

## Third Chance

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## Third Chance

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

### Summary

This isn't the first time Ro has had to start her life over, nor the first time she's had to deal with people who don't like or trust her.

### Notes

For fly\_to\_dawn in Fic In A Box 2023

Canon has two possible outcomes for Ro Laren. In Picard, she survived the destruction of the Maquis, spent time in prison, and then was recruited by Starfleet Intelligence. In the books and Star Trek Online, she survived the Maquis and joined the Bajoran Militia, and was stationed to DS9 as security chief. I'm using that second option.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

"Colonel, you *can't* seriously be considering allowing this." Lieutenant Belasco's voice was filled with a sort of arrogant disbelief that Kira found grating.

*If I were going to argue with either Starfleet or the Militia about personnel, it would be to get rid of Belasco, not Ro*, Kira thought to herself. The lieutenant was Deep Space Nine's Starfleet replacement for Chief O'Brien. He was less skilled than O'Brien was (although that was an unfair comparison—there was a reason O'Brien had been tapped to teach at Starfleet Academy, a rare honor for an NCO). He was less experienced, both in engineering matters *and* in personnel management. And he had in full that Human arrogance about the Federation's superiority, with an unhealthy helping of post-Dominion War suspicion and anger.

"Why not?" Kira asked, instead of saying any of that.

"Because she's a terrorist!" Belasco said.

"So am I," Kira pointed out.

"It's not the same thing!" Belasco said.

"Name one thing Ro Laren—or the Maquis in general—have done that I didn't do in the Resistance."

"They used biogenic weapons on Quatal Prime."

"And we used trilitium resin on Solossos III," Kira pointed out. Much as she respected and admired Captain Sisko, and understood his feelings about Eddington's betrayal, that was one decision she disagreed with.

"They regularly killed civilians."

"I killed a lot of Cardassian so-called civilians in my day," Kira said. "That's why the Federation called the Resistance terrorists." She shook her head. "Cardassians don't make as strong a distinction between military and civilian as the Federation does, and when the Cardassians are conquering a place, the civilians are acting as part of the occupation, suppression, and resource-extraction. They're not innocents completely separate from what their government is doing—they're agents of the state no matter what their role or title. That was just as true in the Demilitarized Zone as it was in the Occupation."

Belasco gaped at her, but was at least smart enough not to further *that* argument. He wouldn't win. "She betrayed Starfleet!" he said.

Now, *that* Kira had no answer for. But fortunately, she didn't need one. The door to her office chimed. "Come in," she said.

Worf stepped through the door, clad in civilian garb that was half-way between Klingon and Federation styles. She gestured him to a seat on the couch, and sat down in the armchair across from it, leaving Belasco standing off to the side.

"Ambassador, thank you for taking the time away from your leave," Kira said. Given that Dax was still stationed on Deep Space Nine as science officer, and that the station was the hub of diplomatic efforts both between quadrants and within Alpha Quadrant nations finding new equilibrium after the war, they saw quite a bit of him. But he and Dax had a tendency to disappear into their quarters when he was here.

"Of course, Colonel Kira," Worf said, settling himself comfortably. "How can I help?"

"You served on the *Enterprise* with Ro Laren, didn't you?" Kira asked. "What's she like?"

"Capable, tactically brilliant, and determined," Worf said without hesitation. "She was an asset to the ship on numerous occasions, well beyond what one would expect of her rank. Cool-headed under pressure. However, she did have problems with authority, which made her ... challenging to manage."

Kira raised her eyebrows. For Worf, that was effusive praise. "And her last mission with *Enterprise*?" Had she been like Eddington, biding her time and waiting for an opportunity to betray her crewmates? Or had it been a more spur-of-the-moment thing?

Worf pondered that before speaking. "I was not consulted on that assignment, and I would have objected to it if I had been. Whatever the tactical objectives, it was dishonorable, and part of a flawed strategy that was unlikely to lead to the long-term results the Federation wished. Lieutenant Ro was an honorable officer, and her sympathies would very naturally be with the people she was being asked to infiltrate and betray."

"So instead, she betrayed Starfleet?" Belasco said.

Worf shot him an irritated glance. "Why are you asking about her?" he asked Kira.

"She survived the fall of the Maquis and joined the Bajoran Militia," Kira said. "They're assigning her here, as chief of security."

Worf cocked his head. "I am pleased to hear that she is alive and well, and in a position that will suit her abilities," he said. "I will pass the information on to Captain Picard—she was a protégé of his."

"Her last mission is classified," Kira said. "Can you share anything about what to do to ensure it doesn't happen again?"

"Don't send her out to gain peoples' trust in order to betray them to the Cardassians," Worf said, with the dry understatement he did so well.

"I think I can guarantee *that's* not going to happen as long as she's in the Militia," Kira said. "Even if the Cardassians turn expansionist again, Bajor will never try to appease them by helping them conquer others."

Worf nodded. "I believe the Federation, also, has learned the futility of attempting to appease expansionist powers. It is foolish, and only emboldens them." This changed the subject to the status of various negotiations and maneuverings among the various Alpha Quadrant powers, which were all licking their wounds from the Dominion War and trying to re-establish their spheres of influence and alliances in the new, post-War reality.

To his credit, Belasco controlled his fuming and made insightful comments at appropriate times. He might be a mediocre engineer, but he had a good knowledge of the larger diplomatic and strategic picture that Kira had found useful.

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The first thing Kira noticed about her new security chief was the earring.

"Captain Ro Laren, reporting as ordered," Ro said, striding into Kira's office.

Kira looked her up and down. "You a follower of the Pah Wraith?"

"What?" Ro frowned.

"The earring, captain," Kira said.

"The Pah Wraith are a myth to scare children with," Ro said. "There *aren't* any Wraith devotees, haven't been for centuries."

"You haven't been back on Bajor very long, have you," Kira said.

"Only two weeks on Bajor itself," Ro said. "The refugee processing was on Derna, and the Militia orientation and retraining was on Jeraddo."

Kira nodded. "On multiple occasions, Pah-wraiths have possessed people on this station, either to try and destroy the Celestial Temple or fight the Prophets. One of their followers tried to assassinate Captain Sisko on Stardate 52152. It was a Pah-wraith that collapsed the wormhole on Stardate 51950, and if Captain Sisko hadn't given his life to seal the Fire Caves, the Pah-wraiths would have destroyed the Celestial Temple and spread themselves to countless worlds across the quadrant, and given their malice and love of death and destruction, that would have been disastrous for everyone." She raised her eyebrows. "*Nobody* told you any of that?"

"No," Ro said. "I did get a number of snide comments about the earring. But I left Bajor at the age of nine and hadn't been back since, so I

didn't know it was anything unusual." She reached up and took off the earring, switching it to the other side.

"Why do you wear it on the wrong side, if *not* to signal allegiance to the Kosst Amojan?" Kira asked.

"Because I don't like people trying to feel my pah," Ro said. She grimaced as she did so, and fumbled a bit with the clasp, obviously unused to wearing it on the correct side.

There had to be more to it; Kira knew Bajorans who rejected Bajoran culture (or aspects of it) and all that the earring symbolized, but they didn't wear the traditional earring on the wrong ear. They didn't wear earrings at all, or wore Federation-style earrings. But Ro didn't seem to want to say more about it, and Kira had more important things to worry about.

"Have a seat, captain," she said, pointing to the chair across from her desk.

"Thank you, sir," Ro said.

Kira wasn't sure if she saw something ironic, or if that was just Ro's normal demeanor. "I have the non-classified portion of your Starfleet record, and Ambassador Worf gives you high praise."

"Ambassador Worf?" Ro said.

"It's a new appointment since the end of the war."

Ro raised her eyebrows. "He's not very ... diplomatic."

Kira shrugged. "He's the Federation ambassador to the Klingon Empire. His straight-forwardness sets him in good stead, there. You'll probably see him around; his wife is our science officer, Lieutenant Commander Jadzia Dax."

