

SPACE: 1999

cross-over with **STAR TREK**
DEEP SPACE NINE

A New Moon Over Bajor



Ariana

Fan fiction based on the two popular science fiction TV series!

"Our computer has just completed its scan of the asteroid," Dax informed him. "It could definitely be the Terran moon. It has the right mass and consistency, and it seems this one is inhabited, too... This construction appears to be some sort of base, but the computer can't identify it as any known configuration. There's also a large nuclear storage unit on the near side..."

"Captain, we're being hailed," interrupted Kira.

"Hailed?"

"By someone on the asteroid."



At the end of the 20th century, a cataclysmic event hurls Earth's moon into the depths of interstellar space. Over three hundred humans aboard Moonbase Alpha begin an odyssey without end.

In the 24th century, humanity has reached the stars, mastered incredible technologies and learned to live peacefully within a United Federation of Planets, save for a few races that demand the destruction of their idealized existence.

Fate has drawn the wayward moon into a parallel universe of the future... and into a divergent timeline where the lunar accident never occurred. The Alphans find themselves emerging from a wormhole—and into close proximity with Federation outpost *Deep Space Nine* and the planet Bajor.

Alphan Commander John Koenig is determined to return his people to their own reality, but personal matters compound their plight. And worse yet, a war between the Federation and the Dominion—and the moon's unalterable course into the heart of the Bajoran system—may finally end their journey.

SPACE: 1999



Fan fiction based on the 1970s science fiction series.

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SPACE:1999

A NEW MOON OVER BAJOR

By Ariana

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*To Ed,
who likes to remind me that the Moon is still in the sky.*

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

A lonely comet, trapped in the gravitational pull of the Bajoran sun, slowly wound its way back into deep space, shedding small fragments of stone and ice as it passed Deep Space Nine. Captain Sisko watched it trace its short streak of light against the starry backdrop of space. There was a time when the view from his office might have brought him peace, but nowadays, the ancient light from those distant stars only reminded him of the harm that had come from space. His eyes drifted off the comet and fell on familiar constellations—Lissepia, the twin suns of the Xepolite system, the complex pattern of stars in the Cardassian empire. These days, interstellar space was anything but peaceful.

The Federation had been at war for over a year now, and Deep Space Nine was in a strategic position. The station guarded the mouth of a wormhole which led to the other side of the galaxy, and it was there, in the Gamma Quadrant, that the Federation had encountered the Dominion.

As Sisko saw it, the Dominion was as antithetical to the Federation as fire was to water. Where the Federation was a democratic association of planets, the Dominion was a totalitarian empire ruled by the shapeshifting Founders. The Founders had not taken kindly to what they perceived as the Federation's encroachment on their Gamma Quadrant territory: within two years of the first contact, the Dominion established a stronghold in the Alpha Quadrant by taking over the Cardassian Empire. War had been inevitable.

It was all so pointless, thought Sisko bitterly. He remembered what his father had once said: "You're always telling me that space is big, that it's an endless frontier, filled with infinite wonders ... You would think it would be more than enough room for people to leave each other alone." Sisko slowly shook his head as he remembered his own response—"It just doesn't work that way."

Sisko sighed and turned away from the window, going to sit in his chair and letting it recline. He looked down at the reflection of his ornamental baseball in the shiny black surface of the desk and tried to think of better things. Cassidy had sent a message to say she would be back on DS9 for a couple of days in a month's time. That was something to look forward to. His son Jake had had a short story published in the Federation fiction data banks. That boy was going to be a great author some day.

Aside from that, life was continuing as usual on the station. The war with the Dominion had even taken on a routine aspect. Every day, there would be reports of the occasional skirmish, but for the moment, both sides seemed to be camping out on their positions. Things had been relatively quiet for the past couple of weeks: even the *Rotarran* was off on manoeuvres, leaving the station temporarily deprived of its usual contingent of rowdy Klingons.

But Sisko was worried. He had a feeling something momentous was about to happen, and after all these years of being the Emissary to the Bajoran Prophets, he had learned not to dismiss his feelings, however vague or trivial they might seem. To Starfleet, the Prophets were merely a race of non-corporeal aliens who lived in the wormhole. The aliens seemed to consider themselves the protectors of the nearby Bajoran system, and the Bajorans worshipped them as the Prophets. For some reason, these aliens had chosen Sisko, a human being, as their Emissary to the outside universe, and he couldn't help wondering if this strange feeling he had might be a sign from the Prophets.

He shook himself out of his unproductive reverie with a start as his comm chime rang. He ran his hand over his shaven scalp and sighed. "Go ahead."

"Captain," called Jadzia Dax, the science officer. "I'm getting some strange readings from the wormhole... it looks as if it's about to open!"

Sisko could hear the amazement in her voice and felt his own heart respond with an increased beat. Maybe the mysterious event he had sensed was about to happen. He rushed out of his office as fast as he could and stood at the top of the steps down to the Ops pit. So far, there was nothing to see on the viewscreen, but he knew DSg's sensors were fine tuned to detect the slightest fluctuation in the wormhole. They could predict its opening up to ten minutes beforehand.

But the wormhole hadn't opened for months, ever since Captain Sisko himself had asked the Prophets to protect the Alpha Quadrant from the Dominion troops still in the Gamma Quadrant. Nothing had come through the wormhole since.

"There's definitely something coming through," said Chief O'Brien as he consulted the readouts in front of him. "According to our sensors, the wormhole will be opening within a couple of minutes."

"Red alert," ordered Sisko. "All hands to battle stations." Whatever was coming out now could be dangerous; perhaps the Gamma Quadrant Dominion had found a way to join its counterpart on this side after all.

The wormhole opened in a bright swirl of oranges and blues, illuminating the sky beyond Deep Space Nine. But it wasn't a mere ship, or even a fleet that came out of the opening this time. It was an extremely large, grey asteroid.

Sisko could tell his subordinates in Ops were as surprised as he was.

"How the hell did that get there?" exclaimed Kira, just before their world literally turned upside down.

The sheer mass of the asteroid pulled Deep Space Nine out of its position near the wormhole, dragging the station with it as it headed towards the Bajoran system. Deep Space Nine's stabilisers were unable to compensate, and the station soon began to tumble over on itself. The gravity generators kept the contents of Ops more or less on the floor, but everything was shaken from side to side with the fluctuating G-forces. Unprepared for the shock, Sisko was thrown against the nearest console. His cheek hit the hard edge of the table.

Bracing himself as every loose object crashed on the right hand bulkhead before sliding back to the left, Sisko watched Dax pull herself up to her console. "I'm trying to compensate," she shouted over the roar of the alert klaxons.

O'Brien had also managed to drag himself to his feet. "Initiating thrusters... we're beginning to break away."

Sisko relaxed a little as the thrusters countered the gravitational pull of the asteroid. The sight on the viewscreen showed that the station was still rotating erratically, but the boost from the thrusters had just been enough to push it back in the direction of the wormhole.

"Reinitialising stabilisers," announced O'Brien. "Just one more spin and we'll be right way up again." Sisko heard him heave a sigh of relief as the spinning stopped.

"That was close," said Kira. "That damn asteroid nearly hit us!" Sisko tugged on his uniform jacket and watched the asteroid slowly moving away on the viewscreen. For some reason, it looked vaguely familiar; Sisko could have sworn he had seen some of the craters on the asteroid's grey surface before. On the other hand, the galaxy was full of pockmarked asteroids—maybe he was simply experiencing *déjà-vu*. The bruise on his cheek was throbbing painfully and as his body recovered from its dizziness, he found it difficult to think clearly.

He had already dismissed the idea, and turned his mind to the problem of assessing damage to the station, when O'Brien spoke. "It looks like the Moon," he said.

"Which moon?" asked Kira, who was cleaning up her broken mug of raktajino.

"Our moon," replied Sisko, now realising where he had seen those craters before. "Terra's moon. Luna."

As he observed the asteroid more closely, he realised that he was currently looking at a pattern of craters very similar to the one on the far side of the Moon. He had often flown over that area during practice flights at the Academy. The only difference was that this asteroid had one extra crater, as if a large bomb had detonated on the surface.

"It can't be," said the Bajoran. "We were on Earth just a couple of weeks ago..."

"...And the Moon was still there," completed Sisko with a nod.

Kira was right: it couldn't possibly be the Moon, not out here in Bajoran space. On the other hand, it had just come out of the wormhole—could it be a Dominion plot, or some message from the Prophets? But if that were the case, why recreate the Terran moon? Sisko dismissed his musings; the idea that this asteroid could be a replica of the Moon was ludicrous.

"Dax, scan the asteroid and see what you can find out," he ordered.

There was a pause while the Trill consulted the external scanners and then a close-up picture of some kind of installation appeared on screen. The station, or whatever it was, was a set of low, white buildings situated in a crater on the underside of the asteroid.

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“Our computer has just completed its scan of the asteroid,” Dax informed him. “It could definitely be the Terran moon. It has the right mass and consistency, and it seems this one is inhabited, too... This construction appears to be some sort of base, but the computer can’t identify it as any known configuration. There’s also a large nuclear storage unit on the near side...”

“Captain, we’re being hailed,” interrupted Kira.

“Hailed?”

“By someone on the asteroid.”

CHAPTER ONE
Crossover

CHAPTER ONE – *Crossover*

“And there we were all in one place

A generation lost in space

With no time left to start again ”

Don McLean - “American Pie” ¹

“*Accidenti!* That was one hell of a ride,” muttered Verdeschi, picking himself off the floor and dusting his beige trousers. ²

Commander Koenig also stood up shakily, brushing off the computer printouts and office stationery which had fallen on him during the Moon’s chaotic journey through the wormhole. The lights in Command Centre were on minimal power; a sign that the main computer was off-line. Koenig headed for the science station, where Verdeschi was already helping the science officer, Maya, to her feet.

“Maya, what happened?” demanded the commander. She was the one who had originally recognised that the disturbance was a wormhole.

“We went through the wormhole,” said the alien, spreading her hands helplessly as she sat down at her station. She leaned down to pick up the punched cards that had fallen to the floor. “There was no way we could avoid it.”

“Sandra,” said Koenig, calling the senior data analyst. “What is the computer’s status?”

“Computer is offline,” she replied.

The commander heard Verdeschi mutter, “What else is new?” Looking in the direction of his first officer, Koenig found that the young man was sitting on Maya’s desk, his arms crossed as he looked down at her. Maya returned his gaze, the ridges above each eye raised as she waited for yet another of the Italian’s jokes.

“You could have warned us it would be so rough!” he exclaimed. “That was some roller-coaster ride. How difficult is to detect a few neutrinos, anyway? You should have picked them up earlier.”

Maya’s blue eyes widened innocently and she put on an outraged expression, although she was smiling. “I’d never been through a wormhole before,” she protested, her Psychon accent audible in her indignation. “You’re lucky I knew what it was and was able to warn you beforehand.”

1 Don McLean - "American Pie" (D. McLean) - From the album *American Pie* (EMI, 1971)

2 *Accidenti* = an exclamation equivalent to "damn!"

“Yeah... ten seconds before we collided with the thing! That wasn’t much time to prepare.” Verdeschi was pretending to be annoyed, but Koenig knew better. The light-hearted bickering between Verdeschi and Maya had been daily entertainment for the whole command staff for years.

Maya, as usual, was unfazed. “As someone who wouldn’t know a neutrino if it came with a little sign, I don’t think you’re qualified to criticize,” she declared, resuming her activities.

Verdeschi opened his mouth to say something, but then shut it again, apparently unable to think of a witty retort. He simply shrugged his shoulders and smiled at Koenig as if to indicate that this was the end of his private conversation. The neon lights in the ceiling flickered on and the clicking and whirring of the computer filled the room as it came back online. The operatives immediately set about reading the LED displays and collating the printouts the computer started to spit out.

“We have work to do,” said Koenig decisively. “Tony, we need to assess how much damage we incurred...”

Verdeschi nodded and immediately walked back to his own console. “I’ll get right on it, John.” He pressed the comm button on his desk. “Calling all sections. Please report.”

“The external sensors are back online,” announced Sandra Benes at the communications console. “We have a picture of where we are.” She flicked a switch and a view of the space above the station appeared on the main screen.

“What’s that?” asked Verdeschi, pointing at a small, round construction spinning in the Moon’s wake. “That wagon-wheel thing.”

“It is like a ship or a space station,” suggested Benes, instinctively standing up to observe the object.

“It probably got pulled out of position when we came out of the wormhole,” said Koenig. The object was spinning uncontrollably, following the Moon, and he assumed that wasn’t its usual state. “Maya, can you scan the construction and tell us what it is?”

Maya consulted the printout the computer produced and then checked the information on her black and white monitor. “Our sensors can’t penetrate the structure, but this solar system seems quite densely populated. I’m picking up a few ships in the area. I’d say the space station is there to guard the wormhole.”

“Great,” said Verdeschi as Operative Kate Andrews handed him a report. He put the clipboard down and looked up at the screen again. “More angry aliens to placate. As if we didn’t have a hard enough time with the last lot.”

Let’s just hope these ones are more amenable than the Hadar, thought Koenig in spite of himself as he observed the spinning construction. Their last encounter with alien life, like so many before, had very nearly spelled the end of Moonbase Alpha.

“Whatever it is, it looks as if they’re moving it back into position,” said Maya.

The alien station was a dark, circular structure with a centre-piece shaped like a wagon wheel and three curved prongs that arched above and below the centre. A multitude of gas-blue thrusters had lit up along one side and the station was slowly tumbling back towards where the wormhole had been. As the Alphans watched, the station stopped spinning altogether.

“Well, John, now would probably be a good time to call them up and say we’re sorry before they start shooting,” suggested Verdeschi, glancing at the commander.

Koenig nodded and turned to Benes. “Sahn, can you establish communications with them?”

“Yes, I... Communications established, commander,” responded Benes, though she sounded surprised that her attempt had succeeded so rapidly.

The screen now showed what was presumably the command area of the alien station. A man in a black and grey uniform was standing in the middle of the shot, apparently waiting to hear what Koenig had to say. He didn’t look pleased, and there was a prominent dark brown bruise on his cheek. Koenig rapidly suppressed the hope he felt at meeting what appeared to be a human; his experiences in space had taught him to trust no one, regardless of their appearance.

“This is Commander John Koenig of Moonbase Alpha,” started the commander, trying to sound as friendly as he could. It jarred him to apologise for something he could not control, but experience had proved that contriteness was the wisest move in situations like this. “We apologise for any damage we might have caused; we have no control over the movement of our Moon, and did not realise there would be a station so near the wormhole.”

The man on the screen nodded and managed a smile. “Oh, we’ll be all right... I am Captain Benjamin Sisko, commander of the Federation station Deep Space Nine. You gave us a bit of a shock, Commander. Perhaps you can explain how this... moon of yours came to be in the wormhole?”

From the man’s appearance and accent, Koenig assumed that Sisko was an African-American and rapidly surmised that the Moon had either come far into the future, or had shifted into a parallel universe. Certainly, there had been no human installations of this kind this far in space before the Moon left Earth orbit. The last time Alpha had had contact with Earth, they had discovered that time dilation due to the Moon’s passage through several space rifts had caused time on Alpha to run much more slowly than in the rest of the universe. It was quite possible that “normal” space could have gone through several centuries, while the inhabitants of the Moon had only lived a few years. ³

3 Moonbase Alpha was contacted by Earth just a few years after Breakaway—by which point, Earth was in the year 2120. *Space: 1999* - "Journey to Where" (ep.28-1976)

“It’s a long story,” answered Koenig. “Our Moon was wrenched out of Earth orbit following an accident. It has been drifting in space ever since.”⁴

Sisko’s smile faded. “So this is the Terran moon?” Koenig nodded, though he was surprised at the use of “Terran”—an adjective he had only ever seen in science fiction. He no longer had to wonder whether it was the future or an alternate universe the wormhole had led them into. Sisko’s surprise made it plain that, in this universe, the Moon was still orbiting Earth. Clearly, Alpha and all its inhabitants had been propelled into a different reality.

“I think you’ve been the victim of a dimensional shift,” said Sisko, enunciating each word as if carefully weighing what information he gave Koenig. “I suggest you beam aboard our station to discuss this.”

Beam aboard? Thought Koenig, before dismissing the term as something which would no doubt be explained later. He was reluctant to go onto the alien station without knowing more about its inhabitants, but on the other hand, Alpha was in no state to receive visitors, he realised as he looked at the mess around him.

“My first officer and I will come over with one of our ships in an hour’s time,” he said finally. That would give him time to discuss the situation with his senior staff. Looking over at Verdeschi, Koenig could tell his first officer was not at all pleased with this arrangement.

“John—” he started. Koenig silenced him with a glance.

“As you wish; we’ll prepare a docking port for you,” said Sisko.

And with that, the captain closed communications on his side, without so much as a goodbye. A symbol representing a star system surrounded by a laurel wreath appeared on screen. The caption, in Latin letters, read “United Federation of Planets.” Koenig was struck by the similitude to the emblem once used by the United Nations on his Earth. He wondered what kind of universe this would prove to be. *I’ll know soon enough*, he thought wryly.

“Eagle One, you are cleared for docking. Please follow the instructions we’re uploading and proceed to Upper Pylon 3,” said Kira as she watched the small ship approach the station. It was of an unfamiliar design, white with a pointed cockpit and a rectangular rear section.

“Roger that, Deep Space Nine,” said a man’s voice over the loudspeakers. “Roger?” thought Kira, as the stranger continued, “Proceeding to your Upper Pylon 3 as instructed.”

4 In the *Space: 1999* universe, the Moon has been used for dumping nuclear waste since the mid-1980s. On September 13, 1999, an accident caused one of the nuclear storage areas to blow up, pushing the Moon out of Earth orbit and sending it on an erratic journey across the universe. *Space: 1999* - "Breakaway" (ep.01-1974)

“He sounds like an Australian,” remarked O’Brien when Kira had closed communications. He also looked at the ship on the screen. “I wonder how they got there, stranded on the Moon. I mean, what are the odds of that happening, in any reality?”

Kira shrugged her shoulders. The vicissitudes of a wandering Terran moon from an alternate universe did not concern her too much. She was more worried about the fact this rogue planetoid was heading for the Bajoran system.

“I’m sure we will find out plenty when we talk to them,” she said as she logged off and, leaving her console to a junior officer, headed for the Turbolift. As first officer, it was her duty to greet visitors to the station and escort them to meet Captain Sisko.

Odo was already at the docking pylon when Kira arrived, and she greeted him with a brief kiss. Since they were alone for the moment, she leaned against him while he held her in his arms. She sighed contentedly and entwined her fingers with his. The solidity of his smooth skin made her reflect how strange it was that in his natural state, he wasn’t solid at all, but a mass of a jelly-like substance... it wasn’t an idea that particularly appealed to her.

To take her mind off this train of thought, she said, “I hear Quark lodged a complaint about what happened.”

“Hmpf.” Odo’s gruff guffaw resonated through her. “He wants to sue Starfleet for not keeping the station upright during business hours. Apparently, a great many of his glasses and bottles were broken when that moon pulled us out of position. It hasn’t stopped him from keeping the bar open, though.”

Kira looked up at Odo and smiled. “Of course not. He might miss out on some profit.”

Odo turned towards the window, which was almost entirely filled with the view of the asteroid. “I’m sure that was the last thing anyone expected to see coming out of the wormhole after all these months: the Terran moon from an alternate universe. I wonder what it was doing in the Gamma Quadrant.”

“Do you think the Dominion has anything to do with this?” Odo shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t want to take any chances, do you?” Kira shook her head; she knew he was right; they couldn’t trust anything that had come from Dominion territory.

Kira and Odo separated rapidly as they felt the vibrations of the Eagle docking with the station. When the airlock opened, Kira put on her best smile to welcome the two humans who came out. She recognised the commander as the tall, dark-haired man in the black jacket and addressed him first.

“Commander,” she said politely, extending her hand for the traditional Terran greeting. “I am Major Kira, first officer of the station, and this is Constable Odo, our chief of security.”

The commander shook her hand and smiled uncertainly, his pale eyes shifting from Kira to Odo and back. "I am John Koenig, commander of Moonbase Alpha, and this is my chief of security, Tony Verdeschi."

Kira noticed that he stressed the term 'chief of security' and looked warily at Odo. His younger colleague remained sullen, hands firmly entrenched in his pockets. Kira could see a couple of devices suspended to the Alphans' belts and suspected that at least one of those objects might be a weapon. She suddenly wished she had brought some security guards with her.

"Welcome to Deep Space Nine," she said with a diplomatic smile, although she realised that things were not getting off to a good start.

The Alphan security man barely nodded a greeting and Kira felt a wave of irritation wash over her. The least he could do was smile when he was being welcomed. He was a slim, pale-skinned man, probably about Kira's age and roughly her height, which made him short by human standards. Like the commander, he wore beige trousers and a jacket, but the highlights on his undershirt were red instead of black, and his jacket was blue. Humans in any universe were evidently keen on colour-coding their ranks.

Kira's initial irritation toward Verdeschi was not helped by the fact he was deliberately looking her over. Perhaps he had never seen a woman in a uniform like hers; for all she knew, he might never have seen a woman in uniform. After all, Captain Sisko had said these people were from an alternate reality; maybe the young man wasn't being rude by the standards of his universe.

At least he seemed to be appreciating what he saw. He gave her a half-smile when he had finished his observation, and Kira, momentarily forgetting his rudeness, automatically responded. He wasn't too bad looking for a human. Dark hair, brown eyes, a well-defined jaw, a chin with just a hint of a cleft in it. She felt Odo's blue gaze on her and realised she had spent just a little too long staring at Verdeschi.

Kira indicated they should move down the corridor. The area was too narrow for more than two people to walk abreast, so Kira and Koenig led the way while Odo and Verdeschi followed silently behind.

"So, what do you make of this, Old Man?" asked Sisko, leaning on the conference room table and looking out at the Moon. He and Dax were waiting for Kira to bring the humans to the wardroom.

“We know it’s definitely the Terran Moon and it’s definitely from an alternate universe,” answered Dax, swiveling her chair around to look at him. Her blue eyes were bright with enthusiasm. “But it’s not a universe we’ve ever encountered before: I even double-checked the Moon’s quantum signature with that of the 300,000 universes the *Enterprise-D* encountered a few years ago. All I can tell so far is that our two universes must have split some time after the late 20th century. Our scan of this Moon found the American flag the Apollo 11 team left on the surface in 1969.”⁵

Sisko smiled: that was one of the first historical events he had learned about in school. “What did you find out about the inhabitants?”

“Our scanners picked up 219 people currently on the base. All human. That’s excluding the people who have come over on the shuttle. Their technology is... very primitive. The whole base seems to be run on nuclear power. I’d say they come from a universe where technological development was much slower.”

“I see,” said Sisko, nodding thoughtfully. “But our next question is: what do we do with a moon from an alternate universe?”

“Usual Starfleet policy is to send people back when they’re in the wrong universe,” she reminded him. “But I don’t see how we can reverse the Moon’s course. That’s beyond our capabilities. It would take the power of a dozen *Galaxy*-class ships to move something as large as the Moon, and even then, exerting that kind of force on it would probably break it up.”

“Not to mention that we don’t have a dozen *Galaxy*-class ships at our disposal,” said Sisko laconically.

Dax smiled. “Exactly. I’ll need to study the question more in depth, of course, but I’m certain we can’t send the whole Moon back to its universe. On the other hand, sending the inhabitants themselves shouldn’t be a problem. Goodness knows we’ve had enough encounters with the Mirror Universe here to teach us how to initiate dimensional shifts.”

She lifted an eyebrow and looked pointedly at Sisko; he was the one who had spent the most time in the so-called Mirror Universe. He wondered briefly if Dax knew what had happened between him and her Mirror counterpart... He rapidly dismissed that train of thought.⁶

5 The *Enterprise-D* encountered over 296,000 alternate Enterprises following Worf’s encounter with a quantum filament in 2369. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* - “Parallels” (ep.263-1993).

6 As of 2374 (season 6), the Deep Space Nine crew had crossed over into the Mirror Universe no fewer than three times. On one occasion, Sisko had a brief affair with his counterpart’s mistress, the alternate Jadzia Dax. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - “Through The Looking Glass” (ep.466-1995).

“But sending the people back is a problem we’ll have to deal with later,” continued Dax, glancing at the asteroid. “I’m afraid our first priority will be destroying the Moon altogether.”

“Destroying it?”

Dax fixed her dark blue gaze on him again. “Benjamin. According to the calculations I’ve run, that Moon is headed straight for Bajor VIII.”

Verdeschi couldn’t help watching Kira’s hips as she walked in front of him. The tight scarlet uniform she was wearing certainly showed off her shapely figure to its advantage. In the brief moment he had observed her at the airlock, Verdeschi had determined two things. First: she was an attractive woman. She was admittedly very thin, but she did have a pretty face and a very sweet smile. Second: she liked him. There was no mistaking the little smile she had given him when she noticed he was observing her. Not that he was available, of course, but it was nice to know he was appreciated.

This was no time for such trivialities, however. As chief of security, it was Verdeschi’s job to be wary of everyone and anything, and being greeted by two unknown creatures instead of Captain Sisko was doing nothing to set his mind at ease. Judging from the extra pleats of skin on the bridge of her nose, and the strange earring she wore, Kira was an alien of some sort and that fact alone was enough to make Verdeschi suspicious of her. Experience had taught him that Maya was the only alien he could trust unconditionally.

Taking his eyes off Kira’s uniform, Verdeschi turned his attention to the other creature, Odo, who was walking beside him. The “constable” was a different kind of alien. He had smooth, undefined features, rather as if he had been made of Plasticine. Verdeschi had some recollection of a children’s animation programme which had featured characters made of “Plastilina”, as it was called in Italy, some of which had not been unlike Odo. But only the alien’s facial features lacked detail; he had fine blond hair and his small blue eyes were as sharp and focused as any human’s. Verdeschi and Odo’s eyes met and the human knew they both shared a common mission. If anything happened to Kira or Koenig, they would spring into action to defend their wards. But Verdeschi also had a trick up his sleeve...

“I hope you had no difficulties docking,” said the major conversationally, her sharp voice interrupting his musings. She was walking sideways so as to smile at the humans while they all went down the corridor. The smile creased her black eyes in a manner which Verdeschi, under other circumstances, might have found very appealing.

“The instructions you gave our pilot were very clear,” said Koenig in response to the major’s question. “We were impressed at how easily your computer systems interfaced with ours.”

Docking seemed to be Major Kira's area of expertise; although he was walking behind her, and could no longer see her face, Verdeschi heard the enthusiasm in her voice as she replied.

"Oh, we get ships from all over the Quadrant docking here," she said. "So we have to be prepared for anything. Vessels like yours which have their airlocks on the side have to dock at the pylons, while front- or back-opening ships can connect to the docking ring. The computerised guiding system has also been optimised to interface with as many autopilots as possible."

They had reached the lift, a narrow, dumb-waiter type of elevator with an open cabin. Once they were all perched on its metal floor, Odo ordered it to "Habitat Ring." Verdeschi made a mental note of how the lift worked: they might have to use it to get back to the docking pylon.

"Is your pilot the—Australian?" asked Kira, hesitating on the last word as if it were unfamiliar.

Verdeschi could tell Koenig was as surprised as he was at the alien's mention of their pilot Alan Carter's nationality.

"Yes," said the commander, nodding. "I suppose you could tell from the accent."

Kira shook her head, making the earring she wore on her right ear jangle. "One of my Terran colleagues recognised it. He's from Ireland; I gather the two regions are quite close."

Verdeschi guffawed involuntarily at the idea. "Close?" he muttered under his breath. Kira heard him and spun around, her sweetness quite forgotten as her dark eyes flashed with anger. In spite of himself, Verdeschi took a step backwards.

"What's so funny?" she demanded sharply, though her expression softened almost immediately as she struggled to regain her composure. "I don't know that much about Terran geography," she said more calmly. "I assumed from what my colleague said that Ireland and the land of the Australians were close."

"The two areas aren't close geographically," interceded Koenig, a smile on his lips; Verdeschi suspected his commander was laughing at him rather than Kira. "But a lot of Australians are descended from Irish ancestors... at least, they were in our universe."

Odo joined the conversation for the first time. "Hmm. Things might be different here," he growled.

So Plastilino can speak after all, thought Verdeschi uncharitably as the lift stopped. But now was not the time to be wasting thoughts on feeble jokes; they had apparently reached the main section of the station, the centre of the "wheel", and Verdeschi had some work to do.

As Koenig walked on with Kira and Odo, Verdeschi followed a couple of paces behind. After checking that Odo was not paying attention to him anymore—the alien had been looking back suspiciously ever since they left the elevator—Verdeschi casually brushed his sleeve against one of the bulkheads. Unnoticed by the others, a small beetle crawled out of his jacket and onto a ridge on the wall. Verdeschi watched it scuttle along the groove in the bulkhead and into a nearby vent. Smiling, he increased his pace and joined the others.

Dax observed the two humans with interest as they sat down opposite her. She was burning with curiosity to find out how these humans had broken away from Earth orbit, and how they had come into the wormhole, and what adventures they had had in between. How had they survived deep space long enough to reach the Gamma Quadrant? What species had they met on the way? Why hadn't they settled on one of the numerous M-class planets in the galaxy? There were a hundred questions the Trill wanted to ask them. They were a mystery, and if there was one thing Dax liked, it was mysteries.

“How did your moon leave Earth's orbit?” she asked once Sisko had done all the introductions. “It must have taken quite a considerable force to move it.”

Koenig nodded. “There was an accident in one of our nuclear storage units. The force of the blast was such that the Moon was propelled out of the solar system. It has been wandering uncontrollably ever since. We were lucky any Alphans survived.”

“You have shuttles,” said Kira, who was sitting just beside Dax, “why didn't you use them to leave the Moon and go back to Earth?”

“The Moon was moving too fast at that point for us to attempt to leave it,” explained Koenig, apparently annoyed at the question. “By the time it was safe to launch the Eagles, it would have taken them centuries to get back to Earth.”

That seemed like a reasonable explanation, although Dax was curious to know more. By now, she had had time to observe the Alphans, as they seemed to call themselves. They neither of them looked at ease, but given the circumstances, Dax could understand that. She rapidly surmised that Verdeschi was young, probably still only in his thirties, and obviously took his job as a bodyguard very seriously: his eyes were darting around, taking in every detail of the room and its occupants. He was reasonably good-looking in a bland way that would fade with age, and Dax soon decided he was nowhere near as interesting as Koenig, sitting beside him.

To a certain extent, the Alphan commander reminded Jadzia of her father; he had the same sort of greying dark hair and piercing blue eyes, although Koenig naturally had no Trill spots running down his hairline. And he was a lot more attractive, too, in a rugged way that appealed to Dax. She estimated the Alphan was probably in his mid-sixties or seventies. Or at least, that was how old he looked by the standards of modern day humans; she had to remind herself that aging might be faster or slower in his universe.

While Dax observed the Alphans, it seemed Odo had some questions of his own to ask. "How did you come to be in the Gamma Quadrant?" he said, suspicion clear in his gruff voice. He was standing behind Kira's chair, his arms folded, as he was wont to do when interrogating a suspect.

"The Gamma Quadrant?" repeated Koenig. He exchanged a puzzled look with Verdeschi and then glanced uncomprehendingly at Sisko, no doubt seeking the assistance of the one other human in the room. It suddenly occurred to Dax that being confronted by three aliens was probably one of the things unnerving the Alphans.

"The Gamma Quadrant is on the other side of the wormhole," explained Sisko. "This side is the Alpha Quadrant."

Koenig smiled. "We don't use those names," he said. "The only Alpha we know is our base on the Moon. As to how we came to be in what you call the Gamma Quadrant: we have no control over our trajectory. We have been through several space warps which have thrown us far away from our original position. We were drifting through space when we encountered the wormhole which brought us into this universe. We assume Alpha was too big and caused a dimensional shift in the wormhole."

"Yes," said Dax, pleased to see that the Alphans understood what had happened to them. Considering the unsophisticated state of their technology, she had half-expected them to be ignorant of basic concepts like parallel universes. "The mass of the Moon must have caused a quantum rift in the wormhole. That would explain why you went in one end and came out into another universe."

"Did you encounter any alien species in the Gamma Quadrant or the wormhole?" asked Odo. Dax could tell that the constable didn't trust the humans: but then Odo never trusted anyone.

"No," answered Koenig, looking up at him. "The last aliens we encountered were quite far away from the wormhole. But I don't know exactly how big this Gamma Quadrant is, so it is possible the aliens were from that area."

The commander's tone was cold and Dax got the feeling he was already losing patience with Odo's questions. Odo, however, seemed not to notice. "What was the nature of your contact with these aliens?"

“Now wait a minute,” interrupted Verdeschi, leaning forward in his seat and pointing menacingly at Odo. “What’s all this about? Are you suspecting us of something?”

It was the first time since the beginning of the meeting that Verdeschi had spoken, and all eyes immediately turned to him. He had flicked back the front panel of his jacket to uncover a device that was probably his weapon; his right hand was resting innocently on the table, but Dax had no doubt it would take only a few seconds for him to fire his gun if necessary.

“Of course we don’t suspect you of anything,” said Kira, her face scrunching up into a reassuring smile. There had been a time when the Bajoran would have been the one to envenom a situation rather than defuse it; but over the years, some of Kira’s attitudes had mellowed, and she was becoming quite a diplomat. As long as no Cardassians were involved.

As Kira spoke, Dax noticed that Verdeschi gave her a quick once-over before turning his attention back to Odo. The look had only lasted a split second, but it made Dax smile as she reflected she didn’t often see humans do that sort of thing these days. She observed the young man’s bland features for a moment as the conversation continued.

There was something about the Alphans’ hairstyles and clothes that was vaguely familiar. It was a minute before she realised that Starfleet uniforms had once looked similar, at least in their cut—long tunics worn with a belt over wide trousers. She smiled involuntarily as she remembered her past host Emony, by then in old age, complaining about those ‘Seventies pyjamas’ back in 2270. Noticing that she was staring at him, Verdeschi met her eye, and Dax looked away, focusing her attention on the conversation again.⁷

“We’ve learned to be cautious about people from alternate universes,” Sisko was saying. He glanced at Kira. “We’ve had some... very bad experiences. I’m sorry if our questions seem unfriendly.”

Security to Odo.

The hail caught Dax unaware, making her start in surprise. She noticed that the Alphans automatically looked up at the ceiling, before exchanging a bemused look.

Odo tapped his comm badge. “Odo here.”

7 The white "pyjama" uniforms were worn by the crew of the original Enterprise in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979). Dax's past host Emony's involvement with Starfleet in the 23rd century was mentioned in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine - "Trials and Tribble-ations"* (ep.503-1996).

Sir, there's been a break-in at the Assay Office. Some of the coffers opened while the station was spinning, and someone made off with their contents. The clerk insists that you should handle this matter personally.

"I'm sure he does," growled Odo. He seemed about to add something else, but then looked at Sisko and simulated a sigh.

"I think we'll be all right without you, Constable," said Sisko with a nod. With three other senior officers attending the meeting, Odo's presence wasn't indispensable, and the captain had probably decided the Alphans posed no immediate threat. Besides, theft at the Assay Office was not something to be taken lightly. Dax knew that some of the station's inhabitants had some very valuable items kept there.

"I'll call a security guard to replace me," said Odo as he left. The promised guard joined them only a couple of minutes later, and the meeting resumed.

"I apologise for the interruption, gentlemen," explained Sisko, turning back to the Alphans. "Odo is a busy man."

"A security chief's work is never done," declared Verdeschi drolly.

"Why do you need to know who we met in this Gamma Quadrant?" asked Koenig, looking at Sisko. "Do you have some kind of conflict with someone there?"

"Yes," admitted Kira frankly. "We're at war with an empire from the other side of the wormhole."

The Alphans exchanged a grave glance. Dax noticed that the constable's departure seemed to have relaxed them; perhaps it made them feel a little less like prisoners at an interrogation. Verdeschi in particular leaned back in his chair and dug his hands into his pockets, a stark contrast to his earlier aggressive stance.

"So if I understand correctly," said Koenig, "this station, Deep Space Nine, is here to guard the entrance of the wormhole in case the enemy attacks."

Sisko nodded and observed the humans through half-closed eyes, as he usually did when he was thinking. "More or less."

"Heh. Alpha must be a right cat among your pigeons," said Verdeschi with a dry laugh. "Believe us, if we could have avoided this, we would have."

"Especially as it seems we're heading straight for the nearest solar system," added Koenig more somberly. "Our science officer estimates we will be entering the system within six days. It seems we've been extremely unlucky; she calculated that we just happen to have arrived when the system's outer planet is nearest to the wormhole. Considering it must have an orbit of several centuries, the Moon seems to have crossed over at the very worst time."

Dax was impressed with their science officer's findings. "Yes, Bajor VIII has an orbit of about 400 Earth years. This is the first time since we discovered the wormhole that the planet is going to be this close. So no, I guess you couldn't have arrived at a worse time," she said, smiling sympathetically. "And... it does look as though your Moon is going to collide with Bajor VIII."

Koenig sighed and nodded gravely: it seemed that this possibility had occurred to the Alphans too. Verdeschi leaned toward his commander as if to remind him of something, though he looked at Sisko as he spoke.

"Our science officer did also say there's a chance Alpha might enter the system at an angle that would allow it to set up orbit around the sun," he said. Koenig nodded and looked hopefully at Sisko, and then at Dax.

"The Terran moon... go into orbit around the Bajoran sun?" repeated Kira incredulously. She too looked at Dax for confirmation or denial of this strange idea.

Dax was surprised at the Alphan science officer's theory; her own calculations had shown that the asteroid was certain to hit Bajor VIII. Maybe the primitive technology on Alpha was responsible for this error. She couldn't expect humans to perform accurate calculations without adequate technical help. Certainly not within the hour the Alphans had spent in this universe.

"Our computer's calculations show that the Moon is on a collision course for the planet. There's no way it will enter orbit," she stated categorically.

Koenig seemed momentarily taken aback and paused thoughtfully, before glancing at Verdeschi. "Obviously, you'd have to talk to our science officer," said the Alphan commander finally. "We're not as familiar with the area as you are, of course, but she did calculate that the wormhole opening once more might be enough to divert the course of the Moon. She did the calculations mentally, so it is possible you're right." His tone made it clear he trusted his science officer's mental calculations rather than the opinion of DS9's computer.

Dax did some brief mental calculations of her own and realised that there was a remote chance Alpha's science officer might be right. But it was very remote.

"The opening of the wormhole would have an effect on the Moon's trajectory," she admitted. "But whether that would divert it enough to make it avoid Bajor VIII would depend entirely on the circumstances under which the wormhole opened and when that happened. The gravitational pull of the wormhole fluctuates considerably each time it opens. It's affected by the size of the object going through, whether the object is entering or exiting; we've even found that the number of ships around Deep Space Nine can cause changes in its mass. In any case, the wormhole has been closed for months now, because of the war. Nothing goes through it these days."

"Except for Alpha," said Koenig shortly.

“Either way, we can’t take the risk,” intervened Sisko. “That planet, Bajor VIII, is inhabited. We may have to destroy your Moon before it reaches the solar system.”

“And what happens to us?” demanded Koenig, scowling at the captain. “There are 223 people on Alpha. Where will we go if you destroy the Moon?”

“You’re all welcome on Deep Space Nine,” said Sisko smoothly. “Starfleet regulations do have provisions for refugees.”

“Refugees?” Verdeschi cast a disapproving glance around the wardroom. “Yeah, I’m sure you do,” he said with a weary sigh; Koenig looked equally discouraged.

“We can probably find a way back for you, anyway,” said Dax in an effort to bolster their spirits again. “It would actually be quite easy if we could find you a warp-capable ship for instance.”

Koenig’s blue eyes widened hopefully. “You have the means to send us back to our own universe?”

“With a ship?” completed Verdeschi. Considering what Dax knew of the Alphans’ situation, she could understand their enthusiasm at the thought of owning a ship they could manoeuvre themselves, instead of counting on the random trajectory of the Moon to bring them somewhere habitable.

“Maybe,” said Sisko noncommittally, casting an irritated glance at Dax. He evidently hadn’t been planning to tell the Alphans anything about sending them back. “We can’t make any promises; I need to talk to my superiors before we can say whether or not we can let you have one of our ships. We need every vessel we have nowadays. There’s also the possibility we won’t be able to devote the time and resources necessary to find a way back for you.”

Koenig frowned thoughtfully. “And what’s the alternative? To keep us here, in this universe? As refugees?”

Sisko nodded. “We could easily evacuate your base and move your people to one of our worlds with a view to sending you back to your universe when the war is over. But I assume you had rather return to your reality as soon as possible.”

“Absolutely. We don’t belong here.” “There’s no doubt about that,” agreed Sisko—*rather undiplomatically*, Dax thought. “Our policy in matters like this is to send people back; we don’t want to start disrupting alternate universes.” “We have enough trouble keeping one under control,” added Kira with a grin.

Her comment made Verdeschi smile, but Koenig ignored her intervention. “So you’ll talk to your superiors and see what you can do?” he asked Sisko. Having got a nod from the captain, Koenig looked at Dax. “In the meantime, perhaps our science team could work with yours to find a way back?”

“Certainly. I’m looking forward to meeting this science officer of yours!”

“You’ll love her,” said Verdeschi confidently.

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He grinned at her, and leaned back in the conference room chair. But as she watched, his expression became suddenly serious, and then turned to fear, when the comm chime rang out and Odo's voice filled the room.

Odo to Sisko. Security alert. There's a Shapeshifter on the Promenade.

CHAPTER TWO
The Metamorph

CHAPTER TWO – *The Metamorph*

*“The gods may throw a dice
Their minds as cold as ice
And someone way down here
Loses someone dear “*

ABBA - “The Winner Takes It All”¹

Odo had gone straight back to his office on the Promenade after leaving the wardroom, only to find that the thief had already been apprehended. Having commended his deputies for their quick work—the man, a drunk, had been found wandering on the Habitat Ring still holding the security box he had stolen—Odo settled down in his office and resumed the routine activities the Moon’s abrupt arrival had interrupted.

He should normally have returned to the wardroom, but he had no desire to continue the meeting with the Alphans; something about them unnerved him, as if he had suddenly become psychic and could sense bad vibes coming from the two humans. The truth, as he himself had the lucidity to recognise, was that Nerys’s reaction to Verdeschi at the airlock had upset him. She had returned the man’s frank, appraising stare with a smile, and the sort of look she used to give Shakaar or Bareil—the constable had been fighting an urge to physically assault Verdeschi ever since.²

Odo liked to think he wasn’t a jealous man. He wasn’t a man, for one thing, he was a Changeling and jealousy was the sort of irrational, disorderly feeling he shouldn’t be letting himself experience. It would cloud his judgment and make him unreasonable. But in spite of his rational determination not to jump to the wrong conclusions, Odo was very, very jealous of anyone Kira showed interest in.

He was intelligent enough to realise this was due to his insecurity where Kira was concerned. Even though they were now lovers, some part of Odo still couldn’t accept the idea that she might indeed share his feelings. After all, he had loved her for years and she had never loved him then.

1 ABBA - “The Winner Takes It All” (B. Andersson / Bj. Ulvaeus) - From the album *Super Trouper* (1980)

2 Bareil Antos and Shakaar Edon were both lovers of Kira’s. See *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - “Shadowplay” (ep.436-1994) and “Crossfire” (ep.485-1996).

He had known from the very moment he met her that he loved her, and that he would never love anyone else as intensely, as completely as he did her. But she hadn't felt the same way, and over the years, he had become convinced that she never would. He had even accepted the idea, going so far as to become her confidant when she had love troubles of her own.

But then, one day, Nerys had discovered how he felt about her. She said that had changed her opinion of him. She said that over the next year, she had come to realise that she loved him too, until, recently, she had accepted him as a lover. Odo wanted desperately to believe that she did love him. But he didn't. He wasn't sure. Maybe she was just pretending because she was lonely, because he made her feel safe, because she was feeling old and needed someone, anyone. Maybe she wasn't pretending; maybe she really believed what she said she felt. But maybe it wasn't true.

For Odo, love was a unique and uncompromising feeling. He loved Kira. He had always loved Kira. He knew that if he lost her, he would never love another the way he loved her. He couldn't 'learn' to love someone; he either loved or he didn't. There was no middle ground for him, no grey area where friendship could turn into true love. From the moment Kira was first pointed out to him, a bedraggled Bajoran queuing up for some gruel on the Cardassian-occupied station, Odo had felt total, absolute love for her. Deep in his liquid insides, Odo believed that, if Kira loved him as much as he loved her, she would have known straight away. He wouldn't have had to wait so many years. ³

Whether she was pretending or not, Odo did enjoy Kira's attention; even if she didn't love him, being with her was better than nothing. He was quite willing to accept anything she gave him; friendship, affection, whatever was on offer made him happy. But he lived in fear: if Kira didn't love him, there was always the possibility she would meet someone she really did love. Odo was sure that some day some worthless humanoid like Verdeschi would come sauntering into her life and take her away from him. All it would take was a glance like the one he had seen her exchange with the Alphan, and he would lose her forever. It made him angry that life could be so cruel.

He was in the midst of these mournful thoughts when his commbadge chimed and one of his deputies called him. "Sir, we've found a Shapeshifter on the Promenade, outside Quark's."

Pausing only to call Sisko and pass on this information, Odo ran out and joined the deputy at the bar. "What happened?"

3 Kira and Odo first met during the Cardassian Occupation, when Odo was working as an investigator for Gul Dukat and Kira was a Resistance fighter. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - "Necessary Evil" (ep.428-1993).

“I saw this Terran mouse running along the wall,” explained the Bajoran. “You told us to keep an eye out for any unusual animals, so N’Dar and I tried to catch it and it transformed into some kind of bird and flew away... There it is!”

Odo looked to where the man was pointing. The bird—a Terran dove, from what Odo could see—was flying over the second level, near the windows which looked out onto the Moon. As he watched, a soldier from the Bajoran Militia ran towards the bird; the animal changed course and flew out above the opening that dropped to the lower level of the Promenade. The soldier drew his disrupter and fired.

The creature fell to the ground with a dull thud and a sickening crack of bones. The Promenade was filled with people come to repair the damage caused when the station’s stabilisers had failed, and it wasn’t long before a crowd had gathered around to stare at the injured Shapeshifter. Odo ordered his deputies to disperse the crowd and pushed forward through the throng to reach the creature.

It was lying on the ground, still shaped like a dove, albeit a heavily injured one, but as Odo watched, its shape began to change. By Starfleet orders, all weapons carried on the station were to be set to stun, not kill, so Odo suspected that the Shapeshifter had merely been rendered unconscious before its fall. The consequences of the fall, however, were more difficult to assess; a Changeling dropping from that height would have suffered no injuries, thanks to its liquid constitution. But this creature looked quite badly hurt.

As the creature stirred, one of the deputies pulled out his disrupter, ready to shoot the Shapeshifter again, but Odo halted him with a wave of the hand. Instead of morphing seamlessly into its new shape, as a Changeling would have done, the creature dissolved briefly into a haze which slowly expanded until it was the size of a humanoid. The haze gradually became focused again, as if the creature’s molecules were coalescing back into solid form.

The form that appeared was that of a young humanoid woman with pale skin and long red hair. Her features were unfamiliar to Odo; instead of the hairy eyebrows of most humanoids species, she had a series of what looked like moles growing above her eyes. Her cheekbones were underlined by a streak of brown skin on either side of her face. In spite of her recent transformation, she appeared to be unconscious. Her face was bruised and scratched, but there was no consistent pattern to the injuries, as if she had been poked at random.

Odo heard Quark’s familiar voice behind him. “Who is she? Is that the Changeling you were all shouting about?”

Odo gave the Ferengi a contemptuous glare and then knelt down beside the alien. Automatically responding to her humanoid form, he felt for a pulse on her wrist. To his surprise, he found one.

“Well, whatever she is, she’s definitely not a Changeling,” said Odo. Letting go of the creature’s hand, he tapped his commbadge. “Odo to Infirmary. Please send a medical team to the Promenade.”

Quark crouched down beside Odo. “Hmm. She’s quite pretty. I wonder where she came from.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious,” answered the constable, looking up at the grey asteroid visible through the upper windows.

The alien was wearing a uniform similar to the Alphans’; she had the same tunic as Verdeschi, beige with scarlet highlights, although she wore no jacket. The bottom part of her uniform was a skirt—an unusual feature in modern clothing—and her beige boots reached almost to her knees. Odo noticed that she also had the same tiny screen device on her belt; it bore the inscription MAYA, which Odo assumed was the alien’s name. There could be no doubt that the Alphans had used this woman to spy on the people on Deep Space Nine. To a certain extent, Odo was pleased by the discovery: it gave him a legitimate reason to distrust the Alphans, other than his irrational jealousy about Verdeschi and Kira.

“She’s coming round,” said Quark, pointing at her. “Maybe she can tell us who she is now. I’d certainly like to make her acquaintance.”

The woman was beginning to stir, her breathing becoming irregular as she regained consciousness. In spite of his suspicions concerning her mission on the station, Odo observed her with interest. The Federation had encountered one or two shapeshifting species other than the Founders, but Odo himself had never met any that did not come from his own people. He was curious to find out how a solid humanoid could change shape as easily as a Changeling.

As he watched her, the alien opened her eyes and blinked a few times, bringing her hand up to her forehead as she winced with pain.

“What happened to me?” she asked in a groggy voice.

“You were stunned,” explained Odo.

“Oh? I thought that was the effect I usually had on people,” she murmured weakly, closing her eyes again.

Odo was completely baffled by this statement, but he heard Quark mutter, “Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“What do you bet?” asked Odo.

“Come on, Odo. I know you’re with Major Kira now, but you have to admit this girl is pretty.” Odo looked down at the woman’s pointed nose and high cheekbones and failed to see what Quark was talking about. Perhaps realising that the Changeling was missing the point, Quark continued, “And she has a sense of humour, too! I’m definitely looking forward to getting to know her better when she wakes up,” he concluded, absently rubbing one of his sizeable ears.

Odo growled impatiently and turned his attention back to the woman, who seemed to have slipped into unconsciousness again. “If she wakes up...”

“Aw, come on, Odo, I’m sure she’ll be fine. Doctor Bashir will patch her up in no time. In fact, here he is now!”

Having checked that the woman’s pulse was still stable, Odo looked up and saw Captain Sisko coming towards them, followed by Doctor Bashir. As soon as they had made their way through the crowd—which had reformed in spite of the Militia’s efforts—Bashir knelt down beside the alien to scan her.

“This isn’t a Changeling,” he declared, evidently puzzled by the readings on his tricorder. “In fact, I’m unable to identify her species. Where did she come from?”

Odo stood up and crossed his arms, thoughtfully observing the Moon. The distant light from the Bajoran sun cast dark shadows on the pockmarked asteroid as it loomed ominously above the station.

“I don’t know,” he answered, “but I have a feeling the Alphans do.”

“She’s wearing clothing similar to theirs,” agreed Sisko. “I left the Alphans with Dax and Kira, but I have a feeling I’ll be having another little conversation with Messrs Koenig and Verdeschi very soon.”

“I’m not surprised to find they were spying on us,” said Odo succinctly. Sisko looked dubious, but said nothing.

Bashir had finished scanning the alien. “She’s had a bad fall as well as being stunned; I have to take her to the Infirmary. Computer,” he called out. “Medical emergency. Two to beam to Infirmary.”

Where was Tony when she needed him? Maya felt herself regaining consciousness and immediately remembered what had happened. She couldn’t recall exactly how she had fallen to the ground, though she could imagine she had been shot down; but she knew she had talked to an alien with a very smooth face who had told her she had been stunned... *Another brilliant idea gone wrong.*

Now that she was conscious again, Maya set about the task of assessing her physical state. Every area of her body seemed to be experiencing some pain; Maya determined that virtually all the molecules she had used to create the shape of a dove had been damaged by her fall. Now that they were back in their natural position in her body, the massive wounds the “dove” had suffered were translated into numerous bruises and pinpoints of pain, as well as severe back and head injuries in Maya’s humanoid form. If she had been awake when she turned back into her natural shape, she could have concentrated the injuries in one part of her body, but as her transformation had been unconscious, the molecules had been disseminated throughout her system.

Maya knew she needed to concentrate on repositioning the random damage to move the injured molecules into one area of her body which could then be treated by medical means. Although she had never quite mastered the technique to the point of being able to transform all the affected molecules into blood or pus that could be drained away, Maya was skillful enough to eliminate the pain in at least some areas of her body. Her current plan was to try and move as much of the damage away from her head as possible before she lost consciousness again.

She was about to start the process when she felt something on her face. It was as if some external force was reconstituting the broken cells of her skin. Still keeping her eyes closed to rest her damaged brain, Maya worked to make sense of what was happening to her. Her hearing was fuzzy, but she could smell that she was still on the Deep Space Nine station, though not on the Promenade. There was no smell of food and perfumes here, and none of the noise of people cleaning up damage. The scent was clean, perhaps a little clinical. *They must have brought me to their medical centre*, she thought. *It must be a medical device.*

“How do you feel?”

The voice was soft and as far as Maya could tell with her impaired hearing, the man speaking sounded concerned. I suppose even they would have caring doctors. Maya tried to pick up his scent; she could smell that he was human, but her olfactory senses were not developed enough for her to make out much more than that.

“Are you a doctor?” she asked hoarsely.

“Yes. I’m Doctor Bashir,” said the soft voice. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Maya.”

“Don’t worry, Maya, you’ll be fine.”

“My brain is damaged. I need to clear it.”

“I know. I’m going to run a regenerative scan on you; it’ll repair as much of the internal damage as possible.”

Against her better judgment, Maya opened her eyes and winced as the sudden influx of electrical impulses flooded her brain. “No! What does your regenerator do?” The doctor who was leaning over her was a young brown-skinned human with a narrow face and soft dark eyes. Maya could tell he was surprised by her question.

“It automatically repairs ruptured tissues, dissolves blood clots, resets bones... It works by realigning and repairing damaged cells.” He spoke in a calm, gentle voice with an accent similar to Tony’s.

The thought of having her cells realigned by an unknown machine panicked Maya. For all she knew, it might fix them in place and stop her from morphing. “How will it know what’s normal for me? Have you ever met people from my species?”

Bashir looked contrite. “No,” he admitted. “But the scanner is calibrated to read your DNA and reconfigure its settings according to your own molecular structure. It’s especially effective when treating humanoids.”

“But I...” Maya instinctively hesitated before revealing her metamorphic skills, but then remembered that quite a crowd had seen her transform into a dove and then back to herself. “I can change my molecular structure at will; what if the machine modifies it? I might not be able to change again if it makes a mistake.”

“I understand,” said Bashir with a nod. “I don’t want to impose any treatment on you that you don’t want. You’ll have to tell me what you need.”

Maya smiled weakly. “Time to regenerate is what I need.”

“Regenerate?” For some reason, her mention of the word made his eyes widen in renewed surprise, though he recovered quickly. “Is there a doctor on the Moon who could help you?” *So they know I’m from Alpha*, she thought. *I suppose it’s pretty obvious. I wonder where Tony is.*

“Doctor Helena Russell is the chief medical officer on Alpha,” she said out loud.

Bashir said he would arrange for Helena to come over. In the meantime, he turned off the regenerator at Maya’s request, and promised not to apply any of his other instruments to her until Helena was there. Closing her eyes, Maya began the painful and lengthy process of regenerating her body.

“She said she was regenerating,” explained Bashir as he came back into his office. Odo was waiting for him there, and the doctor couldn’t help wondering just how similar Maya and Odo might be. Now that he had her on a biobed, Bashir was looking forward to analysing Maya, not of course to satisfy his curiosity, but so that he would know enough about her to help her convalescence. Though he could possibly write an interesting paper about her abilities...

“I heard her,” said Odo. “Why did you suggest running the regenerator on her? You know it doesn’t work on me.”

“You have a fluctuating molecular structure with a lot of non-specialised cells,” said Bashir as he observed Maya’s monitors. “Whereas this Maya is completely humanoid when she isn’t transforming. Look at her readouts. She could be from any number of species.” He pointed at the outline of her bones on the image scan, assuming that those were the elements Odo was most likely to recognise. “Mind you, I don’t see how the regenerator would affect her if beaming her into the Infirmary didn’t.”

“What’s that?” asked Odo, indicating a bright patch on the scan of Maya’s skull.

Bashir magnified the area and asked the computer for an analysis. He wasn’t particularly surprised by the results, though it was fascinating to watch. “She’s moving her damaged cells from her brain to another part of her body. So that’s how she can heal herself...”

"I can't do that!" Odo seemed outraged that Maya might have a skill that he didn't master.

"You don't need to," Bashir told him. "You wouldn't fracture your skull if you fell from that height. You would—"

"Just go 'splat'?"

"Pardon?"

"Oh nothing, it was something Quark said," explained Odo with a wry smile. "But I suppose you're right; being a liquid makes me more resilient in some respects."

"Yes, it does. But this young lady is quite fascinating. Her brain stem is rather unusual," said Bashir, peering at the scan. The brain stem was unlike that of any humanoid he had encountered so far. Maybe that was the key to her ability to transform. "Fascinating..."

His musings were interrupted when he heard the Infirmary door open. Bashir turned to see Sisko enter in the company of two men the doctor did not recognise, though he assumed they were Commander Koenig and his first officer. Odo had already given him a brief description of the 'Alphans' as they called themselves.

"How is your patient doing, Doctor?" asked Sisko as he approached.

"She's regenerating," said Bashir. "She refused to let me use the regeneration scan, and said she could do it on her own."

The younger Alphan, whose name was Verdeschi as Bashir recalled, was standing in the doorway to the ward, watching Maya. "Yeah, sounds like Maya..."

"Doctor, this is Commander Koenig and his first officer, Mr. Verdeschi, of Moonbase Alpha," said Sisko, indicating the two men. "I've explained what happened."

"I take it this young lady is a member of your crew," said Odo, crossing his arms on his chest and regarding the two Alphans suspiciously.

Koenig fixed his blue eyes on Odo. "Maya is our science officer. She's a Metamorph from the planet Psychon," he explained coldly. "I understand you shot her down while she was flying. Captain Sisko said she was severely injured."

"Fortunately, her injuries aren't life-threatening," said Bashir gently, "and her regeneration process seems very effective. She did ask for your chief medical officer... a Doctor Helena Russell? I think it would help if she could come aboard."

"We sent our Eagle back to get her as soon as we heard about Maya," Koenig informed him. "She should be here within an hour. Now, Constable, Captain Sisko has explained to me that you're at war with an empire run by Metamorphs, but perhaps you can explain why you shot Maya without first checking what species she was from?"

The commander's voice was filled with barely concealed anger, and Bashir noticed that his hands were clenched. The doctor tensed up instinctively, bracing himself for the confrontation that would doubtless ensue.

"She was only supposed to be stunned: her injuries were an unfortunate accident," said Odo, narrowing his eyes. "Perhaps you can explain why she was spying on us in the first place."

Verdeschi approached, his expression menacing. "Precisely so that we could find out if you were the kind of people to shoot first and ask questions later—I guess now we know!"

"Wait a minute," intervened Bashir, raising his hands. "It was an accident. Unfortunately, people do make mistakes in times of war."

"Doctor Bashir is right," enunciated Sisko, "I know the war is no excuse, and all I can do is apologise on behalf of the station for what happened to your officer." He gave Odo a quick glance as if to encourage him to apologise too, but the Shapeshifter did not seem inclined to do so.

"You must have known the risks she was running," growled the constable. "Even without the war, if we had turned out to be hostile, she could just as easily have been killed. You can't blame us if your mistake nearly cost her her life."

Verdeschi moved up until he was only a meter away from Odo. "And you can't blame us for taking some precautions," he declared. "We don't have any fancy sensors and the only way to know what's going on somewhere is to go and have a look."

"I take it this great plan was your idea?" sneered Odo.

Bashir was appalled at the constable's reaction, but it was Sisko who stepped in first to try and stop the argument. "Constable!"

"Yeah, it was as it happens," said Verdeschi forcefully, ignoring Sisko's intervention. "My job is to protect Alpha and I happen to take it very seriously. I need to take every opportunity I can to obtain what could be vital information about possible threats to our base."

Koenig grasped Verdeschi's arm as if to pull him back from his confrontation with Odo. The commander had apparently calmed down enough to realise that an argument would not be productive. "Tony, this isn't helping..."

"Including endangering the life of one of your crewmen, I see," retorted Odo as if nobody else but Verdeschi were in the room. Bashir was amazed to see the constable so hostile; he wondered what the Alphans had said or done to get Odo so angry.

"Believe me, if I could do what she does, I'd do it myself," spat out Verdeschi ruefully.

"Oh, so you often send your science officer on dangerous undercover missions, do you?"

“How dare you—?” started the Alphan, taking a step closer. If his commander’s hand hadn’t still been on his arm, Bashir was sure Verdeschi would have taken a swing at Odo.

Their voices were gradually becoming louder, and the doctor started to worry that they might wake Maya. “Gentlemen!” he intervened. “I suggest you go and have your argument somewhere else. This really isn’t the place and my patient—”

“Tony.”

It was the weak call from the next room which interrupted the argument far more effectively than Bashir’s demand for calm. Verdeschi and Koenig both rushed into the ward, though the commander stopped at the foot of Maya’s bed while his colleague went closer, taking her hand in his.

John Koenig was shocked to see the state Maya was in. Her beautiful features were covered in scratches, as if she had been dragged through a patch of brambles, and he could tell from her frown and the way she kept her eyes closed that she was in a great deal of pain. The sight disgusted him; it made him want to punish whoever had done this, or lash out at Bashir for his inadequate care, just do anything rather than stand, helpless, at the foot of her bed.

Looking at his first officer, John could imagine Tony was going through hell. Even though he and Maya were not ‘going out’, or so Tony said at least, they were very close, and John knew his friend had had some misgivings about taking Maya to Deep Space Nine in the first place.

“It’s all right, Maya,” said Tony gently, still holding her hand. “I’m here.”

“Hmm... That’s a great comfort,” she said ironically, though John could see she was smiling.

Tony let go of her hand, his expression comically indignant. “Well, in that case, why did you call me?”

“To tell you to stop shouting!” she declared, her eyes still closed. “I’m regenerating, I need calm.” Her hand reached out blindly, evidently searching for Tony’s. He caught it and clasped it in his hands.

“Oh, we’ll leave you to it, then, and go back to Alpha, shall we?” he teased with a half-smile. Although he was joking, his eyes never left her scratched face.

She ignored his comment and simply murmured, “At least my hearing is better... Commander? Is Helena coming?”

John approached and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Yes, Maya. Alan has gone to fetch her. Helena will be here soon.” He only hoped Helena would know what to do; Bashir evidently had no idea, or he wouldn’t have left Maya in such pain. Whatever universe they had come to, medical care didn’t seem to be its forte.

“Good, we can have an Alphan reunion right here on Deep Space... Nine,” said Maya drowsily. “Now I have some work to do...”

She winced, her skin folding into a deep line between the series of ridges she had in place of eyebrows. John gently brushed a strand of auburn hair off her forehead. Tony seemed too stricken to do anything but hold her hand.

“She needs to rest,” said Bashir in his gentle English accent.

John reached across the bed to touch Tony’s arm. “Come on, Tony; she’ll be all right.”

Tony nodded, his countenance completely devoid of its usual cheerfulness. They joined Bashir at the entrance. Despite his misgivings about the man’s medical talent, John could tell that the doctor was sincerely concerned about Maya, and indeed about the two of them.

“Your commander is right,” said Bashir, placing a friendly hand on Tony’s arm. “She’ll pull through. In fact, I’m sure she’ll be better by tomorrow.”

Tony seemed to clench his teeth as he looked away. “Yeah, thanks,” he said shortly, his tone almost sarcastic. He took in a breath as if to say something else, but then caught John’s eye and put on a wan smile. “Thanks,” he repeated more politely.

“I’m sure you’re doing what you can, Doctor,” said John diplomatically, though he didn’t get that feeling. Surely there had to be some kind of painkiller in this high-tech Infirmary.

“I’ll be able to do even more when your Doctor Russell arrives,” promised Bashir.

Doctor Helena Russell entered the Infirmary, and Bashir fell hopelessly in love.

She was beautiful. Clear grey-blue eyes, neat blonde hair, regular features that looked as though they might have come from the pen of an artist. She was probably a good ten years older than him, and she was also much shorter, but to Bashir, she was a vision of loveliness. He forgot all about his colleagues and the other two Alphans who were still there, and just stared at Russell.

Having been so rapidly infatuated, his heart was almost immediately broken when he saw the wedding ring on her finger. It didn’t take him long to guess who she was married to.

“John!” she exclaimed as soon as she saw Koenig. “What happened?
Alan said—”

“Maya was injured. She’s regenerating herself, but we need you to keep an eye on her progress.” Koenig put his hand on her shoulder, no doubt an involuntary gesture of possessiveness, and indicated Bashir.

The doctor felt his heart beat faster as Koenig introduced him. “This is Doctor Bashir, the station’s chief medical officer. He has been monitoring Maya’s status so far.”

“Doctor Bashir,” she said, directing a graceful smile at the love-struck doctor. She had a North-American accent, but all the poise and elegance of a British Lady—not that Bashir had ever met a real Lady, but he had seen some in holoprograms.

“Please, call me Julian,” he said a little too eagerly.

Bashir could sense Odo’s quizzical blue gaze on him and felt a red wave of embarrassment light up his face. Not for the first time in his life, he was grateful that he had dark skin; if it had been as white as Kira’s, for instance, he would have been walking around with a permanently red face. *Why do I always behave like a complete prat?* He asked himself desperately. The genetic engineering his parents had had performed on him when he was a child had evidently done nothing to improve his social graces.

Whatever she might be thinking of him, Russell didn’t show any emotion on her impassive face. “Julian,” she repeated. “Perhaps you can tell me more about Maya’s condition?”

“I, ah, yes, of course. If you’ll come with me...” Talking to Doctor Russell as one professional to another was a lot easier, and Bashir began to relax and act less like an ‘eager puppy’, as Dax called him. He had to explain to Russell what most of the technology was, but once he had taught her how the monitor worked she set about reading it. After a moment, she shook her head.

“She’s quite dehydrated; you need to apply a saline solution.”

“Pardon?”

Russell was puzzled by his interruption. “Well, whatever you would use to rehydrate a person.”

“Oh right,” said Bashir, a little embarrassed that he hadn’t been able to at least guess what she talking about. He hadn’t been paying proper attention. “I wondered about putting her on the hydrator, but she refused any intervention on the grounds that I wouldn’t know what she needs.”

“Her needs aren’t that special,” said Russell with a smile. “You can rehydrate her the same way as you would any human her size.”

“Understood.” Bashir pressed the appropriate control; the biobed would automatically beam in the required moisture. Maya twitched momentarily, but then became still again. “She’s very sensitive to any kind of treatment, isn’t she?” remarked Bashir. “She could even feel the regenerator... that’s one of our devices. Humanoids don’t usually feel anything when I use it, but she did.”

He turned to Russell and found her staring at the console he was using. Realising he was watching her, she looked up at him with a start. “Hmm? Oh yes, she has a complete awareness of every particle in her body. That’s how she can metamorphose into different shapes, by visualising her individual molecules and then rearranging them to create the new form. Obviously, if you add or remove any part of her, she feels it.”

Bashir was about to ask more about this, when Odo joined their conversation. "So she uses her mind to shapeshift from one solid form to another? That's interesting. I don't have to concentrate at all. I just change shape when I want to."

"You can change shape too?" asked Russell. "You don't look like a Psychon, but they're the only humanoids we've encountered who could do this. And Maya is the last of her species in our universe."

"I'm not a humanoid," said Odo shortly. For some reason, he looked at Verdeschi, as if daring him to say anything, but the Alphan simply looked away and remained silent.

Sensing that the Changeling was unwilling to discuss the subject any further, Bashir clapped his hands together rather noisily. "Now... I don't know if you realise this, but it's actually our evening now. Since Maya will have to stay in the Infirmary until she has recovered, I suggest you stay over here on the station. Now would be an ideal opportunity to get you some guest quarters, don't you think, Odo?"

It was a spur of the moment suggestion, but given how concerned the Alphans seemed for the well-being of their crewmate, he had a feeling they wouldn't want to leave her alone on the station anyway.

The Alphans were visibly surprised by the proposal, which Odo immediately backed up. "We can have some quarters prepared for you within half an hour," said the Changeling. "Including for your pilot, if he wants to leave his ship..."

Russell smiled at Odo and then looked at Koenig. "Mr. Odo was very surprised to find Alan was going to stay on the Eagle while I came here."

Koenig acknowledged her remark with a smile, but then glanced at Verdeschi and said, "I appreciate the offer, but I think it would be best if I returned to Alpha for the night. I feel I should be with the rest of my crew, and I need to update them on our situation over here. Helena, you can stay here with Tony and monitor Maya overnight. Alan and I will come back tomorrow. In the meantime, I think we're still within range to use our commlocks. You can call us if we're needed."

Russell immediately unclipped the device she wore on her belt and looked down at its tiny screen. "Yes, I'm still receiving Alpha's signal."

"You can always use one of our communicators," offered Bashir. "In case there was some interference... or something." It struck him as he made the offer that it would just sound like a lame excuse to make himself look good in Russell's eyes... which it was, he realised.

"Thank you," said Russell with a kind smile. She looked down at the device she was holding and then raised her eyes to Bashir again. "There was something else, Doctor... Julian. I was looking at your instruments, and I was wondering if you could perhaps clear something up for me." Bashir nodded. "It may seem like a stupid question... but what's the date today?"

Space: 1999 - A New Moon Over Bajor

Bashir was caught completely off-guard. “Ah... Well, it’s stardate 51877.1...” Russell exchanged a puzzled glance with Koenig; realising they didn’t understand the stardate, the doctor did some mental arithmetic and added, “...which makes it the evening of October 16, 2374.”

The Alphans didn’t seem particularly surprised. “The twenty-fourth century,” said Russell, looking around at Bashir’s instruments. “That makes sense.”

“Why? What century do you come from?” asked Bashir.

“The twentieth,” answered Russell. “The last time we saw our Earth was in 1999.”

CHAPTER THREE
In The Pale Moonlight

CHAPTER THREE – *In The Pale Moonlight*

*“You’re the light in my deepest darkest hour
You’re my saviour when I fall
And you may not think I care for you
When you know down inside that I really do ”*
Bee Gees - “How Deep Is Your Love”¹

“I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Julian in his gentle English accent when they reached Helena’s quarters. They had left Maya in the care of Deep Space Nine’s night staff, and the station’s doctor had offered to walk Helena back to the apartment Odo had assigned to her.

“I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight,” said Helena firmly as she opened the door. The young man had been innocently flirting with her all evening, and although Julian was sweet, she didn’t want to give him any encouragement. Helena had noticed John’s suspicious look when the doctor was talking to her earlier; her husband was a jealous man, and she had no reason to provoke him.

Bashir nodded and smiled amiably. “Goodnight,” he repeated before leaving.

The lights came on automatically as Helena entered the quarters, but the very first thing she noticed was the view. Almost three quarters of the eye-shaped porthole in her living room was taken up by the Moon. She immediately went to the window to gaze out at the erstwhile satellite which had been her home for so many years. It was upside down due to its passage in the wormhole, and Helena could just see the pale lights from Alpha on the lower edge.

Home, she thought automatically, before pausing to reflect on that instinctive reaction to the artificial light on the asteroid. She remembered being a child, sitting on the rug in her parents’ living room, watching in wonder as the first man set foot on the alien world that was Earth’s nearest astral neighbour. It had never occurred to her then that the “giant leap for mankind” would have such an impact on her own destiny.

Now, nearly four decades of her life later, Helena had come to think of that barren block of rock as her home. It was where she had lived and worked for over six years—where she had met and married John Koenig. Earth was becoming little more than a vague memory. Perhaps the reaction was natural, but Helena found it unsettling nonetheless.

1 Bee Gees - "How Deep Is Your Love" (B. Gibb / R. Gibb/ M. Gibb) - From the motion picture soundtrack *Saturday Night Fever* (RSO, 1977)

Walking away from the Moon, the doctor turned her attention to the interior of the quarters. The design of the living room was unfamiliar, all grey and brown and teal, with neon lighting in triangular panels on the walls and behind mesh on the ceiling, casting a diffuse grid of light on the carpeted floor. The furniture was similar to the décor; there was a black dining table with matching chairs, and a teal sofa in front of the window. One of the walls featured what was probably an inset food dispenser; Helena had seen Doctor Bashir use a similar device in the Infirmary. Two doors opened off the main room; she assumed they lead to the bedroom and possibly a bathroom.

