

the course I keep

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by [violet_pencil](#)

Summary

How to walk on ice: take small steps.

Lenara Kahn has a second chance. She makes a different choice.

Notes

For Netgirl_y2k in the 2022 Fandom 5K fic exchange.

Thanks to chaya, for pre-read and help with the final scenes.

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Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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How to walk on ice: take small steps. Slow movement is still progress, as long as you're headed in the right direction. Lenara has that part down. She's a champion truder, always was, even as a little girl. Sometimes it seems like her clearest memories of early childhood are those endless bright mornings on the way to some class or tutoring session or other, the world around her almost meditatively silent except for the sound of her boots shuffle-stepping through layers of wet snow, slush and black ice. Small steps. Don't twist your head, don't look around. Keep your eyes locked on the path, one step ahead. Keep your balance.

Lenara was always good at that part. Maybe too good. She always held herself too tightly, overcompensating for every shift and sway, jerking nervously back and forth in tense increments. She can get where she's going, but then she can't make herself relax, her skull gripped in an unrelenting vise and every muscle in her body cramped and protesting.

She can feel a tension headache coming on now as she follows her brother and Doctor Pren through the Promenade on their way to the transport shuttle. It's some time before first shift, station time, and the Promenade is bustling with new arrivals spilling in from the docking ring, merchants setting up kiosks and displays of merchandise, and station personnel on their way to or from their shifts. Lenara maneuvers slowly through the foot traffic, pausing patiently and ceding the right of way to anyone who crosses her path. Trailing further and further behind, she watches as her team members exchange a few words with Commander Worf and step up into the airlock, disappearing from sight.

Once they're gone she drifts almost to a stop, looking around—for what? Nothing. She's being ridiculous. Hastily, she shifts her carryall onto her shoulder and picks up the pace, weaving quickly through the crowd until she reaches the airlock.

She knows it's a mistake, she knows. Still.

She turns around. She looks back.

Lenara feels disconnected from her own body, like a puppet or a doll, as she forces herself to board the transport shuttle. Bejal is already seated as she enters the main passenger compartment, staring firmly out the viewport as if the dull outer hull of the station is supremely interesting. He doesn't raise his head to look at Lenara, but some tension in him visibly lessens as she sits down across from him and bends to stow her carryall neatly under the seat.

When she straightens up again, Bejal is staring at her, searching her expression. Lenara clears her throat and refuses to meet his dark, concerned eyes. She's here, isn't she? They're going back. Isn't that enough? Does she have to pretend to be happy about it, too?

"You're making the right decision," Bejal says solemnly, and Lenara could absolutely *scream*.

The right decision? Of course it is. How could there be any doubt? On the one hand, she could throw away everything she's ever worked for, everything she's accomplished in five lifetimes. The effort she put into becoming joined, from childhood on. A lifetime of studying, drilling, sleepless nights and flawless exercises. Her whole young adulthood spent throwing elbows, pushing ruthlessly past everyone else to reach the head of the pack, and all of it for just the chance to *qualify* for initiate training! Her hard-fought position in the Science Ministry— she's the youngest person ever named as the sole lead of a ten-year project, and even after her stunning success, there are years of work ahead before she can claim her accomplishment is complete. To say nothing of her commitment and responsibility to the Kahn symbiont— her family's acceptance— her reputation in Trill society—

And on the other hand...

...but she can't even think it. The price is too high. How fortunate that doing the right thing is going to be so easy. All she has to do in order to avoid disgrace, dishonor and death is: sit still. Swallow this ache. Let the shuttle do its work and put a million empty miles between Lenara and this lonely station on the distant edge of Federation space.

"You'll be all right." Bejal glances over his shoulder, clearly concerned Doctor Pren may be within earshot. "Once we're home and can get back to work... I can't wait to start digging into the telemetry data, can you?"

Lenara's fingers clamp down onto her armrests, and she tries not to grit her teeth. Why hasn't the shuttle disengaged its docking clamps yet?

She has a sudden, intense flashback to a similar feeling at the start of this journey. Boarding the shuttle, too choked with excitement to speak. Everything felt effortless; she was pushed forward by the momentum of seven years of steady work and six months of delirious planning, like the kite-skimmers in the Cannellen River Gorge who let the winds carry them over the white-water rapids. And yes, she was terrified to see Dax again, but hungering for it, too, in a way she tried not to examine too closely. She told herself she was nervous, that's all, as she dug her nails into the cushioned armrests, waiting to break the orbit of Trill. Just nervous. Who wouldn't be?

Pressing her lips together, Lenara shakes herself out of the memory. She tries to settle herself under the weight of the now. If she can just stay calm. She can do this. One step at a time.

"Well, Lenara!" Doctor Pren bustles cheerfully into the passenger compartment, and Lenara flinches. Ignoring Bejal's warning look, Pren claps Lenara on the shoulder, then sits down. "You know, I have to say that when you first proposed this expedition, I thought perhaps it was premature! I admit, I was concerned that we weren't entirely ready for a full test in real field conditions. But now, my goodness. I'm thrilled to

admit I was wrong, of course."

"Of course you were," Lenara says absently, too distracted to think straight.

Pren raises an eyebrow at Bejal, who chuckles, defusing the momentary awkwardness by pretending that it doesn't exist. "I can hardly believe it myself," Bejal says brightly, trying to engage Lenara. "My own sister, who cut half her hair off with Father's pruning scissors when she was seven—"

"Not the hair story again!" Lenara says through her teeth.