"I look forward to it," Ro said.

"I also have a few records from your time with the Maquis," Kira continued. "If we were fighting the Cardassians or the Dominion—or anyone else—you would be a superb addition to this station. If we were a ship in need of a pilot or ops officer, you would also be an excellent asset. But as far as I can tell, you've never had any training or experience with security work."

"That's correct, Colonel," Ro said.

"Any idea why they assigned you here?" Kira asked. Given Ro's record, if Kira were in charge of Militia assignments, she'd have had Ro teaching either piloting or tactics. The Militia didn't have any people with the sort of formal training Ro had gotten at Starfleet's Advanced Tactical Training course.

Ro shrugged. "They didn't consult me, just gave me my orders."

"And if you had to guess?" Kira prodded.

Ro smirked. "I think they thought my experience with Starfleet would be an asset on the Bajoran base with the most Starfleet contact." That was *definitely* sarcasm.

"Ironic, considering our new Chief Engineer has already been in here complaining about you."

"My reputation gets around," Ro said. "Aside from a few people on *Enterprise*, not many Starfleet officers liked me *before* I joined the Maquis."

"Speaking of reputation, if you have an urge to defect again, or disobey orders, please let me know ahead of time," Kira said, voice heavy with both irony and sincerity. She locked eyes with Ro.

Ro matched her in intensity and mood. "Don't give me stupid orders, and I won't."

Kira nodded, secure in the understanding between them. "I'll do my best." In a way, the whole thing felt weirdly like being back in the caves in Shakaar's Resistance cell. Where command was given not based on rank or training or some outside authority requiring it, but on respect within the group. No wonder Ro had had a hard time in Starfleet; they wouldn't have known what to do with her. "So, if you've never done security work before, what's your first step, Captain?"

"I'm halfway through reading the station regulations and the portions of Bajoran legal code that apply to the station," Ro said. "I've already gone over a lot of the security logs from the station's time under Bajoran authority, looking for patterns in both security calls and crimes committed. It looks like there's two basic types of trouble Security gets called for: organized crime such as smuggling and illegal gambling, usually involving Quark in some fashion, and more serious but less predictable trouble coming from visitors to the station. That ranges from 'invasion' to 'cultural misunderstanding.' Not much of that during the Dominion War, of course, but it looks like it's starting to pick up again."

Kira raised her eyebrows. "I'm impressed, captain; that's a lot of work, given how recently you were given your orders."

Ro shrugged. "I wanted to hit the ground running, and if there's one thing Starfleet teaches *all* its people, it's how to take in and analyze lots of information, and then put it to use."

She really *should* be teaching, Kira thought; that was a skill the Militia didn't have much of, or if they did, they were only beginning to teach it now; Kira's generation, of course, had no formal training of any kind, and either you sank or swam based on innate skill and whether or not you had a good mentor.

"Any questions about what you've read?" Kira asked.

"I'm sure I'll have questions once I'm finished with the studying and am settled in with the department," Ro said, "but none come to mind immediately."

"Don't hesitate to ask," Kira said. "I worked very closely with Constable Odo—" she suppressed a pang of grief "—and if past experience is anything to go by, there'll be a lot of times when the safety and well-being of this station and her inhabitants depends on the command staff and Security working smoothly together."

"Thank you, sir," Ro said. "I will do that."

"You'll be starting tomorrow morning," Kira said. "I will be at the Security Office to introduce you to your team and see the command transferred to you."

"Alright," Ro said.

"Dismissed," Kira said.

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Ro sat alone at a table in the Replimat, watching the crowd walk by and seeing what patterns she could spot. Her PADD was out in front of her, but she'd spent a *lot* of time studying in the past few days, and her brain needed to rest before she could absorb any more information. From here, she could see the Romulan Embassy (in what had been the Cardassian Embassy, before the war), the Security office and detention facilities which would shortly be her domain, and the gift shop. Just out of sight around the curve of the Promenade was the station's temple, the Infirmary, and Quark's Bar and Holosuites.

She'd checked the angles, and from the Security Office it was possible to see *across* the entrance to Quark's, and watch who was going in and out, but you couldn't see into it; the temple was the only place with a direct view into Quark's (and vice versa, which she couldn't imagine either the Ferengi or the Vedeks were happy with). If you wanted to know what was happening in Quark's, you had to go in. Given that Quark was the most consistent source of trouble on the station, she foresaw herself spending a lot of time there.

"Captain Ro," came a familiar bass rumble.

"Ambassador Worf," Ro said, looking up at him. She'd never seen him in civilian clothes before, and his hair was loose. It suited him. "Congratulations on your new job."

"Likewise," Worf said. "May I introduce my wife, Lieutenant Commander Jadzia Dax?" He gestured to the Trill woman next to him, wearing a Starfleet uniform.

"Commander," Ro said stiffly, wondering how this was going to go.

"May we join you?" Commander Dax said with a smile.

"Of course." Ro gestured to the seat across the table. Dax sat in it, while Worf grabbed a chair from a nearby table and settled himself in it.

"I understand we're going to be working together," Dax said. "Worf has told me a bit about you."

"All good things, I hope," Ro said.

"Mostly," Dax said, wiggling her head.

"Fair enough," Ro said.

"I have informed Captain Picard that you are alive and have joined the Bajoran Militia," Worf announced.

"Thank you," Ro said, not sure she was pleased. Her greatest regret about joining the Maquis was having to betray Picard's trust. He'd done so much more for her than anybody else alive had, he'd believed in her. She couldn't have done anything else, not and lived with herself, but if he'd decided to hate her she didn't want to know.

"He asked me to pass along his greetings and well-wishes," Worf said.

"Thank you," Ro said again, gut relaxing just a bit. At least it wasn't as bad as it could have been; he might even forgive her, if she could get up the courage to contact him. "How's Alexander?" That seemed safer than asking after any old *Enterprise* crewmates.

"He served in the Klingon Defense Force during the war," Worf said.

"Little Alexander is old enough to serve on a warship?" Ro shook her head. "He can't be, he was just a kid. My time on *Enterprise* wasn't *that* long ago."

"He would not have been old enough to serve on a Federation vessel, which is why he chose to serve the Empire, instead," Worf said.

"Klingons grow up faster than most species do," Dax said, "and Alexander grew at a Klingon rate, not a Human one. It's one of the things we're looking into: Klingons and Trill aren't very compatible biologically, and it turns out there's never been a Trill/Klingon hybrid. Doctor Bashir has solved the initial incompatibilities for gestation, which is the hard part, but there are still other things we need to decide before an embryo can be created. I'd like our children to have a *bit* longer childhoods than Klingons do."

"You're considering having kids?" Ro eyed Worf. He hadn't seemed that great a father to Alexander on *Enterprise*. Or that thrilled about him. Everyone knew he'd shipped the kid off to his parents to raise, at least at first.

"We are," Worf said.

"Congratulations," Ro said.

"But you knew Alexander as a small child," Dax said. "Tell me about him!"

"I didn't know him very well," Ro said. "Didn't hang out with the families much on *Enterprise*. I only really saw him during that one mission where *I* got turned into a kid temporarily. And then the Ferengi, of all people, captured the ship, and they weren't watching the kids so we were the ones with the best opportunity to retake the ship."

Dax turned to Worf, eyes alight with mischief. "Worf! You never told me you *let Ferengi capture your ship!* How did *that* happen?"

"They possessed two Klingon Birds-of-Prey and used them competently," Worf said.

"We never did figure out how they got those," Ro reminisced.

"I doubt the Empire would be happy to announce to the galaxy that they lost a pair of warships to the Ferengi," Dax said. "But you said you had been de-aged. How did that happen? Were you the only one? How did you save the ship?"

Ro explained the transporter accident, and told the story of how they'd used childish tactics to outwit the Ferengi, and Alexander's role in the whole thing. Worf hadn't been present for the most part, being locked up in the brig; the Ferengi had been smart enough to clock him as a major threat.