Julian had assured Helena that she would be warned if anything happened to Maya, and she was herself convinced that the Psychon was doing well, so there was no work for her to do. She wondered briefly whether she should find out how to use the food dispenser to get a drink, but she was not used to ordering drinks unless it was really necessary, and she wasn't particularly thirsty. She wasn't tired either; it was only mid-afternoon on Alpha. There wasn't much for her to do.

Helena noticed a computer terminal in one corner, and walked over to see what it offered. The screen captions were in English, but the buttons had inscriptions in some curlicues she did not recognise; fortunately, most of the commands were accessible by voice control. Helena was not surprised to find that her access was strictly limited to entertainment and general information about the station.

She was finding her way around the computer when the door chime warbled. "Come in," she called out, following the instructions on the terminal. It was strange not to be able to see her visitor before opening the door—something the commlocks permitted on Alpha.

The vocal order released the door lock and Tony walked in. "I, ah, hope I'm not disturbing you, Helena. I didn't feel much like sleeping, so I thought I'd come round for a chat."

"I understand," said Helena sympathetically. She indicated the sofa and they both sat down. "We're not exactly in synch with this station's time cycle."

"No, we're not," he agreed. "I'll tell you something else, too. I had a look at their clock to work out exactly how many hours our cycle is behind theirs. It turns out they're on a twenty-six hour day and their hours are longer than ours, so we'll have to bear that in mind when we're calculating the time difference between here and Alpha."

"Maybe they're on Bajoran time. It would make sense for them to be in synch with that planet rather than Earth."

Tony nodded and leant on the back of the sofa to peer out of the window. "Nice view, huh?"

Helena turned to follow his gaze. "Yes. I wonder if Constable Odo chose these quarters specially so we could see our home."

"I somehow doubt it," said Tony coldly. "It's probably just a coincidence. I don't think the good Constable trusts us any further than he can throw us. Still, I suppose I can understand that. I wouldn't be overjoyed if I had a bunch of strangers bounce in on me from an alternate universe either."

"Doctor Bashir was asking me about our universe. He seemed quite fascinated with our adventures."

"I think he was fascinated with you, more like," said Tony with a grin. "Four hundred years old, and you're still turning heads."

Helena chuckled gently, lowering her eyes. "Julian is a sweet young man. It's funny, you know; these people are as far removed from our time as we are from Shakespeare's, and yet Julian still reminds me of some of the students I went to medical school with. I suppose it's quite reassuring to find humans haven't changed all that much in 400 years."

"Far as I can tell, humans haven't changed a lot in the past 2000 years and then some. There's no reason to think they'd be different in the 24th century than they were in Roman times. We know this lot are at war: that seems to be a perennial human occupation."

"Of course," conceded Helena. "I just thought that contact with aliens might have changed them. They've obviously been working with many of these species for a long time; I noticed some of the aliens were even wearing the same uniforms as the humans."

Tony nodded. "I had a good look at the computer in my quarters while I was waiting for you to come back. It wasn't very forthcoming about specifics, which I guess isn't surprising. What I did get out of it was that this station is run by a military organisation called Starfleet. That's who the black-and-greys are: the Federation's army, evidently. But the station actually belongs to the Bajorans."

"So the Federation are an occupation force?" asked Helena.

"Not exactly. I get the impression Bajor's under some sort of Marshall plan, with the Federation stepping in after a foreign occupation. The trouble is that most of the info assumed I'd already know all about this place's recent history, so I wasn't able to find out much more than that. The rest was stuff Captain Sisko already told us, about the station monitoring the entrance to the wormhole and things like that."

"I was having a look at their computer when you came in. It said Deep Space Nine used to be a mining station."

Tony grinned at the idea and looked around the room. "Looks more like a luxury hotel to me. I was half expecting to find a chocolate on the pillow, except I suppose you're meant to get that sort of thing from the replicator. I have to admit, they have some jolly nice technology in this 24th century."

Helena smiled at the comment, but she got the feeling from the silence that followed it that Tony was gearing himself up to ask something else.

“How’s Maya doing?” he asked finally, innocently observing the criss-cross design on the ceiling.

“She’s fine,” answered Helena indulgently.

Tony ran his hand through his dark hair, involuntarily uncovering the threads of silver at his temples. Helena could remember a time when those hairs had been as dark as the rest. Tony was still young, his features relatively unmarked, but all those years of worry were already beginning to take their toll. *We’re none of us getting any younger*, thought Helena, though it always pained her to see the young people on Alpha getting old before their time.

“We know how much you care for Maya,” she said. “But I think John felt you were overreacting. He said you nearly bit Bashir’s head off.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but yeah, I guess I was pretty upset,” said Tony with a nod, keeping his eyes averted. “Still, I promise to keep my feelings for Maya under wraps until all this is over.”

“That’s what you always do, isn’t it—keep your feelings under wraps,” she said softly.

This time, Tony did look at her, but his eyes were bright with amusement. “Deep down inside,” he announced, placing his hand on his heart, “I’m an Englishman. We never reveal our feelings to anyone. Stiff upper lip and all that.”

He looked so droll Helena couldn’t help smiling. But she shook her head. “You don’t fool me, Verdeschi. Your feelings for Maya are so obvious I’m surprised you’re so keen on denying them.”

“What am I supposed to do—marry her?” he said, his tone still light, although she could detect a hint of irritation in his voice. “I seem to recall we’ve had this conversation before.”

Helena lowered her eyes and nodded. She could well remember the conversation he was referring to: an argument, actually, which took place when she and John had informed Tony of their decision to marry. The first officer had been adamantly opposed to the idea, arguing that it would send a message to all the other Alphans that their commander had definitively given up on the idea of finding a new home. Tony apparently considered that Alpha was no more a place for romance than it was for children.²

“Maybe things will be different if these Starfleet people can give us a ship,” she said hopefully.

Tony guffawed humourlessly. "I don't think we should get our hopes up too high. All we've had from these people so far is one hostile act and a lot of talking. They want to blow up the Moon, they shoot Maya... I don't know... I mean, I know Sisko and Bashir are humans, and that does make me feel a lot better about them. But I don't think we should assume that they're humans like us. And who knows what alien creatures are pulling the strings in Starfleet Command?"

"The trouble with you, Tony, is that you believe the universe is populated with hostile aliens."

"Yeah. Because in my experience, the universe is populated with hostile aliens."

"So, what do you think of these Alphans?" asked Nerys when she came to join Odo in his quarters later that night. She was sitting on the sofa, tired after an evening of assuring various Bajoran dignitaries, including her former lover, First Minister Shakaar, that everything would be done to stop Alpha from colliding with Bajor VIII.

Odo, standing by the window, turned his face in her direction and seemed to consider what to answer. "I don't know," he said finally. "I don't really trust them."

"What's not to trust?" said Nerys, looking up at him in surprise. "They're only a bunch of ancient humans who have been trapped on their own moon for six years. I don't think they represent any threat to Deep Space Nine."

"Hmm." Odo stared at her for a moment, and then looked out of the window again.

Sensing that her lover was upset about something, Nerys came over to join him and placed her hand on his arm, feeling the simulated material of his uniform under her fingers. Odo half shrugged as if to shake her off, and Nerys removed her hand. She followed Odo's gaze; Alpha was not visible from this side of the station, and there was nothing to see out of the window other than the familiar constellation of the Cardassian system.

"Do you think this Shapeshifter of theirs is a threat?" she asked, trying to guess at the cause for Odo's mood. "That she has something to do with the Dominion?"

He shook his head. "She isn't a Founder. She's from some other species we've never met before, but I don't get the impression either she or her Alphan friends have anything to do with the Dominion."

2 Owing to the precarious circumstances on the runaway moon, the Alphans had to enforce a strict no growth policy to preserve life support and resources. *Space: 1999 - "Alpha Child"* (ep.10-1974)

“So what’s wrong?” insisted Nerys. Odo’s elusiveness was beginning to worry her; there was obviously something he didn’t want to tell her, something about the Alphans that bothered him, and she wanted to find out what.

“Nothing. I just have a bad feeling about them. The sooner they’re out of this universe the better,” said Odo shortly. “Now, I need to regenerate. We’re going to have a busy day tomorrow.”

Crushed and confused by the coldness of his tone, Nerys took a step back. “Yes... yes, I suppose we will...” she stuttered, before adding, “Odo...”

Her tone was a gentle invitation for him to say more, to confide in her, but Odo didn’t take the hint. Nerys watched his smooth features for a moment and then turned away.

As she walked back to her own quarters, Nerys pondered what had happened. It was unlike Odo to be so cold towards her; regardless of the situation, he usually made an effort to be warm and welcoming whenever she came to visit him. She was also puzzled by his attitude towards the Alphans. A crew of primitive 20th century refugees was hardly a threat to the station.

Nerys shook her head silently as she entered her quarters and headed for the bedroom. Odo himself had said he didn’t believe the Alphans had any connection to the Dominion, so he obviously wasn’t concerned they might cause any harm to Deep Space Nine or its population. Having performed a thorough scan of their Moonbase with O’Brien earlier that evening, Nerys knew that the Alphans’ weaponry was crude, probably only really effective in hand-to-hand combat, and that their base had been constructed as a science station rather than a military installation. One blast of a photon torpedo and there would be no more Moonbase Alpha. So, no, Odo definitely couldn’t be worried about them being a threat.

As she changed into her night clothes, Nerys was suddenly struck by an idea. It seemed so obvious that she sat down on her bed in disbelief, annoyed that this hadn’t occurred to her before. Odo’s discomfort had to come from the female Shapeshifter. After all, the last time a female Shapeshifter had been on the station, during the Dominion occupation, Odo had been driven to betray his friends, herself included, and very nearly turned the war in the Dominion’s favour.

Nerys shivered involuntarily at the memory. Thanks to the Dominion, the station had been back under control of the Cardassians and the former Prefect of Bajor, Gul Dukat, strutted along the Promenade every day with his Vorta advisor Weyoun. Meanwhile Nerys was made powerless by a non-aggression pact between her government and the Dominion. In spite of this, she had been determined to do everything she could to get rid of the occupation forces and facilitate Starfleet’s return. Odo had been equally determined — until one of his Changeling siblings came on board the station.

This Founder was the head of the Alpha Quadrant Dominion, a Shapeshifter who usually took on a female appearance in solid form. Odo had been... seduced by this creature—there was no other word for it. As a result, he had failed to help Nerys in her attempt to sabotage the Dominion's plans; if Dukat's daughter hadn't unexpectedly helped them, Odo's treachery would have resulted in the death of most of the rebels and would no doubt also have handed the Alpha Quadrant over to the Dominion. ³

Maybe Odo was remembering these events as well, and feared that this other female Shapeshifter might distract him from his duties again. Nerys felt a dull wave of jealousy as she lay down in her bed. Odo was hers; he had no business to be worrying about other females!

Not that she could blame him if he did look for someone closer to his species. He had never really discussed the experience with her, but from what Nerys gathered, 'linking' with his Shapeshifter sibling had been beyond compare with anything he could experience as a solid life form. Not that he ever complained about the shortcomings of humanoid sex; after all, he was in love with Nerys, and she assumed this made him content to make do with the limitations of her solid body. He usually seemed very happy whenever he was with her. It was daunting to have such power over the happiness of another being, but Nerys certainly wasn't going to question her good luck.

Odo was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Someone who loved her completely, unconditionally, who gave her the sort of love a mother would give a child. The sort of love her own mother would have given her if she hadn't been so busy being Dukat's... Nerys dismissed that train of thought rapidly. ⁴

Now that she was involved with Odo, Nerys's only regret was that she couldn't reciprocate his feelings. He had been one of her closest friends for years, he loved her, he was a kind, attentive lover, a person who definitely deserved to be loved, but Nerys knew she didn't love him. Not the way he loved her. Much as she wanted to be, Nerys just wasn't in love with Odo.

³ *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - "Call to Arms", "A Time To Stand", "Rocks and Shoals", "Sons and Daughters", "Behind the Lines", "Favor the Bold", "Sacrifice of Angels" (episodes 524 to 530 - 1997)

⁴ Nerys's mother Kira Meru was the mistress of Gul Dukat, head of the Cardassian Occupation. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - "Wrongs Darker Than Death Or Night" (ep.541-1998)

She knew what love was like; there was no mistaking the feeling, but Odo didn't make her heart beat wildly with a single smile, she didn't yearn for him when he was absent, the feel of his simulated hands on her body didn't make her shiver with desire. Her hope was that being with him, seeing what a wonderful person he was, realising day after day how lucky she was to be loved by him, would some day make her love him. It wasn't impossible, after all. Dax always said that nothing was impossible.

And who needed love, anyway? Nerys knew she wanted stability, safety, the security she had so rarely known in her life, and that was exactly what Odo offered her. It wasn't as if she was going to find anyone better, she reminded herself; Odo's love was that of a Shapeshifter, unaffected by hormones and the irrational behaviour of humanoids. What else could she hope for? Some ordinary humanoid like Verdeschi?

Nerys frowned at the thought and shook her head. "Computer, lights!" she ordered. The room was momentarily plunged into total darkness, before Nerys's eyes got used to the light level and could make out the glow from the computer controls at the head of her bed. She closed her eyes and turned onto her side, waiting for a sleep which would empty her mind of all these depressing thoughts.

By the time Maya woke up the next morning, she had managed to clear most of the damage from her head and move it to her right arm, which was now in excruciating pain. The injury she was creating looked like a burn; her skin was wrinkled and covered in nasty sores. Although it was painful, the burn was fulfilling its purpose of evacuating the damage from Maya's body; the crisp layers of skin were already beginning to peel off.

Maya could tell Doctor Bashir was frustrated by his inability to do anything to relieve her suffering. A painkiller would have made her unable to identify the areas of damage, and tests had proved that Maya's misgivings about the regenerator were justified. After being exposed to the regeneration scan, a cell sample Bashir had taken from Maya had become as firmly bonded as the cells of any ordinary humanoid. If Bashir had run the scan on her, Maya might not have been able to transform again.

After doing the test, Bashir asked some questions about her metamorphic abilities. He said that someone on the station called Odo was a Metamorph too, though he did explain this person was from a completely different species. Maya was fascinated by this information; she had never even heard of any other creatures capable of changing shape. As far as she knew, it was an ability that only Psychons could master, and even then, it was artificially induced thanks to a biological computer. Maya was very curious to meet this Odo.

One thing she didn't particularly appreciate was the way Bashir kept using the term 'Shapeshifter' instead of 'Metamorph'; there was something pejorative about the name that made it sound as if metamorphosing was a trick. But maybe the Starfleet people had started using the term as an insult for their enemies and it had simply caught on.

The doctor eventually left for a staff meeting, leaving Maya in the care of his nurses. To keep Maya's mind off the pain, one of the Bajoran nurses provided her with a flat portable computer they called a 'padd', and the first task Maya set herself was understanding the time cycle on DS9 so that she could easily calculate the difference with Alpha. She then had a replicated breakfast of melon with Parma ham—something she had read about and wanted to taste for some time. After that, she read all the information about the station and its neighbouring star system, as well as the propaganda-loaded news bulletins about the war. After that, she was bored.

Maya regenerated for another half hour until she was too tired to do any more. She then spent some time picking at the wound on her arm. It did nothing to alleviate her pain, and she was certain both Bashir and Helena would have been horrified, but throwing away the ugly strips of mangled skin made her feel she was closer to being healed.

While her left hand was busy picking at the burn, Maya let her mind drift, consciously willing it to think about anything except the pain. Not surprisingly, one of the first thoughts that came to mind was for Tony. The poor man had looked quite distraught when she had seen him late last night; he liked to pretend that he was cool and aloof, but she knew that in reality, he had about as much calm as a clucking mother hen. The image made her smile. She would have to remember to tease him about that.

Maya sometimes felt that joking with Tony was one of the only things that kept her sane... and given her experience of the sanity of her own people, that was no mean feat in her opinion. No matter how unhappy or depressed she might be feeling, she knew she could trust Tony to lift her spirits... most of the time. There had been times, especially recently, when being with him made her uncomfortable.

Maya's thoughts were interrupted when she heard someone clearing their throat. She had expected Tony to be the first person to visit her, but she knew from the unfamiliar sound that her visitor was someone else. Self-consciously hiding her wounded arm under the counterpane, Maya looked up to find the smooth-faced alien at the foot of her bed. She remembered meeting him the previous evening and then hearing him arguing about something with Tony, but she certainly hadn't expected him to come and inquire about her health.

"Good Morning, Miss Maya," he said, looking slightly embarrassed. "I don't know if you remember me—Constable Odo."

Maya smiled politely and nodded a greeting as Odo approached. “Constable. Of course I remember. You were there just after I fell on the Promenade.”

“I hope you are feeling better,” he continued, coming to stand rigidly at her bedside. “I apologise for what happened yesterday; the soldier responsible has been reprimanded.”

“Thank you. I’m a lot better now; Doctor Bashir said I could probably leave the Infirmary later today.” If Odo had noticed the state her arm was in, he certainly didn’t mention it, and Maya kept it well hidden under the cover.

“Good.”

He didn’t seem to know what to say next, so Maya said, “Doctor Bashir told me you were a Metamorph.”

Despite his blurred features, Odo managed to look surprised and embarrassed at the same time. “Um, yes, I am...”

“The method I was taught is based on the repositioning of any number of molecules to simulate a living creature, using subspace transference to achieve mass compression and matter relocation. Perhaps you change shape in a similar way?”

“I... I’m not sure.” Odo’s small blue eyes shifted around the room as he spoke. “It’s just something my people can do naturally, I guess. I’ve always been able to shapeshift... I can’t really describe it, but... I suppose I can give you a demonstration...”

As Maya watched, his hand changed into a gelatinous, orange blob. “This is my natural state,” he explained. “I can change any part of myself to resemble any shape or texture I want.” As an example, he changed the blob into a wooden hammer, and then turned it back to a humanoid hand.

“That’s extraordinary!” exclaimed Maya, ignoring the lancing pain from her arm as it rubbed against the sheet. She had never seen anything like Odo’s method of changing shape; although she was able to change into any living being, she couldn’t morph into inanimate objects. She was so engrossed in Odo’s transformation that she didn’t immediately notice that someone else had joined them.

“I take it you’re feeling better. Holding court, I see.” Maya’s heart leapt with delight as she heard that sarcastic voice, and her eyes immediately left Odo to seek out the Alphan.

“Tony! What are you doing up? It’s only 5.00 a.m. on Alpha—did you come back with John?” He looked tired and haggard, Maya noticed, as if he hadn’t had a good sleep. He was still her favourite human in the whole universe, but his good looks were currently marred by the bags under his eyes and the fact he hadn’t shaved yet.

Tony approached, giving Odo a hostile stare as he placed himself on the other side of Maya's bed. "I stayed here—John's orders," he added, as if to pretend he hadn't wanted to stay. "When the night cycle finished, I thought I might as well get up and see how you were doing."

"You look exhausted," said Maya with concern. "Maybe you should go back to bed."

"No, I'm fine," declared Tony a little too vehemently. "Well, maybe I am a bit jetlagged." He wiped one eye with his finger and looked up at the clock on the wall. "I must admit I didn't sleep very well. They have these lights that seem to stay on all the bloody night, and their beds are atrocious. Hard as nails! Whoever designed those must have been some kind of masochist!"

"Cardassians," said Odo.

Tony stared at him blankly. "Huh?"

"Cardassians designed this station and its furnishings," explained the constable.

"Oh. As in the Cardassians who have joined the Dominion?" said Tony casually, scratching his cheek. "Yes. They're obviously suckers for punishment."

Odo's eyes narrowed. "I see Captain Sisko has given you a full briefing on the situation," he said. For some reason, that seemed to displease him.

"Yeah, well, we're all friends now, right?" "Hmm."

Neither of the security chiefs looked convinced and Maya couldn't help grinning at their childish adversity. She thought she had better warn Tony that Odo was a Metamorph before he went picking a fight with the constable. Perhaps one of the human's most endearing qualities as far as she was concerned was his tendency to act first and think later. But then she didn't like him for his brains.

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "You'll have to point out one of these Cardassians to me some time, and I'll give him a piece of my mind." Before Odo had a chance to answer, Tony had leaned closer to Maya. "Have they given you breakfast yet?"

"Yes, one of the nurses fed me about two hours ago." She noticed the disappointed look on Tony's face and half-regretted her truthfulness. "Perhaps we could have lunch later?"

Tony looked at Odo, and Maya knew that if the constable had not been there, he might have accepted her offer. But as it was, he simply nodded. "We'll see. John and Alan will be back by then." He looked at his commlock. "I'll call them in a couple of hours' time to see what their plans are."

Odo had evidently decided that he was no longer needed. "I think I'll leave you now. I have some work to do. It was a pleasure talking to you, Miss Maya."

Maya smiled and nodded enthusiastically. "I look forward to continuing our conversation later, Constable." She leaned forward as Odo left and the counterpane dropped from her arm.

“*Dio mio!* Maya, what happened to your arm?” Looking up at Tony, Maya could see he was staring at her burn with undisguised horror.

“It’s the result of my regeneration,” she explained seriously, realising that he was genuinely concerned and this was no time for jokes. “I’ve moved nearly all the damage from my fall into this sort of burn. Once all the skin drops off, I’ll be healed.”

Tony drew his gaze away from the hideous wound and looked into Maya’s upturned face. His expression relaxed a little and he shook his head. “You know, sometimes, you really freak me out, honey.”

Maya laughed. “Am I too alien for you, Tony?” she said teasingly.

“Nah. I’ll get used to it... some day.” Tony cupped her chin in his hand and Maya knew he was about to kiss her. He drew his face nearer, until it was only a finger’s length away from hers, and then stopped. “You’re going to turn into some ugly monster, aren’t you?” he said warily.

“No, I can’t transform right now,” said Maya.

“Aha! So I have you in my power at last,” chuckled Tony as he placed his lips on hers.

Maya’s heart beat increased dramatically and, unfortunately, so did the throbbing pain in her arm. This was the only situation in which being with Tony became uncomfortable. Touching him this way always produced such intense emotions that she was afraid she might involuntarily change into something horrible. What was it about this particular human being that made her react so strongly, anyway? Kissing John Koenig had never made her head spin this way, so it wasn’t just some strange allergy to his species. Maybe it was a natural response to being kissed by the person she spent most of her time with, but Maya had neither the knowledge nor the experience of what a normal Psychon reaction would be. All she knew was that what she was feeling was close to unbearable.

Instinctively lifting her hands as the sensation grew too strong, Maya hit her wounded arm against Tony’s chest. She let out an involuntary yelp of pain and Tony immediately let go of her.

“I’m sorry, my arm hurts,” she mumbled, looking down at the burn.

“That’s okay,” she heard him say, though she didn’t believe him. He always tried to hide it, but she knew Tony was puzzled by the way she pushed him away every time he kissed her. So far, Maya had never worked up the courage to explain exactly what was wrong; she was hoping the problem would just go away some day.

Still keeping her eyes down, Maya heard Tony walk away. Sudden panic gripped her, only to be replaced by relief as she realised he had only walked around the bed to be on the side of her good arm. She felt the bed give a little as he sat down beside her.

“Not many people around, are there?” he remarked lightly. “I’d have expected lots of people to be in here. With such a big station, they must get some hurty fingers and runny noses. Where’s that posh doctor of theirs, anyway?”

“He’s at a staff meeting, I think,” said Maya, relaxing now that their mini-crisis was over. She looked up at Tony and found him smiling at her.

“What did Plastilino want?” he asked, indicating the door with a nod of his head.

“Plastilino?”

“Oh, just a joke,” he said vaguely.

“A private joke, evidently.”

“You wouldn’t understand. Anyway, what were you two talking about?”

“Jealous?” said Maya mischievously.

“No, just curious,” he replied, putting on an air of studied nonchalance. “You seemed very interested in whatever he was showing you when I came in.”

“It turns out our friend Odo is a Metamorph, too,” she explained. “He can even turn into inanimate objects! I think I might learn something from him.”

“I see. Yes, he did mention something about that last night,” said Tony. He leaned closer again, this time to whisper in her ear. “Talking about yesterday: did you find out anything interesting... before they shot you?”

“I think you must know most of it by now,” said Maya, keeping her voice low. “About the war with the Dominion and its metamorphosing Founders.” Tony nodded to confirm this. “Well, what I did find out that the Starfleet people might not have told you is that the war isn’t going at all well for the Federation.”

Tony looked around to check no one would overhear them. “Ah now, that is news,” he said with a satisfied smile.

“I might have been listening to a particularly gloomy pair of soldiers,” continued Maya, “but as far as I can tell the Federation’s only advantage is that they control the wormhole. This has cut off the Dominion troops from their reinforcements on the other side of the galaxy, but it still hasn’t stopped the Dominion from invading several Federation worlds in recent months. From the conversations I overheard, it seems the Federation is getting pretty desperate. We couldn’t have arrived at a worse time.”

“Hmm. If they’re losing the war, I suspect the Feds will have more important things to worry about than some rogue asteroid. They’ll probably want to ship us off somewhere and then blow the Moon up or something.” Tony paused thoughtfully and then chucked Maya under the chin. “Well, we’ve got ourselves out of worse situations. I’m sure we’ll find some way to return to our universe as long as the Dominion and the Federation let us... But what you need to do now is concentrate on getting better. We’re going to need that fantastic brain of yours...”

Commander Dax, may I speak with you for a moment? said Sisko over the comm channel.

“Yes, Captain.”

Dax got up and left her station in the Ops pit, eagerly climbing the steps up to Sisko's office. She was hoping the captain had finally received an answer from Starfleet Command as to whether they could spare a ship for the Alphans. Sending the people back to their own universe would be a challenge, but Dax was looking forward to it. It would be a welcome change from worrying about battle manoeuvres and weaponry.

But as soon as she entered Sisko's office, Dax knew the captain had not got the answer he was hoping for. He was leaning back in his chair, handling his fetish baseball pensively. The window behind him was facing the Moon, and the pale reflected light of the faraway Bajoran sun lit up the outline of Sisko's shaven head with an eerie blue glow.

“I take it you got the answer from Starfleet Command,” said Dax, her spirits already deflated by the captain's expression.

“Our orders are to evacuate the Alphans from their Moonbase and keep them on Deep Space Nine until the U.S.S. *Addis-Ababa* arrives to bring them to Starbase 571. In the meantime, we are to find a quick and easy way of destroying the Moon before it reaches the Bajoran system.” Sisko delivered the order from Starfleet in a monotone voice which made it clear he didn't agree.

“Evacuate them and send them to some Starbase?” exclaimed Dax, outraged at the suggestion. “I thought Starfleet policy was to return people to their own universe whenever possible. And surely they can trust us to send the Alphans back.”

Sisko sighed, the tension visible in his hand as it gripped the hard baseball. “I know that. But Admiral Ross is concerned that we'd be wasting our time trying to find a way back for them. According to him, our main priority should be stopping the Moon from entering the Bajoran system. Starfleet is also nervous about messing with the wormhole these days, in case we give the Dominion an opportunity to come through.” He paused and placed his baseball back on its stand. “Needless to say that under those circumstances, they're not willing to provide the Alphans with a ship.”

“Surely the Prophets wouldn't let the Dominion through just because we've sent some ship into the wormhole!”

“You know that Starfleet Command are very uncomfortable with the whole concept of the Prophets,” said Sisko, standing up and beginning to pace, one fist behind his back. “I don't think they fully understand that the Prophets deliberately closed the wormhole because I asked them to.”

“So what are we going to do? Contact Commander Koenig and tell him his people can't return to their own universe?”

“Koenig certainly looked determined to return.” Sisko paused. “How long do you think it would take you to find a way back for them?”

“Not long,” said Dax with a smile. She could tell Sisko was looking for a way around the order. “We already know how to beam individual people into an alternate universe using a recalibrated transporter. Obviously, we can’t use the same method for 223 people; it would take too long, and we’ve no idea where they would end up in their universe. The best method would be to send them back using the wormhole and a modified ship. If we can modulate the shield harmonics to emit the right quantum frequency and then engage a warp bubble, it should be enough to push the ship into subspace and then back out into the appropriate universe... in theory at least.”

“But that just brings us back to the same question: where do we find a ship for them? They’ve become a bit of a rare commodity these days.”

“That’s the big question, isn’t it?” Dax thought for a moment and then added, “Ideally, it would have to be a Starfleet ship; that would make it easier to modify.”

Sisko nodded. “I’m sure it would be. But I doubt you’ll get much choice.”

He stopped his pacing and looked out of the window. “Starfleet have already assigned a team from Bajor IV’s mining crew to come and destroy the Moon; according to the geological survey Chief O’Brien did last night, it shouldn’t be too difficult. I’m going to let him oversee that part of the operation, but I’d like you to study ways of sending the Alphans back. I want to know as soon as possible if that’s feasible. Preferably before Starfleet knows what we’re doing.”

“Don’t worry, Benjamin, I’ll take care of that.”

“I know I can count on you, Old Man,” he said softly, giving her a tender smile. “In the meantime, we must evacuate the Alphans to Deep Space Nine and destroy the Moon before it does any damage; at least that will show some willingness to follow Starfleet’s orders. I’ll discuss this with Commander Koenig when he comes back to DS9.”

“He is *not* going to be pleased,” said Dax emphatically.

Sisko nodded. “No... he isn’t.”

CHAPTER FOUR
The Exiles

CHAPTER FOUR – *The Exiles*

*“There she stood in the doorway
I heard the mission bell
And I was thinking to myself
This could be Heaven or this could be Hell ”*
The Eagles - “Hotel California”¹

“There is no way I am letting my people be evacuated to some refugee camp! I don’t recognise Starfleet’s jurisdiction over Alpha: you have no right to *order* us to leave our home without consulting us first.” Koenig slammed his fist down on Sisko’s desk, beside himself with anger. “What is your Starfleet planning to do with us once we’re on that starbase? Feed us rations and give us menial tasks to do?”

“I understand your reaction,” said Sisko, speaking slowly as if to calm Koenig’s anger. “Believe me, I don’t agree with their orders either.”

“Unfortunately,” said Commander Dax, who was also present in Sisko’s office, “we don’t have that many options. I know your science officer was hoping the Moon might simply pass by Bajor VIII without damage, but I’ve calculated the odds at 1,500 to one. Barring any unforeseen events, this is what will actually happen.”

As she nodded, Sisko pressed a control on his computer terminal and a three dimensional simulation appeared above the desk. Intrigued by the display as much as what it represented, Koenig sat down again and watched as the tiny holographic Moon collided with Bajor VIII, scattering its satellites and pushing the planet out of its original orbit. Estimates of damages and casualties appeared as a virtual screen at the bottom of the simulation.

“There are 50,000 people living on Bajor VIII and its moons,” Sisko informed him as the simulation winked out of existence. “Given a choice between evacuating Alpha and evacuating them, I’m sure you’ll understand that I’d rather evacuate you and destroy the Moon before it does any damage.”

¹ The Eagles - "Hotel California" (D. Felder / D. Henley / G. Frey) - From the album *Hotel California* (EMI, 1976)

Koenig nodded, although he still found it hard to accept that the Moon could not be saved. His aim for the last six years had been to find a home for his people which would allow them to leave the Moon for good, but now that it seemed the former satellite was doomed, Koenig realised he was loath to abandon Moonbase Alpha and everything his people had built there.

“Is there no way of diverting the Moon?” he asked, keeping his tone neutral.

Dax shook her head. “I’m afraid we don’t have the technology to move something that large. It would take a dozen of our most powerful ships and even then, chances are pretty strong the force they would have to exert on it would destroy the Moon anyway.”

Koenig leaned forward as an idea came to mind. “We were once able to change Alpha’s trajectory by detonating some of our nuclear waste.” He omitted to say they had come very close to destroying the Moon in the process. “Perhaps we could repeat the process this time; there should still be enough waste to divert the Moon.”²

Dax looked hopeful as she walked around to Sisko’s terminal. The captain moved his chair back to allow her access, and she entered some information into the computer. The simulation reappeared and zoomed in on the Moon and Bajor VIII, winding back their respective positions to the point at which the course correction would have to be made. Observing the Moon closely in this new view, Koenig’s heart sank as he realised this plan wouldn’t work.

“The nuclear storage units will be on the wrong side of the Moon,” said Dax, shaking her head. “Detonating them would actually push the Moon even closer to the planet.”

Sisko was also reading the information on the terminal. “We don’t have time to speculate anyway. The Moon will have to be destroyed within five days, or the debris could hit the Bajoran system. That means you’ll have to evacuate your base within four days.”

Much as Koenig disliked this whole situation, he could see that Sisko was right. The calculations Maya had made when the Moon first entered this universe were merely being confirmed. “We would have to clear out the entire contents of our base,” he said thoughtfully, his mind already working on the logistics that would be involved. “That would take us a whole week.”

2 A collision between the Moon and the planet Taura was averted when the Alphans detonated charges at one of the nuclear waste deposit areas left intact after Breakaway. *Space: 1999 - "The Seance Spectre"* (ep. 46-1976)

Operation Exodus, the original 24-hour evacuation plan devised before the Moon left Earth orbit, was by now hopelessly outdated. As time passed and the likelihood of finding a more permanent home faded, the Alphans had become increasingly ensconced in their base, even spreading into the catacombs beneath it. The problem was compounded by the fact they had lost half the Eagles they had had when they first left Earth. The last time Koenig had ordered a feasibility study on Operation Exodus, the report's conclusion was that it would take up to ten days to move everything off the base using the existing Eagles.

"I'm afraid you don't have a week, Commander," said Sisko, enunciating each word slowly. The captain had picked up the baseball that was the only ornament on his desk and was twirling it nervously. "As we just said—"

"I know," snapped Koenig, annoyed at what he perceived to be Sisko's condescending tone.

"Perhaps we could help," suggested Dax, apparently trying to defuse the sudden hostility between the two commanders. "We can use the *Defiant* and our runabouts to move your things to the station. Our transporter technology should speed things up a bit; even though the Moon is currently out of range, we can use the transporters to move your equipment to our ships. Also, we could probably store the core memory of your computer in one of our portable databanks. We... scanned your base."

Koenig appreciated the fact she had the grace to be embarrassed by this unauthorised inspection of Alpha. "I estimate that we could download your entire computer into a module about a tenth of the size. That should considerably reduce the amount of equipment you have to take."

"Thank you. If we have to sacrifice the Moon, then so be it," said Koenig, realising he had no choice. "I am prepared to evacuate the contents of our base onto your station. But I will not accept to have my people carted off to some base somewhere just to get us out of your way. We don't belong in this universe: we have to return to ours."

"I agree," said Sisko, "and I'm still hoping to make Starfleet realise that. In the meantime, the U.S.S. *Addis-Ababa* is on its way. It will arrive here in six days to take your people to Starbase 571. We need to have the Moon destroyed and a plan to send you back ready by then. Otherwise, we'll have no choice but to let your people be evacuated to the starbase... I know this is a difficult time for you..."

"Yes," said Koenig shortly, interrupting him. "Yes, we'll have a lot of work to do... If we only have one week to find a way back to our universe, perhaps we should start working on that immediately."

"I'll be in charge of that part," said Dax. "In fact, I was rather hoping your science officer could help, once she's better. We'll need someone who knows your technology."

Koenig saw an opportunity to make sure the Alphans got a say in their future, rather than leaving it up to Starfleet. "I have no doubt that Maya will be a great help in finding a way back," he said. "But she isn't an expert on our technology. You'll need someone from the original Moonbase team."

A smile appeared on Dax's beautiful face. "Do you have any volunteers in mind?"

"Yes. Me."

"That's your main computer?"

Tony could tell the Irishman was not impressed. In fact, Chief O'Brien looked positively horrified, as if he was being asked to fly into space with a biplane. Moonbase Alpha's Mark 10 computer had been one of the most advanced machines of its time, but its time was the 1990s in the Alphan universe, and Tony realised it must be hopelessly outdated by Starfleet's standards.

"Oh, come on. Our giant supermarket till isn't *that* bad," he said loyally, though he wasn't so sure. Tony didn't know much about computers, but Maya never stopped complaining about how slow, archaic and unwieldy this machine was.

"What's this thing run on, anyway? Silicon microcircuits?" O'Brien peered into an open slot on the machine. He literally paled and straightened up again. "Holy Molly. *Transistors!* We'll be here forever." ³

"All the more reason to start work now," said Tony, turning to the operatives. "Come on, ladies, show the man how it works. Let's get those Christmas lights blinking."

One of the computer operatives, Yasko, typed in the appropriate commands on her console while her colleague Annette checked the machine's LED displays. The computer finally spat out a narrow slip of paper which Yasko handed to Tony. "Ready for transfer to Deep Space Nine, sir."

"There you go," declared Tony, waving the strip of paper at O'Brien before throwing it into the recycling bin. "Now what you need to do, Mister O'Brien, is get your computer all geared up and you'll be in business."

O'Brien sighed and nodded sombrely. He tapped the golden broach on his chest. "Computer. Initiate transfer."

Connection established. Memory banks unlocked. Transfer initiated.

³ A vacuum tube made its appearance in Ernst Queller and Jim Haines' workshop in *Space: 1999 - "Voyager's Return"* (ep.12-1974).

Like Alpha's computer—on the rare occasions when it spoke—Deep Space Nine's computer expressed itself in the voice of an American female, though there was no doubt that voice synthesis had improved by the 24th century. Tony reflected that everything else about the DS9 computer was probably more advanced, as well, but he still had to admit he felt some regret at seeing the Mark 10 so abruptly retired, its memory banks drained and its system boards stripped. The computer had served Alpha well. But it had quite literally grown old overnight.

Tony patted one of the computer's colourful panels. "I used to know a guy who would have been heart-broken right now. He really worshiped this computer."

"I can imagine it takes a lot of worshipping," said O'Brien critically. He ran his finger down one of the switches, probably feeling the unfamiliar texture of the chrome fittings. "What happened to him? That man you were talking about, who was in love with this computer."

Tony exchanged an embarrassed look with Yasko. "That's a question you should never ask on Alpha," he said, putting on a jovial smile. "Let's just say he was a casualty of our travels through space. Anyway, if the old beast is going to be retired, I do know someone who'll be happy. Maya has always hated this thing!"

That thought reminded him that he should call her and see how she was doing. She and John were the only Alphans still on Deep Space Nine, and with the commander busy all day, Maya might be in need of cheering up. He automatically looked at her desk beside him and reflected that he should pack up her things if she didn't have time to come back to Alpha before it was evacuated.

He left O'Brien and the operatives to work with the computer, and walked over to his own workstation to start clearing up. A bright splash of scarlet caught the tail of his eye and he turned to find Major Kira picking her way through the clutter of desks in the Command Centre. She looked strangely out of place in her colourful skin-tight suit, so different from the pale, loose fitting uniforms of his Alphan colleagues.

"Mister Verdeschi," she said as she approached. "I believe you and I will be working together to coordinate the transport process. We need to establish a schedule for the evacuation."

Tony smiled politely and shook her hand. "Good morning, Major. The schedule is actually ready; I printed one out as soon as I got back here." He rooted through the papers on his desk. "I'll have to tidy this up... Ah, here we go: the revised Operation Exodus schedule. Complete with annotations by yours truly. Don't worry about the scribbles," he added, noticing Kira's uncertain expression. "I'll decipher my handwriting for you if you have problems reading it."

“Yes...” Kira still looked unconvinced as she observed the paper printout. “But I suppose it won’t be possible to download that list into a padd so I can have a copy...”

“That’s what photocopiers are for,” said Tony brightly, handing her a Xerox of his annotated version. Alphan technology was no doubt primitive in her eyes, but he didn’t want her thinking that it was inefficient. “Now, our first mission is to clear out the Medical Centre; it has evidently been decided we’ll be better off relying on yours rather than ours while we’re here. If you’ll follow me, Major...”

As he led her through the corridors of Alpha to the Medical Centre, it occurred to Tony that he hadn’t often had an opportunity to escort an alien as a guest. Save some rare exceptions, most of Alpha’s visitors had proved untrustworthy or belligerent, and Tony had usually ended up having to fight them at one point or another. Alpha’s disastrous encounter with the Hadar on the other side of the wormhole was still fresh in his memory. He wondered if Kira would prove as dangerous as most of the other aliens he had met; after all, she was here mainly because John had decided to trust Sisko. For all the Alphans knew, the Bajoran might have some hidden agenda of her own. Tony determined to keep an eye on her.

She seemed friendly, at least, and more relaxed than the last time he had seen her. Her pretty smile was not so forced and she was making less of a conscious effort to be diplomatic, or so Tony thought. Kira asked some general questions about the base as they walked through it. In particular, she was curious to know what the ‘round metal plates’ were on the comm posts in the corridors. She looked very surprised when Tony told her they were clocks.

“Interesting way of opening doors,” she remarked, as Tony pointed his commlock at the entrance of the Medical Centre.

Tony just grinned. “You’re lucky we aren’t still using doorknobs... Here we go, our very own ‘Infirmery,’” he announced grandly as they entered the medical ward.

All the medical staff were busy disconnecting the equipment and packing boxes. Tony noticed that Carolyn Powell, still brain-damaged after her breakdown two years earlier, was trying ineffectually to make herself useful by arranging pencils into a box. Looking at Kira, he knew she had noticed Carolyn too. The Bajoran looked troubled; perhaps they weren’t used to mental illness in the 24th century.

“This is Major Kira,” said Tony as Helena approached. “Our Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Russell. I don’t believe you met when we were on DS9.”

“How do you do?” said the doctor with a polite smile. “We’re not quite finished in here, Tony, but you can start evacuating the labs. Ed and Ben have packed everything in there; you’ll find the inventory on the first stack of boxes. We’ll probably be ready here in about an hour’s time.”

Tony led Kira into the adjoining lab, where the two of them set about 'beaming' the supplies up to one of Deep Space Nine's runabouts. Tony had to admit he was very impressed by the process; all Kira had to do was place her broach on a pile of boxes, take it off and say "Energise", and the whole stack vanished in a beam of light. He was admittedly no scientist, but Tony couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of technology would reliably transfer matter from one point to another in a split second. He wondered if the Alphans would be allowed to 'borrow' the technology if they went back to their universe.

They had beamed about three piles of boxes up to the runabout, exchanging only desultory conversation about the nature of molecular transportation, when Kira suddenly asked, "That woman in the Infirmary. She wasn't quite right, was she?"

"Who? Helena? Yeah, I've often wondered about that myself," said Tony with a grin, as he checked the box numbers in one of the stacks.

Kira smiled, but she placed her hands on her hips. "No the other one. What happened to her?"

Tony was crouching down to read the number on the bottom box. "She lost her mind a few years ago," he said casually.

"Lost her mind?" repeated Kira, crouching down beside him.

"Yeah." He straightened up and crossed off a few items on the list. This time, he put on a serious expression and lowered his eyes. "She... killed her lover and his girlfriend and... then went mad. Well, that's the short version, anyway." ⁴

"Oh. I'm sorry." She paused as she sent the stack up, and then continued, "I suppose being isolated in space for so long must have been very difficult for you all."

Carolyn's illness wasn't a direct consequence of being isolated in space—her decline had been triggered by an unexplained space phenomenon—but Tony warmed to Kira's sympathy and responded to her evident desire for conversation.

"We've had our ups and downs," he said. "Considering the circumstances, I think we've been remarkably lucky. Well, some of us, at least. Not everyone made it this far. But we've visited all sorts of fascinating worlds and met some pretty interesting people. Maya, for instance. We'd never have met her if we'd stayed on Earth. So I can't say I regret it all." As far as Tony was concerned, meeting Maya alone was worth all the hardships the Alphans had been through.

"I suppose that, given a choice, no one would want to undo their past," said Kira thoughtfully. "I've been through a lot of hardships myself... but I think in some ways, it has made me a stronger person."

⁴ The long version can be seen in *Space: 1999 - "The Lambda Factor"*.

“Was that because of the Occupation?” Tony was aware that he had no idea what he was talking about.

His guess was evidently accurate; Kira nodded. “I joined the Resistance when I was twelve... I spent the next fourteen years fighting the Cardassians, and I’ve spent the last six years learning to live normally again.”

“Ah, the Cardassians,” said Tony knowledgeably, in an effort to cheer her up. “They certainly get around, don’t they? They occupy you, build the station, design uncomfortable beds, join the Dominion. Trouble-makers, huh?”

Kira laughed. “I suppose they are.” She evidently wasn’t planning to say more on the subject, so Tony left things at that.

He checked the next stack of boxes while Kira sent up another pile. “Talking about murky pasts,” he said to change the subject, “there’s something I was thinking about last night. If I understand this parallel universes business correctly, there’s a possibility we existed here, too; I mean, all the Alphans. You know, back in the 20th century. I suppose it’s just curiosity more than anything else, but I’d be interested to know what my alternate was up to. If I existed in this universe, I obviously didn’t get blasted off with the Moon, so I wonder what I did do.”

Kira seemed surprised by the question. Concentrating on the job at hand, she tapped her broach—“Energise.”—before returning her attention to Tony. “I’m sure Dax could look and see if you existed in this universe,” she said. “You might get a nasty shock, though. Alternates are not always what you’d expect.”

“Ah well, I’m used to nasty shocks after all this time.” Tony ticked off another set of lines on the inventory. As he moved on to the last stack, it occurred to him that it would have been infinitely simpler to just beam everything up in one go. But the inventory had to be checked box by box, and there was no way to do it automatically. They certainly didn’t want to run the risk of losing any medical supplies during the transfer. Tony just hoped he wouldn’t die of boredom by the time everything was off the station.

“It’s a pity we’re not in the right universe,” he continued. “I’d have been interested to find out how much of my LSRO back pay piled up.”

“Was the LSRO the organisation you worked for?” asked Kira. She pointed at the badge on Tony’s jacket as she sent up the boxes.

“Yep, the one and only Lunar Science and Research Organisation. Well... that’s our last bunch, so I guess we’re finished here,” he said, looking around the empty room. Kira nodded with satisfaction. “Just think, Major: only another four or five days of this and we’ll have this whole place cleared!”

Kira’s smile faded.

It was evening on Deep Space Nine and the Promenade was bustling with activity as Maya came out of the Infirmary. Now that her wound was healed, Bashir had discharged her and arranged some quarters on the Habitat Ring for her, but although he ordered her to take some rest, Maya was curious to resume her interrupted exploration of the station. She was also beginning to feel very hungry; having declined the offer of dinner in the Infirmary, she wanted to see if there was some kind of canteen on the station. She could always go to her quarters later.

It seemed that everyone on the station had come to find food and entertainment on the Promenade now that their daytime duties were over. Maya had read a padd describing most of the alien species in this sector, and she was pleased to find she could put a name to most of the creatures she saw. The Bajorans, with their wrinkled noses, were the most common species, along with the familiar-looking human beings, but she also recognised blue-skinned Bolians, pointed-eared Vulcans, as well as a few local Xepolites and Lissepians.

The whole circular avenue was a hive of activity, full of exciting new sights, sounds and smells. Humans and aliens were talking and laughing on their way to whatever entertainment delights the Promenade offered. Women and men were visiting the shops and beauty parlours scattered along the two levels of the circular structure. Children ran and chased each other on their way to the sweet merchant.

Maya was particularly intrigued by the children; watching them play on the Promenade, it occurred to her that she had never actually seen any before. Her entire life, from childhood even, had been conducted among adults. She had been the youngest child in her native Psychon community, and the Alphans she had joined four years earlier had a policy of zero population growth to preserve their life-support systems. So Maya had never seen children in real life. She decided they simply looked like tiny adults and continued on her way.

As she walked past various shops, she became aware that she was attracting a lot of interest. Psychons were no doubt unfamiliar to all the people on the Promenade, and her scarlet-sleeved uniform was unlike anything anyone else was wearing. Maya was uncomfortable among such a large number of people, and she was beginning to think she might be better off on the Habitat Ring after all when she noticed Odo walking through the crowd. The constable was observing the passers-by suspiciously, no doubt on the lookout for trouble, but his bland expression seemed to relax when he caught sight of Maya.

“Miss Maya. I’m pleased to see you’re feeling better,” he said, approaching her.

“Oh yes, I’m completely cured,” she declared, indicating her arm although Odo probably hadn’t noticed her wound that morning. “I was thinking about getting some dinner, actually. Perhaps you could advise me—is there a canteen here?”

Odo looked around thoughtfully. "A canteen? I suppose the Replimat would qualify, but it isn't open in the evenings. The nearest you could get to a canteen is Quark's. Goodness knows it doesn't qualify as a restaurant."

Maya remembered Tony endlessly talking about restaurants in the past and realised that was what she should be looking for, not a canteen like the one on the Moon. She had caught a glimpse of Quark's the previous day; that sounded like an interesting place to eat. She told Odo as much and he offered to accompany her.

"This is a nice place," said Maya appreciatively as they sat down on the upper level of Quark's. "Very colourful." She particularly liked the red and yellow display at the back of the bar; it reminded her of the bright colour schemes of her home planet, very unlike the neutral white of Alpha and the depressing near-black of Deep Space Nine.

"Yes, I suppose it is." Odo sounded as if he had never really noticed the décor before.

They were interrupted as a small man in a tailored suit seemed to pop up out of nowhere beside their table. He had a broad, wrinkled face, with large ears and small, black-rimmed eyes; Maya thought he looked a bit like one of the Munchkins in a film she had seen on Alpha. According to the information she had read that afternoon, he was a Ferengi.

"Odo! Perhaps you could introduce me to your charming new friend," he exclaimed, his needle teeth bared in a friendly grin.

"All right," growled Odo. "This is Maya, the Moon's science officer. Miss Maya, this is Quark, the bartender."

"Delighted to meet you," said Quark suavely. "The last time I saw you, you were lying just outside my bar after a nasty fall. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"I am much better, thank you." Maya smiled sweetly. "You have a very nice place here, Mister Quark. It's very colourful."

"Thank you," said the Ferengi, positively beaming with pride. "It's a sort of cheerful traditional Bajoran décor mixed with the classical Cardassian design of the structure. I've added—"

"All right, Quark," interrupted Odo. "I'm sure Miss Maya would like something to eat now."

"Of course!" Quark pulled his padd out from under his arm, ready to take her order. "What can I get you?"

"Penne all'arrabiata," she said without hesitation. "And... um, red wine that goes with it."

"I'm sure the replicator has just what you want," said Quark with a nod. "And what are you having, Odo? Oh, I forgot—you don't eat and you don't drink. You know, Odo, you're a bartender's nightmare." Pleased with that comment, the Ferengi trotted off with a wide grin on his shriveled little face.

Odo huffed in irritation. “He always makes that joke.”

“But it’s true—you don’t eat or drink?”

“No. I... I don’t need to. I regenerate every sixteen hours by returning to my natural liquid state.”

“How does that help? I mean, surely you expend energy when you’re transforming... or just simply walking around. You’d still need to have some kind of energy intake, wouldn’t you?” Knowing living organisms as she did, Maya couldn’t see how a being could exist without some kind of sustenance.

“I don’t know how my body works,” admitted Odo, “and Doctor Bashir has never been able to find out, either. All I know is that I don’t need food or air and I’m a liquid in my natural state. I’m as far removed from a humanoid as you can get.”

“That’s fascinating,” said Maya. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a liquid life form before. Let alone one who can change into inorganic matter without the help of a machine.”

“I don’t actually change what I’m made of,” explained Odo. “I merely emulate the shape and surface of the object I become and then try to mimic its properties. As an animal, I endeavour to use the shape as if I had muscles and bones beneath it, so that I move the way the animal would. As an inanimate object, I simply make myself as rigid or supple as the object should be. It’s a natural ability of my people.”

Maya was amazed at his flexibility. “That is truly remarkable! I can change my life-pattern into that of any existing being, but I’m unable to change my actual shape at will. I have to concentrate, remember the pattern of the creature I’m transforming into, and go through the process of realigning my own pattern to that of the creature. It only takes a few seconds to do, but it does mean I’m completely limited to existing life forms.”

“By life-pattern, I assume you mean DNA.” Odo looked impressed. “So if you change into... a dove, for instance, you actually are a dove. With the same instincts...”

“... and the same tiny brain,” she said with a smile. “Which can sometimes be a serious disadvantage. But of course, I become a dove with a large amount of matter in an artificial subspace pocket and the instruction to turn back into myself if necessary.”

“We’re a lot more different than I thought,” said Odo thoughtfully. “I never knew a humanoid could change their actual DNA to take on a different form. Is it a natural process that your people evolved? I wouldn’t have thought that was possible.”

Maya smiled as a Ferengi waiter—not Quark—brought her food. “Thank you.” She closed her eyes and breathed in the vapour from her dish. “Oh this smells delicious. I haven’t had real food for years.”

“Strictly speaking, it isn’t real food,” said Odo.

“I know. It’s ‘replicated,’” she said, spearing a piece of pasta with her fork. She sighed contentedly as she tasted it. “It still tastes a lot better than the synthetic food we have to eat on Alpha... Anyway, to answer your question: no, it isn’t a result of natural evolution.”

She sipped the wine and hummed appreciatively before continuing. “Psychon was a beautiful planet, but not very rich in natural resources, so over the millennia, my people designed some very powerful machines capable of changing matter on a molecular level. They discovered that certain children could be taught to do the same thing without the aid of technology, provided they were trained early enough. That’s how I learned.”

“Your people must be very advanced; even more advanced than the Federation,” remarked Odo.

Maya shook her head. “Oh, no,” she said, rapidly swallowing her mouthful. “As far as I can tell, the replicators they have here are just as powerful as our matter transformers. And we never developed warp drive... I gather from what you said that all the people in your species can metamorphose, so that seems to be another difference between us. My parents and my brother couldn’t transform. I was the only one.” Odo nodded. “By the way, what species are you from? You never said.”

Odo looked distinctly embarrassed. “My people... call themselves the Founders.”

“Oh. Of course,” she said, realising her faux pas. “The Founders of the Dominion. I should have thought of that.” She paused, eating some more of her dish before continuing. “It can’t be easy for you, living on the station while the Federation is at war with your people.”

“No,” he said coldly. “It isn’t.” He had probably been asked this question before.

“It wasn’t easy for me, either, when I first came to Alpha,” she said, wanting to show that they had something in common and she wasn’t being gratuitously nosy or condescending. “I... My father had tried to use the Alphans in an experiment, so there was a lot of bad feeling toward me when I first joined them. But after a while, they realised my metamorphic abilities could prove useful and they stopped fearing them. And I think they gradually realised I could be their friend as well.”

As she thought about her friends on Alpha, Maya's mind lingered on Tony. He had called her on her commlock that afternoon — causing major panic among DS9's nursing staff as they tried to find out where they had stored Maya's beeping device. She and Tony had laughed and talked about nothing important, just trivial things about Deep Space Nine and Alpha and medical technology and a hundred little things Maya had already forgotten. Seeing Tony on the tiny black and white screen had made Maya feel less lonely in the Infirmary. Thinking about him and how close the two of them had become over the past four years, Maya reflected that she had integrated very well into Alphan society in the end.

"Yes..." Odo had a faraway look in his eyes which suggested he was recalling some memories of his own. "But how did you join them? If your father was an enemy of theirs..."

Maya looked down at her dish and thoughtfully stabbed a quill-shaped piece of pasta. Even after four years, the memories of Psychon's destruction made her throat tighten in sadness. She ate a little more, but the unfamiliar spicy food took on a bitter taste in her mouth.

"My planet was destroyed when my father's experiment went wrong..." She decided not to tell Odo that her father's 'experiment' had gone wrong because John Koenig destroyed it. "I had no choice," she said finally. "My father was dead, my planet destroyed... The Alphans offered me a home..." ⁵

She looked up at Odo again. He smiled and nodded sympathetically, recognising the fact she didn't want to say any more. It wasn't long before Maya had finished her dish. She sipped some wine, and the sad memories were cast away.

"I came here as a refugee of sorts, too," volunteered Odo suddenly. "My people sent me out into the galaxy when I was an infant. The Cardassians found me floating in the Denorios Belt, near the wormhole—only it hadn't been discovered at that time—and I was taken to a research lab on Bajor, where I 'grew up', I suppose one could say. At first, they didn't even realise I was alive, let alone sentient. They definitely didn't know what to do with a living being that didn't eat, sleep, or breathe!"

"Oh yes. You don't breathe either," said Maya; it was a detail she had almost forgotten.

She couldn't help assessing the tactical advantages that might represent. Her years among the Alphans had taught her to view her metamorphic skill primarily as a weapon, and she took every opportunity to study life forms that might prove useful. From what he had said about his discovery, Maya inferred that Odo's species could also survive in the vacuum of space. A form like this would be a formidable weapon.

5 *Space: 1999* - "The Metamorph"

“No wonder the Federation is doing so badly against the Dominion. Your people must be fearsome enemies,” she said, shaking her head at the thought of combating an army of these Founders.

“They are,” he said with a grave nod. “They have even infiltrated Starfleet in the past. Fortunately for us, these days, they seem content to just play gods in the Dominion.”

“Gods?”

Odo grunted irritably. “Maybe I should explain how the Dominion works. It’ll give you a nice idea what my people are like. There are three main races: the Founders, the Vorta, and the Jem’Hadar. The Vorta and the Jem’Hadar are genetically engineered to consider the Founders as gods. It ensures their loyalty, I suppose. Though as a precautionary measure, the Founders have also made the Jem’Hadar addicted to a substance only they can dispense.”

“Hadar?” said Maya, seized with sudden dread. “So maybe we have met someone from the Dominion in our universe. I’d have to see a picture to be sure, but the last race we encountered before entering the wormhole called themselves the Hadar.”

“What did they look like?”

“The adults were dark grey, with large scales and horns, and a sort of crest that went around their heads, but their young looked almost like dark humans. At first, they were friendly to us; the first delegation they sent to Alpha were women and children who said they wanted to trade with us. But then they started sending men over, and it turned out they just wanted a fight and to steal anything we had of value on Alpha...” She sipped her wine and frowned. “They killed nine Alphans before we were able to stop them.”

“How did you stop them in the end?” asked Odo, perhaps hoping the Alphans’ solution would be applicable to the Jem’Hadar of this universe.

Maya smiled. “It was a typical low-tech Alphan solution. We simply broadcast a very loud, high frequency sound over the station’s communications system. It drove the humans crazy, but it killed the Hadar. After that, the Moon left their star system and we never saw the Hadar again.”

“Hmm. If the Hadar you met were related to the Jem’Hadar in this universe, that information might prove useful.”

“Glad to be of assistance,” she said with a grin. “I think we might have a lot to learn from each other.”

Odo nodded his agreement. “I looking forward to learning,” he said simply.

Sisko opened his eyes and found himself in Ops. He knew he had been asleep in his bed only a moment earlier, but as he looked around, he recognised the blurred outlines and ochre tones that the Prophets conferred to his visions. Once upon a time, he would have been seized with fear or dread, but he now accepted his role as Emissary, and he relaxed into the Prophets' vision, waiting to find out what they wanted to tell him.

The people they had chosen as representatives this time were a reflection of the subject which currently preoccupied Sisko. He recognised Verdeschi and Koenig, and found that Doctor Russell was standing beside him. The alien Maya was at the head of the central table; she was standing with her back to the viewscreen, where Sisko could see the Moon as it looked from DS9 — dark grey and without detail.

"Why have you brought me here?" demanded Sisko, even though he knew the Prophets were never keen to answer direct questions.

"A new world shines over Bajor," said Russell.

"It brings light," said Koenig.

"It brings life," said Verdeschi.

"It brings a new strength to Bajor," concluded Maya, turning to point at the viewscreen.

Sisko looked up at the Moon on the screen and found it was now shining brightly, as white as it could appear on a clear night on Earth.

"Did you bring the Moon deliberately into this universe?" he asked.

"The Sisko fears the new world," said the Russell Prophet, "but there is nothing to fear."

"You mean I shouldn't destroy it? But I have to—if it passes by Bajor VIII, even if they don't collide, there could be thousands of casualties. Bajoran casualties."

"The Sisko has nothing to fear," repeated the Prophets—this time as Koenig.

"The new world will bring a new light to Bajor," said the Maya Prophet.

"But I have to destroy it," explained Sisko as the vision faded. "I have no choice."

CHAPTER FIVE
Children of Time

CHAPTER FIVE – *Children Of Time*

*"She can kill with a smile
She can wound with her eyes
She can ruin your faith with her casual lies
And she only reveals what she wants you to see
She hides like a child
But she's always a woman to me"*
Billy Joel - "She's Always A Woman To Me" ¹

Everything was silent in the subdued light of Alpha's night cycle. The plastic wall panels glowed dimly, casting dull reflections on the blank television screens and metal clocks of the comm posts at each corridor intersection. If anyone had been walking by, they could perhaps have heard the faint ticking of the clocks as the seconds counted down, gradually bringing the small hand closer to the 7 mark. A few ticks later, and Moonbase Alpha came to life.

Like wildfire, the lights in the corridors lit up brightly as Computer triggered the base's day cycle. The night team prepared to get some sleep, having spent most of the night continuing to inventory and pack the contents of the base. Meanwhile, the rest of Alpha was awakening.

A chime rang out in the darkened bedroom and the bedside monitor sprang into life. "Calling Commander John Koenig and Doctor Helena Russell," said the cheerful pre-recorded image of Alpha's broadcaster. "This is your 7 o'clock alarm call. Thank you."

Helena sighed and covered her eyes with her arm. Over the years, she had come to hate that cheery voice with as much vengeance as the mechanical alarm clock she used to have back on Earth. There had been discussions in the past as to whether Barbara's recordings should be replaced with a standard chime, but in the end, it had been decided they might as well keep them. If only to keep Barbara happy.

This was probably one of the last times she would hear that voice here on Alpha, thought Helena, removing her arm as her mind got used to being awake again. She rubbed her eyes and stretched, before turning to find John sitting on the edge of their bed.

"John?"

¹ Billy Joel - "She's Always A Woman To Me" (B. Joel) - From the album *The Stranger* (CBS, 1977)

He was staring in a daze at the test pattern on the monitor, but he started when she called his name. Shifting his position so that he was sitting sideways on the bed, he smiled at her and gently stroked her face.

“Good morning, Helena,” he said in a low voice.

“How did you sleep?” she asked, knowing what the answer would be. His tossing and turning had kept her awake most of the night.

He hesitated, perhaps wanting to conceal the truth, but then obviously decided that Helena would know anyway. “Badly,” he admitted.

She sat up in the bed and placed her hand on his. “Nightmares?”

“Hmm. It’s probably stress. Because of the evacuation.” Helena nodded, although she knew her husband had been suffering from nightmares for years. Sleep therapy and hypnosis had usually helped to relieve the symptoms temporarily, but Helena knew that the only thing that would stop the nightmares for good would be a radical change of life-style.

John was a strong man, but six years of commanding Alpha had taken their toll. The lines around his piercing blue eyes were deeper, his forehead permanently furrowed with worry, his thinning hair now streaked with grey. She remembered noticing Tony’s grey hairs on Deep Space Nine and she couldn’t help letting out a small sigh. They had all been through so much, lost so many friends, and still the ordeal wasn’t over.

“What did you dream about?” she asked gently.

Koenig shook his head, frowning thoughtfully. “It was all very strange. I was in Command Centre, but the people there were the people of DS9: Sisko, Kira, Bashir, Odo... All I remember is Odo pointing to the big screen and saying something about the Moon bringing light to Bajor.”

Helena smiled wryly. “If they blow it up, I can imagine that would give the Bajorans something to look at.”

“Oh well,” he sighed. “I have better things to worry about than a dream. I need to get ready and go back to DS9.”

“You make it sound as if all you ever did was run around the Moonbase chasing bug-eyed monsters, Mister Verdeschi,” laughed Kira as she and Tony headed to the Cafeteria for a well-deserved break after several hours’ work.

“Nah, we were usually running away from them. Not just monsters, either,” he informed her, one finger raised in mock seriousness. “We’ve had encounters with talking clouds, belligerent plants, insane computers, even sentient rocks... and every last one of them wanted to take something from us. You wouldn’t believe it, but Alpha and its population are very sought after in our universe. Everyone we meet wants to have a piece of us.”²

They had reached the Cafeteria; Tony stood aside at the door to let Kira through first and then followed her in. Sandra and Alibe were at a table in a corner, surrounded by some of the Black-and-Greys who were helping in the evacuation. Tony wasn’t particularly surprised to find that all the Starfleets at their table were men: Alibe had been complaining about the shortage of presentable, available males on the Moonbase these days.

Tony waved a greeting to his colleagues, and then indicated a table at the other end of the room. Kira sat down at his invitation.

“What would you like, Major?” he asked. “Basically, you have a choice between synthetic coffee, recycled water, or my own brew of, ah, beer.”

“You make beer?” she said, looking up at him with interest.

“Yup. There’s a pitcher of my last brew over there. We save it for when we’ve run out of everything else,” he told her with a grin.

That wasn’t entirely true: by now, everyone on the Moonbase, except possibly Maya, was wont to drink his beer any evening regardless of its taste. All he had to do was make sure it was fit for human consumption and had plenty of alcohol in it. It still wasn’t real beer, though.

“Well, I’ll give it a try,” replied Kira, flashing a smile at him. “Only a little bit, of course; we do have some more work to do afterwards.”

Tony was about to warn her that she might be in for a disappointment, but then decided that some aliens had been known to enjoy his strange brew before. He was nonetheless a bit nervous when he gave her the glass. He himself had opted for the safer option of the synthetic coffee.

“I have to warn you, Major,” he said as he sat down, “most people don’t really like my beer.”

² The encounters Tony is referring to mostly involved an alien creature trying to get something from the Alphans. The cloud was after Alpha's life support system [*Space: 1999* - "The Beta Cloud" (ep.38-1976)], the sentient plant-life of Luton was hoping to derive entertainment from Koenig and Maya by making them fight three other aliens [*Space: 1999* - "The Rules of Luton" (ep.31-1976)], the computer Brian, driven insane by loneliness, tried to hijack Alpha's energy supplies so it could live forever [*Space: 1999* - "Brian the Brain" (ep.33-1976)], and the sentient rock-like life form the Alphans encountered on one planet needed Alpha's water supplies to survive [*Space: 1999* - "All That Glisters" (ep.28-1976)].

He watched with interest as Kira sipped the drink. He was expecting her to make a face or be falsely polite about it, but instead she took a larger sip.

“Wow! This is great!” she exclaimed, her eyes wide with excitement. “You made this all by yourself?”

“Um, yeah.” He was too astonished by her reaction to formulate any coherent sentences.

“You should sell this. You’d make a fortune on Bajor!” She drank some more. “It’s like Bitter Wine—that’s a liqueur they make in Recantha. Only more...” She bit her lip as she searched for an appropriate word and then apparently gave up. “Better! You have a real winner here, Mister Verdeschi.”

“Well, ah, I’m flattered,” he said with a pleased grin. He hadn’t been planning on bringing any of the beer with him when he left Alpha, but the idea of a potential market on Bajor made him change his mind. “You should call me Tony, by the way. I’m not used to anyone calling me ‘Mister Verdeschi’ anymore.”

“Then you can call me Nerys.”

“That’s a very pretty name.”

They smiled at each other in silence for a moment. Dragging his eyes away from hers, Tony remembered with acute embarrassment that Alibe and Sandra were most probably watching them. Having been out with both women in the past, he suspected they would be more than willing to get the wrong idea about him and Major Kira. Even though there was absolutely no wrong idea to have.

“You grow the ingredients here, don’t you?” Nerys was asking. “One of the reports said you had a Hydroponics section to evacuate.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure what we’re going to do with that on DS9,” said Tony, bringing his mind back onto the present conversation. “But I suppose it’ll come in handy if we ever go back to our own universe. Lots of seeds and things like that.”

“You’re hoping to find a planet to settle on?”

“That’s the idea. We gave up on Earth a long time ago, so we’ve been hoping to find somewhere else to live. It’s pretty neat when you think about it: I’d get to be a Founding Father for a whole colony. Gives me something to strive for. A few generations from now, people would still be talking about my grand exploits and there would be streets and schools named after me.”

He was conscious that he was beginning to let his imagination run riot, and didn’t go any further. “Well, anyway...”

“There are no other humans in your universe, no one who could come and help you?”

Tony thought about their last contact with Earth and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. The last time we talked to anyone over on Earth, they were in the 22nd century and lived in big domed cities... having lived six years on Alpha, I can tell you that when I leave here, I'm looking forward to living somewhere I can actually walk about under the open sky. Preferably somewhere with no bug-eyed monsters either. Somewhere I can relax a little." ³ He realised he had uttered that last sentence a little more wistfully than he had intended. Nerys gave him a sympathetic smile.

"You must have had a hard time," she said gently. "I'm surprised you've kept such good spirits after all these years."

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you can put up with anything as long as you keep a sense of humour. In fact, I believe it has been scientifically proven that laughter is an essential technique for survival. It's also an Alphan specialty. Even Maya practices it piously. In fact, she's the worst of us all."

"Really? What does she do?"

"Um, pick on me, mostly," he laughed. "I once came back to my quarters to find my bedroom had been turned into a jungle. And it was *all* Maya."

"A jungle... in your bedroom?" said Nerys. "Was there... any particular reason she did that?"

Tony looked down in embarrassment and twiddled his mug nervously. "Well, ah, someone told her it was Valentine's day... That was a sort of lover's day on Earth in my time," he explained. "And, well, Helena suggested Maya should give me a plant or something..."

Nerys was silent for a moment, evidently amazed at this information. Maybe she was putting two and two together as far as he and Maya were concerned. In fact, Tony couldn't help feeling rather flattered when he noticed how disappointed she looked.

"Oh. I see," she said slowly. "So you and Maya..."

"Yeah..." He grimaced and scratched his head awkwardly. "Sort of... it's complicated." Tony wasn't particularly keen to discuss his relationship with Maya with anyone, least of all Nerys, whom he barely knew.

"Anyway," said Nerys to change the subject. "Yes, I suppose a sense of humour can be useful in stressful situations. Some of my friends used to joke about how many Cardassians they killed and about the life we led in the Resistance. I could never understand how they could laugh at things like that. Our lives were too tragic."

3 *Space: 1999 - "Journey to Where"* (ep.29-1976)

“Your friends had the right idea,” said Tony seriously. “When it all comes down to it, everything is funny. Laughing about life certainly beats crying about it. I know you probably think I’m a callous bastard, but I’d go stir-crazy if I couldn’t laugh, and I’m not the only one. It’s not callousness, you know. I don’t really find it funny watching my friends die or go mad, all of us stuck on this bloody rock. Do you know there were 311 people when we left Earth?”

Nerys shook her head. “We’ve lost 89 people so far. Not bad losses in military terms, I guess. Less than 15 a year on average; at that rate we could probably survive for another couple of decades. But you know, when I think about that, if I thought about that seriously, it would just drive me crazy. I’ve lost so many friends, plus all the people that mattered to me on Earth. You know, even the one child who was born on Alpha died. Just some disease and then the poor little mite was dead. You’d go mad if you let things like that get to you...”⁴

“I’m sorry,” said Nerys. “I didn’t mean to imply you didn’t care. I just meant that’s something I never learned to do: laugh at things.”

She did look sincerely sorry, and Tony felt guilty for raving at her as if she was accusing him of something. He was evidently letting the stress of the evacuation get to him.

“Sorry for the rant,” he said. “I think I seriously need a holiday!”

“Well, DS9 has no open skies,” she started, “...and I think some of our residents might qualify as ‘monsters’ in your eyes... but we do have some good entertainment facilities there. I’m sure you’d enjoy a trip to a holosuite,” she suggested, before apparently realising he wouldn’t know what that was. “That’s a sort of device which can recreate any environment you like. You can choose where and when you want to go, and the holosuite will simulate the appropriate place, complete with characters. It’s all fake, of course, but it can be very realistic. You can download a book, for instance, and then play one of the characters.”

“So it would be like being in a movie or something?” That sounded interesting.

“A movie?”

“Never mind,” he said, shaking his head. “Probably something you don’t have anymore.”

He thought about what book he’d download to the device. “Hmm. I wouldn’t mind trying my hand at Rhett Butler... um, someone else you wouldn’t know,” he said rapidly, before she got a chance to ask.