Bejal nods, encouraged. "And now, here she is. The creator of the first stable artificial wormhole ever recorded in the history of science! You've changed our understanding of what's possible. The galaxy's going to know your name, Lenara."

"You'll be able to write your own ticket at the Ministry!" Pren adds, clearly unable to imagine loftier heights.

"And I'll *still* never be allowed to forget the time I cut my own hair off with scissors." She means it to be funny, but she doesn't really think it's funny, and her delivery is brittle, on the edge of breaking. Too honest. Bejal's smile freezes. Lenara stands up and turns her back on him. Going to the replicator, she silently navigates through the menu, looking for the pre-set glass of cool water.

"I don't think I've ever mentioned this," Doctor Pren offers, "but in my youth, I was quite awed by Nilani Kahn. Your book 'Theories of Everything and Nothing' was one of the reasons I went into physics in the first place."

Lenara nods without looking back, ill at ease. It's always unsettling when people equate Nilani's work with Lenara's. As if they're the same because they were both scientists. Or worse, both women. It's just as obvious, from Lenara's perspective, that her first host Cirad Kahn's military acumen strongly influences her own leadership style, but do people point *that* out? No, they don't!

"And what we've done here, why, it eclipses even Nilani's most poetic work with warp manifold efficiencies. You could—"

"Eclipsed already! I guess her whole life was a waste." Lenara turns away from the replicator. Bejal and Pren are struck silent, and she stands looming over them, her calm splintering. Say something, she thinks, her hands curling into fists. Say *anything*—

Instinctively, she pushes her sleeves up, or tries to. They get stuck, uncomfortably tight, an inch or two above her wrists. She smooths them down again, irritated. It was Nilani who liked loose blouses and billowing sleeves. Eccentric, unstylish, sentimental: Lenara is none of those things. She tugs at the fabric of her sleeves compulsively, then locks her arms together, squeezing her own wrists. She squeezes her eyes closed too, but that doesn't help. All she can see is Jadzia, her last sight of Dax, burned into her mind's eye: slim and tall and still as a memorial obelisk. A dark shape framed by stars and arches.

Bejal stands, reaching out. "Perhaps you'd better lie down, Lenara. You're clearly not feeling well."

Lenara jerks away from him, violently, before he can touch her. He goes still, holding his arms out, hands open.

She can't breathe. She presses her knuckles hard into her temples, then digs her fingers deeply into her neatly braided and coiled hair, feeling a few carefully placed pins start to shift. Why can't she keep it together? It's so simple! All she has to do is sit down. Sit down and not cry. All she has to do is keep up appearances, like a good socially acceptable Trill citizen. Keep a brave, staid face in public. Don't offend those around you with wild displays of grief. Only weep when you're alone, like Nilani used to. Seventy or eighty more years of this, that's all. For a moment Lenara isn't sure if that was a memory, Nilani's thought or hers. Only seventy or eighty more years.

"I can't do this." It's an almost physical shock, like coming awake from a nightmare. She's not Nilani. She can't live Nilani's life over again. What a profligate waste— what a fool she's been. To be given the gift of joining, and then deliberately choose to spend this life walking the same desolate path as her previous host? Doesn't she owe it to Kahn to *live*, not just exist?

"I know it's hard." Bejal is deadly calm, like— well, like someone who's trying to talk his beloved sister down from the edge of a crumbling ice cliff. In Lenara's peripheral vision, Doctor Pren is stolidly ignoring both of them. "But think of the consequences, Lenara. You mustn't—"

"No, I *can't*," Lenara says. "I'm sorry. Tell Father—" and then, her heart jumping into her throat, she hears the transport shuttle's rear door begin to close. Turning her back on Bejal, she races through the shuttle. The rear door is half shut already, and she has to bend double to get under it, stumbling into the empty airlock.

Bejal calls after her, just a blur of desperate words, but the door slides closed and Lenara is left in silence. She is confined with her own racing thoughts for five terrifying seconds, and then she swallows hard and steps towards the interior controls.

The great gear-shaped airlock engages with a grinding clunk. It rolls open slowly, letting in the noise and clamor of the Promenade. Running a hand over the hopeless disarray of her hair, Lenara steps down out of the airlock onto Deep Space Nine. She braces herself, but it just closes and seals itself again. No one pursues her. She looks up towards the second level of the Promenade, where she last saw Dax standing, but Jadzia's not there.

"Is something the matter, Doctor Kahn?" Commander Worf looms close.

"Commander. I— Yes. No. I'm not leaving." Lenara chokes on the words. Is there something wrong with the air pressure? Her chest feels so tight. A few hot tears slip from her eyes and she blots them with her sleeve as quickly as she can. Commander Worf's hand cups her elbow.

"You must control your emotions," he orders. As Klingon pep talks go, it's surprisingly kind. A shock of laughter bubbles up that Lenara can't

quite suppress. More tears escape, and Commander Worf looks even more fiercely concerned.

"No, I'm all right. I really am." Lenara catches his wrist before he can tap his combadge. "I just need a moment. Please." She inhales deeply, trying to regain her composure. The Ferengi bar just across from the airlock has a cutout counter in the exterior wall, presumably so that station staff can order food or drinks to go. Lenara puts her shoulders back and heads straight for it. Drinking, at a Ferengi bar, barely an hour after breakfast, in public? Lenara dismisses the sneering voice of disapproval in the back of her mind. However scandalous her conduct, it can hardly matter to her reputation now.

