours.”

T’Sorra squinted at him.

Then, with a sharp nod, she stalked toward Quark’s upper level.

Odo watched her go, wondering if he should report her behavior to Captain Sisko. At the very least, it needed to be noted in his secure log—the one that not even his deputies knew about.

For now, however…he had research to do.

He settled back down at his table and lifted his PADD, absorbing himself in the details of Bajoran courtship.

*

“Captain,” T’Sorra said, handing a PADD across Sisko’s desk. “My report on Operation 13.”

That was what T’Sorra had informally—and arbitrarily—called it in her logs, so that Odo wouldn’t find out too easily. Her investigation into whether Odo had been replaced by Founder.

Sisko sighed, glancing over the PADD. “What have you got?”

“I am…*largely* satisfied that he has not, as of our most recent encounter, already been replaced.”

“Largely?”

“He has refused to detail the Link’s functionality for me,” T’Sorra said. “While he displays correct knowledge of protocol and behavior consistent with my expectations, it is still possible a Founder could gain that information from a Link with him and effectively mimic his expertise.”

Sisko frowned. “Hm.”

“Additionally,” T’Sorra said, “while it is not *evidence*, I remain suspicious of his refusal to detail what he knows about the Link.”

“But you’re right,” Sisko said, rubbing his brow. “That’s not evidence.”

“And,” T’Sorra added, “even *if* his correct display of knowledge and protocol is a result of Linking with his replacement, I detect no signs whatsoever that the Changeling in his place has enacted a nefarious agenda.”

“Meaning,” Sisko said, “however valid your concerns may be, there’s no sign that you’re right.”

“Correct,” T’Sorra said. “However, I still believe it prudent to monitor his activities continuously. He remains a very strategic target for future replacement.”

Sisko glanced up at her. “What’s your risk assessment?”

“Given all available information, and assuming innocence per procedure, despite the lack of available information about the Link?” T’Sorra cocked a brow. “There are no *positive*

indicators that he has been replaced. I have only concerns. At this time, I judge the risk acceptable."

"Very well." Sisko set down the PADD. "Carry on, and keep me informed."

Chapter End Notes

I've always wondered why no one questions Odo's identity. Maybe it would've been a pointless plot, or maybe the writers wanted to avoid writing themselves into a corner where Rene's contract was concerned; they couldn't exactly risk Odo's spot among the main cast.

But I have an opportunity the writers didn't! You'll see eventually why I created T'Sorra — but for now, she's the perfect character to question Odo's identity the way I think the show should've. I've been trying to strike a balance here that makes it clear there's no evidence he's been replaced (because he hasn't), and that's why Sisko keeps him in charge — the risk is minimal. And he's just so damn good at his job that Sisko's not about to relieve him without solid evidence. But there still *is* a risk, which makes T'Sorra's ongoing investigation only logical.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Odo struggles with his insecurities.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Profit and Lace," "Time's Orphan," and "The Sound of Her Voice," part 1

(Most of "The Sound of Her Voice" is here. I just shuffled the final scene to the next chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51882.8

The night found Odo sidling up to the bar to lean one shoulder against the bulkhead, watching as Quark toyed with a large, bejeweled ring.

It had been an…interesting day for station security. Staying decidedly off duty as he watched T'Sorra wrangle Quark, Rom, their mother Ishka, Grand Nagus Zek, Brunt, *and* Commissioner Nilva had been an exercise in restraint. But when Quark literally turned himself female so he could stand in for his bedridden mother, Odo decided this was one time when he was content to let someone else handle the situation.

Quark was annoying in any circumstance. *Hormonal* Quark, reeling from the transition, would've been a nightmare.

Now that the excitement had died down and Quark was back to normal, though, Odo found himself absurdly curious. Would his nemesis be back to his usual self? Or did this mark a change in their dynamic?

"Interesting ring," he observed.

"It was a gift." Quark sighed. "Poor Nilva…such a lovely man but so lonely."

"Really," Odo muttered.

Quark nodded. “There was a sweetness to him…and also a strength. Sometimes he’d get this little glint in his eye…”

He looked up at Odo. Odo peered back at him.

“You know what I mean,” Quark said.

“…Not really,” Odo said. “But I’m glad you had a pleasant evening.”

Quark straightened. “You’re mocking me, aren’t you?”

For once, he wasn’t—but his jabs had never cut deep before. “You’re being a little overly sensitive.”

“I’ve only been a male again for six hours.” Quark gasped for air. “My hormones must still be out of balance.” His voice broke. “My emotions are raging out of control!”

Odo shifted awkwardly, wrong-footed. “Is there…anything I can do?”

Quark’s breath hitched on a sob. “Would you mind…giving me…a hug?”

“A *hug*?”

“Just a small one?” Quark begged.

Prophets—was that genuine desperation in the Ferengi’s eyes?

All thoughts of holding this over Quark vanished without a trace. Odo glanced around quickly, but Morn was busy chatting another customer’s ears off, and the Ferengi waiters were busy filling drinks.

No sooner had he grunted his permission than Quark threw his arms around Odo’s middle and started *bawling* into his shoulder.

Morn was definitely watching *now*.

Odo patted Quark’s head a few times, then grasped Quark by the shoulders, pushing him away.

Footsteps preceded a high, squeaky voice behind him. “I hope we’re not interrupting anything!”

Odo never thought he’d be *relieved* to hear the Nagus.

“Ah…excuse me,” he muttered, and slipped clear of the bar.

His substance was still quivering with mortification when a *much* more welcome voice called his name.

“Odo?”

His gaze tracked to hers. “Nerys!”

She sidled up to him, squinting a little. “You alright?”

“Ah…yes.” He sucked in a deep breath, restoring order to his form. “Just a…run-in with Quark.”

One brow crept up.

“He *hugged* me,” Odo admitted.

A teasing smile bloomed across Kira’s face. But, from her, he could tolerate it. Even enjoy it.

Just…maybe not in plain view on the promenade.

He dipped his head to whisper in her ear. “Let’s find someplace a bit quieter, shall we?”

Kira’s eyes twinkled. “Your quarters or mine?”

Stardate: 51921.5 | USS Defiant

“I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful,” said the man on the wall monitor.

“That’s alright,” Odo nodded. “Thank you.”

The transmission ended.

Then the door swished open behind him. Kira entered, carrying the O’Briens’ baby on her hip, humming softly.

Odo approached, entranced. He settled against a console to watch her.

She held Kirayoshi like he was her own, naturally swaying him side to side, soothing him with her voice and adjusting him on her hip as he wriggled and babbled.

“Oh, yes, oh, yes, I know,” she said, smiling at the infant she held in her arms.

“You’re very good with him,” Odo murmured.

“Hmm.” She grinned. “He knows me. I had him inside of me for five months.”

Kirayoshi babbled, and she hoisted him up high, babbling right back. He wriggled again, and she patted his bottom, laughing.

“I think…” She started bouncing him. “I think I might wanna have one of my own someday.”

Odo froze.

That wasn’t something he could give her.

He shifted to his feet and averted his eyes, lest she read him too closely. “According to the archaeologists I talked to, the portal was built by a civilization that vanished two thousand years ago.”

Kira straightened, listening even as she held Kirayoshi.

“Which means,” Odo said, “if Molly survived the fall…she would have found herself all alone.”

“You’re saying that planet was uninhabited three hundred years ago?” Kira asked.

Odo nodded. “The first Bajoran colonists didn’t arrive till the turn of the century.”

Kira shifted the baby in her arms. “An eight-year-old girl, stranded alone on a deserted planet.” Her voice cracked. “Poor Molly.”

She pressed an absent kiss to Kirayoshi’s head.

“With any luck,” Odo said, “the Chief will be able to beam her out a few minutes after she fell.” He touched Kira’s shoulder. “She’ll hardly know she was gone.”

Odo took what comfort he could from being *allowed* this—allowed to be tender with her, to comfort her, as he had always wished to do. The last thing he wanted to think about was their relationship’s inevitable end.

She might love him, might even emotionally accept that he was a Changeling—but that didn’t make him any less alien to her.

He’d give her the world, if he could. He’d give her a home filled with children, duty be damned, if it would make her happy. But he *was* a Changeling. Physiologically incompatible.

He *couldn’t* give her children.

Odo watched her softly rock Kirayoshi, glad her arms were occupied.

If she touched him, she’d feel the tremor of his substance.

She’d be concerned.

He didn’t want her smile to fade from her face.

*

Stardate: 51935.2 | Deep Space Nine

“They were trying to steal a runabout,” Lt. Jones reported.

Odo stepped up behind him. The Chief, Keiko, and eighteen-year-old Molly were seated on the step to the airlock, waiting for him.

Molly was mostly sedated, her head lolling against her father’s shoulder and her eyes rolling back. Keiko looked tense, worried. And Odo wasn’t sure he’d ever seen the Chief quite so… defeated.

He'd just wanted to protect his little girl. Enough that even duty no longer mattered.

Odo would never know what that was like.

He looked to Lt. Jones. “Find out if Deputy Pinar has regained consciousness. I’m going to need his statement.”

Jones turned and left. But he was still within earshot; for the moment, at least, Odo needed to look the part of the stern constable. He stepped closer to the O’Briens, folding his arms.

Keiko looked up, a mother’s worry clear in her eyes.

“Odo,” O’Brien said, “please, let us go.”

“I-If you put her back in a holding cell,” Keiko whispered, “she’ll *die*.”

“I’m disappointed in you, Chief,” Odo said. Then, as Jones’ footsteps faded, “If anyone could break a prisoner out of a holding cell and get them off the station, I’d have thought it would have been you.”

O’Brien hung his head.

Odo pressed the button for the airlock. “On your way.”

The relief that crossed both parents’ features made his breach of protocol worthwhile.

“Thank you,” Keiko whispered.

Odo tolerated her hug, even the grateful kiss she pressed to his cheek. He watched, hands behind his back, as O’Brien and Keiko helped a still-groggy Molly into the airlock.

The Chief looked back.

“Go,” Odo said.

He’d worry about the repercussions later. But somehow he suspected that the captain, a father himself, would understand.

*

Stardate: 51935.5

Odo’s office doors slid open to admit Commander T’Sorra, her chin lifted, her hands clasped behind her back.

He set down his PADD. “Commander.”

“Sir,” T’Sorra said, “may I have a word?”

Odo sighed. Coming from T’Sorra, “a word” only ever meant one thing: a debriefing worthy of Starfleet Intelligence. But by now, he knew that it was easier to humor her than to resist. She was nothing if not persistent.

“Very well,” he muttered.

“You are complicit in the O’Briens’ theft of the *Rio Grande*,” T’Sorra stated. “True?”

“True.”

“This was a breach of protocol,” T’Sorra said. “Also true?”

“True.”

“Then explain,” T’Sorra said.

Odo eyed her. “Commander, you realize that I don’t answer to you?”

T’Sorra cocked one eyebrow. “If you’d rather I describe your conduct unfavorably in my official report…”

Growling under his breath, Odo stood and folded his arms, staring her down. Two could play her game. “You are, of course, aware of the circumstances surrounding the Chief’s actions?”

“Yes,” T’Sorra said.

“Including the fact that Molly was alone on Golana for a *decade*?”

T’Sorra barely blinked. “Yes.”

“Then you realize that she was completely unused to human contact,” Odo said, “and could not be held responsible for her actions.”

“True,” T’Sorra said. “But *you* can.”

“That girl was about to be ripped from her parents’ care and sent to some…specialized care facility.” Odo planted his palms on his desk. “She couldn’t tolerate being trapped in a holding cell; her own adrenaline was literally *killing* her. And you would have me deny a father the chance to save his daughter?”