Nerys laughed. “I’m sure you’d have a great time, regardless of who you played. You could take your Alphan colleagues with you and just go back to Earth as you remembered it.”

⁴ Little Jackie Crawford was born in *Space: 1999* - "Alpha Child" (ep.10-1974)

All we need, thought Tony wryly. He somehow felt that being in a simulation of the 20th century Earth they had lost would do nothing to improve his colleagues' morale. But as for going with someone else to the holosuite... He wondered what Maya would look like in a crinoline.

"The *Rio Grande* must be back by now," said Nerys. "Maybe we should go and see about clearing the stuff in your..." She consulted the padd she had with her. "...'Cinema'?"

Working...

Dax observed the science lab computer screen, aware that both the Alphans were watching her and no doubt expecting miracles from DS9's modern technology. After a few seconds of thought, the computer came to the conclusion it would take it half an hour to calculate the modulations in shield harmonics necessary to shift a one-million-metric-ton Starfleet vessel into an alternate universe.

Determining an efficient, discreet and safe way back for the Alphans was proving a lot harder than Dax had originally thought. In the first place, they didn't actually have a warp ship to go back in. The initial simulations Dax had run with Koenig the previous day had shown that sending the Eagles through on their own was out of the question. Aside from the fact that they were too small and too few to carry the Alphans and all their equipment, there was no way to initiate a quantum shift with them.

The task wouldn't be that much easier even if they did have a warp-capable ship. The only tried and true method of moving into another quantum reality was to use a modified transporter. Dax was sure that her theory concerning the warp bubble and shield harmonics would work, but there was no data to prove this, and she would need some hard facts before she could tell Sisko anything.

"Well, while the computer is thinking about it, I have something here that you might like to read," she said, turning away from her console.

Maya and Koenig both looked at her expectantly as she handed the commander a padd. Following a chance remark by Nerys at Deep Space Nine's staff meeting that morning, Dax had decided to do some research which she thought might interest Koenig. The commander perused the padd briefly and looked suitably interested.

"Koenig, John Robert," he read out. "Born in Brooklyn, U.S.A., March 17, 1957... What is this?"

Dax smiled with satisfaction. "One of your colleagues suggested we should see if any of you had existed in this universe, so I set our computer to work on the evacuation manifest you gave us."

"Did you find Tony, too?" asked Maya, her large eyes bright with curiosity.

“The computer found 222 perfect matches based on name and date of birth,” explained Dax. “It seems as though you all had counterparts in this universe’s 20th century. Well, all the humans did. I’m afraid the Federation has never had any contact with your people, Maya.”

Maya seemed neither surprised nor bothered by this information. Dax reflected that she was probably used to being left out after living for several years in an entirely human population.

“There he is,” said Koenig, pointing at the padd. “Verdeschi, Antonio Dean... he doesn’t call himself Antonio in our universe.”

Maya took the padd from her commander. “...Born in Firenze, Italy, November 9, 1966.” She read the rest in silence, a smile on her lips. “What is an ‘engineer at Ferrari’, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” answered Dax. The two women turned to look at Koenig.

“Ferrari was a car manufacturer in our time. They made Grand Prix racing cars and luxury sports cars...” He seemed to notice the blank look both women gave him and stopped. “Um, I’ll explain later. Let’s just say I think Tony will be impressed when he knows what his counterpart was doing here. It was probably a well-paid job.”

“Oh,” Maya handed the padd back to Koenig. “Married, two children, steady job on Earth. I was hoping for something a little more exciting.” Dax smiled at her, amused by her obvious disappointment.

Koenig finished reading his section of the padd. “This John Koenig certainly lived a different life... Born the same day to the same parents, and then studied astrophysics, but after that everything changes. Joined NASA... left NASA. Worked for various private contractors. Lived in the U.S., France, Switzerland. Married twice, divorced both times. Died of heart failure in 2016. Well,” he said gravely. “I think I’d rather be me than him.”

“I just thought you’d be interested,” said Dax. She quickly checked the computer—it was still working—and then added, “Alternates can sometimes be a surprise. My alternate in the Mirror Universe is apparently a resistance fighter. Kira’s used to be a powerful despot.”

“The Alphans obviously didn’t get a chance to do anything so grand in this universe,” remarked Maya with a grin.

“No,” agreed Koenig. “But it’s quite amazing how similar some things are. The women I married, the people I worked with... Jean and Helena, Victor Bergman...” He paused and then looked at Dax. “You’d have liked Victor—he was... very inquisitive.”

“I often wish I’d had an opportunity to meet him,” said Maya more seriously. “I’m sure we could have done some fantastic work together.”

Koenig nodded gravely. "We lost a lot of good people." No doubt noticing Dax' questioning look, he explained. "The Moon went through a large asteroid field nearly five years ago. Our operation centre at the time, Main Mission, was destroyed, killing all the people who were in there. Most of our senior staff died that day. I can honestly say it was the worst time of my life, worse still than Breakaway."

Dax remembered seeing the Main Mission tower on Alpha's schematics; despite being exposed to vacuum from a large breach, the structure still housed the top part of Alpha's computer. The Moonbase's current Command Centre had evidently been designed originally to serve as some kind of emergency control room underneath the main tower.

"I think your computer is ready," remarked Maya after a brief pause.

The results of the calculations had indeed appeared on screen. Dax shook her head with a sigh. "Well, we're not there yet. Modulating the shield harmonics within their usual parameters would just shift the ship into an alternate universe at random. We'll have to modify the shield generators and possibly recalibrate the warp drive to get an accurate shift."

"Recalibrate the warp drive?" repeated Maya dubiously. "If you do that and modify the shields, wouldn't we end up with a ship we can't use? I can see it might help to push the ship into our universe, but we wouldn't have the knowledge to set it back to the way it needs to be to actually go anywhere. I've been reading up on your technology and although I can understand the theory of how it works, I don't think any of us would be able to actually repair or modify it."

"That's true," admitted Dax. "But once we've run all the simulations, it will be relatively easy to rig a subroutine into the ship's computer which would allow you to switch the settings back."

"So all we need is the right kind of ship," said Koenig.

Dax nodded thoughtfully; that was going to be the difficult part.

Tony poured himself a glass of beer from the brewing machine and held it up to the light. The colour was golden-brown, speckled with fine lines of bubbles. It looked good, but he wasn't too hopeful as he brought it to his lips. A sip confirmed his suspicions: it was far more sour than it should have been. Not completely undrinkable, but still not beer all the same. All those years of work, and he still hadn't cracked the code.

Taking another sip of the drink, he decided it wasn't totally unpleasant, and its alcoholic content was pretty acceptable. Just a nice little pick-me-up for the job at hand. He could see how Nerys, who probably had no particular fondness for beer, might appreciate the concoction on its own merits. Maybe he could sell this barrel to the Bajorans for pocket money.

Glancing at the packing boxes strewn around his quarters, Tony let out a sigh. He had literally spent hours in front of this machine, trying to produce something drinkable. In a couple of days, all this would be gone, blown up with the rest of Alpha, with the quarters he had lived in, the canteen he had eaten in, the Command Centre he had worked in. Every corridor and room that he had so ardently defended as chief of security would be pulverised, simply because the Moon happened to stumble into the wrong universe at the wrong time. He had never thought it would end like this.

His door bell rang; not even taking the time to look at his commlock, he pointed it at the door to disengage the lock. Turning to see who it was, Tony was surprised, and then amused by what was coming towards him.

Major Kira was approaching, swinging her hips in her skin tight scarlet uniform, a mischievous expression on her sweet little face. Knowing that the Bajoran Major had actually left Alpha an hour earlier, Tony wasn't fooled for one minute.

"Oh, Tony, are you making more of that *great* beer?" she cooed.

Tony shook his head and went to sit on the sofa. "That's not funny, Maya."

Maya/Kira draped herself sensually on the sofa beside him and batted her eyelashes. "Oh, please, call me Nerys. It's such a *pretty* name."

As far as Tony could remember, Maya hadn't met Nerys yet. She had the voice completely wrong, but the Psychon did get the false eyelashes and the smile right. She had obviously been talking to Alibe and Sandra. Tony tried to keep a straight face, but somehow Maya's approximate imitation of Kira defeated him.

"You are impossible," he laughed, lifting Kira's simulated face by a finger under the chin.

The face in front of him disappeared into a haze for a moment, only to refocus as Maya's familiar features.

"That's better," he said sincerely.

Tony leaned forward, about to kiss her, when he suddenly found she wasn't there anymore. Unprepared for her sudden absence, he lost his balance and collapsed on the sofa. Maya, in the meantime, had changed into something that looked very much like motor oil. She was dripping onto the floor.

"Uh, Maya?"

The oil started to coalesce into some sort of solid shape, but then disappeared in a haze. Maya became herself again, sitting on the floor.

"Phew, Odo is a very strange creature!" she exclaimed. "No smell, no taste, no eyes, or mouth, or ears. I knew changing into him would offer me some fascinating insights on his people. I've been waiting to do this since yesterday!"

"I see. And you thought you'd wait until I was going to kiss you before trying it," said Tony petulantly, straightening up.

Maya just chuckled. "Here, I brought you something that might interest you." She handed him a strip of golden metal.

Although it looked like gold, the strip was very light. Tony observed it thoughtfully. "What is it? Gold?" he asked, although he knew it was at best made of gold-plated something.

"It's the currency they use around here: gold-pressed latinum."

Tony burst out laughing. "And what do they use as small change: silver-pressed lutonium, perhaps?"

"It is a strange name for a substance, isn't it?" laughed Maya. "But you know what? I analysed it when I got back from DS9, and you'll never guess what we call it in our universe."

"Shoot."

"Tiranium."

"So it has a silly name in both universes." In spite of his joking tone, Tony tossed the strip thoughtfully in his hand. "How much is this worth?"

"We don't really have any frame of reference to compare it with, but Dax said that much would buy you a night in a room on DS9. That's 0.5 mg of latinum encased in gold."

"Hmm. Half a milligram for one night... We'd better tell the others about this, and strip Alpha's life-support systems and medical facilities before we leave. We might need some hard cash if we stay in this universe... You are a clever bunny, finding this out!" he added with an admiring grin.

"I'm not a 'bunny'," she said, putting on a puzzled frown, though Tony knew she understood perfectly well what he meant.

"If you say so, pussycat." Tony winked at her and handed back the latinum. "So we're sitting on the Starfleet equivalent of a gold mine."

"Starfleet don't actually use hard currency," Maya informed him, "but everyone else uses latinum for interstellar commercial exchanges."

"Cool. Capitalism in space. My grandfather would have had a fit! Talking about gold mines: I gather those two busybodies told you what Major Kira said today about my 'beer'."

"Uh-huh?" prompted Maya with a nod.

"Kira reckoned I could sell it on Bajor."

Maya laughed, just as he knew she would. "Come on," he said, "I know it's a big joke around here, but there's no accounting for people's tastes. You should see some of the rubbish humans will drink... well, my beer, for a start! It doesn't qualify as beer, but it's still drinkable alcohol. If the Bajorans like it, I reckon we should try and sell it to them. You never know when we might need some cash."

“Hmm.” Maya looked at the brewing machine. “I think you should speak to Quark, the bartender on DS9. If it’s worth anything, he’ll buy it off you. But I shouldn’t get my hopes up too high if I were you,” she teased, looking up at him.

“That’s what I love about you, Maya. You’re so supportive,” he said sarcastically, though he was grinning. “But don’t worry, my brewing days will be well and truly over once we’ve left.”

Tony thought he saw a shadow of regret cross Maya’s beautiful features. But it was gone almost as soon as he saw it.

“Well, I think it’s about time,” she declared. “Let’s face it, Tony, you’re not cut out for brewing. You should find yourself another hobby. Besides, all that tasting beer is bad for you. It made you put on weight.”

“*What?*”

“Anyway,” she continued, getting up off the floor. “I should be off to pack my things now. Not that I have much to pack, just my Psychon dress, and that’s falling to pieces anyway,” she added thoughtfully. “In any case, I need to work with Helena to see how much tiranium we have in the life support systems.”

“Hey, wait a minute. You’re not going anywhere.” Tony stood up and put his hand on Maya’s arm. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

Maya shrugged his hand off and headed for the door. “Well, I wouldn’t say ‘fat’, but I do notice you’re taking up more of that uniform than you used to.”

A particularly lewd retort made its way to the tip of Tony’s tongue, but he wisely kept it to himself. “You take that back,” he said instead, trying to sound menacing. He only succeeded in sounding childish.

She paused at the door and looked thoughtful, tapping her finger on her chin as if pondering some complex mathematical equation. “Hmm,” she said. “...No, I don’t think I will.” Maya turned towards the door. “Anyway, Tony, you know I’m only saying this because I’m your—*ah!*”

Before she had time to open the door, Tony seized Maya around the waist. She squealed with delight as he hefted her up, and she kicked her legs in a futile effort to get him to drop her. He was about to make her take back what she had said about his weight when Maya suddenly transformed into a cockatoo. Tony was left with an armful of nothing as the bird flew away.

“Will you come back here!” he exclaimed, taking a swipe at her as she flew by.

Maya swerved out of his reach and alighted on the table, changing into a cat as soon as she touched the surface. Undaunted by the impossibility of catching a cat, Tony lunged after her and only succeeded in bruising his knee on the table leg. The cat turned into a panther; now that he had a larger target, Tony was able to wrap his arms around her sleek form. The panther resisted Tony’s attempt to wrest it to the ground; although Maya did not use her claws, she did snap her powerful jaws at him.

Tony fell back instinctively, but leapt to his feet as Maya changed into one of the biped monsters she favoured in combat situations. The creature was truly hideous—*And everyone wants me to go out with this girl?* He thought—but there was no way Tony was going to give up after such an invigorating chase.

“Don’t think you can impress me with your ugly mug,” he warned, throwing himself at her.

Seizing the monster by her shoulders, he struggled to angle his heel behind her leg, hoping to trip her up. The monster tried to push him away, but he was faster. Or maybe Maya was letting him win. Either way, the creature fell to the ground, pulling him down with her. Landing heavily on the monster’s slimy belly, Tony caught her wrists in his hands, pinning her to the floor.

“Now, take back what you said about me!” He felt a tingle in his hands as the wrists he was holding transformed back into Maya’s. His face was only a few centimetres away from hers. He could feel her chest heaving against his. The subtle scent her Psychon body gave out after a strenuous effort hung in the air between them. Her intense blue gaze locked with his. He was so close to her lips...

“Okay, you’re not fat. But you are heavy,” she hissed with a mischievous grin.

Tony let go of her arms and sat up rapidly. “And you are incorrigible!”

“Oooh, did I hurt your feelings?” she cooed, sitting up beside him.

He turned to look at her, a reluctant smile on his lips. She always got the better of him, and although he would have punched out any other person who treated him the way she did, he never resented her teasing. He sometimes felt that their banter was the only thing that kept him sane.

Tony loved her, but Alpha was no place for romance. With 200 people living on the station, the perpetual scrutiny of the small community meant that Tony absolutely needed to have time on his own. Being involved with Maya would have complicated his already stress-filled existence. Or maybe that was just his excuse. Maybe he was just afraid of commitment. Maybe he was just an idiot.

With these thoughts in his mind, Tony looked into Maya’s lovely face. He placed his arm around her shoulder, cupping her head with his hand. It was so easy to lean forward and place his lips on hers. This was the only physical contact they shared; just enough to express their love without getting too involved.

But, as usual, he soon felt her hand pushing him away. Maybe he had kissed her a little too passionately this time. He watched her slim, elegant form as she rose and walked to the sofa; she sat down and picked up the plastic mug Tony had been drinking from earlier. She sipped from it, made a face and put it back on the coffee table.

This was the part of their relationship that Tony didn't understand. He knew his own reasons for not taking things further too rapidly, but he felt Maya's reluctance was due to some other, as yet undetermined, *something* that made her push him away.

"What's wrong?" he asked, aware of the slight petulance that had crept into his voice. He rarely dared to draw attention to her reaction, for fear of sounding like some insensitive cad, or finding out that she didn't like him kissing her in the first place.

"Your beer is truly abominable," she said cheerfully. "Bajorans obviously have no taste!"

"No, I was talking about us," he said, although he cringed inwardly at the wording he had chosen. *Soap opera City*. "One minute you're sitting here beside me, and the next, you're over there!"

"I'm a fast mover," she said with a shrug.

Tony's irritation disappeared as quickly as it had flared up. It was impossible to remain angry with Maya for any length of time. *A kiss is just a kiss*, he thought, before wishing he hadn't phrased it exactly that way in his mind. He now had the song from a corny old movie trotting around his head.

"I admit it," he said, throwing his arms up helplessly. He went to sit down beside her. "You're too fast for me."

Maya pointed at him delightedly. "That's because you need to lose weight!"

Tony put his arms around her and leaned forward until his face was only a few centimetres away from hers. He was pleased to find Maya didn't pull back. "I am *not* overweight," he growled.

She playfully trailed a finger down his nose. "No, you're perfect," she said, her voice hushed and serious.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he said with a grin.

He was about to kiss her again, but was interrupted by the communications panel. Koenig's face appeared in black and white on the monitors beside them.

"Attention all Alphas," he said. "Red Alert. Defence teams into position. The Dominion is attacking Deep Space Nine."

Koenig watched the three Dominion ships on the big screen; a trio of metallic horseshoe crabs intent on destruction. Deep Space Nine had warned Alpha of the ships' arrival just five minutes before the vessels came out of warp within range of the Moonbase's sensors. But even with that meagre advance warning, John knew that Alpha stood no chance against the ships. He could only hope that their target was DS9. There was no reason to believe the Dominion would want to attack Alpha.

"Shields raised. Main lasers ready," announced Tony, turning towards him. "Should we launch Eagles to intercept?"

It was unusual for Tony to ask for advice on tactical matters, but John knew what was on his first officer's mind. He turned and looked at Alan Carter.

"I know it looks like an unfair match," said the pilot, recognising the unspoken question in his commander's expression, "but if they do attack, we'd be better off shooting at them from two places rather than one."

John glanced back at Tony, who nodded, though he didn't look very convinced. "Very well," said the commander. "Alan, you and Bill take two Eagles out. Stay out of sight for the time being."

As Alan left, John heard Tony's console beeping. "We're getting tactical information from DS9," said Tony, before letting out a low whistle. "We're in *deep* trouble if one of these things decides to take a pot shot at us."

"Let's just hope they won't, then," said John curtly. "There's no reason why they should."

"Aside from an aversion to humans?" suggested Tony.

"Eagles are launched," announced Sandra. "They are taking position on the Bajoran side of the Moon. Dominion ships still heading for DS9."

"One of them is breaking off," reported Maya suddenly. "It's heading straight for us!"

John looked up at the screen; one of the Jem'Hadar ships was racing towards the Moon while its two companions continued on to DS9, no doubt to keep the Starfleet forces busy while the first ship attacked Alpha.

"Oh, bloody hell," muttered Tony, looking up at the screen. He switched on communications to the Weapons Section. "Kate, Alexei, I hope you're ready for this," he told the laser operatives. "Cause we don't stand a chance..."

"Eight hundred sixty-six thousand and closing," said Sandra. "They're shooting at us!"

The Command Centre shook as a Dominion missile hit the Moonbase. On the screen, John could see the bright light of some kind of laser emanating from the underbelly of the ship.

"Return fire!" he ordered.

The green beam from Alpha's lasers appeared on screen. Before it reached the vessel, it seemed to hit an energy barrier, like a transparent cocoon enveloping the Dominion ship. The laser beam dispersed ineffectually as another blast from the alien vessel hit Alpha.

Tony slammed his fist onto his console and let out an angry expletive. "They've taken out our shield generators and both of the laser turrets. We're sitting ducks!" The vessel shot once more at Alpha, and then Tony exclaimed, "Wait a minute, they're lowering their shields. What the—"

He was interrupted by a scream from Sandra. Spinning around, John saw that Maya was dematerialising before their very eyes. The dematerialisation didn't seem to be working; instead of disappearing smoothly, Maya's form was fluctuating. John guessed that she was using her metamorphic abilities to fight the transporter—but he doubted she could resist very long.

“Alan, Bill, attack the vessel! Now!” he ordered.

The two Eagles suddenly swept into view on screen and fired on the Dominion ship. Evidently caught unawares, the vessel was hit several times and Maya rematerialised completely in her Command Centre chair. She slumped onto her console, breathless and exhausted by the effort.

There was no time to tend to her, however. It didn't take long for the Dominion vessel to retaliate; two shots were all it needed to disable both the Eagles. Alan's Eagle was close enough to be caught by the Moon's gravitational force, and crashed a few thousand miles away from Alpha. Bill was not so fortunate; the shot sent his Eagle spinning into space.

“We might as well be fighting them with spears and arrows,” muttered John.

“Commander! There is another ship approaching!” announced Sandra, the relief she felt clearly audible in her voice. “It is coming from DS9.”

On screen, the Dominion ship seemed to be under heavy attack. The screen view widened to reveal a flat grey vessel; as it swerved past the Dominion ship, John was able to read its name on the hull. ‘U.S.S. *Defiant*'.

“The cavalry, I presume,” commented Tony.

The Dominion ship left its position above Alpha and seemed to be heading back where it had come from. The *Defiant* gave it chase, both ships disappearing off the Alphan sensors as they went into warp.

“Sahn, when the *Defiant* returns, contact them and send our thanks,” said John, though his tone was less than enthusiastic. He didn't like the fact that Alpha's last battle was a defeat.

Sandra did as she was ordered and then reported that the *Defiant* had rescued Alan and was going after Bill's Eagle. The Command Centre staff was still watching the Federation ship disappear into the distance when five figures suddenly burst in from the door beside the big screen.

There was no doubt that these creatures were related to the Hadar the Alphans had encountered in their own universe. They had presumably beamed onto Alpha while their ship was still hovering over the Moon. Sandra was nearest to them since her desk was at the front of Command Centre; she screamed and instinctively pushed her chair back against Tony's desk.

“Sahn! Activate that sound we used on the Hadar!” ordered John, hoping that the weapon they had used in their own universe would work on the Jem'Hadar as well. There seemed no point waiting to hear what the soldiers wanted.

Sandra activated the sound and put it on loud speaker. John covered his ears as the shrill tone resonated through the room. The Jem'Hadar were visibly disoriented by the sound as they deployed into the Command Centre. One of them attempted to seize Maya but stumbled into the recycling bin beside the computer. Tony immediately seized this opportunity to shoot the Jem'Hadar. The laser was set to maximum and the soldier burst into flames, igniting the scattered papers at the foot of the computer. Maya seized a fire-extinguisher and doused the flames, although she was unable to put it out completely before retreating to Tony's desk beside hers.

John shot at another Jem'Hadar, shearing the creature's shoulder before one of its brethren retaliated with a blast that only narrowly missed the commander. The Jem'Hadar's target was clearly Maya; one managed to catch hold of her and was about to activate a device on his wrist when she transformed into a hawk and flew out of his grasp. The Jem'Hadar evidently had orders not to harm her, because none of them attempted to fire at the hawk as she fluttered in their faces, her talons tearing at their scaly eyes.

They did shoot at the other Alphans, however, and it was only by virtue of the sound which was disorienting the Jem'Hadar that any of the humans survived. As smoke from the fire by the computer began to fill the room, Sandra was injured by the crossfire and took shelter under her desk, crying in pain as she clutched her stomach.

John could tell one of the remaining Jem'Hadar, perhaps irritated by her crying, was about to finish her off—in a desperate attempt to stop him, the commander seized the Jem'Hadar's arm. The soldier spun around and picked John up, throwing him across the room like a rag doll. He felt several bones in his body crack as he hit the bulkhead and lost consciousness. The last thing he saw was Maya changing into one of her favourite monsters.

CHAPTER SIX
War Games

CHAPTER SIX – *War Games*

*"Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith "*
The Rolling Stones - "Sympathy for the Devil" ¹

Still in her monster form, Maya reached out and easily snapped the neck of the Jem'Hadar that had attacked the commander. She could tell that the Jem'Hadar were no longer using their weapons for fear of hitting her; Tony had also realised this fact, and was hiding behind her as he shot at the Dominion soldiers. The fire near the computer had set one of the desks alight and the acrid stench of burning plastic made Maya's eyes water. With the sound still activated in the Command Centre, the Jem'Hadar were finding it increasingly difficult to fight. But as she seized another Jem'Hadar and threw him head first against the computer, Maya suddenly felt an intense dizziness come over her. She instinctively changed back into her normal form and leaned against Tony.

"Maya! What's wrong?" he exclaimed.

"I-I don't know."

Maya was still feeling dizzy when she looked up and saw three more Jem'Hadar soldiers coming into the smoke-filled Command Centre. With them was a woman from a species Maya knew well. *What is a Kareelan doing here?* She thought. The Kareelan was carrying a small device and Maya understood that was why she was unable to transform.

Tony had tried unsuccessfully to rouse the commander, and was now pulling Maya towards the other door as the new Jem'Hadar picked their way through the jumble of desks and charred corpses in the room.

"Come on," said Tony as Maya stumbled dizzily out of the room. "Computer, secure Command Centre!"

He was no doubt hoping to lock that particular group of Jem'Hadar in the noisy, smoky room, but it wasn't long before burns from the Dominion disruptors began to appear through the door.

¹ The Rolling Stones - "Sympathy for the Devil" (M. Jagger / K. Richards) - From the album *Beggar's Banquet* (1968)

Tony and Maya were greeted by an Alphan security team as they ran down the corridor. Tony impatiently ordered his men away, arguing that they were no match for the Jem'Hadar and he would prefer them to wait until the Federation came to help. They were still in the midst of this conversation when the Command Centre doors gave way and the Jem'Hadar, with their Kareelan companion, burst out into the corridor, in hot pursuit of Tony and Maya. The security guards obediently scattered down adjoining corridors to get out of their way.

Maya was so weak from the Kareelan device that Tony was having to virtually drag her down the corridor. She saw him pull out his commlock. "Attention all security personnel. We have been boarded by the Jem'Hadar. Do not attempt to engage them. Stay away from Section 8. I don't want any more casualties." He tried to hook the commlock back onto his belt as they ran, but missed. The commlock fell to the floor with a clatter that seemed to echo around Maya's dizzy mind.

The Dominion device wasn't just making her unable to transform, Maya realised as she tried to keep up with Tony. It was affecting her sense of balance as well. As they passed the Life Support Section, Maya pulled on Tony's arm to stop him.

"Tony... I can't... She's using a device..." Tony supported her as she lost her balance. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, honey. Here," he helped her into the Life Support Section, locking the door behind them. Once they were in, he lowered her to the ground and crouched beside her, his laser gun pointing at the door.

"The sound..." started Maya, her throat suddenly dry. "You need to..."

"Yeah, I know," said Tony, his eyes on the door. "Looks as though it works on this lot just the same as it did on the Hadar. But I can't activate it for the whole base from in here and it's you they're after. I'm damned if I'm going to leave you alone in here."

He glanced at her quickly before returning his attention to the entrance, where the Jem'Hadar were beginning to fight their way through the door.

"Well, I can say I have the most desirable girlfriend in the universe. Everybody wants you, baby," said Tony, trying to sound cheerful, though she could hear the tension in his voice as he watched the door. She noticed that he called her his girlfriend — it was the sort of thing he said when he was under pressure. She smiled at the silly memory that brought up.

Maya wished she could do something useful, but as it was, she could barely keep her eyes open. She hadn't felt this bad in a long time; even her injuries a couple of days earlier had been easier to bear than this. Or at least, that was what she felt right now. The injuries had been less worrying because she knew she could cure them by using her abilities. But this sickness made her unable to transform at all; she couldn't even concentrate enough to sit up straight without leaning on the desk beside her.

"I wonder why they're not just transporting in," muttered Tony as the door began to give way.

"Maybe the tiranium is stopping them..." Maya had no idea what might stop a Dominion transporter from working, but that was the first idea that came to mind.

"I wish they'd get through and get it over with. And where's bloody Starfleet when you need them?"

"Well, this is familiar," said Maya weakly. "You and me waiting for something to burst through the door and kill us."

Tony guffawed. He put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. "The story of our lives, hey?"

Despite the dizziness she felt, and their dire situation, Maya couldn't resist needling him. "Feeling sentimental again? Keep your eye on that door. And shoot that Kareelan if you can."

"Shoot the what?"

As expected, the door burst open. In a flash, Tony fired his laser across the two Jem'Hadar that entered, but one of them still had time to fire. The shot hit Tony's right arm and he groaned in pain, dropping the laser. The smell of scorched human flesh filled Maya's nostrils and made her retch. Four more Jem'Hadar and the Kareelan woman entered the room. Unarmed and wounded, Tony tried to place himself in between Maya and her would-be abductors.

"Get rid of him," said the Kareelan coldly. "We don't have time to play any more games with these primitives."

By now, the device was making Maya feverish; her vision was blurred and her hearing muddy. In fact, she felt very much as she had done when she had woken up in the DS9 Infirmary three days earlier. *Maybe I should get used to it in this universe*, she thought vaguely.

She watched helplessly as one of the Jem'Hadar pushed Tony aside. The human stumbled, but attacked again, attempting ineffectually to knock the soldier over. The Jem'Hadar drove his elbow into Tony's chest and punched him in the face, sending the unfortunate man flying. Tony hit one of the desks with a loud crash and fell into a heap on the floor.

"Tony!" screamed Maya, too sick and frightened to think how useless the cry was.

The Kareelan was advancing on her. “Now then, my little Psychon. Someone wants to talk to you.” She leaned forward, obviously trying to catch Maya.

“They’ll just have to wait!” said Maya, mustering all her strength to lift up Tony’s laser gun and fire. She hit the Kareelan on the arm, scorching a black mark on the woman’s white skin. The Kareelan winced and dropped her device, though she still had the strength to seize Maya’s hair. Maya fired again, this time shooting her attacker point blank in the chest. The Kareelan fell back, groaning in pain, but still alive.

“Capture the creature and let’s get this over with,” she ordered hoarsely.

Maya tried to reach Tony to see if he was still alive—she couldn’t even bear the idea he might not be. She could see that his face was covered in blood from his broken nose, but with the Kareelan’s device still activated, all she was able to do was take a stumbling step in his direction.

She felt the iron grip of a Jem’Hadar hand on her arm. Seized by panic, Maya lashed out and hit the soldier, striking him on the shoulder. Her only reward was a heavy blow to the face that made her ears ring. Maya lost her balance and fell heavily, her weight pulling her out of the Jem’Hadar’s grip. As she collapsed on the floor, she realised the Jem’Hadar had fallen with her and was now sprawled over her legs.

Looking up uncomprehendingly, Maya found that Major Kira and five Starfleet soldiers were now in the room and had started a shootout with the Jem’Hadar. Maya ducked, taking refuge behind the dead soldier, too confused and sick to react or even wonder when the Starfleet people had arrived. All she could think about was Tony.

Lying on the floor, Maya suddenly started to feel better. The sickness was withdrawing, as if a pall of pain was being lifted from her mind. One of the Starfleets had probably destroyed or deactivated the Kareelan’s device. Freed of its influence, Maya immediately rushed over to Tony’s side, hesitantly laying her hand on his neck. He was unconscious, his dark hair matted with blood, his pulse barely perceptible under her fingers. He hadn’t been this bad in a long time. She ran her fingers through his tangled hair. “My hero,” she whispered with a half smile.

“Doctor Bashir, we have a medical emergency here,” she heard Kira say behind her. “Beam into the corridor; there’s something in this room that’s interfering with the transporters.”

Kira crouched down beside Tony; without looking up, Maya heard the Bajoran take in her breath as she saw how bad the human's condition was. The punch he had received in the face had broken his nose and, as far as Maya could tell, smashed one of his cheek bones, reducing his face to a nightmarish pulp of torn flesh and broken bone. His breathing was very hoarse and gurgling, as though his lungs were full of blood; it was possible the Jem'Hadar's elbow had broken some of Tony's ribs. The sound filled Maya with terror. The last Alphan she had heard breathe like that had died before reaching the Medical Centre.

"What happened?" asked Kira.

"What do you think happened?" snapped Maya, turning to glare at the major. "Your Dominion friends attacked us, that's what! What took you so long?"

Kira's eyes narrowed. "We rescued your Eagle pilots. We weren't aware that the Jem'Hadar had boarded your station. You didn't send out a distress signal."

Maya was about to explain that they couldn't send a distress call when the Command Centre was under attack, but then she decided this was no time for petty bickering. Doctor Bashir had just entered, accompanied by Helena.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Helena, clapping her hand over her mouth. She leaned over Tony with concern, but stood back as Bashir crouched down and scanned him with his tricorder.

"He's in pretty bad shape," said Bashir. "We'll need to get him into the corridor and beam him to the *Defiant*. You coming with us?" he asked Maya with his sympathetic smile.

Maya nodded and took Tony's hand, relieved to know that he would have Starfleet technology to save him.

Sisko steepled his hands and observed Maya quizzically as he allowed his chair to gently swivel. "So you have no idea why the Jem'Hadar attacked Alpha," he said in a neutral tone.

Maya seemed to be watching his reflection in the shiny desktop; as he spoke, she started like someone woken up from a day dream and looked up at him, shaking her head silently. Her features were pale and drawn; she was clearly exhausted by her ordeal and Sisko felt a pang of guilt at not letting her rest. But an attack by the Dominion was not something he could ignore.

"The Jem'Hadar must have had some reason," said Sisko, more to himself than to Maya. "I can't imagine they would launch a gratuitous attack on the base simply because it is staffed by humans."

"All I know is that they seemed to be after me," volunteered Maya wearily. "The Jem'Hadar were careful not to shoot me, and the Kareelan said 'someone' wanted to talk to me."

"Kareelan?"

"The woman who was with the Jem'Hadar," explained Maya. "The one I killed."

Sisko checked Kira's preliminary report on the padd in front of him. According to the major, one of the bodies they had found in Alpha's life support area belonged to a Vorta female. As he recalled, the very first Vorta he had ever met had told him she was from a planet called Kareel Prime. Perhaps that hadn't been a lie after all. ²

"Ah, I see. In our universe, her people are known as the Vorta," he explained, leaning back in his chair and listening to its familiar creak. "They are the genetically-engineered administrators of the Dominion."

"The Founders seem very keen on genetic engineering," remarked Maya pensively. "Maybe that's why the Kareelan have a different name here. The people I knew in my universe were traders. They visited my home world when I was a young girl; it was thanks to them that we acquired the technology that allowed some of our people to leave Psychon... I don't know if you know this, but my planet was destroyed. That's why I joined the Alphans. But before all that, people had already started to leave."

Sisko nodded; Odo had filed a report concerning Maya which mentioned the destruction of her home world.

"So it seems the Gamma Quadrant too is a very different place in your universe," he said thoughtfully. "But you said the Jem'Hadar were trying to kidnap you. What made you think they were specifically after you?"

"As I said, the... Vorta said 'Someone wants to speak to you, my little Psychon'. That made it pretty clear that she knew who and what I was, and that their purpose was—"

Dax to Sisko.

"Go ahead."

We're getting a priority call from Cardassia Prime, explained Dax. It's for Maya.

Sisko exchanged a surprised glance with Maya. "Put it through."

"Weyoun!" exclaimed Maya as soon as the Dominion communication was patched through. Sisko stared at her in surprise; her blue eyes were wide with delighted amazement, and she had a half smile on her lips, as if she were greeting a long lost friend.

The Vorta looked from Sisko to Maya, and then twisted his thin lips into a smile which did not quite reach his wrinkled eyes.

² *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - "The Jem'Hadar" (ep.446-1994)

“Your Highness,” he said egregiously, lowering his eyes and spreading his hands as he was wont to do when talking to a Founder. Sisko noticed Maya’s puzzled look as Weyoun addressed her. Whatever her association with the Vorta in her universe, it evidently didn’t involve the use of this title.

“I am honoured to find we were acquainted in your universe as well as mine,” continued Weyoun, his tone still unusually respectful. “And I am pleased to say you look exactly as I remember you, even though it has been over three hundred years since we last met.”

“Is that why you were so impatient to see me?” retorted Maya, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. Her eyes had narrowed and she was observing Weyoun with obvious mistrust.

Sisko was relieved to find that Maya was not prepared to blindly trust Weyoun; he was tempted to intervene and ask Weyoun outright what he wanted, but he decided it might be wiser to sit back and see how things played out. Whatever the reason for Weyoun’s communication, he would probably find out more by observing what the Vorta said to Maya than by interrupting and drawing attention to himself.

“Now, now, there’s no need to be so unfriendly, Your Highness,” cooed Weyoun, still smiling although his eyes were cold as ice.

Maya lifted her head defiantly and glared down at the screen. “Unfriendly? You send in your minions to kidnap me, and wound five of my friends, and you expect me to be friendly with you?”

“I apologise for the damage we caused,” said the Vorta impassively. “I’m afraid the Jem’Hadar do tend to get carried away. Unfortunately, there was no other way for us to bring you here.”

“You could perhaps have asked first.”

“And risk having Starfleet instantly remove you to Deep Space Nine?” Weyoun seemed to realise he had given away more information than he wanted to. He looked away for a second, as if cursing himself for the mistake. He probably hadn’t meant to let Sisko know that Maya was easier to kidnap on Alpha than on DS9.

“Perhaps we could continue this conversation in private,” he suggested, looking pointedly at Sisko.

“I can leave,” said Sisko, making as if to rise from his seat. He knew—and was in no doubt Weyoun knew too—that every communication downloaded to this terminal was recorded and could be monitored remotely.

On screen, Weyoun turned towards Sisko. “You don’t honestly believe I would fall in that trap, Captain?” he said, making no effort to hide his disdain. “No, I was hoping to meet Maya in person. We have some unfinished business to discuss.”

Sisko shrugged his shoulders and sat down again. Maya had not taken her eyes off the screen during the whole conversation; she seemed riveted by Weyoun's image.

"What kind of business?" asked Maya suspiciously, though she was still staring at the Vorta. "What do you want from me?"

This time, Sisko seemed to detect an unusual note of sincerity in the Vorta's expression. "Oh nothing terrible, I can assure you. We're not Dorcons," he said. The statement was evidently designed to reassure Maya, but the young woman's face fell as soon as the last word was spoken.

"What do you know of the Dorcons?" Maya said in a monotone voice, as if she were speaking with her teeth clenched. Sisko could see her hands were gripping the material of her uniform under the desk. Whoever the Dorcons were, they seemed to strike fear in Maya.

"Only that we eradicated them on behalf of your people," said Weyoun casually. "A whole civilisation destroyed... Surely that deserves some gratitude."

Sisko watched as Maya's hands relaxed, though there was still tension in her voice as she said, "I can't be grateful for what the Dominion did for my people in this universe. On my side, the Dorcons are still very much alive."

"As are you," remarked Weyoun. "A remarkable coincidence, indeed. I take it, from what you've said, that the Dominion did not destroy the Dorcon species in your universe?"

"No. But then," said Maya slowly, "there's no Dominion in my universe."

Weyoun looked amazed, and there was no doubt in Sisko's mind that the expression was completely genuine. "Then... what do the Founders do?"

"I don't know: I never met them. Whatever they do, they don't run the Dominion."

The Vorta shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Sisko thought this information might be putting into question some of Weyoun's beliefs about the Founders' godhead. Real gods could perhaps be expected to transcend the differences between quantum realities. The Founders clearly didn't.

"But you did meet the Vorta?" Maya hesitated, perhaps uncertain as to whether she should tell him what she had told Sisko earlier. "Your people are called the Kareelan in my universe," she said finally. "You were traders. You—your counterpart was the leader of a group who visited my planet when I was a young girl. You used to bring me toys and tell me about your family on Kareel Prime." She smiled for the first time that evening. "You said you had a daughter just my age. At least, the alternate Weyoun did," she added more soberly.

"A daughter..."

The Vorta looked away again, his face uncharacteristically sad. No, not sad... wistful, an expression Sisko had never seen on Weyoun's face before. Maybe the creature did have feelings after all.

Whatever his emotions, the expression on Weyoun's face didn't last long. "And what was your position on Psychon in your universe?" he asked abruptly.

"My position?" repeated Maya, frowning uncomprehendingly. "I was the daughter of a scientist. I didn't have any particular position—and I certainly wasn't of royal blood," she added, no doubt remembering that Weyoun had greeted her with the title of 'Highness'.

"No, of course not." Weyoun lifted one hand as if to dismiss the thought. "But your father was Mentor, a great scientist. What did he work on?"

Maya didn't answer straight away. She observed the screen thoughtfully, as if trying to determine what Weyoun was getting at.

"He was trying to save our planet," she said succinctly.

"Using a computer?"

Weyoun looked calm and unconcerned, but Sisko got the feeling they were nearing the whole point of this conversation. The Vorta, and perhaps the Dominion itself, needed something from Maya, possibly something they had been waiting hundreds of years for. The captain suspected Maya had come to the same conclusion.

"Yes," she said, her tone cold and her gaze still locked with Weyoun's. "My father constructed a computer to try and rebuild Psychon before the planet broke up. But he failed. Psychon was destroyed."

Weyoun didn't seem particularly disappointed by this information. He merely nodded thoughtfully, his small mouth curled into a half-smile.

"So once again, our universes diverged. Psychon wasn't destroyed in this reality," he said, obviously conscious of the effect this announcement would have on Maya.

The woman's eyes widened and her lips parted in surprise. She looked at Sisko as if he could confirm this information, and then turned back to Weyoun.

"Psychon wasn't destroyed," she repeated slowly. Sisko could see the sudden hope that lit up her eyes.

"Oh no," said Weyoun, his tone purposeful again. "Psychon is a proud member of the Dominion. It is ruled by your descendants to this day."

"My descendants?" There was no mistaking the delight in Maya's voice. Whatever trap Weyoun was laying for her, it was working.

"Well, your brother's descendants," conceded Weyoun. "Your counterpart had no children, unfortunately."

Maya opened her mouth, a smile on her lips, as if to ask another question about her destiny, but then seemed to decide against it. She paused and then asked more soberly, "How did we meet in this universe? You said it was over three hundred years ago—I didn't know the Kareelan lived that long."

Weyoun looked briefly at Sisko and then back at Maya. “We’re cloned,” he announced simply. “I am the fifth incarnation of the original Weyoun, but I carry his memories. The memories of his time as Dominion advisor to the Psychon royal family, for instance.”

“I wasn’t part of the Psychon royal family,” said Maya again. “In fact, there was no government in my day.”

“I know,” started Weyoun, though he interrupted himself with a quick look at Sisko again. “Maya, it is a pleasure talking to you again. Your brother’s descendants would be very, very pleased if they could see you now. But I do think we should continue this fascinating conversation in private. For one thing, I am sure Captain Sisko is tired of listening to us comparing universes.”

“On the contrary, I’m riveted,” said Sisko, though he knew his protest would make no difference.

As expected, Weyoun ignored him. “I still think it would be best if we could meet alone. I have matters to discuss with you which do not concern the Federation or your human friends. Perhaps we could arrange for you to come here. Cardassia Prime is quite... bearable at this time of year.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Maya, laughing shortly.

“I know the Federation has been filling your mind with lies about the Dominion, Maya,” said Weyoun calmly, “but I assure you, you have nothing to fear from us.”

Maya looked doubtful, but Sisko could tell that she wanted to meet Weyoun and hear what he had to say. The discovery that her planet and her people still existed in this reality, albeit as Dominion subjects, was probably a lure too tempting to resist.

“We could meet...” she started. “But I’d rather we didn’t meet alone. I’m sure you understand that I can’t trust you based purely on one conversation.”

Weyoun laughed dryly. “Really, you have been spending too much time with humans. You have become just as paranoid as they are. It is a trait your counterpart fortunately never developed.”

“I’m not my counterpart,” said Maya shortly. “And paranoia is a very useful trait when you’re lost in space.”

“I’m sure it is. And you are quite right; I do understand. I will allow you to bring along one of your Alphans—perhaps that security chief you’re so fond of. Now, if you won’t come to Cardassia Prime, where do you propose we meet?”

“I could arrange a meeting here on Deep Space Nine,” suggested Sisko, leaning forward.

“Yes, I’m sure you could,” said Weyoun dismissively. “But under the circumstances, I suggest we chose a more neutral place. Why not on Alpha? I understand your base is due to be evacuated, but at least, you would be in familiar surroundings. And I would be fascinated to see primitive human technology.”

Sisko did not like the idea of Weyoun visiting Alpha, even though the base would offer no insights whatsoever into modern Starfleet technology. Having Maya meet the Dominion representative on the Moon would disrupt Starfleet’s evacuation plans. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

Weyoun paid no attention to him. Neither did Maya. “That would be suitable,” she told Weyoun. “But I’ll have to talk to Commander Koenig and get his permission. Alpha is his base after all. Considering he is currently in the Infirmary thanks to your friends, I won’t be able to confirm until tomorrow.”

She had evidently decided to buy herself some time. Or perhaps she was testing to see just how urgently Weyoun wanted to talk to her. Either way, the Vorta seemed to think she was worth the wait.

“I look forward to hearing from you, Maya,” he said calmly. He seemed about to sign off, but then added, “Make sure you do call. This is an opportunity which shouldn’t be missed.”

Inexplicably, Sisko was filled with sudden apprehension. It seemed as though Maya’s presence in this universe had some special significance for Weyoun. It occurred to him that this was perhaps what the Prophets were trying to tell him. Knowing the past and the future as they did, they might have deliberately brought the Moon into this point in space and time for a specific purpose, something to do with the Dominion. Sisko fixed the Vorta’s pale face on the screen, as if observing the creature’s shriveled features would give him the key to this mystery. Perhaps noticing the captain’s curious stare, Weyoun smiled placidly and closed the connection.

As a 24th century doctor, Bashir found the 20th century Alphans fascinating. With Koenig, Verdeschi and Benes still in Deep Space Nine’s Infirmary for treatment—Carter and Fraser had been released earlier—the doctor got ample opportunity to observe humans from the early space age and study, in vivo, the effects of primitive modern medicine.

He found the marks their twentieth century medicine had left most intriguing. All three of the Alphans currently in the Infirmary presented extensive scarring from injuries or surgical procedures. Benes and Koenig even had pockmarks which the computer identified as the result of a disease called ‘chicken pox’—a virus which had been eradicated following the Third World War in the 2080s.

There was also evidence that they had all broken limbs at some time. Verdeschi must have suffered a serious compound fracture of his left tibia less than four years ago, and Bashir was amazed to find the splinters had been bound together by wire and metallic pins and then allowed to heal with the metal still in place. The primitive treatment had apparently been successful, since Verdeschi displayed no lasting physical difficulties, but the injury must have taken months to heal, and was probably extremely painful in the meantime. Bashir couldn't help wondering what psychological effects such a long recovery would have.

He shuddered to think how Doctor Russell would have treated the extensive injuries the three Alphans had incurred during the Jem'Hadar attack that evening. It would probably have taken months for the multiple fractures Koenig and Verdeschi had suffered to heal—if at all. Given the Alphans' primitive technology, it was quite possible the security chief would have succumbed to his injuries before he even got anywhere near the Medical Centre. They were fortunate to have been so close to a state-of-the-art Starfleet Infirmary.

Benes would have been left with terrible scarring on her stomach and legs. *Which would have been a pity*, thought Bashir, as he passed the regenerator over the Alphan's thin ankle. Benes was lying back on the biobed in a blue Starfleet issue medical gown, her eyes tightly closed. Bashir had given her a powerful painkiller as soon as she was beamed to the *Defiant's* sickbay; now they were back on Deep Space Nine, he could see to her wounds rapidly and effectively, but Benes was still reluctant to look at the horrible mess the Jem'Hadar shots had left on her body.

Looking up, Bashir briefly observed her as she reopened her eyes and pointedly looked away. She was an attractive young woman, with finely chiseled features and large, slanting eyes which denoted a possible Asian origin. It would certainly have been a pity to leave her legs with such terrible burn marks. Particularly as she had rather nice legs.

Bashir dismissed his thoughts as unprofessional and stifled a yawn. It was now 2535 and well past his bedtime. But he knew he still had a lot of work to do. The biobed would heal Koenig's cracked ribs and broken arm easily enough, although Bashir still wanted to keep the commander in the Infirmary until the morning to make sure he had no lasting effects from his concussion. Verdeschi, on the other hand, would need microsurgery to fully repair the damage to his chest; one of the Jem'Hadar had smashed in his ribcage, causing bone splinters to tear into his lungs. Bashir would operate on him as soon as Benes was better.

In the meantime, he sat back on the bed to admire his work. The marks on Benes's legs had entirely disappeared, leaving only unblemished skin.

"You see, you're as good as new," he said when he had finished.

Benes leaned over and stared at her bare legs. "That is incredible," she exclaimed with a charming smile. "Thank you, Doctor Bashir."

“Please, call me Julian,” said Bashir automatically. At least he didn’t lose all his means talking to this pretty young woman. He found her less intimidating than Doctor Russell. She wasn’t as beautiful, but seemed more accessible. He would have to find out if she already had someone on Alpha.

“I am Sahn... it is a nickname,” she explained. Her voice was slightly accented, as if the 20th century English she was speaking wasn’t her native language.

They exchanged a smile and Bashir briefly pondered whether he should ask her out for a drink at Quark’s. On the other hand, the Alphans were going through a lot these days, and he decided it would be unfair to complicate the young woman’s life further.

“Well, you’re all cured,” he said reluctantly. “I should tend to the others. I’ll call someone to escort you to your quarters... In the meantime, you can change behind the screen.” He indicated the partition, where a standard grey jump-suit had been replicated for her. Her Alphan uniform had been irreparably damaged by the Jem’Hadar disruptors.

“Thank you, Julian.” She looked around and her eyes fell on Verdeschi and Koenig, still latched into their biobeds. “The commander, Tony—are they all right?”

Bashir nodded and put on his best reassuring expression. “They’ll be fine.” He seemed to be saying that a lot these days. “The commander will be well enough to leave tomorrow morning. Mr Verdeschi will need a bit longer to recover. His injuries were very serious.”

A tender smile spread on Benes’s features and she shook her head gently. “Poor Tony,” she said with a sigh. “He is always getting beaten up.”

Bashir followed her gaze. The first thing he had done was to repair the damage to Verdeschi’s face to clear his airways, and he could see the Alphan’s pale features above the sarcophagus. The man was still under sedation; the biobed was tending to all his needs before Bashir was to operate.

“I think that’s the prerogative of security chiefs everywhere,” remarked Bashir, turning back to Benes.

“I know,” she answered, lowering her eyes as if his remark brought back some sad memories. “Never fall in love with security men or pilots.”

Bashir wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be a quote from someone, or general advice born from her experience on Alpha. For all he knew, Benes might have lost someone dear during the six years of Alpha’s travels.

“That sounds like good advice,” he said, keeping his tone neutral, but friendly.

She drew her eyes away from Verdeschi and nodded sadly. “Very good advice on Alpha. I do not know how Maya can stand it.” Her dark eyes turned back to the security chief. “I could not. I know it hurts too much to lose the people who are close to you...” Benes fixed her gaze on Bashir again. “But that is all over now, is it not, doctor?”

Her voice phrased an affirmation rather than a question, as if she were challenging Bashir to confirm what she said.

“Yes...” said Bashir, unable to think of any other response. “It’s all over now.”

“It does not understand,” said Victor thoughtfully, tapping his chin with his finger.

“It seeks a new life,” intervened David Kano, shaking his head as he leaned on the mobile console that controlled Computer, “but will not take it.”

“It does not seek peace on Bajor.” John turned as he heard Paul Morrow’s clear cut accent behind him. The Englishman was standing, his hands leaning on his Main Mission desk. John looked around, suddenly realising where he was. The panels of Main Mission were pure white, shining far more brightly than they ever had in reality. He felt a bittersweet pleasure at being back here, in this place he had commanded for two years, in company of the colleagues who had died on that fateful day so long ago. He felt the guilt rise in his chest once more, that terrible feeling that he should have done something to save his friends, and yet had failed to do so. But he knew this wasn’t reality; he knew Main Mission had been destroyed forever, and that there was no point in dwelling on the past.

“This is a dream,” he said out loud, hoping that the realisation would take him away from the painful memories. *“None of this is real.”*

“It is stubborn,” said Victor.

“Ignorant,” said David.

“Hostile,” said Paul.

“It does not understand,” said Victor.

“Understand?” repeated John, spinning around to face Victor again.

“Understand what? This is a dream... a hallucination. You’re all dead, you have been for years!”

“Dead?” queried Paul.

“The end of corporeal existence,” explained Victor.

“It thinks only of the end,” said David. “It does not think of the beginning.”

There was a flash of bright light, and John found himself suddenly outdoors. He was standing in a meadow, surrounded by tall grasses and flowers, the air filled with the sweet scent of warm plants. The sky above him was blue, as blue as it had been on Earth so many years ago, on his last vacation before taking over command of Alpha. This wasn’t Earth, though; John could see two pale moons in the sky, neither of them bearing the familiar patterns of Alpha. Puzzled, but charmed by the place, he brushed his hands through the grass and watched as a cloud of pollen and butterflies rose around him.

“This is the beginning,” said Helena’s voice beside him. “A new beginning.”

He turned and found her standing beside him. He smiled automatically, responding to the joy he felt at being in this beautiful place with the woman he loved. But his smile faded gradually as he realised. "Who are you?"

"We are of Bajor," she answered calmly.

"You're the same people who talked to me last night. Who are you? What are you trying to tell me?" He seized Helena's slim arms and shook her, stopping only when he noticed Alan pushing his way through the grass towards them.

"The King is not of Bajor," said the image of the pilot. "He is of the Sisko's people. He does not understand."

"*What* don't I understand?" shouted Koenig, losing patience with the riddles in this dream.

The Helena he was holding smiled placidly. "He will understand."

CHAPTER SEVEN
Paradise Lost

CHAPTER SEVEN – *Paradise Lost*

*“Vado – Questa volta ho deciso che vado
Ma perché non me l’hai detto tu
Di non poterne più?”
Drupi - “Vado Via”¹*

It was 0800 on DS9 when Maya arrived at the Infirmary to see Tony. Having spent most of the night worrying about him, she was annoyed to find him looking insultingly healthy, and entertaining half a dozen people. He was unshaven and seemed to be wearing some kind of blue medical gown, but aside from that, he looked fine. *I needn’t have worried*, she thought, though in truth, she was relieved to know he was all right.

As she approached, unnoticed, Maya counted no fewer than five people standing around Tony’s bed: John, Helena, Sandra, Major Kira and a small Ferengi in a Starfleet uniform. The Ferengi was reading words from a padd.

“Microsoft?” he read.

“Nope, never heard of ‘em,” answered Tony, before looking up and seeing Maya. “Hey, look who’s come to join the party.”

“Now, who’s holding court?” said Maya, crossing her arms as she approached. John and Helena moved back to allow her through to Tony’s bedside.

After casting a nervous glance at Kira and the Ferengi stranger, Maya turned to look at Tony. He was watching her intently, with the strange, slightly dreamy expression she sometimes caught on his face when he thought she wasn’t looking. As he noticed she was watching him, his eyes focused again and the smile on his lips widened.

Maya lifted her head and pretended to be observing him critically. “You need a shave,” she announced loudly.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Maya, thanks for asking,” he said, a twinkle in his eyes. “But I’d like to save *your* life just once.”

“I didn’t save your life,” she answered, shaking her head. “Major Kira did.”

Tony put on a surprised expression and then shrugged his shoulders, turning to Kira, who was standing on the other side of the bed. “Oh, well, in that case, you can go away now, Maya. I’ll talk to Major Kira instead.” He grinned at the Bajoran Major.

¹ Drupi - "Vado Via" (E. Riccardi / L. Albertelli) - 1973

Kira returned his smile, and then shook her head, rolling her eyes. She looked at the Ferengi beside her. "I think we should go now, Nog. We have a lot of work to do before the other Alphans arrive. You'll have to continue this later."

"Nog was telling us some key features of Earth's late 20th century in this universe," explained John, who was standing behind Maya. "So far, it looks as if our two universes diverged some time in the 1970s."

Tony nodded and looked quizzically at the Ferengi. "How come you're such an expert on Earth's 20th century anyway, Nog?"

"I've been there!" said the young man enthusiastically. "When my uncle took me to Starfleet Academy a couple of years ago, we had an accident on the way. We found we were back in the mid 20th century, on Earth! It was some place called..." The Ferengi paused thoughtfully. "Ah yes! Now I remember the name—it was a base near a village called Roswell in Australia... er, no, America."

"Roswell, New Mexico?" exclaimed John, amusement clear in his blue eyes. Maya saw the recognition on all the Alphans' faces. 'Roswell' was evidently something very familiar to the humans, but Maya had no recollection of it ever being mentioned in Alpha's computer.

"What year were you there?" asked Helena.

"Tell me it wasn't 1947," muttered Tony, covering his forehead with one hand. "Please!"

Nog's shriveled little face broke into a toothy grin. "It was! How did you guess? You've heard of this in your universe, too?"

To Maya's puzzlement, the humans all started to laugh. She looked at Kira, but the Bajoran seemed as mystified as she was. The two women exchanged a bemused look and shrugged their shoulders. Nog seemed none the wiser, either.

"Well, it looks as though the conspiracy theories might have been right after all," said John more soberly. "Trust the U.S. Government to cover up something like that for decades. I can't say I'm very surprised."

"I can't believe it," said Tony, casting a suspicious glance at Nog. "We heard so much... garbage about Roswell and little green men and stuff. We thought it was all a lot of hyped up baloney. Something people made up because stories about visiting aliens were in fashion. And then it turns out it was just you..?"

"And my uncle and my father," explained Nog eagerly. "You might think it was garbage, Mr Verdeschi, but Captain Sisko said our adventure might have contributed to the beginning of the space age on Earth. It probably encouraged humans to think about going into outer space to meet new life forms."

Maya thought more in depth about Nog's adventure. "In effect," she started, "what you're describing, Nog, is a time loop. You went back in time because you had an accident on your way to Starfleet Academy. Your presence in 1947 sparked an interest in space on Earth, which in turn probably led to the creation of Starfleet Academy. You decided to go there, which caused you to go back in time, and that started the loop all over again. That's fascinating... And all the more fascinating as it happened in both our universes, even though they diverged four hundred years ago and it's unlikely there's a Starfleet Academy in our reality. That could be an intriguing clue to the nature of quantum realities..."

"Wait, I'll have to stop you there, Maya," intervened Tony, lifting a hand to slow her down. "You're making my head hurt."

Maya patted his hand in fake sympathy. "Don't trouble your pretty little brain with all this, Tony; it's way beyond you anyway."

Tony stared at her for a moment, pouting like a child whose toy had just been taken away. Once he was satisfied Maya had noticed the expression, he turned to Nog and Kira.

"You know, I used to be an intelligent man," he announced in mock seriousness, taking hold of Maya's hand. "But ever since I've met her, I've felt like an idiot. I reckon she's sucked my brains out."

That made Helena and John smile, and Sandra laughed outright. Tony gestured towards them. "You see? I get no respect."

The humans' laughter was so infectious that the aliens joined in as well. After all the trauma of the previous evening, Maya couldn't help laughing when her close friends looked so happy.

"Ow! I think I did myself an injury," said Tony, rubbing his side as his laughter subsided.

"Yes, you should be taking it easy," said Helena more seriously. "I don't care what Doctor Bashir says about his biobed: you had three broken ribs and a punctured lung less than twelve hours ago. You can't expect to be rushing around so soon."

"I'm not rushing around," protested Tony with a grin. "I'm only laughing at my own jokes: there's no harm in that!"

"Anyway, Captain Sisko will be pleased to know you're all in such good spirits," said Kira. "Commander Koenig, now that Doctor Bashir has discharged you, you might want to oversee the evacuation of Alpha this morning. Commander Dax and a team from Starfleet will be assisting you on the Moon."

"This morning?" repeated Maya, turning to John. "The evacuation wasn't supposed to be until tomorrow, wasn't it?"

“Under the circumstances, Captain Sisko thought it would be best if the Alphans were here, rather than still on the Moon,” explained John. “That’s what Major Kira came to tell us. We would be a lot safer here if the Dominion attacks again.”

“But the Dominion isn’t going to attack again,” said Maya. “They’re going to get what they wanted; they’d have no reason to attack Alpha!”

Tony sat upright in his bed, his expression suddenly serious. “Get what they wanted? What are you talking about, Maya?”

“I’ve agreed to meet their leader, Weyoun, on Alpha. Or at least, I said I would discuss it with you,” she said, looking up at John. “He wants to talk to me about Psychon... Oh, Commander, Psychon still exists in this universe. There might even be some of my people this side of the wormhole, in Cardassia.”

“Working for the Dominion?” said John, his expression tenebrous.

Maya didn’t want to answer that question. She could tell from the tone of John’s voice that he didn’t approve. She should have known that he would react the same way as Captain Sisko. Looking around, she could see from the serious expressions of everyone with her that no one shared her delight at finding Psychon still existed here. But then, she shouldn’t really have expected them to. They were all aliens; they wouldn’t understand.

“Weyoun said he just wanted to talk to me,” she told them, “about who I was in this universe. He knew me here, and he knew my brother, just as I knew Weyoun’s counterpart in my reality. He only wants to meet me. He doesn’t want to harm me.”

“You should take what he says with a pinch of salt,” said Kira, grimacing with disgust. “Believe me, I know Weyoun very well; I used to be his liaison officer. And I can tell you that creep’s as slippery as a Tarkalian eel.”

“You’re not going to see him alone,” said Tony firmly, swiveling his legs off the bed and then standing up shakily. “I’m coming with you.” He winced as he straightened up, but started to look around, presumably searching for his uniform. It was obvious he wasn’t going anywhere in a pair of medical pyjamas.

Helena took a step forward and tried to guide him back onto the bed. “Tony! You’re not well enough to get up. You’re not going anywhere.”

“If Maya’s going to meet this guy, I’m going with her,” he said, shaking off Helena’s well-meaning hands.

“Tony...” started Maya, placing her hand on his. She did want Tony to come with her: that was what she had arranged with Weyoun, after all. But she could see he wasn’t strong enough to come; the mere effort of standing up had turned his face a deathly pale colour. He was so weak that it only took another gentle push from Helena to get him to sit down on the bed again.

“You’re not going anywhere, Tony,” Helena repeated firmly. “And you’re definitely not going back to Alpha with Maya.”

“No, he isn’t. *I’m* going with her,” said a gruff voice behind Maya.

Turning her head, the Psychon found that Odo had entered the ward and was standing beside Sandra, his arms folded and a determined expression on his featureless face. It was obvious that Sandra hadn’t seen Odo yet: she was staring at him uncertainly, evidently taking in his alien appearance.

“Captain Sisko told me about your conversation with Weyoun last night,” continued the Changeling. “If you’re so determined to go and meet him, then I should come with you.”

“And why’s that?” asked Tony.

“Weyoun is genetically engineered to revere Founders as gods,” explained Kira, evidently understanding why Sisko had asked Odo to go. “He probably wouldn’t question Odo’s presence.”

“Besides, I don’t have to make my presence known,” added Odo.

Maya wasn’t convinced that Weyoun would accept this change of plan. “No, I said I’d be coming with Tony—”

“Glad to know you included me in your plans,” said Tony good-naturedly, trying to get up again.

“Tony...” said Helena, a warning clear in her voice.

Tony looked at her cautiously, and then evidently decided she wasn’t such a threat after all. On Alpha, she could have sedated him and tied him to the bed if she really didn’t want him to go back on duty: she had been known to employ such drastic means with anyone from the commander down. But here, on Deep Space Nine, she was powerless.

“I tell you what,” said Tony, standing up. “We can all three of us go. If I collapse, Odo can carry me. Ow!” He winced and suddenly clutched his side, his face draining of colour again, though he still seemed determined to come with Maya.

“Tony, you don’t have to do this,” she said, putting her arms around him as he stumbled. “If I meet Weyoun today, everyone will still be on Alpha anyway. They’ll take care of me if he tries to do anything.”

She saw the expression on Tony’s face change as he looked over her shoulder. Turning around, Maya saw that Doctor Bashir had joined the by now considerable group in his Infirmary. He looked at all the people around the bed; his expression darkened as he noticed that Tony was standing up.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he said sternly. “You’re not fit enough to get up yet, Mister Verdeschi. I haven’t discharged you.”

Tony looked at Bashir, and then looked at the device the doctor was waving at him. Perhaps fearing that it might be some kind of sedative, Tony sat down on the bed. Helena looked pleased.

“Why are you so anxious to meet this Weyoun guy anyway?” asked Tony, looking up at Maya again.

“He knew my counterpart,” said Maya, though she seemed to recall she had already told him this earlier. “He can tell me what happened to my family here—I might even have relatives who are still alive. And I can tell him about his counterpart, the one who helped my brother leave Psychon.”

“Well, he might have been a good guy in our universe, but in this one, he’s the head honcho of the Dominion,” remarked Tony. “He’s not the same person here that he was in our reality. Any more than I’m the same person as that Antonio Verdeschi who worked for Ferrari.”

“We’ve seen what the Dominion are capable of,” said John, shaking his head. “I wouldn’t trust their leader on Alpha, whether he’s with you or not. He could be lying about his desire to see you and have some other purpose in mind.”

Maya felt her temper flare up, fueled by fatigue, as she became convinced that they wouldn’t let her go. Both the Alphans and the Starfleets seemed determined to stop her from meeting Weyoun at all. She knew they were right, that it was madness to trust a man just because he looked like someone she had once known. But she also believed that meeting Weyoun was her only chance of learning more about the Psychons in this universe.

“What are you going to do, Commander, order me not to go?” she snapped.

John was taken aback for a second, but then she saw the anger flash in his eyes. “If necessary, yes, *I will*,” he told her, raising his voice.

Maya felt a slight tremor of fear run through her—John Koenig’s wrath was not something to take lightly—but she was too angry and too determined to back down. She glared at him and thought of the most hurtful thing she could say to win the argument.

“We’re not on Alpha anymore. You can’t give me orders.” The pained expression in John’s eyes made Maya regret her outburst almost immediately. Looking at Helena, she found that the Alphan doctor was similarly shocked at what she said. It hurt Maya to see her friends looking at her like this, but it also made her even more determined to get her way. The rift she was creating between herself and her human colleagues would only be worthwhile if she got to see Weyoun.

“What’s got into you, Maya?” asked Helena in a hushed voice.

“Oh give it up, Helena. She’s impossible when she has a bee in her bonnet,” said Tony with disgust. “Bloody hell, Maya, what’s so important about this guy Weyoun? He can’t tell you anything about *your* family. He can only tell you what your counterpart was up to, and for all we know she might have been as psycho as her father!”

Maya spun around to face Tony, too angry now to fully realise what she was doing. She couldn’t even begin to express her rage at what he had said about her father, but she was pleased that Tony’s attack gave her an excuse to fight back.

“You have no idea what it’s been like,” she said, barely realising that she was actually shouting. “For years now I’ve been the last of my race. I’ve lived on Alpha without ever seeing anyone who looked like me, who thought the way I did, or who could even begin to understand how I felt. You’ve all been moaning about never being able to go back to Earth, but at least there was an Earth to go back to. In our universe, I have nothing: no home, no family, nothing but the friendship and kindness of alien people.”

Those last words had no sooner left her lips than she sorely wished she could take them back. But as that was impossible, she just ploughed on. “All I want is to be part of my own people again, just for a while, even if it’s only to hear that they’re the worst criminals in this universe. I just want to know that I’m a Psychon, that I’m not alone, that there are still people like me, that I’m not just this weird alien who doesn’t belong anywhere.”

“We don’t think you’re a weird alien,” retorted Tony, gesturing angrily at her. “Haven’t you been paying attention all these years? Or is it just that you don’t think we’re good enough for you? That it’s worth you going off with some ponce just because he *might* know something about your people? You’re being conned, Maya. How do you know this guy isn’t going to turn into a Dorcon in disguise?”

“Tony’s right, Maya,” said John sternly. “And the Psychons in this universe aren’t ‘your people’. If they’re members of the Dominion—”

“Oh right,” interrupted Maya. “And Doctor Bashir and Captain Sisko aren’t your people, either? You all know what happened to your alternates in this universe, but I’m not allowed to find out what mine was doing?” They were all looking at her, all her Alphan friends, their familiar faces angry or shocked. She suddenly realised that if she said any more, she was going to burst into tears, because she couldn’t stand seeing them watch her like this. “Oh what’s the point,” she cried out.

She turned away and, pushing past an astonished Bashir, left the Infirmary. The humans could argue all they wanted: whether Odo came with her or not, she was going to meet Weyoun.

Tony had discovered how to program the Starfleet computer to give him a random selection of Italian songs, but that was just about the only thing that had gone right so far that day.

“Louder,” he ordered, and the current song became loud enough to cover a conversation. Not that he was about to have a conversation with anyone, alone as he was in his spotless quarters on DS9. The other Alphans had all gone back to help with the evacuation of the Moonbase, but Bashir had adamantly refused to let Tony go anywhere, on the grounds that he was still too weak. Doctors were evidently just as stubborn in the 24th century as they had been in the 20th.

Maya was also on Alpha, no doubt meeting with that damn Leprechaun from the Dominion. Tony just couldn't believe he had made such a mess of things with Maya. Okay, so it was mainly her fault. If she hadn't made such a fuss about going to see that creep Weyoun, he wouldn't have called her father a psycho. And she definitely shouldn't have told John that he couldn't give her orders. Helena was right—what on Earth was Maya thinking when she said that?

Tony ordered a coffee from the replicator and went to lie down on the sofa. He had removed his jacket and tunic: the zip on the latter tended to become rather uncomfortable when he was lying down. Taking a sip of coffee, he hummed appreciatively, closing his eyes as the sharp taste of his first real Espresso in years seemed to spread through his veins and warm his body. Okay, so it wasn't really real coffee. But it was only now he was on Deep Space Nine that he realised how many creature comforts he had done without on Alpha.

The Moonbase had only synthetic food, made from soy beans and raw protein, whereas he was free to order anything he liked here and it tasted just like the real thing. It also occurred to him, as he reopened his eyes and looked around the impersonal decoration of the living-room, that things on Alpha had become distinctly shabby in its six years of use. Reupholstering furniture had never been a priority.

*// Perché sei così bella
Se non sai quello che vuoi?
Io d'amore ti vestirò
Ma non mi domandare dove io ti porterò//²*

Tony had always hated Umberto Tozzi, the sort of schmaltzy crooner his mother liked to listen to when he was a child. But now, that music he used to dislike so much brought back a flood of memories. If he closed his eyes again, he could picture himself back in his parent's flat in Florence, immobilised by the still heat of a summer's day. He could smell the musty odour of the ancient rooms and see, high above him, the flaking paint of the ornate ceiling, last reminder of a time when Via Garibaldi number 14 was some rich banker's private house and not a haphazard collection of converted flats.

2 Umberto Tozzi - "Io Camminerò" (G. Bigazzi / U. Tozzi) - 1976

Translation:
*Why are you so beautiful
If you don't know what you want?
I will dress you in love
But don't ask where I'm taking you*

He was a little boy with long shabby hair and shorts that disappeared under an old Euro '76 T-shirt. It was a July day, one of those days that was so hot and sweltering all he wanted to do was lie on his bed in the oversized room he shared with his brother Guido, looking up at the stylised stars on the distant ceiling, listening to his mother ironing in the next room, her husky voice occasionally rising to sing along with Tozzi's songs on the radio.

Tony opened his eyes and looked at the elaborate grid that decorated Deep Space Nine's ceiling. He chuckled. *Who needs regression therapy when you have music? I should play this song to Maya*, he thought automatically, before realising that was unlikely to happen any time soon. Typical. For the first time in years, the Alphans had hope of some improvement in their lives, and he had to go and argue with Maya. He reminded himself that the argument had been her fault, not his, and that it was up to her to apologise. Then he'd play the song for her.

And what if she didn't apologise? What if Weyoun convinced her to join the Dominion? He'd certainly convinced her to meet him, even in spite of a direct order from John. Or what if Maya decided she preferred Odo, for instance, because he was a Metamorph too and would therefore understand her better? *Cazzo!* He thought crudely, realising that all the questions would only make him more miserable. *Don't be such a fool.* It was bad enough knowing Maya was angry with him; he didn't need to make things worse for himself by wondering what might happen if she stayed angry.

Tony looked up in surprise as the computer momentarily toned down the music so he could hear the door chime. For one insane moment, Tony thought it might be Maya, and his heart leapt accordingly. He then remembered she was still on Alpha talking to the Dominion Big Cheese; that was what he was miserable about, after all.

