

Fairest of the Stars

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Fairest of the Stars

by [Planxty](#)

Summary

Ever since the discovery of the wormhole, Deep Space Nine has attracted visitors from across the galaxy. Among them were Verelan, the daughter of a Romulan senator, and T'Lyra, a Vulcan. In spite of cultural differences and parental disapproval, the two would form a lasting bond strong enough to endure light years of distance, years apart, and the dawn of the Dominion War.

Chapter 1

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One more day until the D’Vinn arrived at Deep Space Nine, and Verelan was already counting down the hours until she could enjoy a change of scenery. Her mother had gone to sleep well before Verelan felt any tiredness, and she found the quiet solitude welcome. She took a minute to straighten up their quarters, putting her mother’s empty glasses and bottles back into the replicator to be re-absorbed. It was one of the small, simple ways she could serve her House, by doing her part to hide the private problem her mother had developed over the past year.

Even in the silence she could hear her mother’s words ringing in her head.

Trips like these will be important when you become a Senator.

When. Not if. Verelan had a path laid in front of her: to first pursue a military career, and then a political one. While it had not been her choice to set off on this path, she could not pick a better trajectory for her life. What she did choose was to pursue this path with ambitious enthusiasm.

The station will be full of bendain. Be wary of them and undue influence they might have, for they do not understand our ways.

This one...this one Verelan found it harder to smile and nod when she heard her mother say it. Verelan had never left her home planet and she could count on one hand the number of offworlders she had seen. Secretly, she was thrilled to meet people from other planets and live alongside them for a few weeks.

Remember, we represent the Romulan Star Empire, so be on your best behavior. I couldn’t stand to suffer another disgrace in the family.

That advice she couldn’t argue with, and she intended to follow it to the letter. Verelan rarely had impulses to be disobedient and never acted on them, but seeing the heartache her mother endured when Verelan’s father was disgraced and expelled from their House gave Verelan a stronger sense of devotion to her mother and a deep fear of disappointing her mother. Publicly, Senator Mheven i-Mirek t’Khaethaetreh was as proud and confident as ever, but behind closed doors she was a broken woman. She wouldn’t be the one to cause more pain.

Verelan sat down on one of the two chairs. Their quarters were small and sparsely furnished, but there was no need for anything unnecessarily elaborate. She closed her eyes, listened to the soft hum of the ship in the background, and ran her fingers through her dark hair. Her hair was grown out longer and shaggier than the traditional cut: a childish style, even if she found it flattering.

The best use of her time would be to get a head start on studying—especially when some dates and facts from her most recent history lesson just wouldn’t stay in her memory where they belonged—but Verelan only wanted to sit back and enjoy the stillness until she could no longer stay awake and finally dragged herself to bed.

Though her sleep was light and fitful, Verelan awoke full of energy and excitement. She began her day with enthusiasm, even glad to listen to her mother’s usual ramblings; a minor annoyance seemed so insignificant compared to the new adventure that would begin in a short amount of time. However, their first hour or so on Deep Space Nine was less adventurous and more procedural. They were greeted by a human Starfleet ensign who told them about the station and led them to their quarters—though Mheven felt mildly insulted to not be greeted by the station’s commander himself. Once they were settled in, and after a little begging, Mheven permitted her daughter to venture out on her own to explore the promenade.

Verelan had visited large cities on ch’Rihan before. She was no stranger to lively shopping districts so full of people scurrying around that they resembled a nest of insects disturbed insects trying to find a new home. The promenade was a long way from matching that level of activity, yet it still felt more alive and overwhelming. Maybe it was the unimaginable variation of all different types of people, and the business were just as varied. Most seemed familiar, only with an alien flair, but some were downright baffling...a Klingon restaurant? She would rather starve.

She found a sense of grounding as she looked at the display for a clothing shop but nearly jumped when she was surprised to hear a friendly voice behind her.

“Hi, I’m Jake. Jolan tru.”

Verelan turned and stared in wide eyed silence at the human boy. He had brown skin, kind eyes, and a warm smile. Verelan guessed he was close to her own age...developmentally at least. She knew nothing about the timing and tempo of human aging..

“That is right, isn’t it?” Jake asked. “Jolan tru?”

“Yes...it is. It’s just that your accent is unusual.” Verelan answered softly.

“Hey, I’m still learning! Anyway, sorry if I startled you, I just wanted to be sure to get your attention now. There’s going to be a ship going through the wormhole in about five minutes, and I know the best spot to see it.”

“Thank you, I would like that. I’ve been looking forward to seeing the wormhole.”

“Great! By the way, what’s your name?”

“I...don’t think we know each other well enough for that.” Verelan narrowed her eyes.

“Sorry. I can’t just call you ‘that Romulan girl’ though, can I?”

Verelan stood up a little straighter. “Were you already planning on talking about me?”

“No, no nothing like that!” Jake held up his hands in surrender. “At most I might mention meeting you over dinner with my dad or the next time I see my best friend Nog...” Jake sighed. “Sorry if I said something wrong, but if you still want to see the wormhole, my favorite viewing spot is on the upper level. Come on.”

Verelan walked alongside Jake through the crowded promenade and up to the next level. The whole time, the human did not allow her a moment of silence.

“Sorry if I’m a little too excited, it’s just that we get a lot of visitors, and almost none are anywhere near my age. I’m one half of the unofficial welcome party. Nog’s the other half. His dad is making him work right now, but if you like I can introduce you to him too.”

Verelan stopped and turned to face Jake. “Are all humans this talkative?”

Jake looked down and scratched the back of his neck. “Well...everyone’s different.” He didn’t say another word until they stood in front of his favored viewport. “This is it. Should be any minute now.”

They weren’t alone. There was a Vulcan girl—again, near Verelan’s age by her own estimation—who stood looking out the viewport. Her dark hair was arranged in elaborate braids at the back of her head, and as Verelan traced the intricate patterns with her eyes she felt both fear and curiosity. For years Verelan held a secret fascination with Vulcans. It started when her father was “allegedly suspected of possible involvement with reunification efforts.” That was the official statement, likely her mother’s attempt to manipulate the facts to preserve her own reputation. Verelan and her mother both knew that he used to go to those secret meetings.

Verelan and Jake arrived just in time. They were gazing into the stars in anticipation for less than a minute before the wormhole opened and revealed its bright display of brilliant swirling colors. Verelan opened her eyes wide and gasped, but the spectacle only lasted a few seconds before the wormhole vanished into the black void of space.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Jake asked. “I’ll never get sick of that view!”

However, Verelan was barely listening, for something else had caught her eye. The Vulcan girl turned around, and Verelan caught herself staring with the same wide-eyed sense of wonder with which she watched the wormhole. Their eyes met, and Verelan looked away in embarrassment, a deep green flush coloring her cheeks. The Vulcan began to walk toward her, and Verelan shrank back.

“Forgive me...I didn’t mean to stare.” Verelan’s voice was soft and distant.

“There is no need to apologize. You have done nothing wrong.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.” Verelan’s heart was racing from a combination of excitement and nerves, though she could not place why. “My name is Verelan. I just arrived here.” Why she felt comfortable enough to give her name to a strange Vulcan, she also could not guess.

“My name is T’Lyra. Every morning I study organic chemistry in the replimat. If it would be favorable to you, you are welcome to join me.”

Verelan let out a long breath to try to calm herself. “I would like that. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“At 0800 hours,” T’Lyra clarified.

“At 0800.”

T’Lyra left, and both Jake and Verelan watched her walk away from behind. When she was out of sight, Jake turned to Verelan.

“I think...” he began. “I think she just asked you on a date.”

Chapter 2

Verelan didn't linger much longer in the promenade before she went back to her quarters. Her mother was still out attending to official business, and Verelan took advantage of the quiet solitude to review some organic chemistry. She couldn't guess how in-depth T'Lyra's understanding of the topic was, but she had a hunch that a people who valued logic so much might have an unmatched scientific education program. She didn't want to appear foolish or uneducated to this Vulcan who she could not stop thinking about.

The door slid open, and Verelan looked up to see her mother standing in the doorway. "I thought for sure I would be back before you," Mheven teased. "With how excited you were, I expected you to still be out exploring the promenade." She crossed the room to stand in front of the replicator and began to scroll through the options on the display panel.

"I was for a while. I met the commander's son, and he showed me the best spot to view the wormhole."

Her mother turned to look toward her. "A human?"

"Yes, ri'nanov." Verelan set her PADD down on the table and let out an exasperated sigh. "What else did you expect the human commander's son to be?" She made no mention of T'Lyra or their plans to see each other again. Verelan could only imagine her mother's reaction to learning that her only child had taken even a passing interest in a Vulcan. She did not want to find out if her prediction was correct.

"Watch your tone, Verelan." Mheven went back to scroll through the replicator's options and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I don't understand what any of these are, and worse yet, I have no way of knowing which ones are toxic to us."

"I don't think the computer would let us poison ourselves."

"Careful not to be so trusting." Mheven stepped away from the replicator and shook her head. "I need to clear my mind."

Verelan knew what that meant. She picked her PADD up again and resumed her reading, but couldn't absorb any of the information. Her eyes simply moved across the screen as her attention was grabbed by the sounds around her: a bottle opening, liquid pouring into a glass.

"Did you meet anyone else?"

Verelan looked up from her reading to see her mother leaning against the wall with a half-empty glass of blue liquid in her hand. Her experience and instinct told her it was more likely her mother told her it was more likely she drank down the first half quickly rather than under-pouring. "No one important, but Jake, the commander's son, wants to introduce me to a close friend of his,"

"Another human?" Mheven took a long sip from her glass, draining half of the remainder.

"He didn't say." Not a lie, but the fewer details her mother knew about Jake's friend the better. If she was discovered to be spending time with T'Lyra, she could claim that this was the friend Jake was so eager to introduce, that he had never mentioned that his friend was Vulcan.

"Well." Mheven drank down the rest and set her empty glass on the table. "I trust your judgment when it comes to the company you keep."

"Thank you, ri'nanov."

Her mother offered the slightest of smiles. "I need to step outside for a short walk. Maybe I'll cross paths with someone who can help me make sense of the replicator."

Verelan smiled back. "Don't take too long. I'm hungry enough I might risk making a wrong choice and eat my last meal."

Mheven's interest was not in the replicator. Her mind swirled with doubts, fears, and regrets that she was still far too sober to process properly. She hadn't meant it when she told her daughter that she trusted her, no matter how badly she wanted to. She kept her usual cold, quiet confident exterior as she walked through the promenade, but inside her heart was racing. Everywhere around her she saw potential threats: to herself, her child, and by extension their house and reputation. Perhaps, though, she could find an ally.

She stopped in front of a shop whose name had caught her attention when she first saw it earlier in the day, and she stepped inside. The shop was empty, and to pass the time Mheven browsed the clothes on the racks with the same sour look on her face that she wore while trying to puzzle out the replicator. Did people really wear such ugly things?

"May I help you?" The Cardassian proprietor stepped forward from the back of the shop. His voice was smooth and silky, and a sly half-smile curled on his face when he looked Mheven in the eye. "Madame Senator, it has been quite a while, hasn't it?"

"I thought you were a gardener."

Garak's half smile only grew. "A man can change careers, can he not?"

Mheven looked back to the clothing rack and ran her fingertips over the sleeve of a particularly terrible jacket. "I think you should have stayed a gardener, and you weren't much of a gardener." Mheven peeled her attention away from the jacket and took a step closer to its creator. "But I think, truly, your career hasn't changed at all, and that's why I paid you a visit."

"Then I'm afraid I must regretfully inform you that those days are long since behind me." Garak made a dramatic little show: a heavy sigh, a polite bow of his head. "Believe me when I say I am a changed man, but a humble, simple tailor."

"I recall that in your old life you owed me several favors. Would you leave those debts unpaid?"

Garak began to straighten up the clothing on the rack, making another performance of being a proud shop owner. “That depends entirely on the sort of favor you have in mind.”

“Something simple, virtually risk free, low stake for you, but high for me.”

“Go on.”

“I came here with my daughter, but I cannot monitor her all the time. An extra pair of watchful eyes would ease my worries.”

“Madame Senator, are you asking me to spy on a child?”

“What a nasty way to look at it!” Mheven snapped. “I don’t want you to invade her privacy, or follow her, or anything untoward. Think of yourself less like a spy and more like a friend of a concerned parent. I only wish to know where she goes and with whom she speaks.”

“To me, that still sounds like spying on a child.”

“The ‘gardener’ I knew would have done it. Consider it.”

Verelan could hardly sleep for her excitement, yet she still made herself lie awake in bed until the very last minute. If she had to rush out the door, she could more easily dodge prying questions, and that was exactly what she did. She couldn’t guess how late it was when her mother came back, how much she had to drink, or when she finally went to sleep. All she saw was that her mother started her day bleary eyed and moving slowly, and that she was able to slip out the door with nothing more than a quick explanation that she was running late for a study session with some of the station’s other children.

She had plenty of time to arrive at the replimat—a bit early even, Verelan guessed that Vulcans valued punctuality—but she still sped through the station’s corridors with a spring in her step. Even though she made good time, T’Lyra had still beaten her, and it seemed like she had been there a while. T’Lyra sat alone, drinking a cup of tea and focused on her work without paying any mind to the distractions around her, and that was no small feat for this time of day. A swarm of Starfleet personnel crowded the area, quickly grabbing a bite to eat, a coffee or Raktajino, or to catch up on some gossip before beginning the next shift.

Verelan took a deep breath. “T’Lyra?” she asked. “May I join you?” She hadn’t bothered getting anything to eat or drink first, as she was too nervous to have much of an appetite.

T’Lyra set down her PADD and looked up at Verelan. Her stoic expression was impossible to read, which made Verelan doubtful and uneasy. “You are three minutes and twenty seven seconds early for our arrangement meeting, but yes, you may.”

Verelan sat across from T’Lyra and glanced at the PADD on the table. On the screen were long columns of text displayed in elaborate, swirling script. Verelan studied them for a moment, even though she couldn’t read them. “Is that writing in your language?”

“It is.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“It serves its function.” T’Lyra picked up her PADD again and pulled up an organic chemistry text. “I suggest we use this first session to assess each other’s knowledge.”

The pair devoted a solid half hour to focused study before Verelan’s mind began to wander. “May I ask you a personal question?”

T’Lyra looked up from her work and raised a curious eyebrow. “You may. However, if it is too personal in nature, I will refuse to answer.”

“Of course. Why did you visit the station?”

“For the past four years I have lived with my parents aboard a science vessel. My father will be conducting surveys in the Gamma Quadrant over the next six weeks.”

“Your whole family lives on the ship? I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“It is...inadvisable for bondmates to be separated for extended periods of time.” T’Lyra looked down as she explained, and she spoke slowly as if each word choice had to be considered carefully. “Extended deep space exploration necessitates such an arrangement. May I ask you the same question?”

“I accompanied my mother, who is traveling on diplomatic business. My father...” Verelan paused. Her throat closed up. She knew what she had to say, but lacked the courage to say it. “I have no father.”

Just over a year, and those words still stung to say even though it was the standard response when a person so badly disgraced came into the conversation. Hvirr i-Mirek tr’Kaethaetreh deserved better. He was a war hero who lost a leg in a Klingon ambush. He had a brilliant mind and a kind heart, but because of a poor choice in his political alignment none of that mattered. Verelan fell silent, and the pair soon resumed their focused study.

“I think that has been enough for today,” T’Lyra began after another half hour. “I would like to meet again tomorrow.”

“Wonderful! I think you’ve already helped clarify some of what we studied.” Verelan’s interest was less in learning more about organic chemistry than she was in learning about T’Lyra. However, it seemed that Vulcans were at least as private as Romulans were, so this would be a slow process.

“And not only to study. I understand you met Jake Sisko. He is fond of old earth sports and offered to show me one of his holosuite programs. He said I was welcome to invite you.”

“Thank you.” Verelan smiled. “I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”

Chapter 3

The lights were dim in Garak's shop, which had been closed to customers for two hours now. Garak still made a show of busying himself with his shop, so that anyone who happened to poke their head in would only see a man taking care of the back end of running a business: taking inventory, rearranging the displays, tidying up the shop, and so on. There was a chime on the door. Perfectly punctual, just as he expected.

"Come in," he called, and not a moment later the door slid open. Mheven stood on the other side with a slender box under her arm, and without hesitation she entered the shop with long, bold strides.

"Garak." She began. "I hope you have given my offer further consideration."

"I have, but I still have reservations, and you have not given me much time to think."

"Then let's talk for a while, and perhaps we can reach an agreement." Mheven took a few steps toward a table that had a display of colorful scarves. In the space between the silks, she set down the box and opened it. From inside she took out a bottle of bright blue liquid and two small glasses. She opened the bottle, filled the glasses, and offered one to Garak, but the Cardassian made no move to take it. "You're smart not to trust me." Mheven took a small sip herself and offered it to Garak again. With a nod and a slight smile, he took the glass.

"Madame Senator," he teased. "I was under the impression that kali-fal was illegal in the Federaton."

"And here I thought you knew how to be discreet." Mheven teased back, shaking her head before she sipped her own drink.