T’Sorra lifted her chin. “The decision was yours. I would only have you explain your breach of protocol.”

“*Protocol*,” Odo said, “does not always align with *justice*. Even in Starfleet.”

T’Sorra studied him.

“Satisfied?” Odo asked.

There was a moment's pause. He couldn't decode the look on her face—and not for lack of trying.

"For now," T'Sorra finally said.

"Then you're dismissed."

A brisk nod. "Sir."

She spun about-face and exited his office, passing Kira on her way out.

"Odo?" Kira asked.

Odo sighed. "Nerys."

"What was all that about?"

Odo sank down into his chair. "Just another debriefing from T'Sorra."

Kira frowned. "What was her problem this time?"

"She seems to disagree with…the way I handled the Chief's theft of the *Rio Grande*."

"Well," Kira said, "if it's any consolation, I think you did the right thing. For the Chief…" Her expression softened. "…and for Molly."

Odo didn't answer.

She rounded his desk, then leaned against its edge to take his hand in hers. "Thank you."

"Least I could do," Odo managed, his voice a bit more gravely than usual.

She leaned down and pressed her lips to his.

The kiss was sweet, chaste—they were, after all, still on duty. Nevertheless, Odo relished the contact, letting his eyes slip shut as he relaxed into his chair.

Kira pulled back, still smiling.

And then her smile faded.

"Nerys?" he asked.

Her brows pinched slightly. "Are you alright?"

Odo startled. In his momentary surrender, had he accidentally let something show on his face?

Kira was peering at him, and he needed her to *stop*.

He cleared his throat. "I'm fine."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes darted all over his face. “Are you hiding from me?”

“What?” His eyes widened. “Nerys—”

She pressed a finger to his lips.

“Odo,” she said softly, “just, yes or no—is there something you’re not telling me?”

Odo’s breath hitched.

He couldn’t lie to her.

But he also couldn’t tell her *yes*.

He settled for his only recourse: a silence that settled between them, speaking as loudly as if he’d cried out his pain.

Kira’s eyes held his.

Then she stroked her fingers over his cheek. “When you’re ready, please…talk to me.”

Odo couldn’t make his voice work. His substance had constricted, crushing his facsimile lungs.

“I…will,” he finally managed.

When you’re ready.

That was a promise he could make. The only problem was…he didn’t think he’d ever *be* ready.

If he talked to her, confided in her, she’d realize he couldn’t give her children.

She’d see the impasse that loomed between them.

Then it would only be a matter of time before he lost her.

Stardate: 51947.5

Odo’s matrix was in knots, and there was nothing he could do about it—so he took it out on Quark.

“Alright,” he said, pacing the length of the bar, “these barstools will have to be removed.”

“Do you know how much they cost?”

“No, and I can’t say I’m interested in learning,” Odo said. He stopped behind Morn. “Station Regulation 2562, paragraph four: ‘All furniture intended for use on the promenade must *not* pose a danger to public safety.’ ”

“What danger?” Quark protested.

“Without a back on the stool, Morn could tumble from his perch at any moment, shattering his upper vertebrae or puncturing three or four of his lungs.”

Morn started to get up, but Quark pushed him right back down. “Nonsense. His body weight is perfectly distributed across the seat!” He spun Morn to face the dabo wheel. “He’s also better able to enjoy the view of the lovely dabo girls than he was before. *And*, should he require another drink, he need only…spin back.”

He spun Morn back around to face the bar.

“Which points out another danger,” Odo said, his arms folded. “Vertigo.”

Quark glared. “This isn’t going to give anybody vertigo!”

He spun Morn again—and this time, the Lurian kept spinning.

Odo didn’t care.

“Your appeal has been heard and rejected,” he said. “I want the barstools removed by the end of the day.” Barely pausing for breath, he headed for the dabo wheel. “Now, it’s come to my attention that your dabo wheel is in violation of Station Regulation 4721, which states—”

“Odo!”

A shiver coursed through his substance. “Nerys.”

She strode into the bar, smiling, and by the Prophets themselves, he would do *anything* to keep that smile on her face.

“You busy?” she asked.

He gravitated toward her. “Not at all.”

“Well, then can I interest you in some lunch?”

“Where shall we go?”

“I was thinking about the Klingon restaurant,” she said, slipping an arm around his waist. “I haven’t been there for ages, and I have been *craving* boiled krada legs.”

Odo smiled. “As you wish.”

Kira beamed at him, and his substance clenched with a dizzying combination of joy and dread.

Joy, that she still smiled at him like that.

Dread, that it wouldn't last forever.

If she felt the way his substance quivered beneath her arm, she didn't comment on it.

*

When Odo strode into Quark's on his next patrol, his back ramrod-straight and his hands clasped behind him, he saw that the barstools had indeed been replaced.

He tapped the back of Morn's seat in approval.

"I hope you're satisfied," Quark said. "I'm sure nothing gives you more pleasure than stifling my creativity."

Odo scoffed. "Only you would consider barstools to be a form of artistic expression."

"Oh yeah?" Quark asked. "Let's see how creative *you* are."

Odo ignored him, scanning for anything amiss as he headed deeper into the bar. He wasn't even interested in harassing Quark, right now—if he could just focus on his work, on his duty, then maybe the tightness in his matrix would release. Just for a moment.

Then Quark's next words stopped him in his tracks. "Have you…picked out the Major's gift yet?"

Odo turned. "Gift?"

"For this Saturday."

Odo peered at him.

"You do know what Saturday is, right?" Quark said.

Odo folded his arms. He knew what Saturday was to *him*. But what could Quark be referring to?

"It's your one-month anniversary with Major Kira," Quark said.

"How do *you* know that?"

"Come now, Odo," Quark said. "You told Dr. Bashir."

Ahh.

Odo sighed, rolling his eyes. "And Dr. Bashir told Dax, who told—"

"—me," Quark said.

Well, he *had* told the doctor it wasn't a secret.

He just hadn’t wanted the pressure of social expectations. He’d wanted to bask in Kira’s light, to enjoy the pure contentment that her love brought him—not worry over what the others thought of him, whether he was acting the part of a romantic partner.

“So,” Quark said, “you haven’t picked out a gift?”

“What business is it of yours?”

“I’m just saying,” Quark said, “Saturday’s only a few days away. You’re running out of time.”

Odo pinned him with a glare. “If you’re trying to sell me something—”

“You think I’m going to get involved?” Quark said, incredulous. “No thank you. The last thing I want to deal with is a panicked lover looking for a gift at the last minute.”

Scoffing, he gestured past Odo to the promenade.

“There’s a whole promenade of shopkeepers out there,” he said, “if you wanna buy a gift.”

Quark bustled away and busied himself behind the bar.

Odo, meanwhile, stood stiff as a board, tension cramping through his substance.

A one-month anniversary gift…wasn’t there a chapter on gifts in that book?

Was he failing in his observance of Bajoran romantic customs?

Odo made a beeline for his office.

*

There *was* a chapter on gifts.

But not just gifts.

It emphasized the setting as much as the gift itself. The importance of letting the real world fall away, just for a while. Of getting away together, spending time just basking in the moment.

Odo could do that. All he *wanted* was to focus on the present moment. To forget their relationship’s inevitable end.

The only problem, then, was logistics. He and Kira couldn’t realistically leave for Bajor; she was the station’s first officer and he was chief of security. Neither of them could get away easily.

That left one of their quarters…or a holosuite. And while Odo hesitated to rely upon an artificially constructed environment, he couldn’t deny that it *would* give him the chance to “take” Kira somewhere special.

All that remained was to choose her gift. And suffer the hit to his dignity that would come from paying *Quark* for an evening in a holosuite.

*

Odo planted his palms on the bar. “Quark.”

Quark popped up from behind it. “What’d I do?”

Odo smirked. “You tell me.”

Quark rolled his eyes. “Nice try.”

He started for the drink replicator.

“Wait!” Odo ordered.

Tentatively, Quark turned.

“Let me see your holoprogram selection,” Odo said.

Quark squinted. “You’re having me on.”

“Not at all.”

Quark squinted harder.

Odo just held out his hand, tapping his outstretched fingers together.

“You’re serious,” Quark said.

“Completely.”

“*You* want to book a holosuite?”

Odo huffed a sigh. “Do you want the latinum or not?”

Quark moved faster than a Denebian viper, handing over his case of holorods.

Odo had just turned for the stairs when Quark spoke behind him.

“Is this for your anniversary?”

Odo turned, flashing a tiny smile. “If you must know—it is.”

He headed up the stairs, his matrix loosening for the first time in weeks.

Maybe, just maybe, if he could get this right…maybe Kira would choose him.

*

“I’ll take this one,” Odo said, handing over the holorod.

“Ahh.” Quark smiled as he read the label. “Jalanda Forum, 2352. That’s certainly…unique. I’m sure the Major will love it.”

“Well,” Odo said, “book us four hours starting at 2100 on Saturday night.”

As he handed back the holorod case, he swore he caught Quark suppress a devious smile.

Odo spied Jake, who occupied the nearest barstool. Come to think of it, Jake had been near Quark every time Odo had come into the bar today…

He shot Jake a questioning glance, but was met with a nonchalant shrug.

Honestly—what could *Jake* possibly have to do with Quark? When Odo ran through his checklist of shady characters to surveil, Captain Sisko’s son didn’t exactly come to mind.

Shaking his head with a light “hmph,” Odo headed out of the bar.

*

Odo stopped at a stall on the promenade operated by a kindly Bajoran woman. Yutem Ilka, he knew from his records.

“Constable Odo?” Her eyes lit with curiosity—and the slightest hint of confusion. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem,” Odo assured her. “Right now, I’m a customer.”

“Oh!” Her face lit up; then she sobered again, peering at him. “I don’t think I’ve ever known you to browse promenade displays. Not unless you’re inspecting the goods, that is.”

Odo managed a light chuckle. “First time for everything.”

“Indeed.” Quickly, Yutem drew herself straight and clasped her hands, her expression softening into a shopkeeper’s warm confidence. “Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“A gift,” Odo replied, scanning her counter display. “For Major Kira.”

“Ah.” There was a twinkle in her eye. “It’s been a month, hasn’t it?”

Odo glanced up at her in barely veiled surprise. Yutem pressed her lips together in amusement.

Almost six years into maintaining security on Deep Space Nine, and the speed with which news spread on this station still managed to surprise Odo. Yutem barely even *knew* him, beyond a station resident’s basic familiarity with the senior staff.

“…Indeed,” Odo said, more gruffly than he intended.

Then his gaze caught on an item on the shelf behind her, just over her shoulder.

A small stone tablet, barely larger than the palm of his hand.

Yutem followed his gaze.

She considered him. “Do you know what it is?”

Odo nodded.

“That is typically given…somewhat later, in a courtship,” Yutem said. “But if you wish, I can have it engraved in two days.”

Odo hesitated.

He knew *he* was ready for the sentiment implied by a promise charm. He was irrevocably Kira’s, forever—no matter if their relationship lasted or ended tomorrow. But *Kira* might not ultimately choose him.

He was alien to her, after all. There was so much he couldn’t give her.

“I’ll…wait,” he finally said.

If Yutem sensed his turmoil, she didn’t show it. Then again, few humanoids could interpret what he laughably called facial expressions.

That *was* useful, in his line of work. And he had long since become used to his isolation.

“I have a more varied selection behind the counter,” Yutem said, “if you would care to browse?”

Odo nodded. “Please.”