There was no commlock to show him who was standing outside the door, so Tony got up and approached the entrance. "Who is it?"

"Tony, it's Nerys." Tony deactivated the lock and the door slid open to reveal Major Kira. "Hi," she said. "I was wondering if you'd like to have some lunch?"

Evidently satisfied that they had had enough silence, the computer turned the music back up to its original volume.

"*Be, si, cioè...* I mean yes," said Tony, confused by the sudden blast of Italian from the computer. "Sure I'd love some lunch. Um, computer, turn the music off!"

The music instantly switched off and they were able to hear each other again. Tony looked down at himself and realised he was still only in his trousers and tank top. "I'll just go and put my top back on. Sorry."

"I like your uniforms, by the way," said Nerys, following him into the room as he went over to get his tunic. "They're very unusual for humans. I thought Terrans only ever wore one piece suits."

“Yeah, they were designed by some big fashion designer—you know, a flash new look for the Moon.” Tony pulled on his tunic and zipped it up.

“I’ve never seen a garment that did up like that,” said Kira, observing the zip that ran up the left sleeve.

“Yeah, neither had I. And I can tell you I curse it every morning,” said Tony as he fastened his belt. The plastic sash felt unusually light without the commlock and gun that usually hung from it. He had managed to lose both the previous night.

“What’s this for?” Kira was pointing at the identity badge on his chest. “I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“That’s in case I forget who I am,” he said with a grin as he put on his jacket. He fiddled to get the two edges of the zip together and then yanked up the slide. Once he had fastened the garment, he discovered he was too hot and was strongly tempted to unzip it again. But feeling Kira’s fascinated gaze fixed on him, he left it at that.

It occurred to him that the static electricity from pulling on the tunic had probably messed up his hair, so he went into the bathroom to smooth his hair down with a bit of water and make sure none of the grey at his temples was showing. Looking at himself in the mirror, he reflected that he was really pleased with the shaving device DS9 provided in its bathrooms; for once in his life, he actually looked clean-shaven. When he turned to leave the bathroom, he found that Nerys was standing in the doorway. She looked very amused.

“What?” he challenged.

Nerys shook her head, though she was now grinning, her eyes bright with amusement. Maybe she wasn’t used to men who took care of their appearance the way he did. Tony shrugged and indicated they could go.

Helena looked around the disused Medical Centre which had been her place of work for the past seven years, ever since she had first become the Alphan Chief Medical Officer in 1998. There was nothing left in there; the ward was a wide empty space, with bare shelves and gaping holes in the walls. All her monitors and scanners had been removed, packed and sent to Deep Space Nine, perhaps to be reused some day... or sent to some museum.

Having seen the technology Julian had at his disposal, Helena realised just how primitive her 20th century instruments were in this age when injuries could be cured at the wave of a regenerator. The events of the previous night had proved how useless she had become: under her care, she was in no doubt Tony and John would have died.

Helena dismissed the thought, shaking her head gently. Comparing the medicine of her time to that of Julian's was as pointless as comparing it to the medicine of Shakespeare's day. She had been an excellent doctor in her time, but that time was gone. What she needed to do now was help the Alphans—and especially John—through the evacuation.

John had just made an announcement from the broadcast centre explaining that Alpha was being evacuated today because of the imminent collision with Bajor VIII, and that Starfleet was currently looking for a way to send them back to their own universe. He had chosen to make no mention of Starfleet Command's plan to evacuate the Alphans to some distant starbase. As far as John was concerned, that was not going to happen. Not as long as he was the commander of the Alphans.

From what Helena could tell, the Alphans had mixed feelings about leaving the Moon. Some, like Alibe or Shermeen, were looking forward to leaving and had already volunteered to be among the first ones to go to Deep Space Nine. Others, the majority, seemed reluctant to leave; Helena herself would have been happier if she knew for sure what was in store for them.

"Helena?"

Without looking around, she leaned back into John's embrace and felt him rest his chin on her head. Her mind momentarily cleared of its problems, she looked down and ran idle fingers over the back of his clasped hands.

"It isn't easy, is it?" he said gently. "We've built so much here."

Helena pulled away and turned to face him. "It would be easier if we knew what was going to happen to us. We've been prepared to leave for years now, but we always thought it would be to go and build a new life on a planet. But now, we're having to leave Alpha with no idea of what the future holds."

"I know." John nodded gravely. "I'm still hoping we can find a way back to our universe."

"With what?" asked Helena. "Without the Moon, we have nowhere to go."

"We didn't have anywhere to go with it, either," he remarked wryly. "But we do have one thing going in our favour." Helena lifted her eyebrows quizzically, waiting to hear what he would say. "Money. It turns out tiranium is a valuable commodity in this universe. Maya found that out yesterday. I've asked Patrick and Jim to strip all the life-support and medical equipment of their tiranium as soon as we've got off the base."

"But we haven't got that much tiranium..." she started, recalling that the substance had always been in short supply on Alpha.

John's rugged features lit up with a grin. "According to the calculations Maya made, we do have enough to buy a ship. We're rich, Helena!" He widened his eyes dramatically in an obvious effort to cheer her up.

Helena smiled at the idea of acquiring a 24th century ship. “Would we know how to pilot a Starfleet ship?”

“Oh, I’m sure we’d work it out,” he said dismissively. “I know Maya has been studying the superluminal propulsion systems they use here.”

“Have you talked to Maya?” asked Helena, her mood more sombre as she remembered the scene in the Infirmary that morning.

John nodded. “She didn’t say much; she came over with Constable Odo to help with the evacuation, and she’ll meet the Dominion representative at 1400, DS9 time. By then, most of the Alphans will be on the station. I said she could use the Medical Centre to meet this man Weyoun.”

Helena lifted her eyebrows again and looked at her husband curiously, remembering how adamantly opposed to the idea he had been only a few hours earlier.

“I figured it wasn’t fair to deny Maya something she wanted so much,” he explained, spreading his hands. “It isn’t as if she’s asked for much in the time she’s been with us... You don’t mind that I told her she could meet Weyoun here, do you?”

Helena looked around and shook her head. What had once been her Medical Centre was now nothing more than a collection of plastic walls and neon lights.

“Yes, that’s all right. I won’t be needing it anymore.”

Odo observed his surroundings with interest. He hadn’t been on Alpha before and he was fascinated by the unfamiliar 20th century décor. One thing he noticed almost immediately was that whoever had decorated the base had a fetish for plastic.

Aside from the brown canvas covering the sofa, everything in Maya’s living room was made of white plastic: the walls, the shelves, the coffee table and chairs, even the clothes hangers in the cupboard by the door. The room was subterranean, and so had no windows, but it was brightly lit by panels on the wall and lights on the ceiling. Those were covered in translucent plastic.

As on DS9, the living quarters were arranged so that the entrance led straight into the main room, but here, the bedroom area was only separated from the living-room by an empty stack of shelves. Odo found it a bit disturbing to be sitting in plain view of Maya’s bed, even though it was stripped of all sheets and covers. Her possessions had probably been transferred to DS9 by now; the shelves and the cupboards were bare, and there were nothing but unadorned hooks on the walls, where pictures had once been hung. All that was left was the furniture—more 20th century textures and shapes to explore.

Odo was particularly intrigued by the floor, which was covered with some kind of textured fabric he didn’t recognise: in fact, as soon as he was alone in Maya’s quarters, he knelt down to observe the material more closely.

He was still on all fours, looking at the floor, when he became aware that Maya was in the room. She had left him to go and get some lunch at the Moonbase's Cafeteria, and was now standing near the entrance, carrying a plastic tray and watching him in surprise. He'd been so engrossed by the texture of the floor surfacing he hadn't even noticed her coming in.

"Oh, ah, I was just... looking at the floor," he said as he got up, unable to make up any excuses for what he had been doing. "Do you have any idea what the covering is made of?"

Maya looked down at the floor thoughtfully, but shook her head. She went to sit on her sofa and placed her tray on a low table. "I'm not sure. I think someone did mention it once... it's called 'lino' or something. I assume it's some kind of plastic, like everything else."

"Well, no, it isn't, actually." Odo approached Maya, dusting himself off—anywhere humanoids lived was always coated with particles of their skin, hair or clothing. He sat on the sofa beside her. "It seems to be a fabric impregnated with some kind of oily resin."

"I see." Maya didn't seem particularly interested in the floor, but she did smile at Odo. "Are floor coverings a hobby of yours?"

Odo was taken aback by the question and it took him a second or two to realise Maya was joking. "No," was all he could think to answer, even though he knew the question wasn't serious. "But I'm always interested in examining different textures and substances. It helps me shapeshift."

Maya's expression immediately lit up with interest. "Oh. You're looking for things that might be useful to change into."

"Well, not necessarily useful." He somehow doubted he would ever be called upon to emulate the Alphan floor-covering. "But I suppose you could say changing into new textures is a hobby of mine."

Maya lowered her eyes. "It's been a while since changing shape was a hobby of mine. It's become more of a job these days..." she let her voice trail off with a half shrug. "How does observing the floor help you transform?"

"I find that changing into different kinds of objects and materials makes it easier to change into other shapes," explained Odo. "It's like... training, if you like. Exercising. Trying out new textures and forms is good preparation for changing into... useful things, like my humanoid appearance. Perhaps you do the same thing."

"Well... I used to," she started. "When I was learning how to transform, I had to do a certain number of exercises every day. They usually involved changing into creatures my size first, and then gradually working on larger or smaller creatures. But since I've been on Alpha, I've had to transform so often I don't even bother to do any 'exercising'."

Maya dipped one of the dry biscuits in her soup and then proceeded to eat it. Odo's eyes automatically followed her hand and he noticed that she had a second commlock on her tray. He could just make out the lettering VERDES on the part he could see.

"I don't mean to pry..." he picked up the commlock. The device was—predictably—covered in plastic, with a tiny glass screen at one end and some kind of antenna at the other. The inscription on the side featured Verdeschi's name and an uninspiring image of the human in shades of grey. "...You seem quite close to Mister Verdeschi... I... heard that he was... that you were together." Odo still found it difficult to believe that such a remarkable young woman could be attracted to such a nondescript human. Having seen her holding the man in the Infirmary that morning, however, he had to accept that it was true.

Maya laughed. "I'm glad to see news travels as fast on Deep Space Nine as it does—did on Alpha," she said. "Do you know Captain Sisko asked me exactly the same thing yesterday? Someone has obviously been talking."

"I think Mr. Verdeschi told Nerys you were lovers," explained Odo innocently.

"Did he, by Jove," she said dryly; her smile had vanished. Odo was surprised to hear the expression she used; he had once heard Doctor Bashir saying exactly the same, inexplicable, thing. *Some regional Terran idiom, no doubt.*

"You don't sound too pleased," he remarked. "I'm sorry. Was it supposed to be a secret?"

"It's complicated," she said, shrugging her shoulders and continuing her lunch. "But yes, we are very close... *even Weyoun knew.* That's why he suggested I bring Tony as my bodyguard. I suppose he tapped into Alpha's main computer. It does contain a lot of information about us, and... it's not exactly difficult to access."

"I suppose you would have preferred to see Weyoun with Mr. Verdeschi as your escort."

Maya smiled wryly and shook her head. "Well... come to think of it, no. Tony can be a bit hot headed sometimes, especially where I'm concerned. But I don't know what Weyoun will make of this change in plan—bringing you instead of Tony." She paused thoughtfully, and then continued. "Perhaps you should change into Tony for a while, just so that Weyoun won't get suspicious that a Federation representative is with me."

"I'm not a Federation representative," said Odo, though he knew that was just a technicality. "And I... can't change into humanoids."

Maya stared at him in surprise. "You can't..? But you said you could change into any object, animate or not. Why can't you change into humanoids?"

It was a sore point with him, but Odo steeled himself to give his explanation. “Unlike you, I don’t actually change my genetic structure. All I do is emulate shapes and surfaces, and the amount of detail necessary to create a realistic humanoid face for any length of time requires a level of skill I haven’t yet mastered...” He paused, before asking, “You find it easy to change into people?”

“Yes, quite easy. I’ll show you!” Maya put her bowl back on the tray and then stared into the middle distance, evidently concentrating. After a couple of seconds, her shape dissolved into the haze Odo had witnessed on the Promenade, the first time he had seen her, but within less than a second, she had rematerialised as Kira, of all people. “You see, a perfect replica.”

Intrigued, Odo leaned closer to look at the details of her face. The resemblance was indeed astounding; every hair, every pore, every subtle wrinkle was just as Odo knew it. Even the shape of her body under the red uniform was perfectly replicated. Maya’s ability to mimic other humanoids was evidently on a par with that of Odo’s own people.

“That is remarkable.”

Maya changed back into herself and laughed. “And rather disturbing, no doubt. I generally avoid changing into people I know too well. It... it can be a bit embarrassing. I’ve never changed into Tony, for instance.”

“I can understand that,” said Odo, nodding. He would definitely not be comfortable emulating Nerys.

“So it seems there are some things I can do that you can’t do, and vice versa,” said Maya delightedly. “I can’t change into inanimate objects, and you can’t change into humanoids.”

Odo reflected on Maya’s transformation into Kira—complete with uniform and commbadge. “There is something I don’t understand,” he remarked. “You said you couldn’t change into inanimate objects. But you changed your clothes as well as your appearance. So you must be able to create non-organic matter.”

Maya laughed. “Yes, that’s a trick I had to learn quickly. Changing into animals is easy, but humanoids have to be clothed. I can change part of myself to simulate clothes by consciously realigning my molecules, but only for a very short period of time...”

There was an electronic beep and Maya looked up at the screens on the wall beside the cupboard. Commander Koenig’s face had appeared on the four screens; Odo was surprised at the total lack of colour in the image, and the distortion caused by the curved glass the image was projected on. He wondered why they needed four screens—two large and two small—but concluded that the design was probably aesthetic rather than practical.

“Maya,” said Koenig. “I’ve just got news from Security. It looks as though your friend Weyoun has materialised in the Medical Centre.”

CHAPTER EIGHT
The Dorcons

CHAPTER EIGHT – *The Dorcons*

*“Once I had a love and it was a gas
Soon turned out had a heart of glass
Seemed like the real thing, only to find
Mucho mistrust, love's gone behind”*
Blondie, “Heart Of Glass”

“I thought we might as well keep each other company while our respective partners are off talking to Weyoun,” said Nerys as she attacked her replicated Larish pie.

She was annoyed that Odo had decided to wander off with Maya without telling her first; Nerys hadn't seen much of her lover in the past two days, and she had been hoping to discuss the Alphans with him over lunch. When she realised that wasn't going to be possible, it had occurred to her that Tony might need cheering up after the scene his girlfriend had caused in the Infirmary.

The Replimat was full, but Tony and Nerys had managed to find a table near the back wall, where they could eat without being constantly interrupted by the to and fro of the people on the Promenade. Tony was eating the sort of Terran dish that Keiko O'Brien enjoyed, a bowl of noodles and meat which had to be consumed using two wooden sticks. But as soon as Nerys spoke, he froze, the sticks halfway to his mouth.

“Our respective partners? You mean, you and Odo..?” He put down his sticks and stared at her.

“Yes,” laughed Nerys. “I thought you knew. Everyone does.” “I guess I'm not part of the Deep Space Nine rumour mill yet,” he said good-naturedly, though his expression made it clear he was still surprised. “Well, ah, here's to you and the good Constable.” He lifted his glass of beer.

“And here's hoping things will be better between you and Maya,” Nerys added as she lifted her glass, although she wasn't sure how he would take the toast. For all she knew, he might be very angry with the woman; she had insulted their commanding officer, after all.

Tony sipped his beer. “Oh, I'm sure everything will be fine provided I grovel enough.” His tone was humorous, but Nerys thought she detected some regret in his voice. Perhaps afraid that his expression might give his feelings away, Tony lowered his eyes and started eating again.

Nerys was disappointed by his reaction; she certainly didn't see why Tony should be the one to grovel. “Why? She's the one who caused a scene. She insulted your commander.”

“John’s a big boy, he can take care of himself,” was Tony’s verdict. He was still looking down at his bowl, idly poking at his food with the sticks. Nerys’s heart sank to see the usually boisterous young man so quiet.

“You really love her, don’t you?” she said.

His gaze sprang back to her face, and for a moment, she thought he might deny it. But he just shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, I do,” he said frankly. “Not much good if she’s mad at me, though.”

“I’m sure...” Nerys tried to think of something reassuring to say. “I’m sure she’ll be fine once she’s seen Weyoun. That was all she wanted.” Nerys reached out and put her hand on Tony’s. His skin under her fingers was soft and warm, and she could feel the light hairs that covered his hand.

“I don’t know...” he started, pulling his hand out from under Nerys’s. His expression brightened up as he continued. “I never know what’s going on in her mind. I mean, it’s hard enough to sort out a human woman. Never mind about an alien. With all due respect to present company,” he added with a wink.

Nerys suspected Tony was just trying to divert the conversation off the specifics of his feelings for Maya. But she had no particular desire to talk about the Psychon anyway, so she answered Tony’s generalisation.

“Oh if you want advice on interspecies relationships, it’s Jadzia you need to talk to,” she told him. “She’s... very broad minded. She’s married now, of course, but when she was single, she used to go out with some very strange creatures. There was this girl from some planet in the Gamma Quadrant—Kreno, I think and—”

“—And she breathed chlorine?” completed Tony. He had started eating again while Nerys talked about Jadzia, but now he laid his sticks across the top of the bowl and leaned on the table, a smirk on his lips.

Nerys was taken aback. “How did you know? Yes, she had to wear an environmental suit while she was on Deep Space Nine, because she couldn’t breathe oxygen.”

“Well, we might be from different universes, but we obviously live in the same galaxy!” He chuckled and drank some more beer. “Kreno was one of the places Maya had heard about when she was living on Psychon... Anyway, so what about this girl?”¹

“Oh nothing. She just went on a date with Jadzia, that’s all. I simply mentioned her because she was one of Jadzia’s more... bizarre conquests. Then there was Captain Baudet of course and—”

¹ Maya turned into a creature from Kreno on two occasions: in *Space: 1999* - "The AB Chrysalis" (ep.35-1976) and *Space: 1999* - "The Beta Cloud" (ep.38-1976)

“So... Jadzia and this girl were going out together?” interrupted Tony, evidently very interested in this detail. Nerys thought he was probably curious because of the association between Kreno and Maya.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Wow,” he said with a grin, before twirling some noodles around his sticks. “Well, I’ll be sure to ask Commander Dax for advice about Maya.”

Nerys watched as Tony expertly used the sticks to pick up a piece of meat and bring it to his mouth. “I’ve been meaning to ask you; is that food from your region?” she said. “Keiko... Chief O’Brien’s wife sometimes eats food with sticks like that, but I haven’t often seen other humans do it.”

Tony shook his head; he covered his mouth as he finished eating. “No,” he said once he could speak. “This isn’t from my country. You could say this is to fulfill a craving I’ve had for some time. You know the way you remember things you can’t have anymore and then rush to get them when they’re available again... I guess I’ll be having a Vindaloo tonight.”

Nerys had no idea what he was talking about, but she decided it didn’t matter anyway, and simply nodded and smiled politely. Talking to him, it was hard to believe Tony had actually been born on Earth over 400 years ago. He seemed able to hold a normal conversation; something she wouldn’t have expected from a “primitive human”, as the Starfleet humans were wont to call their pre-Federation ancestors.

“I gather this Keiko is a close friend of yours,” said Tony, breaking the silence. “You mentioned her before.”

“Oh... yes. I... used to live with the O’Brien’s. I was their son’s surrogate mother,” she explained before he got a chance to ask. “I carried the child for them.” She didn’t want any misunderstandings. ²

Tony looked mildly surprised. “But surely the child was human? Or are Bajorans completely compatible with humans?.. ah, I don’t mean to be nosy,” he added, perhaps feeling that he had asked a very personal question.

Nerys didn’t see what he was embarrassed about. “Well, I had to take a lot of drugs and Julian monitored my condition regularly. But everything went fine. And that’s how I got to know Keiko,” she concluded with a smile.

“That’s fascinating,” he said. He stared at her for a moment, perhaps briefly observing her the way she had observed him earlier. Then his eyes drifted away and his expression changed. “Hey, Alphan life at last!” He stood up and waved. “Alan! Alan!”

² *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - "Body Parts" (ep.497-1996) to "The Begotten" (ep.510-1997)

Nerys—and several other people in the Replimat—turned to see who he was calling. She recognised one of the Eagle pilots the *Defiant* had saved the previous day. He was walking along the Promenade with his head in the air, obviously taking in his surroundings as first time visitors to the station were wont to do. He looked strangely out of place in his beige trousers and long sandy hair, his hands resting in the pockets of his red jacket. As they passed, the human Starfleet officers turned to stare at him; Nerys had already noticed them doing this when she was walking with Tony earlier.

Hearing his name, the Alphan looked around, his face lighting up with amazement as he saw Tony. He immediately headed for their table, pushing his way through the crowded Replimat.

“Tony! Boy, am I glad to see you!” he exclaimed. He threw his arms around his colleague and embraced him enthusiastically. “I thought you were dead!”

“Yeah... a bit less of the handling, thanks,” said Tony lifting his hands, though he was laughing.

The pilot immediately took a step back, also taking a ‘hands off’ posture. “Oh yes. We don’t want anyone thinking we’re queer. Not with so many pretty girls around. Speaking of which... I don’t think we’ve been introduced.” He looked down at Nerys with a bright smile that she automatically returned.

“This is Major Nerys Kira, the first officer of Deep Space Nine,” said Tony, before indicating the pilot. “And this is Captain Alan Carter, our Chief Eagle Pilot. The one from Australia,” he added with a wink.

Nerys smiled at Tony and then shook hands with his colleague. “Actually, my name is Kira Nerys,” she explained. “You can call me Nerys.” She thought she might as well adopt the same level of familiarity with all the Alphans which she had already allowed Tony. It would look suspicious otherwise.

“And what a lovely name it is, too,” said Alan with a grin. Behind him, Nerys saw Tony lift his hands and eyes to the ceiling in melodramatic irritation.

“Stop being silly and get yourself a chair, Alan,” said Tony, sitting down again.

Alan had a look around, walked off, and presently returned with a chair in one hand and a glass of beer in the other. The table Nerys and Tony had been sharing was only meant for two, so Alan placed himself on the side, where he was effectively sitting in between the others.

Nerys noted that the pilot was very different from Tony, older perhaps, with the weathered features of someone who had once spent a lot of time outdoors, and a tan which, given the Alphans’ circumstances, must have been achieved by some artificial means. Although like Tony, he was slightly shorter than average, Nerys could tell he was a muscular man under his Alphan uniform. His sandy hair was longer than Tony’s but less carefully coiffed, giving him a more rugged appearance.

Alan took a long drink from his beer. “Ah... It tastes just like the real thing.”

“You sound like a commercial,” declared Tony. “But one sarky comment about any beer I made and I’ll ram that glass down your throat,” he added jokingly, pointing at Alan.

“Oh, now, do you really think I would dare to compare the two?” “Yeah.”

Alan chuckled and turned to Nerys. “Has he told you about his brewing exploits yet?”

“Oh yes. And I thought his beer was very good,” said Nerys loyally. “In fact, I arranged for his machine to be brought here. Tony’s drink could be very popular among my people.”

Alan stared at her uncertainly for a moment and then shook his head. “Well, there’s no accounting for people’s tastes!”

“There, you see. I’ve been wasting my time trying to brew anything for you lot. I needed to find people who truly appreciate my talents,” said Tony, waving one hand grandly.

“Talking about bringing things over: what’s the story?” asked Alan. “They’re evacuating Alpha this afternoon?”

“Yes,” replied Tony with a nod, his mood obviously deflated. “Last I heard, they were going to try and get everyone over here by three—‘here’ time. The Feds evidently don’t want a bunch of unprotected civilians floating in their backyard.”

“Is this because of last night’s attack? What was all that about, anyway? When I saw Annette last night, she said the Dominion soldiers got onto Alpha and blew up the Command Centre.”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you all about it later,” said Tony, looking self-consciously at Nerys. She guessed he didn’t want her to say anything about Maya and the Dominion. “What I don’t get is why John was allowed back to Alpha and not me. Bashir was just about ready to put me in restraints to stop me from going anywhere.”

Alan laughed. “Glad to know medicine hasn’t changed in all this time. And Bashir obviously has you all sussed out. If I were a doctor, I’d put you in restraints too.”

Nerys looked from one to the other as they spoke, quite content to listen to the two “primitive” humans while she finished her meal. They reminded her very much of Julian and Miles. Human men evidently hadn’t evolved all that much in four centuries.

“Very funny,” said Tony sarcastically in response to his colleague’s joke. “As far as I know, the Frasers are the only other ones still over here. I haven’t seen them, so I don’t know when they’ll resurface.”

"I think those machines they use make you sleepy as well as getting you stitched up or whatever. I slept like a log. The next thing I knew, it was the middle of the day!" remarked Alan. He paused before asking, more soberly, "So basically the Moon's a write-off? It's on a collision course for this planet, and that's it. They're going to blow it up?"

"Yes. Once everyone's off the station, they'll strip the base to take some stuff we might need. Then, from what I gather, the Starfleets will mine it and blow it up first thing tomorrow." Tony's voice was grave, and Nerys could see the regret in Alan's expression. As hard as their lives on the Moon might have been, it was only natural that the Alphans should feel some sadness at the destruction of their home.

Nerys nonetheless allowed herself a smile at Tony's mention of the 'stuff' they might need. She knew exactly what the Alphans were planning to strip from their base. The scan the *Defiant* had run on the Moonbase the previous night had revealed enough latinum in Alpha's circuits to buy about half Deep Space Nine. If Quark found out, he would be over there in the blink of an eye.

Tony noticed her smile and gave her a quizzical glance, as if to ask what was so amusing. She indicated with a minute shake of her head that it was nothing she cared to explain.

Perhaps aware of the glance they had exchanged, Alan leaned towards Nerys and then pointed at his Alphan colleague. "You do realise he's already got a girlfriend on Alpha, don't you? Don't let that Latin charm mislead you."

"And she's already got a boyfriend here," said Tony, chuckling as he pushed away his empty bowl. "So you're wasting your time, Alan."

"How come you're not dead, anyway?" Alan made it sound as if he wished that were the case.

Tony shrugged his shoulders with a grin. "That's 24th century technology for you."

"The 24th century," repeated Alan, his countenance serious as he shook his head incredulously. "Boy, I feel like Buck Rogers."

"Tell me about it," said Tony dryly, finishing off his beer.

Abandoned and unwanted, the carcass of Eagle Sixteen drifted through the Denorios Belt at a stable velocity of 9,000 kph. Its 15-hour journey through the dust and rock fragments of the Belt had battered the former vessel until it was barely recognisable. There was a large gash in the rectangular passenger section, left by the Dominion phaser which had sent it on its journey. Parts of the Eagle's metallic superstructure had been torn off, and it had lost two of its legs. Only the pointed pilot section at the front had survived relatively unscathed, still pressurised, and that was about to be sheared away from the rest of the mangled ship.

Eagle Sixteen collided with a football-sized asteroid. At that speed, the rock went straight through the battered airlock between the command module and the passenger section. The impact tore the Eagle in half and propelled the two sections into nearly opposing directions. The passenger module and what was left of the engines drifted further into the Denorios Belt to be torn up by other asteroids.

The triangular pilot section decompressed with a sudden explosion and broke free of the asteroid field, hurtling back in the direction of the Bajoran system at 12,000 kph.

Maya looked at the door to Medical and took a deep breath. She felt safer knowing that Odo was with her—disguised as the commlock on her belt—but it was still with some apprehension that she opened the door and entered. For all she knew, there might be a brace of Jem'Hadar there, ready to kill her.

Weyoun was already inside, peering at one of the empty holes in the wall, where some medical device had been removed. He was alone, as promised. As she approached, Maya concentrated intensely on his person, as if to transform into him, though she stopped the process before actually changing. That brief assessment was enough for her to determine that his life-pattern was radically different from Odo's. She could be confident this was indeed Weyoun, and not a Founder.

"Ah Maya." Weyoun came close and looked her over short-sightedly. As she had done the previous night, Maya reflected how different he looked with blue eyes. His eyes had been brown in her universe. "I'm sorry to hear your human friend Verdeschi couldn't come."

"He was still too weak after what your soldiers did to him," said Maya, willing herself to be calm. She didn't want to appear too nervous, or she might unwittingly reveal Odo's presence. She wasn't used to being the one who had to hide a Metamorph.

Weyoun nodded thoughtfully. "I must admit that attempting to kidnap you was a mistake on my part, especially as it resulted in your friend being wounded. It would have been very unfortunate if Doctor Bashir hadn't managed to save his life. I doubt you would have been willing to cooperate under those circumstances."

"You can't be sure I'll cooperate under any circumstances. Not until you tell me exactly why you wanted to talk to me."

"In due course," he said with a placating lift of his hand. "Perhaps you would be curious to know more about yourself and your people in this universe first."

Maya didn't answer, and watched as Weyoun indicated a device he had set up on Helena's old desk. Maya regarded it with suspicion from a distance, hoping Odo would recognise it if it was dangerous. Her fake commlock made no movement, so she came closer.

She took a sharp intake of breath when she came near enough to make out the details of the machine. It bore transparent commands in bright greens and oranges—typical hallmarks of Psychon technology.

“It’s a holographic projector,” said Weyoun, but Maya had already guessed that. She even knew which command he would press to activate the device.

The projector sprang into life and showed her an image of herself. Her alter ego was older, her face more wrinkled, and her dark red hair streaked with grey lines running from her temples. Like all the Psychon women Maya remembered from her childhood, this Maya was wearing brown makeup on her ears and cheeks, to highlight the natural streaks of dark skin on her face.

“I am Maya, Ruler of Psychon,” said the image cheerfully. “This is a message for our benefactors in the Dominion, to be broadcast to anyone who wishes to hear it. Our cooperation with the Dominion has brought my planet many benefits which it continues to enjoy to this day...”

Weyoun pressed a command to lower the sound. “It’s a broadcast you—your counterpart made a few years before her death. Just a standard declaration of allegiance to the Dominion.”

“So I was the ruler of my world in this universe,” said Maya, observing her counterpart with interest. It was so difficult to disassociate herself from this other Maya; recognising her own image, she could not help referring to it as ‘I’.

“Yes, Maya inherited the planet when Mentor died.” Weyoun stated the fact with disinterest, though he was watching Maya intently, as if looking for some particular expression on her face.

“And how did my father become the ruler of Psychon? He was only a scientist in my universe. One of the last people to remain on the planet, but still not its ruler.”

“Your father became the ruler of Psychon when he decided to join the Dominion,” explained Weyoun. “A very wise move, which saved both his family and his planet. I remember your father well; he was an intelligent man. Very... expansive too.” There was some emotion in Weyoun’s voice as he mentioned Mentor.

Maya laughed gently. “Oh yes, my father was... as the humans would say: ‘larger than life, and twice as natural!’ So you were a friend of his?”

Weyoun nodded and returned Maya’s smile, though his blue eyes were still as cold as ever. “And I was a friend of Maya’s, too.”

He activated another control and this time, the picture changed to a rectangular view, as if they were looking through a window. The image showed a younger Maya apparently working with Weyoun in her laboratory on Psychon. The wave of homesickness that came over Maya as she saw her childhood home was so strong she nearly cried.

“One could say she changed my life,” said Weyoun, his tone more sombre. “Not that she had any choice.”

As she watched the hologram, Maya noticed two things. First of all, the machine the Maya and Weyoun in the image were working on was the genetic transformer she had used when she was learning to change shape. Second, the Weyoun in the image had brown eyes.

Maya suddenly turned to stare at Weyoun as realisation dawned. His icy blue eyes were fixed on her expectantly. “I understand,” she said slowly. “I understand... Excuse me a moment!”

Without pausing for an answer, she turned and ran out of the Medical Centre. As soon as she was in the corridor, she took the commlock from her belt and threw it on the ground. Odo changed back into himself before he even touched the floor.

“What’s wrong?” asked the Constable angrily.

“I- I don’t need you anymore,” said Maya. “I know what he wanted to tell me. And he’s right; this doesn’t concern the Federation.”

“How do you-?” Odo interrupted himself as the Medical Centre door opened and Weyoun came out.

“Odo,” said the Vorta respectfully, lowering his eyes for a moment, before fixing his gaze accusingly on Maya. “I should have remembered how corruptive the influence of humans can be. I do wonder why I was so foolish as to trust you.”

He was about to activate the device on his wrist, no doubt intending to transport away, but Maya stopped him. “You trusted me because... somehow, I’m the only one who can help you. And I will help you if I can.” Turning back to the Constable, she gave him a pleading look. “Leave us, Odo, please.”

“Now this is definitely the life,” murmured Tony contentedly, his voice muffled by the crook of his arm. Sandra’s hands were working miracles on the tense muscles in his shoulders, the fake sun, or rather suns, were beating down on his body, and the simulated seaside air smelled pleasantly familiar—with his eyes closed, he could just picture himself back on the coast of the Adriatic.

The other Alphans had arrived on Deep Space Nine at 1500 as planned. No sooner had they set foot on the station than Sandra and Alibe decided to organise a trip to Quark’s holosuite for themselves and a few of their fellow officers. Tony had had no intention of going anywhere near the things, but by now, he was rather pleased the girls had convinced him to join them. He hadn’t felt this relaxed in ages.

“And this is the guy who said it was stupid to use this thing go to the beach,” he heard Alibe say. “You really need some sun, Tony. You’re so white, you must shine in the dark!”

Tony lifted his head just high enough to look at her. “Not something you have to worry about, is it?”

She laughed and looked down at her dark brown skin, interrupted only by a white bikini. “Not one of my top concerns, no. As to you glowing in the dark, I guess that’s Maya’s problem.”

“Or Major Kira’s,” suggested Shermeen with a giggle. Rumours about him and Nerys had apparently been flying around Alpha in his absence; so far, he had been treated to non-stop teasing on this subject from his female colleagues.

Tony turned his face towards Shermeen, but from his horizontal position, all he could see were her long white legs laid out on the simulated towel. Observing the smooth skin of her thin legs, he reflected that Shermeen was the one who probably shone in the dark; surely his own swarthy complexion would dim his brightness... He realised his mind was wandering and sighed contentedly; Sahn’s massage was relaxing him beyond rational thought.

“Where is Maya, anyway?” That was Shermeen’s North American drawl again.

“She is on Alpha,” answered Sandra. “She will be back this evening with the others.”

Tony heard Alibe laugh. “So it’s up to us to keep an eye on this guy in the meantime.”

He pondered whether he should answer that, but then rested his chin on his clasped hands and looked around. “Where the hell are Ben and Alan? I could do with some decent conversation here.” He could just make out the two men coming back towards them down the beach.

“Decent conversation?” repeated Sandra, immediately taking her hands off Tony’s back. “You want a massage and conversation?”

“Now, that is truly remarkable,” said Tony, ignoring her as he pointed toward the pilot and the doctor. “Here we are in a tiny little room, and yet it looks as if they’re miles away. What is this—some kind of Tardis?”

“It creates a separate optical illusion for each user,” explained Sandra. “I looked at the instructions: they said the holosuite can only handle six illusions at a time, unless everyone stays together in the same area.”

“I guess that means an Alphan beach party is out,” commented Tony wryly, now lifting himself up onto his elbows. “There are going to be queues miles long for this thing when all the others hear what it can do. It’ll be worse than the queue for the john after a Saturday night disco.”

“Disco?” said Shermeen. Although he was effectively lying with his back to her, Tony guessed from the movement of her legs beside him that she had sat up. “Hey, there’s an idea. Maybe we could have a party this evening!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly.

Shermeen was a botanist, the youngest person on the Moonbase, and although she was now 25, years of being treated like a child by most other Alphans had encouraged her to sometimes behave like one.

“There we go, the sum total of Shermeen’s ambitions in life,” teased Alibe, rolling her eyes. “Mind you, it wouldn’t be a bad way of getting to know the Starfleets and Bajorans.”

“The sum total of Alibe’s ambitions in life,” commented Sandra with a laugh.

“A party would probably be a good idea,” agreed Tony. “Their computer has a great selection of music; I found all the songs I looked for. You can actually program it as a sort of virtual jukebox. You just feed in the parameters and it plays you a bunch of songs that fit them.”

“I didn’t find any of the music I was looking for,” remarked Shermeen. “The only songs I could recognise were old things from the Eighties and before.”

Tony decided he was looking in the wrong direction if most of the conversation was going to be from Shermeen. He turned around to lie on his back and propped himself up on his elbows. “Well, it seems as though our two universes split sometime in the Seventies or Eighties. We’ll probably find that the Nineties were a very different place in their universe.”

“Yeah, maybe they were spared a Seventies revival!” exclaimed Shermeen, tossing her curls disdainfully.

Tony grinned. “You should count yourself lucky we left Earth when we did, so we missed the Eighties revival that was bound to come in the first decade of the 21st century. I was a teenager in the Eighties—it wasn’t a pretty sight.”

Sandra laughed outright at this. “What was not a pretty sight? The Eighties, or you?”

“Hmm. I think I’ll pass on that one,” he said with a chuckle. “Still, there was some good music; we could have a great Seventies and Eighties night if this universe’s Nineties stuff isn’t up to snuff.”

“Up to what?” asked Alibe with a frown.

“It’s an expression.” Tony lay down, his hands under his head. “You puny Earthlings wouldn’t understand.” He realised there was no reason for him to say that, but it was the first thing that came to mind. The women giggled and exchanged puzzled glances. Satisfied that he had thoroughly confused them, he continued, “Now that you’ve all met the Starfleets: what do you think of 24th century humans?”

“They are *boring*,” said Alibe emphatically. Having seen her exercising her charm on a couple of them over the past few days, Tony assumed this was an informed opinion. “Still, it’s good to meet some new people after all this time.”

“Oh, so we weren’t good enough for you?” came Ben’s voice from behind them.

Tony strained to look up at the two men, who had rejoined their group. He winced as the suns caught his eyes, and laid his arm across his face. All he could see were Alan's hairy shins as he walked past.

"Will you look at him, lounging in the sun, surrounded by women. That's your idea of a great holiday, isn't it, Tony?"

"Absolutely." Tony grinned and opened an eye to look at Sandra on his right side. She was outlined against the two suns. "And one of each flavour, too."

The others laughed. "We all know Tony likes his women exotic," said Alibe. Tony joined in with the laughing, although Alibe's remark was a lot closer to the bone than he liked. He could recall a memorable argument with his parents about a similar topic some ten or fifteen years earlier.

"And what about you, Alibe?" asked Alan, sitting down on Tony's left side, near Shermeen. "What kind of new people are you looking for?"

"Tall, black, and handsome," she replied unhesitatingly.

That made Ben laugh. "What am I, then, cold coffee?" "Now you come to mention it, yes, that's a good description," said Alibe, looking him over critically. "Besides, I said 'tall, black, and handsome'."

"Oh, you African girls have no taste," chuckled Ben, kneeling down in the sand and starting to idly dig holes in it. He looked up at the sky. "I wonder where this place is supposed to be? What planet has two suns and lots of beaches?"

"And if we find out what it is, can we go there and colonise it?" added Alan.

Tony sat up on his simulated towel and also looked up briefly at the two suns. They weren't as bright as Earth's sun would have been at the same elevation, but their combined strength was evidently enough to heat the atmosphere to a comfortable 30°C at ground level. On the other hand, maybe the whole thing was pure fantasy, a simulation designed exclusively for the holosuite. Tony was about to make some remark about this when he heard the sound of the door opening.

He turned to find Nerys, in full uniform, standing on the beach. Warm and relaxed as he was, Tony thought she looked rather striking with her dark red uniform outlined against the greenery in the distance. Sitting on the ground in front of her, he was in an ideal position to admire the Major; she was extremely thin, of course, but her painted-on uniform emphasised every curve of her body in a very attractive way.

Nerys looked at the scenery, and then each of the Alphans, her dark eyes wide with surprise. "I see you've mastered the holosuite," she said finally, before looking at Tony. She looked him over, evidently taking in the fact that he was wearing a swimsuit. "Constable Odo needs to see you in his office... Mister Verdeschi," she said rather awkwardly.

Although she didn't give him any reason, Tony found himself hoping this concerned Maya. After all, Odo had been with her virtually all day; maybe they had returned earlier than planned. Tony's heart leapt at the idea of seeing Maya again: once he was face to face with her, he could try and make up for their argument that morning, and everything would be back to normal.

"I'd better get some clothes on, then," he said, reaching for his trousers.

"Oh, I don't know, you could always try going like that," suggested Alibe. "They certainly could do with more light in those corridors."

"What you must understand first of all, Maya, is that the Dominion is based on a hierarchical structure which has existed for nearly two thousand years," said Weyoun, leaning close to her and speaking in a low voice. "The Founders have never been directly involved in running the empire. They have always relied on other species to carry out their orders."

Maya nodded to indicate she knew that much. She was still sitting on the medical bed, with the holographic projector beside her. Weyoun had given it to her so she could review the pictures later; he no doubt hoped this gift would encourage her to help him.

"So the Jem'Hadar enforce security," continued Weyoun, taking a step back, "and the Karemma, for instance, handle the Dominion's trading and finances... and nowadays, administration is entrusted to the Vorta, and scientific research to the Psychons. But things weren't always like that. For centuries, the main species in the Dominion were the Dorcons."

"The Dorcons?" repeated Maya. In spite of herself, she could never hear the name without fear. Ever since the two species had first met, before she was born, the Dorcons had hunted the Psychons for their brainstems. When implanted into a Dorcon, the Psychon brainstem conferred virtual immortality to its recipient.

"Yes," said Weyoun. "With the help of the Founders, the Dorcons became the most powerful race in that sector of the universe. They were the ones who created the Jem'Hadar, and thanks to their creatures, they ruled the Dominion with an iron hand, expanding it by conquest. Kareel Prime suffered a lot under the Dorcons. We were severely punished when a Kareelan fanatic tried to murder the Archon."

Maya recognised the title; the Dorcons had been ruled by an 'Archon' in her universe too. But she chose not to interrupt Weyoun's explanations.

“The Dorcons ruled the Gamma Quadrant, but the one thing they could not control was their own mortality. As humanoid species go, they were very short lived. The Dorcon brainstem ceases to function at an early age, so that the species only has time to mature, reproduce and guide their young halfway to maturity before dying. This was one of the main reasons they remained loyal to the Dominion, because they could trust its stability to protect and provide for their offspring. Also, the Founders are immortal, so that—What is amusing you?”

Maya tried to hide her smile, but couldn't. “It's just... The Founders are truly remarkable people,” she said admiringly. “They need no food, no sleep, no air, and yet they live forever. It's amazing that they bother maintaining an empire at all. It sounds as if they need nothing!”

“They are Gods,” said Weyoun seriously, before apparently realising what he had just said. “And there you have my problem,” he murmured. “But yes, the Dorcons worshipped the Founders too, and served them blindly... until the day they discovered Psychon.”

“Because Psychons gave them immortality.” Maya realised history was not so different in the two universes after all.

“Exactly. Once the Dorcon leaders realised that the Psychon brainstem could make them live longer, they stopped worshipping the Founders and nurtured ambitions of becoming gods themselves. Their plan was to use the might of the Dominion to capture all Psychons and make themselves immortal. After that, they hoped to defeat the Founders and take over the Dominion for themselves. The task must have seemed easy enough; the planet Psychon was already breaking up under the gravitational pull of its sun and no one was a match for the Jem'Hadar. But it wasn't long before the Founders got wind of the conspiracy. And their revenge was terrible.

“With the help of the Psychons and the Vorta, the Founders turned against the Dorcons. The planet Dorca was destroyed and every man, woman and child was made prisoner. As thanks for Psychon's help, the Founders handed over the Dorcons to Mentor, so that he could use their mental energy to restore stability to his planet.”

Maya was appalled. “Using his computer, Psyche? The Dorcons were fed to Psyche?” she cried out. “But that's... disgusting. And Mentor and Maya approved of this?”

“Of course,” said Weyoun, visibly puzzled by her reaction. “The Dorcons had been their enemies for years; they were pleased to be rid of them. Particularly as it meant the computer Psyche received enough power to save the planet.”

'Psyche' was the biological computer Mentor had constructed to restore Psychon's structural integrity. It fed on the minds of sentient life forms; that was how Maya had met the Alphans, when her father had captured John, Helena and Alan, and attempted to entrap the others to feed their consciousness to his computer. Maya had been revolted when she discovered Mentor's plan. She had helped the Alphans escape, but in doing so, Psyche was destroyed, and the planet with it.

It seemed that in this universe, Psyche had received all the fuel it needed, saving Psychon at the expense of a whole race. Maya felt sorry for the Dorcons. She had once been captured by them, when they had attempted to remove her brainstem to save the life of an old Archon. But the terror she still felt at the fate that had awaited her was not enough to make her glad the Dorcons had been exterminated here.

"So the Dorcons are extinct," she said sorrowfully.

"Yes. Now, as I was saying," he continued, evidently annoyed at her interruption of his historical narrative, "the Vorta were also rewarded for their loyalty, and were promoted to administrators in place of the Dorcons. But at a price."

"Your genetic engineering."

Weyoun bowed his head. "The Founders felt they could no longer trust a species based solely on its natural instincts. They had to control those instincts, and the Psychons had a quick and easy way of doing that—the DNA-resequencer. It had taken the Dorcons decades to develop the Jem'Hadar, but Maya was able to change the Vorta within a year. She removed anything which would make the Vorta a liability. No sexual urges, no sense of aesthetics so that we couldn't be distracted by desire. Bad eyesight and a weak constitution so we couldn't become warriors. And most importantly... we believe the Founders are Gods. We can't betray them."

"And you want me to undo all that? Why? If it's in your nature not to betray the Founders, then why do you want me to reverse the engineering they ordered?"

Weyoun looked down at his hands in silence for a moment and then took a deep breath. "The war with the Federation has changed everything for us. Ever since we've been stranded on this side of the wormhole, I have felt that the Founders' confidence in us is waning. Their confidence in me particularly. I've already lost my life five times and I don't want to lose it again."

"And you think you can't do anything against the Founders because of your genetic engineering," said Maya thoughtfully. "But surely the mere fact that you're considering it shows that their hold on you is weaker than you think."

“You think all I have to do is wish it and my genetic engineering will go away?” retorted Weyoun coldly. “That’s a very human notion, if I may say so. Besides, I’m not the only one at stake here; the Founders’ dissatisfaction extends to all Vorta. There may be plans afoot to let the Cardassians take our place. We need to be freed of our genetic engineering so we can fight back if necessary.”

“And you think I’m the only one who can help?” Weyoun smiled condescendingly. “No, of course you’re not the *only* one, Maya. I’m sure any scientist could, in time, reverse the genetic process. But since you’re here and your counterpart happens to be the person who first devised our genetic code, I think you’re the most qualified to help.”

His expression became more grave. “We do need your help, Maya. If you don’t undo our genetic conditioning, I’m afraid my entire species will suffer the same fate as the Dorcons.”

CHAPTER NINE
Bar Association

CHAPTER NINE – *Bar Association*

*“The sign said the words of the Prophets
Are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls
Whispered in the sounds of silence”*

Simon and Garfunkel - “The Sound of Silence”¹

“No, I’m afraid Miss Maya is not with me, Mister Verdeschi,” said Odo, observing the human coldly. It was still difficult to believe Maya had any romantic interest in this young man. The only thing in his favour as far as Odo could tell was that Maya meant a lot to him.

Verdeschi’s face fell. “What happened?”

“Nothing. She’s still in conversation with Weyoun. Whatever he had to say to her had her riveted—I presume we’ll know more when she comes back. If she does come back,” he added, as much to express his own doubts as to test Verdeschi’s reaction.

Sitting on the seat opposite Odo in the Security Office, the human looked suitably depressed, but he exchanged a look with Nerys, who gave him a comforting smile. The Changeling felt his insides ripple with anger. Since when was Nerys giving comforting smiles to a near-complete stranger?

“I also thought you might like to know that all Alpha’s weaponry has just been transferred to Deep Space Nine—into my care,” said Odo, annoyed by Nerys’s behaviour. “It will be handed back to you when you return to your universe.”

“I see,” said Verdeschi thoughtfully. “Actually, I’d been expecting something like that. I do realise you don’t want a station full of laser-toting ‘primitive humans’, but I would feel much more comfortable if at least some of my men were armed. We need our weapons now, in this universe, not just when we return to ours.”

Odo narrowed his eyes. “And what would you do with the weapons?”

“Organise a hold-up at Quark’s?” suggested Verdeschi with a grin. “What do you think we’d do with the weapons? Defend ourselves, of course!”

“That won’t be possible,” said Odo immediately. Verdeschi was right; a station full of laser-toting 20th century humans would be a nightmare. They were said to be a particularly violent breed of humans, with the ruthlessness of Klingons and the mentality of Ferengi. “I cannot allow your people to be armed as long as they are on the station. The Bajoran Militia can protect you while you are here.”

¹ Simon and Garfunkel - "The Sound of Silence" (P. Simon) - From the album *The Sound of Silence* (Columbia, 1965)

Verdeschi frowned and leaned forward in his seat, pointing at Odo. “Now, wait a minute. I’m prepared to be reasonable on this, and I’d expect you to meet me halfway. I thought we were supposed to be guests here, not prisoners. I don’t want to get all military on you, but I think that under the present circumstances, we need to be able to protect *ourselves*, and the only way to do that is for us to bear arms. With all due respect, I don’t know your people—I mean, the Bajorans,” he corrected. “And I don’t know any of the other aliens trotting around the Promenade either. If the Dominion attacked again, your Militia’s first priority would surely be to protect their own kind. In fact, I doubt saving Alphans would be top on anyone’s list.”

Verdeschi was making a visible effort to remain calm. Odo wondered just how long that veneer of civilisation would last.

“And you think that your lasers will offer adequate protection from the Jem’Hadar?” he sneered. He had inspected the Alphan weapons and had found them to be merely laser emitters with two settings, ‘stun’ and ‘kill’—neither of which, as far as he could tell from his quick tests, were guaranteed to yield the desired result.

“Beats our bare fists,” said Verdeschi irritably.

“The answer is *no*,” declared Odo.

Verdeschi took in a deep breath and—again—looked at Nerys. The Major took his hint. “Odo,” she started, “It’s not an unreasonable demand. You asked for no less from the Dominion when they were occupying the station.”

Odo stared at Nerys for a moment, amazed to hear her defending the Alphan—and bringing up a particularly difficult period of Deep Space Nine’s recent history, as well. At the time, Odo had indeed used his influence as a Founder to convince Weyoun to reinstate and rearm the Bajoran Militia on the station, but the Constable did not see that this was in any way comparable to the present situation with the Alphans.

“There, listen to your lady-friend,” said Verdeschi, indicating Nerys with obvious satisfaction. “It’s not like we’re supposed to be your enemies or anything.”

Odo crossed his arms and watched the Alphan suspiciously. “That remains to be seen. I’m afraid I don’t have very good reports of the behaviour of 20th century humans.”

“Oh there we go!” exclaimed Verdeschi, his patience evidently at an end. “Now the truth comes out. Just because we have bad press in the 24th century doesn’t mean you should judge us off-hand. It’s not like I’m telling you I don’t trust you personally because I know what your Founder friends are up to. What proof do you have that we, the Alphans, are going to cause trouble?”

“He’s right, Odo,” intervened Nerys. “You can’t refuse to arm them based purely on prejudice.”

Odo pondered the matter for a few seconds. He was in no doubt that if he continued to refuse, Verdeschi would take up the matter with Sisko, who, being a fellow human, would probably give the Alphans their weapons back. The matter would then be left in Starfleet hands—and quite frankly, Odo didn't have a high opinion of Starfleet Security. If the Alphans were going to have weapons, Odo wanted to be the one keeping an eye on them.

"Very well," he said finally. "I'll allow five of your men to be armed. But I want profiles of those men before the weapons are handed over—and that includes you, Mister Verdeschi. I reserve the right to refuse any applicant."

"What? But that's outrageous!" burst out Verdeschi, standing up to lean on Odo's desk. "The choice of security guards is mine to make. They're my men, and I'll decide who should carry a weapon or not."

Delighted by the Alphan's reaction, Odo also stood up so as to tower over the human. "And based on this outburst, you expect me to trust your judgment, Mister Verdeschi?"

"Oh very clever," said Verdeschi sarcastically, crossing his arms. "Mister Reasonable giving me lessons."

Casting a glance at Nerys, Odo could tell she was seething. "Perhaps we could just settle this matter," she said sharply. "That is, if you'd both stop letting the testosterone do the talking."

Verdeschi guffawed and looked Odo over disdainfully. "Somehow, I think I'm the only one with that problem."

It took a moment for Odo to realise the extent of the insult. And once he did, he promised himself it would be some time before he forgave Verdeschi for it.

John could not suppress a sigh as he looked around the gutted Command Centre. This had been his place of work, his territory, for the past four years. It had always lacked the style and grandeur of the old Main Mission, but he had become used to Alpha's underground 'bunker' as he sometimes thought of it, with its cluttered desks and noisy computer.

Everything was silent now. The main computer had been shut down; its wall of lights was charred and dark, its printers and terminals off-line forever. Nobody would ever use the melted coffee machine again. The big screen wasn't even displaying its customary test pattern. The only things still working were some of the ceiling lights and the life support system.

In a few minutes, John and Helena would take Eagle One to Deep Space Nine, leaving Patrick and Jim and their team of engineers to strip the base. The other Eagles had already been transferred to DS9's runabout hangars. The *Defiant* would evacuate the very last Alphans later that evening, and a Federation team would come to mine the Moon overnight, ready to blow it up in the morning.

John shook his head, reflecting yet again how incredibly unlucky the Alphans had been this time. If they had encountered the wormhole just a few weeks earlier or later, the Moon would have avoided Bajor VIII completely—as it was, a shift of barely a couple of degrees would have been enough to make the two miss each other. Without this imminent collision, John could have parlayed longer with the Federation, negotiating from the relative security of his own base.

Now, John and his people would be no more than exiles, devoid even of that one tiny piece of drifting territory that was theirs. Much as the commander tried to convince himself that he was still in control of the situation, he knew that as soon as the last Alphan set foot on DS9, they would be at the mercy of the Federation. And even if this universe's humans were relatively friendly, Starfleet's best interests were clearly not Alpha's.

John turned back towards the door; there was no point lingering. He lifted his eyes one last time to the sign above the door; the red film had melted and curled at the edges, rendering its inscription illegible. John smiled—not that they had ever needed a sign inside the Command Centre to tell them what it was.

He was about to open the door when it slid open and revealed Maya standing on the other side.

“Commander,” she said. She was the only one of the senior staff on Alpha who always called him Commander. Helena naturally never called him anything but John, and Tony and Alan tended to call everyone by their first name anyway. After all these years of working together in difficult conditions, the familiarity had become something of a comfort. “Can I speak to you in private?”

John indicated she could come into the Command Centre. “Weyoun has left,” she said simply as the doors closed behind her. She was clutching an orange and green box, though she didn't tell him what it was.

“Weyoun asked me to go to Cardassia to help him undo the Vorta's genetic engineering,” she announced, her eyes lowered. “He wants to rebel against the Founders and strike a compromise with the Federation to allow the Vorta back to their home Quadrant. If his people are freed of their loyalty to the Founders, it would put an end to this war which has already cost billions of lives... I... I said I would think about it.”

John was taken aback. He could see Maya's enthusiasm for this project, but the plan didn't seem very sound. It was news to him that putting an end to the Federation-Dominion war was as simple as “undoing” the Vorta's genetic engineering.

“So if we return to our universe, you want to remain in this one,” he said slowly.

“Yes.” She hesitated, clasping her hands nervously and looking around the room—anywhere but at his eyes. “I know it sounds strange, but I think I could really make a difference in this war. My counterpart in this universe was the one who designed the Vorta. She made them devoted to the Founders, she gave them weaknesses that made them unsuited for armed combat, and strengths that made them immune to disease or poisoning. At the Founders’ request, she created a race of perfect administrators and diplomats. But she and I did share some moral traits.”

Turning to look at John again, Maya leaned against the melted blob which had once been his desk, as if seeking support from its indistinct forms. “When Maya designed the Vorta, she programmed them with a flaw—the engineering could be easily undone provided one had the key to do that. The trouble is that Maya died—in rather unclear circumstances—before she could tell anyone what that key was. All Weyoun knows is that it has some link to the Psychon ability to metamorphose.”

John was now beginning to understand why Weyoun had wanted to talk to Maya so urgently. “And he thinks that because you’re Maya’s alternate counterpart, you would know what that key is.” Maya nodded. “Why did he attack us instead of simply explaining all this in the first place? Because that’s the Dominion way?”

“Well, yes...” she started, though she was smiling. “He thought he could explain an overt attack to the Founders as an attempt to neutralise me. His plan was to tell the Founders I was dead and keep me in a secret location so I could free him of his genetic engineering without them knowing... But the truth is that he didn’t have much time to come up with any precise plan at all. We’ve only been here four days.”

“It’s all very interesting,” admitted John, thoughtfully stroking his chin. “It’s a remarkable coincidence that you happen to be the person who engineered the Vorta.”

“I know. I suppose that’s why I feel I should do this... Commander, I’m sure I can help the Vorta,” she declared earnestly. “I already have some idea what my counterpart might have done. It would still take a few weeks of work, but I’m certain I can crack the problem.”

“So you’ve decided to help Weyoun,” said John, unable to suppress a sigh. The prospect of losing Maya was not something he relished. “We’d miss you. I’d certainly miss you.”

“I know. I... I only said I would think about it,” she explained apologetically. “I need to consider all the options before giving my definitive answer. But there is one thing: we mustn’t mention it to anyone, not even the other Alphans. It’s very important that the Federation should hear nothing about this. They would simply try to use me against the Dominion.”

“I can understand that,” agreed John. He didn’t want to get the Alphans involved in this Dominion-Federation war if he could avoid it. “What will you tell Tony?”

Her expression became more grave. “I don’t know. I’ll have to think of something.”

John was sure Tony would stay with her; to lose Maya would be bad enough, but to lose both senior officers at once would be a terrible blow. He had come to rely on them ever since the original senior staff had been virtually wiped out, and he knew he would miss the gaiety the couple had added to the command staff.

“We should be leaving,” said John finally. “Helena will be waiting at the launch pad.”

He walked over to the door and Maya came with him. But before opening the door, he put his arm around her. “I’d rather you stayed with us, Maya,” he said simply. “But if you want to go, I won’t stop you.”

Maya wrapped her arms around him and leaned her face on his shoulder. “Thank you, Commander.”

“Evidently not a good day for talking to Metamorphs,” said Tony laconically as he accompanied Nerys on their way back to Quark’s.

Nerys laughed dryly, though she was furious at Odo for arguing with Tony, and not too pleased with Tony for rising to Odo’s bait.

“Still, I guess I got what I wanted,” continued Tony, looking down at the weapon he was now wearing at his belt. The two security officers had agreed on Odo’s terms in the end—there would be six armed Alphans, including Tony, but Tony was free to choose who would be armed. The rest of the Alphan weapons would be handed over only when the Alphans were ready to leave.

Despite her irritation at Tony for insulting Odo, Nerys looked at the weapon curiously. “Is that what you used to kill those Jem’Hadar? Can I see?”

Tony looked around the Promenade, evidently unsure that this was the place to be doing this, but then unhooked the weapon so that she could look at it. It was a very peculiar shape for a gun, more like the metal knuckle-guards the Cardassians had sometimes worn on the backs of their hands to beat Bajoran prisoners. The weapon was evidently activated by a button on the handle, and the lasers fired from a row of diodes on the front.

“It’s very basic stuff, really,” explained Tony. “One setting for ‘knock ‘em out’ and one for ‘blow ‘em up’.” He held the weapon to his chest and leaned towards her, lifting one eyebrow sinisterly. “Anyone you’d like me to rub out for you, lady?” he said, probably emulating a villain like the ones in Doctor Bashir’s dreary ‘James Bond’ holograms.

Laughing politely, Nerys continued her way to Quark's and Tony followed, reattaching the gun to his belt. The bar was just starting its evening business; Morn was at his usual seat near the entrance and the Ferengi waiters were preparing for the rush hour when the day shift went off duty.

"Anyway, I'm really sorry about what happened earlier. I don't know what it is about Odo, but he just gets to me." Tony grinned apologetically and Nerys decided she could forgive him after all. Odo was another matter. "Here, I'll buy you a drink," proposed Tony as they walked up to the bar.

"At the Federation's expense?" said Nerys, sitting down on one of the stools.

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "I don't have any money. Besides, it's the intention that counts." He tried to wave Quark over, but the Ferengi was busy at the other end of the bar.

Nerys observed Tony's profile for a moment. "And what's the intention?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said with a half shrug. "Just being friendly. I mean, it's not like... well, we're just working together. But you're a nice girl; I don't want to mess things up with you and Odo."

Nerys stared at him as she realised what he was trying to say. It wasn't something she particularly wanted to put into words either. She was aware that he liked her, and his temper notwithstanding, she also found him attractive. But he was right, they were just working together.

Quark had finally responded to Tony's wave and came over to take their order. He was most uncharacteristically sullen and Nerys thought he gave her and Tony a strange look as he left to get their drinks. Remembering just how accurate the Ferengi's hearing was, she decided it would be sensible to change the subject.

"What are your plans for the rest of the evening?" she asked, before realising how the question might be interpreted.

Fortunately, Tony understood what she meant. "Now I have this weapons thing sorted out—" he patted the device at his belt "—I need to round up my security team and let them know what's up. I've got a good idea who I want to back me up, and the rest can take it easy. It's—it wasn't exactly smooth running being a security guard on Alpha."

"It's not exactly a peaceful job anywhere," remarked Nerys with a laugh.

"I guess not," agreed Tony. "It's funny, really. It just occurred to me how weird my life has become. I mean, I never thought the day would come when I would actually miss having the power to kill someone... And yet, I've felt weird all today because I didn't have my laser." He looked down at the weapon again. "It's very disturbing, really. I wasn't brought up like that. I guess it's something I picked up because I had to."

His remark instantly struck a chord with Nerys. "One of our modern Bajoran poets said 'The tragedy of war isn't death; it's the monsters it makes of the living'."

Those words always brought tears to her eyes; they reminded her of what she herself had become. But for the Cardassian Occupation, she would have been an artist or, given her lack of talent, at worst an artist's lady-in-waiting. Instead of that, she had joined the Resistance at twelve and had not laid down arms since.

"Well, I can't argue with your friend," said Tony with a wry grin. "We weren't exactly at war on Alpha—not for longer than a few days at a time, at least—but I think that's true. All that living on the edge, fighting aliens and stuff, being in a position of responsibility. It has really changed me. My parents would be ashamed; their astronaut son has turned into a policeman." He paused, perhaps pondering this thought. It only took a moment for his expression to brighten. "You wouldn't know this, but there were lots of jokes about Italian policemen. For instance, do you know why they always patrol in pairs?"

Nerys shook her head, though she suspected there was some punch line coming up.

"Because one can read and the other can write." Nerys smiled. "You never stay serious very long, do you, Tony?"

"Nah. Like I said the other day, life's too short to be miserable all the time... Ah, at last," he said as Quark finally brought them their drinks. The Ferengi also gave them another funny look; *the little troll had probably appointed himself the guardian of Odo's honour or something*, thought Nerys irritably.

Tony also seemed to have noticed Quark's behaviour. He watched the Ferengi as he walked away. "He doesn't look very cheerful. Does he always look at his customers like that?"

"No. Only ones who buy me drinks," said Nerys humourlessly.

Tony laughed and sipped his coffee. "Talking about buying drinks, I think there's something you should know about my Alphan colleagues."

"And what's that?" Nerys was puzzled by the apparent seriousness of his statement. But looking at him, she noticed the telltale twinkle in his eye.

"They're *terrible* gossips," he declared smugly. "They've spent the last six years perfecting the art of ripping a person's reputation to shreds with a couple of well placed words, and they are obviously planning to continue this proud tradition here on Deep Space Nine." He took a deep breath after saying all that.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" she asked. She had a feeling the conversation was heading right back where it started.

"Hmm," he nodded. "They're talking about us—you and me. See, all we had to do is work together and put in a presence in the Cafeteria and the whole of Alpha goes and gets the wrong idea."

"And what do you suggest we do about it?" she asked, leaning back against the bar and folding her arms.

Tony sighed, although he was still grinning. "Well, we can't avoid each other, that's for sure. We have a lot of work to do."

“Maybe we should just convince them of the solidity of our affection for our respective Shapeshifters.” She paused as something occurred to her. “Though that might not be easy. Looks as though we’ve both managed to argue with them today.”

“Yeah. Good point.” He looked down into his coffee, as if to find some solution in the tiny cup. “That reminds me, I’ve been meaning to ask you if there’s a tailor or a dressmaker on the station. I suppose it’s rather unlikely nowadays...”

Nerys was surprised by the question. “No, there is a tailor’s shop on the Promenade; it’s up beyond the Infirmary. Why? Does your uniform need mending?” She looked him over as if to find some flaw.

“No. I thought I’d do Maya a favour. One of the only things she took with her when she left her planet was the dress she was wearing. She mentioned that it was falling to pieces and I thought it would be a nice idea if I could get someone to mend it for her. I saw her boxes come over this evening; I reckon I know which one her dress is in.”

“That’s a sweet idea!” Nerys was impressed; it seemed that Tony was as attentive as Odo when it came to the woman he loved. She hoped Maya would appreciate what a loving boyfriend she had.

“Well, actually, it’s a cunning plan to get me back in her good books,” he said with a grin. “Just in case I’m still in her bad books when she comes back.”

The cross-shaped launch pad slowly lifted Eagle One to the Moon’s surface. As soon as the platform was still, John engaged the thrusters and the Eagle blasted off in a cloud of Moon dust. The commander looked at his wife, strapped into the co-pilot’s seat, and then at Maya, who was kneeling uncomfortably on the gangway in between them. Both women mustered a half-hearted smile, but John knew they were as sad as he was.

As the craft left the surface, the large, bright stars and planets of the Bajoran system came into view beyond the curve of the Moon’s horizon, bathing the cockpit in a cold white light. The Eagle effected a wide turn to bring it back in the direction of Deep Space Nine, and the low, widely spread buildings of Moonbase Alpha reappeared in the cockpit windows. Helena had activated the external cameras, and they were able to watch Alpha beneath them as the Eagle swept, one last time, over the base.

Tony observed the models displayed in the tailor’s window: all colourful women’s clothes, but nothing he could imagine Maya wearing. He didn’t find the fashions of the 24th century particularly appealing. So far, the only garment he had seen any woman wearing that he actually liked was Nerys’s uniform. But he wasn’t here to buy anything anyway.

“Ah, someone badly in need of a good tailor, I see,” said a high voice beside him.

“Huh?” Startled, Tony turned and found a large reptilian creature in a maroon suit standing in the doorway of the shop. He was quite unlike any alien Tony had seen before, with dark grey skin and ornate ridges running across his forehead, jaw and neck.

“Only joking, of course,” said the man, looking Tony over with undisguised interest. “Although your uniform is very unusual. Especially the pants.”

“Pants?” repeated Tony, before it sank in that whatever translator they had on this station was using American terminology. He followed the alien’s gaze and looked down at his beige trousers. “Oh yeah. They’re, uh, bell-bottoms.”

“Hmm. Very attractive,” said the tailor. Tony wondered if the creature was talking about him or his uniform.

To change the subject, he extended his hand. “I’m Tony Verdeschi. First Officer of Alpha,” he explained.

“I am Garak,” said the alien politely, though he didn’t shake Tony’s hand. “And I am a Cardassian, in case you’re wondering. I gather there weren’t too many of us on Earth in the 20th century.”

“So *you’re* a Cardassian. I’ve been hearing a lot about your species,” said Tony with a grin.

“If Major Kira is the one who has been doing the telling, I must warn you that for some inexplicable reason she appears to be prejudiced against my people. So I shouldn’t pay too much attention to her opinion... Now is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Verdeschi?”

Is there anyone on this station who isn’t gossiping about me and Nerys? Thought Tony, though he said, “I... ah, I have a dress that needs repairing... It belongs to my girlfriend, Maya.”

“Knowing humans as I do, I didn’t actually think it was yours, Mr. Verdeschi.” Garak placed his hand on Tony’s back and guided him into the boutique. “Do step into my shop and let us see what we can do for your lady-friend’s dress...”

It was Julian and Miles’ customary darts night, and they were having dinner in Quark’s when Alan Carter came to join them. The three men exchanged a desultory conversation about replicated food, but Julian noticed that Miles was observing Alan curiously.

The meal completed, Miles finally remarked, “You look really familiar, Alan. You remind me of someone...”

The Alphan pilot was visibly just as surprised as Julian. “I shouldn’t. We haven’t met before; we managed to miss each other completely when you were over on Alpha.”

“I know who you look like,” said Miles, snapping his fingers. “*Bilby*. He was someone I met recently—and he was an Australian, too, though a good deal older than you...”²

“Maybe he was a descendant of mine,” said Alan with a grin. “Apparently, I actually had children in this universe, so anything’s possible.”

“Ah well, it doesn’t matter,” concluded the chief with a shrug. He probably didn’t want to start explaining to Alan that he looked like a deceased member of the Orion crime syndicate. “What are all your colleagues after doing, then?”

“Oh they’ll find their way here soon enough,” said Alan confidently.

Looking around, Julian noticed that quite a few Alphans had already made their way to Quark’s. The married couple, the Frasers, were having a drink together at the bar, and he spotted a few more small groups of coloured jackets in the early evening crowd. Following his cue, Alan had a look around too; in fact, both of them were watching the entrance when Tony Verdeschi came in, looking very pleased with himself. He immediately saw Alan and once he had got a beer at the bar, he came over to join them. By the time he had greeted the two Starfleet officers, all four men were on first name terms.

“So, what have you been up to?” asked Alan as Tony finished shaking hands with everyone. “I haven’t seen you since you went off to see Constable Odo this afternoon.”

“Oh, I was doing odds and ends,” said Tony with a shrug. “Talking to Odo, sorting out problems with quarters, getting chatted up by the station’s resident tailor. That sort of thing.”

“‘Chatted up’? By Garak?” Julian wondered if he had understood correctly.

“What did you need a tailor for?” asked Alan curiously.

Tony looked down at his beer. “Well... Maya’s Psychon dress is falling to pieces. I thought it’d be nice to have it repaired. The guy said it would only take a day to do it. But don’t tell her: it’s a surprise.”

Alan chuckled. “Uh-oh. Does that mean you two have had a tiff?”

“That’s none of your business, pilot,” said Tony good-naturedly, taking a long sip from his glass. “But if I need an Agony Aunt, I’ll let you know.”

“Still, if things don’t work out with Maya, you can always try with the tailor,” teased Alan.

Both the Alphans laughed. “If you want a punch up the throat, just keep going,” said Tony, pointing his glass at Alan.

2 Miles met Bilby while on an undercover operation in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - “Honor Among Thieves” (ep.539-1998). The characters of Bilby and Alan Carter were both played by the Australian actor Nick Tate.

They were interrupted as Leeta came over to take their order. The Alphans made no secret of which part of the Bajoran's anatomy instantly caught their eye. Julian introduced her, careful to specify that she was married to Quark's brother—Alan seemed very disappointed, much to Julian and Tony's amusement.

"What can I get you, gentlemen?" she asked in her cheerful high voice.

"Anything you've got is fine by me, honey," said Alan immediately, looking up at her with a big grin. "But if we're just talking food, I'll have..." He paused and glanced at Tony. "Lasagne."

"I just love the way you looked at me before saying that!" exclaimed Tony, putting on an exaggeratedly hurt expression. "Alan, we've known each other what? Six years? And after all this time, is that really all I am to you—a pile of pasta?"

"Absolutely," said Alan unhesitatingly. Leeta looked from one to the other and giggled.

Tony turned to grin at her. "Oh well, in that case, I'll have a barbecued kangaroo," he said, putting on a semblance of an Australian accent.

"A barbecued... 'kangaroo'? Well, if it's a Terran dish, then I'm sure the replicators will have it," replied Leeta seriously, apparently not noticing that even Julian and Miles were laughing.

"Uh, no, never mind. I'll settle for a meat Vindaloo, thanks."

Miles laughed as Leeta went to get Tony's curry. "So, how are you two enjoying Deep Space Nine so far?"