As they step up to the exterior of the bar, no one immediately approaches to take their order. With an annoyed noise, Commander Worf simply reaches over the counter, retrieving a tall, slim bottle with a curved neck from under the shelf. "Excuse me," a Ferengi waiter squawks, noticing, "this is *not* a self-service establishment!" Worf glowers and uncorks the bottle. "Yes. Well. Like I was saying." The waiter backs up quickly. "A table service fee will be charged to your account."

Worf selects a glass tumbler and sets it firmly on the bar, pouring Lenara a generous amount of something syrupy and vibrantly blue.

"It's a very reasonable charge!" The Ferengi hisses and retreats.

Lenara shakes her head and gulps down a mouthful of whatever it is. It tastes thick, like cider with pulp, but also briny, with an aftertaste like citrus fading into sweetness. "What *is* this?"

"It is..." Commander Worf pauses. "It is blue."

Lenara exhales, shakily. After five lifetimes, you so rarely discover something new.

"Your people will turn their backs to you. That is a hard battle to fight alone," Commander Worf says, almost under his breath, staring into the bar. "But you are fortunate. I have known Commander Dax only a short time, but it is clear that she has the true heart of a warrior."

Good. That makes one of us. Lenara takes a gulp of her lurid drink rather than say it out loud. Honestly, the odd, layered flavor is doing more for her than any amount of intoxicant it might contain, giving her something to focus on and analyze. She can even manage a pinch of empathy for poor Commander Worf, who's clearly just waiting for her to erupt or implode in some horrific emotional display. Well, she's not going to. She just needs one more moment. Then she'll be ready. Just— one more moment. She refuses to even glance back at the airlock. Surely Bejal won't still be holding the shuttle for her. She made herself quite clear. It's certainly too late to change her mind *again*. Surely.

"Why, Doctor Kahn!" Another Ferengi approaches. This one owns the bar; didn't Jazdia introduce them? She hadn't really paid attention. "Are we to suppose you're going to be a permanent resident here in our little corner of the quadrant?" The assumption sends a spike of fear through her, but the Ferengi— what *is* his name? Quonk?— goes on without skipping a beat. "You see?" he tosses over his shoulder at a couple of his waiters. "You idiots were wondering why I closed down the pool— yes, I heard the chatter behind my back. Just goes to show. Do you know the hundred and thirty-seventh Rule of Acquisition, Doctor?"

"No," Lenara breathes. Her glass is rattling slightly against the bar. She sets it down, folding her shaking hands.

"Ah, it's a good one. It—"

"Quark! You have accepted bets regarding the personal life of Commander Dax?" Worf interrupts dangerously.

Quark doesn't flinch. "Clean out your ears, Klingon! I said I shut it down. Everyone was betting on Doctor Kahn to stay, anyway. I certainly was. No, you don't need an environmental systems analyst to know which way the wind blows." He reaches across the bar and pats Lenara's hand, his skin very warm and slightly dry. "Never bet against the house, and never bet against Dax closing the deal on a deluxe acquisition."

Lenara chokes and pulls her hand away. "I beg your pardon."

"What? I said deluxe."

"Perhaps it is not too late for *someone* to leave this station through the airlock."

"At the very least, I think your gambling license ought to be reviewed," Lenara adds. "It can't possibly include arranging betting pools on the affairs of Starfleet officers?" Quark's brow rises, gleefully. *Affairs* was not the best word she could have chosen, Lenara belatedly realizes.

"Excuse me," Quark says happily, holding up one blunt finger. "The limited, risk-aware gaming opportunities that this facility provides are fully regulated, family-friendly—"

"A family of Denebian slime devils, perhaps," Worf mutters.

"—not demonstrably related to money laundering, authorized by the highest levels of station management, and patronized by—"

Worf frowns. "What was that?"

"Authorized by the highest levels of station management?"

Worf emits a low growl, his shoulders going back. Lenara touches his arm before he can speak.

"As fascinating as this is," she says, heart still pounding, "if you'd like to..." Her throat contracts, closing on the words, but Commander Worf takes her meaning. Lenara curls both hands hard around the smooth, cool curve of her glass as he taps his combadge.

"Commander Dax. Meet me outside the assay office. Immediately." He taps his badge again, ending communication abruptly.

Lenara rubs at her face, leaning over and trying to make out the details of her reflection in the dull material of the bar. She left her bag on the shuttle. She doesn't have a hairbrush, or even a hand mirror. "How do I look?" She stares at Worf, who starts to say something, then stops. "Is it that bad?"

"Oh, no, you look *amazing*, sweetie!" Two dabo girls suddenly erupt from the bar's entrance, flanking Lenara at close range in a cloud of glitter and perfume. One has a short mop of reddish hair and a pointy chin, wearing a red silk shift spangled with jewels; the other has deep black eyes and yards of stiff black ribbon looped in trembling coils and arches through her crown of black braids. The same ribbons, albeit in lesser quantity, make up her— well, Lenara supposes *technically* it's a dress. "Hi, I'm Harta," says the dark-eyed one, "this is Leeta! Welcome to Quark's!"

"Welcome back, that is," Leeta chimes in.

"Hey, you two!" Quark snaps, pointing. "Employees are not permitted to leave the premises for any reason during their assigned shift, you know that. Get back in here!"

Leeta scoffs, rolling her eyes. Harta faces Quark and bends at the waist, flashing even more eye-catching skin. She presses her inner wrists together with her fingers curled inward, and sweetly recites, "Employees must take every available opportunity to spontaneously provide exceptional, personalized customer service!"