Dax chimed in with a few stories about some of the odder or funnier things that had happened on the station, Worf adding commentary here or there. It was nice. Collegial. The sort of thing that happened when Starfleet officers hung out together, the sort of thing Ro had so often been excluded from when she wore the same uniform Dax did.

"You know, I'm kind of surprised at the warm welcome," Ro said, studying her mug and contemplating getting another cup of tea. "Considering what your crew did to the Maquis on Solosos III."

Worf shifted uneasily, and he and Dax exchanged a look.

"It wasn't exactly our finest hour," Dax said.

"The tactics were effective, but did not live up to Starfleet's ideals," Worf said.

"I had friends there," Ro said. "Not all of them made it out." She shrugged. "That's war, I guess." She wondered how many of the *Enterprise* crew had died in the war. She hadn't looked it up, too preoccupied with surviving and grieving the loss of her Maquis friends and comrades.

"Most Maquis died when the Dominion started a scorched-earth policy in the Demilitarized Zone," Dax said. "How did you survive?"

Ro sighed. "My ship was on a supply run, and things were hot enough we hadn't been using the standard routes for ... a while, at that point. So there were actually a fair number of Maquis ships that didn't get caught in the sweep—they weren't bothering with small targets, at that point. When we heard what was happening, we went dead and waited for the Dominion ships to leave. Then we headed towards the closest colony, gathered up as many survivors as we could fit aboard, and ran for the border. We happened to be on this side of the DMZ, so we ended up in Bajoran hands. Unlike the Federation, Bajor didn't consider us criminals, so we got asylum."

"And then you joined the Militia," Dax said.

"And then I joined the Militia," Ro said. "And the Federation threw a fit. With the Cardassians gone, they don't much care what happens to former Maquis who live quietly and take up, I don't know, farming or something." And honestly, she'd thought about it, but none of her other options had sounded appealing.

"But given that Bajor is joining the Federation, and even those Militia members who *don't* join Starfleet or serve on DS9 will have access to classified Starfleet information, I can see why they might not like you in a Bajoran uniform," Dax said. "When they posted you to DS9, were they trying to upset the Federation on purpose?"

"If you figure it out, let me know," Ro said. "From what I can tell, there are a lot of conflicting feelings about the Federation and Starfleet within the Militia. So there was probably at least a little of that."

"It's actually a lot better than it was seven years ago," Dax said.

"Glad I missed it, then," Ro said. People looked at her and saw everything they disliked about the other side. Either they were mad at her for leaving Starfleet, or for ever having been Starfleet in the first place.

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Ro arranged for the formal transfer of authority and briefing to take place the day before her first official shift, so that she could start fresh. She'd met some of her crew in the last week, but not all of them; and much as she'd implied otherwise to Colonel Kira, her head was still swimming with the amount of procedures, regulations, and station history she'd tried to cram into her head.

She eyed the first-shift deputies, all lined up in the security office.

"At ease," she said, and they relaxed a bit. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Captain Ro Laren. Captain in the Bajoran Militia is equal to a Federation Lieutenant Senior Grade. Which was the rank I held in Starfleet before I left to join the Maquis. My commission is new but don't let that fool you, I'm not new to military service.

"From what I can tell, this department has been a pillar of this station, performing competently under a wide variety of difficult and unforeseeable circumstances. I'm not a fan of changing things for the sake of change, so things will probably stay mostly the same around here, at least to start. That said, if there are traditions or ways of doing things that you think could be improved, let me know. I don't promise to take your suggestions, but I will listen." She'd always gotten along best with officers who listened to her ideas, even if they chose not to accept her suggestions.

"If any of you are planning to transfer to Starfleet once Bajor formally joins the Federation, and have questions about Starfleet service, I'd be happy to answer them," Ro went on. "If you want to stay in Security you probably won't need much retraining, but if you want to specialize in something else, there'll be a lot to learn, and I can help you get a head start."

She eyed her new department. "Any questions?" There were none, although some of them looked like they had reservations they didn't want to voice. "All right then," she said. "You know your jobs. Get to them."

The deputies dispersed, most of them to patrol or guard stations, one to his shift in the cells—empty, at the moment, so she didn't have to deal with *that*. Ro retreated back into her new office and dove back into the pile of reports waiting for her.

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Ro woke up, heart racing. "Lights!" Even years in the Maquis, living in huts without computers and ships without voice commands, hadn't been enough to break that instinctive response. But she was on DS9, now, and the computer obediently raised the lights. That, more than anything, helped her catch her breath.

If she'd *really* been back on a rustbucket held together with spit and prayers, stuffed to the gills with half-dead friends, dodging Dominion and Cardassian ships with little hope of making it to safety, calling for lights would have done nothing except get her bunkmate to yell at her to shut up.

But she was here, in Bajoran soon-to-be-Federation space, on a Federation-run space station, and the vocal commands worked.

Mouth filled with bile, she went to the bathroom and rinsed her mouth out. Then she got an anti-nausea med from the replicator, and a painkiller for the headache she knew was coming. She thought about getting a sleep med, but on a Starfleet-run station, three medications dispensed at once triggered an automatic alert to sickbay. At least, they would if she were an officer; she had no idea about civilians, or whether it would apply to Militia officers as she now was.

Besides, keyed up as the nightmare had left her, she doubted that anything mild enough to be dispensed without a prescription would do any good. She took the anti-nausea med and painkiller, took another drink of water, and went back to bed.

Ro sighed. "Lights, twenty percent." Which was brighter than she usually preferred to sleep with, but it meant the shadows couldn't play tricks on her. She closed her eyes and tried to snuggle deeper into the mattress. It was too hard, too much like the thin pallets that were the best most Maquis ships had, too much like the bare dirt she'd slept on as a child in the camps. She'd have to see about switching it out for something softer.

But the mattress wasn't really the problem. She'd fallen asleep just fine. The adrenaline flooding her from her nightmare, and the dread of another, *that* was the problem. She could have had the perfect mattress, and her chances of falling back to sleep would still have been slim to none.

She sighed again. That flight—and the weeks and months that had preceded it—had been nightmarish enough to live through the first time.

Even if she couldn't fall back asleep, laying here resting would be better for her brain and body than getting up and trying to do something. Starfleet made sure all its people knew *that*.

So Ro lay in her bed, and tried to keep her breathing even and slow, as the night passed.

At last, she was too bored, and couldn't stand it any longer. "Computer, what time is it?"

"The time is 0348."

"I give up," Ro said. Her alarm was set for 0600, and she couldn't face the thought of lying there for another two hours. And if she took a sleep med *now*, she'd be too groggy in the morning.

So she got up, wrapped herself in a robe, and curled up on her couch. "Computer, what's in my inbox?"

"You have two new shift reports marked low-priority, three informational dispatches from the Bajoran Militia, one security alert from Starfleet —"

"Starfleet? What's it about?"

"The message from Starfleet is a general alert regarding increased piracy in Sector 23."

"Great, just what we need, problems around the Romulan Neutral Zone," Ro said. Still, it wasn't like it was *her* problem, not like it would have been when she was in Starfleet. "Any other messages?"

"You have a personal message from Captain Jean-Luc Picard."

Ro dropped her head and sighed. If he was disappointed in her, or hated her, he wouldn't bother to send a message; but she had betrayed his trust, and she regretted deeply that she'd had to leave that way. While she'd been in the Maquis, she hadn't had to think about it, off in a world far distant from Starfleet and everything she'd known before. But you couldn't outrun your past forever. "Computer, play message."

"Captain Ro. I was pleased to hear that you survived the war, and that you have found your way into the beginnings of a new life. I would be interested to hear about your experiences and your new posting. I hope your new service is a good fit for you, and a good use of your talents and abilities. Picard out."