Alan took a sip of beer. "I'm beginning to like it here," he said with a grin. "The quarters are nice, the food is excellent, and... ah, I must admit I do like the way the waitresses are dressed in here! That one over there, for instance." He pointed to one of the Dabo girls.

Tony followed his indication and his eyes widened in surprise. "Oh boy, you can see her—"

"Exactly," said Alan, his grin wider than ever. "Nice to know some things never change. But on the subject of things that have changed, I have to say I really like the holosuites. We went to the beach this afternoon, some place with two suns."

"Risa," said Julian knowledgeably. "That's a good place to start. But you know you can do anything you like in the holosuites, like participating in novels or watching sporting events. That sort of thing."

Tony perked up as Leeta served him his plate of curry; having thanked her, he repeated, "Sporting events? Like football? The European kind, of course," he added, looking at Alan. "Real football."

"How about cricket?" asked Alan, ignoring him.

"No, not cricket," said Miles firmly, shaking his head. Tony made a face to indicate he didn't think much of that idea either.

Julian chose not to pay any attention to them. “Actually, I do have a cricket programme. I’ve never used it because some people—” he looked pointedly at Miles “—wouldn’t come with me.”

“I really think football would be better,” remarked Tony critically. “Cricket is a silly game. Takes five days of people throwing a ball at each other to get a ridiculous score like 297 for 8, and then you have a draw.”

“Oh, so you think a bunch of nancies in shorts kicking a ball around is better...” said Alan with a grin.

“Cricket is a noble sport,” said the doctor patiently. “My grandfather was the opening batsman for England when they won the Ashes in 2307; we’ve always kept it a family tradition. Besides, it’s one of the only spectator sports that has survived to this day. It’s an institution that has lasted through the centuries.”

“Oh great,” said Tony, chuckling as he dolloped some chutney on his curry. “I guess they really meant it when they said ‘There will always be an England’. I bet they still have the boat race at Oxbridge.”

“Yes. They did when I was at Oxford,” said Julian.

“Tsk. Oxford: scum of the Earth,” muttered Tony with a grin. “I’m a Cambridge man myself.”

“Difficult to believe, isn’t it?” remarked Alan, shaking his head. “The only thing he picked up was the posh accent. Though my personal theory is that some evil alien ate out his brains after he got his Ph.D... I’ve got a pretty good idea who the alien was, too.”

Julian seemed to recall Tony making the exact same joke himself that morning. Jokes were evidently something else that the Alphans liked to recycle.

Tony guffawed. “Oh, we are witty this evening, aren’t we? Care for a brisk trot to the nearest airlock?”

“So,” said Alan, obviously planning to change the subject. “English, Irish, Australian... Looks like we’ve got a regular little Commonwealth table going here.”

Tony spluttered on his drink. “Bite your tongue—Italy is not part of the Commonwealth!”

“You wouldn’t know it, listening to you. ‘Oh I say, I am an Aitalian,’” said Alan, putting on a fake English accent.

Tony put down his fork and waved his hands expansively. “Whadda matter wid you, ‘ey? You prefer I speaka lika da Mamma?” he exclaimed. “Anyway, if we can just get back to the sports thing. I can’t work up any enthusiasm for cricket, but I’m up for a game of football any day. I think I can probably rustle up an Alphan team. We could play Alphans versus Starfleet. That is, assuming football has survived through the centuries too.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” agreed Miles. “I used to be captain of Rathmines F.C. In Dublin. I know one or two other people on the station who wouldn’t mind a game either. Worf will be back with the *Rotarran* this evening; he used to play soccer too, I think. And I’m sure Julian will be up for a game.”

He looked at the doctor expectantly; Julian opened his mouth, shut it again and finally said, “Yes, I.. I have played the occasional game in the past.” It wasn’t an experience he particularly cared to renew.

“You can count me out,” declared Alan. “Soccer is a game for gussies. What you need is Australian football—that’s a game that’ll put hair on your chest!”

“Might just as well play rugby,” remarked Tony jovially. “Anyway, looks like we’ve got ourselves a deal, then. How about a match tomorrow—cheer us up after the, um, Moon gets blown to pieces?” Miles certainly had no objections to that, although Julian didn’t see where they would hold the game or how they would get time off duty to play it.

Satisfied that his football match would take place, Tony turned his attention back to his food and drink. As he picked up his glass, he seemed to notice something beyond Alan opposite him and his smile faded. “Oh. Excuse me a moment.”

Julian watched as Tony got up hurriedly and made his way towards the entrance. Alan turned and leaned on the back of his chair to do the same. “There we go,” he commented dourly. “His master’s voice. She appears and he has to drop everything.”

Maya was standing near the entrance when Tony joined her. She looked troubled and shook her head at something he said. Tony placed his hand on her shoulder; he seemed to be talking to her, although Julian couldn’t see his face. Maya sighed, apparently annoyed by whatever he was saying, though she finally nodded. The two of them made their way towards the stairs and walked up to the top level of the bar.

“I gather that’s a man in love,” said Miles, watching as they disappeared up the stairs.

“Yeah, but you’ll notice he took his pint with him,” Alan pointed out. “He still has his priorities right, poor chap.”

Sisko continued to observe the Promenade thoughtfully from Odo’s office, even though Maya had already disappeared out of sight. The interview had gone surprisingly well, with Maya giving them what appeared to be a frank retelling of her meeting with Weyoun. She had proved to be a charming young woman, more alert and cooperative than she had been when Sisko had talked to her the previous night.

“What do you think, Constable?” he asked, turning away from the door.

Odo put down the padd he had used to record Maya's interview and folded his arms, leaning back in his chair. "I think what she told us was very interesting, but ultimately, not very useful. Psychon is a member of the Dominion, Maya's counterpart was once its ruler, and Weyoun was her Vorta advisor. We could have guessed as much from what Maya told us before she met Weyoun."

"Maybe she was telling the truth when she said it was a private matter," suggested Sisko neutrally. "Perhaps that was all Weyoun wanted to tell her." Having seen how determined the Vorta was to meet Maya, Sisko found that difficult to believe.

"Maybe. But I don't know..." The captain could tell his chief of security was dubious. "You and I know Weyoun very well, Captain. I find it difficult to believe that he would go through all the trouble of trying to kidnap Maya just to tell her about her planet."

The captain nodded and smiled, pleased to see they had both come to the same conclusion. "I agree. And it's also strange that Weyoun was so willing to come into Bajoran space merely to meet her and let her go. He must have told her something she doesn't want us to know." He turned to look out through the office doors again.

"Do you suppose that has anything to do with her questions about staying on Deep Space Nine?" asked Odo.

"I'm sure it does," said Sisko unhesitatingly. "Whatever Weyoun told her, it was something momentous enough for her to consider leaving her Alphan colleagues. I'd like you to continue your surveillance, just to see if she tells any of her Alphan friends something interesting."

"She didn't tell Koenig much." Odo had listened to their conversations ever since they had returned to Alpha, but had heard nothing interesting to report to Sisko.

"It may have occurred to them that we can monitor every part of this station," commented Sisko wryly. "He might be over 400 years old, but I don't get the feeling Koenig was born yesterday. On the other hand, Maya may let something slip to one of her other colleagues: Mister Verdeschi, for instance."

He was about to add that they needed to find some means of enlisting Maya's cooperation when one of the passers-by on the Promenade caught his attention. Most of the people there were the usual evening crowd; Bajorans, humans and assorted aliens — even some Alphans — strolling or hurrying past the security office on their way to Quark's and the other entertainment venues of the Promenade.

But the man who caught his attention was standing still, alone, directly opposite the security office. He was an elderly human with thinning dark grey hair and heavy sideburns, dressed in what almost looked like an Alphan uniform, although he wore no jacket, and his grey-sleeved tunic did not have a polo neck. The man's expression was benevolent; his small eyes fixed Sisko with a friendly, understanding gaze.

The captain stared at the man as he lifted one hand flat in a gesture of peace. Sisko was suddenly overcome by a wave of dizziness and had to lean against the door frame to stop from falling.

"Captain, are you all right?" Sisko felt Odo's hands supporting him. "Do you want me to call Doctor Bashir?"

"No. I... I think the Prophets are talking to me," said Sisko, his mind still spinning. The sensation was familiar; he was coming to accept the sickness that the Prophets caused whenever they approached him. Bashir said each experience was gradually damaging his brain, but Sisko knew this suffering was all part of his role as Emissary.

"The Prophets," he heard Odo say disdainfully. The Changeling was not a great believer in the Prophets' mystical powers, all the more so as he himself came from a species of self-styled gods.

Sisko didn't answer. The spinning had stopped and he was able to straighten up. Looking out through the window panes in the door, he was not surprised to find his mystery Alphan was gone.

CHAPTER TEN
The Last Sunset

CHAPTER TEN – *The Last Sunset*

*"I know I'm just a fool who's willing
To sit around and wait for you
But baby can't you see
There's nothing else for me to do
I'm hopelessly devoted to you"*
Olivia Newton-John, "Hopelessly Devoted" ¹

"So, how did the meeting with Weyoun go?" Maya could hear the hesitation in Tony's voice, as if he was afraid to hear what she would say. "Did you learn more about your family in this universe?"

She nodded, though she didn't know what to say. It was going to be difficult to explain her plan without giving the full story; Tony probably wouldn't be satisfied with the lies she had told Sisko and Odo. Maya looked down at the table they were sharing and wished she had ordered a drink to keep her hands busy. She was afraid that if she started talking to him, she would end up telling him everything. So she said nothing.

"I'm sorry about this morning," he said suddenly. "What I said about your father."

"It doesn't matter."

There was another pause and then Tony spoke again. "You're very quiet. You haven't been replaced by a Changeling, have you?"

Maya smiled and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Tony. I'm just thinking."

He slid his arm around her shoulder and stroked her cheek tenderly. "Want a nanogram of latinum for your thoughts?"

"I have to stay here," she told him bluntly. Realising she needed an excuse, she added, "I want to be with my own people."

Her heart sank as he removed his arm. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tony run his hands over his face as he took stock of what she had just told him. He finished his beer and signaled to a waiter to bring him another one.

"So if we get a ship and go back to our universe, you want to stay in this one?" he asked finally. Maya nodded silently, but Tony seemed to suddenly cheer up. "Well, that's quite a coincidence, actually. I was thinking about staying here myself."

¹ Olivia Newton-John - "Hopelessly Devoted" (J. Farrer) - From the motion picture soundtrack *Grease* (PolyGram, 1978)

Maya very much doubted that this assertion was the result of long reflection. "You don't have to, Tony," she said gently, placing her hand on his. "I can take care of myself."

"What makes you think I want to stay here to take care of you?" Tony had resorted to his habitual teasing, but there was an unusual tremor in his voice. He withdrew his hand from under hers as the Ferengi waiter brought him another glass of beer. "It's obvious this place is just crying out for an Italian restaurant!" he declared, waving his hand. "I can just see it now—'Antonio's' with a prime spot on the Promenade. Considering the potential clientèle here, I could probably get away with it, too. And I'm sure the Cardassians would appreciate Italian cuisine if we had to move to Cardassia to be with your Psychon friends."

Maya smiled. This was the Tony she understood, shallow, joking and uncomplicated. "You open a restaurant? You'd poison all your customers."

"Probably," he admitted in mock seriousness, "but at least you don't get any complaints from the dead. Actually, it's a well known fact that when Italians go abroad the first thing they do is open a restaurant. That's why we never get any respect. We invented Western civilisation, but now all we do is feed people." He emphasised his point with another wide sweep of his hand. "Come to think of it, maybe I should go against the stereotype and open a laundry. Catering is too difficult. I spent a summer working in my uncle Gino's restaurant in Torquay, and I can tell you: never again. Poisoning people is hard work!"

Maya laughed; for a brief moment, she imagined Tony running a busy restaurant like the ones they always showed in the movies. She could just see him dressed in a grimy white jacket with a tea-towel over one shoulder, barking orders at his cooks and waiters. It was a ridiculous idea.

"I think you should just stick to what you know best," she advised.

"Ah yes. Brewing," he said, nodding vigorously. "Of course. The fact the Bajorans like my beer is reason enough to stay in this universe!"

Maya laughed brightly, and Tony put his arm around her again. She felt him kiss her cheek, his soft lips pressing against her cheekbone. Using his free hand, he gently guided her chin around until she was facing him.

"You know why I want to stay here," was all he said, his brown gaze meeting her eyes unwaveringly.

Maya hesitated and looked down again, all the joy suddenly drained from her. He was so serious, so desperate to stay with her even though he had no idea why she was staying. The fact that he was so willing to throw everything away when she had so little to offer in return made Maya sick with guilt. It wasn't fair to separate him from the other Alphans for no good reason.

"Tony. You don't have to stay," she repeated.

“If you’re staying, then I’ll be here with you,” said Tony determinedly. There was another silence and then he wrapped both his arms around her, hugging her awkwardly over the edge of the table. “I love you, Maya, I love you so much, I don’t think you realise.”

Maya was terrified. She didn’t know what to do; she knew Tony loved her—he was wrong to assume otherwise—but she didn’t understand how to respond to that love. There had been no men for her to flirt with on Psychon, so she had never mastered the mating games which humans played so easily.

Perhaps realising she wasn’t going to say anything, Tony let go of her after a couple of minutes and sat up straight in his chair.

“I can tell you one thing, though, Maya,” he said, running his hands through his hair and trying—rather unsuccessfully — to recover his usual aplomb. “When this is all over, I think I’ll go to Australia and apply for a job in a soap opera! I seem to be getting soppy in my old age.”

“Soapy?”

“She speaks,” he exclaimed, evidently quoting something. “O! Speak again, bright angel.”

Maya smiled and relaxed a little; another crisis over. “Is that Shakespeare?” she asked. Most things the humans quoted seemed to be from that author.

“Romeo and Juliet,” he replied with a nod. Maya rolled her eyes: the Alphans always laughed when that play was mentioned. Tony chuckled; he sipped his beer and then his expression became serious again and he took in a deep breath. “Tell me something, Maya. Is there actually a point to all this?”

Maya’s mood was dampened by the bitterness in his voice. “All what?”

“Me being in love with you.” He looked away, only chancing occasional glances at her as he continued. “I mean, I know you’re an alien, and I do realise you haven’t exactly got lots of experience with men, but... well, it gets a bit confusing, sometimes. You know, I’m a pretty basic guy and sometimes, I don’t know if I’m coming or going. Obviously, I keep reminding myself I should give you more time, and it’s true, there’s no hurry. I mean, it’s been four years, but it could be forty. I really think you’re worth it. You’re worth anything I need to do to be with you.”

He lifted his head and looked her straight in the eye. “But now you tell me you want to stay here and I’m supposed to be going back to our universe, it sounds as if it’s make or break time. ‘Cause if I go back into that wormhole, we’re never going to meet again. So I guess my question is... do you actually love me?”

The word that sprang to Maya's lips, unbidden, was 'Yes', but she stopped herself before she could utter it. She wasn't sure if that was the truth. Tony had never asked her about her feelings before, so she had always been able to ignore the problem. She knew that he meant a lot to her, that she would be heartbroken if he died — but she could say the same for John or Helena, and she was pretty sure she wasn't in love with them.

In any case, it wasn't a question of whether or not she loved him. Maya was aware that she was giving Tony very little in return for his affection; she wished she could do more, but it was as if something had kept her paralysed for the past four years, making her incapable of even acknowledging his feelings for fear of making him unhappy with an inappropriate reaction. She didn't know what to do when he kissed her, when the sickness seized her, or what she should say when he told her he loved her. She didn't want to lie and say she loved him when she wasn't sure.

One thing Maya did know: she couldn't let Tony abandon his friends and his career just for her. So she shook her head and answered his question as truthfully as she could.

"I don't know."

She might just as well have slapped him in the face. For a moment, Tony was too stunned to think straight. He just stared at Maya's beautiful features. Her large eyes were downcast, the white makeup on their lids glittering in the dim light, the long eyelashes nearly resting on her cheeks.

Four years, and she didn't know if she loved him? He wanted to tell her again how much he adored her, as if yet another impassioned speech about his feelings would convince her to return them. But he decided he had made enough of a fool of himself for one night. Tony stood up and mumbled something about his dinner downstairs. He was so distraught that the world seemed to be spinning, and he even thought he saw one of the empty glasses on another table shimmer golden for a moment. Without waiting for Maya to say any more, Tony walked away, heading straight for the toilets, the first place that came to mind where he could be alone with his shock.

He didn't know how long he stayed in there. Part of him wanted to go back and see Maya, to ask her if 'I don't know' could possibly mean 'Maybe', while the rest argued that she had just said she didn't know because she didn't have the courage to say outright that she didn't love him. It wasn't impossible that she didn't love him, after all.

But there was nothing to be done about it now. He had asked her straight and she had given her answer. If she didn't love him, then there was no point moping around; he had to steel himself and try to get over her—and that wasn't going to be easy. After checking his reflection in the mirror to make sure his hair was tidy and he didn't look as if he had been crying, Tony took a deep breath and went out to get on with his life.

Bill Fraser, Alan, Miles and Julian were playing darts in the corner of the lower level; Sandra was sitting at the edge of the bar, keeping an attentive eye on the young doctor, who was throwing from a greater distance than the others for some reason. Looking around, Tony could see that the place was now jumping with Alphans. Kate and Yasko were having a laugh with the large alien Tony had noticed at the bar earlier that evening. Alibe and Shermeen were talking to some tall black man Tony didn't recognise. He looked very young, but Alibe had evidently found what she was looking for, judging from the looks she was giving him.

Maya was now sharing a table with John and Helena under the upper level. She looked very calm and collected, and although Tony knew she was apt to put on a placid exterior even when she was troubled, he felt hurt that she didn't look more affected by what had just happened. In spite of his meditative sojourn in the toilets, he still felt like rolling around on the floor and bawling like a two year old. Alternatively, he was strongly tempted to go to the bar and take full advantage of the Federation's largesse.

Rather than stand like an idiot staring at Maya, Tony went to get himself another drink and then walked over to watch the darts game. A quick glance at the scoreboard told him the Alphans were losing.

"Where is Maya?" was the first thing Sandra asked when she noticed Tony standing beside her.

"We're not joined at the hip," he pointed out, taking a large swig from his beer. He felt the alcohol seep into his veins as the sour taste filled his mouth.

"Is something wrong?" Casting a quick glance at her, Tony could see the concern in her large black eyes.

He just nodded; he knew there wasn't much point pretending. Of all the people on Alpha, Sandra probably knew the most about him and Maya. Although there had never been any question of romantic love between them, Tony had been going out with Sandra when Maya joined the Alphans and she was the one who first noticed his interest in the new arrival. To some extent, it was thanks to Sandra that he had first fallen in love with Maya. He didn't feel much like thanking her right then.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Tony shook his head. “After a few more of these, I’ll probably be telling you all about it anyway.” That reminded him that he had better watch his alcohol intake. Shrugging to dismiss the topic, he turned and watched the others playing darts. “Why is Julian throwing from so far away?”

“He is genetically engineered,” she said simply.

“*What?*” Tony nearly spluttered on his beer.

Sandra’s expression suggested she was similarly shocked. “Apparently, he has perfect hand-eye coordination. Miles told me that when I asked; he said it is illegal, but that Julian’s parents struck a deal with Starfleet so he could continue to work for them.”

“They’re evidently very big on tampering with people’s genes in the 24th century, aren’t they?” Tony looked at the doctor, trying to determine if there was any obvious sign of the genetic engineering. He couldn’t see any; the young man was a perfectly ordinary looking Middle-Easterner. “He looks pretty normal, though. Quite a good looking guy, I suppose.”

Sandra nodded enthusiastically. “Oh yes. I think he is beautiful,” she said frankly. “Those eyes, that skin, that body...”

“That genetically-engineered hand-eye coordination,” completed Tony with a grin.

“I do not think he is interested, though,” she said wistfully.

“He must be nuts,” said Tony. “It’s a well-known fact that no one can resist you, Sahn.”

Sandra smiled at his remark, but then her expression changed; she indicated with a nod of the head that he should turn around. Nerys was coming towards them, elbowing her way through the now considerable crowd.

“Hi,” she said as she approached. “I see all your colleagues are settling in well.” She looked at Sandra and then at the darts players before turning her attention back to Tony. “I came over to tell you what I’ve just told Commander Koenig; the last of your technical teams has returned from Alpha, so all 223 of you are over here now. The Bajoran mining crew will be there in a few minutes.” Her expression became more serious as she added, “the order to destroy the Moon will be given first thing tomorrow morning, at 0900.”

Tony sighed. “Okay. Thanks for the information.” Nerys opened her mouth as if to say something else but then looked at Sandra and simply smiled. “Well, I’d better go. I’ll probably see you later,” she said finally, turning to leave. She had no doubt remembered their earlier conversation about not spending too much time together.

Tony watched her for a moment as she pushed her way through the crowd. There was definitely something to be said for that red uniform.

“You fancy her,” said Sandra confidently. She was observing him with a sly smile on her lips.

“Of course I do,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders. “She’s a cute girl. I think she’s very attractive.”

Nerys was now talking to Dax; as Tony watched her, she looked over at him, before hastily averting her eyes.

“The feeling is obviously mutual,” remarked Sandra.

“Hmm.” Tony nodded; that was currently a big point in Nerys’s favour.

“Is that why you are not getting on so well with Maya?”

“Oh no. It’s not that simple.” He decided he was drunk enough to hint at what had happened. “I... I think I overestimated Maya’s interest in me.”

He felt Sandra’s hand on his shoulder. “Oh, Tony. You know she loves you.”

“You think she loves me?” he said dubiously; Sandra nodded. Tony leaned close enough to whisper in her ear.

“Well, maybe you should tell her, because she doesn’t seem to know that.”

“Do not be silly,” said Sandra tenderly, placing her hand on his cheek. “I have been watching the two of you for years now, and it is obvious she loves you. Maybe she just does not realise how much.”

“You’d think that after four years, something would seep through to that super-intelligent brain of hers,” he replied ruefully.

“It is not like you to give up so easily. You know you are irresistible, Tony! Major Kira and I cannot both be wrong,” she said teasingly. “In fact, maybe you should spend some time with the Major, and let Maya see what she is missing.”

“You know, Sahn, that is by far the worst idea I’ve heard in a long time,” he laughed, putting his empty beer glass on the bar. “In all the years I’ve been going out with women—and that’s nearly thirty by now—that particular plan has never worked. If a girl is not interested, you just can’t make her jealous. All she’ll feel when she sees you with another bird is relief!”

Sandra laughed, and he added, “Besides, I’ll have you know that Nerys is already going out with Constable Odo. He hates me enough as it is: I reckon he’d chuck me out of an airlock if I so much as laid a finger on his girlfriend!”

Tony looked back at Nerys. The alcohol in his brain made her look even more attractive than she really was. “Not that I’m not sorely tempted...” he concluded somberly.

“I see Casanova is looking our way,” said Jadzia with one of her knowing smiles. “Evidently someone to add to your long list of admirers.”

Nerys followed her gaze and saw Tony leaning close to Sandra Benes, whispering in her ear. “Yeah. And he’s in for a disappointment like the rest of them,” she said airily, hoping that would put an end to the conversation.

“He seems to have found someone else anyway,” said Jadzia. She watched the two Alphans and added, “I thought he was going out with Maya, though.”

“So did I,” admitted Nerys. She was wondering what was going on; the last time she had talked to him, Tony was planning to get one of Maya’s dresses repaired as an apology for their argument that morning. But now Maya was sitting with the Koenigs, while Tony seemed to be chatting up Sandra. Something had evidently gone wrong.

“I can’t see the attraction myself,” remarked Jadzia, leaning on the bar. She smiled politely as Tony looked their way again; her smile faded when the Alphan turned back to his colleague.

“You have to admit he’s good-looking,” said Nerys. “And he has a great sense of humour.” It occurred to her that those were two characteristics she couldn’t attribute to, say, Odo.

Jadzia smiled indulgently, and Nerys knew she was going to be treated to yet more wisdom from the 300-year-old Dax symbiont. “Nerys. I’ve met literally thousands of young men like Verdeschi. He’s cute and he has a sense of humour, but that’s all there is to him.”

Nerys allowed herself another look at the Alphan and grinned as she remembered him lying on the Risan beach. “Does he really need anything else?”

“Nerys!” Jadzia laughed. “You aren’t serious?”

“Of course not,” Nerys assured her. “I’m already involved with Odo.”

“But if you weren’t..?”

The Bajoran shrugged her shoulders. “You’re the one who always says there’s no harm in looking. I happen to think Tony Verdeschi is a very nice young man.”

“I’d say that’s a good description,” agreed Jadzia, although Nerys had a feeling she didn’t mean that in a good way. “He’s ‘nice’. Nothing more. He probably has a lot of ambitions, but ultimately, he’ll never do anything remarkable or achieve great heights. He’s another of these young men who will talk up a storm about what a mark they’re going to leave in the galaxy, but just wind up settling down into their comfortable little life with a wife and kids... I know, I was once exactly like him. Torias had great ambitions of becoming a famous lover and pilot, but when it all came down to it, all he wanted was to marry Nilani and settle down.”²

Nerys didn’t see why that should affect her interest in Tony, although she did understand why Dax didn’t like him. “And? I’m not interested in knowing what Tony’s going to become. I happen to like him as he is right now. He’ll be gone in three day’s time, anyway. And we’re only talking hypothetically.” She paused and then added, “If you were free, which one of the Alphans would you choose, then?”

Jadzia thought about that for a moment. “If I had to choose anyone, it would probably be Commander Koenig.”

² Torias and Nilani's love story is explored in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - "Rejoined" (ep.478-1995).

Nerys guffawed. "I was forgetting—with your taste in men, I should take your opinion of Tony with a good sprinkle of sugar. Commander Koenig? He probably frightened babies as a living before going to Alpha!" she exclaimed, using an expression from her home province.

"Oh Nerys," sighed Jadzia. "What you're missing is that Koenig is a real man, not some vain young guy who probably checks every mirror he goes past."

The Bajoran burst out laughing; she had to cover her mouth with her hand. "Good point," she admitted once she had stopped laughing. "That's very true. But I'd still take Tony over Koenig any day. He's just more... I like him," she concluded.

"Poor Odo," said Jadzia with a chuckle.

Poor Odo indeed, thought Nerys.

Sisko did not usually frequent Quark's in the evenings, preferring to retire to his quarters to read or study. With the Alphans on the station, however, he thought he should put in an appearance. The place was full; it seemed that the Alphans had lost no time finding the bar. Or getting to know the station's residents.

The very first thing Sisko saw as he entered Quark's was his son talking to two of the Alphan women. One was a pretty black woman with wide eyes and closely-cropped hair. The other, a white girl, looked little more than a teenager. Jake was in mid-conversation as his father approached from behind.

"Absolutely," exclaimed Jake enthusiastically, answering something the white girl had said. "Seen from today, the 20th century is just a series of meaningless events that all seemed to take place one after the other—the Second World War, the beginning of the space era. But meeting you puts everything into perspective. It brings it all to life; these are events that you and your relatives actually lived through. That's what's so fascinating... Oh hi, Dad."

Sisko smiled as his son finally noticed him. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Jake, boring these poor ladies." He looked politely at the two women, waiting for his son to introduce them.

"This is Shermeen Williams, Alibe Kurand," said Jake, indicating the two women. "This is my Dad, Captain Sisko." The Alphans shook hands with Sisko, and Jake added, "Shermeen used to study writing in college!"

Williams grinned and brushed a curl of light brown hair out of her eyes to look up at Jake. "I only did one term. It was just an evening class. I was really studying bioengineering."

As Sisko watched his son laugh with the young woman, he felt a compelling need to warn Jake against getting too attached to someone who was only going to be on the station a few days. On the other hand, Jake was now a grown man who could make his own decisions. Sisko smiled and chose to leave the sermon for some other day.

His smile faded as he noticed someone in the crowd beyond Jake. It was the same elderly Alphan he had seen before; the man was standing in the middle of the crowd, staring intently at Sisko. The captain knew that no one else was able to see his vision, but he still watched the man, trusting his son to explain what was happening to the Alphans. The noise of the crowd in the bar had magically died down as the Prophets took hold of his senses and focused them on the mysterious Alphan. Sisko took a deep breath and tried to relax, waiting patiently for the apparition to speak.

“There is a new world to save Bajor,” said the Alphan in a husky English voice. Sisko wondered why the Prophets had chosen this particular form, so well-defined, and yet so unfamiliar to him.

“How will the Moon save Bajor? If we let it continue on its present course, it will be destroyed, and kill thousands of Bajorans in the process,” said Sisko. He talked in a calm, measured voice, hoping that the Prophets would understand his concerns and answer them.

“No,” replied the vision. “The Sisko’s friends will bring peace to Bajor, and themselves find a new life in peace.”

“In peace?” Sisko heard someone say. Surprised at this unexpected intervention in his vision, the captain turned towards the voice and found that Commander Koenig had approached. Sisko was vaguely aware of the presence of Doctor Russell beside her husband, but his perception was not able to expand beyond the apparition and now, Koenig.

The Alphan Commander barely glanced at Sisko before continuing. “You keep saying we’re going to find a new life here. But we can’t, Victor; our world is going to be destroyed.”

At least that answered the question of who the Alphan was. “There is no need to destroy a world that is going to be saved,” said the Prophet. Having evidently decided this was enough information, the vision disappeared.

The last thing Sisko was aware of was Doctor Russell screaming “John!” before the world went black and he hit the floor.

The Infirmary had become quite crowded now that the senior officers of both Alpha and Deep Space Nine had come to see their respective commanders. Julian ushered out everyone except Helena and Jake, although he allowed Tony and Kira to attend, indicating they should stay at the entrance.

Julian scanned Sisko first, and it only took one pass from the tricorder to confirm what he—and no doubt most of DS9—already suspected. Sisko had been contacted by the Prophets again. And they wanted to make sure he listened.

Jake was looking down at his father with concern. “Is Dad having visions again?” The young man was understandably worried; some of Sisko’s past messages from the Prophets had caused conditions that required surgery.

The doctor simply nodded and turned to Koenig, who was lying on the next bed with Helena leaning over him. As he scanned the commander, Julian was surprised to find he was getting virtually the same readings.

Helena tore her green eyes away from her husband's face and lifted them to Julian. "What have you found, doctor?"

"It looks as though your husband and Captain Sisko have both been contacted by the Prophets," he said thoughtfully.

Helena didn't look surprised. "Commander Dax mentioned the Prophets earlier." She turned to her husband again. "So that's it. These Prophets have been trying to communicate with John for the past two nights, but their message has been unclear. We don't even know why did these aliens are talking to him."

Jake suddenly plucked at Julian's sleeve. "Doctor, Dad's waking up."

"So is John," said Helena as the doctor went over to check Sisko's health. Julian decided to let his Alphan counterpart take care of her husband for a moment.

Tony and Kira approached as their commanding officers recovered.

"What's going on?" asked Tony.

Kira had witnessed enough of Sisko's collapses to know what had happened. "Captain, have the Prophets talked to you again? What did they say?"

"I think..." started Sisko groggily, sitting up with the help of his son. "I think the Prophets deliberately brought the Moon here."

"Who are the Prophets?" asked Tony.

Julian shook his head. "But why would they do that? It's on a straight course for Bajor VIII."

"Surely they wouldn't want thousands of Bajorans to die," completed Kira.

Behind her, Koenig had also recovered enough to join the conversation. "I think their message is clear, though. Whatever their intentions, I'm now certain that they don't want the Moon to be touched." He looked at Sisko curiously. "You've been having the same visions?"

Sisko nodded. "This isn't the first time the Prophets have talked to me," he explained to the Alphans. "But I didn't realise they were communicating with you as well, Commander. At least we now know they don't want the Moon to be destroyed. Unfortunately, we still don't know why. As always with the wormhole aliens, their motives are obscure."

"The wormhole aliens are the Prophets?" asked Tony.

"We have to trust them, though," said Kira earnestly. "Whatever their plan is, we must follow their orders and let their designs unfold."

"Is anyone listening to me?" muttered Tony good-naturedly. Julian was probably the only one who heard him.

Sisko winced thoughtfully and scratched his temple. "I know we should trust them, but it isn't easy. On the face of things, the Moon is going to collide with Bajor VIII, potentially killing tens of thousands of people... Bajoran people. I've already spent most of the day trying to convince Starfleet Command that sending one ship into the wormhole poses no threat. It would take a lot more than visions from the Prophets to convince them to let the Moon continue on its present course."

"Sometimes a leap of faith is necessary," intervened Koenig. Julian noticed that he exchanged a look with his wife and then Tony—they evidently both knew what he was going to say. "Some years ago, the Moon was on a collision course with a planet called Astheria. I... was contacted by the ruler of that world, Arra, who told me that the two worlds had to collide so that Astheria could move onto a different plane of existence. As far as the other Alphans were concerned, the Moon was going to collide with Astheria and be destroyed; they didn't believe me when I told them what Arra had said." ³

As Julian watched her, an expression of regret, perhaps even shame, crossed Helena's features while her husband continued. "The other Alphans rebelled against me, and attempted to change the course of the Moon. Ultimately, it came to a fight between me and the others. The two worlds collided, and Astheria vanished, leaving the Moon intact."

"You're suggesting the Prophets have similar plans for the Moon this time?" asked Sisko seriously.

Koenig smiled grimly and shook his head. "I don't know your Prophets, Captain. And Arra gave me a reason for my faith in her. She told me exactly what would happen if I allowed the Moon to continue on its course. My faith was based on the confidence she inspired in me through her clear message. The Prophets have given us nothing but riddles."

"They do that, the Prophets," said Sisko wryly.

"But the basic message is that the Moon is supposed to collide with Bajor VIII?" asked Tony, clearly puzzled.

"Or that it won't," said Koenig, looking at Sisko. "Maya did mention the possibility that the two worlds would miss each other completely. If the wormhole opens..."

"The chances of the Moon changing course by tomorrow morning are too remote," said Sisko, shaking his head.

3 *Space: 1999 - "Collision Course"* (ep.13-1974)

“What about the Moon changing course within the next day or so?” asked Helena. “That may still be a possibility; the collision is only supposed to take place in two days’ time. Maybe the Prophets know something we don’t.”

“Yes,” agreed Kira, turning hopefully to Sisko. “After all, they couldn’t be asking you to do something that would harm Bajor.”

Koenig nodded in agreement. “The issue here seems to be whether you trust the Prophets enough to follow their instructions.”

“No... It isn’t the only issue,” said Sisko with a sigh. “As a Starfleet officer, I also have to follow the orders from Starfleet Command. And right now, the Prophets’ visions and my orders are in direct conflict.”

Julian noticed the ironic smile that appeared on Koenig’s lips. “I was forgetting about Starfleet Command,” he admitted, exchanging an amused glance with his wife. “It’s not the sort of thing that I’ve had to worry about for some time.”

Sisko merely acknowledged the remark with a thoughtful hum. “If I am going to disobey my orders or ask Starfleet Command to change them, I’ll need conclusive evidence that the destruction of the Moon isn’t necessary. And right now, I have absolutely nothing.”

“Perhaps Maya or Dax...” started Helena, obviously concerned at the thought the Moon might be destroyed for nothing.

“Yes. They might be able to find something,” agreed Sisko, standing up. “But they have less than ten hours until tomorrow morning.”

After being apparently baffled by the whole conversation, Tony now seemed rather amused. He exchanged a glance with Kira and grinned. “Maybe your Prophets will be clever and send you a sign.”

Maya watched as Dax hurried down the corridor, returning to her quarters. The Trill’s husband had returned late that evening, and Dax was naturally anxious to go and join him. *She was lucky*, thought Maya enviously. After what she had told Tony earlier, the Psychon knew she had no one to go to.

The two women had run their calculations again, but there was still no indication that the Moon could be saved. The best the two science officers could suggest was to delay the destruction to see if the Prophets would do anything. Sisko had contacted Starfleet Command, but their answer, predictably, was the same: the Moon had to be destroyed the next day at 0900. They were concerned that any delay would allow the debris from the Moon’s destruction to enter the Bajoran system.

Maya didn't feel like going back to her quarters. The sombre brown walls and subdued lighting felt unfamiliar and depressing after the bright white and primary colours she had grown accustomed to on Alpha. She had already spent one miserable night in the dark apartment, worrying about Tony and wondering what Weyoun wanted from her. Now, she knew what Weyoun wanted, and Tony was healthy and, thanks to her, heartbroken, but the Moon was going to be destroyed and she was planning to leave the Alphans she had lived with for four years. Maya was certain she wouldn't get much sleep if she went back to her quarters.

She went to the Promenade and wandered around for an hour or so, looking through the windows at the closed shops and stalls; the only place that still seemed to be open was Quark's. Maya avoided the bar for a while, but having walked the whole circumference of the Promenade, she finally decided some company would be nice.

The large grey alien who seemed to live at the bar was lumbering out as she approached.

"See you tomorrow, Morn. Now go and get some sleep," she heard Quark's sharp voice advise from within.

The alien seemed to sigh and turned to look regretfully at the bar, before casting a glance at Maya. She smiled at the creature, but it just walked away silently, treading heavily in the quiet of the empty Promenade.

"Miss Maya." Quark's voice was full of surprise as he looked out at her from behind the small bar that opened onto the Promenade. "I didn't expect to see you up so late. I thought you were working with Dax or something."

"I was," said Maya, though she wondered how the bartender knew that. She doubted this information would have been the subject of a public broadcast. "We didn't find anything interesting... and her husband has just come back, so we called it a night."

Quark's expression darkened. "Hmm, Worf." He spat out the name with obvious disdain. "Of all the lumbering idiots in the universe, she had to marry him."

"Were you hoping she would marry you?" asked Maya innocently, leaning on the bar.

The Ferengi lowered his black-rimmed eyes for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if her taste is for lumbering idiots, I suppose it wouldn't have worked anyway... So, you thought you would have a night stroll through the Promenade... Not much to see as you can tell, and not much company to be had. I'm just closing the bar myself; some of your colleagues were in for a late night session in the holosuite, so I stayed open until they left. Morn thought it was his birthday!" he added nodding in the direction the alien had gone.

“Which of my colleagues were they?” Maya wondered if whoever it was might still be awake and ready for a conversation—anything rather than return to her quarters.

“I don’t know. There were four Alphan girls but Jake and Nog were the ones who booked the holosuite, so I don’t know who the women were. I can say one thing, though: I had no idea 20th century women were so good-looking,” he declared, nonchalantly scratching one of his large ears. “Yourself included. I think I should be brushing up on my history!”

Maya smiled and decided there was no need to remind him that she wasn’t from the 20th century. It was hardly an important detail.

“I’m surprised that young man of yours isn’t keeping you company,” continued Quark with a studied innocence that immediately made Maya suspicious. “Where is he, anyway?”

“Tony? I don’t know.” Maya tried to sound unconcerned, but she had a feeling the Ferengi was getting at something.

Quark picked up one of the glasses behind the bar and inspected it critically. “This one’s broken too...” he murmured. “Well, if you want my advice: I should keep an eye on what that young man is doing, and who he’s doing it with, too.”

Maya stared at Quark in surprise. “What do you mean?”

The Ferengi shrugged his shoulders as he threw the broken glass into the recycling unit under his replicator. “I just get the impression that your Mister Verdeschi is becoming very friendly with a certain member of this station’s senior staff. And a lot of people don’t like that... For a start, the lady is already taken and, of course, so is Mister Verdeschi from what I’ve heard.”

“Oh.” Maya frowned and tried to think who Quark was talking about. It suddenly struck her. “You don’t mean Major Kira...? But she’s...” She interrupted herself, shocked at the thought.

“Oh yes, I do,” said the Ferengi, conspiratorially leaning over the bar. “And yes, she’s involved with our mutual friend Odo. While you two were on Alpha talking to our favourite enemy, Mister Verdeschi was making friendly with the Major, right here in this bar!”

Maya felt as though her heart had stopped. Tony... with someone else? Flirting with some woman he had only just met? “That’s not possible,” she said involuntarily. “Maybe they were just talking...”

“Maya, I’m a bartender. Believe me, I know the difference between ‘talking’ and ‘flirting.’” He paused and then added, “I even hear they were holding hands in the Replimat at lunch time.”

That was unbelievable. Maya did remind herself that she had all but told Tony she didn't want a relationship with him earlier that evening. He would probably feel that he was free to flirt with whomever he liked now. But he hadn't known that at lunch time, and he hadn't so much as mentioned Major Kira when he was making his impassioned speeches about wanting to be in the same universe as Maya that evening. The Psychon clenched her teeth firmly, determined not to show her anger to Quark.

"I suppose he's free to do what he wants," she said slowly.

"Well, of course, Mister Verdeschi's morals are your problem. I'm far more concerned about the effect this will have on Odo. The Constable is a good... well, no, not exactly a friend... But I know how much Kira means to him and if she... Well, it would break his heart."

The Ferengi sounded genuinely concerned, but Maya was still too shocked... too outraged to pay attention to what Quark was saying. "I, ah, I... think I'll go to bed now," she stuttered, her sudden inability to speak only adding to her anger.

"I thought you should know," called Quark after her as she made her way back to the Turbolift.

Yes, I certainly needed to know, she thought irritably. That solves a few problems.

As soon as she was back in her benighted quarters, Maya pulled out the holographic projector Weyoun had given her and activated its implanted communications device. She punched in one Psychon word—"horazi", *I will help.*

At 0400 that night, Deep Space Nine's ever vigilant external sensor grid was busy tracking and identifying every object within an 8 billion km perimeter. Every second, the computer dispassionately observed its surroundings—the 273 planets, moons and asteroids in the Bajoran system; the transport vessels and warships patrolling the sector; the comet now drifting out of sensor range. Following the instructions its operators had fed into it, the computer paid particular attention to the portion of space facing the Cardassian border, and also kept a close watch on the relative positions of the Moon and Bajor VIII. Any drastic, unexplained change in either area would set off a warning alarm.

As it scanned its perimeter, the computer picked up an unidentified object just entering its field of vision. Within a couple of seconds, the UFO had been thoroughly inspected and identified as the detached remains of an Alphan Eagle. Its course and speed was plotted, and the computer determined that the object would hit the centre of the wormhole in fourteen hours. None of the instructions in its databanks suggested this was a crisis situation, so the computer merely sent a message to the engineer on duty to signal the presence of the object, and added the Eagle cockpit to the long list of items to be tracked.

By 0850 the next day, most of the Alphans had congregated on the upper level of the Promenade, where they could crowd around the windows and watch the Moon. It appeared as a pale disk outlined against the faint light of the Bajoran sun, little more than an oversized asteroid lost in the vastness of space. It had seemed much larger just a week ago, when it was their only home.

John swallowed hard as he remembered everything he and his companions had lived through. He had never imagined, when he first took command of Moonbase Alpha on September 9, 1999, that his tenure would end with the destruction of Earth's erstwhile satellite 400 years later, to save an alien planet in an alternate reality. Fate played strange tricks.

The Moon had gone through multiple galaxies, visited dozens of worlds in its erratic journey through the universe—Asteria, Piri, Psychon, Arcadia—and encountered wonders no human eyes had ever seen... The Alphans had battled mysterious forces and countless enemies, even themselves at times, in order to preserve their life on the runaway asteroid that had become their only home. There had only ever been one birth on the barren little world, and so many deaths—Victor, Paul, Kano, Tanya, little Jackie Crawford himself... And yet, for six years, the Alphans had called the place 'home'.

But now, the Moon had taken its last journey.

Drawing his eyes off the barely visible asteroid, John looked down at Helena, standing beside him. Alpha hadn't brought him nothing but unhappiness and the burden of command; it had also given him the love of a woman he adored, a love which had survived through thick and thin, which had sometimes seemed like the only shield between him and insanity.

Helena's features were drawn and tired, but she smiled weakly when he looked at her, communicating in a subtle change of expression all the affection she felt for him. He put his arm around her and leaned down to kiss her lips. Whatever happened to the Alphans from now on, he knew he would always have Helena. Their love would be Alpha's legacy.

Maya was one of the last to arrive on the Promenade just before 0900. Like Helena, her face was pale and pinched, her large blue eyes bloodshot and underlined with dark circles. Unkempt and unwashed, her abundant red hair lacked its usual lustre. It was clear from her appearance that Maya had slept little, if at all, that night.

John expected her to go over to Tony; the man was standing a few meters away, comforting Sandra, who, like some of the other women, was already crying. But as on the previous evening, Maya chose to stay with John and Helena. Even with Sandra in his arms, Tony had been watching Maya ever since she first appeared on the Promenade, but the Psychon seemed reluctant to look at him. John promised himself he would discuss this with Helena later, and let her decide what they should do to help Tony and Maya. Right now, he had other things to think about.

The Alphans never heard Sisko give the command that destroyed their little world. All of a sudden, they saw the first explosions ripple silently across the surface of the distant grey asteroid, weakening the structural integrity of the Moon.

John slid his arm around Maya's shoulder, holding her close as she began to cry. He felt Helena grip his other hand and glanced at his wife. She was dry-eyed, her face locked into the impassive mask she put on when her emotions became too much for her. John felt his own eyes fill with tears as he watched while the tiny world he had commanded for six years was reduced to nothing.

Outside, hundreds of thousands of kilometres away, the destruction was continuing. A second set of explosions, triggered by the first one, swept across the weakened surface of the Moon, breaking the asteroid into tiny pieces which spread out into a large sphere of particles.

Maya buried her face against John's chest and he reluctantly drew his hand out of Helena's to hug the weeping Psychon, rocking her gently like a child. Understanding his gesture, Helena put one arm around his back and stroked Maya's hair comfortingly. The humans had lost their home world forever in September 1999, but Maya had seen hers destroyed, and to see her second home reduced to rubble was no doubt bringing back some painful memories.

Before the dust from the explosions had time to scatter too far, the *Defiant* and another ship shaped like a flying swan swept into view and ran some kind of disrupter beam over the debris, until there was no trace of the Moon left.

In less than ten minutes, Alpha was no more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
Take Me Out To The Holosuite

CHAPTER ELEVEN – *Take Me Out To The Holosuite*

*“Three lions on the shirt
Jules Rimet still gleaming
No more years of hurt
No more need for dreaming”*

Baddiel, Skinner & The Lightening Seeds - “Three Lions”¹

“What do we do now?”

John looked around his senior staff as he uttered the words, watching their reactions to this obvious question. They all looked just as depressed as he felt, sitting despondently on the teal sofas and chairs of the Koenigs’ quarters, the patches of diffuse light from the ceiling further emphasising their tragic demeanour. Sandra’s eyes were still red and devoid of makeup from crying; Helena’s expression was impassively stony; Alan was staring down at his hands; Maya still looked as though she was about to collapse from lack of sleep. Even Tony was serious, sitting opposite John in one of the armchairs, leaning forward, elbows on his knees and hands clasped. The Moon had been destroyed barely two hours earlier, and John could understand his staff’s despondency; but time was running out. They needed to review their options and make a decision about their future.

John let his gaze stay on his first officer; it was at times like this that the man’s humour became useful. Tony seemed to understand what was required and straightened up in his chair, putting on a cheerful expression.

“Maybe we could throw a party?” he suggested with a wry grin.

“I don’t think anyone is in the mood for a party,” said Maya sharply, casting an acrid glance at Tony.

Not surprisingly, the first officer’s cheerfulness evaporated completely and Tony slumped back in his chair, his effort at joviality completely quelched.

“What is Starfleet’s plan, exactly?” asked Alan, wearily running his hand over his face. “To evacuate us off to God knows where?”

“Starbase 571, isn’t it?” said Tony, still sullen.

John nodded. “The U.S.S. *Addis-Ababa* will be coming the day after tomorrow. It will take one day for the Starfleets to load all our equipment onto the ship, and then it will take three weeks to take us to the starbase.”

¹ Baddiel, Skinner & The Lightening Seeds - “Three Lions” (1998)

“Three weeks?” repeated Sandra. “Where is this base?” “As far as I was able to tell, it’s near Alpha Centauri,” said John, realising the impact this would have on his human staff.

“Alpha Centauri, but that’s—” started Tony. Probably realising he was about to state the obvious, he hesitated, but finally concluded, “With the technology of this time, we would only be a few hours away from Earth.”

“We could go back to Earth,” murmured Sandra dreamily, the idea evidently very appealing to her.

This was precisely why John had preferred to keep this detail as quiet as possible. He did not want the Alphans to go to Starfleet’s Earth in this universe. The Prophets’ apparent plan to give Alpha a permanent home had come to nothing and John still believed that his people did not belong in this universe and should return to their own as soon as possible.

“It isn’t our Earth,” said John sternly. He knew he needed to make it clear from the start that staying in this reality was not an option. “We’re still in the wrong universe, remember? Starfleet’s Earth isn’t ours: it’s not as if we’re going to find our families and friends there.”

“It’s not as if we would in our universe either,” remarked Alan. “Our Earth was a wreck the last time we saw it in the 22nd century. Who knows what it’s like now? But Starfleet’s Earth is a haven; O’Brien and Bashir were telling me yesterday how peaceful it is, even with the war. I’m sure they wouldn’t object to us going there to visit. We might be able to make ourselves useful; perhaps even settle there.”

Tony glanced at John before looking at Alan. “I don’t get the impression Starfleet have a high regard for our technological skills,” he said cautiously. “We’re a bit old-fashioned by their standards.”

“That does not matter,” argued Sandra. “We do not need to know how their technology works in order to use it. If Starfleet is willing to accept us as refugees anyway, then I think we should take advantage of that. Going to 24th century Earth in this universe or in our own will be the same as far as we are concerned. At least Earth in this universe is in better condition than in ours.”

“Sandra is right.” John’s heart sank as he heard his wife’s voice join the dissenting chorus. “We would have a better life here than in our own universe. If Starfleet can’t send us back now, then we might just as well settle here. The Federation is a vast empire; there must be plenty of places where we could live. There are even areas which are relatively untouched by the war. We could finally stop wandering and settle down... have children.”

John had been wondering when the ‘children’ issue would come up. It was another of those things the Alphans never talked about, like discussing the deaths of their numerous colleagues killed since Breakaway. He could understand his friends’ desire to stay in the Federation. They would no longer be fending for themselves, instead entrusting their subsistence and safety to Starfleet, living out their lives in a comfortable universe, free of the fear and uncertainty of their life on Alpha. They could have children—it wasn’t too late even for him and Helena—and live out their lives in the shadow of the Federation.

But that was definitely not how John envisaged the Alphans’ ultimate fate.

“We don’t belong in this universe,” he said firmly. “Even Starfleet doesn’t know what the long-term effects of living in a universe that resonates at a different quantum frequency might be, let alone what effect it would have on children born here.”

“I don’t think that would be a problem,” intervened Maya drowsily. She was frowning, evidently trying to concentrate in spite of her obvious tiredness. “The difference in quantum signatures would have already affected us by now if it was going to. According to the Starfleet records, people have been known to live in alternate universes for up to several months, and they didn’t suffer any side effects.”

“Several months isn’t several years,” remarked John sternly. Maya lowered her eyes without responding. “What you’re suggesting is that we stay in this universe, living on Starfleet’s bounty indefinitely, just because it’s the easy option.” The thought that the Alphans could be so easily seduced by the Federation’s technology made him angry, and he involuntarily raised his voice. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to live out my life as a parasite, dependant on Starfleet for my security and my food.”

“Okay, so what’s the alternative?” asked Tony, shrugging his shoulders. It was clear that he too, like the others, thought they should simply follow Starfleet’s plan.

“If we can get a ship, we can go back to our universe and settle on a planet there,” replied John more calmly. “A faster-than-light ship would allow us to chose any Earth-like planet we wanted. We could finally colonise a new world where mankind can start again.”

This was the goal that had always been in John’s mind—ever since an alien being had told him that the Alphans’ destiny was to give humanity a new chance on a world other than the Earth. He wasn’t so sure that his colleagues shared this vision. Maybe they needed proof of the feasibility of his plan.

“The tiranium we salvaged from Alpha will be enough to purchase a ship. Commander Dax and I talked to the Ferengi Quark yesterday evening, and it seems he can get us a warp-capable vessel,” he explained, trying to project a lot more confidence than he felt.

“You’re going to buy a ship from the *bartender*?” laughed Tony.

John had had similar misgivings when Dax first suggested the idea the previous day. But if Dax trusted Quark to conduct this transaction, John saw no reason to refuse. It wasn’t as if he had any better solutions to explore.

“Commander Dax has checked the specifications of the ship he’s proposing,” he said finally. “She can reconfigure the warp drive so that the ship can jump back to our own universe once it’s in the wormhole.”

“What will Starfleet think of *that*?” asked Alan. “I thought they didn’t want anyone to use the wormhole?”

John shrugged his shoulders. “If Captain Sisko says it’s safe to use the wormhole to get back to our universe, I’ll take his word rather than Starfleet’s. And Dax seems to think that shifting back will be a piece of cake.”

Tony nodded, apparently convinced by these arguments. “Mind you, Commander Dax seems to think everything’s a doddle,” he said with a grin. “But how soon can our friend Big Ears get us a ship? Surely Starfleet will just pack us onto this U.S.S. *Addis-Ababa* willy-nilly if we’re still around when it arrives. You said it would take a day to transfer all our equipment onto the Starfleet ship; will we have time to get everything onto this other one? And how can we do that without Starfleet noticing and trying to stop us?”

“That is a problem,” admitted John. “We’ll have to trust Captain Sisko to stall Starfleet.”

Tony guffawed. “Yeah. Sisko’s so good at stalling Starfleet,” he said sarcastically. “He was going to get them to rescind the order to blow up the Moon, too, wasn’t he? And that was a project even the local gods were behind.”

“We’ll just have to trust him,” said John. “For the moment, our first priority is to get that ship, but I’d be grateful if you didn’t discuss this with the rest of the Alphans. And that’s an order,” he added sternly. “We don’t want Starfleet to know all about our plans before they’ve come into effect.”

“I doubt it’s very easy to keep a secret on a station like this,” remarked Tony. “For all we know, they might be listening to us right now. If so, then—’hello, Constable,’” he added, looking upwards as the Starfleets did when they were using their comm system.

John automatically raised his eyes to the ceiling, although there were no eavesdropping devices to be seen. “I doubt Captain Sisko would be very sorry to see us go whichever way we leave,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s Starfleet Command we need to worry about. In the meantime, those of you who don’t have any duties to perform can simply enjoy the facilities here. Everything is at the Federation’s expense, however, so make sure everyone knows not to go overboard with their expenditures.”

“Oh yeah, speaking of entertainment, I wanted to let you all know that we’re having a Starfleet-Alpha friendly this afternoon at 1600,” said Tony as an afterthought. “Football, of course.”

“Soccer,” corrected Alan, looking at John and Helena. “Tony managed to pester the Starfleets into organising a match in the holosuite.”

“Didn’t take much pestering,” protested Tony good-naturedly. “I hope you’ll all turn up to cheer the ‘Squadra Azzurra’ to victory.”

John exchanged a surprised glance with Helena. It seemed very soon after the destruction of the Moon for Tony to be thinking about entertainment. On the other hand, a lot of Alphans enjoyed soccer; the matches they used to play on the base were always well-attended.

“We’ll certainly be there,” he said with a smile. John was surprised that Maya didn’t have any comment to make about Tony’s ‘football’ match. Looking at her, he realised she was either sulking or just too tired to say anything. “Well, I think that’s all we have to discuss for now. I’ll see you all this afternoon, then.”

He watched as his officers left the quarters and then turned to Helena. His wife had a thoughtful expression on her features, eyes half-closed, eyebrows raised.

“Tony and Maya don’t seem to be getting on very well,” she remarked. “She was looking daggers at him all during the meeting. I was very surprised.”

John hadn’t noticed that particular detail, but he did know something was wrong. Perhaps they had argued about Maya’s encounter with Weyoun; after all, it was quite possible that she had told him about her plan to go to Cardassia and that Tony hadn’t taken it well.

“Maybe they’ve had an argument,” he said, mindful to keep his promise to Maya and not mention the Dominion.

“Yes,” agreed Helena. “It’s difficult to tell what Tony thinks of anything, but I know Maya has been through a lot these last few days; even more than we have. She’s been shot, Tony was nearly killed, then on top of that she’s had to deal with whatever the Dominion told her and the Moon’s destruction. I suspect she hasn’t been sleeping very well; anyone’s temper would fray under those circumstances. We saw how she behaved yesterday morning.”

“I suppose so,” said John. “We’ll have to try and convince her to take things easy for a couple of days at least.”

“Actually, I was going to suggest that for *all* the Alphans,” said Helena, lifting her eyebrows significantly.

Odo cast a suspicious glance around as he walked into Quark's bar. The lunchtime rush had just finished; the Ferengi waiters were busy clearing tables and cleaning the floor, while a couple of Bajoran technicians were setting up the giant holographic screen Quark used to transmit sporting events. Odo had a feeling this 'football match' Chief O'Brien had organised was going to be a major disruption. It would attract a lot of people to Quark's, thus provoking inevitable chaos on the Promenade, not to mention that people would no doubt attempt to bet on the game, causing fights and arguments. Odo hated it when there were special events at the bar.

The bartender was studiously polishing glasses as Odo approached. The constable was of the opinion that Quark pursued this activity purely so as to look busy—the replicators provided cleaning facilities far more adequate than a damp cloth, after all.

"Odo, what can I do for you?" said Quark with an egregious grin.

"I hear you're in the market for selling ships these days." Quark's face fell and he interrupted his cleaning. "What are you talking about?" he said finally, starting to vigorously rub the glass again.

"You told Dax you had a ship for the Alphans," said Odo patiently. "I thought I might help you with the transaction. Captain Sisko wouldn't like to see his human friends swindled out of their latinum."

Apparently reassured, Quark put down the glass and started scrubbing another one. "Pshaw, Odo, you don't seriously think I would do that, do you? I like the Alphans; they're some of the best customers I've ever had. You know, after I visited Earth in the 20th century, I've often wished people from that time could come and visit my bar. And my dream has come true. Two hundred primitive humans taking advantage of everything Quark's has to offer: drinks, holosuites, the Dabo table. These aren't your boring Starfleet types. The Alphans know how to enjoy themselves."

"At the Federation's expense," said Odo. He knew from close observation how profligate the Alphans were; Quark's dream come true indeed.

"Whose expense it is doesn't matter," said Quark with a shrug. "At least they appreciate what I have to offer. As to the ship, it's all well above board, don't worry, even though it's behind Starfleet's back. I have a Xepolite contact who can provide a ship by tomorrow evening, just in time to beat that Starfleet vessel. Though why the Alphans are so anxious to leave when the Federation is offering them free hospitality is beyond me."

Odo wasn't interested in knowing why the Alphans wanted to return to their universe; his only desire was to see them go. "They value their freedom, like all humanoids," he said vaguely.

“Their commander does,” agreed the Ferengi. “But I think some of the others would prefer the free hospitality. And this notion of sending them back to their universe ‘secretly’ as it were is downright silly in my opinion. Sisko is just too anxious to do these humans a favour.”

Odo nodded. He had already noticed the captain’s strong bias in favour of the Alphans, and this had been further confirmed when he brought Sisko his report on Maya’s activities during the last 26 hours. There was ample evidence that the woman was planning to remain on DS9 to conduct covert operations for the Dominion, but Sisko was still reluctant to arrest her. Maybe the captain felt a special need to help Koenig’s people after sharing a Prophet-induced vision with the Alphan commander the previous night.

“I have all the specs on the ship, if you like,” continued Quark. It was unlike him to volunteer information, but Odo suspected this was just an effort to keep the conversation going.

The constable was about to tell Quark to send the information to the security office when the photosensitive cells in his simulated eyes caught sight of Nerys’s red uniform approaching. Odo had barely talked to her for the past two days; she hadn’t even bothered to turn up for their daily review of the criminal activities report, explaining each time that she was too busy with the Alphans. It was obvious which Alphan was keeping her busy.

No doubt realising that Nerys had come to talk to Odo, Quark had made himself scarce, though the constable suspected he would be keeping an ear on the conversation nonetheless. Considering the rumours circulating about Verdeschi and Nerys, Odo didn’t want to appear weak and forgiving while Quark was listening.

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring your Terran shadow with you,” said Odo before Nerys got a chance to tell him another one of her lies.

The major’s polite smile vanished. “For your information, I haven’t seen Tony all day. I came to check that you had adequate security planned for this afternoon’s match.”

“Yes, everything is ready,” he replied coldly, noticing that it had taken her no time to guess which ‘Terran shadow’ he was referring to. “I’ll send you the details as soon as I get back to my office.”

“Good. I also wanted to let you know I’ll be manning Ops since Captain Sisko will be here to see the match.” She turned on her heels and Odo watched her walk out, now wishing he hadn’t angered her by mentioning Verdeschi.

Turning back to the bar, Odo wasn’t particularly surprised to find Quark had returned. “You know, Odo, I’d give you a drink if you drank,” said the Ferengi sympathetically. “You look as if you could do with one. Personally, I think it’s disgusting. They should have more respect for you and Maya.”

Having witnessed Maya's insensitivity to Verdeschi's declaration of love the previous evening, Odo wasn't so sure she deserved any respect. Under different circumstances, he would have had heartfelt sympathy for Verdeschi—the constable had, after all, suffered similar disappointment at Nerys's hands in the past. But Odo's sympathy was severely dampened by the suspicion that the human would no doubt attempt to get over his disappointment by flirting—or perhaps even having an affair—with Nerys.

As to the major herself, Odo had to come to the same conclusion as before: she didn't love him and never would. He couldn't blame her for looking elsewhere if she wanted to, and he certainly wouldn't stand in her way.

"Come."

The door responded to Maya's voice command and opened, allowing Helena into the Psychon's living-room. Maya had obviously made no effort to unpack her things; all the boxes were neatly piled in a corner, untouched, and, aside from Maya herself sitting on the couch, the only sign that anyone was living in the quarters was a half-finished bowl of replicated spaghetti carbonara on the dining table.

"Helena," said Maya with a smile, looking up from the padd she was reading.

"Well, you look a lot more cheerful," remarked Helena as she approached. "Did you get some sleep?"

Maya nodded and smiled sheepishly. "Thank you for giving me those pills. I felt a bit guilty sleeping during the day, but you're right, it really helped. It's certainly cleared up my mind a lot."

"I'm glad to hear it." Helena sat down on the couch beside Maya and looked at the padd she was holding. "What are you reading?"

"I'm trying to see if I can wrap my mind around some of the technology they have here," explained Maya. She handed the padd to Helena, but the doctor couldn't understand any of the complex equations in the document, and simply gave the padd back.

"It's... not as easy as I had hoped," admitted Maya, putting the padd beside her. "Replicators and transporters are easy to understand; they're not unlike some of the matter-energy conversion technology we had on Psychon, though I never learned as much about that as I should have. What is giving me the most trouble is warp technology. It wasn't something I ever studied on Psychon, even though we had obtained faster than light ships by the time my brother left. I'm finding it difficult to understand how the warp field works, or rather, how it can move a whole ship into subspace and still maintain temporal integrity while traveling at close to infinite speeds... anyway, I suppose there had to be something I wouldn't understand. The Federation is more advanced than Psychon was," she concluded wistfully.

Helena smiled. “Well, I certainly wouldn’t understand any of that. Julian was kind enough to give me some documentation about 24th century medical instruments. If I have to, I’m sure I can learn how to use them, but I don’t think I’ll ever understand how they work.” She paused briefly to mark the transition and then asked, “Are you coming to the soccer match? It’ll be starting in about half an hour’s time.”

Maya’s expression immediately closed. “No, I have a lot of studying to do. I’ve seen Tony playing football before.”

“It isn’t just Tony playing—you know Bill, Patrick, Alexei and Bob will be there too,” Helena reminded her, although she was observing Maya’s expression intently. “Have you two had an argument?”

“We two who?” asked Maya lightly.

“You and Tony, who else?” said Helena sternly. “As far as I can tell, you’ve hardly spoken to him at all since you came back from Alpha last night.”

Maya shrugged her shoulders. “We can’t get along all the time.”

“Well, that’s the point: you usually do. I’ve rarely seen you argue about anything!” Helena placed her hand on Maya’s and squeezed it comfortingly. “Come on, Maya, tell me what’s wrong. Whatever it is, I’m sure you can work it out; you know how much Tony loves you and—”

“Oh, I know he goes and tells everyone how much he loves me,” said Maya, withdrawing her hand with barely disguised anger. “But that evidently hasn’t stopped him from seeing someone else!”

Helena was amazed. “Seeing someone else? Tony? But that’s not possible. Who could he possibly—” She interrupted herself and tried to think of anyone Tony might have been seeing. The only person who came to mind was Sandra; he had been talking to her the previous evening, and they had comforted each other when the Moon was destroyed. But Helena knew Sandra and Tony had no feelings for each other now; besides, Sandra was a good friend of Maya’s, who surely wouldn’t betray her this way.

Thinking more carefully, Helena remembered a few stray remarks over the past few days, little more than hearsay and innuendo, but which all pointed to one person... “It can’t be Major Kira, surely.”

Maya threw up her hands melodramatically—something she had, ironically, picked up from Tony. “There, you see, everyone has noticed. It’s so obvious that this whole station is talking about them.”

“Oh Maya!” exclaimed Helena in sympathy. “I can’t believe Tony would be so... such a... It doesn’t sound like him.”

Helena had known Tony for years, and in all that time, she had never heard so much as a rumour that he ever behaved as anything but a perfect gentleman. As far as she knew, he had been totally devoted to Maya for the past four years, resisting any advances from other women—Shermeen, for instance. On the other hand, Helena did know that their relationship was platonic—perhaps it had been a little too optimistic to think Tony would be content with that for this length of time. Not that this was a thought Helena cared to share with Maya. And it still didn't excuse Tony.

"How do you know that there's anything going on between them?" asked Helena. "They've been working together for the past few days; it's only logical that they should be spending a lot of time together."

"Quark said he knew they were flirting," said Maya, though Helena could see some doubt in her eyes.

"That's just hearsay, Maya. Did Quark actually see anything?" Maya shook her head. "But everyone is certain something's happening. Even I guessed it was Major Kira when Quark suggested Tony might be with someone else."

"I really can't believe he would do that," said Helena hopefully. "He's not even going to be on the station for that much longer. Why would he be interested in a woman he's only going to know for a week?"

As she spoke, it occurred to Helena that there was at least one good reason she could think of. Looking at Maya, she also realised that the possibility hadn't eluded the Psychon either. It did make sense; maybe Tony was tired of platonic relations. Helena was very disappointed, and angry at Tony for being so inconsiderate of Maya's feelings.

"If this is true... If you find that he really is flirting with Kira, then you can't let him get away with it," said Helena, her outrage increasing as she thought about it. "That sort of behaviour is unpardonable."

"It doesn't really matter," said Maya with a half-hearted shrug. "He can do what he likes: I won't be seeing him for much longer anyway."

Helena stared at her uncomprehendingly. "Why? What do you mean?"

"Whether you go to Starbase 571 or return to our universe, I won't be coming with you."

"The half time air was sweet perfume," quoted John as he got his drink from the bar. He sipped it cautiously, feeling Helena's careful eye on him. "Hmm, it's been a long time since I drank alcohol; I'd better watch out."

Helena smiled indulgently. "Julian said that most of the Earth drinks they have here are actually based on a substance called synthehol, which gives you the buzz of alcohol, but without any of the unpleasant side-effects."

“Sounds like the reverse of Tony’s beer,” exclaimed John with a grin. “Well, it certainly tastes right, and if it means I don’t have to worry about a hangover tomorrow, then it definitely sounds good to me!”

John looked around Quark’s with satisfaction. Nearly all the Alphans had made their way to the bar to watch the football match; in fact, there was hardly a Starfleet or a Bajoran uniform to be seen. It was still only mid-afternoon, so John assumed most of the station’s regular personnel were on duty anyway.

The mood in the bar was euphoric; Alpha’s blue team was up 1-0 at half time. Deep Space Nine’s holosuite had been put to good use; the game was taking place in what looked like a real soccer field, with six real players and five holographic ones on each team. The referee and his assistants were also holograms, no doubt to ensure their impartiality. John was extremely impressed with the quality of the holographic illusions.

As he sipped his drink, John felt more relaxed than he had been in a long time. Although he knew it wouldn’t last, he felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders now that Alpha was destroyed. He knew he would be back to worrying about the Alphans’ future after the match, but for the moment, he was content to enjoy the happy atmosphere.

Looking around, he caught sight of Sisko and Dax, towering over the Alphan crowd. They had evidently come to see the match; hardly surprising considering Dax’s monster of a husband was on the Starfleet team. Seeing the captain, John remembered that there was one topic he had been meaning to discuss with him for some time already. The very first thing he had noticed in Sisko’s office was the baseball the captain kept on his desk. John appreciated soccer after his years working with Europeans—but his heart really belonged to baseball.

“Maybe we could go and talk to Captain Sisko,” he remarked innocently.

“About baseball, perhaps?”

There were times when John wondered if Helena was becoming psychic after all these years of working with him. She had an uncanny ability to guess what he was planning, even when he thought he was being very careful to conceal his intentions. Helena smiled and half shrugged to indicate they might just as well go.

“You can be proud of your team, Commander,” said Dax once the four had exchanged some small talk and the conversation had drifted naturally onto the soccer match. “The Alphans are good. Fraser in particular has some excellent moves, and Verdeschi is a fantastic midfield. I’m ashamed to say I don’t think the Starfleet team is doing so well. Miles and Worf are a bit rusty, and I’m not sure that Julian and Ensign Hauptman were wise choices. If I see Julian miss a pass once more, I’m going to climb up there to replace him myself! His genetic engineering obviously didn’t include foot-eye coordination.”

“Alan did say something about this genetic engineering,” said John, exchanging a glance with his wife. “To be quite honest, we thought that might give the Starfleet team an unfair advantage.”

“The ones with the advantage are the Alphans,” replied Dax with a grin, “because they actually know how to play! The only Starfleet officer who’s doing really well is Lieutenant Dos Santos in the goal—which is fortunate considering how many balls he’s having to deflect. The Starfleet team is too much on the defensive; they’re concentrating on stopping the Alphans from scoring goals instead of thinking about scoring themselves. I’m not surprised Fraser managed to score only fifteen minutes into the game.”

“Bill will be getting a hero’s welcome when he comes out of the holosuite,” agreed John. Realising that neither Sisko nor Helena were interested in soccer, he broached the topic he was really looking forward to discussing. “A lot of Alphans enjoy soccer, but it never really caught on in the States; I’m a baseball man myself.”

“I do enjoy a good game of baseball,” said Sisko enthusiastically. “It isn’t played nowadays; most competitive sports were banned in the 21st century. But it’s still possible to view old matches in the holosuite.”

“Really?” exclaimed John with interest. “I’d be fascinated to know if the World Series results were the same in this universe as in ours.”

“Ask me any year, and I can give you the finalists,” challenged Sisko with a grin.

“1998?”

“New York Yankees vs San Diego Padres.”² “Boston Red Socks vs St. Louis Cardinals on our side.”³ Helena rolled her eyes and exchanged a long-suffering glance with Dax. “I take it you’re not a baseball fan, Doctor,” remarked the Starfleet commander, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

Helena laughed and shook her head. “No, not really. It always used to amaze me that men could remember baseball results from four years ago—but four centuries? Now, I’m impressed!”

Their conversation was interrupted as, on screen, the two teams came back onto the field for the second half. The crowd at Quark’s booed as the Starfleet team came on, and then cheered euphorically for their own team. John had to resist the temptation to do likewise; he knew it wouldn’t be polite to boo Sisko and Dax’s team when he was in the middle of a conversation with them.

² Source: www.worldseries.com

³ *Space: 1999* - "Journey to Where" (ep.29-1976)

Not that the conversation continued much longer. Sisko made some excuse about a communication to make, and Helena wandered off to chat with Sandra and some of the other women; all of which left John to enjoy the match in the company of Dax. At least the alien woman knew something about the game. In fact, she knew a lot more than he did.

“Oh so *that’s* what ‘off-side’ means,” he exclaimed when she explained why her husband’s goal had just been disallowed. “To be quite honest, I never dared to ask the soccer fanatics on Alpha. They all behaved as if it was something obvious and I... I must admit I liked to pretend I knew everything.”

“Most commanders do,” said Dax with an amused glint in her intelligent blue eyes. “As to the game, I suppose whoever made up the rules thought it wouldn’t be fair if the attacker was closer to the goal than the defenders from the opposite team when he got the ball. It does make for some strange situations... not to mention a lot of fights...”