"That's right. Let me just fix your hair, hold still," Leeta says, quickly removing and replacing pins. Meanwhile Harta whips a small white cloth out of some hidden pocket in her intermittently opaque dress and dabs gently under Lenara's eyes. Whatever it's infused with smells minty and feels damp and cool and refreshing, and Lenara relaxes and closes her eyes, letting it happen. "There you are! Perfect!" Leeta says a minute later, poking one last pin back into place.

"If you two are almost done wasting your unpaid break time," Quark says dryly, "might I point out, she's not a customer. She hasn't bought anything."

"Why would she," Harta says without looking back, "with a sales pitch like yours!" She curls her arm around Lenara's waist protectively, then lets go.

"Double-down dabo spins pay off triple during happy hour, all month until Ha'mara!" Leeta adds, beaming, and waves goodbye as she and her friend disappear back into Quark's.

Worf nods to Lenara and moves away, cutting across the Promenade towards the assay office, just a few storefronts down and across the way from the bar. Next to the office's armored facade, a turbolift slowly descends to the lower level, and a slim young woman in a dark uniform steps out. Her face is implacable, her eyes blank. No matter what anyone says, that one hasn't forgotten her initiate training, Lenara thinks, with a sensation of something almost like pride.

Dax pastes a pleasant expression on her face as she looks in Worf's direction, but Lenara knows her well enough to know that her heart is an ice cliff right now, crumbling under pitiless sunlight. It makes her lungs hurt. Her own hands are ice-cold. She steps out into the flow of traffic, moving past a handful of Bajorans in their brown security uniforms, and watches Jadzia's face.

When Jadzia sees her she stops still, clearly struggling to keep her expression neutral. Lenara lifts her chin and sets her jaw. She won't cry, she *won't* ruin Harta's careful work. Crossing the promenade in four broad strides, Jadzia pulls Lenara into an ardent embrace, actually lifting Lenara's feet off the ground as she spins around, holding her tight. "Is this real?" Jadzia staggers, dizzy and unbalanced, and sets her down again. She searches Lenara's face, still disbelieving. "You're here?"

"I'm here." Lenara clutches Jadzia's shoulders and hangs on as Jadzia pulls her close, her cheek against Lenara's temple. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." She'll say it every day for the rest of her life, if she has to.

"No, don't apologize." Jadzia says, the words a low buzz against Lenara's ear. She pulls back to stare, and then slowly she begins to smile, a relieved and weary look, like someone who's had a dislocated joint set or a bone mended. The surprise of freedom from anguish, the pleasure of simply being alive without the kind of pain that makes you wish you weren't. "You're *here*."

"How could I go? Don't you know how beautiful you are?" Lenara blurts, and Jadzia's smile grows. She leans in, pressing her mouth to the tenderest spot just under Lenara's ear, sucking hard behind the hinge of her jaw, where a Trill's pulse is strongest. Lenara's knees lock. She's trembling like a jet of clear water bursting from a fountain. "Dax, we're in public!" she whispers.

"So we are." Jadzia murmurs. But she doesn't let go, and Lenara can't. The heat of her lean body, the scent of her hair, the shape of her mouth— the warm patch at the edge of Lenara's jaw that feels like the only part of her body that's ever been alive. She can't resist any of it; she wants all of it. She wants to be held close, never to be let go. Luckily, out of the two of them, Jadzia has always been the stronger one, the one less afraid to simply reach out and take hold of what she wants.

But it's not fair for Jadzia to always be the one reaching out, always blazing the trail. Lenara has to take the lead now. It scares the life out of her, it makes her shake, but this is a debt she owes, and a debt she'll gladly, willingly pay. So she lifts her head and presses her mouth to Jadzia's, kissing her deeply in front of the whole Promenade. Losing herself in the meltingly sweet kiss, she parts her lips for the brush of Jadzia's tongue— and then Jadzia pulls back, choking on a laugh.

"What *is* that?" She runs her tongue around the inside of her own mouth. "Tastes like you've been drinking straight slusho mix."

"She has been!" yelps a voice from the bar, *surely* too far away to— oh, yes, of course, Ferengi hearing. "I'll put it on your tab!"

"You'll knock it off *your* standing Tongo debt from last week's game, you mean," Jadzia shouts back. Lenara tips her head back and stares up at the vaulted Cardassian architecture above them, not really wanting to know how much attention they're currently gathering.

"That's what I said!" comes the sullen retort, and Jadzia throws her head back and laughs, loud and unrestrained.

When she looks back at Lenara almost all the fear is gone. "What now?"

"I suppose I won't be vacating my guest quarters after all." Lenara is speaking out of pure relief, without thinking. Something unsure flickers in Jadzia's eyes before she nods in agreement. Lenara blinks. Surely Jadzia wouldn't want to share the same quarters right away? It may not feel like it, but it is early days, still.

"I guess not! We'll have to run it by Odo..." She glances towards the bar, then looks at Lenara. "Where's your bag?"

"I left it on the shuttle," Lenara says with a careless shrug, as though she's the kind of person who does that sort of thing all the time, and then she remembers— "Oh, that Risian perfume you gave me!"

"Don't worry about it, it was nothing. If you really liked it, I'll take you to Risa and get you another bottle! I bet you've still never been. Well, we can now. We have all the time in the world!" Jadzia hugs Lenara again, squeezing hard, as if she's not afraid Lenara will break. Lenara matches her grip. She doesn't ever want to let go.

Well. They're not on Trill any more, are they?

She doesn't have to.