Short, and sort of abrupt. But then, he was a busy man, and they'd never been *close*; he was a captain, and she'd been an ensign. He'd taken an interest in her career. Maybe he was still interested? Ro sighed. She had no idea how to respond. She wasn't *actually* sorry about joining the Maquis, despite all her regrets about how it went down. Could she just ... respond as he had, ignoring all the reasons they hadn't spoken in years?

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Ro frowned at the report she was reading. Something seemed off, but she couldn't say for sure. One of the deputies would know. She touched the intercom for the brig and got only static.

She was half-way through bringing up the technical specs to see if she could fix it before she realized she wasn't in the Maquis any longer. There was a maintenance crew on call.

But she couldn't find either the Militia or Starfleet maintenance request forms on her terminal. It was possible she wasn't correctly remembering the Militia procedure—she'd had to cram an awful lot of information into a fairly short period, and things were bound to have fallen through the cracks. She used her commbadge to call Deputy Yndar to her office. They didn't have anybody in their cells today, so there was no harm in having him step out.

"Yes, Captain?" Yndar said, poking his head in.

Ro wondered if that would ever stop being weird to hear. The Bajoran ranks were ... odd, after years in Starfleet. "Two things. I've got some questions about a report, and I can't figure out how to submit a maintenance request."

"Ah," Yndar said. "We're still using the Cardassian maintenance request system."

"I know how Starfleet does things, I know how the Militia does things, and now I have to learn a third system?" Ro made a face. "I suppose the Cardassian system is better integrated to the station than our own system would be."

"Here, let me show you," Yndar said. "It should be in a top-level directory, the number of things that go wrong on this station. They broke everything they could and didn't leave any manuals behind when they left, *and* they deleted the parts catalogue from the station replicators."

"Typical," Ro said. "If they couldn't have it, spoil it so nobody else could, either."

"Yeah," Yndar said. He showed her where the maintenance request subroutine was hiding, and walked her through reporting a problem. Then he answered her questions about the reports. Then he went back to his post. He was efficient, professional, and courteous.

Ro was left feeling a bit off balance.

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"On the house," Quark said, setting a drink down in front of her.

"Security officers are not allowed to accept gifts, so no, it's not," Ro said.

"Not allowed to accept gifts!" Quark said. "Even if it's only a drink? What harm can one drink do?"

"It's the things that come *after* the drink that are the problem," Ro said. Actually, the drink was below the value threshold of what she could accept, but she wanted to put Quark a little off balance, and she didn't want alcohol, anyhow. She was going to try a mild sedative tonight, to see if she could sleep through the night for a change, and they often reacted with alcohol or narcotics. "Vulcan spice tea and an Ubed casserole, please."

"Ooh, variety, I like it," Quark said. "Would you like replicated tea, or the real thing?"

"The real thing," Ro said. She hadn't had the real thing since she'd been on Earth for Advanced Tactical Training. It would be interesting to see how fresh it was here, this far out from Vulcan. Replicated might actually be better. But she'd try it and see.

To her surprise, it was actually good quality tea, and fresh enough to be worth paying a premium for—someone must be growing it nearby. The casserole was a different variant than the one she was used to, but not bad.

"Mind if I join you?"

Ro looked up to see Dax coming over from the entryway. "Go right ahead," she said. "Worf left already?"

Dax grimaced. "He never gets to stay as long as he'd like. We've thought about requesting a transfer for me, but ... there isn't any place that needs a science officer that's better positioned for Worf's work, right now. He's doing a lot of travelling, and we're hosting a lot of diplomatic conferences here. Things will settle down eventually, and available postings for me will change, and until then we'll deal with it."

She sat down in a chair and nodded to a passing waiter. "My usual, please." She looked at Ro's food. "Vulcan tea and Betazoid food—eclectic

tastes. You know, if you want homemade Bajoran food, there isn't a Bajoran restaurant here, but a couple of station residents have a sideline cooking meals for people."

"Thanks for the offer," Ro said, "but I actually don't have much of a taste for Bajoran food. The refugee camp I grew up in had a couple of Federation replicators that only worked half the time, and whatever local plants and animals we could gather."

"Ah," Dax said. She seemed less embarrassed than Federation people usually were by the mention of Ro's childhood; maybe it was the extra lives that gave her some perspective, or maybe just that she'd spent the last few years working with Bajorans who probably all had similar stories of deprivation. "Did the replicators have Betazoid cuisine, then?"

"I'm not sure," Ro said. "I was introduced to this dish by Counselor Troi, on the *Enterprise*. How's she doing these days, do you know?" It hadn't come up in the conversation with Worf.

"Still on the *Enterprise*," Dax said. "That crew has been together a *remarkably* long time, Worf is the only one who left."

"You're kidding," Ro said. "Even during the war, they didn't give Riker his own ship?"

"Nope," Dax said, flashing a smile at the waiter who brought her food.

"Huh," Ro said, resuming her meal now that Dax had something to eat, too. Well, even if Troi had been reassigned, it wasn't like she'd have been sent *here*. And just because she was the first counselor Ro had known who wasn't completely useless or untrustworthy (or both) didn't mean that she'd still be willing to help after the way Ro had left.

And Ro was fine, anyway; it was just a bit of trouble sleeping. She'd been through rough patches before, worse than this.

"So I was thinking," Dax said. "Kira and I sometimes do things together in the holosuites—fun things. Spa days, frothy mindless historical fantasy stories, as far away from work as we can get. Would you like to join us?"

Social time with her commanding officer? Ro had certainly never been offered *that* before. And it was true that she was only two ranks below the Lieutenant Colonel, and one of the senior officers on the station. And the highest-ranking Bajoran besides the Colonel herself. But still.

"If the colonel is okay with it, it sounds like it could be fun," Ro said. Frothy mindless historical fantasies weren't exactly her thing, but she wasn't going to turn down an overture of friendship from a fellow officer.

That was one of the ways the Maquis had been different from Starfleet. She hadn't been the life of the party, but she hadn't been a loner, either. For the first time in her life, she'd felt like she fit in. Or, at least, that she didn't fit any less than other people did.

"I'll talk to her," Dax said. "We've got something planned for tomorrow evening, if you're free."

Definite plans would be more awkward for Colonel Kira to get out of, if she didn't want to have a relative stranger in her recreational time. "I'm swamped right now, trying to get settled in and learn the job. Maybe another time?" It had the virtue of being true.

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A week into her new security chief's tenure, Kira called her in for a progress report.

"So, how are you settling in?" she said.

Captain Ro shrugged and sipped her tea. "Haven't screwed up yet, that's always a plus."

"I figured I'd have heard about it if you had," Kira said.

"I'm getting a handle on the rhythms of the work, and getting to know my deputies," Ro said. "There's a couple of things I'm planning on changing in the patrol schedule; nothing's really been adjusted since the end of the war, when Constable Odo left. And the security needs are different in peacetime."

"Will you be going back to one of Odo's schedules, or coming up with something new?" Kira asked.

"Peacetime isn't the same now as it was before the war," Ro said. "Trade patterns have shifted, given the number of planets devastated by the war, and Bajor's coming Federation membership. More Klingons, fewer Cardassians, and that means different security challenges. So, probably something new."

"All right," Kira said.

"I'm more concerned about organized crime, to be honest," Ro said. "Constable Odo's reports about his investigations are sometimes ... unspecific. He *had* contacts who would pass him information about certain types of criminal activity, but he never wrote down their names. Whether those helpful people will continue to talk to us ... who knows. And from things the deputies have said, I'm pretty sure he sometimes used his shapeshifting to perform illegal surveillance of Quark and other suspects."

"Odo had a very finely-tuned sense of justice," Kira said. "He would never have done anything he believed was wrong." She sighed. "But he learned how to do security work under the Cardassians. He was always fair, and there's a reason we were happy to keep him in the same job after the Cardassians left. But he did miss the level of surveillance the Cardassians used, and Captain Sisko never reprimanded him for spying on Quark or other suspects."

"In the Federation, surveillance by law enforcement is illegal without a court order," Ro said. "Regardless of why you're doing it. Not everyone has a finely-tuned sense of justice like Odo did."