*

Kira was *breathtaking*.

He’d always known she was beautiful. But when she met him in his office in a flowing robe hemmed with golden satin, her bright smile lighting up her face, Odo swore his entire world ground to a halt.

Kira’s smile turned teasing. “Odo?”

Just like that, his world started spinning again. He remembered to breathe.

“You’re…beautiful,” he murmured, rounding his desk to take her hands in his.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” Kira said. She glanced up and down his form. “Though you’re not planning on taking me out in your security uniform, are you?”

Odo blinked rapidly. It took a solid second for her words to register.

“Oh!” He shook himself, then shut his eyes, concentrating on mimicking the folded layers of his own robe. “Better?”

Kira looked him up and down a second time, now with appreciation. “Much!”

The exchange reminded him vaguely of a time, years ago now, just before she had gotten involved with Shakaar. When she’d stood next to him at the First Minister’s diplomatic reception, and asked him why he didn’t “wear” that belt anymore.

How times had changed.

“So,” Kira said, “are you going to tell me where you’re taking me?”

Odo smiled warmly. “I was…hoping to surprise you.”

Kira grinned. “Sounds good to me.”

“Well.” Odo plucked her gift box off the edge of his desk and offered his other arm. “Shall we?”

Kira’s eyes were bright as she tucked her arm through his.

Striding down the promenade in full Bajoran formal robes was a…unique experience. Not altogether unpleasant; if having Kira in his life meant embracing his romantic side for all to see, letting the station’s inhabitants see something other than the dour investigator, he could live with that. He just hoped it would last.

As they entered Quark’s, he shook away those thoughts. He didn’t need them spoiling their night.

He wanted—needed—this to be *perfect*.

Chapter End Notes

I *love* Odo's part in "Time's Orphan" — not least of all because I'm sure he's drawing some unconscious parallels between Molly's situation and his *own* upbringing. I imagine a "specialized care facility" would sound a lot like a laboratory to him. In any case, Molly was faced with the prospect of being brought up by doctors, not parents. And Odo's never had parents like the O'Briens, who will fight for their child. He's only had Dr. Mora.

So, this episode felt like a convergence of Odo's troubled upbringing and his anxiety over being unable to give Kira children. And it marks the moment, for me, when he became open to the idea of being a father. Early in the show, he's expressed disinterest in it, and I've always thought his past with his only father figure was too troubled for him

to be comfortable with becoming a father himself. But now…well, he's come a long way from the crusty constable we knew in the earlier seasons!

There's just so much subtext here, and I love it 😍

As for the promise charm — that's my own invention. Yes, I will be elaborating on it… later down the line!

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Odo's anxieties come to a head.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "The Sound of Her Voice," part 2 and "Tears of the Prophets," part 1

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Here you go,” Quark said, handing Odo the holorod over the bar counter.

Was Odo imagining the devious glint in his eye?

Then Kira sidled up next to him, touching his lower back, and all such thoughts fled his mind.

He turned for the stairs.

“Odo,” Quark called.

He turned back.

“Have a good time.”

That looked like…an almost genuine smile on his face.

With a curt nod, Odo headed for the stairs once more, Kira’s gift in one hand and the holorod in the other, Kira herself at his side.

As they ascended to the holosuites, anxiety twisted his matrix.

Could this be enough?

Enough to keep Kira’s mind off of what he couldn’t give her?

Enough to keep them both focused on the present, enjoying what they had *right now*, before their relationship inevitably disintegrated?

Kira pressed a gentle hand to Odo's back. "You alright?"

"I…yes."

He sucked in a deliberate breath, trying to loosen his cells. Kira's brows pinched briefly, but she didn't question him.

Odo pressed the control panel by the holosuite doors, and they slid open—revealing a rectangular pool that glittered beneath a sky dotted with puffs of cloud. An ornate bridge stretched across the pool to the program's centerpiece: a tall, domed building, its exterior wall lined with columns, warm musical tones swelling from within.

At his side, Kira gasped. He turned, alarmed to see tears in her eyes.

Her hands clapped over her mouth. Her gaze darted briefly to his, and he saw her jaw work as she tried several times to speak.

"Odo," she murmured.

His breath hitched. "Did I—?"

"The Jalanda Forum?" she asked.

He nodded. "I just thought…"

"*Odo.*" She cut him off with a squeeze of his hand, blinking back her tears. "It's perfect."

*

"I don't believe it," Quark muttered.

"Neither do I," said Jake.

"I'm gonna win this one, Jake," Quark whispered. "You know what the best part is? I beat *Odo*."

Jake chuckled.

"I finally beat him," Quark said. "Jake, I did it! I've beat him!"

Unbeknownst to either of them, T'Sorra watched from behind a support pillar, her chin tilted.

*

Odo spent the next four hours basking in Kira's light. Her bright smile, the tears in her eyes as the music of Bajor's best composers swelled through the air, the way she leaned into his side and wrapped her arms around him and set her chin against his shoulder…it was nothing short of paradise, and he never wanted it to end.

In fact, he enjoyed this in a way no humanoid could. He wondered if Kira realized that when she tucked herself against him, he could feel her touch in every atom of his being. Though he "wore" a traditional Bajoran robe, it was as much a part of him as his uniform. She wasn't touching his clothes—she was touching *him*.

As the soft tones of a particularly reverent song began to fill the forum, Odo slipped the gift box from the folds of his facsimile robe.

Kira noticed his movement. She straightened, pulling back to look at him.

"Nerys," he said softly, "I love you. More than you know."

With trembling hands, he opened the box.

Kira gasped.

He'd chosen a small ruby pendant. Not quite as laden with meaning as a promise charm, but special nonetheless.

"It's beautiful," Kira whispered.

"It was handcrafted by artisans in Tozhat," Odo said. "They're working to reclaim Bajor's artistic heritage. I toured the area during my leave, after the occupation."

"You bought this then?"

"Ah…no," Odo said. "But fortunately, this station's civilian inhabitants can get to Bajor more easily than I can. A promenade shopkeeper sold it to me."

"Ah." Kira lifted the pendant from the box. Turning, she flashed him a smile over shoulder. "Put it on me?"

"Of course."

He could feel Kira's warmth against his substance as he draped the pendant over her front and fastened the clasp behind her neck, brushing a kiss to her skin.

As the music swelled around them, Kira turned to face him once more. She leaned into him and rested her head against the crook of his neck, swaying with him gently.

Odo's eyes slipped shut.

He wanted to remember this, to hold on to this. To revel in being able to make her happy.

*

When Odo descended the staircase, Kira at his side, his senses prickled. Something—no, *someone*—was out of place.

Scanning the immediate vicinity, his gaze landed on the Starfleet security officer—a Bolian man—stationed a discreet distance from the stairs.

Well. Discreet to anyone but *him*.

The officer's eyes flicked briefly in his direction—but not briefly enough—before he tapped his combadge. Odo could barely make out his voice over the din of Quark's late-night crowd.

"Vademm to T'Sorra."

Odo's eyes narrowed.

Kira frowned. "Something wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Odo said, on guard. He gave her shoulder a passing squeeze as he approached Vademm, then stared the officer down. "Report."

"Commander T'Sorra is on her way," Vademm replied.

"Why?"

"To speak to you," Vademm said. "I was ordered to wait and let her know when you left the holosuite." He paused, suddenly nervous. "Sir."

Kira stepped up behind him, fixing her own sharp gaze on Vademm. "Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

"Yes," T'Sorra answered as she marched in. "There is."

Odo kept his eyes narrowed, shifting his focus to her. "Commander, what's going on?"

"Sir, I wish to speak with you in Security," T'Sorra replied. "Immediately."

Odo exchanged a glance with Kira—and the bold authority in her eyes told him in no uncertain terms that she would be joining them.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

*

As his office doors slid shut behind them, Odo rounded his desk and took his seat, fixing T'Sorra with a glare. "Report."

In lieu of a reply, T'Sorra set a PADD on his desk.

Odo picked it up. Read the first few lines.

His eyes narrowed further.

"What is it?" Kira asked.

“Quark was caught in Cargo Bay Three,” Odo growled. “Smuggling Denevan crystals….with Jake Sisko.”

Kira blinked. “Jake?”

“I’m satisfied that *his* involvement is peripheral.” T’Sorra clasped her hands behind her back. “However, upon his arrest, Quark made a full confession. He admits to purposely distracting you with…*romantic* matters, so that his activities would escape your notice.”

“Hmph,” Odo muttered. “So he *was* planning something.”

He’d *thought* he’d observed a devious glint in Quark’s eye.

T’Sorra cocked her head. “You knew?”

Odo frowned up at her.

“You suspected Quark’s criminal intent,” T’Sorra said, “and yet you took no action?”

Odo’s substance clenched.

“Now, wait a minute,” Kira said. “Odo was off duty, spending time with me. This isn’t his fault. Besides, you caught them, didn’t you, Commander?”

“I did,” T’Sorra said. “But I question Odo’s focus on his job.”

“Commander—”

“No,” Odo said quietly. “She’s right.”

Kira turned to him, aghast.

“I noticed Quark’s behavior,” Odo said. “I shouldn’t have dismissed it.”

For a long moment, Kira stared at him, wordless. Then she swung back to face T’Sorra. “Commander, you’re dismissed.”

“Sir,” T’Sorra nodded.

She spun on her heel and exited the office.

Kira turned, planting her palms on Odo’s desk. “Odo, you can’t seriously believe this is your fault.”

Odo shook his head. “Nerys…over two years ago, I promised Captain Sisko I would never let my personal life interfere with my duty. It seems I just did.”

Kira’s jaw dropped. “Don’t tell me you regret the night we just had.”

“No,” Odo said softly, his eyes widening. “Not in the least.”

“Then…?”

“Nerys, I should have at least called in a deputy myself,” Odo said. “I could have assigned security to watch Quark and then focused on you. But I ignored his behavior entirely.” He lowered his eyes. “I failed in my duty.”

He’d been so caught up in his anxieties, his *need* to give Kira the perfect night, that he’d neglected his responsibilities.

He could not let this happen again.

“Odo, no,” Kira said. “You didn’t fail. Everyone errs now and then!”

“*I* don’t,” Odo said. “Not in my work. That’s why Captain Sisko keeps me in charge, instead of a Starfleet officer.”

Instead of T’Sorra.

Kira sighed, shaking her head. “Will you at least let the night shift relieve you? You’re supposed to be off duty right now.”

Odo managed a small smile. “If you insist.”

“I do,” Kira said, smiling.

She rounded his desk and took his hands in hers, then pressed a kiss to his fingers. Odo’s eyes slipped shut.

“Then I will,” he said softly.

“Good.”

Stardate: 51955.7

Odo hadn’t seen Kira all day—ever since he’d arrested Vedek Solis.

It wasn’t unheard of for them to go a day or two without seeing much of each other. The war kept Kira busy in Ops, and *him* busy on the promenade. But today, Deep Space Nine had hosted the Gratitude Festival, and he still hadn’t seen her.

Finally, he sought her out in the Bajoran shrine—a place he rarely entered without cause.

She was smiling.

Watching as a group of children ran to join their parents.

The captain passed him on his way out; Odo nodded briefly in greeting, even as he made a beeline for Kira.

Her eyes met his, sharp.

Then she turned and began unpinning a satin decoration from one wall of the shrine.

“Nerys, I’ve been looking for you,” he said.

“Yeah, well, I really don’t feel like talking to you right now.”

Her words pierced him like shards of ice.

“Nerys,” he tried, “it’s my *duty* to maintain order on the promenade.”