Jadzia leads Lenara to the changeling security chief's office, where he's the third or possibly fourth person in ten minutes to be completely unsurprised by Lenara's continued presence on the station. His gaze slides from Dax to Lenara, intensely unruffled, and he gives Dax a nod and a grunt of acknowledgement. Then he turns back to his desk and hands her a padd with a form to fill out, so that Lenara can be reassigned the guest quarters that she just left. It's all a bit anticlimactic.

"I really do have to get back to Ops," Jadzia apologizes as they leave the security office. "There's a lot of work to be done on the Defiant, and that means station maintenance teams are short-handed all around. Will you be all right by yourself? If there's any trouble with your quarters or your access codes just tell Odo— he's a born fixer, he likes things to be just right. You can stop by Quark's for dinner and tell him to put it on my account, or the Replimat is open until 2600 hours— Odo gave you the talk about pickpockets on the Promenade when you arrived, didn't he? Really, though, if you need anything at all, just stop by the infirmary and ask for Julian, he can—"

"Dax, I'll be fine," Lenara says fondly as the turbolift lurches into motion, carrying them towards the habitat ring. "I can fend for myself for a few hours. It won't be like that time I asked you to water my Triskerran vine cuttings and came back to—"

"Okay," Jadzia says, bursting into laughter, "I've told you and told you, that wasn't my fault! Oh! Do you still garden?" As they step out of the turbolift into the habitat ring, she takes Lenara's hands in hers and turns to face her, walking backwards through the gently curving halls. It seems hazardous, but Jadzia walks just as quickly backwards as forwards, and seems to know exactly where she's going. "I'll have to introduce you to Professor O'Brien. She's on Bajor right now assisting with a botanical survey mission, but I think you two would be great friends, she's — you'll just love her. And her daughter Molly is just the sweetest. Wait till you hear her singing the Toby the Targ song about ecological biodiversity. Oh, I'm so glad you'll get to meet them!"

"I don't garden, and I don't know who Toby the Targ is... but of course I'd love to meet all your friends." She's unable to keep from smiling, carried away by Jadzia's infectious joy.

Jadzia squeezes her hands. "We have time."

She keeps saying that... Lenara closes her eyes, letting Jadzia, still walking backwards, guide both their steps. "Do you remember when you flew the two of us up to the Tenaran archipelago to watch the spring ice breaking?"

Jadzia's pace slows. "I remember." The small, dark cabin with its old-fashioned metal stove, the pocket of profound warmth they'd created together under layers of quilts and blankets. Nilani and Torias had looked out at the sea ice, that first morning, and both their voices dropped instinctively to whispers. Their shadows on the snow and under the ice-white sky were like two tiny stick figures drawn in the center of a huge empty page. They had been the only two people on the isolated island. After a few days Nilani had started wondering if maybe they were the only two people who had ever existed. "We slept in. Woke up too late," Jadzia says, her own voice lowering, softening. "And we ended up missing it."

That was the last spring that Nilani had with Torias Dax. That autumn, he was gone. "I kept telling myself that maybe someday, in some other life, it wouldn't hurt too much to go back and try again." *With someone else*, goes unspoken. Lenara opens her eyes. "I thought I *did* have all the time in the world. I thought I'd have another chance."

"And now?"

"We both know what happens now," Lenara says. Jadzia stops walking. Worry flashes across her face, quickly hidden behind an expressionless mask. She tries to pull her hands out of Lenara's, but Lenara doesn't let her, hanging on tight. "Dax, listen," she says, and waits until Jadzia looks up. "A day ago you saved my life. You know there are some who would say that the chance you took was an unacceptable risk to your symbiont."

"I'm a Starfleet officer, and you're a civilian scientist," Jadzia says coolly. "I've taken calculated risks like that before—"

"And you'll do it again, I know. I understand, you know I do!" Oh yes, she's going into this with her eyes wide open. Just like the last time.

"That's not my point. What would've happened if you hadn't been there? If I'd still been in the engine room when the compartment was vented, if my body had passed through that flare of plasma—"

Jadzia finally flinches. "Don't say it, don't. Please."

"What would have happened to Kahn, without you?" Lenara pushes on. "Even if they'd been able to save the symbiont, it'd take days to get back to Trill, and by that time—"

"But it didn't happen!" Jadzia says tightly.

"No. It didn't. But it could have. And I chose to come out here, far away from Trill, and take the risk of working in an uncontrolled environment, because my work is important to me, just as yours is to you! Klingons, Jem'Hadar, left-over self-destruct programs in the station's mainframe— how many times have you almost died, right here on this station? How many times have you almost died in a way that meant the end of Dax?"

"Do you want the truth? I don't keep track!"

It's like a splash of cold water in Lenara's face, and she shudders. Yes, she'd been anticipating an answer along those lines, based on the stories Dax has told her about life here on the station— but truth be told, that water was still colder than she'd been expecting.

"Lenara, why are we talking about this?" Jadzia pleads. "Why now?"

Lenara regards her steadily. She doesn't remember the moment the deckplates ruptured and threw her across the room, slamming her skull into the bulkhead and concussing her nearly unconscious. What she remembers is the heat of the plasma fire lapping at her feet and legs, like a living sea eager to drown her. The flash had temporarily blinded her; she couldn't see anything but darkness, and flickering red-green afterimages. She wouldn't have known which way to crawl, even if she could. She'd known she was going to die. And then a hand had touched her in that endless roaring darkness, and she'd known it was Jadzia, bringing her safely home.