"We're not in the Federation," Kira pointed out.

"We will be soon," Ro said. "The station has always been in a weird place, legally speaking, but that will be resolved when Bajor enters the Federation. Federation standards for evidence tend to be fairly strict. They vary by planetary jurisdiction, of course, and we won't know what the Bajoran laws will be until all the details are hammered out. But there's a minimum standard of civil rights required of all Federation members. Even if Odo were still here, he'd have to change tactics if he wanted any of his evidence to hold up in court."

"With Quark, things usually don't go that far," Kira said. "He's rarely into anything *deeply* illegal or dangerous, and his various misdemeanors were mostly useful to force him to toe the line." Kira thought about it for a second. "Sometimes also for blackmailing him into doing what we needed him to for the good of the station. Quark understands that, I'm pretty sure it's how Ferengi society works."

Ro paused. "So that's why some of the reports are incomplete," she said, sounding satisfied. "Odo definitely wouldn't have wanted to put *that* in writing."

"No, he wouldn't have."

"And his deputies are all still loyal to him, and wouldn't want him to look bad."

Kira was pleased to hear they still respected and cared for Odo. With the Dominion War, and Odo's complex relationship to his people, things had been ... rocky, in that department.

"But we still have a problem," Ro said. "We can't use Odo's tactics, either practically or legally, which means we don't have the same leverage."

"Quark isn't that bad," Kira pointed out. "He's never done anything *really* awful, or we would have let the charges go through and gotten him convicted and deported."

Ro shook her head. "Bajor's entry into the Federation changes things. After the Occupation we weren't wealthy enough in our own right to be worth much to the crime syndicates. Oh, sure, there was the wormhole ... but it's easy to control who goes through that, so it's too hard to run a criminal enterprise through it, especially back when it was first found. And then the war came. But now Bajor's joining the Federation. It's going to get a lot more prosperous very quickly. *And* things are going to change a lot in a short time—which means opportunities for the syndicates to take advantage of. And if they can get a solid foothold on Bajor, that means they have a solid foothold *in the Federation*. We're a lot more tempting a target than we used to be."

"I thought you didn't have any previous law enforcement experience," Kira said. "How do you know that?"

Ro shrugged. "Starfleet isn't all exploring, you know—or all fighting. It takes a while for regular Federation law enforcement to set up in the space around new member worlds, so smaller Starfleet cruisers end up filling in the gaps. My first assignment out of the academy spent some time rooting out a nest of pirates around Gadika III. It took us a couple of months, not because they were hard to fight—or even hard to find. But they'd gotten dug in to the Gadikan government, had a number of people in their pocket. And they got advance notice of our movements. Took a while to clean up."

"I see," Kira said. "I'll pass along the warning to other Militia posts. Do you have any contacts in Starfleet who might have advice?" Given Ro's history, it was a long shot.

Ro winced. "Probably not any who would be willing to talk to me, or at least, not any with current experience in anti-piracy work. Captain Picard would probably answer any questions I sent him, but ... it's probably close to two decades since he was captain of a ship that *might* get sent on that sort of mission. And you know Worf, of course, but he spent his career on larger starships, not small cruisers."

"Right," Kira said. "Well, we'll just have to keep an eye on things." She paused, trying to gauge Ro's reaction. "How are you settling in on a personal level?"

"Fine," Ro said shortly.

Kira nodded, but let the silence linger for a bit before continuing. "How are you getting along with the deputies?"

"No problems, sir," Ro said.

Kira nodded again. Ro Laren was enough like her, she thought, to predict her reactions. Ro was prickly, independent, and would resent being coddled. But she'd also been thrown into a position she was unqualified for to sink or swim, and Kira had never in her life been as isolated as Ro probably was right now. And if she got space to talk, she might use it.

"Dax tells me she invited you to one of our holosuite outings," Kira said before the silence could get awkward.

"She did," Ro said.

"And you turned her down," Kira said. "Was that really because you were busy, or were you not interested?"

Ro shrugged. "Little of both. I really am that busy, but also, fantasy adventure really isn't my thing. I don't mind it, but it's not what I'd choose on my own. And then there was the fact that she volunteered your time without asking you. If *you* weren't interested, less awkward all around if I said no first."

"Fair enough," Kira said. "I've learned to enjoy the fantasy adventures, but they're more Dax's thing than mine. The spa days are really nice. What do you do to relax?"

"On the holodecks?" Ro said "Mysteries, puzzle games, and rock climbing."

"I don't know that I've ever climbed rocks as a hobby," Kira said. "How's it done?"

"There's two basic types, bouldering and walling," Ro said. "Bouldering is more like what you'd do on a mission: find a rock and climb over it, usually without going high enough to be dangerous, without any specialized equipment. Or not much; if you're doing it for sport usually you use special shoes and put chalk on your hands to help your grip, and put a mat below you to break your fall. Walling takes more equipment to do—you're climbing up a cliff face, or a wall that simulates a cliff face. Usually with a rope to catch you if you fall."

"You climb up cliffs?" Kira raised her eyebrows. "For fun?"

"I do," Ro said with a smile. "It's hard, but if you do it right it's not dangerous—especially in a holodeck—and you have the most incredible views and sense of accomplishment when you're done. I can show you some time, if you're interested."

"I am," Kira said. "If nothing else, it sounds like a more interesting workout than just lifting weights or running on a treadmill."

"It is," Ro said.

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Ro eyed her inbox. She hadn't responded to Captain Picard's message, and the longer it took the more awkward it would get. But she still wasn't sure what to say.

Fortunately, she had no shortage of other work to do instead. She went through her mental to-do list, decided that more studying of regulations and logs today would be counterproductive, and went on to the relatively easy tasks.

The interior security station comms *still* were not fixed. Ro pulled up the maintenance form, only to find it wasn't there. Not pending, not resolved, not denied, nothing.

She tapped her commbadge. "Ro to Yndar, I can't find the maintenance form for the security comms problem. Is there something I'm missing?"

"I'll check," he said. A few minutes later he called her back. "I can't find it, either. That's weird."

"It's not a known bug in the system?"

"No, sir, I've never seen it happen before. I wondered why it isn't fixed yet."

"Okay," Ro said. "Well, I'm submitting it again, we'll see if it gets eaten again."

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Kira had to cancel her next holosuite outing with Dax; there was a minor diplomatic incident with the Romulans that turned out to be not so minor after all, and which needed in a truly infuriating amount of flattery and reassurances to smooth over. Kira actually wasn't directly involved with most of it; it had happened on the station, but (thank the Prophets) hadn't been caused by station personnel. Still, for someone who hadn't contributed to the problem, dealing with it took far too much of her time. Dax had been very helpful, both as executive officer and also with advice about the necessary diplomacy. Ro had handled the security aspects of it competently. Julian hadn't been involved at all. Belasco had kept as low a profile as possible, which was a relief given that he was even less suited to diplomacy than Kira was.

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Ro double-checked the maintenance requests. The Security Station internal comms had been deleted from the queue *again*. She hadn't had time to worry about it (or much of anything else besides Romulan egos) while dealing with security for the Romulan ambassador. Now that things were back to normal, it was one of many things to check up on.

She tapped her commbadge. "Ro to Belasco."

"Belasco here."

"Your maintenance request system has problems. It's eaten two maintenance requests."

"Nonsense, it's working perfectly."

"How would you know that if it's eating requests?" Ro asked.

"Nobody else has complained."

"That just means it's an intermittent fault."

"If you submitted a maintenance request and it's no longer there, the request must have been submitted improperly. These Cardassian systems are a bit tricky, and you're new here."

"Deputy Yndar walked me through the process," Ro said. "He's been here since the Cardassians left, and knows the station backwards and forwards."

There was a pause. "What was the nature of the request?"

"Security's hardwired internal communications system isn't working."

Belasco scoffed. "That's a low-priority fix if ever there was one. You all have functional combadges, it's redundant."