She turned, glared. “You arrested a vedek!”

“Because he broke the law!” Odo said, following her as she crossed the shrine to unpin another decoration. “Fundraising on the promenade without a license is strictly forbidden. Station Regulation 1526, paragraph 7—”

“Vedek Solis was raising funds for Bajoran flood victims!”

She crossed the shrine again, to the tall candlesticks burning near the altar.

“A very worthy cause!” Odo agreed. “Nevertheless, station regulations are quite clear—”

Kira rounded on him. “I don’t care about station regulations!”

She extinguished the candles, perfunctory, tension radiating from every movement.

Odo’s matrix tightened.

Maybe this wasn’t an argument he could win.

Seeking out something, *anything*, to change the subject, his gaze fell upon the orb on the altar. “Is-is-is that the Orb of Contemplation?”

Kira spun back around and looked him dead in the eye. “Goodbye, Odo.”

She stormed past him.

Odo watched her go, his substance churning—but the sensation was muted, distant.

Her love was a miracle. He’d known it couldn’t last.

He just hadn’t expected his *duty* to be their breaking point.

*

Dominion Headquarters | Cardassia

“Legate Damar,” said the Glinn, “excuse the interruption, but—”

Before the glinn could finish speaking, the Founder once known as Dr. Cox entered, followed closely by the Vorta Rivun and two Jem'Hadar guards—and Dukat.

Immediately, Weyoun lowered his eyes and spread his hands in deference. "Founder. You honor us with your presence."

The Founder ignored him.

"Dukat," Damar said.

Dukat glared from beneath his brow ridges. His teeth were gritted, the muscles in his neck straining, as flecks of flame sparked in his eyes.

Weyoun squinted. "What's happened to him?"

Damar, however, shifted on his feet. "About what happened to your daughter—"

The Founder raised a hand. "Enough."

Damar opened his mouth to protest, but Weyoun rounded on him, pinning him with a glare.

The tiniest of smiles graced the Founder's face.

"Rivun," the Founder said, "explain to them."

Rivun bowed slightly. "Yes, Founder."

Curiosity—of a calculating sort, befitting his breeding as a diplomat, but curiosity nonetheless—glinted in Weyoun's eyes as Rivun, bred for science, stepped forward.

"Weyoun," Rivun said, ignoring Damar, "you are of course aware of how Captain Benjamin Sisko orchestrated his victory over our occupational forces nearly a year ago?"

"Of course," Weyoun said. "Our fleet was wiped out by those…wormhole aliens."

"They're not just wormhole aliens," Rivun said. "Not to the Bajorans, anyway."

Damar huffed. "What does it matter what the Bajorans believe?"

Rivun's gaze flashed to Weyoun. "Is he always so shortsighted?"

"Oh, he has his uses," Weyoun chuckled, ignoring Damar's scowl. "Now, I believe you were about to tell me something about the wormhole aliens?"

"You know they're standing between us and bringing in reinforcements from the Gamma Quadrant," Rivun said. "And, conveniently, they support the moral fabric of Bajoran society. What's more, the Federation only occupies this sector on Bajor's invitation."

A smile teased at Weyoun's face. "Go on."

“If Bajor loses its gods,” Rivun said, “travel through the wormhole will reopen…and the Federation will struggle to guard it.” He paused. “We must destroy the Prophets.”

“How?” Weyoun asked.

Rivun smiled. “Founder…if I may?”

“Proceed.”

Weyoun watched with interest as Rivun withdrew a PADD from the folds of his vest and tapped at the screen. Suddenly, Dukat gasped and doubled over—and the sparks of flame in his pupils eclipsed his eyes entirely, even as every muscle in his body tensed and he drew in harsh pants through gritted teeth.

Damar started forward. “Dukat!”

Weyoun thrust out an arm, holding him back, even as his eyes narrowed. “What have you done to him?”

“We have weaponized him,” Rivun said.

“Weyoun,” the Founder spoke.

Weyoun lowered his eyes. “Yes, Founder.”

“This operation is in its final stages,” the Founder said. “Soon, you will be summoned to witness this vessel’s potential.”

Weyoun bowed his head. “I await your command, Founder.”

*

Deep Space Nine

Jake had barely left Sisko’s quarters—having insisted upon joining him on the *Defiant* when the task force left for Chin’toka, as a reporter—when that familiar, eerie dreamlike quality overtook Sisko’s surroundings.

He was in Ops—or, what looked like Ops—facing Worf across the situation table.

“The Sisko,” the Worf-Prophet said, “is of Bajor.”

Martok spoke, behind Sisko. “It is where he belongs.”

Then, Sisko was in his office—facing the wall. Admiral Ross’s voice spoke from behind him.

“It is where he is meant to be.”

Sisko turned, found the Ross-Prophet seated at the desk. “Are you telling me not to go to Cardassia?”

He was back at the situation table.

“The Sisko is of Bajor,” Ross said.

“It is dangerous to walk a different path,” said Martok.

“Dangerous?” Sisko asked. “In what way?”

Ross approached. “The false vessel will rise.”

“The false vessel?” Sisko repeated. He frowned. “That’s what you said during the Reckoning.”

Worf spoke. “The Sisko must not falter.”

Sisko’s brows pinched.

That was familiar, too.

“*What* false vessel?” Sisko demanded. “Tell me what you need me to do!”

Senator Letant spoke. “The Reckoning was aborted.”

“That’s right,” Sisko said. “By Kai Winn.”

“Kosst Amojan will rise,” said Martok.

“The Sisko,” Ross said, “must not leave the chosen path.”

Light flashed, and Sisko found himself alone in his quarters again.

*

“The Cardassians call them orbital weapon platforms,” Admiral Ross said, indicating the tactical display.

Sisko was barely listening.

He was gathered with Ross, Martok, and Senator Letant in the wardroom for a briefing on what they were up against in the Chin’toka system.

“Intelligence reports indicate,” Ross continued, “the Dominion has placed hundreds of them throughout the Chin’toka system.”

“Are they operational?” Sisko asked.

“No,” Ross said. “Not yet.”

Martok spoke up. “How much time do we have before they are?”

“Two, maybe three days.”

“So,” Letant said, “it would appear that your weak spot is about to become much stronger.”

Martok scoffed, chuckling. “Leave it to a Romulan to run at the first sign of trouble!”

“And leave it to a Klingon to leap to the wrong conclusion,” Letant said. “The Romulan Empire has agreed to join the invasion of Cardassia, and we live up to our agreements. The only question is: Can the invasion be launched before the defensive grid is activated?”

“We’ll have to leave first thing in the morning,” Martok said.

“Then it’s settled,” Ross said. “Good luck, gentlemen. Good luck to all of us.”

Letant’s brow twitched up. “Romulans don’t believe in *luck*.”

He headed for the door.

“All the better!” Martok called after him. After the door hummed shut behind the senator, he favored Sisko and Ross with a predatory grin. “It leaves more for the rest of us.”

Then Martok made his own exit.

Sisko stared at the tactical display, only half studying it. The rest of his mind was occupied with the Prophets’ words.

“Are you telling me not to go to Cardassia?”

…the false vessel will rise…

…the Sisko must not falter…

“You’ve been, uh, quiet, Ben,” Ross said. “Those weapon platforms have you worried?”

If only.

If this were a simple matter of tactical strategy, Sisko would know what to do—or, at least, would be confident about making a decision and facing the consequences.

But his duty as the Emissary had never been so straightforward.

“It’s not about that, sir,” he murmured.

For a long beat, he was silent.

This wasn’t a subject Ross was likely to understand. But if the Prophets were urging him not to go to Chin’toka…

“It’s about the Prophets.” He paced away, then winced, correcting himself. “Ah—the wormhole aliens. They spoke to me last night.”

He heard the tension in Ross’s voice. “I hope they gave the mission their blessing.”

“They told me not to go to Cardassia,” Sisko said. “That I should stay here.”

“Did they give you a reason?”

“Nothing concrete.” Sisko’s brows pinched. “They spoke of a ‘false vessel.’ Of Kosst Amojan. I think this has to do with the Reckoning.”

“When you made the call to abandon Deep Space Nine,” Ross said.

Sisko winced. “Admiral—”

“What is it you’re telling me, Ben?” Ross asked. “You want permission to stay behind?”

“It’s not about what *I* want,” Sisko said. “It’s about what the Prophets want.”

“That’s not a good enough answer,” Ross said. “Not from a Starfleet captain.”

Sisko faced him.

“The Prophets don’t see me as a Starfleet captain,” he said. “They see me as their Emissary.”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it?” Ross said. “For the past six years, you’ve tried to be both, and up to now, I’ve been patient. I’ve indulged you. I’ve gone out on a limb for you many times, but this is it. You’ve got to make a decision.”

Sisko’s gaze drifted away, troubled.

“You are either the Emissary or a Starfleet captain,” Ross said. “You can’t be both.”

Sisko took a deep breath.

Searched the room—as if he could find answers within these bulkheads, on the tactical display that faced him.

His duties as the Emissary and as a Starfleet officer had never been compatible…and were both equally impossible to shirk.

But when it came down to it…

If he *had* to make a choice…

“I’ll…”

He hesitated, then faced Ross.

“I’ll be on the *Defiant* bridge at 0500.”

*

Dominion Headquarters | Cardassia

“The combined fleet?” Damar asked. “At Deep Space Nine?”

“Composed of Federation, Klingon, and Romulan ships,” Weyoun told him.

Romulans.

Until three months ago, the nonaggression pact had held them well in check. Dominion intelligence didn’t know exactly who was responsible for Senator Vreenak’s death, but Weyoun had no doubt Sisko was involved.

Captain Benjamin Sisko was proving very…frustrating.

“You think they’ll head for the Chin’toka system?” Damar asked.

“I would.”

“Well, then.” Damar’s confident bluster was frustrating, too. “We have nothing to worry about. The weapon platforms will be operational in time to greet them.”

“That’s a very comforting thought,” Weyoun said. “If it’s accurate.”

“I’ll make sure that it is.”

Then the doors slid open. The Founder called his name.

“Founder.” He turned immediately, lowering his eyes and spreading his hands, Damar forgotten. “You honor us with your presence.”

“Come with me,” the Founder ordered.

Weyoun followed.

*

Dukat was slumped in the seat, head bowed against its back, his eyes closed.

He looked, for all intents and purposes, thoroughly neutralized.

Weyoun had known Dukat for too long—and had watched him nearly cost the Dominion the Alpha Quadrant—to make that assumption. But he put his faith in the Founders, and he was not here to offer advice. Not until it was asked of him.

Instead, he simply observed Dukat, his eyes narrowed.

The Founder nodded to the other Vorta, Rivun. “Activate him.”

Out the corner of Weyoun’s eye, Rivun tapped at his PADD.

Dukat’s body jerked.

His eyes opened.

They burned a deep, consuming red.

All the while, wisps of red energy leaped and swirled about his body like the flames of a fire, licking against his skin and clothes.

There was still cognizance in that face. Weyoun could see it in the tightness of the lines around Dukat's mouth, in his clenched teeth, in the strain of his neck muscles. In the harsh, labored rise and fall of his chest.

What Dukat lacked, Weyoun could see, was free will.

He was fully aware. But he was aware of whatever had been done to him—and there was nothing he could do about it.

Which begged the question…

"I beg indulgence," Weyoun murmured. "What has been done to him?"

The Founder smiled serenely. "It is no indulgence, Weyoun. As the Vorta overseeing this war, this falls under your purview." He looked to the other Vorta. "Rivun, explain."