Remembering Jadzia's cool hand landing on her shoulder, Lenara reaches out, trailing her fingers over the side of Jadzia's face, where her spots disappear into her hair. "All I'm saying is... have you considered that we might be getting ahead of ourselves, just a little? To worry so much about what's going to happen to our symbionts, when you and I grow old."

A startled laugh sticks in Jadzia's throat as she catches Lenara's meaning. "Well. That's dark."

"We can't know tomorrow," Lenara insists. "We only have the now. And right now, I'm alive, and I'm here. We're here together." She takes a deep breath. "And I'd rather have another chance with you than another chance at the Tenaran archipelago. I honestly would."

Jadzia sighs, raising one hand to press over her own heart. Does Lenara sound like she's trying to convince herself? All right, she's trying to convince herself. Small steps, Lenara reminds herself. She takes one small step forward and embraces Jadzia, there in the corridor. Which one of them is trembling? It's hard to tell.

After a while, even walking slowly, even with frequent pauses for conversation, their gradual progress eventually brings them back to Lenara's quarters. No more excuses for delay. Still, even still, Lenara leans back against the wall and pulls Jadzia in. Jadzia angles her head back and hugs Lenara close.

Lenara nestles close, her head tucked onto Jadzia's shoulder. She hears a soft, muffled sound after a moment, and when she pulls back, there's a suspicious brightness gleaming in Jadzia's eyes. "Oh, Dax! Darling, don't—"

"No, no." Jadzia shakes her head, blinking hard. "I'm just so happy. I can't believe it."

"Believe it," Lenara says. "My eyes are open, Dax. *Jadzia*. Whatever it takes, from now on, I'll do anything, anything to show you—"

Jadzia surges forward with a gasp, her hands landing on Lenara's shoulder and waist, gripping her eagerly. Taking the lead, she presses Lenara firmly back against the wall, sealing their mouths together. Lenara submits gratefully. She feels so safe here, with Jadzia's body covering hers, hiding her away from the world, Jadzia's mouth hot and trembling over her own, faintly bitter and slick and sweet from her morning raktajino.

They trade kisses in the hallway for what feels like one brief stolen moment... but is probably more like twenty minutes. They break apart, Jadzia chuckling guiltily, when her combadge starts to chirp.

Lenara fans her face, trying to breathe quietly as whoever it is on the other end of the line asks Dax what sounds like a rather urgent question about misaligned plasma conduits, then follows it up with: "...only if you're not, uh, *busy*, Commander! We can probably figure it out if... You know. We could—"

"No," Jadzia says dryly, "it's fine, Lieutenant. I'll be there in five."

Lenara raises an eyebrow as Jadzia smooths her hands down the front of her uniform. She's not sure if she should be amused or horrified by the fact that every sentient being on this fate-forsaken station seems to know exactly what she and Jadzia are up to.

"It's a small station," Jadzia says, her mouth quirking as she reads Lenara's expression. "Word travels fast. But I do *really* have to go." She squares her shoulders and plants a fist on her hip, looking up and to the right like an early-era Trill Space Defense Service recruitment poster. "Duty calls, Jadzia Dax answers."

She's so beautiful. Emotion surges over Lenara like a wave. What fools they all are. Anger flares inside her again, poisonous, and she tries to let it go. Her co-workers, her brother, the Science Ministry, the Symbiosis Commission— yes, right now Lenara feels like she could withstand the condemnation of Trill itself. Who could look at this woman, beautiful and lean as a lissetta tree, piercing eyes like the blazing weapons of a warship, her measured voice that holds all the yearning of every wild, gentle beast that has ever sent up its lonely howl to the moons, and come to the conclusion that Lenara only wants her because she's the shade of some past lover? Even that Starfleet engineer on the other side of the station, elbow-deep in stripped plasma conduits, knows how Lenara feels! *Anyone can see, anyone can see that I...*

"What is it?" Jadzia asks, peering intently at her.

"Nothing." Lenara shakes her head, brushing away the question. "Later." Jadzia is right. They'll have time. There's no recriminations, no regrets holding them back now, just a world of newness, of first times and first confessions. Just Lenara spilling over with joy, enough to fill this lifetime to the brim... She finally moves close enough to the door to trigger its sensors. She steps into her quarters, then turns to face Jadzia. "I'll see you tonight?"

"I'll do my best." Jadzia leans in and cups Lenara's face, giving her one last firm kiss. As she moves away again, Lenara keeps her eyes shut, so that she doesn't have to watch. The door hisses shut between them, and Lenara is alone.

She barely makes it into the bedroom before the tears begin to fall. Casting herself down on the narrow Cardassian bed, she weeps and weeps. Oh, she could have missed this. She could have let it all go. And of course she's crying for what she's lost, what she's turned her back on, all the doors that are closed to her now— oh yes, that's part of it. But more than anything, she's weeping for what she could have lost, and somehow, miraculously, didn't.

Chapter End Notes

Nilani and Torias' trip to the archipelago was inspired by "Notes from an Island," by Tove Jansson & Tuulikki Pietilä.

Humans have some good sayings

Lenara feels much better after pulling all the pins out of her hair and taking a long, high-pressure sonic shower. Then she realizes she doesn't have any clothes to put on except for the dress and underthings she dropped on the floor outside the refresher cubicle without thinking, so she has to stand awkwardly wrapped in a gray bedsheet for three minutes while she runs everything through the laundry sonic. She's half-expecting Jadzia to have rounded up some kind of ad-hoc station welcome committee that's going to ring her door chime at any moment.