Garak pressed an open hand to his heart and let out a dramatic sigh. "Madame, you wound me with such doubts!" After a sip of his drink he was back to his usual sly self. "But I am interested in having a conversation and ready to listen."

"Let me make it clear how little I am asking of you. You don't need to go out of your way or make any great efforts. Just pay attention if you see her on the promenade, and make a note of who is with her."

"That I can manage." Another sip from his glass. While Mheven could drink kal-fal as easily as water, with every sip Garak struggled to hide the burning sensation he felt with each mouthful. "In the interest of transparency, I may have seen her this morning in the replimat, unless there's another Romulan girl on the station."

"Verelan is the only one. She told me she was studying with other children from the station."

"There was only one other with her, a Vulcan girl."

"A Vulcan?" Mheven gasped. The news hit her like a slap in the face. Mheven's heart began to race, as if she suddenly faced some unknown threat. "What do you know about her?"

"Virtually nothing, as I told you before I have no interest in keeping tabs on children. However, I can make a few inferences. There is a Vulcan science vessel here to conduct surveys in the Gamma quadrant. I don't recall ever seeing her before its arrival."

Mheven drank down the rest of her kali-fal. "Find out more about her."

"You ask too much and offer too little, Madame Senator." Garak finished the rest of his drink in one swig and reacted to the strong taste with a little shake off his head. He handed his glass back to Mheven. "Might I suggest that if you wish to know more about your daughter's personal affairs, you should talk to her yourself."

Mheven kept her narrowed eyes on Garak as she packed the glasses and the bottle back into their case. "Do you have any children?"

"No, none."

"Then you have no place to tell me how to raise mine." She snapped shut the case, tucked it under her arm, and rushed out of the shop.

Verelan spent the rest of the day alone in her quarters. Alone, but not lonely. She busied herself mainly with study but also with exploring all of the art and media the computer had to offer from cultures so different and far from her own. In time she settled back into studying, her focus back on organic chemistry even though the subject frustrated her. This morning's session with T'Lyra had only served to highlight how inadequate her own understanding was.

The door slid open, and Verelan looked up from her work to see her mother standing in the doorway with a sour expression on her face.

"How was your old friend?" Verelan tried to sound bright and pleasant in an attempt to counter her mother's foul mood.

"Time, it seems has changed him" Mheven still moved at a rushed pace as she set the case on the table, opened it, and poured herself another glass of kali-fal before she sat across from her daughter. "I have yet to determine if the change has been for better or worse." She paused to take a sip. "Have you eaten yet?"

Verelan nodded. "I have. Some kind of creamy soup from Earth, and it hasn't killed me."

"Well, not yet it hasn't," Mheven teased. "There's something I need to talk to you about. Who did you meet to study with this morning?"

"Someone I met on the promenade the other day." A true yet evasive answer.

“I guessed as much.” Another sip. “Tell me more.”

Verelan straightened up and leaned back in her seat. “Why are you so interested?”

“I could ask you why you’re acting so cagey.” Mehven drank down the rest of her kali-fal. She set the glass on the table but still kept her hand on it. “I only want to know more about your friends and to make sure that you’re making good choices in the company you keep.”

“I’ve been keeping the company of someone who has already helped me understand organic chemistry, that should be enough.”

“It might be, if only you hadn’t chosen to study with a Vulcan.” Mheven took a deep breath. “Don’t you think you would find more meaningful companionship with a friend who allows themselves to feel the same emotions you do?”

“Maybe, but what if I told you that T’Lyra was nothing more to me than a chemistry tutor?”

“Then I would still remind you that our ancestors separated themselves from Surak’s followers for a reason. Be wary of Vulcans, for they wish to erase our culture as see our people submit themselves to logic.”

Exasperated, Verelan leaned her head back and let out an exaggerated sigh. “I’ve said nothing about wanting to join another culture, I only wanted help with organic chemistry.”

Mheven stood up and shook her head. “I’m going to bed.” As she walked past, she patted her daughter on the shoulder. “Make good choices, Verelan.”

Chapter 4

Jake and Nog sat at their usual corner of the upper level of the promenade. They sat on the floor with their legs dangling off the edge (Odo's warnings were no deterrent), hung onto the railing and watched the people below.

"Check it out." Jake pointed to a Bollian man in a brightly colored jacket with gold fringe on the shoulders. "Looks like Garak finally sold that ugly jacket."

"Ugly?! I think it's fantastic!" Nog kept his eyes on the Bollian as he walked away. "I almost wanted it for myself."

"Only because it reminds you of something your Uncle Quark would wear," Jake teased, giving his friend a playful punch on the arm.

"Yes. It does, and Uncle has the best fashion sense of anyone I have ever met."

Jake chuckled and shook his head. "Whatever, I've got to get going." He used the railing to pull himself up to his feet. "I'm meeting T'Lyra and Verelan to play baseball in the Holo-suite."

Nog jumped up. "The females?" He winced, remembering a piece of advice his friend had given him. "Girls! I mean, girls. Why didn't you invite me?"

Jake shrugged. "Because I thought you hated baseball. All you ever do is complain about how boring it is."

"I hate baseball less than I like females. There are so few young ones, you shouldn't be able to hog them all."

"Trust me, I'm not hogging them, they're more interested in each other than either of us, but if you really want to come along, we'd love to have you."

"Great!"

"Just promise me you won't call them 'females.'"

"Hey, I'm trying my best!" Nog held his hands out in front of himself in a sign of defeat. "I'll meet you there, just as soon as I go back to my quarters to get the mat you gave me."

"You mean the mitt?"

"Right. See you soon."

Jake, Verelan, and T'Lyra were already waiting outside the entrance to the holo-suite when Nog rushed up to join them, already short of breath. He triumphantly raised his baseball glove in the air. "Found it! I came as fast as I could."

"Looks like you've already got a bit of a warmup, huh?" Jake teased. "T'Lyra, Verelan, this is Nog, my friend I told you about."

Verelan crossed her arms. "You never said that your friend was a Ferengi."

Nog took two quick steps to close the distance between them. He puffed out his chest and put his hands on his hips and had to lean his head back to look at her. Verelan was small for a Romulan, but she still towered over him, which gave him the appearance of a little brother working up the courage to stand up to his older sister. "That isn't a problem is it?"

Verelan felt everyone's on her as she thought up a tactful answer. "No, it isn't. I'm sorry if it sounded like I suggested otherwise."

"Well, come on, let's get going." Jake motioned toward the door to the holo-suite. "We don't have a ton of time, and you three have a lot to learn."

"What do you mean the three of us?" Nog snapped. "I've played baseball with you before!"

"Yeah, and I've seen you play." Jake stepped forward, and the doors to the holo-suite slid open. Jake's three friends followed close behind him before the doors shut. "Computer, run program Sisko two. Practice mode."

The empty holo-suite transformed into a baseball field on a sunny Earth day. A rack at the edge of the field held all of the necessary equipment. Jake, like Nog, had his own glove, but he grabbed a ball and tossed it up in the air a few times. "This program has everything. You can build a team with all of the old greats from Earth, adjust the difficulty, add spectators in the stands, or just sit back and watch a game. There's a lot of technique and rules to get down, though, so today let's just work on the very basics. Just a little game of catch... Hey, Nog, heads up!" Jake caught Nog's attention instantly before he threw the ball. Nog watched the ball fly toward him with wide eyes and made a wild dive to try to catch it, but missed the ball by a wide margin. "Nice try."

"That wasn't fair!" Nog bent down to pick the ball off the ground. "You're always talking about how no one can beat one of your signature curveballs.." He tossed the ball back to Jake.

"That wasn't a curveball." Jake rolled his eyes and tossed the ball to Verelan, who nearly fumbled the catch but recovered. "You try."

Verelan and T'Lyra each took a glove and stepped back to put enough distance between them. Verelan threw the ball gently, and T'Lyra caught it with ease.

“Great! But don’t be afraid to put a little more oomph behind it,” Jake suggested. “Like this...Ready, Nog?”

Nog braced himself, and Jake wound up for a powerful throw. He kept his composure better this time and lunged to reach the ball in a more dignified manner, but he still missed.

T’Lyra prepared for a throw, and Verelan braced herself to catch it. The ball soared toward her, and Verelan scrambled to catch it. She couldn’t react fast enough, and before she could move to catch the ball, she felt the white hot sensation of searing pain in her face and was knocked backwards off her balance. The others rushed to her side as she slowly sat up.

“Verelan? Are you ok?” Jake asked as he looked into Verelan’s eyes. “You aren’t dizzy or seeing double or anything, are you?”

“No, I...” The pain was centered on her nose and the space just above her upper lip, which made moving her upper lip to talk uncomfortable. Everything between her nose and chin felt wet and warm. Verelan touched just beneath her nose, and when she took her hand away she saw just what she suspected: dark green blood. “It just hurts. A lot.”

“I believe it,” Jake said with an understanding nod. “Your nose is already swollen, and it’s bleeding. A lot.”

“Please accept my sincerest apologies.” T’Lyra offered a hand to help Verelan up off of the ground. “It was not my intent to cause you any harm.”

“I know, and I forgive you.” Verelan took T’Lyra’s hand and pulled herself back to her feet. For a moment, they stood looking each other in the eye, and Verelan forgot about the pain, the blood, and the embarrassment. There was only T’Lyra...until Jake spoke again.

“You need to get to the infirmary. Computer end program.” The baseball field transformed back into an empty holosuite, and the group made their way back to the door.

The pain hadn’t dulled by the time the group reached the infirmary, which was mostly empty aside from a handful of Starfleet medical personnel who were focused on some side work.

“Doctor Bashir?” Jake called. “Or anyone...we need a little help.”

“Jake? Is everything alright?” The human doctor turned around to face them. He remained composed, but his eyes were fixed on Verelan’s bloody face. “What happened?”

“Baseball accident,” Jake explained.

“I see. Have a seat on the bio bed on the right, and as for the rest of you, I know you want to look after your friend, but this is a bit too much of a crowd for the infirmary.”

“Got it.” Jake nodded. “We’ll wait right outside. See you in a bit, Verelan.” With that, the other three left.

The doctor stepped in front of Verelan with his tricorder ready and began to examine the injury. “You’ve got to be careful playing baseball with Jake. I hear he’s got quite the arm.”

“It wasn’t Jake who did it, it was T’Lyra, the Vulcan.”

“Then that means you have two to watch out for. Your nose is broken, but it’s a simple fracture and will only take a moment to sort out.” Doctor Bashir worked in silence, and—as promised—he repaired the damage and cleaned away the blood in a matter of minutes.

“Good as new. You’re free to go, and maybe tell T’Lyra to be a bit more careful,” he teased. “Maybe remind Jake too, just to be safe.”

Verelan hopped off of the biobed. “You won’t tell anyone about this, will you?”

“Of course not. Your secret is safe with me.”

Verelan stepped outside and into the corridor to find only T’Lyra waiting for her. “What happened to Jake and Nog?” she asked.

“I wanted to escort you back to your quarters alone. I will inform them of your successful recovery.”

“Does it still look bad? I don’t want my mother to find out.”

“There is no evidence of injury, but there are blood stains on your shirt.”

The pair began to walk in silence before Verelan found the courage to ask a question. “Why do you want to walk alone with me?”

“I find your company pleasing, and I wanted to spend time with you outside of studying. I was under the impression that you shared this sentiment. Was I mistaken?”

“No, you weren’t, and that’s the problem, though I would probably describe my feelings with words that were much stronger and less...logical.” Verelan paused, trying to think of a tactful way to express what was on her mind. “My mother isn’t fond of Vulcans, and I imagine your parents don’t care much for Romulans either.”

“They have concerns about my spending time with emotional beings, but those same concerns stand for any friends of mine who are not Vulcans.” T’Lyra stopped, but Verelan continued on for a few paces before turning back around to face her. “However, they are unaware that being in your presence stirs certain feelings that I cannot control.” T’Lyra stepped around Verelan and continued on.

Verelan turned around and caught up to T’Lyra with a spring in her step. “Dare I ask what sort of feelings?”

T'Lyra narrowed her eyes. "The sort of feelings that are typically reserved for one's bondmate."

Wide-eyed Verelan froze as T'Lyra continued to walk ahead. "There isn't some Vulcan out there who's going to get jealous of me is there?" she asked as she sped to catch back up.

"Vulcans do not feel jealousy, and I have no bondmate."

After a while, Verelan spoke again. "It's right around this corner. You should go, I don't want to risk being seen together."

"I understand." T'Lyra held up her hand with her index and pointer finger extended. Verelan reached out to press the tips of her own fingers against T'Lyra's, and closed her eyes. They enjoyed this moment of stillness and closeness before Verelan opened her eyes.

"I'll see you in the morning. For organic chemistry."

The pair kept their fingertips in contact as long as they could while Verelan walked away. Her head was turned and her eyes on T'Lyra even as she stepped through the door.

Chapter 5

Verelan's mother wasn't in, and the extra time and space that granted her was a huge relief. She changed into a clean shirt and went to the replicator for a meal, as the day's excitement left her ravenous. While she was more trusting of the Federation replicator's ability to not feed her poison than her mother, she wasn't as adventurous in her tastes as she wanted to be. No need to stray from what she already knew she liked, another bowl of the creamy Earth soup would do just fine. Broccoli Cheddar, it was called.

While she was grateful to enjoy her meal in solitude and silence, she couldn't help but notice that her mother was later coming home. It seemed odd, with all of her distaste for foreigners Verelan hadn't expected her mother to be interested in window shopping in the promenade or hanging around Quark's. Verelan tried to shrug it off as she brought her soup bowl back to the replicator. She was probably overthinking it.

She settled back down in her seat with a PADD to study. While she would rather polish up her organic chemistry in the hopes of impressing T'Lyra, there were other subjects she had been neglecting, such as those historical facts and dates that never seemed to stay in her memory where they belonged. However, she couldn't focus, and caught herself reading the same paragraph three times when the door slid open and her mother stepped inside. Verelan turned her head to look, and in an instant she saw all the subtle signs that revealed just what her mother had been up to. Her eyelids were heavy, her footsteps louder, and her right shoulder slightly slumped. Barely perceptible, unless you knew what to look for.

"Verelan." Her mother's voice was louder, another sign. "Have you eaten yet? I had an unexpected social call with Senator Kerih, and then I met with an old friend." There was acidity in her voice, far too annoyed for someone who had just returned from visiting with friends.

"I have."

Mheven took a half-empty bottle of kali-fal and a glass from the shelf and sat across from Verelan, her movements awkward and inelegant. "I heard that you were seen leaving the infirmary. Are you alright?" She set the glass on the table and filled it with the blue liquid.

"I'm fine. This afternoon I went to the holosuite to play an old Earth sport with Jake, and I was hit with a ball. It was nothing serious."

"Just Jake?" Mheven took the first sip of her drink, long and easy.

"And some of his friends."

"Including the Vulcan." Another long sip. "The Vulcan who I told you to stay away from."

Verelan straightened up and took a little breath. "I recall that you told me to make good choices, and I don't think I've made any poor ones."

Mheven placed both hands on the table and shook her head. "You really think that? Even after you got hurt?"

"Yes, Ri'nanov." Verelan pushed her chair back and stood up. She wanted to get out of this room and far away from her mother but had nowhere to go. "My day was otherwise very pleasant."

Mheven sprang to her feet and drained the rest of her drink. "Who did it? Who hit you?"

"No one hit me!" Verelan snapped. "It was an accident. T'Lyra threw a ball that I couldn't catch."

"So it was the Vulcan?"

Exasperated, Verelan closed her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair. "Yes, and it was an accident. What logical reason would she have to try to hurt me?"

Her mother paused before she answered, taking a moment to calm down. "Anything can be justified with logic, Verelan. I need to clear my head, I'll be back soon."

Verelan watched as her mother walked back out the door. Her heart raced and she felt frozen in place, and she stared at the closed door for close to a minute before following her mother out the door. By the time Verelan stepped out into the corridor, there was no sign of her mother. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Whatever her mother had in mind (which hopefully was nothing more than a long walk after all), the only place it made sense for her to go was the promenade. As Verelan made her way through the station she worked to calm herself by making sure she walked at a slow and steady pace and taking slow deep breaths.

The promenade was buzzing with energy at this hour, just after a duty shift ended and station personnel were hungry and ready to unwind. Verelan took another deep breath. This was pointless. There was no need to go looking in every shop and restaurant, what her mother did was beyond her control. While she was out, Verelan decided to stop by the replimat for a cup of tea, to calm her nerves before she went back home.

Her worries were close to vanishing altogether when she stepped into the replimat. Like the promenade, it was crowded at this time of day with few empty tables in sight. Most of the people gathered there tried to steal secretive glances at a trio of people talking loudly—the sort of barely hidden gesture where one takes a noticeable pause, a quick peek, and then returns with added enthusiasm to their food or drink. Curiosity gripped Verelan, she wove through the crowd, and what she saw inside made everything rush back. Her face grew hot and her throat felt tight when she saw her mother, T'Lyra, and a middle aged Vulcan man who presumably was T'Lyra's father. They were arguing, or, more accurately, Mheven was arguing at them: barely containing her rage while the pair of Vulcans remained calm. Verelan didn't dare come any closer, instead she took a step back into the crowd and listened closely as she hung back.