Her voice trailed off as she looked up at the screen. Following her gaze, John realised that her husband Worf was not at all pleased with the holographic referee’s decision. Evidently irritated by Worf’s behaviour, the referee pointed at him and waved a yellow card. John knew that was a warning not to do it again or he would be sent off.

“Oh, Worf!” cried out Dax in exasperation. “Don’t make a fuss. You were so off-side you might as well have been standing in the goal!”

The other players had crowded around to see what was happening; Tony in particular seemed very vocal about the argument—John knew the Italian took his football very seriously. By then, Worf was obviously looking to take out his anger on someone, and the Alphan first officer no doubt seemed like a logical target. The Klingon took one punch at the human, and Tony fell over, straight as a bowling pin.

There was a howl from the crowd, a mixture of laughter and concern, while Tony lay flat on his back, apparently unconscious. Alarmed to see his first officer in this condition, John exchanged a concerned look with his wife; he realised she was prepared to go into the holosuite if necessary. On screen, Doctor Bashir rushed over and waved one of his instruments at the Alphan; that magic wand did the trick and Tony was soon sitting up and shaking his head in surprise. Within a few minutes, he was up and ready to play again. Worf, meanwhile, was sent off.

“Oh what an *idiot!*” Dax threw her hands up helplessly. “I guess that definitely puts an end to Starfleet’s chances. And sure enough, here comes your friend Verdeschi now.”

Apparently fully recovered, Tony was working his way up the field with the ball. A surprised Bashir tried to intercept him, but the Italian looked over his shoulder, saw Bill, and within a split second, hit the ball with the back of his heel, straight to the tip of his colleague's boot. Bill took a moment to look around him, evidently assessing his position relative to the Starfleet defenders—satisfied with this, he kicked the ball powerfully, sending it flying towards the Starfleet goal. Dos Santos dived frantically but could only stare in horror as the ball hurtled straight past him and went bounding into the net.

“YES!” shouted John, joining in the joy of his colleagues.

On screen, Bill raised his fists in victory as his team mates surrounded him. They slapped him on the back and embraced him, and Tony even got carried away enough to kiss him. Although she hadn't been paying attention for most of the match, John saw Helena pushing her way through the exuberant crowd towards him, a delighted smile on her lovely features. At last, after nearly a week of being 'primitive humans' to their Starfleet hosts, the Alphans got an opportunity to prove their worth.

Nerys was congratulating herself. For the first time since Alpha had appeared, she had managed to avoid Tony completely for a whole day. Odo was right; Tony had turned into her shadow this past week and it was time to spend some time away from the man. Aside from anything else, she was getting far too interested in the Alphan—she was even having dreams about him!

A Starfleet ensign handed her a report on the station's medical supplies and Nerys drew her mind off Tony. She had volunteered to command Ops while the rest of the senior staff were either playing or watching the football match, and she was pleased with this wise decision. After all, the last thing she wanted was to see Tony performing sporting feats. She had always had a liking for sportsmen—her lover Bareil Antos had been an excellent springball player—and she really didn't need any new reasons to like Tony. She would let Maya admire him for a change.

On the other hand, she was rather curious about the match. It had started nearly two hours earlier, so Nerys was sure there must have been some result by now. Her loyalty to her Starfleet friends notwithstanding, Nerys was hoping the Alphans were doing well. It didn't seem fair to make them play against people like Worf and Julian. She looked down at the padd in her hand and decided to take it to the Infirmary herself. Julian would probably still be playing the game, but one of the nurses on duty could no doubt let her know how the match was proceeding. Besides, Ops had been dreadfully dull this afternoon; Nerys was bored.

She could hear the cheers from Quark's as she brought the report to the Infirmary. Nerys assumed from the noise that the game was still going on; that made her confident she wouldn't encounter Tony if she avoided the bar. Nerys had no sooner stepped into the Infirmary than she realised her mistake.

"Another outing for Verdeschi the Unconscious. I should just move in here and save myself the trouble of coming in to be patched up every day. Maybe I need to take out accident coverage or something."

There was no mistaking that cheerful voice. *It's the will of the Prophets*, thought Nerys with a sigh as she walked in.

Tony was sitting up on one of the beds, stripped to the waist and wearing very little besides—a pair of white shorts, blue knee-high socks and laced-up shoes. He looked up and grinned as he recognised Nerys. She returned his smile, though she frowned briefly when he winked at her. Fortunately, Julian hadn't noticed; he was currently inspecting Tony's head with his tricorder.

"You're lucky I am here to patch you up," said the doctor wryly. "You should have known better than to pick a fight with Worf. And I told you not to continue playing after he knocked you out... Oh good evening, Major." He smiled at Nerys and snapped his tricorder shut.

"That's the trouble with your technology," said Tony. "Makes me feel invincible."

"You sure that's nothing to do with your ego?" suggested Nerys. Tony just laughed good-naturedly; they exchanged a glance and Nerys's heartbeat increased momentarily. She took a deep breath and looked away.

"Anyway, Julian," she said to bring the topic off Tony for a moment, "you said something about going to the holosuite tonight. I was wondering what time Odo and I should come around." Nerys thought she might as well mention the constable, though it seemed rather pointless with Tony half-naked in front of her.

"The holosuite? What were you planning to do?" asked Tony, putting on a politely interested expression as he was evidently unaware that he was invited.

"Oh, ah, I thought we could go to Vic's tonight," said Julian. "The combined senior staffs of DS9 and Alpha, that is. It's actually a 20th century night club: you and your colleagues can probably tell us more about the time period."

Tony stood up and slid on his muddy blue top. Nerys noticed it had his name and a big Terran number 10 on the back. "Depends which end of the 20th century we're talking about," said the Alphan. "If we're going to the Cotton Club, I'll be as lost as you are."

"You need to ask the replicator for '1960 evening wear'," explained Nerys. That was as much as she knew about the prerequisites for visiting the programme. "It's a very good programme. Odo and I had our first date there."

“1960? That’s a bit before my time. I wasn’t even born then!” Tony laughed and added, “I can’t believe you all go to a 20th century night-club for entertainment. That’s a bit old-fashioned, isn’t it? I don’t think I’d personally use the holosuite to recreate a 16th century tavern!”

“So you prefer Risa?” suggested Julian with a chuckle. Nerys had a sudden flashback to the Alphans on the Risan beach the previous day. She remembered with embarrassment that she had been struck dumb by the sight.

“Oh yeah, we liked that one,” agreed Tony with a grin. He looked at Nerys again. “Well, the rest of the team is celebrating at Quark’s, but I really need to go and change.” He indicated his muddy costume, and went to pick up his Alphan jacket, which was laid out on a chair.

“And I’d better go and tell Odo the plan for tonight,” announced Nerys.

“I’ll see you all at 2000,” called out Julian after them.

Nerys followed Tony out of the Infirmary; it was only once they were walking along the Promenade to the Turbolift that it occurred to her she should have let Tony go on first, and followed later. As it was, anyone on the Promenade would see them walking together. Not that they were doing anything wrong—yet.

At 1800, just a couple thousand kilometres away from DS9, the detached cockpit of Eagle Sixteen was concluding its journey. As it reached the apparently empty area that was the wormhole’s tether to normal space, it was greeted by a sudden surge in neutrinos, which gradually built up, buffeting the tiny object like a cork on the sea. After a few seconds, the mouth of the wormhole burst into existence in a bright flurry of colours, reducing the cockpit to the relative size of a spec of dust.

Unable to counter the gravitational pull of the giant wormhole, the Eagle cockpit was sucked into the subspace tunnel. Further away, Deep Space Nine rocked imperceptibly, its stabilisers long used to compensating for the opening and closing of the wormhole. But further still, the sudden addition of the wormhole to the mass in that sector caused minute shifts in the relative positions of Bajor VIII and its satellites. Shifts which Deep Space Nine’s computer duly noted, analysed and transmitted to the technician on duty. *Shifts which came nine hours too late.*

CHAPTER TWELVE
All That Glisters

CHAPTER TWELVE – *All That Glisters*

*“And so you're back from outer space
I just walked in to find you here
With that sad look upon your face
I should have changed that stupid lock
I should have made you leave your key
If I'd've known for just one second you'd be back to bother me”*
Gloria Gaynor - “I Will Survive”¹

Maya peered cautiously into the bar before entering. She wanted to make sure she wouldn't unexpectedly bump into Tony. She had managed to avoid the football match, but by now, she was tired of being alone in her quarters: familiarity didn't make them any less depressing. She was in the mood for some company.

There were certainly plenty of people in Quark's. A quick glance around suggested that nearly all the other Alphans were present. The only notable exception as far as Maya could tell was Tony, but given her current feelings about him, that was probably just as well.

“Maya!” Helena was calling her; the Psychon turned towards her friend's voice and moved over to join her. Helena was with John, Dax and a large alien who was introduced as Dax's husband, Worf. They discussed the football match—although she didn't want to offend the Starfleet officers by telling them so, Maya was very pleased to hear that the Alphans had scored a clear victory.

“Of course, the Starfleet team would have won if they weren't playing with one man down for the last half hour,” said Dax, scowling at her husband. She was evidently very annoyed by Starfleet's defeat.

“Why? What happened?” asked Maya innocently.

Ignoring her husband's growl, Dax crossed her arms. “Worf knocked your friend Verdeschi unconscious.” Maya's heart skipped a beat. No doubt reading her expression, Dax smiled reassuringly. “Don't worry, he recovered very quickly, and even went on to score a goal!”

“No amount of injury would stop Tony from playing football,” said Maya fondly, relieved to know he was all right.

She glanced at Helena and noticed that the doctor was watching her disapprovingly. Maya suddenly remembered that she wasn't supposed to be feeling any fondness for Tony. He deserved to be punished for flirting with Kira.

¹ Gloria Gaynor - "I Will Survive" (Fekaris / Perren) - Polygram, 1978

“He’s in the Infirmary,” said Dax, apparently unaware of Helena’s reaction. “Perhaps you should go and see how he is.”

Maya looked at Helena; the doctor’s expression was still serious and forbidding. Having spent the afternoon thinking over what she had told Tony the previous night, Maya now felt that she should have given Tony more explanation as to why she didn’t want him to stay with her. Perhaps she could take this opportunity to talk to him again.

“Yes, I think I should congratulate him for the Alphans’ victory,” she said decisively. She smiled sweetly at Helena and backed away through the crowd.

Maya didn’t even need to go to the Infirmary to see if Tony was all right. She had barely gone one hundred metres down the Promenade when she caught sight of a bright red uniform contrasted with the blue of an Italian football shirt. Tony and Kira were walking in the opposite direction, toward the Turbolift that led to the Habitat Ring. They were evidently in full conversation, Tony gesturing as he entertained Kira with one of his long-winded stories.

Maya stood on the Promenade for a moment, unsure what to do next, her heart thumping with disappointment. So Tony did like Kira better; Quark was right. And Helena was right too: if that was how Tony behaved, then Maya shouldn’t be wasting any time thinking about him. She tried to tell herself she should be angry at him for betraying her like this, but all Maya felt right then was disappointment, and regret that she hadn’t thought to tell him she loved him when she got a chance.

She returned to Quark’s and walked up to the bar, her mood completely deflated. A few of the Alphans were singing loudly in a corner. Maya recognised it as a cheerful European football song about lions that Bill always wanted to sing every time they had a match. She knew it so well she was half tempted to sing along. Not that it suited her present mood at all. ²

“If they sing that once more, I’m throwing them out,” grumbled Quark as he approached. “Now, what can I get you, Maya?” he asked more kindly.

Maya frowned thoughtfully for a moment; she knew that thanks to the replicators, Quark could get her anything she wanted. She tried to think of something that would cheer her up. Alcohol would no doubt do the trick, but she was loath to drink when she knew she wasn’t used to it. The only alcohol she had ever drunk was Tony’s infamous beer; that was hardly encouragement to try any others.

2 The British Alphans are entertaining Quark's with a rendition of Baddiel, Skinner & the Lightening Seeds' "Three Lions", the unofficial anthem of England's presence at the 1998 World Cup.

Her mind lingered on the thought of Tony tinkering with his brewing machine. She remembered the last time they had been on Alpha together, just before the Jem'Hadar attack, when she had teased him by taking Major Kira's shape. Maya's heart sank as she realised what a mistake that must have been. She knew she could have stopped Tony from going with Kira if she'd had the presence of mind to tell him she loved him. Even if she didn't, at least she could have kept him with her... but kept him for what? To take him to Cardassia? And what if it turned out she was mistaking infatuation for love—was that enough to build their future lives on? Her thoughts simply brought her back to the same arguments that had made her hesitate in the first place. All Maya knew for sure was that she didn't want Tony to be with Kira.

"I can always come back later if you're not ready to order now," she heard Quark say. Maya realised she had been staring into space for some time and shook herself out of her reverie.

"You were right," she said simply, turning to look at the Ferengi's wizened orange face. "What you said last night—it's true. He's with her right now."

Maya could have sworn one of the bottles on the counter behind Quark shimmered unnaturally for a moment. She stared at it, but was unable to decide whether it had really moved or she had been the victim of an optical illusion.

"I'm sorry," said Quark sincerely; looking at him, Maya saw that his small eyes were full of sympathy. "Here, whatever you want, it's on the house."

"All my drinks are on the Federation, aren't they?" Maya smiled, though she was still curious about the bottle.

Quark flashed a toothy grin at her. "Oh, well, in that case, whatever you want is on the Federation. Now, have you decided what you'd like to drink yet?"

"What would you suggest?"

"I think I have just what you need to cheer up," he said, waving a finger at her.

Maya watched the Ferengi as he fetched different bottles and poured small quantities of their contents into a glass, producing a clear, transparent beverage. Curious, Maya reached for it, but Quark stopped her hand. Folding his middle finger against his thumb, he flicked his green nail against the rim of the glass and the beverage turned to iridescent and then orange.

Maya was so surprised that she involuntarily clapped her hands with delight. "Oh, that's lovely! What is it?"

"A Samarian Sunset. A drink for pretty ladies," said Quark smoothly, handing her the colourful glass.

Maya smiled as she prepared to taste the drink. Looking over Quark's shoulder, she realised the bottle she had observed earlier was gone. *So Odo is wasting his time spying on me, she thought wryly, when he should be keeping an eye on that girlfriend of his.*

Her musings were interrupted as Dax came to join her. "Maya, we need to go to Ops. The wormhole has just opened."

"How did the game go?" asked Nerys conversationally, as she and Tony waited for the Turbolift to the Habitat Ring. "I heard you were doing very well."

"Oh, yes, we beat Starfleet 3-1! That'll teach them to call us 'primitive humans'. Mind you, they were one man down for most of the second half, but then that's the price of Worf for knocking me out!" exclaimed Tony with a grin.

"Why did he do that?" asked Nerys, standing aside to let people off the lift.

"Usual old reason," said Tony. "He probably didn't like the look of me. And I called him a few names too, which didn't help. I doubt he knows much Italian, but I think he could guess what I was saying."

Nerys laughed and walked into the lift; she barely noticed that they were alone in it. "I see you've been making lots of friends."

"Oh yes, I'm Mister Popular on Deep Space Nine," declared Tony as the lift glided toward the Habitat Ring. "Odo hates me, Maya has ditched me and now some Klingon brute wants to kill me. I definitely have a line in making friends and influencing people!"

Nerys laughed and chose not to remark on the bit about Maya 'ditching' him. The girl obviously didn't appreciate what Tony was offering her; Nerys reflected that she had once treated Odo exactly the same way, something she had come to regret once she was involved with him. She could probably give the Psychon some good advice about the advantages of being in a relationship with a man who worshipped her. On the other hand, Nerys was in no mood for giving lectures. Especially as her relationship with Odo was hardly a great success right now.

Deciding that she should say something to cheer Tony up, Nerys cast a glance at his current accoutrement. Most collective games Nerys knew were not played half-naked, but rather with sensible, formfitting costumes; even Sisko's favourite Earth game, 'baseball', required the contestants to be dressed. Tony's outfit left not only his arms uncovered, but, more disturbingly, his legs as well. Nerys wasn't used to seeing the legs of human males.

"You really don't like that uniform of yours, do you, Tony?" she remarked. "Every time I see you, you seem to be wearing something else."

"Usually *less*, right?" said Tony. He immediately put on the jacket he was carrying. "Better? I must say you do have a habit of walking in on me when I'm in various states of undress. I only hope you like what you see," he added more quietly.

"I've seen better," she said with a smile, looking him over again.

Tony's eyes lit up and he moved closer, evidently interpreting the comment as an encouragement. "I'll bet you have. Being cooped up on the Moon didn't really do much for my complexion. You probably won't believe this, but I used to be quite good-looking when I was young."

"Oh? And when was that, then?" asked Nerys, as though she couldn't possibly imagine him ever being young.

"Well, about 400 years ago, of course," he replied. "I'm currently... what was it? Yes, 407 years old. Strictly speaking, I'll be 408 in November."

"All right, I'll admit you don't look bad for a 400-year-old." Tony took another step closer and Nerys could smell the replicated mud from his clothes. "I'd like to think I don't look bad for a 40-year-old, either," he said with a confident smile that made her shiver.

"I think you don't look bad for someone with such a big ego, either," remarked Nerys, turning away. She felt the deceleration of the lift and involuntarily sighed with relief.

The door opened and they stepped out into the empty corridor. "I'm not as narcissistic as you seem to think, Nerys," said Tony as she walked with him in the direction of the Alphans' quarters. She could hear the levity in his voice. "It's not like I'm making it all up. I mean, I'm handsome, I'm funny, I'm in a position of authority... besides, it's a well known fact that no woman can resist an Italian."

"Really?" she said dubiously.

"Well, maybe it's just that no woman can resist me."

Tony said that with such mock seriousness that Nerys couldn't help laughing. "I find that hard to believe."

"And you're right," he agreed without missing a beat. "I know someone who's been resisting me for years."

"Ah, the elusive Maya." Nerys narrowed her eyes knowingly, aware that it was a gesture most men found seductive.

"Yeah," he said shortly, stopping to look at Nerys. "I'll bet you look great in something else than your uniform, too."

"Like a swimsuit?" she asked, remembering him on the beach the previous day.

Tony guffawed and raised his hands innocently. "You're the one who said it, Nerys...but, yes, if you ever decide to visit Risa, be sure to let me know!" He chuckled and then his smile faded. "If you didn't already have someone to take you there, I'd do it myself..."

Nerys felt a sudden rush of adrenaline tense up her body, draining the blood from her face and making her heart beat faster. She could take advantage of Tony's remark to say that she did indeed have someone else. Then she could walk away, forget about all this and go back to the Promenade, to tell Odo about the plan for tonight as was her original intention. But she didn't.

She took a step back and leaned against the nearest bulkhead. "Odo doesn't like beaches," she said softly.

As Nerys had expected, Tony moved closer, though he was smiling again. He looked down and slowly traced the top of her belt, making her shudder with the unexpected touch. When he lifted his eyes back to her face; they were twinkling with amusement. "I suppose he'd get lots of sand in him."

Nerys burst out laughing at the mental image that brought to mind. She knew it was cruel to laugh at Odo, Odo who loved her so much but whom she did not love and who could not make her feel so euphoric with his laughter and his closeness and his scent and the feel of his lips on hers. Odo had no scent, just a vague odour of the stale air in his small office on the Promenade, not the scent of a humanoid like herself, made of flesh and blood, a humanoid from a sibling race and who tasted of beer and sweat and desire.

Tony's mouth left her lips and moved to attack her neck and Nerys took in a deep breath, like a gasp for air although she could still breathe, even pinned to the bulkhead as she was. She looked up at the ceiling, her head spinning and her mind emptied of thought, the lights blurred by her half-closed eyes. Tony's embrace loosened suddenly and Nerys's gaze refocused; she turned to look at him uncomprehendingly.

"I think we need a change of venue," he explained breathlessly.

"Oh, Prophets! And I'm still on duty," she reminded herself out loud.

"Now she tells me!" Tony was laughing, probably at her and himself and the whole ludicrous situation. "I'm definitely jinxed," he added, shaking his head incredulously. He leaned against the bulkhead beside her and ran his hand flat over her uniform. "I see I managed to get some holographic mud on you."

Nerys glanced down at herself and smiled; there was no mud to be seen. "I'm sorry," she said. "I do have to go back to Ops." That was the truth; she wasn't supposed to be on the Habitat Ring at all. "Maybe next time."

"Oh, there's going to be a next time, is there?" exclaimed Tony with an uncertain smile.

Nerys looked at him. She opened her mouth and then realised she couldn't make any promises either way. Tony kissed her again, more gently this time, and she ran her hands up underneath his jacket, on the back of his muddy shirt.

Tony finally let go of her and stepped away. "So... you're going back?" Nerys nodded. "Well... I, ah, I need to go and... have a... a shower and change and stuff," he stuttered. "I guess I'll see you in Julian's holosuite night club tonight."

"Yes," she said, still dazed by the whole chain of events. "I'll... I'll see you later." And with that, she took a deep breath and walked back to the lift.

"The Moon would have entered orbit around the Bajoran sun?" John couldn't believe his ears. He watched the simulation on Sisko's desk; it showed that the wormhole's unexpected opening would have diverted the Moon just enough to allow it to enter the Bajoran system without hitting Bajor VIII. Given the relative positions the Moon and the planet would have been in at 1800, Deep Space Nine's computer came to the conclusion that Alpha would have then gone on to assume a medium orbit around the sun.

"The computer calculates the odds as being 7 to 1," explained Dax. "Obviously, we can't start speculating on what might have been... It's too late now. But when the wormhole opened, Maya and I decided to run a simulation, and you see the result. We thought you might like to know."

"At least it gives us some idea what the Prophets were talking about when they were asking you both not to destroy the Moon," said Maya. "They presumably knew that the Eagle would open the wormhole and that there was a chance this would allow Alpha to orbit the sun."

John stayed silent for a moment, too angry to trust himself to say anything. Even though he had spent the last six years hoping his people might some day be able to leave Alpha behind and settle somewhere else, contemplating this near miss made John very bitter. The Alphans had preserved all the possessions and equipment they had had on the Moon, but the erstwhile satellite itself had been their last link to the Earth they had grown up on. Now that he knew the Moon could have been saved, John realised how much he was going to miss it.

"That's why they kept telling me we were going to find a new home," he said finally. "If Alpha had entered the Bajoran system unharmed, we could have stayed there."

"With our technology, we might even have been able to create an artificial atmosphere on the Moon," said Dax.

John remembered the one time that had happened to Alpha. He exchanged a glance with Maya, but then remembered she hadn't been with them at the time. Five years ago, the Moon had very nearly entered orbit around an alien sun. The existing inhabitants of the system had equipped Alpha with an artificial atmosphere and, for a few days until the Moon drifted back out into interstellar space, the Alphans had enjoyed an outdoor life on the surface of their home. ³

"There's no point thinking about what might have been," said Sisko ponderously. "But I wonder why the Prophets were so keen to see you settle in this system."

"Maybe they took pity on us," suggested Maya with a wan smile.

3 *Space: 1999 - "The Last Sunset"* (ep.11-1974)

“Perhaps they wanted you to stay here,” said Sisko. John noticed that the captain looked at Maya as he spoke. “I’m beginning to think your presence in this universe is no coincidence. The odds of that Eagle hitting the centre of the wormhole were too long. I doubt the Prophets would have bothered to pay attention to a detail like that unless it was of vital importance to them.”

Knowing as he did Maya’s connection with the Dominion in this universe, John had come to the same conclusion, although he couldn’t share that thought with the Starfleets.

“What could be of vital importance to the Prophets?” asked John. “If they live in the wormhole and outside of linear time, surely Alpha would be of no significance to them.”

“The Prophets consider themselves the protectors of the Bajoran people; we can only assume that their purpose had something to do with a threat to Bajor.” Sisko looked at Maya thoughtfully. “I was hoping to find some reference to the Moon or its inhabitants in the ancient texts, but there appears to be no mention of this event anywhere. The Prophets have usually announced any important event beforehand, albeit in a form which is only comprehensible after the fact—but then that is typical of any oracle.”

“Maybe they can’t foresee things that come from an alternate universe,” suggested Dax. As everyone turned to look at her, she smiled innocently. “I’m not a theologian; it’s just a hunch.”

“You might be right,” agreed Maya. “The Prophets may be specialists on predicting the future, but inherently, that means they can only be observing one universe at a time. The theory of quantum realities postulates that for every ‘yes’ or ‘no’ decision, both decisions are taken, thus splitting the universe. The result is an infinity of different realities, so an infinity of possible futures for any given point in time. It’s conceivable the Prophets only exist in their present form in this particular reality, not in ours, so they can only predict events that occur in this universe.”

“A Starfleet manual couldn’t have put it better,” said Dax. “But quantum realities only apply to linear time. Beings that live outside time should, in theory, be able to see all of the different quantum threads at once. This does in fact explain the Prophet’s ability to view events that are likely to happen rather than those which will happen.”

John could see at least one other flaw in Maya’s theory; the wormhole existed in both realities, which meant the Prophets probably did as well. But he was in no mood for a philosophical discussion which would lead nowhere. It was interesting to know what the Prophets were hoping for when they had contacted Sisko and John, but as far as the commander could tell, it made absolutely no difference to the Alphans’ present situation.

“Whatever the Prophets’ plans were, they have failed,” he said sternly. “We need to concentrate on what we’re going to do next.”

Dax smiled brightly. “That’s exactly what I’ll be concentrating on. We want to make sure the Alphan’s future is a good one. But in the meantime, what we’re going to do right now is go to Vic’s.”

*//Fly me to the moon
And let me play among the stars
Let me see what spring is like
On Jupiter and Mars// 4*

Tony wondered if Julian had had the bad taste to ask for the song, or if it was just an unfortunate feature of the programme. Perhaps it was simply part of the holographic band’s usual repertoire. Looking around, Tony wondered what 24th century weirdo had thought this programme up. As far as he could tell, he was standing in a fair approximation of a Sixties night-club, complete with a crooner on stage. *Just when I thought things couldn’t get any stranger...* he reflected.

It didn’t take Tony long to spot the Alphan and Starfleet tables in the dim light, though he felt his heart sink as the first thing he noticed was Maya’s long red hair. She was sitting with her back to him, looking up at the stage. He could see her clear cut features profiled in the dark, the slope of her nose, the curves of her lips, her beautiful long throat. He barely noticed that Kate and Alibe were at the table with her, while Julian and Sandra shared a table nearby.

Tony hesitated before joining them. He couldn’t talk to Maya after what had happened earlier. A bitter pang of guilt tore at his heart at the very thought. Tony would have liked to think he’d have more restraint than to pounce on Deep Space Nine’s first officer in a corridor, but there were evidently no limits to the ways in which he could surprise himself.

“Tony! Hey, we’re over here!” called out Alibe, waving her arm.

There was no escape. All the others, including Maya, had turned to look at him. Tony felt he had no choice but to go and join them. As he approached, he noticed that Alibe was the only black person in the holosuite—no doubt a touch of realism on the part of the programmer.

“Hiya, Tone,” exclaimed Kate, lighting a cigarette. “I say, you look like James Bond in that tux. Very chic.”

Tony grinned and lifted an eyebrow, straightening his bow tie. “All right, then, who’s playing Pushy Galore?”

4 Frank Sinatra - "Fly Me To The Moon" (B. Howard)

"Maya, no doubt," laughed Alibe. "She'd probably make a good James Bond girl. I can just see her in a furry bikini." Maya responded to this comment with an uncharacteristic giggle.

Tony found that a chair seemed to have miraculously materialised beside him. "I think you have several references mixed up there, baby," he said, pulling the chair up to the table, beside Maya. The other two women moved over to make way for him. "You know John would have a fit if he saw you smoking, Alibe," he remarked, pointing at the cigarette in her hand.

"Oh, come on," said Alibe with a shrug. "We're not on Alpha anymore. We don't have to worry about clogging up the life-support systems or whatever. Besides, the instructions on this holosuite say that nothing you eat, drink or do in here will harm you."

"So, want one?" offered Kate, picking up the case on the table.

"Um, no thanks." Tony realised he had forgotten just how offensive the smell of tobacco could be. He was not tempted to resume the habit. "Anyway, talking about furry bikinis, we all know who looks good in those," he said, looking pointedly at Sandra. She was in conversation with Julian, but she did cast a glance at the other table when she realised they were looking at her.

"Oh, yes, of course, the leopard skin bikini!" exclaimed Alibe much more loudly than necessary.

One of the Alphan's more bizarre adventures had involved some kind of de-evolving mist that had reverted most of the crew to stone age creatures. Somehow, in the course of the adventure, a de-evolved Commander Koenig had got Sandra to dress up in a garment that looked rather like a leopard skin bikini. Tony had remarkably vivid memories of the costume; it was around that time that he—and indeed half the male population on the base—had decided he wouldn't mind going out with Sandra.⁵

The communications officer had heard Alibe's last remark. "Oh, you are so silly!" she said, though she was smiling. "That was years ago!" Julian evidently wanted to know what the joke was about, but Sandra shook her head; it was probably not something she wanted to explain.

Turning to look at Maya, Tony found that she was laughing with the others. Encouraged by her apparent good mood, he decided he was brave enough to talk to her. She didn't know what he had done, after all. Not yet.

"Hello you," he said gently. "I've barely seen you all day. What have you been up to?"

5 *Space: 1999 - "The Full Circle"* (ep.15-1974)

Maya's expression was not unfriendly, but there was a coldness in her eyes that made him feel as though he was talking to a new date, rather than a girl he had loved for four years. Maybe Maya didn't feel she had to be kind to Tony now she had told him she didn't love him.

"I've been learning all sorts of interesting things," she said, her voice slightly slurred and her Psychon accent more pronounced than usual. "About warp drives, transporters and human nature. Far more interesting than yet another of your football matches." She waved her hand disdainfully.

If he didn't know better he would have sworn Maya was drunk. But with Kate and Alibe no doubt hanging on every word, he decided not to say anything untoward.

"I'll have you know my football matches are fascinating, especially when we win!" he declared.

"Ah, but you can't always win, Tony," said Maya philosophically.

Tony stared at her, unsure what to say. There was definitely something different in her attitude tonight and he didn't think it had anything to do with the drink. It was possible that she had heard and believed the rumours about him and Nerys. Perhaps that even explained what she had told him the previous night.

What she had told him... Had he been alone, Tony might have slapped his forehead in frustration. This should have occurred to him before. It all made sense: Maya had told him she didn't love him because she thought he was interested in Nerys. And like the complete prat that he was, he had found nothing better to do than to immediately jump into Nerys's arms. Barring that mistake, he could have redeemed himself in Maya's eyes and proved that the rumours were wrong. But now that he had made them true, there wasn't much to be done.

Tony wished the holosuite floor would open and swallow him up. Alternatively, he could probably go to the docking ring and throw himself out of an airlock. Even burying his face in his hands would have made him feel a bit better. But none of those were realistic possibilities, so he picked up the cigarette case on the table and observed it unseeingly for a moment.

"Maya," he said finally, turning towards her. "I need to talk to you. I've been such a..."

"Shut up, Tony. I'm listening to the music," she said impatiently.

Tony looked down at the cigarette case again as the reflections from the stage caught his eye. He was tired from the football match and the worry, and the guilt he felt at having kissed Nerys made him tongue tied and depressed. How could everything collapse in one week? He had no home, no command, no girlfriend, no family, no future... not even the mental comfort of being an honourable man.

"I ah... I think I'll go and get myself a drink," he said finally.

The crooner was winding down his Sinatra imitation as Tony approached the bar. He reflected that it should be possible to create Old Blue Eyes himself in a holosuite; unless of course there was some kind of copyright infringement involved. It wouldn't have surprised Tony at all if Sinatra had secured his rights up to the 30th century. As it was, the holographic crooner wasn't all that bad, though Tony had never particularly liked that type of music.

Having got his drink, Tony decided to stay at the bar rather than go back to Maya. There was nothing he could say to make things better, so he might just as well keep quiet and let Maya get on with her life. He was pensively finishing off an olive when he saw the holographic crooner coming towards him. They exchanged some general small talk about the show and the crooner, who called himself Vic, asked if Tony had any requests.

"I suppose you know 'Volare,'" suggested Tony. Off the top of his head, it was the only Italian song he could think of that a 1960s crooner would know. Further reflection proposed 'O Sole Mio' and 'Una Lacrima Sul Viso' as alternatives, but by then Vic had nodded enthusiastically.

"Do I ever! Am I to take it you're a Dino fan, Mister Verdeschi?" asked the hologram with a pleasant smile.

"Well, my parents were into all that stuff," admitted Tony, shrugging this shoulders. "Actually... don't tell the others, but my brother and I were named after Sinatra and Martin. My brother's middle name was Frank—mine is Dean. I guess my parents liked the idea of Italians doing so well in the States."

"Ah, parents," exclaimed Vic. "Someone to blame for all your misfortunes!"

In spite of himself, Tony was quite impressed with Vic: he had never imagined he would find a self-aware holographic crooner such good company. There was evidently a lot more to 24th century holographic technology than simply recreating beaches and football stadiums.

"But I do think your parents have good taste, Mister Verdeschi," continued the crooner. "You can't go wrong with Frank and Dean. It'll be a pleasure to sing 'Volare' for you. Just one thing, though: make sure you invite that lovely lady of yours to dance. I know you don't think she likes you, but she does."

"Oh really?" said Tony coldly, surprised at the hologram's sudden intrusion into his private life.

Undeterred by the Italian's reaction, Vic pointed a finger at him and smiled knowingly. "Let me tell you something. You could say I'm designed to spot these things—believe me, that chick's crazy about you. She might not know it yet, but she is."

"Maya isn't a 'chick,'" said Tony shortly.

"You're right, she's a lady," agreed the hologram. "But she's a lady who doesn't know what she wants, and who isn't going to find out if you're hiding over here at the bar!"

Tony shook his head, unconvinced. "I don't think I'm *that* important. I'm hardly God's gift to women."

"Have you been taking self-esteem-lowering courses from Odo or what?" exclaimed Vic, spreading his hands. "Where's that Italian zest for life?"

"I don't think I ever had it. I was born with a Northern European depression. In any case, you... you don't understand. Things haven't been... working out between us," said Tony vaguely. He didn't want to tell Vic about Nerys, but on the other hand, he did want to make it clear this problems wouldn't be solved by asking Maya to dance. "I'm definitely in her bad books."

"Come on. Whatever it is, I doubt she'll be angry for long," said Vic soothingly. "She's crazy about you, I tell you. Her pretty little face lit up like a Christmas tree when you walked in—until she remembered whatever it is she's supposed to be mad about and started to ignore you. Trust me, you go and ask her to dance. What's the worst that can happen?"

"She could tell me to get lost... again." "Well, you just keep asking her, and I guarantee you some day she'll say yes," said the hologram confidently as he turned grandiosely to his orchestra.

Great. There's the next twenty years of my life all planned out, thought Tony wryly as Vic began to sing.

Jazzed up as this version of 'Volare' was, it was definitely danceable. Tony had never learned ballroom dancing, and as far as he knew, Maya had never learned to dance at all, but he still thought it would be a very good idea to have a twirl on the dance floor. By way of encouragement, the programme had arranged a few holographic dancers on the floor.

There was the possibility that Maya would refuse, of course. But even if she didn't love him, she would surely have the sense not to make her rejection of him public—it would put both of them in a very bad light. Tony took a deep breath and approached Maya's table.

*//Volare, oh, oh!
Cantare, oh, oh, oh, oh!
Nel blu dipinto di blu
Felice di stare lassù//⁶*

"Would you care for a dance, *Signorina?*" he asked, making the offer with just enough of his usual humour to possibly save face if she refused.

Maya stared at him in surprise, evidently unsure what to say. The puzzled expression on her face was a throwback to the days of her first arrival on Alpha, when just about everything Tony said or did seemed to confuse her. Within the few seconds before she spoke, Tony had time to guess that the expression was not a good sign.

“No, I really don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said loudly, shaking her head.

So much for taking advice from holograms. Under other circumstances, back in the days when he was into asking girls to dance, Tony would have either insisted or made some joke, but right now, he felt like doing neither. His friends, his work colleagues and his Deep Space Nine acquaintances—not to mention the hologram on the stage—were watching him, and all he could do was look at Maya’s downcast eyes.

“I will dance with you, Tony!” Sandra’s cheerful voice echoed empty in his petrified mind and he felt her hands on his arm. Shaking himself out of his shock, Tony smiled and shrugged his shoulders, as if Maya’s refusal didn’t really matter. He allowed Sandra to drag him onto the dance floor.

“You looked as though you needed saving,” said Sandra once they were out of earshot of the others. “You should have seen the expression on your face. Poor Tony; you went all red.”

“I think I nearly went into cataleptic shock,” he said jokingly, although he wasn’t far from the truth. As he matched his steps to Sandra’s—she was someone who obviously did know ballroom dancing—Tony realised he was trembling. “*O dio*, why do I do this to myself?”

“Because you are in love with her?” “Oh yeah, I forgot,” he answered bitterly. “As if the whole station didn’t know that by now. Even that holographic crooner over there is an expert on my love life. Well, I can tell you one thing, Sahn: I’ve been around a bit. I’ve been embarrassed and I’ve been insulted. But rarely to that extent.” “I think you are making too much of it,” said Sandra reasonably. “Maya does not know ballroom dancing. She probably did not want to embarrass herself by trying.” “Right, so she decided to embarrass me, instead,” muttered Tony through clenched teeth.

“What happened between you two, anyway?” asked Sandra. “You said last night that she did not love you. How do you know?”

“Because I asked her,” he said shortly, careful not to tread on her feet as they danced.

“Oh, so maybe you just frightened her away by asking if she loved you! She probably needs more time to think things over.”

“I didn’t think it was an unreasonable question considering—” he suddenly remembered that Sandra probably didn’t know about Maya’s plan to stay on DS9 and changed what he was about to say. “—Considering she and I have been... considering we’ve known each other for four years. I thought it was time we knew where we both stood.”

“Did you ask her to marry you?”

“*What?*”

Sandra evidently realised she was on the wrong track and laughed. “It just occurred to me that would be the sort of situation where you would need to know. Oh, do not worry Tony. Maybe Maya is worrying too much: she might see things differently once she has relaxed, perhaps with a few drinks.”

“You have the most *terrible* ideas,” declared Tony. “First you want me to have it off with another woman to make her jealous and now you want me to make her drunk!” He stopped dancing. “Oh, I’ll sort something out. Maybe you’re right: maybe we both need time to think things over.” He turned to look at Maya; she had her back to him again.

“What are you going to do?” asked Sandra, looking up at him in puzzlement.

“Go and get some food, I think,” he declared. He didn’t enjoy this kind of dancing and it was out of the question for him to go back and talk to Maya again. “I’m getting quite hungry. You coming?” Tony thought it would be safer to go back to Quark’s with Sandra rather than alone. She would be a handy excuse not to talk to Nerys if they came across the Bajoran.

Sandra looked at Julian, still sitting at his table, and shook her head. “I might join you later. I have already eaten anyway.”

Tony nodded and then hugged her. “Thanks for trying to help, Sahn. You’re the best ex-girlfriend I’ve ever had.”

“If the competition is girls like Alibe, then that is not difficult,” she said with a grin.

They walked back to the tables occupied by the Starfleet and Alphan officers. Sandra sat down with Julian, and Tony politely took his leave from everyone, careful to even include Maya, as if nothing had happened. The Koenigs had arrived while he was dancing, as well as Dax, Worf, Odo and O’Brien. Tony doubted his presence would be missed considering the number of people now clustered at the tables in the front row of Vic’s.

Space: 1999 - A New Moon Over Bajor

Stepping out of the holosuite, Tony was disturbed to find that the very first person he noticed, standing on the lower level of Quark's, was Nerys. She was in the midst of a conversation with some of his Alphan colleagues, including Ben, Alan and the Frasers. They evidently had some alternate plans for the evening; in fact, judging by the clothes they were wearing, Tony suspected they were going to recreate a disco in Holosuite Two.

As Tony leaned on the upstairs banister, Nerys looked up and saw him. She gave him a smile.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
***Looking For Par'mach In All The
Wrong Places***

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – *Looking For Par'mach In All The Wrong Places*

*“God, but you’re beautiful, aren’t you?
Feel your warm hand walking around
I won’t pull away, my passion always wins
So keep on a-moving in, keep a-tuning in
Synchronise rhythm now”*
Kate Bush - “Feel It” ¹

Leaning against the bar, Nerys watched as Tony approached. She had hoped to avoid both Odo and Tony by not going to Vic’s, but the Prophets were evidently adamant that she should encounter the Alphan at every opportunity. Well, if Tony was going to be unavoidable, Nerys decided she might as well stop the fight and enjoy herself. Accordingly, she relaxed and met Tony’s eye unwaveringly when he smiled at her.

He looked very attractive in his black and white suit. It was a design which she particularly liked; even Odo had looked alluring in one when they had had their first date at Vic’s. In fact, Nerys wasn’t sure if that wasn’t the main reason she had decided to go out with the constable in the first place. There was something so... neat and dignified about the costume.

This opinion was evidently not shared by Tony’s colleagues. Jake’s Alphan girlfriend Shermeen even burst out laughing when she saw him.

“Who’s died, Tony?” she asked. “You look like an undertaker!”

“Are you planning to make someone an offer they can’t refuse?” chimed in Alan.

Tony lifted his hands. “Okay, that’s enough wisecracking about the tux, thank you very much. It was for that holosuite programme Julian invited us to. Even Worf was wearing one.”

“We didn’t see Worf, but we did see John and Helena,” said Bill Fraser, his delivery distinctly slurred by some of Quark’s real alcohol. “The difference is that John looked good in a tux. You look like you’re going to be best man at someone’s wedding.”

¹ Kate Bush - "Feel It" (K. Bush) - From the album *Kick Inside* (EMI, 1977)

Tony looked down at himself. “Hmm. Maybe you have a point; I seem to recall I was wearing something similar at Pat and Shell’s wedding. Anyway, talking about weird clothes; what are you all up to? You look as if you’re going to a disco.” He cast a glance at Nerys’s revealing costume and smiled.²

“Exactly!” exclaimed Shermeen. “As soon as HoloSuite Two is vacant, we’ll be off to Studio 54. You know, the famous 1970s New York disco!”

“No, I can’t say I do,” said Tony. “I was a bit too young to catch the disco craze first time around. Barring a couple of things like *Saturday Night Fever*, that is.”

“Anyway, this place is great,” said Jake enthusiastically. “We went there last night and we thought we’d go with more people this time.”

The Alphans started discussing the pros and cons of ‘discos’ and ‘night clubs’ from various periods, finally concluding that ‘Studio 54’ was probably the best of a bad lot. Nerys didn’t join in, as she had no opinion on the subject, but she did take the opportunity to observe Tony to her heart’s content. There was no harm in looking, after all.

“Sorry about that,” said Tony, approaching Nerys once the conversation had drifted onto topics he wasn’t interested in. “I didn’t mean to ignore you completely, Nerys.” He gave her a charming smile and added, “That’s a lovely dress you’re wearing.”

“Proof that I look good without my uniform?” suggested Nerys. “Shermeen and Annette got hold of me and before I could do anything, they’d convinced me to put this on. I’m told it’s ideal for a ‘disco’.”

The dress was short and low cut, made of a silvery material that was a lot more obnoxious than anything in Nerys’s regular wardrobe. The other women were wearing similar costumes, so Nerys had allowed them to select a dress for her. She wasn’t entirely comfortable with their choice; she usually went for clothes in shades of red similar to her uniform because she thought red suited her... not that she was used to seeing herself in any other colour these days.

“It looks great,” said Tony, observing her appreciatively. “Really... great.” That seemed to be as much as he could say about her dress, but he obviously liked it. “There must be something wrong, here,” he added, leaning close to her. “I thought I was supposed to be half naked whenever I met you.”

Nerys laughed and looked around self-consciously. She noticed that some of the patrons of Quark’s were watching her disapprovingly and she felt a pang of guilt. Perhaps she should have opted for a quiet night in her quarters—she had been too easily convinced by the Alphans’ invitation to join them. But on the other hand, Jadzia was always encouraging her to have “fun”, and this ‘disco’ certainly sounded fun.

2 Tony was best man at the marriage of Patrick and Michelle Osgood. *Space: 1999 - "Catacombs of the Moon"* (ep.36-1976)

“So you decided to give Vic’s a miss?” she remarked, casting a glance at the upper level of Quark’s although the holosuites weren’t visible from the bar. “Didn’t you like it?”

“Oh, it was good fun. My parents would have loved it,” he said with a grin. “And I got on like a house on fire with Vic. But let’s just say that Maya’s presence made it all a bit awkward... and if the choice is between that and a disco, then I’m definitely up for the disco. I love dancing. I think I’ll need a change of clothes, though.”

“The holosuite won’t be free for another half hour. Why don’t you go and get changed... and maybe you can bring some of your beer too.” Nerys had enjoyed Tony’s beer when she first tasted it and she was looking forward to drinking some more. She noticed Tony looked unsure, so she added, “I’ll make sure Quark doesn’t mind.”

Nerys looked around at Quark, who was studiously wiping glasses at the other end of the bar. He gave them one of his dirty looks and Nerys wondered if she was making the right decision by encouraging Tony. The answer, obviously, was no.

“If you say so.” Tony smiled pleasantly and Nerys’s momentary misgivings vanished. “Well, I’d better go and sort all that out. I’ll see you in about an hour’s time—it usually takes me that long to figure out what I want to wear,” he informed her.

As he left, Tony evidently felt compelled to check with his hand that there were no creases at the back of Nerys’s dress. Surprised, but not displeased, the Bajoran smiled as she watched him walk away.

Maya accepted the drink the holographic waitress brought her and sipped it thoughtfully. She could understand now why the humans had been so interested in creating their own alcoholic beverages on Alpha; if Tony’s beer, for all its foul taste, could offer them the solace of this Martini, then it was no wonder he brewed it with such dedication.

And if there was one thing Maya felt she needed right now, it was solace. The artificial alcohol seemed to amplify her emotions and clarify her thoughts, making her realise just how incredibly stupid she was. Maybe the flaw in Psychon nature wasn’t insanity; maybe it was just an inherent inability to see what was best for them. ³

“I am so stupid,” she said out loud.

³ Maya once expressed the possibility that there might be “some flaw in the Psychon nature that turns us all into monsters.” *Space: 1999 - “Dorzak,”*(ep.45-1976)

Helena was talking to Julian about medical problems and evidently didn't hear her, so Maya sighed and looked around. The holographic singer had finished his show and probably gone off for a holographic break, leaving his orchestra to play some jolly music. Dax, Worf and John were talking about football with Chief O'Brien, who was describing some match he had played as a young man on Earth. Sandra was dancing with Odo—an incongruous sight, but it appeared that they were the only two people in the holosuite who both knew how to dance and actually wanted to do it. Kate and Alibe had left the night club about half an hour after Tony did and were no doubt entertaining themselves elsewhere.

Maya wouldn't have minded dancing, if she could dance with Tony. She could have danced with him, of course: all she had to do was say yes. But she didn't and that was that. Yet another opportunity missed.

She had seen Tony talking to the singer and then watched him approach, feeling her heart beat wildly as she realised he was going to ask her to dance. At that moment, more than anything, Maya had wanted to dance with him, even if she didn't know how and she would probably tread on her dress or do something ridiculous. But then she remembered seeing him with Kira earlier, heading for the Habitat Ring, and what could he be doing on the Habitat Ring with a woman like that? What if he had slept with Kira already? With that thought in her mind, there was only one answer Maya could give when he asked her to dance.

The minute she said no, Maya knew she should have said yes. The expression on Tony's face made it clear, in her opinion, that he was completely innocent. Or if he wasn't, and if he had slept with Kira, at least he wanted to be with Maya more than the major. But before she could say anything to change her answer, Sandra had whisked him away.

And now Tony had gone. Maya was sure she could locate him and apologise, beg him to forgive her if necessary. All she had to do was walk out of the holosuite and ask the computer for his location. But what if he was with Kira right now? That would be too embarrassing for all three of them. Aside from anything else, Maya knew that she was drunk, and that would hardly encourage Tony to fall into her arms. Maya decided it was probably safer to sit in Vic's and stare into her Martini. At least the drink gave her some comfort.

*//Like the days of stopping at the Savoy
Now we freak, oh what a joy
Just come on down to 54
Find a spot out on the floor...// 4*

Even though he was leaning against the bar with Nerys beside him, Tony's body was automatically moving to the vibrations of the music. Just when he thought his life couldn't become more surreal, it took another turn for the bizarre. Having waltzed around with Sandra in a Sixties night club barely an hour earlier, here he was now watching the colourful holograms of a Seventies disco.

"So what do you make of it, Nerys? Human decadence of yesteryear," said Tony, waving his glass at the assorted holograms and Alphans. Some of the holograms—in particular the night club's busboys—weren't wearing much; the Alphans' attire was, so far, less revealing. Ben was the only one who had dared go for a pristine white disco suit; not that anyone was likely to mistake him for Travolta.

"It's not like anything I've ever experienced before!" said Nerys with a laugh.

"I'll bet! I'll have to teach you how to dance so you can enjoy it properly." Tony paused and then pointed to the dance floor. "Basically, you do what Shermeen is doing: hop up and down and wave your arms around. There, I've taught you. Now enjoy yourself!"

The Bajoran laughed again and leaned against him with the sort of free familiarity alcohol encouraged. Instinctively responding to the invitation, Tony wrapped his free arm around her and let it wander down the shiny material on Nerys's back. She turned to smile at him. Boy, she was one pretty girl. Even with the little pleats on her nose, she was very cute—in fact, the pleats themselves were pretty cute. Tony slipped his other arm around Nerys, careful not to pour beer down her back in the process, and then pulled her against him and kissed her. *He was probably quite good at kissing*, he thought, *considering he never got to do anything else in the past four years.*

As promised, Tony had come to the holosuite with a keg of his beer, which was now officially called Strange Brew to avoid confusion with the far superior replicated beer that the holographic bar dispensed. Not surprisingly, Tony and Nerys were the only ones drinking the brew, though Nog tried a glass as well. Nerys had explained that she wasn't used to real alcohol and should take it easy—but she evidently found the taste of the brew irresistible, since she was on her third glass. It seemed to have a liberating effect on her; Tony certainly wasn't complaining.

Tony was about to say something about the beer when his gaze was distracted by a white disco suit boogying towards them.

"*I said Freak!*" sang Ben Vincent as he side-stepped his way into Tony's field of vision. "I'm surprised you're not dancing, Tony. And what on Earth happened to your famous Italian fashion sense? You look as though you're wearing your uniform trousers!"

Tony glanced down at his cream trousers and dark brown shirt. "My sense of *disco* fashion was curbed by good taste," he informed the doctor. "And what's with everyone criticising my clothes these days, anyway?" He glanced at Nerys.

Given the little time he had had to choose an outfit, Tony wasn't dissatisfied with the result. At least he had made more effort than Jim Haines, who was wearing a T-shirt and a worn-out pair of jeans, or Pat Osgood, who hadn't even bothered to change out of his uniform at all!

The doctor stopped boogying for a moment as he waited to identify the next song. Hearing Little Michael Jackson's high pitched squeak, Ben started gyrating again. Tony was strongly tempted to do the same. It had been too long since he had been in a disco, and as he had told Nerys earlier, he loved dancing. All he needed was a little more drink and a good song, and he would be down there strutting his stuff with the holograms.

"Anyway," continued Ben, still dancing, "me and the other guys were thinking about doing the LSRO song later on. I'm sure Major Kira will enjoy it," he said, grinning at Nerys. "A 20th century folk song about the Lunar Science and Research Organisation we all worked for."

"No, please. We suffered enough back on Earth," pleaded Tony. "Let's not do that."

"And all this coyness from the man who penned one of the verses!" exclaimed the other Alphan. "You'd think he was embarrassed... *A.B.C. - Easy as 1, 2, 3!*"

Tony laughed as Ben suddenly pirouetted. "In case you're wondering, Nerys," said Tony, pointing at the doctor, "This is Dr. Ben Vincent, one of the leading lights of Alpha's medical team."

"Not anymore—unless I can get the hang of hyposprays and tricorders," said Ben cheerfully. "The medicine I knew is the equivalent of leeches and bleedings to these people!"

Tony felt a twinge of regret at the thought that this was true of all the scientists on Alpha. It was all very well partying in the holosuite, but it didn't take away from the fact that the Alphans' future in the Federation looked pretty bleak. Most of the knowledge they had spent their lives learning was useless now.

Ben didn't seem bothered; he was still boogying like there was no tomorrow. "Ah well, at least I still have my *cool* moves. And Ah'm lookin' *good!*" he exclaimed, pointing at his reflection in the mirror on the wall. ⁵

"Dr. Ben Vincent," declared Tony in mock seriousness, "the human version of the Cat. Mind you, Nerys, it's a well-known fact that black people and Italians have natural rhythm."

⁵ Ben is actually imitating the Cat, a character from the British sci-fi comedy series *Red Dwarf*.

“Ha ha ha!” Ben positively roared with laughter. “Pull the other one! He’s just making it up, Nerys. The truth is that humans are colour-coded. The darker the hue, the better the deal. Hey, it’s an indisputable fact, mon,” he exclaimed as Tony began to protest. “Once they’ve had black, they never look back!”⁶

This made Tony speechless with laughter. “That is the silliest thing I’ve ever heard!” he declared when he’d got his voice back. Nerys also seemed to find this very amusing. Tony instinctively held her closer, just in case she might take Ben at his word.

“Anyway I’ll leave you two to it,” said the doctor. He looked from Tony to Nerys and back again with a dubious expression, no doubt asking himself what was going on. Tony met his eye and Ben shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll go and tell the others you’re up for the LSRO song, Tony,” he said as he danced away.

“Oh no...” The LSRO song was not something Tony wanted to sing in front of Nerys. He was hoping to impress her with his charm and sophistication, not frighten her off with a rude version of a disreputable disco hit.

He realised Nerys was observing him, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She smiled as she caught his eye. Tony knew why he was attracted to her, but he wondered what made her so willing to go along with this seduction. Perhaps she was very unhappy in her relationship with Odo. Perhaps she was very attracted to Tony—that was a gratifying thought. Or perhaps she was just very drunk.

He was distracted from his thoughts by a change in the music. “Oh boy, I have got to dance now!” he exclaimed. “Are you coming?”

Nerys hesitated, evidently surprised by the request, but then nodded. Tony guided her onto the dance floor, accidentally in close proximity to Ben and Alibe, who had evidently decided they’d be better off together after all.

“Hey, look who’s joined us. I bet this was your favourite as a kid, Tony,” said Alibe.

“A trendy movie about a guy called Tony?” exclaimed Ben. “He probably had posters of Travolta on his walls!”

Tony rolled his eyes at Nerys and she responded with a smile as she danced. She wasn’t doing too badly for someone who had never heard disco music before. The bass line was evidently proving irresistible, because she was soon undulating her hips as expertly as Alibe. Maybe Bajorans had ‘natural rhythm’ too.

Tony moved to dance closer to her, almost near enough to touch. Nerys didn’t back away. Upon reflection, Tony didn’t really want to know what her motives were. It was enough to know that she fancied him.

6 An adage one of the author’s Jamaican colleagues contributed at an office party.

*//Well now, I get low and I get high
And if I can't get either, I really try
Got the wings of heaven on my shoes
I'm a dancin' man and I just can't lose//7*

Julian was having a good time. He wasn't exactly using the venue for all its worth, but he was thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to talk to Helena at Vic's. She was an attentive and interested listener, and he took great pleasure in provoking different responses on her lovely features as he detailed some of his adventures. After nearly seven years on DS9, Julian had plenty of stories to tell.

"So you actually discovered that your serum would cure the children?" said Helena. "That's fascinating. You saved a whole planet from the Quickening disease!"⁸

"I saved future generations," corrected Julian glumly. "I could stop their children from developing the disease, but I couldn't save the current inhabitants. The Dominion had seen to it that they could not possibly be cured."

Thinking about the Dominion, Julian involuntarily looked at Maya, who was sitting with her back to them as she presumably watched the dancers. Julian wondered vaguely what she had discussed with Weyoun the previous day. On the other hand, that was Odo's concern—Odo, who was currently dancing with Sandra, a privilege Julian could have reserved for himself had he not found Helena's company more agreeable.

"You've had some fascinating adventures, Julian," continued Helena, interrupting his thoughts.

Julian smiled at her, admiring her elegant features. "I wanted frontier medicine, and that's exactly what I got. Mind you, I don't get the impression you were exactly bored in your time on Alpha."

"No, I wasn't..." Helena lowered her eyes sadly, and Julian kicked himself for being so tactless. The Alphans had barely had a day to get over the destruction of their world. He was about to apologise when he noticed that Koenig had come over to join them.

"Helena, I think we should call it a night," he suggested, sitting on a chair beside his wife. "It's getting late."

7 The Bee Gees - "Stayin' Alive" (B. Gibb / R. Gibb/ M. Gibb) - 1977

8 *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - "The Quickening" (ep.495-1996)

“Oh...” Helena was visibly disappointed by the interruption, but she looked at her husband and smiled. “You’re right, we should be going. We didn’t get much rest last night,” she explained to Julian. “It was a pleasure talking to you, Julian, and thank you very much for inviting us here. We had a great time.”

Julian muttered some polite responses and shook hands with both the Koenigs. He was sad to see Helena leave when they’d been getting on so well. On the other hand, however, he did realise he would be better off using this opportunity to talk to an Alphan woman who was not married.

After the Koenigs had left, Julian looked around the holosuite. Miles had already gone, Maya was watching the dancers, Sandra was dancing with Odo, and Dax and Worf were also waltzing around in a corner—this latter sight was only slightly more bizarre than seeing Worf in a tuxedo in the first place.

Julian sighed. His original plan had been to spend the evening with Sandra, but things just didn’t click between them. There was no particular reason for this; it was a case of not being on the same subspace frequency. Perhaps it was just as well, since Sandra would be gone in just two days’ time.

He was wondering if he should strike up a conversation with Maya when he noticed that one of the Alphan women who had left earlier had returned. Her name was Kate as he recalled; a plain English girl with brown hair and a pleasant smile. He rose to greet her as she approached.

“Heya,” she said familiarly. She looked at Sandra and Odo on the dance floor. “I came to see if Sahn wanted to join us in the other holosuite. We’re having a disco; I know she loves dancing. Looks as if she’s enjoying herself here, though.”

“Yes,” said Bashir with a nod. He wasn’t sure if she was expecting him to say any more.

Kate turned towards him with a shrug. “Oh well, I think I’ll leave Sahn to it, then... But why don’t you join us, doctor?”

Encouraged by her smile, Julian was tempted to follow her suggestion. He didn’t know much about discos, aside from the fact that they belonged to the decade immediately after Vic’s. He finally shook his head; he was the one who had booked the holosuite and he felt he should stay there. In any case, he really enjoyed Vic’s. “No, I.. I’ll stay here. Thank you.”

“Okay,” Kate nodded understandingly. “Maybe later, then.” Watching her leave the holosuite, Julian wondered if Kate had really wanted him to go with her. It had been a while since he’d been out with anyone—his long running affection for Dax coupled with the anxiety of the war had limited his love life in the last few months.

Julian sat down and turned his attention to the stage as Vic came back to continue his show. While Vic started on his first song, the doctor noticed that Maya was ordering another drink. Although he hadn't been keeping track, Julian counted this was probably the fourth or fifth Martini she had had that night. The replicated synthehol drinks that the holosuite dispensed were harmless, however, so he thought nothing more of it.

Maya was lost in thought. The clarity she had felt a couple of hours earlier was gone, and her thoughts were now a muddle, as if large quantities of packing foam had been poured into her mind. What she did know was that she had gone from feeling horribly guilty to being angry with Tony for making her fall in love with him in the first place. The very idea of him with Kira made her furious; he was just like the rest of the humans, as disloyal and selfish as they depicted themselves in all their books. If he had been within reach, she would probably have changed into a monster and given him a thrashing.

Maya was just starting to imagine in detail what would happen if she caught Tony, when she realised Doctor Bashir was sitting beside her and had placed his hand on hers. She stared at his hand, surprised by the unexpected touch.

"Maya, are you all right?" asked the doctor. "You look as if you've had a drop too much to drink. Your species may be intolerant to synthehol: it shouldn't be affecting you like this. Do you want me to accompany you back to your quarters?"

Maya withdrew her hand and stared at him coldly. "You humans, all you think about is sex!"

Bashir was visibly taken aback by her icy comment. "I'm sorry, that's not what I meant," he said gently. "Look, why don't I get one of your friends to take care of you? I can get Sahn to walk you home, all right?"

"No! It's not all right," exclaimed Maya loudly, deciding to vent her anger about Tony on any of his miserable species. "And what are you calling 'home'? I don't have a home! You people just blew it up—you humans, you always have to ruin things and blow them up. You destroyed my home planet and now Alpha. And don't call those black, dark... ugly holes you call quarters 'home'. It's like being in a tomb with little spotlights. I hate humans, you're all murderers and heartbreakers and I hope the Dominion will win because then I can be rid of you all!"

By now, she had got the attention of everyone in the holosuite. Even the holograms had stopped playing their music. Sandra and Dax tried to calm Maya down, but the Psychon was having none of it. Unconcerned by the disturbance she was causing, she continued to express the muddle that was currently in her mind.

“Let go of me,” she screamed, shaking off Dax’ well-meaning hands. “You, Dax and Worf: you call yourself aliens, but you’re just lackeys to the humans. They’re a disease, a galactic disease! Look, even Odo, who’s from a species of perfect Metamorphs, pretends to be one. And Worf the great Klingon warrior, who likes to dance to syrupy human music in a game that isn’t even real! You’re pathetic, all of you!”

Worf’s eyes widened, lifting his bushy eyebrows. “If you were not a woman...” he growled.

“Worf. That won’t help,” admonished his wife before looking up at Bashir. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Allergy to synthehol,” explained the doctor. “Some species can’t control its effects. Yridians, for instance, are incapable of sobering up without sleeping it off. In those cases, the effect of synthehol is indistinguishable from that of real alcohol.”

“Oh do stop babbling!” exclaimed Maya, getting up. She was tired of being constantly surrounded by humans, of listening to their incessant chattering and their arrogant belief that they knew everything about anything. Even the holograms were humans!

She left Vic’s and managed to make her way down from the holosuite to the upper level of Quark’s. The stairs were a lot harder to tackle than she remembered; something seemed to be affecting her sense of balance and the long evening dress she was wearing didn’t help. Maya tripped and fell to her knees at the bottom of the stairs. She was still struggling to extricate herself from the folds of her dress when a column of shimmering orange shifted down from the holosuite level. Odo changed back into this humanoid form and tried to help Maya up.

“Let go of me,” she snapped, hitting him impatiently. “You dirty... shapeshifting spy! Don’t think I don’t know about your little plan to find out what I told Weyoun. You’ve been eavesdropping on all my conversations, haven’t you, Odo? I’ll bet you were even there when I was having a private conversation with Tony right here last night. I’ll bet you really enjoyed that, cause you really hate him, don’t you! And you know what he’s doing right now, don’t you? Making you a big cuckold. I’m sure you’d look really good with a pair of horns!”

“She is drunk, she does not know what she is saying,” apologised Sandra who had come down to join them.

Maya felt sudden misgivings when she heard her colleague defending her. Sandra was a human, but she was a good human. As the operative crouched down to help her up, Maya wrapped her arms around her and began to cry. “I’m so stupid,” she lamented. “Why am I so stupid, Sahn?”

“You are not stupid, you are very clever,” said Sandra soothingly. “But right now, you are also very drunk.”

Maya straightened up a bit to look at Sandra. "If I'm so clever," she said with a hiccup. "Why did I tell Tony I didn't love him when it should be obvious even to me that I do?"

"I really do not know," admitted Sandra. "But now you mention it... You are right: you are both very stupid."

Maya nodded miserably and started to cry again, smudging her mascara as she wiped her eyes. "Yes, I should have said I wanted him with me but I thought he'd be unhappy on Cardassia because he likes to be with his friends and I didn't want to take him away from you all just because I was being selfish and wanting to have him with me when I went to work with Weyoun but I thought it would be easier if he left with all of you and didn't see me again and I didn't even know how much I wanted him and now I wish I had said I loved him but I thought he was unhappy with me and now he's sleeping with Kira-a-a-" Her voice broke off into sobs and she leant into Sandra's arms again.

"Sleeping with..?" Bashir interrupted himself before he could say any more. Odo looked similarly affected; in fact, the Shapeshifter mumbled something about needing to regenerate and then left abruptly. Maya felt some satisfaction at having rattled the all-knowing Starfleet officers. The fact that Odo wasn't a Starfleet officer didn't cross her mind at that point.

Bashir soon recovered his calm. "Maya, we need to get you to the Infirmary."

"I should have told him I loved him," she said disconsolately. "I won't get another chance now. He likes her better."

Maya looked up at Bashir; he was smiling at her understandingly. "I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding. You'll be able to sort things out tomorrow. Now, why don't we go to the Infirmary and make you feel better?"

Maya tried to think about that for a moment, but then gave up and simply nodded. Bashir helped her to her feet and guided her to the exit on the upper level of Quark's. Sandra said something about going to find Tony—not that Maya wanted him to see her in this state. She doubted Tony would be easily found in any case; he was no doubt with Kira.

Judging from the looks they were giving her, most of the patrons in the bar had heard what she had said about Weyoun. But Maya didn't care anymore; Bashir was right, she would let Tony do whatever he was doing now and then she could sort things out with him tomorrow.

//It's fun to work at the LSRO

You can get yourself clean

You can have a good meal

You can do whoever you feel// 9

Nerys couldn't understand all the lyrics, but she decided that was probably just as well. She had rarely seen anything funnier than the five Alphan men dancing back and forth, waving their arms in haphazard unison as they shouted their lyrics over the blaring music. Bill and Alan had absolutely no coordination whatsoever, but Tony, Ben and Jim seemed to be executing some kind of simple choreography. She could see why it had taken two hours for Ben to convince all this colleagues to participate: it was one of the most bizarre sights Nerys had ever seen.

The humans from her time weren't like this, she reflected. They didn't make tasteless jokes about each other's skin colour or sexual prowess, or sing lewd songs about the organisation they worked for. The very thought made Nerys smile as she tried to imagine the likes of Sisko and Miles singing rude lyrics about Starfleet.

Strange as it was, the whole experience was delightfully inebriating. Tony's bitter alcohol and her conviction that she was only following the Prophets' plans by being here made Nerys feel freer than she had in a long time. The pounding music with its fast, regular rhythm seemed to will her body to move with it, and she was making no effort to resist. It was possible that she looked ridiculous dancing like this, but then she knew she couldn't possibly look more ridiculous than Alan or Bill.

In any case, no one was paying her any notice; the others were all dancing or watching the LSRO singers, except possibly for Shermeen and Jake who couldn't take their eyes off each other. Alibe and Kate were laughing hysterically, pointing at the singers; Nog was trying to impress the Japanese girl Yasko; Annette and the Osgoods were dancing more sedately further away, and Nerys didn't recognise any of the other Alphans who had found their way to the holosuite. But they all had better things to do than look at her.

Nerys knew she shouldn't be admiring the Alphan, not when she was involved with Odo. It wasn't as if Odo made her unhappy; he was the sweetest person she had ever been involved with. But there was something lacking, something she couldn't quite define, but which had evidently bothered her enough to pursue Tony in such a blatant fashion. Perhaps she had a need to feel real flesh and bones when she kissed a lover, rather than the smooth surface of Odo's simulated skin. Perhaps she wanted a lover who could sleep beside her without retreating to a bucket for his nightly rest.

Or perhaps all this had nothing to do with Odo at all—perhaps it was just a sign that Nerys was incapable of forming a durable relationship. She had been a terrorist most of her life; she had learned to push people away before they became too close, before they became close enough for their death to break her heart. Perhaps it was simply too difficult to break the habits of a lifetime.

On the other hand, she might have had too much of Tony's beer. Nerys dismissed the thoughts and concentrated on Tony instead. Now that the LSRO song was finished, he was entirely lost in the music, his eyes half-closed, his whole body following the rhythm with a sensuality that the Bajoran found surprisingly enticing. She had never known that watching a man dance could be so beguiling.

To distract herself from her unpleasant thoughts, Nerys wrapped her arms around Tony's neck and kissed him passionately, oblivious to the people around them on the dance floor. He was hot, his face and hair covered in sweat from the exertion of dancing. In an effort to cool him down, Nerys unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. She tentatively slid her hand under the clammy material, running her fingers along Tony's collarbone. She needed to undo more buttons to get better access to his shoulders and chest. By then, the shirt was half unbuttoned and Nerys decided she might as well undo it completely.

"Is this a subtle hint that I'm overdressed?" asked Tony, lifting his arms so that Nerys could disengage his shirt from his trousers and undo the last button.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're always overdressed," she said, wrapping her bare arms around him under the shirt. She had all but forgotten her earlier misgivings.

"Oh boy," he whispered as her hands ran up the warm skin on his back. That seemed to be the sum total of his vocabulary right then. "Oh boy," he repeated, closing his eyes as Nerys pushed the shirt down off his shoulders. She had absolutely no idea why she had this strange compulsion to undress him on the holosuite dance floor, but as long as he didn't protest, she assumed it was still acceptable behaviour. Somewhere in the back of Nerys's mind a little warning went off which suggested this was a perverted result of Tony's beer rather than 'acceptable behaviour'. She ignored this thought and kissed Tony again.

"Oh, come on, get your shirt back on, Verdeschi. You're attracting moths with that white skin of yours!"

Nerys didn't have time to see which one of the Alphan women had come up with this helpful comment, but it did bring her back to her senses. Tony was similarly affected; he opened his eyes and looked around.

"One of these days, I'm going to kill Alibe," he said. "But I guess I'll have to find her first..." He peered around him, but Alibe was nowhere to be seen.

"I wonder why she interrupted us," said Nerys, her arms still around Tony. Looking over his shoulder, she noticed that Sandra Benes, dressed in a full length yellow evening dress, was watching them from the entrance of the disco. Nerys ignored the woman and kissed Tony's shoulder as he spoke.

"Rule One of life on Alpha: nothing is sacred," he was explaining, oblivious to Benes' presence. "Especially not ex-boyfriends you're not particularly keen on."

"Ex-? Oh. I see."

Tony shrugged his shoulders. He laughed as Alan and Bill passed, both making exaggerated efforts to shield their eyes from the sight of his naked torso. "Boy, I must admit this is a bit like one of those dreams where you're somewhere public and you suddenly realise you're naked... I think I'll pull my shirt back on before anyone starts thinking I'm one of these half-naked waiters they have in here."

"I think you look pretty good like that," said Nerys without thinking. Tony's beer had definitely gone to her head; the only thing she could concentrate on right now was her sudden desire to be alone with him.

"Well, um, I prefer to be dressed in public," he said as he started buttoning up his shirt. Tony looked embarrassed and Nerys felt a pang of guilt. It evaporated as soon as he spoke again. "It's a different matter in private, of course."

Nerys smiled. She hesitated for a split second, some glimmer of conscience trying to break through the fog in her brain. This wasn't how she was supposed to behave. She knew this wasn't how she was supposed to behave. But her relationship with Odo was already over. She had gone too far to turn back now.

She leaned over to murmur in Tony's ear. "Now, how could I resist a promise like that?"

He drew back to look at her face and smiled as she took his hand, leading him towards the holosuite door.

*//You're just too good to be true
Can't take my eyes off of you
You'd be like heaven to touch
Oh, I want to hold you so much...// 10*

Maya was mortified. She sat disconsolately on the Infirmary's examination bed and looked down at her pink evening dress. Bashir had given her a shot of something to clear her thoughts, but now that they were clear, Maya realised she would have preferred them to stay muddled. This evening was not her proudest moment.

"You should be feeling better now," said Bashir. "But you'll still need a good night's sleep to work it off completely. I must say I've rarely seen such a violent reaction to synthehol. Most humanoids are able to control its effects the minute they feel them; that's certainly why it was designed. On the other hand, we did already know that your body is hypersensitive to any kind of stimulation."

Maya looked up sharply as something occurred to her. "Would that include sexual simulation?"

No doubt remembering Maya's reaction when she thought he was propositioning her earlier, Bashir took a step back. "I—I can't speak for that," he said hastily. "At least... well, I—obviously, I am a doctor and—"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you. I'd better be going; I think things are just getting worse." Maya smiled wanly and stood up. "This really hasn't been my day."