Rivun stepped forward. "He is a vessel for a Pah-wraith."

"A Pah-wraith?" Weyoun asked.

"An enemy of the Prophets," Rivun said.

Weyoun turned. "And I take it this Pah-wraith can…destroy the Prophets?"

"That is its purpose," Rivun said. "And we have ensured it."

Weyoun narrowed his eyes.

"Since before Captain Sisko deployed the minefield," Rivun said, "we have extracted Pah-wraiths from the Bajoran fire caves and worked to engineer them. And once we got access to Dukat—"

"Got access?" Weyoun repeated.

The Founder spoke. "I replaced the Federation doctor assigned to treat him."

Weyoun smiled. "Oh, the Founder is wise."

"For more than six months now," Rivun said, "we have been administering doses of chroniton radiation and resequencing his cellular structure. We have made his body the perfect host."

"Weyoun," the Founder said.

"Yes, Founder."

“I understand the enemy is poised to attack Chin’toka?”

“That’s correct,” Weyoun said.

“Let them,” said the Founder. “I want you to keep them occupied in that system. While you do, Rivun will lead a battalion to Deep Space Nine. We will unleash the Pah-wraith upon the wormhole.”

Weyoun bowed his head. “It will be done."

Chapter End Notes

I actually *like* Odo letting Quark have a win in the original episode, and not even letting Quark know that he’s being *handed* a win. But the way I’m handling the current arc of “To Have and to Hold,” I felt this worked best to play on Odo’s doubts.

Also…guys, why the heck does Odo take Kira to *Paris*? I can see *him* in Paris, if he’s there to make her happy, but I can’t see *Kira* in Paris. The trope of Trek characters loving Earth history strikes again, except it’s a *Bajoran*. Like, come on. So I fixed it.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The allied Federation fleet attacks Chin'toka.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Tears of the Prophets," part 2

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stardate: 51958.8 | Deep Space Nine

Odo stayed in his office long into the night, occupying himself with reports and communiques that could easily have waited till morning—just as he had for the past three days.

At this rate, he was going to run out of work to keep busy. And that wasn't something he'd previously thought possible.

Then his doors hummed open.

He looked up—and *Nerys* entered.

She was…smiling?

"Busy?" she asked.

"Uh…" He fumbled. "A little."

"Well, the captain's leaving with the task force first thing in the morning," Kira said. "I'll have Ops tomorrow."

"I heard."

He stared down at his PADD.

"And…?"

“And…” Odo winced, looking back up at her. “I’m sorry I arrested him. I only meant to do my duty—I was afraid to risk neglecting it. But I can see how it might have seemed excessive.”

Kira squinted. “What are you talking about?”

“Vedek Solis?” Odo said. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“No,” Kira said. “But now I know why you’ve been avoiding me for the past few days.”

Odo’s eyes widened. “I haven’t been avoiding you. I’ve been…helping *you* to avoid *me*!”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because…you don’t want us to be together anymore?”

Kira softened. “Is that what you’ve been thinking?”

She rounded his desk to lean against its edge. Then Odo’s entire substance froze as she took his hands in hers.

“Odo,” she murmured, “we had an argument. But I’ve known since the Reckoning that you’re the one I want to be with, forever.”

Odo blinked.

He couldn’t have drawn breath if he’d tried.

…*forever*…

Was he hearing things?

“Odo?” she asked.

He cleared his throat. “You—you mean that?”

“Of course.”

“But…”

“But what?” she asked softly.

Odo’s eyes fluttered shut.

He might as well just say it. He’d already thought their relationship was over; the worst she could do was confirm that after all.

He sighed. “Nerys…I can’t give you children.”

He watched her, bracing himself for the realization that would cross her face, the disappointment.

But it didn’t come.

“What?” she asked.

“I can’t—”

She put up a hand. “No, I heard what you said. But—let me get this straight. You think I’d leave you because you can’t give me children?”

He looked up at her. “Wouldn’t you?”

“Why would you think that?”

Odo frowned. “Three weeks ago, on the *Defiant*, when you watched Kirayoshi…you said you might want a child of your own.”

Then, realization *did* cross her face.

But it was accompanied by softness.

“Is *that* what’s been bothering you the last few weeks?” she asked.

Odo sighed. Nodded.

“Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“I was…too afraid of the answer,” Odo admitted. “I suppose I just…wanted to enjoy what we had while it lasted.”

Kira’s face creased with sympathy.

“And,” Odo added, “after the Reckoning…I worried that coming to you like that all the time wouldn’t be romantic. It seemed you’d spent our entire relationship…comforting me. I couldn’t imagine you’d tolerate that for long.”

“Odo,” Kira said, squeezing his fingers, “I *love* it when you talk to me. And to tell you the truth, it’s wonderful to be able to hold you.”

He stared up at her in bafflement. “Why?”

“Wouldn’t you get the same satisfaction from being there for me, comforting me?”

“Without a doubt.” Odo smiled. “I…think I understand.”

“Good,” Kira said. “And on the subject of children, if we want to one day, we can adopt. Or get a surrogate. We have options.”

Her words stopped Odo in his tracks. “You…want to raise a child with me?”

She smiled. “Someday, maybe. If you do.”

Odo’s eyes blew wide.

She *wanted* him.

Loved him.

Was committed to him.

…you’re the one I want to be with, forever…

…I’ve known since the Reckoning…

This was, he knew, born out of his respect for her—for her faith, her beliefs, her choices, even when it had pained him. Even when it had torn him apart inside. Even when the sight of her lying in her grave was burned into his memory.

She had chosen him.

That was worth…everything.

He would gladly bear his memories of Gaia—and of the Reckoning—if it meant Kira felt respected.

“*Nerys,*” he murmured.

Smiling, Kira knelt before his chair, his hands still clasped in hers. “I *love* you, Odo.”

“And I love you.”

“*And,*” she said, “I’ll be tied to Ops, tomorrow, while the captain’s away…so I thought we could spend tonight together.”

Odo’s entire being loosened. “That’s a wonderful idea.”

“Then I’ll see you later,” she said softly.

“I look forward to that.”

“Good.”

Her smile brightened her entire face, captivating him. And then she leaned up to press a soft kiss to his lips.

Time stopped. The world beyond drifted behind a haze as every atom of Odo’s being shivered at the contact, as his breath stalled in his chest, savoring the feel of her lips against his.

Savoring the knowledge that he got to *keep* this.

That she *loved* him, just as he had loved her for so many years.

That she chose him, as her partner.

That this would *last*.

Happiness was…in the cards for him, it seemed. Something he'd never quite thought possible in the years he'd spent alone.

Kira pulled back.

"You know, Nerys…" Odo weaved their fingers together. "Observing humanoid relationships and being in one…are very different things."

She smiled. "Like night and day."

*

Dominion Headquarters | Cardassia

Damar studied the tactical readout. "The enemy fleet is approaching the Chin'toka system."

"What's the status of our weapon platforms?" Weyoun asked.

Damar hesitated a beat.

"Still off line."

Weyoun sighed. "It pains me to say this, but you Cardassians are proving to be quite a disappointment."

Damar turned. "I'll remind you that you said that."

Weyoun chuckled lightly, shaking his head.

What was it with Cardassians and their constant need to bluster and posture? They seemed far more concerned with reputation and power than results.

And *results* were what the Dominion needed.

*

The doors to Damar's quarters had barely hummed shut behind him when a voice croaked from the dark.

"Damar?"

Damar frowned. "Dukat?"

There was no answer—only labored breathing.

"Computer, lights," Damar ordered.

The room became illuminated, revealing Dukat hunched on the couch, one elbow braced against the armrest as he white-knuckled the leather.

“Dukat?” Damar asked again. “What are you—?”

“*Help me,*” Dukat gritted out.

Damar’s eyes flicked over his old mentor’s form—from his tightly clenched teeth, to the tension that radiated from every muscle, to his burning red eyes.

“What’s happened to you?” Damar asked.

“I’ve been…possessed.” Dukat stood and leaned heavily on the crest of the couch. “It’s called a Pah-wraith. A demon of Bajoran…superstition.” He growled the word. “You have to help me.”

“Do they know you’re here?”

“Rivun has me on a tight leash. I’ve managed to lengthen it by being suitably…docile.” The last word, he uttered though gritted teeth. “I will *not* be an instrument for someone else’s purpose!”

Damar hesitated. He knew better than to defy the Dominion.

“*Damar.*”

Dukat’s burning glare—paired with the wild tension in his face—brooked no argument.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Damar said.

He’d barely uttered the words before Dukat spasmed. His eyes went wild as his mouth opened in a silent, agonized cry, and a haze of red energy momentarily lifted from his body before swirling violently around him. Dukat jerked and stumbled back, fingers scrabbling ineffectually at the couch crest before he collapsed to the floor.

“Dukat!”

Damar rushed to his side, only to be interrupted as the doors to his quarters slid open. Rivun entered, flanked by two Jem’Hadar.

Didn’t the Vorta have any concept of privacy?

“Step aside,” ordered Rivun.

Damar glared up at him. Dukat, meanwhile, was straining, his neck muscles bulging as he thrashed beneath the onslaught.

“I said,” Rivun ordered, “step aside.”

“What are you doing to him?” Damar demanded.

“He has brought this punishment upon himself,” Rivun said. “The Pah-wraith within him does not take kindly to disobedience. Now step aside.”

The Jem’Hadar took aim.

Damar scowled. But he would be a fool to defy a Jem’Hadar; Weyoun never ceased to remind him of his place within the Dominion.

He got to his feet and backed away from Dukat. Then he watched as the Jem’Hadar dragged his still-thrashing mentor away.

*

Stardate: 51959.2 | Deep Space Nine

“If you ask me,” the Chief said, yawning, “it’s an ungodly hour to go to war. You can quote me on that.”

Jake chuckled. “I will.”

“Oh, Jadzia,” O’Brien called over his shoulder, “will you look in on Keiko and the kids while I’m gone?”

Dax nodded. “You can count on it.”

“And try to keep Julian out of trouble.”

“Now that’s pushing,” Dax teased as he and the others ducked through the airlock to the *Defiant*.

Benjamin looked past her to Kira. “It’s your station, Major.”

Kira dipped her chin. “Good luck, Captain.”

Benjamin nodded.

“Benjamin,” Dax called.

He turned.

“Give ’em hell.”

A broad grin spread across Benjamin’s face before he disembarked through the airlock.

“Well,” Kira said, “I’d better get up to Ops.”

As she spoke, Worf approached the airlock.

“I’ll be right there,” Dax told Kira.

Kira smiled over her shoulder; no doubt she knew Dax wanted to see Worf off.

“Oh!” Suddenly, Kira turned. “Jadzia, I said a prayer at the shrine last night for the two of you.”

“About having a baby?” Dax asked.

“The Prophets can be helpful in such matters,” Kira said, squeezing her arm.

Dax’s heart fluttered; she pressed a hand to her chest. “Oh, I hope they’re listening.”

Smiling warmly, Kira headed down the corridor.

“Did you hear that?” Dax sidled up to Worf. “We have the Prophets on our side.”

*

USS Defiant

As the fleet warped into the Chin’toka system, a green-blue planet dotted with clouds filled the viewscreen—surrounded by automated defense platforms shaped like metal claws.

“Looks like we’re in luck, Captain,” the Chief reported. “The defensive grid’s still off-line.”

“There are Jem’Hadar fighters approaching,” said T’Sorra. “Bearing 059 mark 031.”

Nog’s eyes were locked on the viewscreen. “They must know they don’t stand a chance against a fleet this size.”