"...And for the safety of my own child, it would serve you well to learn how to control yours." Mheven raised her voice (but her words were slightly slurred) and sounded as though she was fighting not to shout. Verelan closed her eyes. Her hands shook, and just to stay in the spot

instead of either running away or rushing in to beg her mother to stop took enormous strength of will.

“While I often have reservations about the company she keeps, T’Lyra has done nothing wrong.” The Vulcan’s voice was eerily cold and unreadable. “Some of your concerns might be understandable, however your reaction has been sullied by an excess of emotion, and, based on my observation, an excess of alcohol.”

That accusation made Verelan open her eyes and step over to where she had a clearer view of the exchange. Had it always been so obvious? She had been under the impression that her mother hid her secret well.

“How dare you?” Mheven narrowed her eyes and stepped closer, now only inches from the Vulcan man. “I won’t be insulted by a Yyao.”

Verelan gasped and judged from the other observer’s lack of response that the universal translators hadn’t conveyed that her mother had called the Vulcan a slur. She not only insulted him but dared to push him. Verelan could not be a bystander any longer. She pushed her way through the crowd, but before she reached them the conflict had already escalated. A pair of humans in Starfleet uniforms tried to restrain her, but she broke free with little effort. A Ferengi with a holocamera hung near the back and climbed on top of a chair to better document the altercation while Mheven launched herself at the Vulcan again. The fight was over as quickly as it started, all of the violence coming to a end when the Vulcan incapacitated Mheven with a nerve pinch.

The crowd began to disperse as security personnel rushed in. While two lifted Mheven’s unconscious body off the floor, another spoke with the Vulcan—calm as ever, who answered all of their questions without hesitation and agreed to go along for further questioning. Even as the chaos faded away, Verelan still felt as tense and fearful as if she was still in danger. She nearly jumped when the security chief walked toward her.

“I understand that was your mother?” he asked. Verelan couldn’t guess his species. He didn’t look like anyone she had ever seen or learned about.

“Yes, but I wasn’t involved in any of this.” Verelan didn’t look him in the eye, instead she stared at the spot where her mother lay unconscious only moments ago.

“But you were a witness and likely have valuable insight. I would like to ask you a few questions..”

Verelan nodded. She offered a desperate glance to T’Lyra, who still waited silently. Their eyes met for a moment, but Verelan could not guess what the Vulcan might be thinking. Whatever lurked beneath that serene Vulcan exterior, Verelan hoped it wasn’t contempt.

Chapter 6

Verelan spent her night restless and full of frenetic energy. Her conversation with Odo, the security chief, had been invasive and uncomfortable. She answered his questions truthfully about what she had witnessed in the replimat, but he had also asked more personal questions, Verelan was more guarded. She denied any knowledge that her mother had been drinking before the fight or that she had any habits of excessive drinking at all. When asked if her mother had any history of violent outburst, at least she could answer with honesty and no fear of further harm to her mother's reputation. This was the first time she had seen her mother behave like that.

For the next few days she would have solitude and peace in her quarters, which she always wanted, even if the cause came at a great cost. One of her mother's aides, Merik, had agreed to keep an eye on her, but Verelan expected to see little of him. Already he made it clear that he had no interest in watching over a teenager.

Morning came, and Verelan had not made any attempt to sleep or even fill the time with something productive or even enjoyable. Already, the time approached when she normally left her quarters to meet T'Lyra. To see her Vulcan friend again would be unwise, but Verelan craved T'Lyra's presence, if only to have one final conversation and find some closure.

Three times, Verelan stopped and turned around, and three times she convinced herself to carry on. She reached the replimat ten minutes later than usual and paused to give her choice final consideration. T'Lyra was there, but hadn't spotted her yet. The Vulcan sat alone with her usual cup of tea and reading from a PADD. Like she did when they first met, Verelan's eyes went to the elaborate braid in her hair, and she briefly wondered how early T'Lyra must have to wake up to style her hair.

Verelan took a deep breath to brace herself before she crossed the room and stood beside T'Lyra's table.

"T'Lyra."

The Vulcan looked up from her reading but said nothing. "I would like to talk about what my mother did last night."

"The incident seemed straightforward, but if there is more you wish to say, I am willing to listen."

Verelan sat down across from T'Lyra and took another deep breath. "I don't mean to apologize on her behalf, that's not for me to do, and I don't think she should be forgiven. My mother...I shouldn't say this, it's been a closely guarded secret...she drinks. She drinks too much and speaks her mind, and until today she did a very good job of hiding it. Unfortunately, what's really on her mind is..." Verelan fell silent, struggling to think of what to say that would both be accurate and not a scathing insult.

"Uninhibited xenophobia." T'Lyra offered.

"I was trying to be more subtle, but you're not wrong. What she called your father...I'm not sure the translator can convey how impolite of a word it is. This was the first time I've seen her react violently." The pair fell silent, and T'Lyra picked her PADD back up and began to read again. "You do know I'm not like that, right?"

T'Lyra set her PADD back down on the table. "I have no doubts. Her views and actions do not reflect your own." She reached across the table to extend her hand toward Verelan, with two fingers outstretched. Verelan's hand met hers, and the tips of their fingers touched. "However, given these events, it would be wise to exercise discretion."

Verelan smiled, slight but enough that it reached her eyes. "Right." She let her fingertips linger on T'Lyra's for another moment before pulling them away. "I still want to find a way to continue to spend time together. Discreetly, of course."

"Of course," T'Lyra repeated. "My parents do not approve of our companionship either, less so than my friendship with Jake and Nog now that there is an added safety concern."

Verelan sighed. "Understandable, but trust me when I say she's never acted like that before."

"I believe you, but I doubt if my parents will." T'Lyra looked down at her PADD and took a deep breath. "You should go. We will see each other again. Jolan'tru, Verelan."

"Jolan'tru."

Verelan began to walk away and stole one more glance at T'Lyra, but it made her heart heavy to see that T'Lyra hadn't noticed or looked up from her work. Her steps were heavy, and she kept her eyes cast down at the ground as she walked. Halfway across the promenade, Verelan resolved herself to keep her heartache private and forced herself to hold her head high and stand up straight. She paused for a moment to take in her surroundings and at least try to enjoy what the station had to offer. However, she spotted someone who gave her an uncomfortable jolt of energy: the Ferengi with the camera from the night before.

Verelan wove through the crowd to reach him. "Excuse me!" She called, and the Ferengi turned to face her. "Excuse me. You recorded the fight from the other night, right?"

"And what of it?" The Ferengi sneered, revealed a twisted smile of sharpened teeth. His voice was raspy and acidic.

“Please,” she begged, “No one can see it.”

“Well, in that case, I’d be happy to surrender all the files to you.” The Ferengi crossed his arms. “For the right amount of latinum.”

“I...don’t have any latinum.”

“Too bad.” The Ferengi began to walk past her. “That means I’m going to have to talk to someone else.”

Fearful and shocked, she froze in place and watched the Ferengi walk away. The sound of a familiar voice behind her, even though it was soft and friendly, nearly made her jump up.

“Hey, Verelan.”

She snapped around and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw who it was. “Jake! Sorry. I suppose you have something to say about last night.”

“No, actually, but I did want to say that I caught the end of that.”

“Do you have any idea what that Ferengi’s name is? Because I think he means to blackmail my mother.”

“Me? No, but Nog might, or Odo. Maybe you should tell him if you think it’s serious.”

Verelan sighed. She dreaded the thought of going to the security chief again.

“Or maybe not Odo...” Jake paused to think. “I could ask Nog to talk to him. There’s no way he’d give up the chance to turn a profit, but Ferengi can’t stand women or non-Ferengi. Nog might be able to get some kind of deal.”

“I appreciate the offer.” Verelan tried to smile. “And you can’t tell him this, because I’m sure he’d take it as a great insult, but Nog doesn’t exactly strike me as a master negotiator.”

“Ouch. You’re right, that is a pretty harsh thing to say about a Ferengi.” Jake paused and scratched the back of his neck. “Look, if there’s anything you want to talk about...”

“There isn’t”

“Well, in case you change your mind...”

“I won’t.”

“Okay, okay...” Jake held his hands up in front of him in a sign of surrender. “I’ll see you around, then.” Jake began to walk away, and Verelan found once again that she felt frozen in place: not wanting to leave, yet not wanting to go anywhere else.

Chapter 7

T'Lyra had stayed in the replimat to study for another thirty-five minutes and eleven seconds before she was satisfied with the progress she made in her organic chemistry studies. Her work was completed, but throughout she faced unusual distractions. Verelan was on her mind... Verelan was often on her mind, and T'Lyra could not place a logical reason why. She had no grievances, no questions that needed answering, no unfinished business, and no future plans to anticipate. As she left her table to return to her quarters, T'Lyra tried to force herself to forget the Romulan girl, but she found the seemingly simple task to be more challenging than expected.

She spent the remainder of the day alone in her quarters engulfed in solitary, focused study. The unwelcome thoughts about the Romulan were quieter, but still tried to creep into her mind. Her father, Tevak, returned home first; instead of his usual work he spent much of the day in discussion with station security. He had not been found to be at fault for the actions he took against Mheven, for he had acted in self defense.

"T'Lyra-kam," he began once he stepped inside the door. "I trust that your day was productive."

"Yes, Sa-mekh." T'Lyra set down her PADD. "Today did not deviate from the norm. I accomplished more studying than I set out to, and I would like to disclose that I did speak briefly with Verelan this morning."

"The Romulan?" Tevak raised a perplexed eyebrow.

"The Romulan who's mother assaulted you, yes."

"I was under the impression that you knew the safety risks inherent in associating with her."

"Yes, Sa-mekh. It would be logical to avoid her. She approached me to apologize for her mother's actions and to offer assurance that she does not share her mother's violent and xenophobic tendencies. I will not be seeking out her companionship, but I cannot control if she chooses to approach me."

T'Lyra picked up her PADD and resumed her study. She did not (and would not) tell her father about the way that thoughts of Verelan had a way of creeping into her mind or that she had every intention of continuing to spend time with the Romulan girl in secret. Her choice was logical in its own way. What she wanted was to be near Verelan, full transparency with her father would prevent her from achieving that end.

Jake spent his day bored and restless, unable to focus or enjoy anything. His mind was circling with fear and worry about T'Lyra and Verelan, but he tried to find something positive to look forward to. Tonight, after all, was etouffee night...too bad he didn't have much of an appetite.

There was still about thirty more minutes before Jake expected his dad to return, and he went ahead and took it upon himself to begin to prep the meal, something to keep his mind active and his hands busy,

"Computer, play music," he said. "Something upbeat." The music began, lively pop from Earth in the 1950s and 60s. A slight smile crept onto Jake's face and he began to get the ingredients ready. This dish was a bit different from a traditional etouffee, but Ben Sisko still insisted that using what was in your own backyard was still in the spirit of Louisiana cooking. The rice, flour, and butter might have been replicated, but the produce came from the hydroponic garden, and the protein was a large shrimp-like crustacean brought up from Bajor.

Jake started on the rice set to work measuring, sorting, and preparing the ingredients. Everything was almost ready when the door slid open and his dad arrived home.

"Dad!" Jake turned his head to look toward his father. "I hope it's ok that I got started without you. I got kinda bored."

"Glad to have a little extra help," Ben answered with a warm smile. Even after a full day of work, he came home with a bright and comforting energy that helped to ease his worries. "Nice work on your mis en place, that's the secret to a successful kitchen...or a successful science lab."

"Yeah, Dad, but what I'd rather be a writer?" Jake teased.

Ben paused to consider this. "Then I imagine the same concept works in the abstract. Organize your ideas before you get to work."

Jake smiled. "That makes sense. Do you wanna jump in and get started on the roux?"

"I think you should start the roux. One of these days you're going to have to learn to cook without me."

"I guess so, I'm just surprised you're already trusting me with the roux." Jake shrugged.

"Well, I'll still be closely supervising."

Jake looked to his father for last minute encouragement before he put the butter in the pan and swirled it around as it bubbled and melted. He added the flour and began to whisk it in, keeping a close eye on the roux as the flour dissolved and began to develop color. A faint nutty aroma filled the room.

"Jake, now, turn down the heat!" Ben spoke with urgency and outstretched a hand in reaction.

Jake turned the heat low and kept on whisking. "Already? I thought it needed to get a little darker."

"It will, as it continues cooking. You can't turn it back if it's overdone, though."

"Right."

“I can take over if your whisking arm needs a break.”

Jake handed off the whisk to his dad and began to add in the vegetables little by little. They worked in silence for a few minutes before Jake spoke again. “Dad...” his voice was soft and distant. “I’m worried.”

Ben slowed down his whisking and looked toward his son. “What about?”

“About Verelan and T’Lyra.” Jake sighed and added the last of the vegetables. The savory aroma of the holy trinity mixed with the toasty scent of the roux. Now it was beginning to smell like a real Louisiana kitchen. “About how they’re handling it after their parents fought last night.”

Ben nodded. “And don’t make the mistake of assuming that just because T’Lyra is a Vulcan that she’s coping better. They still have emotions, you know...in their own way. Here...” He pointed to a jar full of stock—made early from shells of the Bajoran shrimp. “It’s time to add the liquid.”

The stock steamed and bubbled as Jake began to slowly pour it into the pan, Ben still stirring all the while. “They’re not gonna be able to spend time together anymore,” Jake continued. “And they were really starting to like each other...Like, like-like.”

Ben sighed and shook his head. “Jake, I don’t like it either. I can’t stand it that there is someone on this station who’s so motivated by prejudice. I can’t stand to think that this is going to drive a wedge between two young people who care about each other, but aside from intervening when safety issues arise, I can’t exactly control how other people live their lives.”

“I know it might not be right for me to be thinking of other people like this, but I kind of want to see them have a secret relationship. You know, like Romeo and Juliet.”

“Careful what you wish for, Jake. Romeo and Juliet was a tragedy.” The stock began to simmer. “You can add the shrimp now. It should be ready soon.”

Quark’s Bar, Restaurant, and Holosuite Arcade stayed open twenty-six hours a day—the better to profit off of station personnel who worked and slept at odd hours—but it’s proprietor was a man who needed rest and understood the money saving value of sending home all but a handful of his employees. Quark was nearly ready to turn in for the night, and the bar was almost empty, but something wasn’t right: a table with three chairs around it when there should have only been two. Quark walked to the table, stood across from the extra chair and leaning forward to place his hands on the table.

“Odo, if you’ve got a problem you can talk to me like a man instead of spying.”

The chair transformed into the station’s security chief. Even though his face was difficult to read, he exuded stern authority with rigid posture and his arms crossed.

“I’m surprised I went undetected this long. And on a slow night,” Odo taunted.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been tired. What do you want?”

“Nothing you need to worry yourself over...yet. I’ve had concerns over recent gambling activity.”

Quark straightened out his spine and crossed his arms, now mirroring Odo, but his stance was more defensive. “What, you have a problem with Dabo now? After all these years?”

“I wasn’t talking about Dabo, Quark.” There was an even more abrasive edge in Odo’s usually gruff voice. “I was talking about the fight in the promenade and the rumors that you acted as a bookie.”

“Which is still perfectly legal—I checked—even if some might call it a morally gray area. If one of my customers wants to make a gentleman’s bet, I am happy to oblige them.”

“...And the rumors that you’re already taking bets for a rematch. I do hope you’re not thinking of doing anything to incite another incident.”

“Odo!” Quark clutched his heart in a dramatic and exaggerated display. “You wound me! To think I have such poor business sense... Violence makes people avoid places, and people don’t spend latinum at places they avoid. Any short term gains couldn’t make up for the long term effects of my bar earning a reputation as an unsafe establishment.”

Finally, Odo uncrossed his arms. “Your argument is a sound one, but I’m not entirely convinced...”

“And I, past the point where I ever expect you to be. If you’re that worried, turn back into a chair and stay as long as you please. I’m sure keeping an eye on little old me won’t prevent you from doing any actual work.”

Chapter 8

The past three days had been lonely for Verelan. While she usually enjoyed space from her mother, after a while the novelty wore off and the solitude wore her down. There were no morning study sessions, and despite T'Lyra's promise to continue to discreetly continue to see one another, all they could manage was one interaction in passing: a knowing glance that lingered a little too long.

Without T'Lyra, Verelan felt little need to venture out of her quarters but tried to force herself to make a daily outing in order to preserve whatever remained of her sanity. She was ready to leave the promenade as soon as she arrived, until she saw Jake and Nog on the upper level. The two boys sat in a corner, hanging onto the railing with their legs dangling over the ledge. Verelan felt a burst of energy as she rushed up the stairs to join them.

"Do you mind if I join you?" she asked when she stood behind them.

"Not at all, it's great to see you!" Jake said as the two boys scooted to each side to make room. Verelan sat on the ground between them. "So, um..." Jake paused and looked away. His voice was soft when he spoke again. "Have you been doing alright?"

Verelan gave him a pointed look. "Do you really want to know, or are doing the annoying human thing where you only want to hear that I'm fine?"

"I want the truth."

"Awful."

"I can imagine."

The trio fell silent until Nog took a deep breath and spoke up. "You know...My dad used to be furious that Jake and I were friends. In fact, he used to hate hew-mons as a rule."