Ro agreed; it was mostly there because the Cardassians were paranoid and wanted a system that would be harder to crack into even if you stole a Cardassian communicator. "Which is why I'm more concerned about the fact that your system is deleting maintenance requests."

"And again, nobody else has a problem."

"You mean, nobody else has *reported* a problem, which is not the same thing," Ro said. "Maybe they're just sitting around wondering why nobody's come to fix their issue yet."

"If it'll make you happy, I'll come fix your communications systems personally." There was a sarcastic edge to his voice.

"I don't care *who* fixes it." Ro reined in her temper. Belasco was an ass who hated her; she'd served with people like him before, and she probably would again. At least he didn't outrank her. "Fix your maintenance system. Ro out."

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"Want a spa day?" Ro looked up to see Dax poking her head into the security office.

Ro glanced down at the file she was working on. Her shift was over, and it wasn't like the paperwork was going anywhere. "In the holosuites, I presume? How's the program's massage therapist?" She hadn't had a really good massage since leaving *Enterprise*, and it always helped her sleep. On DS9, a spa on the holosuite was probably the best option.

"Pretty good for a non-sentient hologram," Dax said. "Not at the level you'd need for serious therapeutic work, but perfect for ordinary massage."

"I would *love* to join you," Ro decided. "Give me ten minutes to wrap up what I'm doing?"

"Meet us in Suite 6," Dax said.

'Us' probably meant the Colonel as well. Ro wouldn't have necessarily *chosen* to hang out and get a massage with her CO, but on the other hand, Kira seemed to be competent and sensible and wasn't holding Ro's past against her, so it'd probably be fine.

Ro finished reading the report, signed off on it, and headed over to Quark's.

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"You could have *asked* before inviting her," Kira protested as they changed into loose robes in the holosuite.

"I thought you liked her," Dax said innocently.

"I do!" Kira said. "But it's awkward socializing with subordinates, and a little warning would have been nice. *Especially* for a spa day."

"I'm your subordinate, too," Dax said.

"That's different," Kira said. "We were friends for years before I took command of the station."

Dax shrugged. "Being commanding officer doesn't mean you have to be isolated. I like her, and it's a fun way of getting to know your senior staff better."

"Sisko never hung out at the spa with us," Kira pointed out.

"Ben gave dinners where he cooked for people instead," Dax said. "Besides, given what she's been through, I'd say *she* needs some simple, easy relaxation, and *I* like the spa, and I like people. And I want to be hospitable to our new staff."

"You haven't asked Belasco to do something," Kira said. "And I'd say *he* could use some simple, easy relaxation if anyone could."

"I did when he first got here," Dax said. "He turned me down. And then I saw the difference between how he treated his Bajoran subordinates and the Starfleet crew."

"Is there something I should be aware of?" Kira asked. You wouldn't think a single step on the promotion ladder would cut her off so much from the station grapevine, but she was constantly surprised how much less she heard about.

Dax made a face. "If it were enough to act on, I'd have told you already."

The holosuite door opened with a hiss and a little grinding noise; Quark was cheaping out on maintenance, as usual.

"Ro! Glad you could join us," Dax said. "Kira and I usually start with a dip in the hot tub and then a massage. What are your preferences?"

"Hot tub then massage sounds fine to me," Ro said, stripping off her clothes. She was fit, but with a variety of scars old and new that Federation medicine could have easily eliminated, if Ro had chosen it. She hadn't.

Kira had scars, too, that she hadn't allowed Julian to remove. She didn't want to do away with the physical reminder of some of the things she'd been through.

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The hot tub was great. There were two pools, side by side, one set to a good temperature for Bajorans, the other set to Dax's comfort. It was a little odd to have someone in the same pool, but it wasn't bad.

"So," Kira said, "I hear they have spas on some Federation starships?"

"No," Ro said. She leaned her head back against the padded rest and consciously worked on relaxing each muscle group individually one at a time. "*Enterprise* had a salon, and there was a massage therapist attached to Sickbay that anyone could make an appointment with any time, but if you wanted something like this you had to use the holodeck."

"A massage therapist in *sickbay*?" Kira said.

"It's part of physical therapy," Dax explained. "We don't need one on the station, because if someone needs serious rehabilitation, we send them to Bajor. But a large exploring ship like *Enterprise*, which might not come back to a Federation port for months or years, needs to be able to do everything. Including long-term physical therapy and rehab."

"Huh," Kira said. She and Dax started debating where the line was between extravagance and caring for the well-being of people so far from home for so long.

Ro closed her eyes and let the conversation wash over her as she let all her tension seep out into the water.

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Ro had been quiet in the hot tubs, but as they snacked on finger food before their massages, Dax asked her about what she was finding hardest to get used to on the station.

"You know, it's funny," Ro said. "This is the first time I've ever come into an assignment as a superior officer? When I was in Starfleet, I made it to lieutenant, got busted down to ensign for getting people killed, then I got assigned to the *Enterprise* and eventually promoted again. But I was still on the same ship, everybody already knew me both times I made Lieutenant. The people I was commanding knew me before I got the rank. And then in the Maquis, you don't—didn't—get outside assignments. You joined the crew of whoever wanted you, or wanted to follow you."

Kira noted that present tense. "The Resistance was like that."

"I know," Ro said. "We had our share of old Resistance fighters in the Maquis."

"Watch who you're calling old," Kira said dryly.

"Didn't mean it that way," Ro said with a grimace. "I've commanded people, and I've started my life over somewhere nobody knew me. I've done both multiple times. This is the first time I'm doing both at the *same* time."

Kira had never had to start her life over; not really. That was a major difference in their life experience. Still. "Coming here was a little like that, for me. I'd never served with strangers before, and I'd certainly never commanded them. And I had no idea what to expect from Starfleet officers, and most of what I *did* expect turned out to be wrong in one way or another. Captain—then Commander—Sisko was a great help, and I learned a lot from him."

"It's not that it's *difficult*," Ro said. "Just odd."

Dax chimed in with a story about Torias and his first squadron command, during advanced pilot training, and the trouble he had gotten himself into, and the conversation turned to stories about pranks and hijinks and stupid accidents they had done or seen in their careers.

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Ro wasn't sure whether it was the sleep med or the massage, but she slept better that night than she had in a while. That only lasted until the handover briefing at the beginning of her shift the next day, when Deputy Gerjo noted that Belasco had fixed the internal comms system during beta shift the night before.

"Very thoughtful of him, to come in and handle it personally on his off shift," Ro said neutrally.

Gerjo rolled his eyes but didn't comment, and the briefing went on.

Ro got herself a cup of tea from the replicator and sat in her office, thinking. Belasco didn't like her, and this was a low-priority repair. She would have expected the comms repair to go to the very bottom of the priority list, and yet he'd come in to do it personally the very day it was reported to him?

She checked the surveillance logs—Ro wasn't thrilled about spending most of her working hours in a place with continuous recordings, but at least her office didn't have cameras, just a sensor on the door to report who went in and out, and when.

Belasco hadn't brought an assistant with him. This sort of work—tracing a fault that might be in one of several rooms, or in one of several interconnected computer systems—was usually done in pairs to speed things up.

He didn't like her, but he'd found a reason to be alone in her office while she was off-duty.

Ro had had fellow officers express their dislike of her through pranks on several occasions, both at the academy and on her first posting. She would have hoped that someone who rose to command a department on a joint station wouldn't pull nasty pranks, but she couldn't rule it out.

A quick search of her office didn't find anything.

A security scan, however, did.

Ro tapped her commbadge. "Ro to Colonel Kira."

"Kira here. Go ahead."

"Could you join me in my office, sir?" Ro said. "There's something you're going to want to see."

There was a pause.

"I'll be right there, Captain."

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"He *bugged your office*?" Kira was shocked.

Ro shrugged. "Can't prove it was him. He's the only person who's been in here alone besides me since I got here, but I didn't do a security sweep when I moved in. It could have been here longer than that."