But it doesn't happen, and Lenara manages to get dressed without disaster. She's really going to need more than one outfit, she thinks, shaking out the sheet and letting it float slowly back down onto the mattress. She wonders if she'd be able to wear any of Jadzia's clothes. The thought makes her inhale sharply. It's a day for discovering new tastes. New thoughts.

Leaving her hair unpinned and loose, Lenara lies down on the couch, almost too tired to think.

Almost.

Eventually her door does chime, after a long, meditative time, and Lenara props herself up on one arm. "Come?"

It's Major Kira, hands clasped behind her back. "Doctor Kahn. Hello. Do you have a moment?"

Lenara rises to greet the Major, flipping her hand in an expressive gesture to indicate her empty room. "My schedule has never been more clear."

"Good," the Major says as she comes in and sits down on the low gray couch in the seating area. "Well, not *good*." She winces, coughs, and starts over. "Oh, you know what I mean. Welcome to Deep Space Nine."

Lenara sits down across from her in the matching armchair. "Thank you."

"I had a meeting with Odo this morning. He mentioned you're planning to stay on the station, indefinitely." Kira raises an eyebrow, and Lenara nods. "Okay. So, tell me if this sounds crazy, and keep in mind, it's all theoretical— but I wanted to ask. Would you be interested in taking a position with the Bajoran Science Institute? Based here on the station, of course," she adds quickly.

Lenara blinks, then glances over Kira's shoulder at the window, and the starfield outside. There's really only one obvious reason for a scientist to need to work from this station. "We're talking about studying the wormhole, I assume? Theoretically."

"Honestly, it's long past time." Kira leans back in her chair, propping her ankle on her knee and interlacing her fingers. "A lot of people have come to study the wormhole over the years, and we've collected a lot of data, but when you try to find time to do something with it... Something always seems to come up," she says with heavy understatement. "The Bajoran government has its own priorities, like making sure we don't all starve or freeze to death, and on the station it seems like there's some new disaster to deal with every other week."

"Yes, Dax has told me a few stories. It sounds... bracing, but it doesn't seem like it would leave much time in her schedule for independent scientific study."

"No. And with the Klingons leaving the Khitomer Accords, and the Dominion at our doorstep, non-essential science projects are less of a priority than ever. But if you'd be interested?" She shrugs, smiling crookedly. "Bajor could hardly ask for someone more qualified."

Lenara presses her lips together, then leans forward. "Is it possible that I might have the opportunity to study a Bajoran Orb?"

Major Kira looks up sharply, then sighs. "That's not likely, I'm afraid. The political considerations..."

"Religious ones too, I gather."

"Oh, there's not much difference on Bajor these days," Kira says, glancing out Lenara's window at the stars. Something grim creeps into her tone. "The Vedek Assembly was originally created to provide spiritual advice to the Kai... but some of the more active factions carry a lot of power in the government." She takes a deep breath and sighs. "Don't get me wrong, the opposition wouldn't be monolithic. We're Bajorans, we don't all agree on anything. Some Vedeks believe very strongly that the Prophets gave the Orbs to Bajor for exactly that purpose, to help us understand them more fully. They would argue that it's our obligation to the Prophets to study them, and to share what we learn."

"But others would say—?"

"Well, some factions still aren't happy that we haven't kicked every non-Bajoran off our planet and out of this system already, to say nothing of giving them unfettered access to our most sacred relics. No offense."

"None taken," Lenara says. "I understand the Orbs are only now in the process of being repatriated from Cardassia."

"Yes, it's one of the stipulations in the peace treaty; they have to return them. And we actually have reclaimed four of them. But all of them? I'll believe it when I see it." Kira says. She shifts uncomfortably in her chair, rolling her shoulder as if it's stiff. "We're *just* getting them back. Maybe if they didn't leave Bajor... Maybe."

"Trust can be difficult when you've been betrayed."

"Difficult, yes," Kira muses, then looks back at Lenara, startling her with the intensity of her gaze. "But the difference between difficult and impossible is why there's a free, independent Bajor. *And* a treaty with the Cardassians. We have to move forward in that spirit. I believe that."

Lenara nods, hoping she looks thoughtful. "The best way to predict the future is to invent it."

"Is that a Human saying?" Kira tilts her head.

"Yes! You know, I love Human sayings," Lenara confesses. Kira breaks into a grin, her eyes narrowing, dark and delighted. "There's really nothing better for when you can't think of what to say, but you want to say *something*. I know, I know," she says apologetically, "it sounds a little patronizing, but—"

"Oh no," Kira says, snorting, "I've spent four years listening to Humans say the most *random*— You're absolutely right! I mean, 'You have to laugh or you'll cry,' what does that even mean? That's just what life is! You don't need a saying for that!"

"How about, 'Every pot has a lid.' Yes?" Lenara says, throwing her hands in the air. "Of course it does? Why would anyone make a pot without a lid?"

"No matter how early you get up, it doesn't make the sun rise any earlier.' That's a good one, actually," Kira admits, "I like that one."

"Oh, that *is* a good one," Lenara says appreciatively. "To be fair, though, no Trill likes to get up in the morning. It's a whole marsupial thing. Evolutionary," she explains. "Not our fault."

"Oh, I see. Is that why Dax drinks three raktajinos before lunch?"

"Does she?" Lenara asks, shocked, and Kira raises her eyebrows. "Well. Maybe I will too." She catches herself repeatedly smoothing her hands over the fabric of her skirt and makes herself stop. "You were saying, about this theoretical plan for a wormhole research group..."