“That will not matter to the Jem’Hadar,” Worf said.

Meanwhile, Jake tapped his stylus idly against his PADD as he drifted closer to the viewscreen—and, unconsciously, closer to his father.

Sisko sensed his movement. “Sit down, Jake.”

“…Right,” Jake said.

The comm beeped. *“Martok to Sisko.”*

“Go ahead.”

“My attack wing is closest to those Jem’Hadar fighters,” said Martok. *“Preparing to engage.”*

“Good luck, General,” Sisko said.

Five Klingon warbirds peeled away from the fleet to meet the incoming fighters. Phasers struck—and then a Jem’Hadar fighter twirled directly into a collision course with one of the warbirds.

The warbird blew, taking the fighter with it.

Almost simultaneously, two more fighters dove into a pair of Vor’cha cruisers, tearing them apart.

A warbird scored a hit—only for the damaged fighter to tumble straight down the middle of another Vor'cha.

Nog watched with alarm. "I always thought the Jem'Hadar were crazy."

Sisko was pleased—or was that disturbed?—to note the distinct lack of panic in the ensign's voice. He had come a long way. But no cadet deserved to be battle-hardened so quickly.

"There's method to their madness," Garak said. "They're inflicting considerable damage on the Klingons."

"And," Worf added, "buying time to get their weapon platforms operational."

"Sisko to Martok," Sisko said.

Martok opened a channel on-screen. *"The Jem'Hadar have managed to cripple or destroy fifteen of my ships."*

"Do you need any assistance?"

"That won't be necessary," Martok said. *"Commence firing on the weapon platforms."*

"You heard him," Sisko said.

The fleet moved in.

Phasers fired; several of the platforms blew. The *Defiant* jolted as it cruised past one just as it exploded.

Then, as Sisko watched, the platforms ahead began to rotate to face the fleet, their claws opening up. Torpedoes launched and struck the fleet. One phaser beam drilled brutally though an Excelsior-class ship's hull; the starship tumbled away, adrift, as one pylon blew.

*

Dominion Headquarters | Cardassia

Damar and Weyoun watched with satisfaction as the weapon platforms activated and tore through the incoming fleet.

"I believe you owe me an apology," Damar said.

Weyoun was smiling. "I believe you're right."

Damar smirked.

"Imagine," Weyoun said, his gaze still locked on the tactical readout. "As we speak, a battalion is headed for Deep Space Nine. We'll have reinforcements through the wormhole within the hour."

Damar shot him a side glance. "What you're doing to Dukat—"

Weyoun glared. “—is no less than he deserves.”

Damar scowled.

“Need I remind you,” Weyoun said, “your former mentor nearly cost us the Alpha Quadrant.”

“Then this is his punishment?”

Weyoun chuckled. “How petty. This is strategic—nothing more, nothing less. Any *punishment* is incidental.”

Damar scoffed.

“Although,” Weyoun added, “the fact that a previously unpredictable element has not only been neutralized but engineered to service our aims…” He scanned the readout idly. “It’s quite ingenious.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying this,” Damar muttered.

*

USS Defiant

On the battlefront, the weapon platforms were tearing through the fleet. An Akira-class starship, already missing half a nacelle, was struck with three phaser beams at once; plasma caught fire on its hull and burned through its saucer.

Meanwhile, a warbird collided with a platform and lost a wing. It twirled past a Vor’cha cruiser whose neck had torn apart.

The *Defiant* itself shuddered under fire.

“We are unable to penetrate their forcefields,” Worf reported.

“Captain,” Garak said, swiveling. “I’ve just noted something odd about those platforms.”

He was silent for a solid second.

Damned enigmatic—

“Well, don’t keep it to yourself, Mr. Garak!” Sisko said.

“Not one of them seems to have a power generator on board.”

Oh, *that* could be useful.

“He’s right,” O’Brien reported. “Each one seems to be getting its power from a central source.”

“Then we must find that source,” Worf said, “and destroy it.”

“Chief?” Sisko asked.

“I’m on it!”

*

Deep Space Nine

Dax strolled the promenade upper level alongside Julian. She was due in Ops shortly, but she had a little time.

And at this very moment, work was the furthest thing from her mind.

“According to the DNA scans I did this morning,” Julian said, “the ovarian resequencing enzymes I gave you…appear to be working.”

He lifted his chin with an air of satisfaction. Dax stopped wringing her hands.

“You mean, Worf and I can have a baby?”

Julian grinned. “It certainly looks that way.”

Butterflies danced in Dax’s stomach.

“I must say,” Julian continued, “I didn’t expect such positive results so early. It’s quite amazing, actually.”

Dax threw her arms around him. “Oh, thank you, Julian!”

She released him a moment later; he smiled, nonplussed, and squeezed her hands. “It’s all part of being a doctor.”

“Oh, no, it’s more than that,” Dax insisted. “You’re a good friend. You always have been.”

“And I always will be,” Julian said.

She knew it was the truth.

“Well,” she said, composing herself, “I’d better get back to work.” She nodded to herself, making a decision. “But first I’m going to stop by the Bajoran shrine.”

Julian’s brows furrowed. “What for?”

“Kira said a prayer for me and Worf last night,” Dax said, smiling brightly. “She told the Prophets how much we wanted a baby.”

“Well, I’d say they’ve been listening,” Julian said. “That is, if you believe in the Prophets.”

Dax laughed, grinning. “Oh, well, I do today!”

She squeezed his shoulder. But she had barely stepped past him when her combadge chirped.

“Kira to Dax.”

She sobered. “Dax here.”

“Report to Ops immediately.”

A cold weight settled in Dax’s stomach. “Is there a problem?”

“There’s a Jem’Hadar battalion approaching.”

She and Julian shared a dark look.

“On my way,” Dax said.

*

The station shuddered under phaser fire as Dax rode the turbolift up to Ops.

“Incoming transmission,” reported tactical, just as Dax assumed her science station.

“On screen,” Kira ordered.

An unfamiliar Vorta appeared on the viewscreen. *“I am Rivun. The first shot was a warning. I don’t suppose you’d care to lower your shields and make this easier on all of us?”*

“I don’t think so, Rivun,” Kira said.

Rivun smiled. *“If you insist.”*

The comm line severed, reverting to a view of the attacking ships. It was a small fleet—fifty registering on sensors—but still more than enough to take on Deep Space Nine.

“I sure wish the Ninth Fleet were here,” Dax muttered.

The deck jolted; Kira caught herself on the situation table. “We’ll have to manage without them.”

The Jem’Hadar fighters swarmed in toward the station.

“They’re firing phasers,” reported tactical.

“Return fire,” Kira ordered.

The station shuddered beneath Dax’s feet. On the viewscreen, several phaser beams struck home; the disabled fighters tumbled beyond the docking ring.

Then Dax’s console beeped an alert. She frowned at the display.

“Sir,” tactical reported, “it appears they’re only targeting the shield generators.”

“Divert auxiliary power,” Kira said.

“Strange,” Dax said. “Rivun specifically asked us to lower our shields. Not surrender.”

Kira’s eyes flashed to hers.

Then Dax’s console beeped again—and her brows furrowed as she registered the data.

“Major,” she said, “I’m detecting unusual readings from the wormhole.”

Ops shuddered again; sparks flew.

“What kind of unusual readings?” Kira asked.

“Neutrino emissions are off the scale.” Dax frowned. “These readings are almost identical to __”

Suddenly, the station jolted *hard*—sending Dax flying back into the console behind her. She hauled herself back upright, ignoring the pain in her neck.

“Report!” Kira ordered.

“A compressed tachyon beam just struck the docking ring,” said tactical. “Shields have failed!”

Kira braced herself against the situation table.

“Major,” Dax said, fingers flying across her readouts, “I’m detecting a transporter beam on __”

“Odo to Kira.”

Kira tapped her combadge. “Report, Constable.”

“Dukat has just beamed onto the promenade.”

“Dukat?”

Kira and Dax exchanged a glance.

“Major, he looks the way Jake did when the Pah-wraith possessed him.”

Kira sucked in a sharp breath. Dax watched a myriad of emotions flash across her face—running the gamut of alarm, fear, and a flicker of awed dread before settling on steely determination.

“Any sign of a Prophet?” she asked.

“Negative, Major.”

Kira nodded once, decisively.

“Toryes,” Kira ordered tactical, “status of the Jem’Hadar ships?”

“Still concentrating fire on the docking ring.” Toryes frowned. “They don’t seem to be making any attempt to destroy the station. They’re just keeping our shields disabled.”

“Try to raise them,” Kira ordered. “Dax, can you activate the chroniton generator?”

“On it,” Dax said.

“Odo,” Kira ordered, “status?”

“Dukat appears to be headed for the Bajoran shrine.” Odo paused. *“He’s made no attempt to attack or interact with my deputies.”*

“Don’t let him reach the shrine,” Kira said. “Whatever it takes!”

“Understood, Major.”

“Major,” Dax said, “I have the chroniton generator ready.”

Kira nodded. “Now.”

Dax pressed the activation key. All around them, a strange whine emitted from the bulkheads —but, of course, there was no effect on any corporeal entity.

“Major,” Odo reported, *“there’s something wrong.”*

“Report!”

“Dukat doesn’t seem to be affected.” He hesitated; Dax could hear the generator as a distant whine over the comm. *“He seems to be…displaced, somehow. As if he’s in two places at once.”*

Kira spun to Dax. “Dax, go see what’s going on.”

Immediately, Dax grabbed a tricorder and made a beeline for the turbolift.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, guys…years ago, I read a fic “fixing” the O/K scene in Odo’s office. At her “Don’t change the subject,” he breaks: “I’m not changing the subject!” and points out that she’s never actually told him she loves him.

I stand by that. The scene *bugs* me — but it actually bugs me for a deeper reason. That little dialogue oversight is just one of myriad ways that the O/K *romantic* relationship feels shallowly handled to me, without the deep emotional *bonding* these two deserve.

Giving them that deep bonding is the reason “To Have and to Hold” exists. In this fic, she’s already said “I love you” half a million times. But I built a *different* sort of “Odo

doubts their future” arc up to this episode, culminating in T’Sorra’s questioning in Chapter 18 and then *real conversations*.

It was important to me to take full advantage of this scene and conclude Season 6 on a properly secure note for the O/K relationship, because in Season 7…they’re gonna *need* it. Badly.

Now, here's another story...

"To Have and to Hold" was conceived as an Odo/Kira fix-it fic. It has always revolved around a single line: in "His Way," when the supposedly insightful Vic Fontaine tells poor Odo that he's "frozen solid" and suggests that he has no emotions. Odo deserves better than that from a character meant to be a cross between Guinan and Ben from TNG: "Lower Decks." And I wanted to *show* Kira falling in love with him gradually, rather than that sudden, forced "moment of clarity" we got in the show.

The retcon was originally supposed to begin during "His Way" and follow the Odo/Kira relationship from there. It would've been a simple montage, and it certainly wouldn't have exceeded 80,000 words.

But once I'd decided to start a retcon, I went down a rabbit hole. I figured this was my chance to fix *other* things about the show that bugged me, too. At first, those changes still revolved entirely around Odo/Kira. Gaia became a theme that stuck with them for months after the episode. I deep-dived the Dominion War. Then, it occurred to me to fix *Dukat*, too.

And *then*, I realized something that should have been obvious to me all along: if I could fix the Pah-wraiths so that they didn't feel so much like they were falling off the edges of the canon plot, they could beautifully patch up a plot hole in my planned post-canon *Dauntless* series.