"Yeah, I remember that." Jake added. "And my dad...well I wouldn't say he hated all Ferengi, but he didn't like Nog, and he did think humans are Ferengi were too different to get along."

Verelan considered this. "And what made them change their minds?"

"Well, my dad realized that it wasn't fair to think of people like that. My dad thinks it's important to treat people with respect." Jake explained.

"I can't imagine anything more unlikely happening to my mother." Verelan sighed and turned to Nog. "Did your father have the same kind of realization?"

"Not exactly. I think being surrounded by hew-mons just made him accept their unusual ways a little more."

"Almost as unlikely." Verelan turned away and watched the people move about on the lower level. The trio people-watched in silence until Jake pointed out someone on the lower level.

"Look!" He called as he pointed. There she was: T'Lyra. "You should go down and say something."

"Jake." Verelan spoke firmly. "We agreed to be more secretive."

"Fine, just don't complain to me when you regret it."

"What even would I say?"

"I don't know." Jake shrugged. "You two never had a problem thinking of things to talk about before. Plan a secret date, or something romantic like that."

Verelan made no move and only watched until she felt a surge of energy brought on by sudden fear. Maybe she would regret missing this opportunity...She sprang to her feet and rushed to follow T'Lyra. The Vulcan had been on her way out and was away from the main crowd of the promenade when Verelan caught up to her. Perfect.

"Jolan'Tru," She said.

T'Lyra turned around. Her features softened, and for a moment Verelan swore she could see the corners of her mouth turn upward in the slightest of smiles. "Verelan...We had agreed to be discreet."

"I know...but if you're willing to be bold, I have an idea for how we could privately spend time together." She bit her lip. Her heart raced, and she had the sudden feeling like she was sprinting down a path she should not be on no matter how badly she wanted it. "If you would like to meet me later in my quarters, my mother is still in custody and I've been mostly left to my own devices."

"What you are suggesting carries a high degree of risk."

"It does, doesn't it? I understand if you think the whole thing sounds stupid and illogical, but this may be our only chance."

"This suggestion also carries a high degree of award. I will meet you in two hours."

Verelan felt as though she had been lifted off of her feet, and a broad grin appeared on her face. "Seen you then." The girls pressed the tips of

their fingers together before Verelan dashed off.

The next two hours were nothing but nerves and frenetic energy. Verelan wanted everything to be perfect but was satisfied with nothing. She made a fuss over her hair, her clothes, and briefly considered re-arranging the furniture. The two hours were up in the blink of an eye, and yet when she heard the chime on the door she wished for a few more minutes to prepare.

“Come in,” she answered, self conscious of the sound of her own voice for the first time in her life. The door slid open, and T’Lyra stepped inside. The Vulcan had not done a thing to change her appearance from the last time they saw each other, which made Verelan feel foolish for all of her efforts.

“Apologies,” She began. “I was fifty-nine seconds late.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Verelan answered with a smile. “Computer, play music. Jake told me about this one, an ancient Earth song. I heard it’s banned in the Romulan Star Empire for promoting dangerous ideals.”

The music began with a few bars of easy bass before a male voice began to sing:

Trailer’s for sale or rent. Rooms to let fifty cents...

Verelan went to the table where her mother had left a half-empty bottle of kali-fal, poured two glasses and offered one to T’Lyra. The Vulcan hesitated: glancing from the glass to Verelan, and back to the glass before taking it.

No phone, no pool, no pets. I ain’t got no cigarettes...

“It can go down harsh, if you’re not used to it,” Verelan warned. The girls raised their glasses and drank down the blue liquid. Verelan stifled a cough as it burned on the way down, but T’Lyra seemed entirely unbothered.

Ah, but two hours of pushin’ broom buys an eight by twelve four-bit room...

They set down their glasses and stepped closer. Even though her heart was racing and her fingertips shaking, Verelan felt bold enough to reach up to link her hands behind T’Lyra’s neck. They leaned closer to one another, closed their eyes and began to sway to the music.

I’m a man of means by no means. King of the road.

Their lips touched, briefly at first, and then again with prolonged enthusiasm. Still feeling bold, Verelan’s hands went up to the back of T’Lyra’s head and began to work loose her elaborate braids.

T’Lyra pulled away from Verelan’s lips just enough to whisper. “Would you consent to a mind meld?”

“Maybe” Verelan spoke just as softly when she answered. “Tell me what it’s like.”

“Two minds joined as one. A depth of intimacy that defies description.”

Verelan opened her eyes. “Yes. That’s what I want.”

T’Lyra placed her hand on the side of Verelan’s face. “This is my first time initiating a mind meld.” They looked into each other’s eyes, and Verelan took a deep breath before T’Lyra spoke again. “Your mind to my mind. Your thoughts to my thoughts.”

In an instant they were no longer separate consciousnesses, but one. First, their breathing and heartbeats were in sync, then sensations and feelings, and finally thoughts and memories were shared with such vivid clarity that it was as if each have lived the other’s life. T’Lyra and Verelan existed solely within their shared mind, but a few wisps of their physical surroundings leaked in, such as the voice singing in the background, though it sounded far away.

I know every engineer on every train. All of the children, and all of their names...

There was an interruption. Verelan was not aware enough to see what it was, all she knew was the abrupt severing of their link, which hit her with enough shock that she let out a pained shriek.

Every handout in every town...

The room felt foreign and wrong, and after a moment lost in a daze, Verelan turned her head and saw her mother standing in the doorway.

And every lock that ain’t locked when no one’s around...

“Computer, stop music.” Mheven ordered. She had her eyes locked on T’Lyra. “Go. Now.”

T’Lyra did not hesitate or look back as she sprinted out the door, her half-undone hair flowing down her back as she moved. Even in her state of fear and confusion, as Verelan watched her leave she still could spare a thought on how she had never realized just how long T’Lyra’s hair was.

At first, Mheven had no words for her daughter, and Verelan found the silence more uncomfortable than being scolded. If her mother was saying something, even in anger, Verelan knew what was on her mind. Now, though, all she could do was guess as she watched her mother slump down into a chair, hang her head, and rub her temples. Verelan was alert and shrank away from her mother, backing up until her back pressed against the wall. She tried to find some reassurance in the fact that her mother hadn’t yet reached for the bottle.

Mheven shook her head. “You have no idea what you have done.” She glanced toward the bottle but made no move. “I’m sure she coerced you

horribly.”

Verelan looked down and had to find the courage to respond. “I invited her here myself, and you’re acting as though you caught us in bed!”

“I would have preferred that.” Mheven looked up, and Verelan was surprised to see not anger but fear and hurt in her mother’s eyes. “One youthful mistake that could be ignored and forgotten. Instead, you have laid open your mind to an outsider. Your memories, your secrets, your most private thoughts...and not to mention the secrets you’ve kept for my benefit.”

“Your worst secret was already public knowledge...” Verelan muttered.

Her mother gave her a sharp look but otherwise ignored her daughter’s snide comment. “I hope you were right to trust her, Verelan, because it chills me to think what one of those people might do with such knowledge. And when you were already promised to Rai.”

“You told me yourselves that secret dalliances were acceptable!” Verelan snapped.

“Secret dalliances, Verelan! And never with an outsider.” Mheven closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I can’t stand to talk about this any longer. I need to lie down.”

With that, she stood up and left her daughter alone. Verelan stood in shock before she sank down to sit on the ground. She tried to take slow, deep breaths to try to calm herself but only felt the panic grow. Maybe her mother was right. Maybe melding with T’Lyra was a foolish mistake.

Chapter 9

There was no need for Mheven to punish her child, for Verelan became withdrawn and isolated all on her own. She rarely left her quarters, and all of the enthusiasm she once had for this trip to the station was gone. Her mind was torn apart, both wanting this torment to come to a quick end and dreading the return home. Once she left, T'Lyra would be out of her life forever.

Yet, all the while Verelan could not get T'Lyra out of her mind. At first she was sure it was nothing more than heartache and burning desire for someone she could not have, but so much time alone with herself made Verelan feel less like she was thinking about T'Lyra and more like she was feeling her, sensing her presence and aware that her feelings of longing were mutual. But all of that sounded insane, like the sad pining of someone who was far too lonely. She had to get out, if not to spend time with T'Lyra than at least to speak to Jake or Nog or anyone other than her own mother...who at least had stopped drinking, even if she did look at Verelan with disapproval.

Only five days remained until Verelan would have to leave Deep Space Nine, and she knew that if she didn't have some kind of closure with T'Lyra, Jake, and Nog she would regret it for the rest of her life. Five days until this fever dream of a trip was over and she had to return to... what? An arranged marriage to someone who (while agreeable) she did not desire. A career that she hadn't chosen for herself. The inevitability that she would become the matriarch of a House in rapid decline. A life without the person who filled her mind and heart in every waking moment. It all seemed so empty.

She spotted T'Lyra from across the promenade and rushed over, weaving in and out of the crowd. "T'Lyra!" Verelan called, and the Vulcan froze and stared as Verelan approached, but she softened when Verelan was near and held up her first two fingers. Verelan reached out to touch her fingertips and closed her eyes as she took in a deep breath and enjoyed the closeness they shared.

"I find your enthusiasm admirable." T'Lyra answered, staying still so their fingertips could touch a moment longer. "However, we agreed to be more secretive after...."

"I know...I got excited. I have an idea." A nervous smile appeared on Verelan's face, and she paused and looked away. Her heart fluttered, what she had in mind sounded ridiculous. "What if...What if I found a way to stay behind? On the station?"

T'Lyra pulled her fingers away. "That would not be logical. I am scheduled to depart with my family in thirteen days, four hours, and nineteen minutes."

"Yes, but if I go home I won't be able to freely cross the neutral zone whenever I please. What if we never see each other again?"

"Which means that if you stay here you will not be able to return home. You will be a defector with no family and few friends. I cannot condone such an illogical course of action."

Verelan blinked and took a deep breath. Her eyes itched and her voice trembled. "I don't think I could stand to be away from you."

"You won't be." T'Lyra held up her two fingers again, and Verelan reached out to touch them. "We are bonded. Touching, yet not touching. Apart, yet never apart."

"Is that what it is? Why I feel connected to you?"

T'Lyra nodded. "An unintended effect of our mind meld. I should not have initiated it, my mind is too young and undisciplined, and I was aware of that. While this is the outcome I wanted, it is still a complication."

Verelan made herself smile, only to comfort herself. She knew the expression on her face would make a difference to T'Lyra. "I think we've complicated each other's lives regardless, this way at least the absence is easier to bear. I can feel the link between us, but I have a hard time trusting that it will still hold strong over such long distances and for years at a time."

"Your skepticism is reasonable and logical, but for thousands of years Vulcans have found that such bonds are not affected by time or distance." T'Lyra held up one hand in a Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Verelan."

"Live long and prosper."

The pair shared no further words, and T'Lyra turned to go. Verelan watched her walk away and felt the growing fear that this might be the last time she saw T'Lyra. Her bondmate. Her T'hy'la. Her e'lev.

Chapter 10

On the journey home, Verelan and her mother never spoke a word of anything that happened on Deep Space Nine, or about much of anything, and when they returned to Ch'Rihan, Mheven busied herself with a new mission to rush her child into adulthood. She insisted that Verelan trim her unruly hair and arranged frequent meetings with Rai, her betrothed. "You're confused," her mother would say. "Everything will be set right when you understand what you're supposed to desire."

Except Rai was not desirable. He was pleasant. Verelan found no fault with him, but after such deep intimacy with T'Lyra it felt as though an indestructible wall stood between her and Rai. They found little to talk about aside from Rai's endless questions about the space station. Still, she enjoyed the time they spent together, less for the company and more for the fact that the long walks they took kept her out of the house. Verelan cherished the time away from her mother and grandmother and the constant reminders that her House was a diminished one.

As they turned back, Rai reached out to take Verelan's hand. They stood together for a moment, silently gazing into each other's eyes...and Verelan felt...nothing. There was no connection, no excitement, no swell of joy. There was only a void that reminded her of how much her heart ached for a Vulcan she would never see again.

Mirne i-Mirek t'Khaethaetreh was a frail woman with a domineering personality. Her frame was small and alarmingly thin, her white hair grew wild, and the left side of her face was soft and slack from the early stages of Tuvan Syndrome. And yet this tiny, seemingly weak woman was full of rage and fire and had the kind of bold courage and confidence that could shatter a person's ego with a word. Mheven had never stopped holding a healthy amount of fear for her own mother.

With Verelan out, this was Mheven's best opportunity to humble herself, face her fears, and ask her mother for advice. They sat in silence together in the garden before Mheven found the courage to speak, but she still couldn't bring herself to look her mother in the eye.

"It...was a mistake to bring Verelan with me."

"I tried to warn you." A smug smile curled onto Mirne's face, the poor control she had over the left side of her face exaggerated the expression. "So, how terrible was it?"

"Embarrassingly so. I had hoped that exposing her to other cultures would serve to demonstrate the superiority of our own, but instead she showed insatiable fascination."

"What else did you expect from a curious child?"

Mheven took a deep breath. "I think I failed to convey the gravity of this situation. This 'fascination' included befriending foreigners, allowing them to influence her, and..." She lowered her voice. They were alone, but to admit what Verelan had done brought her a deep sense of shame. "She...became involved with a Vulcan. *Involved*, ri'nanov." The fewer details she shared the better. This whole affair was messy enough without having to face the fact that her daughter's mind had been infected.

"Verelan's mistakes can be explained by youthful foolishness. What about your own?"

Mheven sat up a little straighter, and her eyes opened wider, but she regained her composure. "Ri'ranov, I'm not sure which missteps you mean."

"Mheven," Mirne sighed. "Getting drunk and starting fights is not behavior suitable for a senator."

She blinked and her heart raced as she scrambled to think up a quick strategy either to defend herself or evade the damning accusation. "So you heard about how I was viciously assaulted."

"Maybe you could have painted yourself as the victim if the footage had not already spread far and wide." Mirne raised her voice and spoke to her daughter as if she was still a small, disobedient child. "My guess is that the only thing that could save your reputation is if someone else has a scandal bad enough that yours fades into the background."

Mheven leaned back in her seat, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. "There is some good to have come from all this." She tried to bury her anger and fear as she tried to defuse the tension. "I haven't had a drop to drink since."

Mirne rolled her eyes. "Forgive my lack of excitement. I might have offered my congratulations if only you had done something about your dreadful habit before making an idiot of yourself and ruining what little remaining respectability our House had left."

"I was protecting my child!"

"And it seems like you did a poor job of that too." Mirne closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "I'm too tired for this. Leave me. I don't want to speak to you again until you have a solution as to how to repair your destroyed reputation."

The sun was beginning to set when Verelan returned home. Her House had been in both figurative and literal decay her entire life. From early childhood she had hazy memories of living in a beautiful home that was always full of visitors, among them the most influential people in the Empire. Now that beautiful home was a mess of deferred maintenance and empty aside from Verelan, her mother, her grandmother, and occasionally an uncle when his work with the Tal Shiar didn't keep him away (though it seemed more and more like he was trying to distance himself from his family.)

When Verelan returned home she rushed to her grandmother's side. Her mother and uncle acted as though their mother was some kind of

fearsome creature, but she had been nothing but kind and warm to Verelan.

Mirne did not move from her seat (moving much at all was difficult for her) but she gave her granddaughter a friendly smile. "You're back later than expected."

"I wanted to enjoy the weather, since it wasn't so sultry today," Verelan answered as she sat beside her grandmother.

"And here I was thinking it was because you enjoyed spending time with Rai," Mirne teased.

"I find him agreeable."

"But not as agreeable as someone else?" Mirne pressed.

Verelan froze and took a moment to study her grandmother's face. She was as warm and pleasant as ever, no signs of disappointment or anger, which made Verelan question whether her grandmother's question was a coincidence or if she found out about what happened on Deep Space Nine. "Forgive me, Hru'ri'ranov, I'm not sure what would give you that idea."

"So was your mother lying when she told me about your Vulcan sweetheart?"

A deep green blush colored Verelan's cheeks. She tried to recover, even though she knew the truth was plainly revealed on her face. "I think she may have misread a friendship of mine."

"Dearest Verelan." Marine leaned closer and took her granddaughter's hand. "I'm not angry with you. What I feel is pity because you've fallen into a trap that many of our kind are susceptible to. Something about Surak's followers is irresistible. So long as it's kept secret, there is no shame in it."

"You almost sound like you're talking from experience," Verelan teased. Anything to shift focus away from herself.

Mirne let go of Verelan's hand, leaned back and chuckled softly. "I haven't told a soul this. Verelan, do not betray my trust, but my husband was not your uncle's father."

Verelan felt a jolt of energy that made her spine shoot straight and nearly made her jump to her feet. "Hru'ri'ranov!" She stared wide-eyed at her grandmother, unable to accept that this respectable, elegant old woman was also the sort of person to have a secret half-Vulcan bastard. "If anyone found out that would ruin him."

"Which is why I kept it secret." Mirne spoke slowly and clearly, as if she was trying to explain a simple concept to a child too young to comprehend. "In fact, I have reason to believe that your father's interest in reunification had less to do with his ideals and more to do with his infatuation with the movement's leader."

"That isn't true!" Verelan snapped, actually springing to her feet this time. Even before her father's disgrace, her grandmother had made a hobby out of insulting her father, and every time it felt like a personal attack.