"Right. Like I said, it's just an idea right now. There'll be opposition, I want to prepare you for that. But I'll be on your side, and so will Dax, of course. And if there's any real trouble, you can talk to Captain Sisko. People listen to him on Bajor. He means a lot to us," Kira says firmly, and stands. "So... Think about it."

"I will," Lenara says, and rises to see Kira out.

Kira takes a step towards the door, then stops. "We didn't really get a chance to talk very much, before," she says straightforwardly. "I guess I wasn't sure how. Are you Dax's wife? Her ex-wife? A stranger? A friend?"

"A little of everything? I was confused too. I still am," she adds lightly, "but I'm starting to figure it out."

"Yeah. Well. I wanted to say. There was..." Kira looks down, gathering herself, then meets Lenara's eyes steadily. "There was someone I loved, and I lost him. Not too long ago. It feels like yesterday, you know? Every morning you wake up—"

"Every morning you wake up and you remember." Lenara says softly. "Yes. I know."

"He was the chief negotiator for the peace treaty with Cardassia. I've been trying to think of something I could do to honor his life, and with you deciding to stay... This feels right."

"I hope so."

"And I wanted to say, too. If I had a chance to... If I could have him back, even if it was... I can't know how it works for Trills. How it feels for you and Dax. But even if he was different, if he came back as a different person..."

"It's not quite the same," Lenara says. "But I do know how precious it is. This chance I have, now."

Kira nods silently, lips pressed together. "He would've loved the idea of Bajorans finally having the opportunity to really study the wormhole. He was fearless, you know? The Prophets' greatest gift—" And suddenly her expression brightens. "Hey, this is some good timing." She takes a quick step back into the room, taking Lenara's arm and turning her, pulling her towards the window. "Look, there, the Boslic freighter."

Blame it on a stressful day on top of a stressful month, but Lenara's first stupid thought is: why is she showing me this? Does she think I haven't seen a freighter—?

And then space splits, blooms, grows into something larger and greater than Lenara could ever have imagined. Radiation lenses outward, shading blue to indigo, cradling its golden internal glow. She's studied this phenomenon in dry, dissected abstraction; probe telemetry, comparative energy matrix ratings, estimated uncertainties of neutrino fluxes. But: "I didn't know it looked—" she says, hoarse, breathless in the *light* of it. And then the wormhole folds in, composes itself sweetly, and becomes the long, empty path to the stars again. "I didn't know it looked like that!"

She feels the euphoria of the new, sweeping over her again. A lifetime devoted to studying *this*?

"I see why you call it the Celestial Temple," she says, perhaps undiplomatically.

It doesn't seem like she's offended Kira, though. "Yeah," she says. "And we called it that before we knew what it looked like."

"So you did," Lenara says, still trembling. She clears her throat, turning to face Kira again. "Thank you... Thank you for telling me about..."

"His name was Bareil. Bareil Antos."

"I'd like to hear more about him," Lenara says. "If you'd like to talk, sometime."

Kira studies Lenara's face. Whatever she finds there seems to reassure her. "So you are really staying."

"Yes. I am."

"Good. There's plenty of work to be done here." Major Kira laughs, short and rough. The laugh of a person who's chosen to laugh, rather than cry. Because that's just what life is. "And this station is actually a pretty good place to start building a new life. Trust me on that."

"I will."

"Well. Let me know if there's anything that I can do for you, Doctor." Kira nods in farewell as she turns once again to go.

"There is, actually," Lenara says, her hands shaking slightly, and Kira turns back in surprise. "I don't suppose you have a pair of scissors I could borrow?"

Major Kira fetches a pair of gold-handled, remarkably dangerous-looking scissors from her quarters and puts them into Lenara's hands. Half-amused curiosity lurks in her eyes, but she doesn't ask any questions, just nods and leaves again. Lenara truly appreciates her discretion. She considers, turning the scissors over and over, but eventually just puts them down on the coffee table. Moving back towards the window, she presses her hand against the cool material separating her from the emptiness outside. She waits for a moment, hoping. Nothing happens. But the waiting isn't empty any more, it's euphoric. Exhilarating.

Years ago, she'd read Jazia's initial report on the Orb that she'd briefly had the opportunity to study, with permission of the Kai Opaka. It had been just one more paper among many submitted to Starfleet's speculative spacetime physics journal, so subtly intriguing in its premise that Lenara almost missed the name of the author, and then—! Well, it only made sense that it was Dax. Her darling, daring Dax.

Lenara never told anyone, but the final groundbreaking steps that led her artificial wormhole project to its ultimate success were more than a little inspired by pondering the unique energies of the Bajoran Orbs.

She'll get to tell Jazia that, now. She'll have the chance. They have the time.

Pulling in a deep, deep breath, she holds it for a long moment, then lets go, letting the intense relaxation rush through her body. At some point, she'll have to turn away from this window, and if another ship passes through the wormhole, she'll miss it. At some point she'll need to go to the Replimat and get something to eat, before she falls over. At some point she'll need to buy clothes.

And at some point she'll have to come back into this bland and mostly empty room, and log into the communications console and read... well, whatever messages are there. From Trill. From Bejal and Father and her superiors at the Ministry. From her former life, from anyone who's already heard about what she and Dax have done.

But not yet.

Not yet.

End Notes

Well, I saw straightaway
That the lay was steep,
But I fell for you, honey,
Easy as falling asleep.
And that, right there,
Is the course I keep.
— Joanna Newsom, "Good Intentions Paving Company"

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