"I am a doctor, you know," said Bashir, who had evidently recovered his professionalism. "And I'm a specialist in xenobiology, so if you do have a problem you want to talk about, I promise not to be embarrassed."

Maya hesitated. "No, I don't think—" "Is it something to do with Tony?" "Hmm." Maya sat down again. It was perhaps time to admit that she did have a problem. She had never been able to work up the courage to describe her difficulties to Helena, feeling that it would be unfair to talk about Tony to such a close friend. Bashir, on the other hand, was a virtual stranger, and one with training and experience on alien species.

Maya briefly described her problem, but Bashir did most of the talking. He spoke about pheromones and reproductive cycles and sexual stimuli and procreative urges until Maya half wished she hadn't brought up the topic. The one thing she did learn was that instincts couldn't be trusted when engaging in a physical relationship with a humanoid from another species, because different species were aroused by different stimuli.

"It is quite possible that Tony's advances—his kisses, for instance—are subconsciously perceived as a threat by your Psychon instincts," said the doctor earnestly. "Do you know if Psychon lovers kissed on the mouth?"

Maya blushed; she had never known any Psychon lovers. "I—I don't know. I think so."

Bashir was no doubt about to question her further, but they were interrupted as Kate and Sandra came in. Maya heaved an involuntary sigh of relief.

"Julian, a fight has broken out at Quark's, Alphans against Klingons," announced Sandra, though both women looked amused rather than worried. "We are afraid someone might get hurt."

"A fight?" repeated Bashir. He immediately grabbed a medkit and made for the door, followed by Maya and the two operatives. "Someone has to stop them. The Alphans will get slaughtered!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Kate airily. "They're having a great time. Alan started it, you know. He called one of the Klingons 'walnut-head'. That went down like a lead balloon, I can tell you."

"The Klingons do tend to be a bit sensitive," agreed Bashir with a laugh as they left the Infirmary. "Alan must be a very brave man; some of those Klingons are literally twice his size."

“It’s not the size that matters,” retorted Kate flirtatiously. “It’s what you do with it. Look! It’s like an old fashioned bar fight!”

They all stood aside as Alexei Petrov stumbled out of the bar, evidently the victim of a vigorous punch. He had no sooner fallen to the ground than he was up and racing back into Quark’s to face his assailant. Peering into the bar, Maya could see it really was like a scene from one of the old ‘Westerns’ they had had in Alpha’s cinema. The fight mainly involved the Alphans and the Klingons, although there were some Starfleets and Bajorans participating as well. Maya watched Alan knock one of the Klingons over the Dabo table, while Bill crashed a chair over the head of another one—with minimal effect. Kate was right; they were having a great time.

“I’m surprised Tony isn’t in there with them,” remarked Maya.

She noticed that Sandra and Kate suddenly exchanged an embarrassed look. Bashir was evidently unaware of this exchange. “Oh yes, did you find Tony, Sahn?” he asked.

Sandra half shrugged, evidently unwilling to admit that she had. Kate also lowered her eyes and hesitated before answering. “Well, he’s not in Quark’s anymore, that’s for certain,” she said vaguely, before adding, “We’ll probably see him around tomorrow.”

Maya felt a horrible pain in her chest, as if Kate had suddenly stabbed her. She knew exactly what they were trying to tell her. Tony must have left Quark’s with Kira.

“Oh,” she said coldly. “Well, I’d better go and sleep off my synthehol. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

She said goodnight and turned away from the bar. Sandra caught up with her. “I will walk with you to the Habitat Ring, Maya.”

The operative cast a regretful look at Bashir, now in conversation with Kate. Even though he turned to smile at the women politely as they left, Maya could tell the doctor was far more interested in what Kate was telling him. She felt sorry for Sandra. Almost as sorry as she felt for herself.

“Human men are so unreliable,” she muttered as they walked towards the Turbolift.

Sandra just laughed. “Oh Maya, you do not need to be so cynical! There are a lot of good men... Though I agree we two are not having a good evening tonight,” she added, shaking her head.

Maya felt her earlier anger return as she realised exactly why she wasn’t having a good night. She wouldn’t have felt compelled to drink herself silly and start insulting the senior staff of DS9 if Tony hadn’t been flirting with Kira in the first place. The Psychon decided that her plan for tomorrow—after apologising to anyone she had offended—would be to kill the man.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
The Troubled Spirit

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – *The Troubled Spirit*

*“Io ti amo
E chiedo perdono
Ricordi chi sono
Apri la porta a un guerriero di carta igienica.”*
Umberto Tozzi - “Ti Amo”¹

Nerys opened her eyes and stared blearily at Tony's back. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, facing away from her. She watched the light from the headboard console play on his pale skin as he rubbed the back of his neck. His dark hair was disarrayed, his posture tired and listless.

Sleepy, Nerys closed her eyes again and tried not to think of the mess she had put herself in. She couldn't think of anything to say to Tony. He had suddenly become irrelevant—all that mattered now was for her to battle her guilty conscience. And think about what she had done to Odo.

Nerys felt her heart sink as she thought of Odo. Now that the effects of Tony's beer were wearing off, she was beginning to feel the full force of the mistake she had made. *Maybe I'm just like my mother after all*, she thought, cruel to herself and to the unfortunate woman who had borne her. She silently ran her hand through her hair and rubbed her eyes. When she reopened them, she found Tony was looking at her.

“Hi, I'm Tony. Remember me?” Tony sounded cheerful, but he didn't look it. Nerys reflected that it had been a very long day for him and it was beginning to show. The bags under his eyes were darkened and more pronounced, his sharp nose pinched, his skin an unhealthy pale grey even in the multicoloured glow from the headboard.

Nerys smiled wanly, pleased to see the man display some modicum of civility under the circumstances. “What time is it?”

“Four a.m.,” he said shortly. He was probably as embarrassed as she was.

“You going?” she managed to say.

“I guess I might as well. I'm damned if I can see how two people can sleep together on these beds. Especially with those bloody lights on.”

“Oh you get used to it.” Nerys had always liked the beds on Deep Space Nine; they were better than anything she'd slept on during the Occupation.

¹ Umberto Tozzi - “Ti Amo” (G. Bigazzi / U. Tozzi) - From the album *Ti Amo* (EastWest, 1977)

“Well, I can tell you the beds on Alpha were a lot better than this. A very strange shape, but more ergonomic, that’s for sure.” There was a long pause, and then he scratched his shoulder. “Ah well. I’d better be going. I have some sleeping off to do, and I just know what a happy bunny I’m going to be in the morning.”

Nerys felt the bed move as Tony stood up. She closed her eyes again and listened to the human rooting around the room, no doubt assembling his clothes. Her tired mind drifted, bringing up a confused jumble of images from the last twenty-six hours—the disco, Tony in a tuxedo, a flashback to Odo wearing a similar costume a couple of months ago...

Her mind returned to the present when she heard Tony’s voice again. “Nerys.” She opened her eyes and he continued. “I suspect we’ll spend the next two days avoiding each other, but while we’re still on speaking terms, I just wanted to thank you for everything. The dancing, the company... the raktajino.”

Nerys smiled. “I guess we’ll both have some explaining to do,” she said, half aware that her mind wasn’t as focused on this conversation as it should be.

“We’ll just have to blame it on the boogie,” said Tony with a wan smile.

Nerys didn’t even attempt to understand what he was talking about. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

Tony winced uncertainly, before finally saying, “I wonder if they still have the Foreign Legion in the 24th century...” That seemed to cheer him up. “That was where—”

Nerys just shook her head; she was no longer in the mood for Tony’s witticisms. They had been enjoyable when she was having fun the previous evening, and even when they were working together all week. But now that guilt was slowly beginning to invade her thoughts, Tony’s jokes were tasteless and out of place. And he was right, she realised: they probably would spend the next two days avoiding each other.

Perhaps realising that their conversation was at an end, Tony mumbled a goodnight and Nerys closed her eyes again. She heard the door to her bedroom swish open and then shut, followed by nothing but the quiet humming of the life-support system.

“Time to wake up, Mister Carter,” said Odo, observing the Alphan’s slumbering form with relish. “You have a visitor.”

Carter finally reacted, pulling himself groggily into a seating position, bleary-eyed and yawning. His other colleagues roused themselves with similar difficulty. Carter looked around the holding cell with surprise, evidently disoriented for a moment; then he scratched his chin and grinned sheepishly as he saw who was standing on the other side of the forcefield.

“Oh... g’day, Commander.”

Koenig didn't say anything; the look on his face was no doubt enough to strike fear in the heart of any of his subordinates. From what Odo knew of the man, Koenig had a fine temper, and waking up to the news that several of his senior officers had been arrested for causing a brawl at Quark's had probably done nothing to improve his mood.

Odo deactivated the forcefield. "They're all yours, Commander. Try to keep them out of trouble."

The constable watched as Koenig escorted his officers out of the brig. In a perverse way, Odo was pleased to see his low opinion of the Alphans confirmed. He would have preferred an opportunity to throw Verdeschi himself into a holding cell, but as it was, he had to make do with the Alphan's crony Carter. It was still satisfying to know that 20th century humans were indeed as inferior as the constable had hoped.

Dismissing these ugly thoughts, Odo gave the rowdy Klingons in one of the other holding cells his assurance that General Martok would be along shortly. Satisfied with the morning's work so far, the constable returned to his office.

He had half expected to find Nerys there, come to apologise or break off their relationship or beg for forgiveness, whatever humanoids did under these circumstances. But his office was disconcertingly empty. All he found when he activated his terminal was a message informing him that Nerys had called in sick.

Defeated, Odo set his humanoid form down onto his chair, even though the gesture brought his solidified body no comfort. Nerys wouldn't apologise, or beg, or even break things off, because Nerys didn't even care enough to talk to him.

What had happened—no one had dared mention the previous night to Odo. Floating in his bucket overnight, the Changeling had hoped against hope that Nerys might have come to her senses, or at the very least that Maya's synthehol-induced outbursts would have drawn Verdeschi away from the major. But as soon as Odo had set foot outside his quarters that morning, the sympathetic or amused gazes that had followed him to his office made it clear that Nerys's expected romance with Verdeschi had finally come to fruition. And everyone knew about it.

Odo had overheard the conversations on the Promenade. Driven by a morbid fascination with Nerys's infidelity, he had disguised himself as wall panels and furniture to eavesdrop on the station's population.

Odo had listened to Nog and Yasko at the Replimat. The Alphan girl wondered out loud if Nerys and Verdeschi had enjoyed themselves the previous night. Nog, who wasn't eating anything, moaned and said they couldn't have because Verdeschi's beer was poison and it probably made them as sick as it did him.

Odo had followed Alibe Kurand and Ben Vincent down the Promenade. The two Alphans were laughing at Maya, saying that she should have seized her chance for “Italian lovin’” while she still had it. They laughed at Verdeschi, too, and declared that he probably wasn’t used to being undressed in public.

Shivering with disgust, Odo had returned to the Replimat. There he encountered the only couple who did not seem interested in gossiping about Verdeschi and Nerys. Jake and Shermeen were too busy lamenting their imminent separation, gazing into each other’s eyes with all the passion of humanoid infatuation.

Odo had felt like revealing himself and berating them both for being such fools. Love was a poison more potent than Verdeschi’s brew. Had he not loved Nerys, Odo would have been a happy creature.

But there was little he could do about his feelings, he realised as he leaned back in his chair. He knew that if Nerys walked in right now to beg him for forgiveness, he would probably give it before she even opened her mouth. And then they would continue this insecure relationship they were building. And things might be all right for a while, until the next young man walked into Nerys’s life...

Maybe this was the best time to break the cycle before it began. Assuming that Nerys did want to resume their relationship, it would be up to Odo to work up enough resolve to break up with her now. Then he wouldn’t have to worry about this happening again in the future. All he needed now was the resolve.

“No ship?” repeated John through clenched teeth.

He had a good mind to hit the Ferengi, though he realised that would hardly be wise under the circumstances. As it was, John was in the unenviable position of having to pay the bartender for the damage Alan and his friends had caused the previous night. Fifty milligrams of the Alphans’ tiranium and Quark promised not to press charges. To some extent, it was no surprise that Quark’s promised ship had developed a ‘problem’ overnight.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” said Quark with an egregious smile, though he did take a step back when he saw the expression on John’s face. “I got a communication from my contact this morning. It seems that the ship he was going to sell you sort of... exploded last night. Still, you wouldn’t have wanted it anyway if its warp core was that unstable.”

“Why do I get the impression this isn’t a coincidence?” growled John.

“I assure you, Commander, this has absolutely nothing to do with the damage your people did.” Quark waved his hand at the mess of broken furniture around them in the bar. “It was an unfortunate accident; I’ll make sure never to trade with that Xepolite crook ever again. To think he was planning to sell you defective merchandise, using *me* as the middleman!”

John wasn't interested in the Ferengi's explanations. The anger he had felt at Quark's announcement had waned, and he was left with nothing but disappointment at finding that luck was against the Alphans once more. They would have to leave with the *Addis-Ababa* after all. It would be less than 11 hours before the ship arrived; there was no time left to find another solution. He turned on his heels and left the bar.

"Anyway," Quark called after him. "What makes you think I'd do anything to delay your departure? I'm looking forward too much to having you people off this station!"

Ignoring him, John made his way back to the quarters he shared with Helena. His wife was already carefully putting away anything they had replicated or unpacked since they arrived, even though they wouldn't be leaving the station until the next day.

"How did things go with Quark?" she asked, looking up as he entered.

John sighed and sat down on the sofa. "Not well," he said shortly. "We can't have a ship—especially not after what happened last night."

"Oh John." Helena sat down beside him. "I'm sorry."

"We'll have to leave with the *Addis-Ababa* after all. Well, I guess it doesn't matter how we leave. I think we've overstayed our welcome here." John was about to repeat 'especially after last night', but decided that went without saying. "I should think Starfleet will be glad to see the back of us. They can't have a very high opinion of the Alphans right now."

"John. You can't blame the Alphans for behaving the way they did," said Helena softly. "And I don't think the Starfleets will either. The Alphans are young. For the first time in six years, they have no duties to perform, no immediate survival to worry about. They just needed to... let their hair down, if you like. Things got a little out of hand, but I don't think you should blame them."

"Blame them? Of course I blame them. We're not talking about just any Alphans here. They're supposed to be my senior officers." John spat out the word with vehemence. "How can I look Sisko in the eyes knowing how my staff have behaved? A first officer who can't keep his hands to himself, a science officer who drowns her sorrows in alcohol and then tells the whole of Quark's her plans to collude with the enemy, a chief Eagle pilot who brawls with Klingons, and meanwhile half the Alphans..." He didn't want to describe what he had been told.

"But what can we do, John? They're not children..."

"Oh so first, they're young, and now they're not children, and those are excuses?" John saw Helena's closed expression and realised he was being unfair, taking out his anger on her. "I'm sorry, Helena. I just never imagined that the day would come when I would be ashamed of the Alphans."

She smiled and placed her hands on his. "I still think you're being too harsh, John. In the first place, all you've heard are rumours. You already heard Alan and Bill's version of the brawl and you know the Klingons were as much to blame as they were. Why don't you wait to hear Maya and Tony's version of things before condemning them?"

"I'm not sure I want to hear Tony's version of anything." John preferred not to think about his first officer's reportedly lewd conduct.

Helena lowered her eyes and nodded. "In any case, the moral behaviour of our colleagues is not your responsibility. Least of all now, when we're not on Alpha."

This remark struck a sensitive chord, fueling the misgivings that had lurked in John's mind ever since his argument with Maya in the Infirmary two days earlier. He withdrew his hands from his wife's and stood up, instinctively using the physical movement to distance himself from her words.

"That's what worries me," he admitted, pacing towards the dining table and then turning to look at Helena again. "While we were on Alpha, I was respected as the last LSRO-designated commander of the base. But now that the Moonbase is gone, I may have to fight to keep my authority. You're right; I have no jurisdiction over the moral behaviour of the Alphans. However, as long as I'm their commander, I *am* responsible if they display the sort of unruly behaviour which got Bill and Alan arrested last night. But that only works if they recognise my authority."

Helena shook her head. "Who would question it?"

"They might not question it now, but what will happen when we're on Starbase 571? We'll be under the jurisdiction of Starfleet there, and I'm not sure I can command under those circumstances. We've seen how often Starfleet Command have interfered with Sisko's plans. You know I never did like having someone looking over my shoulder all the time."

"I see," said Helena, lifting one eyebrow knowledgeably. "So you're worried our move to Starbase 571 will undermine your authority. Once upon a time, you were our leader, bringing us to our home in the Promised Land. And now that's over, you think you won't have anything to do."

John smiled wryly and shook his head. "Maybe. But this isn't the Promised Land. And all this isn't just about me."

He walked over to look out the window, stalling while he mentally formulated his next sentence. "I suppose I got this idea we... that Alpha was the hope of the human race. That it was our mission to find a new home and rebuild Earth's culture... in *our* universe, where humanity is close to extinction. But we're not needed here. The human race has colonised half the galaxy in this universe."

“So we can have a colony too. The fact that humans have expanded so far is an added chance for us.” Helena came to join him at the window, placing a conciliatory hand on his shoulder. “John, I understand what you’re saying about our mission. I know what Arra and the voice in the Black Sun told you about the Alphans’ destiny. But it’s a lot to ask our people to keep drifting through space until we find some new Eden. Starfleet is offering us a home right here, right now.”

John nodded silently as Helena continued, breathing his name in that unique way that still made his heart miss a beat. “John, we don’t even have to stay here forever. We can move to Starbase 571 and then go back to our universe when Starfleet is ready to send us back. We will have acquired some 24th century technology by then, perhaps even some devices which will make colonisation easier in our universe. And if we decide to stay in this reality, we wouldn’t necessarily have to live under Starfleet’s orders. The Federation has any number of planets which we could colonise without interference... We could have a home, John,” she added, her tone almost a plea.

John shook his head and turned to lean his back against the window. “I know. But the more I think about it, the more I believe going to Starbase 571 is a mistake. I—I can’t explain it, but it’s a feeling I’ve got.”

“Maybe the Prophets are speaking to you again,” suggested Helena seriously.

“Maybe.” John sighed. “In any case, you’re right. We should be looking at the advantages of our present situation. Whatever feelings I might have on the subject, we have no choice but to go to Starbase 571. We’ll have three weeks to decide what to do before we get there. I spoke to Dax this morning; she said the *Addis-Ababa* will be arriving at 1800 and there will be a reception this evening to get to know the ship’s senior staff. In the meantime, I need to keep my command staff in shape and give them a few heartfelt words about last night. I’ll convene a meeting for noon; that should give everyone time to get over their hangovers...”

Even with dark glasses, the lights on the Promenade were too bright, and Tony was acutely aware of how conspicuous he was. It seemed as though every single person who passed was staring at him. Somewhere in the dark recesses of the cotton wool that had replaced his brains, Tony could think of at least three good reasons for their interest. He was wearing sunglasses, he was leaning unsteadily against the wall beside the Turbolift, and he was the guy who had slept with Kira the previous night.

With seemingly superhuman determination, Tony managed to tear himself away from his support and head with relative dignity toward the Infirmary. He had hesitated and procrastinated all morning, or at least since he had woken up, but finally the drums pounding in his head had proved too painful to bear. Besides, he had to go and face the outside world some time, and now was as good a time as any.

Tony was walking with his eyes firmly on the ground when he became aware of a pair of green bell-bottoms walking alongside him. They had no sooner appeared than their owner identified herself.

"Tony," said Sandra. "You look terrible." Tony was about to retort that he *felt* terrible, too, but that was too obvious. Besides, he wasn't sure he was ready for coherent speech yet. So he said nothing.

He cast a glance at Sandra. Like him, she was in civilian clothes; a cream-coloured blouse and dark green trousers with a matching scarf in her short hair. After six years of living in their various Alphan uniforms, Tony wasn't surprised to find that his colleagues were seized with a desire to wear some more colourful garments. He had opted for jeans and a polo neck jumper himself.

"I have good news for you," continued Sandra cheerfully. "Maya loves you!"

"Yeah, and I daresay Jesus loves me, too. But can either of them cure my hangover?"

"It is not funny, Tony. I am serious; you have to give Maya another chance."

"Why?" he exclaimed, a lot louder than he had intended to. Putting his hand to his throbbing head, Tony continued more quietly. "After all these years, I've run out of other chances to give her. Look, I'm sorry, but I have a hangover the size of a nebula, Sahn. I just can't wrap my mind around concepts like 'Maya', 'love' and 'me' right now."

"You had a good night, then," said Sandra gently. She looked disappointed and Tony couldn't blame her; he was rather disappointed himself.

"Not really," he admitted. "Seen from this morning, it was bloody awful, though I *think* I was having a good time at some point... I suppose everyone knows about me fraternising with the natives?"

Sandra nodded. "It was the first topic of conversation of every person I have met. A lot of people saw you leave Quark's with Major Kira; they are naturally imagining the worst. Do you... are you involved with Kira?"

Tony looked around to check that no one was eavesdropping on their conversation and then sighed. "Um, no, not exactly... it's not the sort of thing that's going to turn into a *relationship* as such. Look, sweetheart, much as I'd love to give you a blow by blow account of my night, I really need to do something about this headache."

Sandra smiled indulgently. "I am sure Julian has a magic wand for hangovers."

Julian, it seemed, was not particularly overworked at that precise moment. He was leaning against his desk, arms crossed, and was evidently in mid-pontification, all for the benefit of Kate, who was sitting in the doctor's swivel chair.

"Now there's someone who has definitely been drinking too much of his own beer," said the English girl when she noticed her two colleagues coming in. Tony wondered why everyone was so damn cheerful this morning.

Julian headed for his medicine cabinet. "Oh, I know what you need, Tony. I think you know what to do with this," he added, coming back to hand Tony a hypospray.

Tony decided not to voice any of the rude suggestions that came to mind, every one of which were no doubt satisfyingly guaranteed to wipe that inane smile off Julian's genetically engineered face. The Italian realised he should avoid any kind of speech until he was rid of his headache and at peace with the universe once more. This was no time to be sharpening his wits on people who were trying to help him. He applied the hypospray to himself.

On Julian's instruction, Tony started counting to ten. This was just about as much thinking as his brain could handle at that moment. However, just as Julian promised, he found that his mind was clearing by the time he had reached *otto*.

"Oh wow!" exclaimed Tony as his vision returned to normal and the pounding in his head finally stopped. "I think I've just found *the* hypospray I want to settle down with!"

"At last an antidote to your beer, hey?" said Kate, twirling the chair and giving Julian a flirtatious smile even though she was talking to Tony. "The perfect follow-up to a party like last night's."

"Glad to know someone enjoyed it," said Tony sourly.

Kate and Julian exchanged a knowing glance, and an embarrassed silence fell heavily on the Infirmary. Even Sandra was looking down at the floor, unwilling to meet Tony's eye. This was no more than he had expected. Neither the Starfleets nor the Alphans were going to be particularly keen on him after his roll in the hay with the station's first officer. The Alphans would think he was a heel for cheating on Maya—it wasn't exactly common knowledge that she'd told him to naff off, after all—and the Starfleets, of course, would no doubt blame him for seducing their Bajoran major when she was already in a well-approved relationship with Odo.

After listening to the silence for a long moment, Tony pocketed the hypospray and smiled with well-practised nonchalance.

"Well, I guess I'll leave you all to... discuss last night," he declared. "And meanwhile, I'll go off and complete my entry form for this year's Darwin Awards."

That seemed to leave everyone completely baffled; even Tony's colleagues had evidently never heard of the posthumous awards given to people who died in the most stupid circumstances. Tony was pretty sure that someone on DS9 was bound to chuck him out of an airlock at some point that day. He certainly appeared to have developed an uncanny knack for making enemies. His only consolation was that his premature extinction at the hands of Odo, Maya, Kira, Worf, or whoever, would mean that his unique brand of stupidity would never get a chance to propagate to the rest of humanity.

That witty thought cheered Tony up immeasurably. He was making his way back to the Turbolift with a grin on his face when he realised Sandra had caught up with him again.

"Tony, where are you going?"

Tony got into the Turbolift. "I'm going back to my quarters to have some breakfast now that my stomach has recovered. You can come along with me and let me know all the latest gossip. Didn't Shermeen and Yasko get lucky last night, too?"

"Are you not going to see Maya?" asked Sandra, following him in.

"Of course not," he snapped, before continuing more calmly. "I hardly think that would be appropriate, given the circumstances. Besides, she couldn't even decide if she wanted me in the same universe, I doubt she'll... Oh, never mind..."

Sandra nodded wisely as the Turbolift whooshed down to the Habitat Ring. "Maya told me all about your conversation, and her plans to work for the Dominion..."

"Plans to work..? She didn't tell me that!" "I do not think she wanted to tell me, either. But she was very drunk and very keen to explain how much she loved you." The Turbolift stopped and they both got out.

"Soap Opera City all around, isn't it?" said Tony wryly. "Drunken confessions, ill-advised indiscretions, half-baked political intrigue. I'm beginning to think this place is a bad influence. Things were simpler on Alpha: all we had to worry about were the monsters and the occasional mutiny... and we had better music, too," he added with a grin.

"Really. Sometimes you behave like a teenager, Tony!" exclaimed Sandra. Surprised, Tony stopped to stare at her as she continued, "Love is not something to be ashamed of, or something you need to hide because it makes you look weak. It is not 'mushy' or 'syrupy' or 'garbage'. This is real life, not a soap opera: you cannot survive if you do not know how to love someone! You always try and pretend that you do not care—"

“Well, you tell me what I’m supposed to do,” he responded angrily. “Mope around and wait for Little Miss Muffet to change her mind?” (2)

“You do not seriously think that she does not love you, Tony!”

This made Tony guffaw. “Contrary to what you might think, Sahn, I don’t happen to think I’m irresistible. When a woman tells me she doesn’t want me, I tend to believe her. I’m not a mind reader, and in my experience, it’s always well within the bounds of probability that I might be misinterpreting a woman’s interest in me. And when I’m on the receiving end of the sort of mixed signals Maya has been giving out, it doesn’t take much for me to think the worst.”

“You two make me crazy!” said Sandra, shaking her head in irritation. “You have a chance for so much and you waste it with stupid worries and jokes and... You neither of you realise how lucky you are...” Her voice trailed off and Tony silently wrapped his arms around her. He could tell Sandra was upset, not because of him and Maya, but because of some worry of her own. Maybe she felt unhappy because she wasn’t in a relationship, and had little prospect of one in the near future.

“You’re right,” said Tony soothingly, patting Sandra’s back. “Maybe I overdo the bit about not wanting romance. It doesn’t mean I don’t care, you know it doesn’t. I’m just putting on a brave face and trying not to get hurt. Trying not to end up looking a complete prat when I’m rucked up in something I don’t really understand. I mean, let’s face it, I’ve spent the last four years pursuing a grown woman with an IQ twice my own and who has about as much idea what to do with me and my emotions as a twelve-year-old. It’s a bit weird.”

Consoled, Sandra drew away. “So, will you go and see Maya afterwards?” she asked, obviously not planning to let the topic drop.

“After what happened last night?” started Tony. He looked into Sandra’s black eyes and sighed. “Oh, who am I kidding? Of course I’ll go and see her and let her stomp all over me, as usual...” He winked at Sandra. “I have no other purpose in life, after all.”

- 2 The nursery rhyme Tony is referring to goes as follows (interpretations at the reader's discretion).

*Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet
Eating her curds and whey
There came a big spider
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away*

It is 0700.

The voice of Deep Space Nine's computer broke momentarily into Maya's deep sleep. The Psychon lifted her head and tried ineffectually to clear the masses of red hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. Her mind still completely numb, Maya decided the battle was not worth the effort and gave up. She laid her head on the pillow, buried her face in her hair, and went back to sleep.

The door chime was the next thing that interrupted her rest.

This time, her mind was a lot clearer as she reacted to the noise. Maya winced in pain as the circulation returned to her right arm, which she had apparently been lying on all night. Smoothing back her hair with her other hand, she got a feeling that she had been asleep a lot longer than a few minutes.

"Computer, what time is it?"

It is 1109.

"What?"

Still groggy, Maya hastily got up. As if to encourage her, the door chime rang again. Concerned that the person at the door might be Sandra or Helena come to see how she was, Maya decided not to waste any time putting on her uniform, and wrapped herself up in a replicated bathrobe.

She hurried into the living-room as the door chimed a third time. On Alpha, she would have used her commlock to see who was on the other side of the door, but here all Maya could do was open it using the manual control—it was another few seconds before she remembered she could use voice-activation to identify her visitor and unlock the door. By then she had pressed the open button.

Maya found herself nose to nose with Tony. She immediately pressed the button to close the door again.

"Maya!" she heard him shout over the intercom. "Open the door! There's something I need to tell you."

"What? That Bajor's your favourite planet?" she snapped, leaning against the door as if to stop Tony from coming in.

"No... Look, I want to... I came to tell you we have a staff meeting at the Koenigs' at twelve... And I need to apologise," he added contritely. "I'm really sorry about last night."

"I'm sure you are." Knowing that the expected response was supposed to be anger, Maya made her voice as icy as she could muster. "So now you've apologised and delivered your message, you can go away."

"Maya, we really need to talk. I... what happened last night doesn't change my feelings for you. You know I love you—goodness knows that's obvious enough!"

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"Now wait a minute, Maya." She could tell from his voice that he too was losing his temper.

“I know my behaviour was unpardonable, but you didn’t exactly give me any reason to behave better. You humiliated me in front of our colleagues and the Starfleets—that was uncalled for. What did you expect me to do after you told me to bugger off twice? Hang around and give you an opportunity to do it again?”

“If I had known what you were going to do, I would have humiliated you more!”

“You know what your problem is, Maya? You don’t know what you want. You’ve been about as receptive as a cold fish for the past four years, never letting me touch you, making fun of me when I tell you I love you, telling me you don’t even want me in the same universe and generally making it clear you could do without me shadowing you all the time. But the minute I go off with someone who can actually demonstrate an ounce of warm behaviour, you get all jealous and mean! You have to make up your mind some day, Maya, because I’m sick and tired of this. In fact, I don’t know why I bothered to come when I know jolly well you don’t care. I might just as well go away.”

“That sounds like a good idea to me!” shouted Maya, relying on her automatic anger reflexes to deal with the situation. Her mind was too busy taking in everything Tony had just said to her.

“If I leave, I’m not coming back this time, Maya. There’ll be no point running after me.”

“I’m not planning to! Just go away!” There was a long silence, and Maya felt her heart sink at the thought that he might indeed have gone. Everything he had said to her was true, she realised. She had been cold, selfish and cruel all these years; being the object of Tony’s passion had so terrified her that she had never managed—perhaps never properly tried—to get beyond her idiotic worries and consider the effect she was having on Tony. Thinking over the past four years, she wondered how Tony had managed to be so patient with her, even giving her a second chance the previous night after she told him...

Maya sank down to the ground, still leaning against the door. Life was just too complicated. She was in love with Tony, but she was supposed to be angry with him for sleeping with Kira. But now he was gone, she wasn’t angry, just... heartbroken. She began to cry; she couldn’t let this happen again. She had hesitated too long last night and he had ended up with Kira. She needed to run after him and catch him before he got a chance to do anything stupid.

This decision taken, Maya stood up again. She pressed the door control and found herself face to face with Tony.

“I guess we neither of us do as we’re told,” he said with a sheepish grin.

Beside herself with joy, Maya threw her arms around his neck and kissed him before he got a chance to say anything more. She remembered they were standing in the doorway to her quarters and took a step back, pulling him in with her. The door slid closed while she continued to kiss him, until she finally felt that familiar, frightening dizziness come over her. Tony probably sensed her reaction in spite of her efforts to hide it.

“Wow,” he said, pulling away. He gently brushed Maya’s long hair out of her face and smiled.

Maya wiped her eyes. “Wow?”

“Well, you know me: I’m either speechless or I waffle.”

“You do have a distinct tendency to waffle,” she agreed with a nod. He looked so beautiful; she suddenly remembered how close she had come to losing him altogether and wrapped her arms around him again. “I’m so sorry, Tony. I never meant to hurt you like this. It was... You’re right, I’ve been so selfish... I should have realised how confusing all this must have been... I thought you were unhappy with me, and I suppose I just took the Dominion as an excuse... but then when I knew about you and Kira...” She bit her lip and realised she wasn’t making much sense. She only hoped this reminder of her mistakes wouldn’t make him angry again.

“Oh Maya, I’m really sorry about last night,” he said contritely. “I shouldn’t have... but I just... I just wanted you to know that it didn’t change anything... I mean, as far as my feelings for you are concerned.”

“I know you—”

“I guess if you didn’t like me before you probably hate me now, and I completely understand. It was a stupid thing to do, though I suppose that makes things easier to some extent, because then you won’t be so worried about me going back to our universe... but the point is that I’d really like to be with you, even if you don’t love me...”

“Tony...”

“Because I adore you, Maya. I know it didn’t look like that last night, but I do. It’s just that I couldn’t stand the idea that you didn’t love me. But if that’s the case, then I realise I can live with it, just as long as I’m with you... If you want us to go on as we did before, then that’s fine. I just want to be...”

Maya finally got him to stop talking by placing her hand flat on his mouth.

“Tony. I love you.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
Return To Grace

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – *Return To Grace*

*“With you eternally mine
In love there is
No measure of time
They planned it all at the start
That you and I’d
Live in each other’s heart”*
Barbra Streisand - “Woman in Love” ¹

Sitting on the sofa with Maya in his arms, Tony reflected that he had rarely been so happy in his whole life. He did have vague recollections of similar joy in the past — on some rare occasions when a woman he loved had returned the feeling, or when his parents would admire something he did without immediately telling him his brother Guido did it better. But nothing could really compare to knowing, after four years of doubt, that Maya loved him.

He hadn’t seriously imagined this would happen. He thought, when he came to see Maya, that she would rant and rave and make him go away; which indeed, she had tried to do. But Tony had never imagined that she would come after him, jump into his arms and tell him she loved him so quickly. He had expected to do a longer penance for his sins.

“You look very thoughtful,” said Maya, observing him with her chin on his shoulder.

Tony leaned down to kiss her. “I’m thinking about us.”

“Together at last,” she said with a bright smile. “I’m sure everyone will be very relieved.”

“Everyone?”

In spite of himself, Tony tensed at the idea of ‘everyone’ knowing about their reconciliation. He could accept Maya’s rapid forgiveness—goodness knows he wouldn’t have wanted it any other way—but he wasn’t sure his colleagues would be so understanding.

“Maya... I think it might be a good idea if we didn’t tell anyone about all this. You know, us getting together again. Not for the moment, anyway.”

Maya shifted her position so that she could look at Tony’s face. “Why? I should think people would be happy for us.”

“Hmm.”

Tony didn’t believe that for one minute. “To be quite honest, I’m afraid people will say some nasty things about you if they know we’ve made up this quickly.”

¹ Barbra Streisand - “Woman in Love” (B. Gibb / R. Gibb) – From the album *Guilty* (1981)

“Why, because I was drunk last night?” Tony grinned at the thought. “I’m really sorry I missed that. You know it’s been my ambition for the past four years to see what you’re like when you’re drunk.”

“You wouldn’t have enjoyed it,” said Maya, tapping Tony’s chin with her finger, “because if you *had* seen me last night, I would probably have killed you. I was crazy with jealousy.” She kissed his neck.

“That’s our problem—I mean, what happened between me and Kira.” Tony let his smile fade. “Everyone knows about it. And if they find out about you and me, everyone will... they’ll say you’re weak, or stupid, or something, because you’ve forgiven me so quickly.” As he spoke, Tony realised he was just giving Maya rope to hang him with.

Maya straightened up and crossed her arms angrily. “Why would they say that? I’m not being weak, I’m being sensible. I don’t see why we should torture ourselves just because I’m *supposed* to hate you for what you did. I love you, and I understand what happened, so there’s no reason not to forgive you right now! I don’t care what people think.”

“That’s a very laudable attitude, Maya. But trust me on this; even if it’s none of their business, people are not going to be happy when they find out.”

“Then we won’t tell anyone,” she promised. “It’ll be just you and me.”

Maya knelt on the sofa and placed her lips on the mole Tony hated so much on his left cheek. Sighing contentedly, Tony buried his face in her hair and kissed the corner of her jaw. After a moment’s hesitation, he let his lips trail further down, to the collar of her bathrobe. Her hair smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and the distinctive odour of Quark’s, mingled with Maya’s own Psychon scent. Eyes closed, Tony nuzzled the soft skin at the base of her neck, his mind reeling with the thought that he was finally allowed to hold her again. The last two days had been agony. Short-lived agony, admittedly, but agony nonetheless.

Tony let go of her as Maya leaned back on the sofa. Her face was flushed and her eyes half-closed, usually the signs that any further advances from him would be met with rejection. Although he wasn’t in the mood for passion, Tony did want to kiss Maya, too elated to forgo this simple expression of his love. He placed his hand on her knee to stabilise himself as he leaned towards her, but he was surprised to find bare skin where the bathrobe had fallen away from her legs. He almost immediately felt Maya’s hand on his chest, pushing him away.

Trying not to look too disappointed, Tony obeyed; he had been naïve to think that admitting her love for him would change whatever difficulty Maya had with physical contact. The habits of four years kicked in, and he started to think of some joke to defuse the situation.

“Oh boy. You’re not wearing anything under that, are you!” he exclaimed, looking at the bathrobe as if it were some kind of animal about to bite him.

Maya smiled, but shook her head sadly. "I don't know what's the matter with me," she said. "I'm really sorry, Tony. I feel so stupid. I thought that realising how I felt would sort this out. I don't know why I keep pushing you away. But I—I don't want you to leave me again." She sounded as if she was on the verge of tears.

"Hey..." Tony embraced her; he was quite amazed how mature and sensible he felt right then. "Whatever it is, it's okay. That's not the be-all and end-all of a relationship. Just tell me what's wrong. If you don't like it when I kiss you..."

"No, I think it's rather the reverse. I... It actually gets too much. I feel as though I'm going to change into a monster or something."

Tony didn't trust himself to say anything about that. Evidently puzzled, Maya pulled back to look at his face.

"Tony! It's not funny!" she exclaimed.

"No, but it's very flattering," he said, trying—and failing—to keep a straight face. "I know it's not funny, and I'm not making fun of you. But I somehow doubt you'd change into a monster, *carina*. That's not usually what happens when I kiss a girl."

Maya smiled reluctantly. "Oh? And what usually happens when you kiss a girl?"

"Um, a slap in the face?"

"That can be arranged," she said petulantly.

Maya glanced at Tony; he admired the subtle change in her large eyes as her expression softened. *God, she was beautiful.*

"I..." she started. "I asked Dr. Bashir about it yesterday and he said—"

"You asked Julian about... about this?" Tony wasn't sure he liked the idea of Maya discussing their problems with outsiders. It made him feel inadequate, as if he should have been able to solve the problem himself a long time ago. But this was no time to be worrying about his pride. "What did he say?"

"Lots of things. He went on about stimuli and pheromones and all the things that can go wrong when people from different species try to... get involved."

"Stimuli and pheromones?" repeated Tony dubiously. "What does he think we are, moths?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'd make a very good moth, Tony," she said teasingly.

"Anyway, Dr. Bashir thought I might be subconsciously misinterpreting your kisses as some kind of, um, attack..." Maya lowered her eyes demurely; Tony could tell she was as embarrassed by this whole conversation as he was.

He stared at her for a moment, unsure what he should say or, indeed, what Maya wanted him to say. "Right," he started. "Well, that's interesting... but you shouldn't worry about that sort of thing. It's not really that important, you know, sweetheart."

Maya broke away and sat back on the sofa, modestly wrapping her bathrobe around her. Tony realised he had said the wrong thing.

"It obviously is important," she said petulantly. "You wouldn't have... slept with Kira if it wasn't."

Tony groaned involuntarily and rubbed his face with his hands. He should have seen this coming. "Okay, let's just get some things straight," he said, realising that the explanation he had prepared on his way here would come in handy after all. "Two nights ago, you told me you didn't want me around. That was... I don't want to make you feel bad, but you were pretty hard on me. If you'd left me any hope, I would have waited for you, you know I would. But since you seemed so sure you didn't want me, I thought I might as well, um..." He couldn't think how to put it without making things worse.

"I do want you," said Maya in a little voice.

"And that's all I need to know." Tony felt a surge of emotion as Maya turned to look at him. "That was why I went after Kira—because I thought you didn't love me, not because we've never slept together. I'm not an animal, Maya. I can live without sex, but I can't live without love."

That sounded a lot more corny and melodramatic than he had intended, but Maya didn't seem to mind. Moving closer, she took Tony's hand and, to his amazement, kissed it. "Hopefully, we won't have to do without either."

Tony wondered if he had understood that correctly. Was his sweet, innocent Maya propositioning him? He pulled her towards him, guiding her so that she was leaning with her back against him and he could hug her comfortably.

"I'll take you up on that promise later," he said gently.

"Later?" She actually sounded disappointed.

"We're wanted in the Koenigs' quarters, remember?" He chuckled and whispered in her ear, "Though you're pretty desirable right here."

Nerys stared at the door through eyes swollen with crying, but she didn't answer the ringing chime. The guilt she had started to feel the previous night had hit her like a phaser blast when she woke up and she was in no mood to see anyone. Tony's alcohol had left her with a strong headache and a heavy heart. She had ruined her relationship with Odo for nothing, just for the sake of her attraction to a passing human being.

Nerys, it's Jadzia.

Nerys still didn't answer. She was so ashamed of what she had done, of the way she had not only been unfaithful to Odo, but so publicly as well. There could be no doubt that the Alphans who had been in the holosuite would tell everyone what they had seen. She hadn't just made a blatant pass at Tony, she had downright undressed him, even though she knew everyone present—including Jake and Nog—could see them. This made Nerys cry even harder.

Nerys! Are you okay? I heard you called in sick, I came to see how you are.

Hearing her friend's concerned voice made Nerys feel a little better. Jadzia, with three hundred years of experience in her belly, would know what to do; the Dax symbiont had been through many relationships, after all. Nerys blew her nose and rubbed her eyes, before finally announcing, "Come."

The door unlocked and Jadzia came to sit beside Nerys on the sofa. The Trill looked sincerely worried. "Oh, Nerys, I... I heard what happened. Do you want to talk about it?"

"I was really stupid," said Nerys, working to regain her composure. "I had too much to drink and I... acted on impulse."

As she spoke, she realised she wasn't telling the truth; she had acted on an impulse which had nothing to do with drink. That was probably the worst part of the whole situation. Nerys knew she hadn't slept with Tony because she had had too much of his alcohol last night, but because she had been longing to have him ever since she first set eyes on him a week earlier. She could have stopped this at any moment; the Prophets knew she had never had any trouble getting rid of unwanted suitors in the past. She could have arranged to have lunch with Tony in the company of her other colleagues, or even helped him by telling that dreary woman he was so enamoured of to pay more attention to him. And no one had forced her to go to the disco. She had brought the whole situation on herself.

"So it's true?" said Jadzia.

"Oh yes. It's true all right." Nerys looked apprehensively at her friend. "What... what are people saying?"

She knew she could trust Jadzia to be honest. "They're saying that you spent the night with Verdeschi. Morn said he saw you leaving Quark's together."

"Great," huffed Nerys, her intense guilt somewhat abated by a more familiar sensation of anger. "Glad to know even the resident barfly is taking an interest in my private life!"

She got up and went over to order a raktajino from the replicator. The sight of the mug sparkling into existence brought back a sudden memory. The last time she had ordered a raktajino from this replicator, Tony had been standing behind her, his bare skin pressed against hers, his mouth on her neck, his hands... Nerys seized the mug and took a large sip from it, unwilling to turn back to Jadzia with that image still in her mind.

"Are you all right?" asked Jadzia. Out of the corner of her eye, Nerys could tell her friend was leaning over to try and see her face.

Nerys walked back to the sofa and shook her head. "Oh, Jadzia," she breathed, unable to express her feelings out loud. "I've made such a mistake. Odo will never forgive me."

"What happened, anyway?" asked Jadzia. "Did you have an argument with Odo?"

Tears welled in her eyes as Nerys felt a pang of guilt stab at her heart. Poor Odo had done absolutely nothing to deserve this. He had argued with Nerys and treated Tony unfairly, but it was all because he had known, he had felt that things would eventually come to this, that Nerys was so attracted to Tony she would eventually be unfaithful to him. *I guess that serves him right for loving a hopeless woman like me*, thought Nerys listlessly.

She felt Jadzia put her arm around her and leaned gratefully on the coarse material of her friend's Starfleet uniform.

"I—I don't know what happened," she said with a hiccup. "I just wanted—" She couldn't bring herself to admit exactly what she had wanted: Tony Verdeschi. "Oh, I don't know what to do, Jadzia. How can I ever face Odo again?"

"It's not going to be easy," admitted Jadzia, although her calm voice was reassuring. "And how you handle it depends on what you want."

"I wish I knew."

"Do you love Tony Verdeschi?"

"No."

"Do you love Odo?"

Nerys lowered her eyes and pulled away. She didn't want to admit to her friend how selfish she had been, accepting a relationship with Odo when she knew she didn't love him. Jadzia had been so delighted when Nerys had told her she and Odo were together; it seemed unfair to tell her now that it had all been a sham, brought about only by Nerys's loneliness and need for love. Nerys started to cry again.

"Oh Nerys." She could hear the disappointment in Jadzia's voice. "You have to tell him if you don't love him. It's not fair to let him think there might be more."

"He already knows." Nerys had realised that from the start. She knew Odo was in no doubt as to her feelings for him: friendship, affection, but not love.

There was a pause while Jadzia no doubt pondered this situation. "Either way, he's the one you need to talk to," she said finally. "Everyone else will forget about it almost as soon as the Alphans are gone. But you will have to clear things up with Odo."

Looking around her assembled colleagues, Helena could see why John was worried things were falling apart. Aside from the Koenigs themselves, Alan was the only one who had bothered to wear his uniform. Sandra was smartly dressed in a green trouser suit and a cream blouse, while Tony was wearing jeans, sneakers and a sweater. In fact, he looked most uncharacteristically scruffy, but given the circumstances, Helena wasn't surprised.

It was Maya's attire which particularly caught Helena's attention; the only remnant of her uniform were her beige knee-high boots. Her hair was loose—something Helena had only ever seen when Maya was ill—and she was wearing a short navy blue jumper dress over a white top. She was studiously ignoring Tony; Helena assumed Maya had heard the rumours about his behaviour the previous night. She hoped to catch the Psychon after the meeting to discuss this with her.

As could be expected, John was looking daggers at Alan, Maya and Tony. "I don't suppose any of you will be surprised to hear I'm not very proud of you today," said John sternly. "I was under the mistaken impression that you were all mature adults capable of behaving yourselves in a public place. Instead, I find myself fielding complaints about my senior staff being drunk and disorderly in Quark's! I never imagined the day would come when I would be so ashamed of you. Do you know what Constable Odo's security report on us said this morning? It described the Alphans as violent, offensive and promiscuous."

"I guess he's getting his revenge at last," said Maya primly.

John spun around to look at the Psychon. "What do you mean?"

Maya crossed her legs and met his eye unwaveringly. "I don't think Odo has ever liked us, Commander," she said with a shrug. "He's been cordial enough to me, but he's resented our presence on the station ever since we arrived. And I'm sure we can all guess why."

As if on cue, everyone turned to look at Tony; he lowered his eyes, though he looked amused rather than ashamed. Helena wondered if this was just bravado or if he sincerely thought cheating on Maya was a joke; if the latter, then she was very disappointed in him. That he should sleep with Kira was bad enough, but she had hoped he would at least show some remorse.

Maya glanced at him and stifled a grin, like a naughty schoolgirl exchanging a private joke with one of her mates. This surprised Helena even more than Tony's reaction; surely Maya shouldn't be laughing with Tony after what he had done. Helena was all the more determined to waylay Maya after the meeting.

"Odo's personal feelings aren't the issue," said John, raising his voice with visible irritation. "Quark has logged a complaint against us, Odo has filed a negative report, and our relationship with our Starfleet hosts has soured considerably. Our position in this universe has been drastically weakened as a consequence. Starfleet won't be so willing to listen to our demands when they've seen so many of us misbehave like this. I feel as though my senior staff is made up of a bunch of students!"

John had evidently forgotten Helena's earlier advice to not be too hard on the culprits. The commander glared at Maya, Tony and Alan; they all kept their eyes lowered and shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Tony and Maya were no longer smiling.

“All that won’t matter once we’ve returned to our universe,” said Alan ruefully.

“That’s something else I wanted to tell you,” growled John. “The ship we were supposed to purchase has been damaged, and following what happened last night, Quark isn’t planning to help us any further. In other words, we’re staying here.”

Sandra was the only one who looked pleased. “So we will be going to Earth after all?”

“We’ll be going to Starbase 571 first,” explained John, his voice now tired and resigned. “As I said yesterday, we just don’t know what effects living in this universe might have, and Starfleet’s aim is still to eventually send us back to our own reality. I realise some of you are hoping to visit Earth, but we’ll just have to abide by Starfleet’s plans, whatever they are.”

Knowing how much John hated this situation, Helena thought he was doing a good job of presenting the facts impartially. “We’re being driven back by the war with the Dominion, but once that’s over, we’ll be returning to our reality.”

“And what if the Dominion wins?” asked Alan.

John looked pointedly at Maya, but the Psychon was too busy studiously smoothing her short dress to notice. “We’ll just have to hope the Dominion won’t win. Speaking of which: Maya, I believe our friend Constable Odo has some questions about that. He wants you to go to his office, or he’ll be arresting you for colluding with the enemy.” This time, Maya did look up. “He would like to know what you were planning to do with Weyoun on Cardassia.”

“Nothing naughty, I promise,” she said with an innocent smile. Tony guffawed, but no one else was amused. “All right, I’ll go and see Odo after the meeting.”

“Good. Make sure you do: I’d rather he didn’t have to arrest you.” Maya nodded and John continued. “You also need to know that Captain Sisko has organised a farewell reception for us this evening. I expect everyone to be on their best behaviour this time. It will be an opportunity to meet the crew of the *Addis-Ababa*. The senior staff of Deep Space Nine will be there as well.”

Helena noticed Tony and Maya exchanging another glance; the Italian shook his head incredulously. “That should be interesting!”

Only another day, and the Alphans would be gone. Odo was looking forward to seeing the back of them.

Sitting in his office, he was still seething over what had happened the previous night. Odo had tried not to think about Nerys’s indiscretion all morning, concentrating instead on his work, but in vain.

He had been tempted to go and see her, once or twice even rising from his chair, ready to head for her quarters. But he had decided against this—it wasn't up to him to make the first move. If she came to see him, he'd no doubt forgive her as soon as she entered the office. If she didn't come to see him, then it was all over and there was no point making himself miserable. He had done himself quite enough harm just listening to the rumours on the Promenade.

Odo firmly turned his mind back onto the Alphans and how much he had grown to dislike them. Though the truth be told, he had disliked them from the very first—the only difference was that he now had several good reasons.

There was also the question of Maya's involvement with the Dominion. Odo was hoping this point would be clarified as soon as Koenig had finished his meeting with his senior staff. The Alphan commander had promised to send the Psychon to Odo's office, and the Constable was confident that he would get the truth out of her this time. The mere revelation that she had been planning to work with Weyoun on Cardassia was enough to send her to a Federation jail—perhaps the menace of separating her from her Alphan friends would encourage her to talk.

Odo expected to see her at 1300 or 1400; if she hadn't arrived by that time, he would go and arrest her. In the meantime, the computer was tracking her movements and would warn him if Maya attempted to leave the station. With DS9's shields up, there was no way she could beam out without authorisation, and she would only have to set foot on a shuttle launch pad for the security alarm to go off.

Provided Koenig managed to hector his subordinates back in line, the day promised to be peaceful for Odo. A Bolian cargo ship was supposed to deliver some supplies at 1330, not that this had anything to do with the constable, and then the next major event would be the arrival of the *Addis-Ababa* that evening. Nothing for Odo to do until Maya turned up, and what he did afterwards would depend on what she told him.

Odo was in the midst of these satisfying thoughts when he heard the door to his office open. He looked up, saw who was standing there, and wasn't particularly surprised.

"Odo," she started.

She lowered her dark eyes, a frown creasing the skin above her nose ridges. She was in uniform, her short hair neatly combed, but her face was tired, her eyes puffed under their habitual makeup. Careful to hide the delight he felt at her coming to see him, Odo stayed silent and waited to hear what she would say.

"I... I know this won't change anything," said Nerys. "But I'm really sorry."

Odo couldn't trust himself to say anything about this. He was afraid he would instinctively tell her she was forgiven, because as he watched her, standing so miserable in the middle of the room, all he could think about was how much he loved her. But she didn't deserve forgiveness; there was no excuse for her infidelity, no mitigating circumstances that could explain her night with Verdeschi.

Nerys looked at Odo. "I guess I have no excuse." "No, you don't," agreed Odo. This time, he was the one who lowered his eyes. "You don't love me, Nerys. There's no point continuing like this. Even if you begged me to forgive you, even if I did, we both know the day would come when you would meet someone else and leave me." He caught movement in the corner of his eye and turned towards Nerys as she sat down opposite him. She was crying.

"You're wrong to say I don't love you," she said gently. "I'm not in love with you, but I do care. What happened last night doesn't mean I don't want us to stay together."

"You sleep with someone else and expect us to stay together?" exclaimed Odo.

"It was just sex. I know... that's no excuse. But it didn't mean anything to me. Not in the long term, not compared to what we had." Nerys ran her hand through her hair and then wiped her eyes, carefully running her fingers on her lower lids to avoid smudging her makeup. "You're the best man I've ever met, Odo. No one has ever loved me the way you do. I knew I didn't deserve it, and I did hope I could work to earn that love, because I knew I would lose it... and now I have..."

Odo knew she hadn't lost his love; nothing she did would ever stop him from loving her. She was a murderer, a liar, an adulteress, but he would always love her. But his feelings notwithstanding, Odo realised he couldn't afford to be involved with her under these circumstances. She would betray him again; there was no way this would remain an isolated incident, and although he couldn't avoid feeling hurt when she did such a thing, he could avoid being publicly humiliated. If they were no longer officially involved, then he could nurse his broken heart in the privacy he required, without the added complication of everyone laughing behind his back.

"My... feelings for you won't change," he said finally, unwilling to meet her eye. "But I think we should take the time to reconsider our relationship."

"It won't happen again," she assured him. The desperate tone of her voice tugged at Odo's tormented insides, but he had already been expecting that lie.

"It will," he retorted simply, his gruff voice sounding a lot more calm to his auditory senses than he actually felt. "And that's why I want to release you from any obligation toward me. It isn't fair to expect you to remain faithful to me when you don't love me."

"But Odo—"

Steeling himself, Odo looked up and met her eye. She was still crying, now oblivious to the makeup that traced black marks on her pale pink cheeks.

"Maybe we can pick up where we left off later," he started. Unable to keep his eyes on her sorrowful expression, he lowered his eyes and looked at his terminal. A brand new communication caught his eye and, he quickly realised, offered him a way out of this uncomfortable scene with Nerys.

"We've just received a communication from that Bolian freighter which is due to dock at 1330," he informed her. "It seems they've had an accident and will need to beam several crewmembers to the Infirmary when they arrive."

"I guess I should go and arrange for their arrival," said Nerys listlessly, a hint of disdain in her voice. Maybe she realised he was just looking for an excuse to get her to leave. Either way, she took the hint; after quickly wiping the ruined makeup off her cheeks, she turned on her heels and walked out.

Odo wished he could revert to his liquid form. Unwilling to do so in his office, where someone might gawk at him from the Promenade, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes instead, his face studied impassivity while his insides boiled with emotion.

John had dismissed the meeting; the senior staff of the defunct Moonbase Alpha left the Koenigs' quarters one after the other. Helena overheard Alan and Sandra discussing what they would do if they went to Earth as they went out. John explained that he had to see Sisko about the arrangements for the Alphans' evacuation to the *Addis-Ababa*. Tony and Maya were pretending to leave separately, but as she stopped the Psychon and asked to speak to her, it was obvious to Helena that Tony was waiting. He followed the others when he realised Helena had noticed him. The two women were left alone.

"You seem to be getting on well with Tony," remarked Helena as she picked up John's half-finished cup of coffee and went to put it in the replicator. The device dissolved its creation in a blur of particles and Helena turned back towards Maya.

The young woman was now sitting on the arm of the sofa; she was fiddling with the hem of her dress, probably unsure what to say. Helena wondered if her outfit was a suggestion of Tony's or just something Maya thought would please him.

"You know Tony and I always get along well," said Maya with a shrug.

Helena remembered saying something similar to Maya the previous day. Things had definitely changed. She sat down at the dining table and glanced back at the replicator. "Have you had lunch? We could replicate something..."

Maya shook her head. "Actually, I was going to..."

"...Have lunch with Tony?"

The look that flashed on Maya's face made it clear Helena had guessed right. The Psychon lowered her eyes and smiled like a schoolgirl admitting to a crush. "I suppose it's obvious," she admitted, coming over to sit at the dining table with Helena. She seized her friend's hands, her large eyes bright with joy. "Oh, Helena, you have no idea how happy I am! I was so miserable without him."

Helena couldn't work up any enthusiasm for this revelation. "You were only without him for one night."

"Strictly speaking, it's been hundreds of nights," said Maya. "I should have told him I loved him years ago."

"You told him you loved him... this morning?" Maya nodded and Helena was horrified. "After what happened last night? That was a bit quick wasn't it?"

Maya let go of Helena's hands and sat back in her chair, apparently mystified. "Quick? Why? Is there a time limit on how soon I can forgive my own... boyfriend?"

"No, but I can certainly say I wouldn't forgive John so quickly if he behaved like that. I mean, what I've heard of Tony's behaviour last night is outrageous!"

"Maybe it was," said Maya, though she didn't sound the least bit concerned. "But that's in the past now."

"The past? It was only last night!" exclaimed Helena. "You really should take some time to think about this. I think you're being far too hasty, forgiving him so soon."

Perhaps troubled by what Helena was saying, Maya frowned and shook her head. "Why? I love Tony and I want to be with him; I see no point in making us both miserable by sulking for days!"

"But he slept with another woman," Helena reminded her. "Not even 24 hours ago! It doesn't matter how much you love him; it certainly doesn't look as if he has the same devotion and loyalty to you. It's very noble of you to forgive him so easily, but from what I gather, he really doesn't deserve it."

"You obviously don't know Tony like I do," said Maya stubbornly. "His devotion to me has been faultless for four years, and until now, he's been getting very little in exchange. I've been cruel to him, Helena. I didn't realise at the time, but now I know how much he suffered because of me. He loves me; there's no doubt about that."

"He has a strange way of showing it."

"Helena, you don't know everything. He only went with Kira because of me. I told him... he asked me if I loved him the other day. I told him I didn't know, and I said I didn't want him to stay in this universe with me if the Alphans could go back to our reality. It's not surprising that he thought we were no longer together. So you see, if I'm upset by what he did last night, I've only got myself to blame."

“Maya, you most certainly shouldn’t blame yourself for what he did! Tony is a grown man: he made his own decision—no one forced him to sleep with Kira. What I see is that he’s had his fun and now you’re letting him get away with it.”

“What am I supposed to do—punish him?” exclaimed Maya, standing up. “Tony said you’d react like this. I don’t care if the whole universe is whispering behind our backs and saying he’s a bastard and I’m an idiot. I am not being stupid, Helena, in fact, I think last night has made my mind clearer than it has ever been. I’ve been hiding from the truth for four whole years, but now I know how close I came to losing him I realise I love Tony. And whatever you might think, he definitely deserves that love. Now, I have a lunch date with him...”

Helena followed her as she stalked off. “Maya...” she called gently, placing her hand on the young woman’s arm. If Maya was in love, Helena knew from personal experience that arguing would only make her more determined. “Be careful, Maya. Don’t let him hurt you—he’s not necessarily worth it.”

Maya seemed relieved at Helena’s gesture of peace; she immediately embraced her with a grateful sigh.

“Oh, don’t worry, Helena, I know he is.”

The Bolian freighter *Urdal* reached Deep Space Nine at 1347, seventeen minutes past schedule. Its captain had already warned the station staff that several crewmembers had been injured in a fire on board. The medical facilities on the freighter were too limited to cope with the situation and the injured Bolians needed to be immediately beamed into DS9’s Infirmary. Accordingly, the shields on Deep Space Nine were lowered for 2.4 minutes. Just long enough for the station’s transporters to lock on and beam out the casualties.

Maya’s heart was beating wildly as she rang the chime of Tony’s quarters. Bolstered by Helena’s—admittedly half-hearted—blessing, she was impatient to be with her love again. Maya was about to jump into Tony’s arms as soon as he opened the door, but she paused when he leaned against the door frame and looked her over critically. She knew she needed to give him time to tell whatever joke was coming before smothering him in kisses.

“No thanks, I don’t buy cookies,” he said.

“Cookies?” asked Maya as she stepped in, sure of her welcome.

“Wrong reference, of course. You’re dressed as a schoolgirl, not a Girl Scout.”

He had made a similar comment about her costume when she had come out of her bedroom that morning. Maya had chosen the clothes because the replicator said they were from the late 20th century and because the short skirt would show off her legs. Her four years on Alpha had taught her that, as she was rather flat-chested, her legs were her best attribute.

Tony grinned and shook his head, his eyes following Maya as she went to sit on the sofa. “Besides which, they don’t have Girl Scouts in my country. British invention.”

“I thought Girl Scouts were called Girl Guides,” said Maya, sitting down on his sofa. This topic was one of many useless subjects she had read all about in Alpha’s computer.

Tony hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans and shook his head. “Sorry I mentioned it. Trust you to be an expert on Girl Guides—you’d probably have been one if you’d grown up on Earth.” He walked over to the replicator. “Now, what would you like for your instant lunch?”

“Pizza. Actually come to think of it, I think the book I read said they were called Guides in Britain, but Scouts in the United States. So we’re both right.”

“That’s nice to know. I have a feeling it’ll be a rare occurrence,” he said with a grin. “You really want pizza for lunch?”

“Yes, a Meat Feast. Talking about different names for things, do you know what the replicator called this?” She indicated her dress. “A jumper. But I thought *this* was a jumper.” She plucked at the collar of the garment she was wearing under the dress.

She suddenly noticed that Tony was leaning against the replicator, laughing. He tried to become more serious when he saw her looking at him. “Um, yeah, it’s just another difference between American English and British English. I’d call that a pinafore and yes, for me, that other garment they call a sweater is a jumper.”

He suddenly guffawed again. “But let’s just get back to food. There’s something you need to know, baby: ‘Meat Feast’ is not actually a type of pizza. Margherita, Bolognese, Quattro Stagioni, but not ‘Meat Feast’. That’s just a trademark.”

Maya was embarrassed by this mistake and annoyed at Tony’s reaction. She had read the name on a small piece of paper someone had left in one of the books in Alpha’s library and she had remembered it as a type of Italian dish. Tony evidently thought this was hilarious; he was still laughing while he punched in the instructions.

“See, it doesn’t come in a big cardboard box,” he announced as a large dish materialised in the replicator. A second one appeared as soon as Tony had taken the first and put it on the dining table. “Here, since we have no television to veg out in front of, we might as well eat at the table like civilised human beings — well, speaking strictly for myself, of course.”

“Oh, I can be a human, if you like.” Maya knew how much Tony hated her transformations; it seemed a fair way to get back at him for laughing at her. She accordingly transformed her face and hair to emulate the characteristics of a human.

“Maya...” Tony scowled at her as she came over to join him.

Unconcerned, Maya whisked the long straight hair she had given herself off the shoulders of her dress as she sat down. Even to her limited human olfactory senses, the food smelled delicious and the pizza looked just as it had on the picture she had seen all those years ago.

“Come on, Tony,” she said flirtatiously. “Surely you don’t object to eating with someone from your own species.”

“I thought you couldn’t eat when you were in a different shape,” he retorted confidently. Maya made a face; trust him to remember that! “Anyway, I don’t like blondes... Maya, please...”

With a shrug, Maya concentrated and changed back into herself. Tony nodded with satisfaction. “That’s more like it. Much more like it, in fact.” He leaned his chin on his hand and stared at her adoringly. “I don’t know if I’ve told you this before, but you are the most beautiful woman in the universe.”

His tone was so serious that Maya instinctively thought up a light-hearted retort. “I wouldn’t like to think you’d fall in love with any less,” she said as she started to eat. Having taken her first mouthful, Maya realised she should respond a little more sympathetically to his declaration. She didn’t want him accusing her of being a ‘cold fish’ anymore.

“I love you too,” she said. Maya stared at Tony for a moment, reflecting how nice he looked in a yellow polo neck jumper... sweater... whatever. She remembered him wearing a tuxedo the previous night and wondered idly if there was any way she might convince him to wear one again some day. That costume had really suited him.

Tony reached out to take her hand. He continued to admire her for a minute or so before his expression changed to amusement. “Hmm. I think we have a whole string orchestra warbling along with this conversation. We’re getting so syrupy that if anyone was listening to us, they’d probably need a bucket to throw up in.”

“Oh that’s nice,” exclaimed Maya. “I tell you I love you and all you think about is people throwing up in buckets!”

“Yes... I think I need to work on my mental associations,” he admitted, withdrawing his hand to start cutting up his pizza. “I used to wonder why I was still single in my thirties. I think I’m beginning to know why.” He paused and smirked. “I was waiting for you to come along, of course,” he said, his tone rife with insincerity.

“You smooth talker,” she responded. She took another mouthful. “This is very good! What type of pizza is it?”

Tony’s smirk turned to a genuine grin. “A Meat Feast. Or as close as I could get. I couldn’t remember all the ingredients. Now I come to think of it, I don’t think the real thing would have had green peppers on it.”

“It’s delicious,” she assured him. Since she had no idea what the real thing would have tasted like, she was unlikely to be disappointed.

Their meal continued, interrupted only by more meaningless conversation about food and drink and school uniforms, and the occasional long silence where all Tony and Maya did was gaze at each other. Maya was so beautifully happy she forgot all about the Dominion, and Tony sleeping with Kira, and her insulting Dax and Worf, and all the other things that had been festering in her mind since the previous night. For the moment at least, she and Tony were the only people in the universe. Maya wished it could stay like that forever.

“By the way, weren’t you supposed to go and see Odo?” asked Tony when they had nearly finished their pizzas.

Maya sighed at this reminder. “Oh, I’ll see him later. I don’t want to be thinking about serious things like the Dominion. I want to be with you. Even if it’s only to talk about silly things that probably haven’t existed for centuries like Meat Feasts and Girl Guides.”

Looking at him, Maya felt a sudden surge of tenderness, tinged with guilt that she had never appreciated him before. So what if Helena thought her change of heart was too sudden—Tony’s indiscretion of the previous night had opened her eyes, and she was determined she wasn’t going to let any opportunity go by this time around.

With that thought in mind, Maya got up and, aware that Tony was watching every movement, she made her way slowly towards him, coming to finally sit on his knee. It was something she had once seen a woman do in a movie.

Tony seemed to appreciate the gesture. He responded readily to her kiss, his hands gently rubbing her back. The sickness seized her, as always, but Maya determinedly ignored it. She was doing a fairly good job of pretending her head wasn’t spinning when she realised with astonishment that Tony was the one pushing her away this time.

“Maya, it isn’t an emergency,” he said. Responding to her puzzled expression, he stuttered, “Ma-making love to me. It isn’t urgent.”

Hurt by his assessment of her motives, Maya started to get up, but Tony stopped her, forcibly pulling her back onto his knee. She was surprised by the strength of his grasp on her hips.

“I’m sorry, Maya, I’m really sorry,” he said contritely, hugging her and burying his face in her hair. “I just...” He lifted his head out of her hair and bit his lip. “I think you need to know that I suffer from a very common incurable disease called foot-in-mouth syndrome. It means there’s no connection between my brain and my speech centres... Can we start this conversation over again?”

Maya smiled, though she was still puzzled by his rejection. “All right. I was kissing you and you pushed me away. I thought I was the one who had a problem with that.”

Tony's body tensed so completely that Maya knew she would have sensed it even without sitting on his knee. "I don't have a problem," he said shortly.

"Oh." Maya was startled by his denial and leaned forward to get up again. Tony still had her firmly held in place; Maya knew that she was stronger than he was and could easily break away if necessary, but she chose not to resist.

"All right, what's your non-problem?" she said, her tone deliberately light.

"I... I don't think it would be... appropriate," said Tony after a thoughtful pause.

Maya sensed trouble. "Appropriate."

"I can't help it, I still feel guilty about last night," he blurted out. "I... It doesn't feel right. It's too soon, I don't deserve this."

Maya sighed and straightened up, shaking her head. "You humans... You actually want me to punish you for what you did, don't you! Even though I accept your reasons and I've forgiven you. Well, I have news for you, Antonio: I'm not going to punish you. In the first place, I'm sure you'll get plenty of punishment from everyone else in the station. And I refuse to make myself unhappy by making you unhappy just to cater to some masochistic streak in your species, you... you silly man!"

Tony seemed taken aback by her reaction. He stared at her and then looked away, and then thought about that for a moment and finally grinned sheepishly. "Hey, I'm a Catholic, I was born guilty!" he said gently. "But you're right. I guess I am being a bit silly."

Maya kissed his cheek. "Definitely," she whispered. Inspired by his contrite expression, she brushed her lips on his bristly cheek and then tried the same manoeuvre on his neck. The skin there was delightfully soft; Maya pulled gently on his collar to kiss more of it further down. She heard Tony take a sharp intake of breath, but as he didn't protest, she kissed him on the cheek again.

"Hmm, Maya, is it all right if I change my mind?" She felt his hands push on her hips, indicating she should get up. Maya obeyed and Tony rose with her to kiss her passionately, without his usual restraint, perhaps because he knew she was unlikely to reject him this time. She felt his hands at the back of her dress; the unfamiliar touch made her shiver and she let out an involuntary sigh.

That was apparently all the encouragement Tony needed—the next thing Maya knew, they had covered the few metres to the sofa and Maya was lying on it, with Tony kneeling on the floor. Her mind was spinning, but the sensation felt less oppressive this time. She was sure she wasn't going to turn into a monster... or at least, that if she did, Tony wouldn't mind.

But all of a sudden, everything went wrong. Maya felt the pull of a transporter on her body as an external force attempted to transform her molecules into energy. She immediately tried to turn into a bee—the smallest creature she could emulate. Although the transporter didn't allow her to transform properly, the process of pushing over 99% of her mass into subspace did stop it from getting a lock on her.

Tony, of course, had no such defences and disappeared immediately. Desirous to be with him wherever he was, Maya relaxed her shape and let the transporter take her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
Matter Of Life And Death

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – *Matter Of Life And Death*

*“He said he would be leaving
On that midnight train to Georgia,
And he’s goin’ back
To a simpler place and time.
And I’ll be with him
On that midnight train to Georgia,
I’d rather live in his world
Than live without him in mine”*
Gladys Knight & The Pips - “Midnight Train to Georgia”¹

“I know this doesn’t mean anything to you,” stormed Tony indignantly, “but that was very bad timing!”

The Jem’Hadar beyond the forcefield were unimpressed by his outburst, so Tony decided to save his breath and turned his attention to his surroundings instead. As far as he could tell, he was in a holding cell, presumably aboard a Dominion starship. He was in the process of assessing any possible means of escape when Maya materialised beside him.

“Tony!” she exclaimed breathlessly, “are you all right?”

“Yeah... What are you doing here? I thought you could stop the Dominion from transporting you!”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right,” she explained. “Besides, resisting a transporter is exhausting.”

She did look tired, he realised, and although he was annoyed that she was in the same danger as he was—whatever that turned out to be—Tony was glad to have Maya with him. He smiled and straightened her dress before returning his attention to the layout of the cell. Predictably, there was no visible way out other than the forcefield. In any case, he didn’t have much time to ponder the question.

“I’m glad you could both join us.”

Tony looked out to see a white-skinned alien in a purple suit approaching. He needed no introduction to guess who it was. “You must be the chief Pixie around here.”

“Weyoun! Why did you kidnap us? I thought we’d agreed—” started Maya, walking up to the limit of the forcefield.