"We have no way of knowing. You weren't wrong for falling for the Vulcan girl or for any involvement, but the time has come to forget her and move on."

"I don't know that I can, hru'ri'ranov."

T'Lyra and her family ate their evening meal and cleaned up in silence. They still had another two weeks about the Vahklas before returning to Vulcan for a short while. V'Las, T'Lyra's mother, was the first to break the silence.

"I received word that Ivek's bondmate died unexpectedly in an accident." She spoke plainly, nothing more than stating the objective fact that this young Vulcan had died.

T'Lyra knew Ivek well, though she had not seen him since they were both very young. Ivek had always been the tallest among boys his age and was very quiet. He had sloppy handwriting (which, perhaps could have improved with practice since the last time they met) and had a brilliant mind for mathematics.

"The elders think that T'Lyra would be a suitable replacement." Again, she spoke plainly to state facts.

T'Lyra's eyes opened wider, a subtle display of emotion that was doubtlessly noticed by her parents. "Ko-mekh, I cannot honor that request." Her father raised a perplexed eyebrow. Even though her parents said nothing, she could feel their demands for further explanation. "I already have a bondmate."

"I do not understand how such an outcome could have occurred." For all of his Vulcan restraint, Tevak had a clear, acidic bite in his voice.

"I initiated a mind-meld with Verelan, and ever since we have been linked to each other. It was not my intent, but it is the reality of my situation."

"T'Lyra. Your mind is too young and undisciplined to safely initiate a meld. You behaved illogically."

"Yes, Sa-mekh, I did."

"...And with a Romulan..." V'Las added, but the other ignored her.

"Do you have an explanation for such behavior?"

“Not a logical one, no. I desired to be closer to her.”

“Desire. It is not logical.”

“No, Sa-mekh. It is not.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Tone shift begins here. The rest of this fic will include themes of major injuries, PTSD, and ableism throughout

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“Verelan.” A gentle male voice called her name

“Are you sure she can understand you?” A second voice asked, this one was female.

“There’s no damage to her language centers,” the first voice explained. “Though, it isn’t uncommon for a person to find themselves unable to speak as a psychological response to trauma.”

Verelan opened her eyes and immediately lifted her hands to shield her eyes from the light. The room was too bright and too cold, her left field of view was gone, her left arm felt heavy and awkward, and the right only moved at all with extreme force of will. “I can speak,” she answered, but she found her tongue and mouth just as difficult to control. The words came out slow and slurred, and the voice that came out didn’t sound like her own. She turned her head to look at the people who spoke to her. Two humans. The woman she had never seen before, and while she had no memory of ever seeing the man before, something about him seemed familiar.

“Try not to move too much just yet.” His voice was soft and kind, but he still did nothing to put her at ease. “You’ve sustained a head injury and radiation damage on the left side of your face. Your left eye could not be saved, and you can expect effects on memory and motor control.”

Verelan closed her eyes and let her arms fall to her sides. “No good news, then?”

“Well. If it’s any comfort, you were part of an effort that helped turn the tide of the Dominion War, and your baby is unharmed.”

“What war?” The full gravity of the doctor’s statement hit her a moment later, and her eyes snapped open. Verelan tried to sit up, but just lifting her head hit her with an unbearable wave of nausea. “What baby?” She had no memory of conceiving a child.

“It would seem that the gaps in your memory are vast.” He still spoke so soft and easy, and this time it did provide a bit of comfort. “Some might come back with time, but it might be best to make peace with the fact that some of your memories may be forever lost. For now it’s best to trust the process and try to rest.”

“Where am I?”

“Deep Space Nine, a space station,” he explained. “You’ve been here before, five years ago. Do you remember it at all?”

“No...I’ve never been here before.”

Touching, yet not touching. Apart, yet never apart.

Five years had passed since T’Lyra had seen Verelan, and her bondmate was still a constant presence in her life, a comforting presence that always took up a little space in the back of her mind. Their link made T’Lyra feel whole, even if it did complicate her life. Her inability to bond with another Vulcan was only a small inconvenience compared to other issues that arose. Verelan was an emotional and impulsive being, so full of fear and frustration, and their connection challenged T’Lyra’s abilities to control her own emotions. T’Lyra longed for a way to comfort her absent bondmate and only hoped that her own calm meditations would soothe Verelan’s troubled heart.

T’Lyra lived a lot of life in her lover’s absence. She attended Starfleet Academy and developed a deep friendship with her classmate, Nog. She began her career in Starfleet aboard the T’Kumbra under Captain Solok, and in such a short span of time she had already seen more of the horrors of war than she had ever expected, but the worst was one she was to present to witness. After six months on the front lines, the T’Kumbra arrived at Deep Space Nine. T’Lyra sought welcome respite from the horrors of war, but instead she felt an unexpected closeness, a deeply intimate connection the likes of which she hadn’t felt in five years. Verelan was here, in this place where they had met and bonded, and she was still hurt and suffering.

Between her duties and practicing for the upcoming baseball game that Solok had coordinated, T’Lyra did enough investigating to learn that she was correct. Verelan was here, she was hurt, and she was recovering in the infirmary. Due to confidentiality reasons, that was all she was able to learn

Verelan’s world had been reduced to the inside of Deep Space Nine’s infirmary, with most of her hours spent asleep or staring at the ceiling. Every day there were promises that a Romulan ship would come to take her home as soon as the logistics were sorted out, and everyday that piece of information slipped her mind.

In her convalescence, Verelan began to regain control of her body. She relearned how to dress and feed herself (even though it was difficult and awkward work) and could walk a short distance with a cane. Her mind, however, did not come back over to her control so easily. While her childhood memories were crystal clear, the past five years were an empty void. New memories didn’t want to stick either; she had forgotten the station’s doctor’s name so many times she gave up on asking. There were other ways in which her mind refused to cooperate.

Even with no injury to her remaining eye, she found herself unable to read, the letters scrambled into nonsense. Numbers made no sense to her. Headaches and dizzy spells were a constant reality.

The ship back home would eventually arrive, but Verelan doubted if she wanted to be on it. Her military career was over, and in her state she had no hope of starting in a political career like she was meant to. No matter how crushed she felt, her mother would surely take it worse.

The human doctor was back—Verelan was too proud to ask for his name again. As usual he towered over her as Verelan laid on her back on the biobed, but his face was still warm and kind. “If you’re feeling up to it, you have a visitor.”

“And who came all the way out to this space station to see me?” Verelan tried to make herself sit up, slow and steady to keep her head from spinning.

“Well, it’s more of a coincidence that the two of you happened to be here at the same time. I doubt if you remember, but you met here years ago. She’s a Vulcan named T’Lyra, and I was under the impression that the two of you were close.”

“That isn’t possible. I’ve met few Vulcans and none who I liked, but if she wants to speak to me, you may send her in.”

The Vulcan entered but was cautious to keep space between them and clasped her hand behind her back. She wore a Starfleet uniform (accented with teal blue) and her dark hair was arranged in braids. Verelan’s gaze went straight to those braids and she felt as though she was getting lost trying to trace the path of a maze. She had no recollection of ever seeing this woman before, but something about her felt safe and familiar.

She stepped closer. “Verelan,” she began. “Do you remember me?”

Verelan thought deeply, trying to put some concrete memory to that sense of familiarity, but nothing came to her. “I don’t remember ever meeting you, but I know that I care about you deeply and that I trust you.” Why, she could not guess, and if she thought about it it confused her.

“Enough to stay with me for the next two weeks while my ship undergoes repairs?”

“I can’t say why, but I wish we had more than two weeks.”

Chapter 12

It would have been more logical to speak to Captain Solok sooner, but conflicting schedules meant that “at the next convenience” had to become “five minutes before baseball practice.” T’Lyra approached the Captain on the way to the holosuite. She was still dressed in her uniform and hadn’t bothered to change into athletic clothing. There was no need, for she had no intentions of participating in today’s practice...or any of them.

“Captain,” she began. “I will be unable to participate in the upcoming baseball game.”

“Are you injured?” Solok asked. There was no concern or worry in his voice or on his face. He only sought a straightforward explanation.

“No, Captain. I have recently learned that my bondmate is on board.”

Solok raised an eyebrow. This was not an expression of curiosity or interest, but one of stern disapproval. “The Romulan?”

“Her name is Verelan. Names, Captain, are important to all, but especially to Romulans.”

“I fail to see a logical reason indulge the whims of an emotional species.”

“Verelan recently acquired a traumatic brain injury. She is adapting to life with a new and significant disability and has no one else to help her.”

“And because of this you refuse to honor your commitment, Ensign?” His tone was accusatory. It seemed they would disagree on which choice was the most logical one,

“Assisting a disabled woman seems to be a more logical use of my time, Captain, rather than spending hours in the Holosuite playing a game.”

Solok narrowed his eyes, but T’Lyra remained cool and unfazed: back straight, shoulders back, and her hands clasped behind her back. She kept her eye contact with the Captain while he considered her request.

“Very well. I understand the logic in granting this request, but I expect a list of suitable replacements.” Solok began to step past T’Lyra. Practice would begin soon.

“I have already compiled such a list. I have an additional request.”

Solok raised his eyebrow again. “What is this request?”

“A leave of absence to last the duration of our time on Deep Space Nine so that I will be able to devote more time to assisting Verelan.”

“Your duties have already been reduced for the duration of our stay, but I will give this request the consideration which it is due when I receive the request in writing.”

The consideration which it was due. T’Lyra’s interaction with the Captain led her to the prediction that Solok would find her request to be due very little consideration.

“I appreciate the consideration, Captain. Have a productive practice.”

Released from her commitments, T’Lyra returned to the infirmary. Three days had passed since she last visited her bondmate, but she was more interested in speaking to the human doctor first. When she arrived, she was greeted by a young Andorian nurse with dark blue skin and her white hair in a long braid down her back.

“Is Doctor Bashir available to talk?” T’Lyra asked.

The nurse nodded. “He is. I’ll go get him.”

Moments later Doctor Bashir appeared. His eyelids looked heavy from fatigue, but he still kept his usual mildly pleasant expression on his face. “T’Lyra. I take it you’re here to see Verelan?”

“Yes, but I had hoped to ask you some questions first.”

“Well, if you were hoping to ask more questions about Verelan, I’m afraid ethical standards prevent me from divulging further details.” Even in his refusal, Bashir was warm and friendly.

“Doctor, you do not seem to understand the nature of our relationship. Verelan is my bondmate.”

“And I still cannot breach standards of confidentiality, but you may ask your questions, and I’ll answer them if I am able.”

“Is Verelan stable enough to leave the infirmary?”

“I would say so, but what’s holding her back more is her ability to live independently. She still needs a lot of support and someone to give it.”

“I can offer that support, for the next eleven days.” A gamble. Captain Solok had not released her from all of her responsibilities yet, but T’Lyra was confident in her ability either to negotiate or to find someone to help when she could not.

“And that should be long enough to bridge the gap until the transport back to Romulus arrives. If this is what Verelan wants, I see no reason to

object.”

Doctor Bashir led T’Lyra through the infirmary, and the moment Verelan saw her bondmate her excitement surged so strongly that she sprang up and tried to get to her feet. Her balance, however, couldn’t match her energy, and her knees buckled. T’Lyra rushed to her side to catch her and helped ease her back onto the bio bed.

“T’Lyra.” Verelan grinned for the first time since her injury. “I still have no idea who you are, but yours is the first name I’ve remembered.” She glanced past T’Lyra and to the human doctor. “Yours never seems to stick.”

“It’s Julian Bashir, and I’m happy to give as many reminders as necessary.” He fell silent for a moment to let the two young women enjoy each other’s company before he spoke again. “Verelan. A few days ago T’Lyra offered to let you stay with her for a while. If this is still what you want, you can leave the infirmary with her today.”

“It is. I’m eager to get out of here.” Verelan’s voice had a bright effervescence, much like when they first met when they were younger.

“Wonderful. In that case I have a few forms to fill out, and then I’ll get you a wheelchair.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Verelan snapped. All of the joy and excitement was gone from her voice. “I am capable of walking out of here with dignity and on my own two feet.”

“Verelan.” T’Lyra spoke this time, “There is nothing shameful or undignified about having a disability.”

“You might be right.” Verelan tried to get back to her feet, and T’Lyra moved to support her weight. “But I don’t have a disability.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Cw: mention of suicide

After a long and agonizing journey, Verelan accomplished what she set out to do: she made it back to T'Lyra's quarters upright and on her own two feet...in a way. She had only gone a short way before her legs began to shake and her head began to spin. T'Lyra supported most of her weight and held her upright, while Verelan struggled to put one foot in front of the other. T'Lyra never showed any sign of frustration or impatience.

Verelan breathed a heavy sigh of relief when they reached T'Lyra's quarters and the door slid open; she was in a daze as if she was living through some fever dream she could barely remember. Her shoulders slumped, and she turned her head to look at T'Lyra. "Are all Vulcans as patient as you?"

"It would not be logical to become frustrated with someone who is...experiencing difficult circumstances." Now that they were alone, T'Lyra was bold enough to support more of her bondmate's weight, practically carrying her to bed. "You have over-exerted yourself and need to rest. Perseverance will aid you in recovery, but ego will not."

Straight away, Verelan fell into a deep sleep, the kind where she closed her eyes and felt as though only a moment had passed before she woke up hungry and with every muscle in her body heavy and aching. She was able to limp to the table to join T'Lyra for an evening meal of plomeek soup, and even though she found Vulcan food bland she was too hungry to complain.

They ate in silence, each for different reasons. For T'Lyra it was an old habit born from Vulcan custom, but Verelan found motor control so difficult that she couldn't imagine taking a part of her concentration to focus on a conversation. Every now and then she glanced at T'Lyra to make sure the Vulcan wasn't staring at her. No matter how hard she tried to keep her hands steady, they shook, and every movement was slow and uncomfortable. Having a pair of eyes on her made it all the worse.

T'Lyra finished her soup well before Verelan and sat and waited while Verelan struggled her way through soup that was getting cold. Verelan set down her spoon. "I'm sorry this is taking so long. If you have something else you would rather do, I wouldn't mind."

"Practice is essential for re-learning these skills, but if you need additional assistance, you need only to ask."

"I'd rather starve than be spoon-fed like an infant." Verelan sighed. "Do you have anything more to say about my ego?"

"No, I don't find it necessary to repeat myself."

Another sigh, and a heavy moment of silence passed before Verelan spoke again. "I don't understand it. I don't understand any of it. I know I've never met you, but I feel connected to you and somehow I know you feel the same."

T'Lyra stood up and began to collect the dishes. "We were very close. If you would consent to a mind meld, I can restore the memories we shared when we melded last."

"Absolutely not." Verelan shook her head. "Nothing is more private than a person's mind. I don't know what sort of person would agree to open up like that, but it's not me."

"You are right. One's mind is a deeply private place, and to meld is deeply intimate. I respect your boundaries, but I do think it would help."

Verelan smiled. She still retained early memories of the uncharitable things her mother used to say about Vulcans, that their cold logic stripped them of any sense of ethics and that they felt entitled to pry into the minds of everyone around them. T'Lyra at least wasn't like that.

"The Station's Romulan liaison wishes to speak with you," T'Lyra continued. "I arranged a meeting for tomorrow morning."

"I wish you hadn't." Verelan sighed. "I can't allow myself to be seen in this condition."

"Improvements will be slow and gradual, Verelan. If you cannot make peace with your current state, you will never allow yourself to be seen by anyone."

"That sounds much more pleasant to be honest." Verelan fought to get to her feet, one hand gripping tightly on the edge of the table to support herself. "I need to get back to sleep."

Verelan fell into another deep sleep that seemed to last only a moment before she awoke to T'Lyra gently pressing on her shoulder.

"Verelan."

Verelan opened her eyes and moaned softly. Her body still ached.

"I realize that uninterrupted rest is necessary for your recovery, but it was necessary to awaken you with enough time to prepare for your meeting with the Romulan liaison."

"What meeting?" Verelan tried to sit up but was hit with a wave of nausea and only got so far as to prop herself up on her elbows.

“The liaison requested a meeting, which I arranged. He wished to inform you of the details of the current state of the war and the Romulan Star Empire.”

“Not looking forward to that one.” Verelan pushed past her discomfort and forced herself to sit up. “How much longer do I have?”

“Fifty eight minutes.”

Verelan needed nearly all that time to get ready. She was able to do everything on her own, even though her head was spinning, her fingers felt as though they belonged to someone else, and she had to pause twice to sit down to keep herself from dry heaving. She also lost time staring in shock at the face in the mirror. Her mind’s eye hadn’t caught up with her own perception of her appearance, and where she expected to see a youth with unkempt hair she saw a very different person. Her hair was cropped in the military style (a change she didn’t remember making), and angry scars marked the left side of her face.

The appointment was to take place in a spare meeting room on the promenade, and Verelan made her way to location the same way she had left the infirmary: with T’Lyra supporting her weight so she still had the satisfaction of being, technically, upright. This time she made a greater effort to hide her struggles. She would not be seen showing weakness to one of her own people.