And so, the arc with Dukat, the Pah-wraiths, and the Dominion was born.

I have been *so* excited to get to this point in the story. But we're not done yet—the "valse vessel" plot has merely laid the groundwork for some massive changes to Season 7. I can't wait to share it all with you!

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The Dominion's "false vessel" rises.

Chapter Notes

Canon-divergent

Continuity: "Tears of the Prophets," part 3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dukat seemed to be…vibrating, somehow. It was like seeing double, back when Odo was a Solid, each image just slightly displaced. Like a string pulled taut.

That was new. But the burning red eyes weren't. He *looked* like Kosst Amojan.

Was *this* what the Prophets had failed to stop?

During the Reckoning, the one that had possessed Kira had mentioned a "false vessel"—was that Dukat?

His deputies had phasers trained, but their aim was wavering. Odo himself wasn't sure, if he were to lash out with a tentacle of his substance, he would manage to strike his target.

His deputies were afraid, too. Steadily backing with Dukat's equally slow advance, eyes flickering side to side, hands trembling where they grasped their phasers.

"Steady!" Odo ordered, keeping a close eye.

He couldn't lose their focus.

Dukat himself seemed…distant. Unseeing. There was no glint of danger in his eyes, no rage twisting his features. As if he were merely a vessel. His muscles were coiled, but it seemed all the intent in the body before Odo was that of a Pah-wraith, not the former prefect of Bajor.

A turbolift hummed nearby. Footsteps rushed. A Starfleet tricorder whirred.

"Confirmed," Dax reported. "There are two separate entities inhabiting his body."

“I know that, Commander!” Odo said. “Why is he—?”

“Checking.” A few tricorder beeps. Then, “You’re right—he *is* temporally displaced.”

“Dax, report,” Kira ordered.

Dax tapped her combadge, even as she backed with Dukat’s advance at Odo’s side, flanked by the deputies. “His cellular structure’s been altered. He’s deflecting the chroniton radiation before it can reach the Pah-wraith.”

As she spoke, Dukat’s mouth twisted into a grimace of pain.

“Then the generator won’t work,” Kira said.

“Negative,” Dax said.

“Find me another solution. Kira out.”

Dax’s tricorder whirred again. She kept backing alongside Odo, past one of the promenade kiosks. They were drawing near the shrine.

Dax tapped rapidly at her readout. “There!”

“Commander?” Odo asked.

Dax’s gaze hardened. Then Dukat stopped mid-stride.

“What are you—” Odo started.

“Give me a minute,” Dax said, still working furiously at her tricorder.

Dukat’s face twisted into a snarl; his eyes were wide and his brow ridges pinched with pain, and *that*, Odo thought, was all him. His form seemed to vibrate even harder, its frequency rising and yet…tightening, somehow, like it was being squeezed into just one place but shuddering in protest.

“I’m generating a interference signal,” Dax said. “Confining his temporal amplitude.”

Odo had no idea what that meant. “Just tell me it’s working!”

“So far,” Dax answered.

Dukat had yet to step them closer to the shrine. His teeth were gritted, hands fisted tight at his sides, his brow ridges lowering over his eyes in fury.

And then he thrust out a hand, fingers splayed.

Dax flew backward, head over heels, crumpling when her body struck a kiosk.

“Commander!” Odo shouted.

Dukat spoke then, his voice deep and resonant. “Move aside.”

Odo’s deputies were quaking with terror, glancing at him and each other in panic.

“Stand where you are!” Odo ordered.

Dukat’s vibrations built in intensity. Odo found himself fiercely grateful he wasn’t humanoid; he was better able to keep his gaze locked on this entity.

“Commander?” he called, his gaze still fixed on Dukat.

“I’m alright!” Dax said.

He heard her roll to her feet, then registered the distant whir of her tricorder.

Dukat *bellowed*.

There was no other way to describe the sound that emitted from his chest at a deep, inhuman register, more befitting of the sound within a great horn than any organic being. His eyes flashed a brilliant, burning red, and flames curdled across his body, leaping and spiraling. The air itself seemed to shudder.

“Commander…?” Odo called.

Dax’s tricorder whirred. “I’ll try to—”

Then his arm thrust forward again, emitting a column of flame that struck her square in the chest. Odo’s eyes blew wide as Dax’s body convulsed and her own eyes rolled back, pain and fear painting her features. Dukat bore down, his features twisting into pure, dark hatred.

“Commander!” Odo shouted.

Dukat’s gaze flashed his way. Without lessening his onslaught on Dax for a second, he lifted his other arm and Odo was thrown backward to impact the bulkhead.

He rolled upright just in time to see Dax convulse violently before her body slammed to the floor.

She tumbled over, limp.

The column of flame withdrew.

“Commander?” Odo checked.

No answer.

He tapped his combadge. “Dr. Bashir to the promenade. Medical emergency.”

“On my way.”

Dukat scanned the promenade left and right; Odo's deputies backed away, and Odo found himself at a loss for how to stop them.

What orders could he give, anyway?

How could they stop a Pah-wraith?

Dukat stepped past him, indifferent now, even as his form still seemed to vibrate in place. He advanced steadily toward the shrine.

Odo tapped his combadge. "Major, he's headed for the shrine. I've been unable to stop him."

"Dax…?"

"She's down." He glanced across the promenade; Dax had yet to move. "No movement."

"Acknowledged." Kira paused. *"Follow him, but keep your distance. If you see any opportunity—"*

"I will, Major."

Odo rolled to his feet and started after Dukat, just as he stepped through the shrine archway.

"He's inside," Odo reported.

"Be careful, Constable."

Cautiously, Odo followed. As he stepped through the archway himself, he caught sight of Dukat standing before the altar, his hands raised; the forcefield flickered beneath his palms, then disengaged.

Dukat reached for the ark doors.

"Major, he's opening the orb," Odo said.

"Can you stop him?"

Desperately, Odo scanned his surroundings, but came up empty. "I don't see how."

Dukat opened the ark. The orb's light filled the chamber, pale blue and ethereal.

Then Dukat's elbows tensed down to his sides. He spasmed—once, twice.

The space in front of him was illuminated with red flame.

Odo watched, transfixed, as the Pah-wraith's energy poured into the orb—as Dukat's head tipped back on a terrible scream that filled the shrine and grated against his cells.

Then Dukat slumped to the floor.

The orb upon the altar was dark, black and shriveled as coal.

Odo rushed forward, hesitating only briefly when a Dominion transporter effect shimmered, and Dukat's body was beamed away before his eyes. He darted to the orb, his gaze flickering over it, around it, searching for some sign or clue he could understand.

"Major." He cleared his throat, forced his voice to work. "The orb is…dark."

There was a beat of silence.

"What do you mean, dark?"

"I don't know." Odo's breath hitched. "If I were a ranjen, or a vedek, or even a science officer, then maybe—"

"Odo, just tell me what you see."

"It looks…dead." He winced at Kira's sharp, involuntary inhale. "Shriveled. Like coal."

Again, there was only silence.

This time, though, it lasted longer than a beat. It swelled over the comm.

"Major?" Odo asked.

"The wormhole," Kira gasped. *"It just…collapsed."*

*

USS Defiant

Sisko shuddered and leaned against the crest of his chair, suddenly dizzy.

For the briefest of moments, it was as if something had reached for him and *tugged*, something displaced from this time. Something…familiar.

Then it was gone, as if it had never been there.

"Dad, what is it?" Jake asked.

His son's words barely registered. Neither did the shudder of the bridge beneath phaser fire.

"I'm not sure," Sisko murmured. "I think I felt the Prophets…reaching out to me."

Now, he couldn't feel them at all. There was a strange, unnameable emptiness spreading through his chest, cold and hollow.

"Something's wrong," he murmured.

"Sir, I found it," O'Brien said suddenly. "There's a subspace power generator on a small moon orbiting the far planet. It's transmitting energy to the weapon platforms."

But the Chief's words wouldn't land.

The Chief swiveled. “Captain?”

Sisko’s head was still spinning.

“Lay in a course,” Worf ordered; dimly, Sisko registered him take the captain’s chair.

“Aye, sir,” Nog said.

“Mr. Sisko,” Worf said to Jake, “take your father to his quarters.”

Sisko barely registered his son squeeze his shoulder and guide him off the bridge.

*

“Approaching the target,” Nog reported.

“On screen,” Worf ordered.

A small, misshapen moon appeared on the viewscreen, riddled with conduits and transmitters, even as the *Defiant* shuddered beneath incoming weapon fire.

“Target locked,” T’Sorra reported.

“Fire,” Worf ordered.

The fleet came in for a pass, phasers scorching.

“No effect,” T’Sorra said. “We can’t penetrate the moon’s defensive grid.”

The bridge shuddered.

“Sir,” O’Brien said, “I have an idea.”

“Report,” said Worf.

“Maybe *we* can’t destroy that power generator,” O’Brien said, “but I bet those weapon platforms could.”

T’Sorra cocked a brow. “They will not fire on their own power source.”

Garak turned, catching on. “They might, if we could fool the platform’s targeting systems into thinking the generator’s an enemy ship.”

“We can use our deflector array to imprint a Federation warp signature on the generator’s energy matrix,” O’Brien said.

“That…” T’Sorra tilted her chin. “…could work.”

Worf nodded. “Proceed.” The bridge shuddered again; sparks flew from the consoles. “Evasive maneuvers! Pattern theta!”

The *Defiant* swerved side to side as the fleet passed across the moon. A Klingon warbird blew.

“Induction stabilizers set,” O’Brien reported. “Booster modulators synchronized. Ready to activate deflector!”

“Now!” Worf ordered.

One minute, the *Defiant* was dodging phaser beams as it passed between several of the weapon platforms. The next, all the platforms in sight rotated to aim at the moon. Torpedoes fired at the central power generator—and the entire array across the moon’s surface blew in a brilliant fireball.

“We did it!” Nog cried.

As the fleet cruised on, the platforms began to fold and shut down. Phaser beams blasted the now-defenseless structures to pieces.

The comm beeped. *“Martok to* Defiant.*”*

“Go ahead, General,” Worf answered.

“Excellent work,” Martok said. *“We will begin transporting ground troops to both planets immediately.”*

The comm disengaged—only to beep again.

“Captain,” O’Brien reported, “we’re receiving a priority one transmission from Deep Space Nine.” He paused. “Medical emergency.”

*

Dominion Headquarters | Cardassia

Weyoun watched the tactical readout with alarm as the Federation fleet tore through Chin’toka’s armaments.

The weapon platforms were destroyed, their power source obliterated—so much for Damar’s confidence. He was proving to be too much like his mentor. Overconfident, blustering, arrogantly self-assured. His people *were* a disappointment.

Then the door slid open, and Rivun entered.

“Well?” Weyoun demanded. “Where are our reinforcements?”

Rivun’s eyes flicked side to side.

The Founder stepped forward. “Answer him.”

“They won’t be coming,” Rivun said quietly.

Weyoun advanced a step. “What do you mean they won’t be coming?”

Rivun shifted on his feet. “The experiment failed. The Pah-wraith was unleashed on the wormhole, but…the wormhole has sealed shut.”

“*What?*” Weyoun said.

The Founder spoke up. “You were instructed to ensure that Bajor’s gods were destroyed, but that the wormhole would remain open.”

“Yes, Founder.” Rivun bowed his head. “I beg forgiveness.”

There was a pregnant beat, during which Weyoun’s gaze flicked ever so briefly to the Founder, awaiting his god’s judgment.

The Founder spoke to the Jem’Hadar. “First, execute him.”