“I changed my mind,” interrupted Weyoun. “I wasn’t prepared to wait around while you sorted out your petty concerns with your human friends. You agreed to come and help me, and I expect you to hold to that agreement.”

¹ Gladys Knight & The Pips - "Midnight Train To Georgia" (J. Weatherly) - 1973

“But not today—I thought we had until tomorrow!” Maya stared at the Vorta for a moment and then took a step back. “You’re... You’re not Weyoun, are you...”

Weyoun seemed surprised, but after a moment’s hesitation, he smiled and morphed seamlessly into a column of shimmering orange, before coalescing back into the shape of a humanoid woman with features not unlike Odo’s. She observed the two humanoids with keen interest.

“I had forgotten the powers Maya had,” said the woman. “It has been a long time since I met a metamorphosing Psychon. We don’t allow them to develop the ability these days.”

“Yeah, you’re really into peace and liberty in the Dominion, aren’t you?” remarked Tony. He was pretty sure he was going to find this Plastilina as annoying as her relative on DS9.

“What do you want?” asked Maya. “Where’s Weyoun?” The female Founder smiled, but there was clearly no emotion behind the expression.

“Weyoun is fulfilling his role as administrator of the Alpha Quadrant Dominion, as should be,” she said placidly. “A role he will continue to fill until we decide to do something about this... flaw he appears to have developed.”

“What will you do to him?”

Tony was surprised at Maya’s question; he thought she should be worrying about what Plastilina was planning to do to *them*, not some Dominion despot who had no doubt brought his fate on himself. The female Founder evidently agreed with him.

“That is not your concern.” She turned to one of the Jem’Hadar. “Deactivate the forcefield and run the inhibitor.”

The forcefield zapped out of existence and Maya suddenly winced in pain, grasping Tony’s arm. There was a bench in the holding cell; Tony guided Maya to it and sat her down. “What are you doing to her?” he demanded, turning to face the Founder.

“We can’t afford to have her turning into some monster,” explained Plastilina. “The device is harmless; it merely targets those parts of the Psychon brain which allow her to transform. Now, if we could get down to business. We need to know exactly what Weyoun told you, Maya. We could scan your brain directly for the information, but that process is usually fatal for Psychons, so it would be easier if you told us yourself. Of course, if you don’t want to cooperate, we do have plenty of means of persuasion at our disposal.”

The Founder nodded to the Jem'Hadar and two soldiers entered the holding cell and seized Tony. He put up as much resistance as he could, punching one of the Jem'Hadar in the stomach, but the creatures were much stronger than he was. As soon as they had a firm hand on him, they dragged Tony out of the cell with minimal difficulty and shackled his hands behind his back. Tony made up for his powerlessness by roundly insulting them and the Female Founder, though this only brought him a punch in the face. Remembering how his last encounter with the Jem'Hadar had ended, Tony gritted his teeth, his mouth full of blood from his cut lip.

"Maya, you don't have to tell them anything," he said.

"I'll tell you what you want to know if you let him go," said Maya. Although she was visibly weakened by the inhibitor, she was looking at Tony with concern. So much for taking his advise.

"No," said Plastilina flatly. "You will tell us what we want to know, and in exchange, we won't inflict further pain on him."

Tony braced himself for the demonstration which would undoubtedly follow. But no amount of expectation would have prepared him for the onslaught he received. The pain came suddenly, flooding his entire system as if every vein in his body was filled with molten lead. Every thought, every emotion, every resolution of bravery wavered and then collapsed in front of this intense, all-consuming pain. For what seemed to be an eternity, Tony's entire being concentrated on the sensation.

And then it stopped. His senses disorientated by the sudden loss of the mesmerising torment, Tony opened his eyes and blinked a few times. He was kneeling on the floor between his Jem'Hadar guards, having no doubt given Maya a suitably persuasive display of sheer agony. All he could see were her high-heeled boots a couple of metres from him; Tony didn't want to look up and see the effect witnessing his pain had had on her.

"Good, so we're agreed, are we?" he heard the female Founder declare. "Come with me, Maya, and let's see if you're as clever as your counterpart was."

Maya's Alphan boots walked out of Tony's line of sight and the two Jem'Hadar picked him up to unceremoniously dump him in the holding cell. Tony watched the forcefield fizzle back into existence and then lumbered over to sit on the bench. His mouth was sore and filled with blood; he leaned over the side of the bench and spat a mouthful of blood onto the floor; there were no sanitary arrangements at all in the cell, so he could do little else. With his hands still shackled behind his back, Tony wiped his chin on his shoulder. He then sat back and waited.

“What do you mean, they were abducted?” shouted John, slamming his fist down on Sisko’s desk. The baseball rocked on its little stand and the Starfleet captain had to lean forward to catch it.

“I’m sorry. I realise this isn’t the best news...” started Sisko, irritatingly calm under the circumstances.

“You’re damn right it isn’t!” stormed John, glaring at Sisko and then at Odo and Kira who were also present. “My first officer and my science officer get kidnapped and all you people can say is ‘sorry’? This is ridiculous! All this supposedly high-tech 24th-century equipment and you can’t even protect *two people*?”

“If you’d just let us explain—” started Kira. She was scowling at him, her hands on her skinny hips.

John returned the woman’s scowl with a glare that made her even paler. The day had been extremely frustrating so far, and this latest tragedy finally gave John a good opportunity to express some of the rage he felt.

“Do by all means!” he exclaimed. “I’m dying to hear your explanation!”

“We had to lower our shields to beam in casualties from a civilian freighter,” explained Sisko before Kira could speak. “The Dominion must have been monitoring the station; they beamed out Verdeschi and Maya as soon as our shields were down.”

“Wasn’t there anything you could do to stop them?” demanded John.

“No,” admitted Odo. “The computer warned us as soon as Maya beamed out, but we have no means of countering a Dominion transporter.”

Sisko was thoughtfully fingering his baseball. “Commander, we’re doing everything we can to get your officers back. Chief O’Brien is analysing the transporter signature to see if he can determine its precise origin. Commanders Worf and Dax have taken the *Defiant* to try and locate the Dominion ship Verdeschi and Maya were beamed to. Unfortunately, Dominion transporters have an extremely long range...”

The captain let his voice trail off and John realised what Sisko was trying to tell him. There was a chance they might never find Tony and Maya again. *This can’t be happening*, thought John incredulously, feeling the same sense of panic, of desperation which had seized him when Main Mission was destroyed. He couldn’t lose his officers like this, not Tony and Maya. They were his friends, and he had lost more than his fair share of friends already.

“Isn’t there anything else we can do?” he asked, his anger now abated by desperation.

Sisko lowered his eyes and shook his head. “I’ve already contacted Weyoun on Cardassia Prime. He denies any knowledge of the abduction, of course... Though he did seem very surprised when I told him about it.”

“So it’s possible that Weyoun isn’t the one who kidnapped Tony and Maya?” asked John. Given what Maya had told him about Weyoun’s plans to go behind the Founders’ backs, he found this piece of information very worrying.

The captain nodded. “Commander, what did Maya tell you of her encounter with Weyoun?”

“Only that her counterpart was the one who designed the Vorta and that Weyoun believed Maya would be able to reverse the genetic engineering.” There seemed no point dissimulating now; John wanted to make sure the Starfleets knew anything that might help them find Tony and Maya.

“Weyoun *wanted* her to reverse it?” said Sisko, visibly surprised. He glanced at Kira and then Odo.

“Maybe something’s happened and Weyoun wants to turn against the Founders,” suggested Odo. “His genetic engineering is just about the only thing that keeps him loyal, after all. If we could get him to turn against the Dominion...”

Kira shrugged her thin shoulders as she completed his sentence. “...They would just kill him and clone another Weyoun to take his place. Probably one that was even more loyal than the previous ones.”

“But that’s something they can’t do,” said John suddenly. “Maya mentioned some kind of ‘key’ which only her counterpart knew and which was the fastest way to unlock and rebuild the Vorta’s genetic code. Maya—our Maya—thought she might have already guessed what her counterpart had done. That’s what Weyoun was counting on when he first contacted her. Without that key, the Vorta can’t reverse their engineering... and the Founders can’t improve on it either.”

“Unless they get their hands on Maya,” said Sisko thoughtfully. He placed his baseball back on its stand. “So depending on who kidnapped her, we’re either looking at a rebellion of the Vorta against the Founders or the creation of a whole new generation of Vorta who are even more dedicated to the Founders.”

“Assuming Maya has guessed the right code,” Kira reminded him.

Sisko acknowledged her remark with a nod. “Either way, all we can do right now is sit back and wait.”

Defeated, John looked at the starfield visible from Sisko’s window. “Sit back and wait,” he repeated irritably. “I never was good at that.”

With no in-built sense of time, Tony had no idea how long he sat in the holding cell, hands tied behind his back, though he suspected it was several hours. He wondered if Maya was all right, and whether she was telling Plastilina what she wanted to know. He could only hope that it wasn’t something which would affect the Alphans. If it was, and Maya didn’t cooperate, there was the possibility the Jem’Hadar would inflict the same torture on him again.

The thought of being subjected to the same punishment made Tony shudder with terror. It was strange to think that barely a couple of hours earlier, his main concern had been his romance with Maya. *How quickly things change.* He let his mind linger on the pleasant memory of Maya in his arms, her laughter when he was caressing her, the expectant look on her face as he started to peel away her layers of clothing... He decided to dismiss that train of thought.

Tony looked up as Maya and the female Founder came back in. Maya looked downright ill, her face nearly as pale as her jumper; the inhibitor had clearly remained activated the whole time. Letting his eyes drift off Maya's ashen features, Tony nearly did a double-take when he realised what kind of creature was following Plastilina. Bumpy eyebrows, brown streaks on his face, widow's peak: there could be no doubt the man was a Psychon. In spite of himself, Tony was pleased to find the creature was large and squat, with as much charm as the trader Taybor. He wouldn't have liked Maya to spend any length of time with a young, good-looking male of her species. ²

The Jem'Hadar shoved Maya into the holding cell and reactivated the forcefield. She immediately came to sit beside Tony, brushing her fingers on his bruised jaw in silent concern. Looking up, Tony saw the Psychon man watching them with obvious disgust.

"You have been most cooperative, Maya," said the Founder in a calm voice that made Tony shiver. "The information you have given us will prove very useful. Professor, will you be needing her any more?"

"No, you may do with her as you see fit, Founder," said the Psychon, bowing respectfully. "The creature will be of no further use to my research."

"The 'creature?'" blurted out Tony angrily, springing to his feet. "You should show a bit more respect when you're talking about a lady!"

"Tony—" started Maya, placing a warning hand on his arm. He immediately fought to calm himself down.

The Psychon approached the forcefield and smiled cruelly. "A woman who indulges her basest desires with an animal from a lower order is no lady."

Tony would have gladly punched the fellow, but as he was currently handcuffed and locked behind a forcefield, there wasn't much to be done. Besides, Maya was right; this was hardly a good time to turn all chivalrous. He did have to wonder how Maya could have worked with this creep.

"I'm glad the information I gave you was useful, Founder," said Maya in a drowsy voice. "I kept my promise and gave you what you wanted. Now let us go. Please!"

² *Space: 1999 - "The Taybor"* (ep.30-1976)

The Founder motioned the Psychon away. Tony had a very bad feeling as the Shapeshifter observed them thoughtfully; her smooth face was too placid not to be preparing something. The moment she spoke, Tony's heart filled with dread.

"I never promised to let you go," said the Founder slyly, narrowing her eyes. "I only promised not to inflict further pain on your human friend—"

She was interrupted as a Cardassian soldier came into the room. "Founder," he said. "A Starfleet vessel is heading for the border: it's the U.S.S. *Defiant*. Weyoun has contacted us and wants to know if he should send a fleet to intercept... or if this is some private matter you'd rather deal with personally."

The Founder's placid features revealed no emotion, but Tony could tell she was pondering the situation. "Tell Weyoun there is no need for a fleet. We will take care of the *Defiant* ourselves."

The Cardassian bowed with a modicum of respect and left. Plastilina turned to Tony and Maya.

"It seems you are fortunate, Alphans," she said. "I will return you to the *Defiant*, since your friends have been so kind as to come and get you. The Federation has been keeping Weyoun quite busy with their protests about abducting neutral refugees; letting you go should put an end to those discussions before our Vorta friend decides to say something stupid. Besides, I have a few things to say to him myself."

She nodded to the Jem'Hadar guard and the forcefield was deactivated. Tony cautiously stood up, observing the Founder suspiciously. He could hardly believe that the Founder was simply letting them go; there had to be a catch. At Plastilina's behest, Tony stepped out of the holding cell, Maya close behind.

"Before I let you go, however, I need to warn you," continued the Founder. Tony felt sure the catch was coming now. "I understand you are both from an alternate reality. I would advise you to return to it as soon as possible. If you are still in this universe by the end of the next day cycle on Deep Space Nine, we will hunt you down and kill you. I will handle the Weyoun problem today, but I will not run the risk that some other Vorta might enlist your cooperation, Maya. You should be grateful I'm giving you this chance instead of killing you right now."

"Believe me, we *are* grateful," said Tony sincerely.

Looking up at the Ops screen, Dax observed the U.S.S. *Addis-Ababa*, docked at one of the upper pylons, and found herself wondering if this was the shape of Starfleet vessels to come. Small and squat, it barely looked like a Starfleet vessel at all, or at best like a *Galaxy*-class that had been compressed so that its warp nacelles were alongside the main hull and the saucer section was squashed into an almost rectangular shape.

“So that’s the *Addis-Ababa*,” said Koenig neutrally, standing beside her in the pit and similarly fascinated by the screen.

Koenig had accompanied Verdeschi and Maya to the Infirmary when the *Defiant* brought them back half an hour earlier, but he was now back in Ops, his mood considerably improved by the safe return of his officers.

Dax nodded and turned to look at him. “*Saber*-class, 40 officers and crew, enough cargo space for ten of your Eagles and the rest of your equipment, enough emergency evacuation quarters for your people to live in until you reach Starbase 571. There’s a gym and a recreation area. It should be a relatively pleasant trip.”³

“Ah, but does it have a holosuite?” asked the commander with a twinkle in his eye.

“No holodeck, and no bar, either, I’m afraid. It’s just a light cruiser, not as well equipped as an explorer vessel like the *Galaxy* or *Intrepid* classes...” she interrupted herself as she realised this wouldn’t mean anything to Koenig. “You’ll naturally find all the other amenities of Deep Space Nine on Starbase 571.”⁴

A shadow of regret passed over Koenig’s features. “That’ll give us something to look forward to.”

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to send you back to your reality. I know how much you wanted to go; we were really hoping we could get you a ship.”

“And now, we’ve got a ship, but it’s just not heading in the right direction,” said Koenig thoughtfully, looking up at the screen again. “Maybe later.”

“You can be certain Starfleet will return you to your universe as soon as possible. In the meantime, you and your people can consider it a vacation,” she said brightly.

“I think my people are already considering it a vacation. Judging from everything that happened last night, it’s probably just as well the *Addis-Ababa* is such a sober ship.” Koenig’s expression darkened as he continued. “What kind of armament does it have? The Dominion might have returned Maya this time, but if they try to abduct her again, the ship might have to do some fighting.”

3 The Rolling Stones - "Sympathy for the Devil" (M. Jagger / K. Richards) - From the album *Beggars Banquet* (1968) The specifications for the *Saber*-class are taken from the "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Technical Manual" by Herman Zimmerman, Rick Sternbach and Doug Drexler (1998, Pocket Books).

4 For reference, the *Enterprise-D* was a *Galaxy*-class starship, and the *Voyager* is *Intrepid*-class.

Dax consulted the vessel's specifications on her console. "That shouldn't be a problem. The ship has as much weaponry as the *Defiant*—four type-10 phaser emitters and two photon torpedo launchers—that's a good match for the Jem'Hadar. Besides, once it clears the Bajoran system, it will be traveling entirely in Federation space, where it's unlikely to come under attack. You'll all be a lot safer than here on Deep Space Nine... well, you saw what can happen here."

"Yes, I did," said Koenig coldly. Dax felt some regret at the way that relations between the Alphans and the Starfleet officers had soured since the previous evening. Koenig looked beyond her and added, "Speaking of which, here's one of our victims right now."

Dax turned to see Tony Verdeschi coming down towards them. He had changed out of his casual clothing and was wearing a red and beige Alphan uniform with a navy blue jacket. Dax noticed that he was also carrying one of the Alphan's strangely shaped weapons, perhaps as a belated reaction to the fact he had been abducted in civilian clothes.

"Is that our ship?" he asked, peering up at the oval viewscreen. "Looks... *big*."

Although the 300-metre long ship was far from 'big' in her eyes, Dax simply nodded. "I've been telling Commander Koenig all about it. You'll be safer there than you were on the station. You won't have to worry about the Dominion anymore."

"Sounds good to me," said Verdeschi seriously.

Dax reflected that he looked and sounded a lot more subdued than usual; his recent experience with the Dominion had evidently affected him. Observing his pale, pinched features, Dax still found it difficult to believe that Kira had actually been attracted to the man to the point of cheating on Odo. But then, Kira's taste in men hadn't always coincided with her own.

"John," started Verdeschi, turning to his commander. "I was wondering if we could go and see how Alan is getting on with the Eagles. We're going to have to pick and choose which ones we're taking if we can only take ten. I think we should decide that as soon as possible."

Koenig seemed momentarily surprised by the suggestion, but after a quick glance at Dax, he nodded. "That's an excellent point, Tony. Commander, do you know what will happen to the remaining Eagles?"

"Since they're legally your property, they'll be sent to Starbase 571 as soon we find another ship to make the journey. I know the Daystrom Institute would like to study one of them. Since they never existed in this universe, they'll be of interest to the Federation's scientific community."

"I'm sure they will," said Verdeschi neutrally. "When will your people start moving the stuff onto the *Addis-Ababa*?"

“They’ll transfer the Eagles and all your equipment overnight, then you can supervise the transfer of your personal effects tomorrow morning,” explained Dax. “If all goes to plan, we’ll have you all ready to leave by noon.”

Koenig smiled. “We’ll be sorry to go. Well, let’s see about those Eagles.”

Dax watched as Verdeschi unsmilingly led the way out of Ops. She felt sorry for the Alphans after everything they had been through. Still, they could look forward to a peaceful trip to Starbase 571.

Maya’s delayed meeting with Odo took place almost as soon as she was back on Deep Space Nine. Doctor Bashir had examined her upon arrival and found her to be fit now that the Dominion inhibitor was no longer affecting her, so Maya had reluctantly left Tony in the Infirmary and accompanied Odo to the Security Office.

She decided to be candid, as she was too tired to think up any lies; besides, Commander Koenig had already told the Starfleets everything she had told him—enough to allow them to piece together the puzzle of her involvement with the Dominion. The only thing she omitted to tell Odo was that she had to leave this universe on pain of death—she wanted to give Tony time to discuss this with John first.

As she prepared to leave the Security Office, having told Odo everything she knew, Maya remembered the previous evening and turned back. She had already apologised to Dax and Worf while she was on the *Defiant*, and she felt she owed Odo an apology as well.

“Odo, I’m sorry about last night, what I said...” she started. Odo nodded in mute acceptance of her apology. “I wish things had turned out better... I really enjoyed comparing our metamorphic skills. I’d never met a creature like you; I wish we’d had more time to talk.”

“Yes, so do I,” agreed Odo. “I take it you’ll be leaving with your colleagues after all.”

Maya smiled. “I’ll go wherever Tony goes,” she said, though she knew it was more a case of Tony going wherever she went; he wasn’t under a death threat from the Dominion, after all.

“And what will you do if he betrays you again?” asked Odo sternly.

Surprised by this sudden reminder of the previous night’s misadventures, Maya shook her head. “Betrays me? You mean if he sleeps with someone else again?” She shrugged her shoulders. “I know his soul belongs to me. What he does with his body is irrelevant...”

She smiled confidently. “But I know it won’t happen again.”

Odo lowered his eyes and Maya felt a pang of sorrow. She wished she could reassure Odo somehow and tell him that he could forgive Kira the way she had forgiven Tony and everything would be well. But Maya didn't know Kira; she had no idea if the woman was sorry for what she did, or if she was simply the sort to do this all the time.

"I hope we'll speak again before I leave the station," she said finally, deciding to say nothing about Kira at all. "But anyway, I wanted to thank you."

As she walked along the Promenade after leaving Odo's office, Maya peered through the windows, trying to catch a glimpse of the *Addis-Ababa*. She had seen it very briefly when the *Defiant* returned to DS9 and although she probably wouldn't be leaving with the ship the next day, Maya was curious to know what it looked like. She finally caught sight of something that looked like a large space ship docked at one of the upper pylons, but the window wasn't pointing in the right direction, so she could only see part of the ship.

"I take it that's to be your home for the next three weeks," said a voice behind her.

Startled, Maya turned to face her interlocutor. She recognised him as a Cardassian, like some of the crew on the Founder's ship. Maya seemed to recall someone mentioning a Cardassian tailor, but she hadn't met him before.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, my dear," he said, bowing slightly and peering at her with wide blue eyes. "My name is Garak, I'm the station's resident tailor. I noticed you standing here and as this is your last night on the station, I thought I should seize this opportunity to mention a certain item which was left in my care, but apparently forgotten..."

"Forgotten?"

"I *was* hoping your friend Verdeschi might pass by here, but unfortunately, I must have missed him. I'm afraid I'll have to spoil his surprise for him, as I wouldn't like you to leave without seeing the fruit of my efforts. If you would care to accompany me back to my shop, I will show you the item in question."

Thoroughly puzzled, but equally intrigued by the Cardassian's enigmatic speech, Maya followed him to his boutique. She had never been in a tailor's shop before and she couldn't help staring at all the colourful garments on display. Maya wondered briefly if she could use some of the Alphans' tiranium to buy herself some of these cheerful clothes, instead of having to search through the myriad replicator catalogues before she found something she liked. Most of the garments she had worn on Alpha had been cast-offs from her colleagues or the clothes of women who had died. Maya didn't have any clothes of her own. Except her Psychon dress, of course, and that was...

...Lying on the tailor's worktable? Maya approached the green and silver dress cautiously; she was certain she had left it in one of the boxes in her quarters. Not that she could wear it anymore, since the fine, web-like material on the bodice had begun to disintegrate. This dress, on the other hand, appeared to be intact.

"It is your dress, is it not?" asked Garak. "Your friend Mr. Verdeschi brought it to me two days ago, saying he wanted to surprise you by having it repaired. He was supposed to come and get it yesterday afternoon, after his sporting feat, but I haven't seen him since."

"He probably forgot," said Maya vaguely as she picked up the dress. It had been beautifully repaired, its material now as fine and shiny as when her father first gave it to her. For the second time that day, she thought of Psychon. When she had been working with the Dominion's Psychon professor, all she could think about was the insanity and the ruthlessness which her people were capable of. Even her father and the murderous poet Dorzak had shown those traits in her own universe. But with the dress in her hands, she remembered that her people were also capable of creating beauty.

Then, suddenly, in the midst of her fond recollections of Psychon, Maya had a vision of Tony greeting her one evening—perhaps the time the trader Taybor had dinner with them—and declaring 'Ah, here comes Miss *Icecapades*!'. She smiled as she remembered she had sworn to kill Tony when someone finally explained that the *Icecapades* were a glitzy ice-skating show.

Still smiling, Maya turned to Garak. "You've done a wonderful job," she said, stroking the soft tserin feathers on the sleeves. It suddenly occurred to her that this tailor's work probably wasn't covered by Starfleet's expenses. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing, my dear. The delight in your eyes as you picked up the garment was thanks enough," he said graciously.

Maya hesitated and then took a step towards the door. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Garak turned as she passed him. "Although... I *would* be interested to hear about your dealings with the Dominion. They do control my homeland, after all. Perhaps you could tell me about your adventures while I pack the dress in something more easy to carry..."

John remained silent as the Turbolift he was standing in with Tony shot towards the Docking Ring, the outer circle of Deep Space Nine. He knew Tony wanted to brief him about his adventures on the Dominion ship; John had not had a chance to talk to either of his officers after they returned. Maya had been almost instantly whisked away to be interrogated by Odo, and Tony was kept in the Infirmary while Doctor Bashir repaired some injuries the Jem'Hadar had inflicted on him. John reflected that the Alphans were having a very painful time in this universe; it seemed that not one single day had passed without at least one of them being in the Infirmary. Usually Tony.

They left the Turbolift and headed for the shuttle hangars where the Eagles were kept. The white vessels looked strangely out of place in the cramped confines of the shuttle bays, their superstructures giving them a complex, unfinished air compared to the small, smooth Starfleet shuttles. Alan and one of his assistants, Pete Garforth, were already checking the Eagles; they waved as Tony and John approached Eagle One. The commander could smell the familiar odour of the Eagles' propulsion fuels and it made him think of home. The Eagles were all that was left of Moonbase Alpha.

Tony opened the hatch to Eagle One and released the access staircase. The two men climbed into the Eagle, closing the door behind them.

"What's with the sudden Eagle inspection, Tony?" asked John.

"Just making sure we're somewhere we can't be overheard," said Tony, sitting down at the lab table. "Seems the Starfleet eavesdropping devices don't work too well through titanium. Besides, you *will* have to pick and choose your Eagles, won't you? Can't take them all with you." He smiled wryly. "Seems the longer we stay here, the more we lose."

John nodded and took another seat. "What happened on the Dominion ship?"

"Did Maya tell you about the code for engineering the Vorta?" asked Tony. John indicated she had.

"Yeah, she gave me a nice long briefing about all that while we were on the *Defiant*. She felt there was no point keeping me in the dark anymore since she was going to tell the Starfleets all about it anyway. Well, that's what it was all about. The Head Founder kidnapped us so she could get Maya to tell her the code. Maya did, and the Founder let us go. But only if we get the hell out of this universe within the next twenty-four hours. If we're still around tomorrow evening, Maya is a goner. You've seen how powerful the Dominion is: if they want to assassinate Maya, they can do it any time. We're only lucky the Founder had other plans for us this afternoon. Maya reckons she let us go so she could put some kind of pressure on Weyoun... Anyway, the point is that we have to leave this universe after all."

“That means we need to go back to our universe or at least put plenty of distance between you and the Dominion,” said John thoughtfully, taking stock of what Tony had just told him. “I don’t care what Dax says about the *Addis-Ababa’s* armament; I still don’t believe Starfleet can protect us. We need to go back to our reality.”

“John, Maya and I are the only ones who need to leave,” said Tony. “I wanted to discuss it with you first, but then I thought we could ask O’Brien or Dax about that modified transporter they have, the one that allows them to go to another universe. That would be enough to beam Maya and me into another reality... hopefully our own.”

John shook his head. “I have no intention of letting the Alphans be split up like this. If you have to leave, then we all leave with you.”

“You mean you’re planning to wrench 200 people away from a universe they’re perfectly happy in just because Maya happens to be on the Dominion’s most wanted list?” The Italian’s tone made it clear what he thought of this plan.

“Tony, we’re not supposed to be here,” said John patiently. “We were brought here by the whim of some aliens who probably read Maya’s mind and thought her connection to the Dominion might help in the war. But we weren’t saved from that black hole all those years ago just to serve in the half-baked plans of the Prophets. Our purpose is to repopulate humanity in our universe, where it needs us most, not here where our species governs an empire of hundreds of billions of people.”

“With all due respect, John, I don’t think there’s any greater purpose at play here,” said Tony. He thoughtfully fingered a device on the table. “I agree that we were brought here by the Prophets, but I don’t see why we shouldn’t stay. The Federation looks like a nice place to live; it’s a jolly sight better than the conditions we were living in on the Moon.”

“But we can find a planet in our own universe, one that we can colonise,” argued John. “We can build our own life there, rebuild our civilisation on a new basis. Wouldn’t that be better than being refugees in the Federation?”

“I know. I know what you mean, John,” said Tony with a sigh. “The pioneer life, a rural community. But two hundred people with an average age of 40; that’s not much of a basis for a colony... And I know most of them would rather stay here. You ask Kate or Shermeen: they’re having a good time here. If I had a choice, I’d stay here myself. Live in peace, knowing that no one is going burst in and kill me in my bed, knowing that I’m free to worry about trivial things like kids and relationships.” He shook his head and spread his hands helplessly.

John smiled. "You can worry about that sort of thing just as well in our universe. Since you and Maya have to go back anyway, we might as well all go together. Kate and Shermeen are enjoying holiday romances; they already know we're leaving DS9 tomorrow. Whether we go back to our universe or to the other end of the Federation, the result will be exactly the same as far as they're concerned."

Tony still looked unconvinced. He shook his head and tackled the problem from a different angle. "But that just brings us back to the same old problem anyway: how do we get 200 people back to our universe? It's a lot easier to send the two of us back."

"I still have the schematics Dax drew up at the beginning of the week," suggested John as an idea came to mind. "About modifying a ship's shield generators. She was sure that method would work."

"Didn't she say those plans would only work with a Starfleet vessel?" protested Tony.

"Who said we didn't have a Starfleet vessel at our disposal?" said John with a sly smile.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
In The Hands Of The Prophets

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – *In The Hands Of The Prophets*

*“So goodbye yellow brick road
Where the dogs of society howl
You can't plant me in your penthouse
I'm going back to my plough
Back to the howling owl in the woods
Hunting the horny black toad
Oh I've finally decided my future lies
Beyond the yellow brick road”*
Elton John - “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road” ¹

The reception that evening didn't turn out as interesting as Tony had expected. The embarrassment he had felt at the idea of facing Nerys that morning had all but vanished, cast aside by far more important considerations like his own survival and his concern for Maya's well-being. In fact, thoughts of Maya overrode any others. Tony looked around impatiently and wondered where she was. Helena had said Maya was getting ready when she had left her, but by now, the Psychon was twenty minutes late.

The crew of the *Addis-Ababa* offered little distraction. They were mostly humans, and even the aliens were a dreary lot, more interested in discussing the technical specifications of the Alphans' Eagles or the primitive level of their medical knowledge. The only one with any spark of life was Ensign Flores, an eager teenager who served as the *Addis-Ababa's* helmswoman. Like Nog, she had been field promoted because Starfleet needed every officer it could get to fight the war. Tony reflected that the 24th century humans weren't so superior after all; there was nothing sophisticated about using children as canon fodder. He said as much to the *Addis-Ababa's* Captain Sorensen, making himself a new enemy in the process. ²

But Tony lost all interest in Ensign Flores's simpering when the wardroom door opened and Maya stepped in. She noticed Tony immediately, and he watched in awe as she made her way towards him. Maya was wearing her Psychon dress, the one she had been wearing when her planet was destroyed, the only one that she said truly belonged to her... the one that Tony had completely forgotten to get from Garak.

- 1 Elton John - "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" (E. John / B. Taupin) - From the album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (Mercury Records, 1975)
- 2 Marissa Flores's Starfleet career started very early, when Captain Jean-Luc Picard gave her the honorary title 'Number One' during a crisis on the *Enterprise-D* (*Star Trek: The Next Generation* - "Disaster"). She is better known in online *Star Trek* fan fiction circles as the heroine of Stephen Ratliff's series of "Marrissa" stories.

The dress sparkled like the costume of a Las Vegas performer, but Maya somehow gave it a regal air, the feathers on the sleeves and hem further emphasising the grace of her movements, the transparent material at her throat highlighting the elegance of her sloping shoulders, the split in the skirt offering tantalising glimpses of her long legs. Tony felt his mouth go dry as he watched the movement of Maya's hips under the shiny tight garment. It would have been a great pity if the Dominion had killed them, because this was definitely a sight worth living for.

Tony let out a sigh of bliss as she reached him. "Hmm. You must be my birthday present. Nice wrapping. I hate to say this, though, but you're about a month early."

"We'll just have to make the present last longer," she responded.

Tony wasn't sure what to make of that, so he said nothing and kissed Maya's lips. He had no sooner done that than he remembered they were supposed to be playing it cool and not letting anyone know they were together again. Or that was what they had decided to do that morning, at any rate. It seemed a very trivial concern after their torture at the hands of the Dominion.

"I'm sorry I'm late," said Maya. She looked down at her dress and put on a contrite expression. "I had some difficulty remembering how to put the dress on. I'd forgotten how revealing it was, too. I'm rather wishing I hadn't worn it now."

"Why? I think it looks fantastic!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "It runs rings around anything anyone else is wearing."

Tony indicated the other guests with a sweep of his arm. The Starfleets were all wearing their dress uniform—white jackets that made them look like a bunch of navy captains. By contrast, the Alphan men were in their usual uniforms, while the women were wearing evening dresses. Maya's costume was by far the most remarkable.

Having looked at the others, Maya turned to observe Tony critically. "As for you: you're looking very... ordinary. You should have worn that tuxedo you were wearing last night. It really suited you."

Tony was about to inquire about this sudden fetish people had for seeing him in a tuxedo when he remembered that the other person who had remarked on it was Nerys. He decided it was probably best not to bring up that topic.

"Well, you look beautiful. Absolutely beautiful." He paused for a moment, before adding, "Though I must admit I have this strange compulsion to sing 'Copacabana.'³

3 Barry Manilow - "Copacabana". The song tells the story of a showgirl "with yellow feathers in her hair" who is in love with a young man called Tony.

Maya rolled her eyes and pouted, pretending to be annoyed. "Oh, I know. The song about the showgirl with feathers. You've made that joke before. And the one about Las Vegas performers and the *Iccapades*," she added, before he had time to fall back on any of his other stock jokes.

Tony laughed; Maya was getting far too good at predicting his jokes these days. He was going to make some remark to that effect, but he noticed that John and Helena were approaching.

"Maya, you look *lovely!*" exclaimed Helena. "I thought you couldn't wear that dress anymore."

Maya smiled tenderly at Tony. "Someone gave it to the station's tailor to be repaired."

"And then forgot all about it," said Tony apologetically.

"Actually, it was just as well that you did," said Maya, casting a glance around her to check that no Starfleets were listening. "I had a fascinating discussion with Mr Garak. He is a very interesting person and he knows a great deal about Starfleet. In particular, how their access codes work..."

She let her voice trail off, allowing her colleagues to work out the rest by themselves. Garak must have given Maya some advice which would be useful for their plan the next day. They obviously couldn't discuss it right then, so the two couples split up and went to mingle with the other guests.

Tony introduced Maya to various people he had talked to before, and the two of them set about getting as much information from the crew of the *Addis-Ababa* as possible. They asked about the layout of the ship and what sort of equipment it had; surprisingly, the Starfleets didn't seem suspicious of their motives, and answered all the questions freely. They evidently thought the Alphans were just being curious. Tony was seriously beginning to wonder how these people thought they were going to win the war. They certainly didn't seem worried about Dominion spies.

Tony and Maya finally left the Starfleets and went to get some food. It wasn't until they had reached the table that Tony noticed Nerys helping herself to some of the delicacies on offer. She was dressed in a rather unbecoming purple tunic, evidently the dress uniform of the Bajoran militia. Tony was about to turn away, but by then, she had seen them and it was too late. Or at least, that's what Tony assumed Maya was thinking, since she continued toward the table; Tony himself would have had no qualms walking away.

"Good evening, Major," exclaimed Maya in a friendly voice. "Are these Bajoran dishes?"

Nerys looked at Maya and frowned. Then she glanced at Tony and lowered her eyes. "Yes. This one is hasperat."

"I tried it earlier," said Maya. "It's delicious. I wanted to thank you for your hospitality, Major. I wish we'd had time to learn more about your people."

“You’re welcome.” Nerys seemed uncertain what else she should say. Her plate was full; she glanced around, evidently wondering if she could make a quick escape now.

“It’s a pity we didn’t have more time to talk,” continued Maya. “I’m sure we have a lot in common.”

Nerys smiled politely and said something about needing to talk to Dax. Tony watched as the major walked off rapidly; he could understand her embarrassment.

“A lot in common?” he repeated as he turned to look at Maya. “That was about as subtle as a bull in a china shop!”

Maya clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh dear. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sure she understood... Do you think she’ll be terribly offended?”

Although he was embarrassed by the whole incident, Tony decided to take it lightly. He had promised Maya he wouldn’t take the problem so seriously, after all. “Well, I’m sure she appreciated your peace offering... but I’d just let the topic drop until we leave here. Aside from anything else, it’d be my worst nightmare, you two comparing notes.”

“Oh, is that what you’re afraid of?” said Maya teasingly, looking around as if to find Nerys again. “You’re right, maybe I should ask her for some tips.”

Tony’s mood immediately plummeted. “She wouldn’t know that much,” he said humourlessly. Glancing at Maya, he found that her expression had softened.

“Tony, stop punishing yourself. You know I don’t blame you for what happened. If anything, I think it’s amusing. You would really have to be a very cruel, uncaring man to do it again after what we’ve been through today, so I know I can trust you from now on. What you’ve done doesn’t matter because I know what you’re going to do.”

“And what am I going to do?” asked Tony with a timid smile.

“Stay with me forever,” declared Maya, as if it were obvious. “I’m going to make sure you never leave my side.”

“Sounds good to me! When do we start?” Maya looked down at the plate she was holding and then put it on the table. She took Tony’s hand. “How about right now?”

“Well, Ben. It looks as though there’s a happy ending for someone,” said Dax, indicating Verdeschi and Maya as they left the reception, arm in arm and clearly enjoying each other’s company. “I doubt Odo and Kira will be so quick to make up. On the other hand, if Tony and Maya could do it, I’m sure they can also put all this adventure behind them...”

“Don’t you ever get tired of match-making, Old Man?” asked Sisko, smiling at her mischievous expression.

As the captain of the station, Sisko made a point of keeping some distance between himself and the private lives of his subordinates. But it didn't mean he didn't enjoy hearing about them from Dax—as long as the news wasn't as bad as it had been that morning. Sisko had been shocked to hear of Kira's night with Verdeschi.

"Match-making is a sport I've enjoyed for seven lifetimes," said Dax brightly. "And I don't intend to give it up any time soon." Her expression became more serious. "Odo and Kira's relationship could really work once they're past these problems. I think Nerys now realizes how lucky she is that Odo loves her."

"Are you suggesting the events of last night might be beneficial in the long run?" said Sisko dubiously. He knew Odo loved Kira and he hoped that the couple would make up. It would certainly make staff meetings a lot easier; Sisko knew from past experience that, barring exceptional circumstances, former lovers did not make good work colleagues.

"*We-ell*, that depends," admitted Dax. "It depends mainly on how willing Odo will be to trust Nerys after what happened. But I'll be sure to keep you posted on future developments," she added with a grin, before changing the subject. "Oh, Ben, I really wish we could do more for the Alphans. They've lost so much in this one week. And all for nothing, too. If we'd known earlier that the Moon would go into orbit... if we'd waited..."

"I know. But there's nothing we can do about that now. I'm sure the Alphans will be able to return to their universe as soon as this war is over. When that time comes, it's even possible that Starfleet will give them a ship. They'll be better off than they were on the Moon."

Like Dax, Sisko wished he could have helped the Alphans achieve their goals. Had they arrived a couple of years earlier, Starfleet would have had no objections to giving the Alphans everything they needed to find a home. It was unfortunate that the Prophets had brought the Alphans into this universe just when the Federation was at war with the Dominion. Maya's revelations notwithstanding, Sisko knew that the Alphans would have a minimal impact on the war, so he still didn't understand why the Prophets had sent them to Deep Space Nine instead of letting them cross the wormhole in their own universe.

But there was nothing Sisko could do for them. He couldn't offer them a ship and there had been too little time for Dax to think of a simpler way to transport the 223 Alphans into their own universe.

"They were looking for a home and all we give them is exile," he said thoughtfully as his eyes fell on Koenig. "But I get the feeling they'll find their home in the end. Commander Koenig will settle for nothing less."

"I feel really stupid," she said softly, running her fingers through the silky strands of his thick dark hair. "We could have done this years ago."

"I could have told you that years ago," he said, his breath warm against her chest.

"I thought... when I felt that way, I really thought I was going to change into a monster."

"I know, you told me earlier." She could tell he was smiling even though she couldn't see his face. "Now, that would have been an interesting experience. Still I suppose it would have been a fun way of finding out if you're enjoying what I'm doing."

She laughed and ran her fingers further down, out of his hair and to his shoulder. "I doubt you would have been amused if it really happened."

"No, but I have to expect some surprises if I'm going to have a relationship with an alien," he said gently. He pressed his lips against her skin, making her shudder with the unexpected caress.

"Ah well, you're getting to be quite an expert on that subject, aren't you!"

She was joking, because she thought that was funny. But then she remembered he probably wouldn't appreciate the joke. He shifted his body so that he could rest his chin on her chest and look up at her.

"That's not funny," he said.

"Yes, it is," she told him. "You told me yourself: everything is funny if you look at it the right way."

"Well, I promise to laugh with you when I've finished feeling guilty." He smiled uncertainly. "So you're... um, you're glad you didn't change into a monster, then?"

"Ecstatic!" She laughed and tried to lean forward to kiss him. He pulled himself up the bed so that his face was level with hers.

"Ecstatic, eh?" He looked very pleased. She'd read somewhere that human men liked to be told they were wonderful lovers. She smiled and wondered why he'd need to be told.

While he was lying beside her, looking pleased, she ran her hand over his face, down his long nose, along his neck to the muscles on his chest and shoulders. He was so much stronger than she had imagined, so much more masculine now that he was out of his uniform, his silhouette freed of its artificial aesthetics. She let her fingers catch the curly dark hairs that grew on his chest and then traced their contour down to where they grew sparser on his stomach.

"Ah! That's ticklish!" he exclaimed, instinctively covering his stomach with his arms.

She moved her hand back to his chest. "You're beautiful," she said sincerely. "I don't know how I managed to resist you all this time."

"Oh I always wondered that as well," he said, though he didn't sound very confident.

She wondered if she should say something about his lack of self-confidence, but then decided to leave the serious talking for some other time. He really was beautiful, lying naked on the bed, his pale skin showcased by the shiny dark sheets. No doubt realising that she was admiring him, he smiled again.

“You could take a photograph, you know,” he suggested. “You don’t have to memorise me right now.”

“No, you’re right. I’m sure I will have plenty of opportunities to look at you from now on. In fact, I will make a point of observing you like this at least once a day.”

There was that pleased grin again. He folded one arm behind his head, propping himself up to look at her. “Oh, I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“I do wish you weren’t leaving, Shermeen,” said Jake plaintively, holding the young woman’s hands.

“I know! I wish I was staying here,” she responded sadly.

Standing in the doorway of the Turbolift that led from the Promenade to Upper Pylon 3, Nerys watched the young lovers for a moment longer before reluctantly deciding that she would have to separate them. The *Addis-Ababa* was due to leave in less than an hour; all the Alphans’ equipment and belongings had been transferred to the ship, and Nerys was currently in the process of accompanying the last of the Alphans to their new temporary home.

“Shermeen,” she said; she couldn’t remember the girl’s last name. “I’m sorry, but we have to go.”

The girl gave Jake one last, lingering kiss and entered the Turbolift. Nerys happened to look up as she turned to follow Shermeen. Odo was standing on the upper level of the Promenade, evidently watching her and the Alphans. When he realised Nerys had seen him, he turned and walked away.

On the way to the Upper Pylon, Nerys couldn’t help thinking about Odo. Now that a couple of days had passed, her mind felt clearer and she finally knew what she wanted. She wanted Odo back. There was no future for her on her own, and she would never find anyone who was as good for her as he was. Her brief escapade with Tony had made her realise how futile it was to look anywhere else. She didn’t need sex, she needed to be loved. If Odo took her back, then this time, she would make sure she kept him.

She shook herself out of her reverie as the Turbolift stopped at the top of the docking pylon. The small group of Alphans followed her down the corridor to the airlock, where she handed them over to the care of Maya. The Alphan science officer would lead her people to their designated quarters on the ship.

Now that all the lower ranking Alphans were on board, all that was left for Nerys to do was to wait for Captain Sisko and Doctor Bashir to arrive with the Koenigs. She went to look out of the window. Staring unseeingly at the stars and the contours of the station below, Nerys wondered if she could ever convince Odo to forgive her. She remembered she had forgiven him for linking with the Female Founder, even though he had nearly caused the death of Rom at the time. Maybe he would find it in his liquid insides to forgive her for her indiscretion.

"Oh, hi," she heard behind her. Turning, Nerys found Tony standing in the narrow passageway in front of the airlock. She lowered her eyes, unsure what to say to him; he seemed similarly afflicted, since neither of them spoke for a couple of minutes.

"See, I told you we wouldn't have anything to say to each other," he said finally. Looking up, Nerys found that he was smiling awkwardly.

"I..." She hesitated and then said, "I gather you've made up with Maya."

Tony's smile became more confident. "Oh yes. I never wanted anything else."

"I know," said Nerys with a nod. She let her eyes drift back to the window.

"I hope you'll do as well with Odo," he said. "Well, if that's what you want, of course. Otherwise, I wish you the best of luck in finding a kindred spirit."

Nerys didn't think she would ever find a kindred spirit. "Odo will do fine."

Tony nodded and stayed silent for a moment. "Well, the thing to do is go and talk to him," he said finally. "If you want to be together, there's no point making yourselves both miserable by sulking for ages. Life is too short to make yourself unhappy for no good reason."

That made Nerys smile. "Odo's people live for centuries."

"Oh, so he just *has* to be awkward," said Tony with a laugh. "But that doesn't mean he has to be miserable all the time. It certainly doesn't mean you should be."

He paused and then laughed again. "Oh, listen to me: the expert on romance! You do whatever you want to do, just make sure you end up happy, okay?"

Nerys smiled at him and they both turned as Maya came to join them. Unselfconscious, the Psychon walked over to Tony and leaned against him; his entire attention was immediately focused on her, his brown eyes fixed on her large blue ones, both of them lost to the world as soon as they were together. Nerys envied them. She turned to look out of the window at the cold, unchanging stars.

Standing on the steps to the airlock, John cast one last glance around the Promenade. Deep Space Nine was a strange place, he reflected, a giant shopping mall in interstellar space, unlikely guardian to the gateway between two powerful empires. The station was all contradictions, an unsteady balance between the rigours of military necessity and the wealthy decadence of a society too used to being at peace to fully realise that it was at war.

John wondered how much longer Starfleet would hold out against the Dominion. Their only advantage as far as he could see was that the mighty Prophets were on their side and that the wormhole was therefore under Federation control. The Dominion appeared to have the advantage of ruthlessness and determination. But John was aware that he didn't know enough about the situation to judge Starfleet's chances. In any case, it was no longer his concern. The Alphans were leaving Deep Space Nine for good.

Tony and Maya were waiting at the docking pylon with Major Kira when the Koenigs arrived with Sisko and Bashir. The other DS9 officers had already bid farewell to the Koenigs that morning. Seeing Tony standing next to Kira made John even more relieved that the Alphans were leaving now, so soon after their disastrous night at Quark's. It was a good time for a clean break.

"Commander," said Sisko, reaching to shake John's hand. "It has been a pleasure meeting you and your people. I wish you all the best of luck in your future endeavours. I'm sure you'll find Starbase 571 a pleasant place to live while you wait to go back to your universe."

John smiled politely and nodded his agreement, though he exchanged a glance with Tony. Their plans were made, everyone knew what to do; all that remained was to let the *Addis-Ababa* leave the station, and then the Alphans would move into action.

"I'm grateful for all the help you and your staff gave us," said John. "I wish we had met under different circumstances, Captain. Despite the 400 years between us, I think we have a few things in common. Not least a passion for baseball."

Sisko laughed, a generous smile lighting up his normally serious face. "Oh, I definitely enjoyed meeting someone who knows baseball!"

"If we'd stayed longer, you two could have had a game in the holosuite," said Tony with a grin. "I'm not sure if it would have drawn the crowds the way the football match did, though."

"And I'm not sure that the result would have been the same, either," said Sisko slyly. "But I'm glad you had a pleasant stay."

"Oh, we're going to have some good memories," said Tony, slipping his arm around Maya. "But I don't think I'll ever forget the décor in your Infirmary."

"Yes," agreed Bashir. "I was beginning to wonder when you would move in!"

Helena laughed brightly. "Maybe we should dispense with quarters for you, Tony, and just set you up in the *Addis-Ababa's* Infirmary straight away."

"I promise I'd bring you flowers," said Maya by way of encouragement. Kira laughed.

"Oh very funny." Tony shrugged petulantly. "Just because I'm a little accident prone and have a knack for making people beat me up..."

John glanced at the airlock; one of the *Addis-Ababa's* crew was waiting there, perhaps to remind them that it was time to leave.

“Well, thank you all for everything,” said John. He shook hands with Dr. Bashir and Captain Sisko. “I think the *Addis-Ababa* is ready to go. Give our regards to your colleagues who aren’t here.”

“We’ll be sure to do that,” promised Sisko.

John accompanied Helena into the airlock; he was already halfway to the entrance of the *Addis-Ababa* when he heard Kira’s voice calling after them.

“Have a good trip!”

“And you have a good life,” Tony responded gently.

The *Addis-Ababa* had been gone for three hours. Sisko had watched the ship disappear as it went into warp, and had then returned to his office. He still felt regret that he and his colleagues hadn’t made better use of the unique opportunity they had been given to meet people from another time and space. Playing soccer, dancing in the holosuites, the occasional brief discussion about baseball—those were hardly activities designed to explore the uniqueness of the Alphans.

Upon reflection, though, Sisko decided it was probably just as well. The crew of DS9 had welcomed the Alphans as friends—some perhaps a little too friendly—and although things hadn’t turned out the way their commander wanted, Sisko believed that most of the Alphans had enjoyed their stay. Starfleet would no doubt place them under a microscope as soon as they reached Starbase 571; it was just as well that DS9 had given them a vacation.

He was observing his baseball and wishing there had been time to take Koenig to a holosuite match when he was interrupted by the comm chime.

Captain! Exclaimed Kira over the commlink. ***There’s a vessel approaching... It’s the Addis-Ababa!***

Sisko was seized with sudden foreboding. There was no reason for the *Addis-Ababa* to return to Deep Space Nine without warning. The captain left his office and joined his crew in the Ops pit.

“They’ve just dropped out of warp,” announced Dax, her eyes on her console.

“On screen,” ordered Sisko. The viewscreen changed to a view of the squat Starfleet vessel. “Major, contact them and ask what they’re doing.”

Kira worked on her console for a couple of minutes and shook her head. “No response.”

“It looks as though they’re offloading three of the Alphans’ Eagles,” said O’Brien, peering up at the screen before checking his console again. “Yes. Sensors confirm that those are Eagles. There are about 10-15 people on each one.”

“Three *Eagles*?” repeated Sisko. This was getting stranger by the minute. “What’s the ship’s status?”

O'Brien frowned uncomprehendingly as he read the information. "The ship is heading for the wormhole at full impulse. ETA is five minutes. Looks like they're expecting a fight, though. Their shields are up and the phaser banks are armed and ready. What the hell is going on?"

Sisko knew exactly what was going on. He didn't even need Kira's hushed exclamation—"The Alphans!"—to make it clear what had happened.

"They're hailing us," said Kira. Without waiting for Sisko's order, she switched the communication onto the screen.

As Sisko had expected, the bridge of the *Addis-Ababa* was now manned exclusively by Alphans. Koenig was standing in front of the captain's chair; Verdeschi was at Tactical, Maya at the helm; Carter and Benes were also present, apparently studying the other consoles at the back of the bridge.

"Don't try to stop us, Captain," warned Koenig before Sisko could speak. "We know how to use this ship's weapons, if nothing else." Behind him, Verdeschi smiled confidently.

"Where are you going?" exclaimed Sisko. "To the Gamma Quadrant—in a Starfleet vessel? The Dominion will have you destroyed in less than an hour!"

Koenig's stony expression didn't change. "We're not planning on staying there for any length of time. Our goal was always to return to our own universe, Captain. Now that we have the ship, that's exactly what we'll do."

"You're planning to modify the shield harmonics once you reach the Gamma Quadrant?" asked Dax. "But we're not sure that method will work. Besides, you'd need a Starfleet engineer. Even Maya won't be able to modify the shields before the Dominion comes after you. You'll never make it!"

"In that case, we'll die trying," said Koenig determinedly. "You should be pleased to see us go, Captain Sisko. You get what you want and we get what we want. You'll find the original crew of the *Addis-Ababa* in the three Eagles we just offloaded. Forty Starfleets against two hundred Alphans—including one Metamorph—just wasn't a fair match."

"ETA to wormhole two minutes, Commander," announced Maya.

"Goodbye, Captain Sisko," said Koenig. "And thank you for the hospitality."

"Now, that was worth it just for the look on their faces," exclaimed Tony as the screen went blank. "A rowdy rabble of primitive humans hijacking one of their precious Starfleet ships! I wonder if they'll ever live it down!"

"It was a job well done," agreed John, "but it's a bit early for congratulations. Sahn, can you give me ship-wide communications?"

"Um, actually, I'm the one with the communications console," said Tony with a chuckle. "It seems that the chief of security doubles as a receptionist on Starfleet vessels. Anyway, I think you have ship-wide communications now, Commander—or should that be 'Captain?'"

John turned around to briefly smile at Tony before making his announcement. They had only been in charge of the ship for an hour and there were already numerous things that annoyed the Alphans. Something John had immediately noticed was that the science and tactical stations were on a platform behind the captain's chair. It wasn't that John didn't trust his officers, but he had grown accustomed to seeing all his staff at once when he looked towards the viewscreen. With this layout, he was going to get neck pains trying to see the people behind him. Still, this was not the time to be picky about the ship they had hijacked.

"Attention all Alphan personnel," he announced. "We will be entering the wormhole in less than two minutes. We are heading for the Gamma Quadrant, where we hope to modify this ship so that it can shift back into our own universe. Thanks to the technology on this vessel, we will have food and accommodation to last us years, as well as the ability to choose a planet to settle on. Our dream of finding a permanent home is at last close to being a reality."

He watched the wormhole opening on the viewscreen and walked back to sit in the captain's chair. "Everyone brace yourselves—you remember what a rough ride the wormhole is! I'll see you all on the other side. Koenig out."

The ship shook violently as it was sucked into the wormhole. Holding on to the armrests of his chair, John allowed himself a moment of doubt. Sisko was right. The Dominion would slaughter them as soon as they came out of the wormhole. And even if they didn't, would Maya really be able to implement Dax's plans at such short notice? They couldn't even be sure that Dax was thinking about this type of ship when she made her calculations. And what if the Alphans truly didn't want to return to their own universe? There had been no time to run a poll or take votes; John had made the decision and his officers had followed their orders. But it didn't mean they agreed with them. Tony had played an active part in the hijacking, even though John knew he didn't approve of this plan. Tony had obeyed because he trusted John to make a wise decision. *Oh God, I do hope I made a wise decision*, thought John desperately, as he stared at the blue filaments on the viewscreen.

All of a sudden, without warning, the whole bridge disappeared. John was encased in pure light; there was no substance around him, not even something under his feet. He raised his hand and could see the dark material of his jacket, but there was nothing else to look at but himself; no sounds but the beating of his own heart.

"The King is running away from his destiny," came a voice out of the light.

John turned and saw a figure approaching. It was a replica of Helena, dressed in her Alphan trouser uniform.

"I'm not running away from anything. I want to return my people to our universe," explained John, though his only thought was that he had no time for the Prophets' games.

“The King’s destiny is on Bajor,” said the Prophet calmly. “He will find a new life in peace. The peace he has left behind will become the peace of his people.”

John frowned, trying to make sense of the Prophet’s riddles. “The peace we left behind? You were going on about peace before; does this mean that your plan did work in the end, even though the Moon was destroyed?”

Another Prophet appeared, this time disguised as Maya. “Bajor will know peace thanks to the King’s people,” she said with a smile unusual for a Prophet. “And the King’s people will have a home thanks to Bajor. In time, everyone will have what they wanted. The Sisko will have peace, the King will have land. Everything will be in its place and as should be.”

“In its place...” repeated John. “Does this mean you can send us back to our universe?”

There was no answer. The light disappeared, and John found himself back in the captain’s chair on the bridge of the *Addis-Ababa*. He blinked in the relative darkness of the Starfleet vessel, but once his eyes grew accustomed to the change in luminosity, he realised all his Alphan subordinates were exactly where he had last seen them, evidently unaware of his encounter with the Prophets. John rubbed his eyes and prayed that he had understood the Prophets correctly.

“John, are you all right?”

The commander started as he heard Tony’s voice. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine. The Prophets spoke to me...”

Tony was on his knees on the upper part of the bridge, watching John anxiously under the railing. “What did they say?” he asked.

Maya interrupted them before John could explain. “Commander, we’re exiting the wormhole,” she said. On screen, the blue filaments gave way to the darkness of space.

“This can’t be right!” exclaimed Maya, staring at the viewscreen. “The configuration of these planets looks exactly the same as those in the Bajoran system. But no Deep Space Nine.” She looked down at her console, evidently trying to make sense of the Starfleet readouts. “I can’t tell for sure... Oh, I know—Computer, identify that system in front of us. And is it inhabited?”

John automatically looked up at the ceiling as the computer responded to Maya’s request. The Psychon had earlier used her metamorphic skills to convince the computer she was Captain Sorensen, and had then transferred all its access rights to the Alphans. Given its vocal interface and good grasp of spoken English, John could tell the computer of the *Addis-Ababa* was going to be their most precious aid in handling the unfamiliar ship.

Star system is known as the Bajoran System. One M-class planet, Bajor. Plant and animal life. No intelligent life-forms.

Maya frowned. “Well, we’re clearly back in the Alpha Quadrant. But there was more than one habitable planet in the system the last time we were there.”

“Hey, maybe the Prophets have sent us back to our own universe,” exclaimed Tony. “They’re the ones who kicked us into the Starfleet one in the first place; maybe they decided to send us back. And as luck would have it, there’s the Bajoran system, completely uninhabited and ripe for the taking. Just the right place for a bunch of space hijackers to settle down!”

“I think that’s exactly what’s happened,” agreed John. “The Prophets spoke to me while we were in the wormhole and said that everything would be ‘in its place’. It looks as though we’re home at last!”

Standing on the platform behind Tony, Sandra was so delighted she wrapped her arms around Alan. “Alan! We have made it! We can have a home!”

“Okay, okay,” said the pilot, though he looked as pleased as she was. “No need to strangle me!”

John felt as euphoric as his colleagues. Six years of wandering and they finally had somewhere to go. Even if Bajor proved unsuitable, the *Addis-Ababa* could take them to another planet; the Federation computer they had on board probably contained information about thousands of star systems. John smiled sadly as his mind returned to the early days of the Moon’s wandering, when David Kano had enthusiastically announced that the Moon was likely to pass by three thousand Earth-like planets, provided they were ready to wait two thousand years. Thanks to the *Addis-Ababa*, they wouldn’t have to wait that long. ⁴

Casting his memories aside, John let himself be recaptured by the enthusiasm of the moment. “Maya, get the computer to give you any information it can about this Bajor. Any threats, any problems, let me know.”

He unhooked his commlock, hoping that the system would still work. He was grinning ear to ear when Helena’s puzzled face appeared on the tiny screen.

“Helena, how are things in sickbay?”

Helena laughed. “Well, a hologram just appeared and demanded to know the nature of the medical emergency, but now we’ve turned him off, everything seems to be fine. You look very pleased with yourself, too. What’s going on?”

“What’s going on, Helena, is that we’ve finally found a home!”

⁴ *Space: 1999 - "Matter Of Life And Death"* (ep.2-1974)

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

John closed his eyes and breathed in the warm Bajoran air, listening with pleasure to the twittering of unfamiliar birds and the rustling of the tall grasses on the prairie. It had been far too long since he had enjoyed a Summer's day on a hospitable planet. This was the sort of air human beings were supposed to breathe, not the recycled gasses of Alpha or even Deep Space Nine. This was the sort of air the Alphans could finally enjoy, safe in the knowledge that they had found their long awaited home.

Opening his eyes again, John admired the outlines of two of Bajor's moons, pale disks barely visible in the bright blue sky. This was the region the Prophets had shown John in a dream and it was even more beautiful in reality. According to the *Addis-Ababa's* computer, well versed in Bajoran geography from its own universe, this was the heart of Recantha province, the planet's main agricultural area. All the tests the Alphans had run so far showed that Recantha's climate and soil would be ideal for the Earth seeds the Alphans had brought with them. It looked as though it would be an equally ideal place for the humans to live.

The Alphans had spent the last week carefully investigating possible colonisation sites on Bajor. Memories of Deep Space Nine were already fading; even those who had not wanted to leave the station were now making plans for their future life on Bajor. John had toyed with the idea of taking the *Addis-Ababa* back to Earth, but as the Alphans hadn't yet found out how to get the vessel into warp—it had taken them two days just to get from the wormhole to Bajor—a return to Earth would have to wait until later. In any case, the Alphans all had vivid memories of the state their home planet had been in the last time they had seen it in this universe. Bajor seemed a far more promising place to repopulate the human species. If things didn't work out here, they could always move on.

With his eyes still on Bajor's moons, the commander saw a large bird approaching and smiled. There were no eagles on Bajor.

Maya alighted among the tall grasses and reappeared as herself. "Commander, this area is beautiful! There are streams and forests to the north, teeming with fish and birds and all sorts of game. The computer was right; this is an ideal home for us."

John smiled, already well aware of Maya's admiration for the *Addis-Ababa's* 24th century computer.

"The Prophets must be pleased," added Maya with a glint of amusement in her large eyes. "Didn't they all but order us to settle here?"

"Maybe they wanted to make sure Bajor was inhabited in all realities," said John, looking up at the sky again. "Who knows, a few generations down the line, our descendants might end up worshipping them the way the Bajorans do."

“Are you suggesting they brought us back here so that we could breed disciples for them?” laughed Maya.

“I can’t help wondering what they originally intended,” said John thoughtfully. “It seems it would have been easier for them to simply let the Moon travel through the wormhole and enter the Bajoran system in this reality. Instead of which, they shifted it into another universe where it got destroyed.”

“I’m sure their decision to send the Moon into the Starfleet universe had something to do with me,” said Maya. “Perhaps they wanted to kill two birds with one stone—give the Federation an advantage in the war while giving us a permanent home in exchange. As it happens, the Moon was destroyed, so their plan to give us a new home orbiting the Bajoran sun failed. But we have nothing to complain about in the end: after all, we wouldn’t have got the *Addis-Ababa* if we had stayed in this universe. Its Starfleet technology will make the task of setting up a new colony much easier than it would have been with our existing equipment.”

“Oh, I agree that we’re far better off. And the Prophets seemed to think that we’d somehow brought peace to Bajor. But I still don’t understand how our presence in the Starfleet universe gave the Federation an advantage in the war.”

“Well, I can’t be certain what the Prophets were thinking,” said Maya, tapping her chin pensively, “but it certainly looks as though I was a... cat among the Dominion’s pigeons. Instead of concentrating on the war effort, the Head Founder will have to focus on the Vorta for a while. Even assuming that the code I gave her was the right one, it could be months before the Vorta species can be recreated. There will be a lot of trial and error involved in eliminating those ‘flaws’ she was so worried about. Besides, I think the Founder will have other things on her mind as well...”

Maya paused and frowned thoughtfully. “I scanned her life form when we were on the Dominion ship. I didn’t really think about it at the time, but there was something... different about her. She didn’t ‘feel’ the same as Odo; it was as if she wasn’t quite from the same species. I was too preoccupied to worry about it then, but comparing my mental map of the two of them now, I’m beginning to think she had some kind of disease. That’ll give her something to worry about as well. Maybe all this will divert the Head Founder’s attention from the war and give Starfleet a chance to fight back.”¹

1 The aftermath of those failed Vorta improvements can be seen in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* - “Faith, Treachery And The Great River” (ep.556-1998)

“I suppose that could be a help from the Prophets’ point of view,” said John dubiously. “Goodness knows what the war looks like to a race of non-corporeal beings. They might think they did the Bajorans a great favour, even though it looks like nothing to us. But I still don’t see why the Prophets wasted so much time and energy for such a meagre result.”

“Neither do I. The Prophets evidently move in mysterious ways, as you humans would say. But at least we’re amply rewarded for our help.” She indicated the landscape with a sweep of her hand.

John noticed a shiny white object in the blue sky and shielded his eyes as Eagle One landed a few hundred metres away. Tony, Alan and Helena were back from their own survey of the surrounding area. John and Maya approached the Eagle once its engines were cut; Tony and Alan hopped out to greet them—Helena was evidently still working inside.

“Ah, here come Starsky and Hutch,” said Maya mischievously as she went to embrace Tony.

“And what would *you* know about *Starsky and Hutch*?” challenged Tony, though he returned her embrace and kissed her.

Like all new lovers, they seemed to find it impossible to keep their hands off each other. John found their new intimacy amusing; he could remember a time when he and Helena had been similarly afflicted. Not that he didn’t enjoy touching Helena even now, but they had become somewhat more dignified as time passed.

“So, what do you all think of the planet?” he asked.

“It’s beautiful,” said Alan. “Blue skies, thick forests, endless prairies just begging to be tilled... and it’s all in a much better state than Earth has been for centuries. I know we’ve been talking about finding some kind of garden of Eden for years now, but I never thought we’d actually find one!”

“You should have had more faith,” said Helena, who had just come to join them. “Don’t you know John Koening always keeps his word? Oh John, this planet is perfect! We’ve been here a week, and still nothing has gone wrong. Maybe it’s time to move everyone else down.”

“They’re all impatient to settle here,” agreed Tony. “Shermeen says hydroponics isn’t good enough for her anymore; she wants to do some ‘real work with real soil.’”

John smiled and slid his arm around Helena. “I think you’re right; it’s time to settle down,” he said with a grin, before adding more thoughtfully, “The only thing I find a bit worrying is that there’s no intelligent life here. Lots of plants and animals, but no Bajorans. Why don’t they exist in this universe? Did they get wiped out, and if so, by what?” He was concerned that the absence of Bajorans might reveal a hitherto undisclosed danger on the planet.

“I was wondering about that too, so I had a chat with the *Addis-Ababa*'s computer,” explained Maya. “It seems there's some doubt as to whether the Bajorans in the Starfleet universe really originated on Bajor. Their civilisation suddenly appeared on the planet around 30,000 years ago, but there are few traces of intelligent life before that time. If this theory is true in the Starfleet universe, then it's possible that the Bajorans just didn't make it to Bajor in this reality. It doesn't mean there was any kind of sinister cataclysm that wiped them out.”

“Hey, do you think the Prophets sent us here because they wanted some disciples in another reality?” suggested Tony. “I mean, since there are no Bajorans here. Perhaps they thought it would be a good idea to populate Bajor with some grateful people.”

“Actually, Maya and I were discussing that earlier,” said John, amused to find that Tony had had exactly the same thought.

“Aha, great minds and all that,” declared Tony. “So what was your conclusion?”

“That the Prophets move in mysterious ways,” said Maya with a grin.

Alan didn't look so pleased. “I'm not so sure I like the idea of being one of the Prophets' hand-picked disciples.”

“Don't worry, I for one have no intention of worshipping them,” John assured him.

Helena smiled up at John and then looked around at the landscape. “Well, we don't need to worship them, but at least they've given us plenty to be grateful for.”

Tony was also observing the scenery with obvious satisfaction. “I have a feeling Bajor will be my favourite planet after all—ack!”

John laughed with the others as, inexplicably, Maya pretended to strangle Tony.

Time had passed. It had been months since the Alphans left Deep Space Nine. Sisko rarely thought about them nowadays; the war, Jadzia's untimely death, his own doubts about his role as Emissary had all given him far more important matters to dwell on. The pressures had been such that he had finally chosen to take a leave of absence—time to grieve for the loss of a dear friend, time to rethink his role in the grand scheme of things.

Sitting on the doorstep at the back of his father's restaurant, Sisko peered into the warmth of a New Orleans night and remembered the Alphans. Deep Space Nine had gone back to normal after they left. The Eagles were sent to the Daystrom Institute, along with the reports the senior staff of DS9 had compiled on the Alphans. The crew of the *Addis-Ababa* were verbally reprimanded for the loss of their ship and then reassigned to other vessels. Maya's information about the Vorta's genetic engineering had had no visible effect on the Dominion.

Whether he had been reengineered or not, Weyoun looked and behaved the same as always. Whatever the Prophets had hoped for on that side, their plan seemed to have failed. The Romulans' entry into the war had so far tipped the balance in the Federation's favour, but that had nothing to do with the Alphans or the Prophets. Odo and Kira had made up, with the Bajoran—now promoted to colonel—seemingly more determined than ever to put the incident with Verdeschi behind them. As far as Sisko knew, they were still together.

Sisko had all but forgotten about the Alphans until he saw an Eagle in one of his dreams the previous night. The image, no doubt retrieved from his subconscious, had stayed with him all day as he worked in his father's kitchen. Now that he had the time, Sisko thought about those wanderers he had known so briefly.

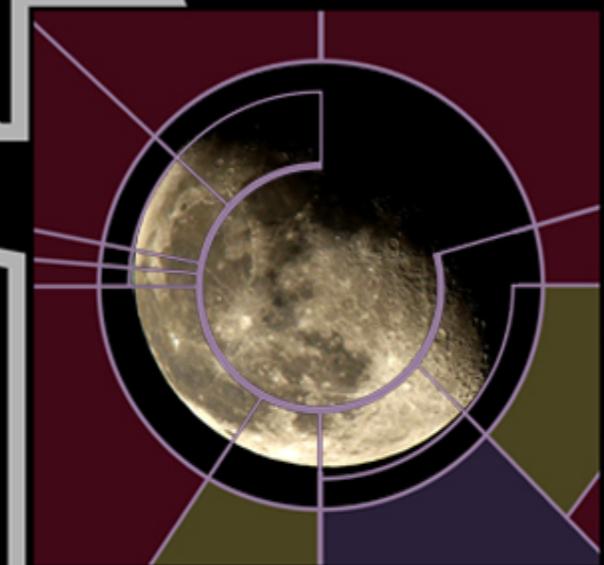
The Alphans had been through worse ordeals than his, he thought. Losing their home, all their families and so many of their friends, drifting uncontrollably through space and time until they encountered the Prophets and lost even that one part of their Earth which they still possessed. And yet they hadn't lost hope. Sisko knew that even when he was pretending to go along with Starfleet's plans, Koenig had remained doggedly faithful to his belief that he could find a permanent home for his people. He had believed it was his destiny.

Sisko wondered if Koenig had fulfilled his destiny. It was possible that the Prophets had intercepted the *Addis-Ababa* and sent the Alphans back to their universe, just as they had intercepted the Moon originally and brought the Alphans into Sisko's universe. Or maybe the ship had simply drifted into the Gamma Quadrant to be destroyed by the Dominion. But either way, Koenig had had no doubt that his destiny was in his own universe, and he had had no qualms about doing what needed to be done to return there. *If Koenig could keep such a strong faith after so many ordeals, why can't I believe in my own destiny?* Sisko asked himself.

He looked up at the full moon shining above the ancient city and suddenly knew without a doubt that his own destiny lay on Deep Space Nine. He had to return there and continue the fight.

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The Moon

Diameter: 3476 km

Mass: 7.35×10^{22} kg

Location: Unknown (formerly in Earth orbit)

In Earth history, the Moon was called "Luna" by the Romans, "Selene" and "Artemis" by the Greeks, among other names in various other mythologies.

The Moon has virtually no atmosphere. It does not possess a global magnetic field, although some surface rocks exhibit residual magnetism, implying one may have existed in the Moon's history.



DEEP SPACE NINE

DOCKING CONTROL CABIN

Originally a Cardassian mining and refinery station named *Terok Nor* in orbit around the planet Bajor, it was built by slave Bajoran labor under Cardassian rule in 2351. It was abandoned and wrecked towards the end of the Cardassian occupation of Bajor in 2369. The station was originally commanded by Gul Skrain Dukat, the last Cardassian prefect of Bajor, until 2369 when the Bajorans assumed command of the station, along with, at the request of the Bajoran provisional government, the Federation. It was then renamed *Deep Space Nine* (DS9), with command assigned to then-Commander Benjamin Sisko, who was later promoted to Captain at the end of 2371.

The station was still in Bajoran space, however, and subject to Bajoran laws. After the discovery of the Bajoran wormhole shortly after Sisko assumed command, circa stardate 46379.1, the station was moved to the mouth of the wormhole to consolidate Bajor's claim to it, after which the station assumed a great commercial, scientific and strategic importance.

LOWER DOCKING PYLON

Source: Wikipedia.org

DOCKING CONTROL CABIN

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