"Not *much* longer," Kira said. "Given the war and all the mess with his people and all the people who hated him because he was a changeling, Odo did regular security sweeps of his office and quarters. If this had been here before he left, he would have found it."

"Still doesn't prove that Belasco planted it," Ro said.

"You keep saying that, but you're the one who said it might be him," Kira said. "You don't like him."

Ro shrugged. "That's why I want to make sure we don't rush to blame him. I've spent a lot of time disliked and distrusted by my fellow officers, and had too many people assume I'd done things I hadn't just because it was an easy answer and they wanted to believe the worst of me."

"Whereas you'd *rather* they thought badly of you because of the things you'd actually done," Kira said, voice heavy with irony.

Ro nodded. "Yeah." She looked at the bug again. "And if he *did* do it, there's not much we can do unless we can prove it. Which might be a problem. It's a professionally made bug; high quality but generic. I checked on the specs and it's the sort of thing someone uses when they don't want it to be traced back to them. But it wasn't hidden very well, and if whoever planted it had known how to use it effectively, they could have made it a lot harder to find."

"So, someone with access to good equipment, but not a professional spy." Kira put her hands on the desk and leaned over it, examining the small bug.

"Exactly," Ro said. "And you never know. It might have been there for a while. It might have been planted by someone who wants to keep tabs on station security. It might have been planted by someone who could erase their entry to the station from the security logs."

"Somebody good enough to hack into the Security Office's computer would be good enough to set the bug properly," Kira said.

"Most likely," Ro said.

"Do we know if this is the only active bug, or are there others?"

Ro shrugged. "It's the only bug active in the security offices, ops, or the deuterium refinery. Those are the only places with enough security to do an automatic scan that would find it—it's small and designed to go undetected if possible. Anywhere else, we're going to have to send deputies to comb the station with hand scanners. Oh, and *your* office would also need to be scanned manually."

Kira grimaced. Of course the deuterium refinery—formerly the ore processing facility where the majority of Bajoran laborers had been forced to work during the Occupation—would have that kind of surveillance. "Let's do a full scan of the station."

"It won't pick up any bugs that aren't currently in use," Ro pointed out. "So if someone has a stash of them somewhere, we won't find them."

"I'll call Dax, see if she has any ideas."

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"Well?" Ro asked.

Dax looked up from her tricorder. "Maybe."

"What's the problem?" Kira asked.

"There are a *lot* of electronic devices on this station, both station equipment and personal items." Dax shrugged. "The components in this device are a bit on the rare side, and some of the alloy combinations they had to use to get this much scanning and memory into a device this small are distinctive. But not distinctive *enough* to be easily identified, and there could be any number of legitimate devices made with similar materials. I can modify the tricorders to look for it, but it's going to be a short-range scan and there are going to be false positives. And there are *also* going to be places where the equipment in the walls will mask what's on the other side of them."

"How short a range?" Ro asked.

"Max range, with no walls or furniture or other things in the way, will probably be about five meters. If you're scanning through bulkheads, probably more like two or three meters, depending on what exactly is *in* the bulkheads."

Kira and Ro exchanged a glance. Ro shrugged.

"Not ideal, but it's better than nothing," Kira said.

"Problem is, if it *is* Belasco, he'll hear about the scan as soon as we start it, and dispose of any evidence," Dax said. "It's going to be hard to hide deputies combing the station with scanners. And even if we had every one of our officers and crew out looking, he'd still probably have time to move or destroy anything."

Ro nodded. "And if it's not Belasco, they might still be tipped off. And the bug was found in the security office; it might have been a deputy. They're the only people who spend a lot of time in here without an escort. So even just limiting the search to the deputies might not be enough."

Kira smiled. "I think I have an idea."

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Ro looked at the crowd in the security staging area. It was the first time since she'd taken command of the department that they'd all been gathered into one place. The deputies were chatting desultorily. All were present, except for the few in the middle of their sleep cycle who would get briefed later. She called them to attention and began her briefing.

"We're going to be doing a training exercise and manually searching the station for surveillance devices, security weaknesses, contraband goods, and explosives. Some things have been planted for you to find. There will also be false positives. It is not your job to remove or diffuse anything you find at this time; we may be doing other exercises for how to handle that aspect of things later, but this current exercise is simply about searching the station. All you have to do is report your findings."

She explained the procedure, the rewards for the three people who found the most items of interest, and reminded them of the boundaries of Federation privacy regulations and how they applied to security scans without a warrant.

"And," she said, "we're *also* going to be practicing information security. If this were a real scan, if somebody *had* planted listening devices or a bomb or something, we would want to avoid tipping them off until we'd found our target. So! Consider this exercise classified until it is completed. And that includes your crewmates in other departments: nobody says anything to *anyone* outside the department until we're done. And if you can scan an area without *looking* like you're scanning it—or at least without anyone seeing you do it—so much the better.

Deputy Pinar raised a hand. "Sir, the scanning program is automated, right? We don't have to be watching it as it runs?"

"For the most part," Ro said. "But the scan will only work at a fairly short range, and there are a lot of things on the station that could block or distort it, so you'll have to check every so often to make sure you don't need to re-scan an area from a different spot or something. But no, you don't have to walk around staring at your tricorder while pretending you're not."

Ro waited a few seconds. "Any other questions?"

There was a general shuffling and shaking of heads.

"Dismissed."

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By the end of the shift, as people were turning in their tricorders and signing out, many things had been found. None of them were what they were looking for, and only one was something Dax had planted as part of the exercise. It would take several days, at this rate, to scan the whole station.

"I expected more grumbling," Ro said to Deputy Yndar as they wrapped up the last few details and got ready to hand the station over to beta shift.

Yndar shrugged. "We've had enough problems with spies and saboteurs over the years that everyone can see the reason for it. And besides, patrol is either boring or exciting in the bad way. The competition livens things up a bit."

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Given the limitations of the scan, Ro was almost surprised when they found what they were looking for.

And even more surprised that the stash of bugs was in Belasco's quarters. She hadn't thought he'd be stupid enough to keep them where they would obviously be his. If *Ro* had illegal surveillance devices, she'd put them somewhere she'd have plausible deniability if they were found.

She waited until after shift to call the Colonel. As far as the deputies were concerned, this was just another thing planted for them to find, and Ro wanted to keep it that way for now. She had an awful hunch about where he'd gotten those bugs.

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"No lecture about Federation privacy rules?" Kira asked as Ro used her security override to open Belasco's quarters.

The door slid open, and Ro gestured her inside. "He's not a civilian, he's a Starfleet officer and you're his CO. You have the authority to search his quarters and personal effects at any time. And even if he was a civilian, the scan was perfectly legal, so it would be easy to get a warrant based on it."

"Good to know," Kira said.

It only took a few seconds for Ro's tricorder to find the bugs. They were in a box in a bureau by the door.

Ro scanned them. "No fingerprints or DNA on these ones, either," she said. "Whoever gave them to him was careful."

"We'll see if Dax can figure anything out," Kira said. "Meanwhile, it's time to have a chat with Mr. Belasco."

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Belasco's confident walk into Kira's office faltered a bit when he saw Ro standing by her desk. Guilty conscience, Kira wondered? Dax was standing on Kira's other side, but it was Ro that Belasco kept glancing towards.

"Lieutenant Belasco," she said, gesturing to the box of bugs. "Would you care to explain why you used an illegal surveillance device to spy on your colleague?"

"You had no right to search my things," Belasco said, drawing himself up to his full height.

"So you admit they're yours?" Dax asked.

Belasco glanced at her but didn't respond.

"And as it happens, Lieutenant, I *do* have the right to search your things, as your commanding officer," Kira said. "And I'd like an answer to Commander Dax's question."

"Sir." Belasco said stiffly.

"Do you admit that these are yours?" Kira asked. "Do you admit that you planted a bug in the security office while you were in there to do maintenance?"