When they arrived at the meeting room, a Romulan man was already inside, sitting at the desk. He had a short, round build, his hair was beginning to go gray, and he did not rise to greet her. Instead he narrowed his eyes on T’Lyra. “We will be discussing sensitive matters regarding the Romulan Star Empire. Surely you understand why an outsider cannot be present.”

“I do,” T’Lyra answered before she turned to Verelan. “I will be in the holosuite. My shipmate will be conducting their baseball practice. I can observe and offer advice even though I will not be playing.” She extended her index and middle finger to Verelan, but Verelan made no move toward her.

As T’Lyra turned to go, Verelan sat down across from the liaison. “We haven’t met before, have we?” She tried to keep her outlook bright and effervescent even though she felt frightened and apprehensive about the whole thing.

“No we have not.” His words were clipped and stern. “My name is Hexce tr’Liun.”

Wonderful. She would forget that in less than five minutes.

Hexce slid a PADD across the table. “To read at your own convenience, explaining the full details of years of war would take time that I do not have.”

Verelan looked down at the PADD and felt another wave of nausea, but kept the dry-heaving at bay. She couldn’t read the damn thing.

Hexce spent their meeting explaining the short version of what happened in the war so far and the Romulan Star Empire’s involvement (but he still talked like a man who loved the sound of his own voice). Verelan only gave a token effort into paying attention; she had no hope of retaining anything anyway. What she did hope to remember were the personal details: her brief service record, the name of the ship she served on, and so on. Verelan clung to those little pieces of information with desperation, not only because they were all she had to recall a life she had forgotten but also in the hope that something would be a key to unlock more buried memories. Nothing worked, though. These were all more whisps to fade into the distance.

“If you have no further questions,” Hexce said after a while. “That should cover everything.”

“I do have questions, though. Lots.”

“My time, Verelan, is limited. I can only entertain your most pressing concerns.”

“The father of my child?”

“What reason do I have to know such personal details?”

Verelan looked down. That was a stupid question, the answer to which was likely to remain a mystery for the rest of her life. “Do you know how my family has been?”

Hexce chuckled and shook his head. “Forgive me, it’s strange to think just how much has slipped through your faulty memory. Verelan, you have no family.”

Another wave of nausea gripped her, and this one she couldn’t control. She doubled over and tried to choke down the spasms that threatened to make her start dry heaving again. After a few deep breaths she looked up again. “Elaborate, please. I do remember having a family.” Verelan spoke as if she was out of breath.

“Three years have passed since your grandmother’s death.”

No surprise. Verelan’s grandmother had been in poor health for years.

“Two years have passed since your mother died from her disgrace, and your uncle has been neither seen nor heard from since.”

Died from her disgrace: a euphemism for a situation where one chose to end their life instead of living with shame.

“And the nature of her disgrace?” Verelan braced herself for more devastating news, but she could not guess what it might be. Her memories of her mother were of a woman who was stern, quick to anger, and deeply valued tradition. It was no surprise that she chose death above dishonor, but what vexed Verelan was she might have done to fall so far.

“Rapid decline after your father became involved with the reunification movement that resulted in extreme alcoholism, erratic behavior, and the loss of her senate seat.” Which meant that her House would be forever barred from the political sphere. A House of one, or two if she chose to keep the baby.

“My father...” Verelan’s voice was soft and distant. Some memories came back, but felt like a dream. “I do remember that, and that he’s been presumed dead.”

Hexce nodded. “You know, I used to admire the women of House Khaethaetreh. You seem to have a generational tradition of enduring dishonor and somehow recovering gracefully. I suppose your mother’s mistakes were a step too far.” He rose from his seat and came around the other side of the desk. Verelan stayed seated a moment longer, finding her balance and getting to her feet was no small task. “We’ve run out of time. In seven days, the T’Met will be arriving, and you will be able to return home another three days after.”

“Will I be making the journey alone?”

“No, your betrothed will accompany you.”

“Rai?” Verelan did remember the boy she had been promised to, even if she never recalled seeing him past the age of fifteen. What a patient and understanding man, if he still wanted her after all of her family troubles and her grievous injuries!

Hexce chuckled. “Element, no. Rai and his family wanted nothing more to do with your disgraced House. Luckily for you my daughter Odime shares my admiration for the resilience of Khaethaethreh women. Thank her when you see her, I doubt if you would have any reputation without her support, but I suppose I was too optimistic to hope you would remember her courtship.”

“That never happened.” Her mind raced trying to find any distant memories that would confirm or deny this man’s statement, but there was nothing. Only memories of Rai when they were young, but none that suggested he was displeased with her. Nothing Hexce told her (aside from her grandmother’s death) made sense with the way she remembered her family. “I have no memory of that.”

“You have no memory of a lot of things. I will leave you to process it. Just, please, separate yourself from the Vulcan before Odime arrives.”

Chapter 14

With no hope of making it all the way back to her quarters on her own, Verelan made the shorter journey to Quarks to wait for T'Lyra. The first few steps gave her a much needed swell of pride to be going somewhere all on her own, but she forgot that feeling less than halfway through when the whole undertaking proved more challenging than she expected. She was slow and unsteady and sore by the time she was able to slump down on a barstool. Her heart was pacing, and she was short of breath as if she had been running.

The bar was lively, but not crowded. This was still the most sensory stimulation she had experienced since her injury, and the lights and sounds blurred into a chaotic swirl of clinking glasses, half-audible conversations, and Dabo wheels. Verelan closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"You feeling alright?"

Verelan opened her eyes. The Ferengi proprietor, Quark, stood in front of her. Having a conversation to focus on made her surroundings seem less overwhelming.

"I'd feel much better if I had a glass of cold water."

"You look like you need it, but just so you know, the water isn't complimentary." Quark kept a friendly demeanor, but spoke as if he was explaining something to a child who had to hear the same lesson over and over.

"It's fine, this is what I need."

"Well, if you want something a little more interesting, I'm pleased to announce that our replicators are now capable of making Romulan ale. I'm curious to know what you think."

"No thank you...I'm pregnant."

"Am I offering congratulations or condolences?"

"I'm not sure what to make of the situation myself."

"Well, that water will be on the house regardless."

"How generous." Verelan rolled her eyes.

"That is generous for a Ferengi."

Verelan turned her head to see who spoke. There were two empty seats on her left, and on the other side a Klingon with one eye. Verelan glanced away quickly, afraid that the Klingon would think she was staring and take it as an insult. She didn't want to find out what happened to people who accidentally insulted Klingons.

"I don't mind a few curious stares, Romulan. I've grown accustomed to it. In time, you will too. Scars are a sign of having survived!"

Verelan shrank back, suddenly self-conscious of...everything: her scars, the way she walked, , the way she struggled with simple tasks. Quark returned and set a glass of water in front of her, but Verelan only looked down at it. She didn't want to be seen with her shaking hands and awkward movements.

"Fortunately for you and I, we were born with a spare eye."

She let out a soft laugh. "That sounds like something my father would have said." Thank the Elements she still had fond, clear memories of her father. Thinking about him gave her a bit more confidence. "He came back from a skirmish with one leg." She smirked at the Klingon. "Never did figure out whose it was."

"HA!" The Klingon slammed a hand down on the table. "That one I have not heard before! I will have to remember it!"

"Never thought I'd earn a Klingon's approval in anything." Verelan dared to reach for her water and took a sip, trying to force herself not to care about her shaking hands or that she had to use both hands to hold the glass, like a very young child.

"And not long ago I would have never imagined having a pleasant conversation with a Romulan. This war has pushed everyone past their limit, and has proven that anyone is capable of courage and honor. Klingons, Humans, Romulans, and even a few Ferengi." His eye narrowed on Quark. "Very few Ferengi!"

"I appreciate the encouraging words." She took another sip of water. "But my worst injuries are the ones that can't be seen."

"They always are, young Romulan, but take pride in every scar, every lasting injury, for these are the signs that you are a survivor, a warrior who is remarkably difficult to kill!"

Verelan smiled and looked down. This was more attention that she wanted. She turned her head and noticed that a group of Vulcans were descending the stairs from the upper level. T'Lyra was with them. Most of the Vulcans didn't stay around, but T'Lyra went straight to Verelan's side. T'Lyra walked toward her bondmate at a clipped pace, and a middle aged Vulcan man with dark hair and pale eyes lingered behind her.

"Is this your bondmate who requires constant assistance?" the male Vulcan asked. He didn't have the usual flat tone Verelan associated with

Vulcan speech, there was an acidic bite in each word.,

“She had a private meeting, Captain,” T’Lyra answered.

“And a shorter walk from the meeting room to here,” Verelan added.

The Vulcan captain glanced from Verelan to T’Lyra. “Very well. Am I correct in predicting that your presence at today’s practice was a rare exception?”

“You are, but if I am able, I intend to watch the final game. I have friends on both teams. If we do not see one another before the game, may your remaining practice sessions be productive.” T’Lyra offered her hand to Verelan so she could steady herself as she got down from the barstool, and the pair left.

Verelan was exhausted and agitated when they returned to T’Lyra’s quarters. As soon as they were inside the door, Verelan repeated everything that she had been told in her meeting, afraid that if she waited a moment longer it would all slip away. She paused briefly when she slumped down into a chair, took a deep breath to calm herself and to take the time to make sure that she was including every detail, and continued on. T’Lyra simply listened, unbothered by her bondmate’s frantic emotions.

“I don’t trust him,” she said when she was sure she was done sharing. “And don’t tell me I have no logical reason not to, because I know that.”

“Actually, I think skepticism is logical in this situation. You have been asked to accept information that you can neither confirm nor deny.”

“Then what should I do? Because I can’t accuse him of lying when I have no proof.”

“Some facts can be confirmed via official records, such as deaths and changes in political office.”

“Which you would not be able to access.” And it wouldn’t solve her biggest mysteries: the father of her child, or this woman with whom she allegedly had a relationship when there was not yet any official marriage.

“I can attempt to find someone who is able.”

There was a heavy silence where Verelan looked into T’Lyra’s eyes. She knew what she wanted to say but couldn’t find the courage to say it. Before she spoke, she looked away. “I want to do the mind meld.”

“Are you certain? Recently you were resistant to the idea.” T’Lyra took Verelan’s hand, and that simple touch sparked a connection between them that assured Verelan that she was sharing this moment with someone she cared for and needed to trust.

“T’Lyra, I need my memories back.”

“Manage your expectations. I can only guarantee the restoration of memories we shared.”

“I’ll take what I can get.”

“And in an agitated state, the meld will be at best unpleasant and at worst dangerous.”

Verelan closed her eyes and tried to breathe deeply, but it didn’t seem to calm her racing mind.

“Computer, play music,” T’Lyra said. A few bars of a soft bass rhythm began like something from a dream before the male singer began.

Trailers for sale or rent. Rooms to let fifty cents.

Verelan opened her eyes. “Have I heard this before?”

T’Lyra nodded. “Five years ago, and presumably not since. You told me this kind of music was illegal in the Romulan Star Empire.”

Verelan didn’t recall that conversation, but she did feel a familiar sense of intimacy when T’Lyra placed her fingertips on the side of her face and said, “Your mind to my mind, your thoughts to my thoughts.”

It came back all at once...not all of it, most of the last five years was still a void, but the rush of this sudden expansion of her memories was almost too much to handle. Where previously there had been nothing, now memories were integrated into her mind as if they had been there all along: her first arrival on Deep Space Nine, seeing the wormhole and meeting T’Lyra, studying together, the fight between their parents, their first meld, their difficult goodbye...

T’Lyra probed deeper, trying to catch wisps of memories that had been destroyed but found nothing but useless shadows: her grandmother on her deathbed, her mother drunk and yelling, Rai with a heavy look in his eyes.

Verelan gasped for air when T’Lyra ended the meld, and tears began to well in her eyes. This...was a different woman in front of her, not a stranger she felt as though she could trust but someone she used to love deeply, and maybe still loved deeply. The memories were there, but Verelan was too overwhelmed to know how to process them.

“I...I need to lie down.” Her voice was shaky and frightened. T’Lyra nodded and helped Verelan to her feet. She was less steady on her feet than usual. “And I want you beside me, at least for a little while. I feel like all those years apart were a waste.”

“Verelan, that time was not wasted, but with only days remaining together, it would behoove us not to waste the time we have.”

Chapter 15

T'Lyra laid still beside Verelan until her bondmate fell asleep. She would have liked to stay by Verelan's side and savor the peace and stillness, but it was early in the day, and she had much to do. Years ago, when she was first on the station, she recalled that Jake Sisko mentioned that the Cardassian tailor had a stint working on Romulus.

Jake. T'Lyra had hoped to spend more time with her old childhood friend while she was here, but time had a way of getting away from her. Caring for Verelan took most of her time, and many of the humans on the station made an effort to avoid the crew of the T'Kumbra. Not that it was logical for them to do so, the rivalry was between Sisko and Solok and no one else...Not that T'Lyra found said rivalry entirely logical.

Before she left, T'Lyra placed a gentle hand on Verelan's shoulder to wake her, but Verelan did not stir. Best to let her sleep and heal; this errand would not take long.

T'Lyra returned to the Promenade, walking with purpose and at a clipped pace as she made her way through the station's corridors. When she arrived at Garak's shop, he was assisting a customer by holding up samples of brightly colored silks for a tall human woman to inspect. He paused his work for just a moment to glance at T'Lyra as she entered.

"Welcome," he called in a voice that was bright yet hid a secret slyness. "Make yourself at home, I will be able to help you shortly."

"I hope to speak with you privately," T'Lyra answered.

"That, too, can be accommodated."

While Garak carried on with his work, T'Lyra stepped back and waited with her hands clasped behind her back. She felt no need to busy herself with browsing the shop's selection for the sake of killing time, not when she had no current need for new clothing. Garak did not need much time to finish with this customer: they picked a sample of blue-green silk, discussed a few details, and after Garak made some notes in his PADD they said their goodbyes, and the woman went on her way.

"Now." Garak neatly folded his silk samples and tidied up his supplies. "What private matter is on your mind?"

"I understand that you once worked on Romulus."

"And why, may I ask, does it matter if a person changes their career and lives in a different place?" His answer was evasive, but his tone was playful, teasing.

"I want to know if you have credentials that would allow you to access official Romulan records."

"My dear, I'm afraid I was only a simple gardener back in those days, but I might be able to be of assistance, depending on what exactly you need."

"Confirmation of dates and causes of death and changes of political position. Verelan, my bondmate, has been told information that she is reluctant to believe."

"Sounds simple enough."

"And any additional information on the Romulan liaison, Hexce. Verelan does not trust him."

Garak gave T'Lyra a knowing look. "I used to know Hexce. Verelan is smart not to trust him. Their houses have been feuding for generations, and the animosity between him and Verelan's mother was especially bitter."

"I will inform Verelan of this. That was all I wished to ask, we will talk again soon. Live long and prosper." T'Lyra held up her right hand to give a Vulcan salute before she turned to go.

When she returned to her quarters, the lights were low and she found Verelan sitting up in bed.

"I nearly panicked when I woke up alone," she teased. Her tone was light and playful, but she looked exhausted: her eyelids were heavy and her face was pale.

T'Lyra went to the bed and sat beside her. "Apologies. I incorrectly assumed that you would be asleep for at least a few hours and chose not to disturb you."

"It's fine. I have a lot to process, to have some time alone was good for me." Verelan rested her head on T'Lyra's shoulder and took her hand. The pair sat in silence before T'Lyra spoke.

"I spoke to Garak."

"Garak?"

"The tailor. He once worked as a gardener on Romulus and may be the only impartial party with the credentials to confirm Hexce's statements."

Verelan turned her head to bury her face against T'Lyra's shoulder. "Elements, don't I hope he's wrong?"

T'Lyra kissed the top of Verelan's head. "While you recently learned of several tragedies, if Hexced has obscured the truth, one must consider

what ulterior motives would cause him to justify such deception. Garak warned that Hexce was a bitter rival of your mother.”

“It’s more than that.” Verelan tilted her head to look at T’Lyra, and it seemed as if in those few short moments her exhaustion had grown, and her eyes glistened with tears. “If he’s right I killed my mother.”

“You are not responsible for her actions.”

“I’m not guiltless either, or did I misinterpret the memories you restored? She fought your father because of me and wrecked her reputation shortly after.”

“My previous statement still stands. She did not act on your behest.”

Silence again. Verelan buried her face back into T’Lyra’s shoulder, and T’Lyra placed a comforting hand on the back of Verelan’s head. No attempts to meld again, just warmth and physical touch. With Verelan’s initial reluctance toward melding, T’Lyra dared not try again without express consent.

Verelan didn’t move her head when she spoke again, and so her voice was soft and muffled. “I shouldn’t have survived.” She shook and took shallow, rapid breaths to keep herself from weeping. “I have nothing left and my only hope lies with someone who likely wants to manipulate me.” Putting her thoughts into words pushed Verelan over the edge, She could no longer control herself, and once the tears began to stream from her eyes, Verelan rolled to her other side to turn her back to T’Lyra. “You can go if you want. I imagine I’ve become very undesirable to you, with such vulgar displays of emotion.”

“Actually, I always found your emotions engaging.”

Verelan sat up and turned her head to look at her bondmate. She tried to force a smile. “I bet the other Vulcans hate that.”