Rivun barely had time to sink to his knees before he was vaporized.

“I beg the Founder’s wisdom,” Weyoun said. “Without the wormhole—”

“You will hold Cardassia for the Dominion,” the Founder said. “Continue breeding Alpha Jem’Hadar. Reinforce our deployment in key zones. Ensure our shipyards are protected.”

Weyoun bowed his head. “Yes, Founder.”

“And,” the Founder added, “keep a close watch on Bajoran space. I suspect we may soon spy an opportunity.”

*

Deep Space Nine

Kira paced back and forth in the infirmary. Odo stood at her side, stalwart, his arms folded across his chest.

Even before she’d fallen in love with him, she’d always drawn such strength from his steady, rigid presence. The firm wall at her back. Now, as he watched her with that fathomless mix of concern and devotion in his eyes, she appreciated him even more.

The doors opened, and Worf barged in, headed straight for the surgical suite.

Neither Kira nor Odo stopped him.

Then, minutes later, the Emissary himself entered, followed by his son. T’Sorra was right on their heels, her hands clasped tightly behind her back.

Odo glanced up. “I have it handled, Commander.”

T’Sorra hesitated. “Sir—”

“Dismissed.”

After a moment’s pause, T’Sorra nodded sharply and exited the infirmary.

Then the door to the surgical suite hissed open and shut. Julian emerged, dressed in full orange surgical garb.

Kira started forward. Odo’s hand at her arm—not quite touching her, not physically restraining her, but reminding her of his presence—stopped her.

She held her breath as Julian approached.

His face was dark, grim.

His movements, slow.

Kira’s heart stopped before he could utter a word.

“I managed to save the Dax symbiont.” His voice was dull, toneless. “We have to get it to Trill as soon as possible.”

Cold dread prickled across Kira’s skin. She was grateful when Odo’s hand covered her shoulder, warm and grounding.

“There was, um…” Julian swallowed. “…nothing I could do for Jadzia.”

Kira stared at him, sure that if she could just turn his words over in her head enough, she could make them mean something else.

Jadzia wasn’t gone.

She couldn’t be.

The Emissary pushed past Kira, leaving the air cold at her side. Odo filled the space behind her, resting both his hands reassuringly on her shoulders.

Numbly, distantly, she reached up to squeeze his fingers.

He had to be reeling too, didn’t he? He hadn’t been as close to Jadzia as she’d been, but they’d still been friends, comrades in arms who’d trusted one another with their lives.

And he’d been there, when it happened. He’d seen Dukat strike the fatal blow.

But inevitably, Kira’s duty registered.

“I’ve, um…” She sucked in a sharp breath. “I’ve got to get to Ops. Contact Trill. Jadzia’s family.”

Odo squeezed her shoulders. “I’ll be in my office.”

Kira managed a tiny smile.

Of *course* he would be in his office. Duty called. But she knew it was his way of offering an ear, letting her know he was there, without interfering with what they both knew needed to be done.

Gratefully, Kira squeezed his fingers again. “I’ll be there.”

*

In the quiet before the funeral, Kira finally found a moment to just *be*.

She lit the candles of her prayer mandala and raised her palms, letting her eyes fall shut, relaxing to the sound of her own heartbeat and opening her *pagh* to the Prophets.

If they were there.

The wormhole was…gone, it seemed. The most similar sensor readings in the station’s logs were of the first time it had closed, six years ago now—back when the captain had first made contact with the beings Starfleet called “wormhole aliens.”

The vedeks, for once, corroborated Starfleet’s readings. The Celestial Temple had simply vanished. There was no trace.

All across Bajor, the orbs were dark, shriveled.

The place in Kira’s chest where she had always felt she could *feel* their presence, their love, was cold and empty.

Her hands trembled before the altar.

Then, distantly, she registered the chime of her door.

She didn’t answer at first. She didn’t want to see anyone. In this moment, she didn’t want to put on the mask of duty, or even engage with a friend—she just wanted to be *Nerys*, believer in the Prophets, grieving friend to Jadzia Dax.

Then there was a voice through her door. “Nerys?”

Odo.

She smiled. “Come in.”

The door hummed open, shut. His booted footsteps padded toward her.

He didn’t speak.

He simply crept up behind her, cupped her shoulders, slid his arms around her.

Kira sighed, leaning back into his embrace.

For a long moment, she just *breathed*, focusing on the gentle rise and fall of his chest.

“You alright?” she finally murmured.

There was a pause, before his breath whispered at her ear. “I might ask the same of you.”

“And I asked about *you*.”

He hesitated.

“I’ll be alright, Nerys,” he said quietly. “I’m more concerned about *you*, right now.”

Her breath hitched.

It was so much easier to focus on him. Easier to hold him, to revel in his trust in her, than to think about her own loss.

She’d lost friends before—not that she wanted to crack open *that* particular Pandora’s box. But then, she’d always had the Prophets.

She could trust that, no matter how much her own world spun—no matter how much grief tore at her—they had a plan.

Now…

Against her will, a tear slipped down her cheek.

She brushed it away.

Another took its place—and then another, and another, until she was crying silently in Odo’s arms, her shoulders jumping unsteadily as she held back her sobs.

“*Nerys.*”

Gently, he turned her around until she could rest her head on his shoulder and bury her face in the crook of his neck. His arms wrapped around her, solid and steady.

She clutched weakly at the fabric of his uniform.

In her mind’s eye, she was back in Ops—watching as the Celestial Temple burst open, only for its outer swirls to fade to faint wisps of color as its core burned bright and imploded in a spectacular fireball.

A tiny sob hitched in her throat.

Where had the Prophets gone?

Why had they turned their backs?

Would they ever—

She froze.

Her eyes blew wide, staring unseeing over Odo's shoulder, as fear clawed its way up her insides and lodged in her throat.

"…Nerys?"

She gulped a sharp, shaky breath.

No, she couldn't think about that.

Couldn't entertain that notion.

The Prophets would return. She *had* to believe that. If she didn't—what could she do?

"*Nerys,*" Odo murmured.

She couldn't speak.

His hands rubbed over her back, holding her close, a steady counterpoint to her racing heart.

"I'm here, Nerys," he said quietly. "We'll get through this. Together."

She pulled back. Looked into his eyes.

Searched his face.

She wasn't even sure what she was looking for. But as she took in the bottomless love that sparkled in his gaze, shining so brightly it could light the stars, she found it.

That wasn't just love.

It was admiration, awe, tenderness, devotion. Respect.

Faith.

That. *That* was what she needed to see.

His faith wasn't in the Prophets—it was in *her*. And maybe that was exactly what she needed right now.

Kira laid her head back on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him, squeezing hard.

"I love you," she whispered.

Odo's arms tightened around her. "I love *you*, Nerys."

Kira closed her eyes.

*

Minutes before the funeral, Sisko stood in the dark of the cargo bay, staring down at the long, black torpedo tube.

It was draped with the customary Federation flag—all the dressings of rank and ceremony. Of duty. Of *Starfleet*.

That duty was once his guiding light.

“The funeral service is due to begin in a few minutes, Jadzia,” he said, “but I need to talk to you one last time.”

He took a deep breath.

“When I first met you,” he said, “you told me that my relationship with Jadzia Dax wouldn’t be any different than the one I had with Curzon Dax. Things didn’t work out that way.” He sighed. “I had a hell of a lot of fun with both of you. But Curzon was my mentor. *You*…you were my friend, and I am going to *miss* you.”

His voice wavered.

“I should’ve listened to the Prophets,” he murmured, “and not gone to Cardassia. Then maybe you’d still be alive.”

An ache—nameless and consuming—tightened his chest, burning him from the inside out.

“Damn it!” he hissed, placing his hands on the torpedo tube. “Why aren’t you still here, Jadzia? I need you to help me sort things out. Something’s happened to the Prophets—something…that’s made them turn their backs on Bajor, and I’m responsible—and I don’t know what to do about it…how to make…it right again.”

He didn’t know how to be the Emissary. He’d never known—he’d just taken it day by day, tried to feel his way through.

But he *knew* how to be a Starfleet officer.

That was straightforward.

A matter of orders, protocol, command responsibility.

But it went beyond that. He *believed* in the Federation, in Starfleet. He always had. There was little he wouldn’t do to safeguard the dream he and his compatriots all stood for. He would, and *had*, sacrificed a great deal—paid high prices that had tested his deepest convictions—all in the name of the oath he was sworn to uphold.

He’d thought, if he had to shirk one duty, he couldn’t go wrong by choosing Starfleet.

And, somehow, he’d failed in both.

“I’ve failed as the Emissary,” he murmured, “and for the first time in my life…I’ve failed in my duty as a Starfleet officer.”

He heaved in a shaking breath.

“I need time to think,” he said. “Clear my head…but I can’t do it here, not on the station, not now. I need to get away…and find a way to figure out how to make things right again.”

His sense of duty *burned*—stronger than ever before, and yet desperate, impotent.

“And I have to make things right again, Jadzia,” he murmured. “I *have* to.”

*

Sisko emerged from his office, his bag slung over his shoulder, and descended the steps into Ops.

“The station’s all yours, Major,” he said.

Kira nodded. “She’ll be here when you get back.”

“This leave of absence you’re taking, sir,” Bashir said. “How long do you think you’ll be gone?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Sisko said.

“We’ll be waiting,” Odo said.

Sisko took a step past them, but O’Brien’s voice stopped him.

“Good luck, sir.”

Sisko shook his hand. “Thanks, Chief.” He turned to face the rest of them. “My thanks to all of you.” Then he clasped his son’s shoulder. “Let’s go home, Jake.”

Home.

Not too long ago, her Emissary had thought of this station—and Bajor—as his home.

Now, he was speaking of Earth instead.

He and Jake boarded the turbolift. Kira watched with the rest of the senior staff as it descended out of view.

Kira allowed herself only a moment of melancholy before ascending the steps to the captain’s office—*her* office, for now—and stepping through the doors, Odo close on her heels. She had only just rounded the desk to sit when something—or, rather, something’s absence—caught her eye.

She slumped, sighing. “I was afraid of that. He’s not sure he’s coming back.”

“What makes you say that?” Odo asked.

Kira nodded to the empty desk surface. “His baseball. He took it with him.”

Odo squeezed her shoulder.

She looked up at him, caught sight of the boundless love that shone in his eyes.

To think, a year ago, she had doubted that love.

Doubted his devotion.

Now, as her lips quirked into a smile, she knew—the path ahead was uncertain, but whatever they faced, they could face it together.

*

In the dark of space, a passenger transport disembarked from Deep Space Nine and set course for Earth.

The Emissary stared out one window, his eyes searching, his mind a million miles away.

Though he was seated amidst rows of passengers—and though his son sat next to him, a worried furrow in his brow—he may as well have stood alone.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand here ends the first part of the retcon!

My priority with "Tears of the Prophets" was to give Dax a better death. And, of course, to weave in my reworked "false vessel" plot with the Dominion, Dukat, and the Pah-wraiths.

With that said, though...Season 7 gets the bulk of the changes, and that's what I've *really* looked forward to rewriting! It's the reason this retcon exists — the reason it expanded from just an O/K fix-it to a series rewrite. I've laid the groundwork in this first part, and you'll see some epic themes come out of the woodwork in the second part — themes that will follow us into the *Dauntless* main action!

The retcon will be continued in Part 2, "For Better or for Worse"!

End Notes

Kudos and comments make my day

PS. If you enjoy my work, you have my full blessing to download my fics! It is my personal stance that I will consider it a compliment of the highest order if you want to hold onto your own copies for posterity.

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