Belasco bit his lip, then decided to brazen it out. "What if I did? She's a traitor! She can't be trusted! And she has you in her corner, which I expected, you Bajorans are all thick as thieves together. But she got *Commander Dax* behind her, as well. There was no point in any official action, but I wanted to make sure that *when* she betrays us, we'll know."

"She has me behind her, Lieutenant, because unlike you, *I* listened to the people who actually knew her, instead of to my prejudices," Dax said pointedly.

"You're all taken in by her," Belasco said. "I don't know why, it's not like she's that charismatic—"

"I'm a pretty good judge of character, Belasco," Dax said. "I've had seven lifetimes to practice."

"Lieutenant," Kira said. "Refresh my memory. What do Starfleet regulations say you should do when you believe your superior officer is committing a dangerous mistake and nobody in your chain of command will listen?"

"Contact the Judge Advocate General's office, or the Operations Office, for advice, depending on what sort of mistake it is," Belasco answered promptly. He bit his lip and wouldn't meet her eyes. Not out of shame, but out of ... something else.

"And you did, didn't you?" Ro said. "And whoever it was you got ahold of confirmed that I was a dangerous terrorist and a threat to the station and to all of Starfleet, but said their hands were tied and there was nothing they could do because the Bajorans were being irrational, and gave you the surveillance devices so you could prove it. Probably promised you a promotion and a better posting if you got intelligence they could use."

Belasco's jaw dropped. His mouth moved wordlessly for a few seconds. "I—I don't—That's absurd! Why would you think that?" He wasn't as convincing as he was trying to sound.

"When I was out of Starfleet the first time," Ro said, "Admiral Niles Kennelly gave me a secret mission. Officially, I was to make contact with a group of Bajorans who had attacked a Federation colony, to help the *Enterprise* settle things peacefully. Unofficially, I was to provide the group with weapons. Kennelly said that he knew the Cardassians were vicious, violent people, and a threat to the peace and stability of the whole quadrant."

This was a story Kira hadn't heard; she glanced at Dax, who gave a slight nod that she knew it; Worf must have told her.

"Kennelly said he wanted to ensure the group could defend themselves," Ro went on, "both because it was the right thing to do, and because anything that stopped or slowed the Cardassians in their goals could only be good for the Federation in the long run. But his hands were tied, officially, by the spineless cowards in the diplomatic corps who wanted to appease the Cardassians at any cost. But he could reinstate me and send me with secret orders. If I succeeded in arming the group without anyone realizing how they'd gotten the weapons, he would let me keep my commission and give me my pick of postings."

It sounded too good to be true, Kira thought. And if there was an admiral who favored Bajor that strongly, Captain Sisko would have called him in to help when they'd had conflicts with Starfleet or the Federation.

"Obviously he kept his word," Belasco said, "because otherwise you wouldn't have been in a position to betray Starfleet later."

"He didn't, actually," Ro said. "He couldn't. He was being court-martialed. You see, every single word he'd told me was a lie. He was actually working with the Cardassians. They were the ones who had destroyed the colony and framed Bajoran terrorists, to try and get the Federation involved on Cardassia's side. Kennelly was their patsy, but he also genuinely believed that a war would be good for Starfleet and that an alliance with the Cardassians would be good for the Federation. I figured out what was going on, and told Captain Picard, who was able to expose the whole thing. It was my courage and integrity in coming forward—even though I knew it might get my commission revoked, again,

and sent back to prison—that got me my post on the *Enterprise*. Not Kennelly's machinations."

"I don't see what any of that has to do with me," Belasco said steadily. He was tense, and his eyes kept flicking between the two of them, Kira noticed.

"Your contact at Starfleet Ops wouldn't have been Admiral Kaluža, would it?" Dax asked. "She heads the right subdepartment for your complaint to hit her desk."

"How—" Belasco swallowed. "I don't know what you mean."

"I've had the misfortune of working with her before," Kira said. "Kaluža believes that Bajorans are violent thugs, and inherently untrustworthy. She's been working to keep Bajor out of the Federation since the idea was first floated shortly after the Occupation ended. I know of at least two separate occasions when negotiations were stalled because of things she had convinced Starfleet to demand, or various Federation ambassadors to ask for. And a separate one where she intentionally and maliciously edited a cultural briefing to make a new ambassador to Bajor look bad."

"If she's the one who gave you the bugs," Dax said, "I don't doubt she truly believed anything she told you about how untrustworthy Bajorans are. But she'd be *delighted* to have inside intelligence she could use to try and drive further wedges between Bajor and the Federation."

If Kaluža were the only stumbling block, Bajor would have joined long before the Dominion War, Kira mused. Bajor had never made *too* much of a fuss about her, because there were a few people like that on the Bajoran side of the negotiations, so they didn't exactly have the moral high ground. But there was no point muddying the waters to point that out.

"She can't prevent Bajor joining at this late date," Ro said. "But she could, for example, make it *much* harder for members of the Bajoran Militia who want to transfer to Starfleet to do so."

"If she's your contact, Lieutenant, I'm sure she thought her birthday had come early when you brought your concerns to her," Kira said.

"But whether you got the bugs from her or someone else, you should come clean," Ro said. "It will never be easier than it is right now. I know for a fact that there are a number of Starfleet officers like Captain Picard who have a great respect for people who realize their mistakes and own up to them. Whether you stick it out or confess, this is going in your record. Every future commanding officer you ever have will see that you tried to spy on a fellow officer, a Federation ally. The question is, what are they going to see *next* to that? Are they going to see you came clean and did the right thing? Or not?"

Belasco was wavering, Kira could see it in his eyes.

"Do the right thing," Dax said. "Starfleet should be better than paranoia and hate and spying on our allies."

Belasco opened his mouth, closed it again, and looked down. He shook his head, and looked up again. "I am serving Starfleet and the Federation as they *need* to be served," he said. "I wish you could see that, sir."

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"Now what?" Ro asked after Belasco had left. He would be confined to quarters until he could be shipped off back to Starfleet.

"Now, we write our reports and leave it in Starfleet's hands," Dax said. "And hope we don't have an engineering crisis until we can get a replacement."

"We can't prove he did it," Ro said. "The evidence is circumstantial, and he never actually confessed."

"If he gets a good lawyer, he probably won't even be court-martialed," Dax said. "It'll be a black mark on his record, at worst."

"And there's a good chance he'll be targeted by Section 31 or any other unscrupulous senior officer looking for someone to do their dirty work with plausible deniability," Ro said.

Kira shrugged. "It's out of our hands now," she said. "Hopefully his replacement will be better. You did a good job, Captain; I was impressed with your professionalism. You didn't let your prejudices make you jump to conclusions, and you advocated for Belasco even though you didn't like him."

"Thank you, sir," Ro said.

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Ro turned down Dax's invitation to dinner at the Replimat, and headed home as soon as her shift was over. As the doors to her quarters closed behind her, she sighed. It had been a long day without any good resolution for anyone. Belasco had no idea what he was in for, and he was going to be in a position to fall in with people who would amplify his worst traits. She wished they could have either gotten through to him, or gotten him out of Starfleet.

Still, at least they'd gotten him off the station so *she* wouldn't have to deal with him any longer. And done it before he'd had a chance to spy on her. And her new CO liked her.

It wasn't like the support she'd gotten from Picard; he'd believed in her, trusted her, given her space to prove herself. It had been what she needed at the time. But they'd had such different lives, and he'd been so much older and more experienced that there had been a large gulf between them even before she'd left Starfleet.

With Kira, she was closer to her age and experience, and there was a kind of camaraderie she could never have had with Picard.



But Ro was still grateful for everything she'd learned from him. And she'd put off calling him long enough.

Ro got herself a cup of tea from the replicator, and sat down in front of her communications screen. She started the recording. "Captain Picard, it was good to hear from you. I enjoyed meeting Ambassador Worf again, and his wife Lieutenant Dax and I are becoming friends. I was glad to hear that you and the new *Enterprise* came through the war well ..."

## End Notes

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