“They are unaware. And you do have other options, if you are willing to not return to Romulus.”

“What other options, staying alone on this station and hiding for the rest of my days?”

“I am willing to request reassignment or resign so that we may remain together.” T’Lyra inched closer and put her hands on Verelan’s shoulders, Her touch was firm, grounding.

Verelan turned away and took a few heavy breaths. She hung her head and slumped her shoulders. “No…Please no, none of that. It wouldn’t be honorable for you to shirk your duties in the middle of a war. It isn’t logical either. I’m not worth any of that.”

“This would not be the first time my feelings for you have driven me to behave illogically.”

Verelan placed each hand flat on the bed beside her and braced herself as if she meant to lift herself off of the bed. Instead, though, she let out a heavy sigh and turned around to face T’Lyra. “Please don’t do anything stupid because of me.”

T’Lyra raised one hand and placed it against Verelan’s cheek. “Verelan, it is already five years too late for that.”

A smile appeared on Verelan’s face, one that reached her eyes (which still shined with tears). Both she and T’Lyra leaned in close and lingered inches apart before closing the space with a passionate kiss.

Chapter 16

Two days passed with little incident, only that each passing hour brought Verelan and T'Lyra to a point where a decision would need to be made, and yet they were no closer to making that decision. Verelan found herself with more strength and energy and used it to devote more time and purpose to physical and occupational therapy. She was determined to return to her home planet with a greater sense of dignity, even if the human doctor warned her that her goals were lofty and reassured her that there was nothing undignified about her condition.

Verelan's renewed sense of optimism was not lessened. She put more effort into re-learning how to read, and while she found it discouragingly difficult, a little more came back to her. With sufficient focus she could read slowly, but too slowly to be able to make much sense of anything. T'Lyra did point out that if the skill never returned, the computer was perfectly capable of reading text aloud. Verelan also dove headlong into a program meant to teach handwriting to young children, which T'Lyra also pointed out was not a necessary skill if it proved to be too difficult. Still, Verelan cherished the small sense of accomplishment after so much was taken from her.

She and T'Lyra found a certain peaceful closeness in existing near one another and engaging in their separate work: Verelan practicing her reading and writing and T'Lyra attending to personal business. After a time, T'Lyra set her PADD down on the table.

"Garak will be arriving soon," she said. "He has results from his investigation and wishes to discuss the matter privately."

"Garak...the tailor? The Cardassian?" There was a bright spark of excitement in Verelan's voice. It wasn't that she was thrilled to speak to Garak, but that she was pleased with herself for remembering both a name and the person to whom it belonged.

T'Lyra nodded. "Garak the Cardassian tailor who had a history working on Romulus."

"I'll get ready as fast as I can." Verelan rose to her feet but didn't move in her usual cautious manner and lost her balance, but T'Lyra was quick enough to catch her.

"Do not allow your renewed confidence to lead you to overestimate your abilities."

Verelan found that (as usual) T'Lyra was right. Her strength and energy didn't match her expectations, and just a sonic shower and a change of clothes left her drained and ready for a break, and not a minute after she slumped back into her chair there was a chime at the door.

"Come in," T'Lyra answered, and when the door slid open Garak stepped inside.

Verelan moved as if she meant to stand (moving carefully this time), but Garak shook his head. "Oh no, no need for that. Let me come to you." He took a seat beside her, and T'Lyra sat on his other side. "I hope you don't mind if we dispense with the usual pleasantries and get right to business."

"I prefer direct communication," T'Lyra answered.

"Of course." Garak shifted in his seat and turned his attention to Verelan. "Every verifiable fact that Hexce told you is true."

Verelan looked away. It should have come as a relief that (in this regard) Hewxce had not been deceptive, but it meant that she could no longer hang onto some distant hope that her family was still alive. She took a deep breath. "So I should trust him?"

"Absolutely not. I still have concerns over that which cannot be verified. Namely, the alleged relationship between you and his daughter. If there is deception, they have been very clever to avoid claiming that the two of you are married, as such records could be confirmed."

She took another deep breath and tried to process what Garak told her. "You sound very sure that there is deception."

"The sole surviving member of a disgraced rival house who still holds a considerable amount of land...even if you did enter into this relationship with this woman, I find it hard to believe that it was willing and without coercion."

Another deep breath. "And these people are my only allies on Ch'Rihan."

"Not necessarily," T'Lyra answered. "Garak, if you have no further insight, I have matters I wish to discuss alone with Verelan."

"Then I will leave you to it." Garak stood up. "Consider what I told you carefully."

T'Lyra watched Garak leave and took Verelan's hand when the door closed behind him. "You may be able to find another ally in your child's father or his family."

Verelan's heart jumped, and she squeezed T'Lyra's hand. "You found out who he is?"

"No, but I have narrowed down the possibilities. Based on how far along you are in your pregnancy, the child was most likely conceived on board the ship where you served, and I have acquired the crew manifest."

Her heart began to flutter. "Then start reading them off, and we'll see if anything sparks my memory."

"Temper your optimism, Verelan. There is no way of knowing if a name alone is enough to trigger a lost memory,"

"I still want to try."

"There were few survivors. He is unlikely to be still alive."

"I'm aware of that."

T'Lyra picked her PADD up, found the file with the crew manifest, and began to read off the list of names. The ship had a small crew, but with each unfamiliar name she heard, Verelan felt her sense of hopeful confidence dissolve. When she reached the end of the list, T'Lyra set the PADD back on the table and gave Verelan a thoughtful look.

"Am I correct to assume that you do not recall having sexual relations with any of these people?"

"S'Talon tr'Sei is the only name I recognize, but it's only the name. I couldn't say who he was or what he was to me."

"Then we are no closer to finding an answer."

Verelan's shoulders slumped. She knew T'Lyra was right, that recognition of a name meant nothing without further context, but she was so desperate for answers that she didn't want to abandon the idea so easily. "What if we melded again?"

"The last time we were only able to recover memories that we shared. What you hope to achieve may be beyond the scope of what can be feasibly accomplished."

"But there's no harm in trying, is there? And now we have a name, something to search for."

They looked into each other's eyes for a long moment before T'Lyra placed a gentle yet firm hand on Verelan's face. "Manage your expectations, Verelan. Your mind to my mind, your thoughts to my thoughts."

For the second time since Verelan's injury, two minds became one. With no distracting background music and no lingering hesitation on Verelan's part, the depth of intimacy was stronger than before. Verelan allowed T'Lyra to probe more deeply into the forgotten realm that was the past five years. Again, there was nothing tangible to grasp onto, aside from the image of one young man's face. There were no memories or other knowledge, but Verelan knew who he was. S'Talon. Their minds separated, and after a gasp, Verelan gave T'Lyra a wide-eyed look.

"I found no further memories of this man. We know what he looks like, but have no more proof."

Verelan looked down. Again, she knew T'Lyra was right, but she couldn't bring herself to abandon hope.

Chapter 17

Seven days had passed since her initial meeting with Hexce. The T'Met arrived and docked at the station earlier that day, and Verelan was minutes away from another meeting. She was unsure of what to expect or what choices she would ultimately have to make, but Garak's warnings gave her a knot of anxiety that killed her appetite and made the shaking in her hands worse. Her hope had been to see Hexce again with significant and obvious progress in her recovery, but in spite of her enthusiastic effort her condition and abilities remained the same.

"I want to walk into Hexce's office on my own," Verelan said before she left. "And there's no logic in it, it's nothing but pride."

"May I suggest a compromise? Allow me to accompany you to the promenade, where we will part ways and you will be able to proceed alone."

T'Lyra walked beside Verelan with a supportive hand on her upper arm just in case, but she let Verelan support herself as much as she could. When they reached the promenade, T'Lyra stopped and took Verelan's hand. Their bond was strong, and through it Verelan felt a wave of calming confidence.

"Jake has reserved a holosuite appointment for this evening." No easy feat when two baseball teams have only days for crucial final practice. "If this would interest you, Nog was also invited."

"What sort of program?"

"An old Earth music venue."

Verelan smiled. "I need to see how I feel after all this." They lingered together a moment longer before Verelan squeezed T'Lyra's hand and turned to go.

Her heart raced, and she found it especially difficult to control her balance, but Verelan tried to stand tall and proud as she stepped inside the office. Hexce was there, and his daughter (her name was another that wouldn't stay in her memory no matter how hard she tried). Their resemblance to one another was unmistakable, but even with this woman standing in front of her Verelan had no recollection, no distant feeling of vague familiarity, nothing but a feeling to certainty that she stood in front of a perfect stranger.

Hexce's daughter stood up and smiled, but it didn't reach her cold, grey eyes. "Verelan. I understand that you don't remember me. My name is Odime."

Panic gripped Verelan, and she backed away like a threatened animal. "I don't know you." She stumbled and grabbed the back of a chair to steady herself but couldn't regain her balance well enough to stand up straight. "I have never seen you before in my life."

"Verelan." Hexce tried to speak calmly, but there was something cold and sinister in his voice. "Your memories are unreliable."

"I know I have never seen her before." Verelan's breath was shallow and quick. She glanced toward the door and fought the urge to bolt.

"Verelan." Odime spoke firmly. "I understand that this may be overwhelming for you. I think once you're home you'll feel much better."

"I'm not sure I want to go anywhere with you."

"Verelan." If Odime was firm, her father was forceful. "I'm afraid you don't have a choice. With your condition, in your impaired cognitive state...Odime has been granted a guardianship over you. This is not your decision to make."

Her sense of panic only grew, and in front of her she no longer saw two people but two objective threats to her safety. She straightened up as best as she could and knocked over the chair in the process "I don't believe you!" Reeling and unsteady, she backed up to the door. "I don't believe any of it!"

It wasn't long before station security showed up to investigate the incident, T'Lyra along with them. The small office now felt crowded now that the three Romulans were joined by the station's security chief, one of his deputies, and T'Lyra. Hexce and Odime somehow remained calm.

"Constable." Hexce began. "I'm afraid this is all a misunderstanding. No threats were made, and I have the documentation to verify Verelan's status,"

"About that," the security chief interrupted, crossing his arms. "Given the circumstances, I cannot enforce this guardianship until its authenticity is verified. I don't know how these things are usually done in the Romulan Star Empire, but it seems unusual to me that such an arrangement would be made without the patient's knowledge and without a thorough evaluation."

"Constable, we don't have time for this, the T'Met leaves in three days. Your station's medical department shared records freely, and those records were used to make this determination."

"You have my assurance the process will be expedited. In the meantime I recommend that you keep your distance from one another as to avoid another headed disagreement." He gave each person present a pointed look. "Good day."

He turned to go, but Hexce called after him. "Constable. One more thing. The alliance between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire is in a delicate balance. I would hate for a personal affair to become an interplanetary one."

"My duty, you'll find is to the people on the station. You will have your answers soon." He had no further words and simply gave a polite bow of his head before he turned to go.

There was a tense moment of silence before T'Lyra spoke. "We will speak again. Live long and prosper."

Verelan was still in a heightened, alert state when they left, and she swallowed some of her pride and allowed T'Lyra to help support her more as they walked. "When did Jake want to meet in the Holo-suite?" she asked, desperate to think about anything other than the heavy reality of her situation.

"I was ready to assume that you were no longer interested in such a frivolity after the unfortunate outcome of your meeting."

"Elements, no. I'm exhausted and overwhelmed, but I think frivolity is exactly what I need. We only have a few more days together. I'd rather enjoy them than sit around and worry."

"In that case, the appointment is scheduled for three hours and forty six minutes from now. I suggest using much of that time to prepare. The occasion requires historically appropriate formal attire."

Verelan refused any assistance and insisted on getting ready on her own. The idea of a grand reveal sparked a sense of joy, even though she suspected it wouldn't make much of a difference to her Vulcan partner. In reality, however, the task proved to be more challenging than she expected. Her gown was in dove-grey silk with blue accents. The full skirt had layers and layers of tulle that Verelan had to wrestle just to get into the damn thing. It was a fight, however, she could not win. She managed to get the dress on, but lost her balance in the process. She stumbled, grabbed the back of a chair to catch herself, and panicked for just a moment when the chair teetered and threatened to pull her to the ground with it, but in the end it righted itself.

"T'Lyra!" She called. "I think I need your help after all."

A moment later the door slid open, and T'Lyra stepped inside. Verelan's heart jumped. Was this damn Vulcan trying to drive her wild? T'Lyra wore a gown that hung close to her slender form. It was in a shade of deep green velvet that Verelan typically associated with the boudoir. Her hair, though, was all Vulcan: tidy, elaborate braids that coiled around her head. She went to Verelan's side and began to fasten the back of Verelan's dress. "An admirable effort, nonetheless. I don't believe human women of this era were expected to dress themselves, at least not for this level of formality."

"I doubt it they were expected to walk either. I haven't tried the shoes, but I don't think I could even stand upright in them."

"We have time to find an alternative."

"Or you could carry me!" Verelan teased. "If Odime saw us it would drive her crazy."

"You have enough interpersonal problems without intentionally provoking more...though I can understand the temptation."

Verelan agreed to T'Lyra's more logical suggestion and replicated a more sensible pair of shoes. Her new attire gave her a stronger sense of poise that she maintained even walking with a cane and leaning on T'Lyra—finally she understood what her bondmate and the human doctor meant when they insisted there was nothing undignified about her condition. Her one regret, however, was that she hadn't replicated an appropriate jacket as well. She always found the station to be chilly, so with her arms and shoulders bare she was freezing.

The walk hadn't drained Verelan so much as usual, but when they reached Quark's she was more than ready to sit down, enjoy some music, and stay off her feet for a while. The holo-suite door opened to reveal an elegant scene: a lounge with soft lighting; tables with crisp white table cloths and little candles, holographic patrons and waitstaff in formal attire, and a band whose style sounded hauntingly familiar.

"Jake and Nog arrived early," T'Lyra pointed out as she looked toward a table near the stage. A human and a Ferengi wearing tuxedos. Verelan recognized them from the memories T'Lyra shared when they melded. It was odd to have memories of friendship and still feel as though she stood in front of a pair of strangers.

"T'Lyra, Verelan!" Jake called. "Glad you made it, come and have a seat." Verelan and T'Lyra sat down as Jake addressed Verelan directly. "I'm Jake, and this is Nog, we're..."

"..Old friends." Verelan added. "I have had some of my memories restored."

"Oh, good! T'Lyra mentioned that, but I wasn't sure..."

"Jake." Verelan interrupted. "I don't want to talk about it. I just want to relax and listen to the music."

"Sorry."

There was an awkward lull until Nog spoke up with a sudden change in topic. "So, T'Lyra, do you think the Logicians will be ready for the big game?"

"I have attended few practice sessions, but I trust that they have been progressing well with Captain Solok's guidance."

"Not gonna lie," Jake added. "I'm kinda glad you dropped out. I bet you got real good with practice, and Verelan would have a harder time choosing which team to root for."

Verelan looked down and sighed. "I might not be able to watch the game." She lifted her head to look back at Jake. "It's complicated...and it's also something else I don't want to talk about."

"Sorry." Jake shook his head. "Just trying to be nice."

Another lull brought them to the final few bars of the song, which the pianist punctuated with a little flourish on the keys before the crowd gave their applause.

“Thank you, thank you.” Vic had a cool and easy air about him, like he was just as comfortable onstage in front of an audience as he was at home with his closest friends. “This next one is a special request.”

The bass player began the song with a few jazzy notes, and Verelan recognized the tune even before Vic began to sing.

“Trailers for sale or rent. Rooms to let fifty cents...”

T’Lyra glanced to Verelan. “I believed the human custom is to ask for a dance.”

“Oh no!” Verelan gasped. “I’m too clumsy, I’d make a fool of myself.”

“The four of us are the only real people present. The crowd around us is comprised of holograms who cannot pass unfair judgment.”

“Would it make you feel better if me and Nog danced too?” Jake suggested. “You can’t possibly be worse than us!”

Nog snapped his head around to look up at his human friend. “Wait, what?! I don’t want any part of this!”

“Not scared are you?” Jake teased.

“Of course not!”

“Then let’s hit the dance floor, twinkle toes.”

Verelan didn’t dance so much as she leaned against T’Lyra and they swayed to the music. Every now and then she glanced toward Jake and Nog, and seeing their attempts at dancing made her smile. Jake tried to approach the endeavor with enthusiasm to lead his friend into twirls and dips, and Nog put up resistance the entire time. Both stepped on each other’s toes often. They returned to their seats after the one song, Verelan and Jake both trying to hold back giggles.

“There.” Nog leaned back and crossed his arms. “Are you happy?”

With a lull in the music, Jake let himself laugh with more vigor. “Actually yeah. And for the rest of my life, whenever I’m feeling down, I’m going to remember that.”

“I might too,” Verelan agreed. Even T’Lyra let a slight smile appear on her face.

There was no more dancing, they simply spent the rest of their time listening to the music and to Vic’s patter between songs. He had a clever wit and such an approachable sense of confidence that listening to him speak was almost as enchanting as listening to him sing.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, we’ve reached that sad part that comes in every show. I’ve got time for one more for you tonight.” There were a few polite claps and cheers before the band began to play one last time.

“Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear. And it shows them pearly white...”

Jake bobbed his head to the music. “Hey, Nog, this one has a great beat if I can convince you to join me for another dance.”

“Not unless you pay me.”

The song ended to peals of applause and cheers, and Vic gave a gracious bow. “Thank you, thank you all. You’ve been a lovely audience. You know where to find me next time. Drive safe.”

The applause continued as Vic left the stage, and the holographic waitstaff went into a frenzy to clear up the tables. T’Lyra stood up first and offered a hand to Verelan to help her to her feet. “Jake, Nog. I would like to see you both again before I leave.”

“Me too,” Verelan added. “I have two friendships to rebuild, but very little time to do it.”

“See you round,” Jake said. “Computer, end program.”

The lounge disappeared to reveal the empty holosuite, and the four friends stepped through the door. Just outside, they were greeted again by the security chief. Verelan felt her heart sink.

“I trust you enjoyed yourselves at Vic’s? It’s become a popular program lately.”

“I wouldn’t have minded an interruption for something important,” Verelan answered.

“Important, but not urgent.”

Jake and Nog exchanged a knowing look. “We’ll see you later,” Jake said before the two young men slipped away.

“I would like to arrange a meeting for tomorrow morning between the two of us and also Garak and Doctor Bashir.”

Bashir. That was the name of the human doctor she could never remember.

“Has Hexce’s documentation been confirmed already?”

“No, but there’s a chance they might be within the next few hours. I would like to have this discussion regardless.”

“Can T’Lyra join us.”

“If that’s what you want, but it is a private matter.”

“T’Lyra knows the inside of my mind.”

“In that case, I’ll see you in the morning.” Without another word, he turned to go.

Chapter 18

The night before was exhilarating, but it took its toll. When T'Lyra woke Verelan from her deep sleep, Verelan still felt as though she was in a fog and in need of at least four more hours of rest. She was averaging eight hours every night and wondered how humans could manage to accomplish anything of value with a short life and fully a third spent sleeping. She didn't find more energy as she got dressed and ready, and when she went to sit and wait for their guests her head grew heavy.

Odo was the first to arrive, and with his gruff manner he didn't waste much time with pleasantries and small talk, aside from a curt nod and a begrudgingly given "good morning." Doctor Bashir arrived soon after, his chipper demeanor a stark contrast to the security chief. That meant they had only to wait on Garak... The door chime rang one more time, and all eyes were on the Cardassian tailor.

"You are three minutes and twenty seven minutes late," T'Lyra noted.

"Then I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive my tardiness. I have a very good reason. I have the results you were waiting for."

T'Lyra's quarters were small and not meant to entertain so many people at one. The gathered group made the room feel small and crowded. There was not enough seating, so Odo and T'Lyra chose to stand. Bashir was in a chair next to Verelan in, and Garak sat across from her.

All eyes were still on Garak until he spoke again, and tension gripped the room. "Well," he began. "The documents are legitimate. Odime does have a legal guardianship over you, which Odo has violated in his refusal to enforce it."

Verelan's fatigue vanished only to be replaced by anger and panic. She gave T'Lyra a desperate look, and T'Lyra respond by going to her side and taking her hand. Verelan closed her eyes and let her bondmate's calming energy soothe her.

"I wasn't finished," Garak continued. "But I can understand why this news is distressing. The documentation is legitimate, but I suspect it was not obtained by legitimate means."

She took a deep breath and gave her tired, panicked mind a chance to process this news. She had an enemy, someone who meant to control her while hiding behind a mask of generosity and selflessness.

"We may be able to challenge it," Bashir added. He spoke softly, and his voice was gentle and warm, just like when she first woke up in the infirmary. "As your physician, I can confirm that you are more than capable of making your own decisions, and I am more than willing to stand before the proper authorities in your defense."

Verelan still had nothing to say. She closed her eyes again and tried to take deep breaths, but they came out rapid and shallow. The room was spinning, and Verelan felt as though the world was crumbling around her.

She shook her head. "No."

"Verelan?" Bashir asked.

She took a deep breath and shook her head again. "Hexce said that such interference might threaten the alliance. I can make a personal sacrifice to avoid that possibility."

"Hexce holds far less power and influence than he thinks he does. I doubt if his family's personal disputes are enough to warrant such an outcome."

Verelan held T'Lyra's hand tightly, desperate for some sense of grounding and confronting the looming reality that she had very little time left before she would have to separate from her bondmate forever. Still, she knew this choice was the right one. "It's a risk I'd rather not take, and it's more than that. I want so badly to return home, but without Odime I have nothing to return to. No family, no House, no career, no reputation..."

"Are you quite sure that's what you want?" Odo asked, firm but polite. "If your safety and wellbeing are at risk, it might be in your best interest to move on and find a new path."

Verelan looked to each of the people gathered around her. Each wore a look of concern, except for Odo whose plain face was impossible to read, but his earlier questions indicated that he shared in that concern. "A few hours to consider my choice, please, but I am unlikely to change my mind."

"Then I will leave you to it." Odo turned to go, and Bashir and Garak stood up.

"Wait, Garak," Verelan called. "I have one more question before you go."

"Yes?"

"Did you ever know S'Talon tr'Sei? Or anyone from his House?"

Garak thought for a moment and offered a small nod. "S'Talon? No, but I did know of a Faleen t'Sei who was rumored to have been involved with reunification efforts but who was also able to diffuse the accusations with minimal damage to her reputation."

Verelan's mood lifted. "Thank you. I have no more questions, and I will have my final decision by the end of the day."

When she was alone Verelan took T'Lyra's hand again and turned to face her lover. "S'Talon is my child's father. I can't explain it, but I have such a strong feeling."

“Verelan.” T’Lyra came around to sit beside her. “I am aware that trying to appeal to logic to a Romulan is a futile effort, but if all you have is a feeling, you still have no proof.”

“I see no harm in trying to reach out to him or his family, especially when I have no one else.”

T’Lyra squeezed Verelan’s hand. “Neither do I, but manage your expectations.”

With T’Lyra’s assistance, Verelan sent a message to Faleen t’Sei. As per T’Lyra’s suggestion she kept her tone neutral and did not mention any of her personal problems. She said only that she served with S’Talon, her injuries caused massive memory loss, and she suspected that S’Talon was her baby’s father. Against T’Lyra’s advice, she also included that would be returned soon and marrying Odime t’Liun. Her mind had already been made up on the matter.

After the message was sent, Verelan leaned back and closed her eyes. T’Lyra stood behind her and placed her hands on Verelan’s shoulders. “So you are sure this is your final decision?”

Verelan nodded. “This is what I need to do, I only wish I could have more time with you before I have to commit myself to Odime.”

“As do I. Since your mind is made up, it would be logical to instead use this time to enjoy each other’s company. The baseball game will be starting in one hour and seventeen minutes, if you are still interested in going to the holosuite to watch.”

Verelan smiled. “I had forgotten that was today.”

“It had not been a priority. I neglected to mention it.”

“I need to rest. Wake me up in time.”

Verelan had expected the Logicians to win, even though she wanted more to see the Niners (and her friends Jake and Nog) succeed. T’Lyra was reserved and quiet as she watched, and Verelan could not guess which team she favored: her shipmate or her old friends, or if she favored any team at all. She had not expected that (even in their defeat) the Niners had put on an entertaining show, but what enjoyed the most was a few hours to clear her mind and forget her worries.

They hung back as the baseball players left the holosuite and were the final people to step through the arch and back into Quark’s, and they kept their distance as the two teams socialized and taunted one another until some of the excitement died down. Verelan felt a heaviness in her heart. It wasn’t only T’Lyra who she would be parted from, but her friends Jake and Nog.

“Hey! Verelan, T’Lyra! Come on over!” Jake called. As they walked over they passed a few remaining Vulcans who gave T’Lyra a sideways glance. “Glad you made it to see the game. Let me get you something to drink.”

“Cranberry juice with seltzer.” Verelan was fond of the bitter taste of that Earth beverage.

“The same,” added T’Lyra.

While Jake turned his attention to a Ferengi behind the bar so he could place the order. While he was occupied, Verelan gave T’Lyra a sneaky glance, then looked back to the Vulcans who hadn’t yet left (they weren’t paying attention to them), and back to T’Lyra before feeling bold enough to take her hand. They only held hands for a moment before Jake turned around with a drink in each hand.

“I guess you’ll be leaving soon, huh?” He said to T’Lyra, who nodded in response as she took her glass of juice.

“Yes, the T’Kumbra departs at 0700 tomorrow.”

“And I will also be departing soon, on the T’Met.” Verelan added.

“Wow.” Jake nervously looked down and scratched the back of his neck. “Guess I kind of hoped we might have more time, and that the two of you wouldn’t be parting ways.”

“I will be returning to the front lines, and Verelan must return to her own home to recover,” T’Lyra replied before she took a sip of juice.

“Yeah...That makes sense too, I guess.” Jake still looked down and kept his hand on the back of his neck. “I kind of thought...no, never mind. It’s stupid.”

“Jake.” T’Lyra began. “I would appreciate candor, if you feel safe and comfortable to share.”

“Okay...but it’s really stupid, maybe even creepy...” Verelan and T’Lyra both looked at him expecting an answer. Jake took a breath. “I always, even back when we were kids, kinda hoped that in spite of everything you two would find a way to make it work.”

“You hoped for an outcome that would end favorably for your friends. It is actually quite logical.”

“Just don’t tell that to Captain Solok,” Nog teased, and Jake gave him a playful punch on the arm.

“Hey...” Jake continued. “We’ll try to keep in touch, and maybe we’ll all see each other again. And Verelan...” He paused and made sure to look Verelan in the eye. The serious tone in his voice stood in stark contrast to the celebratory atmosphere. “That goes for you too. Things are changing between the Federation and the Romulans.”

“I wish I shared your optimism,” Verelan answered with a forced smile.

There was one of the baseball players Verelan wanted to speak with...needed to. Odo stood out in the crowd. Instead of the Niners uniform he

was still in his umpire attire, sans protective gear. Even the usually gruff constable seemed to enjoy a bit of cheerful socialization, until Verelan caught his eye.

“Odo!” Verelan called, and the security chief stepped toward her. Her heart raced, and she felt her throat close up. She blinked, suddenly fearful of what she had to say and the decision she faced. It wasn’t too late to change her mind. “I wanted to tell you that I’ve considered my options, and…” She paused to take a deep breath and looked at T’Lyra. The racing feeling in her heart turned into searing pain. “I stand by my original choice.”

Odo only nodded. “I appreciate the update.”

Everything became too overwhelming: the lights, the sound of laughter and conversation, the smell of food, clinking glasses, the dabo wheel. Verelan closed her eyes and breathed deeply but still felt waves of panicked dizziness. “T’Lyra. I need to leave. Now.”

Verelan leaned on her partner for support but still had unreliable control of her legs and felt as though the ground was wobbling beneath her. Not sense she had first awoken in the infirmary had she felt so unstable and out of touch with her body. Out in the promenade where the environment was calmer, some of Verelan’s panic eased, but she was still shaking and breathing rapidly. T’Lyra place a firm hand on the side of Verelan’s face, but Verelan turned away.

“Please no.” She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself, and her eyes began to glimmer with tears. “Not in public… I need to go to Odime.”

However, T’Lyra did not attempt a full meld. She only meant to serve as a calming, steady presence. “And you need to ease your troubled mind. No matter what comes to pass, we will not be separated.”

Chapter 19

As a partner, Odime was unpleasant but not unkind. She never criticized or argued with Verelan, she never pressured Verelan to give affection she did not want to give, but she lacked the patience and grace of T'Lyra, but she managed to say a lot without speaking a word. She stared at Verelan's shaking hands, or impatiently drummed her fingertips on the table when Verelan took her time to slowly eat, and never offered to help Verelan move around. To share a small space with her on the long journey home was grating, and with each passing hour she craved more and more to be back on her own home planet.

When she materialized outside of the Liun home on Ch'Rihan, Verelan felt a wave of old, forgotten memories rush over her. Not memories that she had lost due to injury (she was beginning to make peace with the reality that most of those memories may not return. What she felt instead was glimpses of the distant past, familiar little things from her childhood that she hadn't realized were sorely missed in her absence. Things like the color of the sky or the shape of the trees.

The Liun home reminded her of her own, from her childhood, before everything began to fall apart. Instead of a home that was empty and decaying, this one was full of life with visitors and servants and kept to a standard that would impress anyone who came to call. Verelan found herself overwhelmed, and as soon as she crossed the threshold she stopped to rub her temples.

"Not too tired already?" Odime asked. "My mother was so eager to meet you."

"I haven't met her yet?"

Odime leaned back with a sudden look of panic in her eyes, but she took a little breath and forced a slight smile. "Eager to meet you again. Our circumstances have given her a rare opportunity: a second chance at a first impression."

"Was the first one so bad?"

Odime narrowed her eyes but said nothing as she led Verelan to the sitting room. Odime's mother was older than she expected, with a sharp face and cold eyes. She did not rise from her seat to greet them.

"You're home later than expected," she said.

"Travel delays are a common and unfortunate experience," Odime explained. "I had tried to communicate that clearly."

"No matter, you're here now." She still did not stand, but looked toward Verelan. "And you must be Verelan. A pleasure to meet you. Please, have a seat."

Verelan sat down and gave Odime a sideways look. "You said I had met your mother before."

"Forgive me, I misspoke. A pleasure to meet you again."

"Likewise." She kept her eyes on Odime, searching for some other sign of deception. Her heart began to race much like when her father first told her of this supposed relationship. Garak was right, these people could not be trusted, but Verelan tried to reassure herself that this personal sacrifice was worthwhile.

A servant arrived with a tray bearing a teapot and three cups. Their conversation carried on as he poured the tea.

"I heard about your injuries," Odime's mother went on. "And I hope your recovery wasn't hindered by the incompetence of Federation medical practices."

Verelan reached for a cup of tea and noticed that Odime's mother stared in the same way as her hands shook and the at the odd way she had to hold the cup steady with both her hands as she took a sip "I wouldn't call any of it incompetent. In fact, I found Doctor...Bashir to be very professional and polite."

"My dear," Odime began, speaking like she was explain an oversimplified concept to a child. "Politeness won't fix the hole in your brain."

"No." Another sip. "You're right. But I had also hoped that returning home would allow me to see a neurologist who has a more in depth understanding of Rihan physiology."

"Don't be too optimistic," Odime's mother warned as she sipped her tea. "It may be too late to expect any real improvement."

"I don't think hope is harmful."

"But false hope is." Odime's mother took another long sip of tea. "Now. I would like to speak to my daughter alone. Imin will show you to your room."

Verelan stood up too quickly to keep her composure as she steadied herself with her cane. She managed to keep her reeling body upright and stable for the few steps to follow Imin out the door, but when she was out of sight she could no longer keep control of herself.

"I need to stop," she breathed as she stumbled. Imin grabbed her upper arm to hold her up, but Verelan shook her head. "No...let me sit for a minute. The floor is fine." Imin complied and helped to lower Verelan to the floor.

She sat with her head hung low and breathed deeply to wait for the dizziness to subside, and when she began to hear the muffled voices of Odime and her mother she gave her full attention to listening closely.

“...almost a shame that they’re both dead.” Verelan could not tell who this voice belonged to. Even without a wall between them, Odime and her mother sounded similar. “I would have loved to see the look on Mirne and Mheven’s faces to know their heir had become so broken down as to surrender herself to a rival House.”

“And with the authority I have over all her decisions, she has no way out.”

Verelan took another deep breath. She hadn’t yet recovered, but she could not risk discovery, so she lifted her heavy head to look up at Imin. “Help me up, and I might need support along the way.”

Even with Imin’s help, Verelan was unsteady on her feet and her body shook, but she wasn’t sure if it was from the dizzy spell or the recent news. When she reached her room, she collapsed on the bed and closed her eyes. The creeping suspicion that she had made the wrong choice swelled and grew within her, but she tried to chase those thoughts away. Whatever their motives, Odime and her parents had not been unkind. They were the reason she had a home to return to, the reason her own reputation was not utterly destroyed.

She tried to calm herself. Before Odime finished speaking with her mother, Verelan would need to send a message to her only other possible ally: Faleen t’Sei.

Chapter 20

The weeks went by with no response from Faleen. Verelan's initial assessment that Odime and her mother were unpleasant but not unkind remained true, but the unpleasantness seemed to grow the more they became accustomed to Verelan's presence. The marriage contracts were signed, and with the change Odime became more persistent with her demands for physical affection and more controlling of her "fragile wife," reluctant to allow her to leave the house or insisting that she go and rest when company came to visit. A small price to pay for finding her one safe space on her home planet.

Her best moments came when Odime was away and Verelan was left to spend hours sitting in silence with Odime's mother. Eviess was a harsh woman when she did speak, but at least she didn't speak much. In these silent moments, Verelan would often close her eyes and drift off. It was a gamble whether Eviess would be in a fair enough mood to let her rest or if she would rouse her with some harsh words. Rather than Eviess' shrill voice, what woke her was the sound of footsteps. Verelan opened her eyes and lifted her heavy head to see Imin standing in the doorway.

"There is a visitor for Verelan," he said.

Eviess raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Who would possibly visit her? Her family is all dead."

"I have friends," Verelan snapped. "Surely they haven't all died."

Eviess narrowed her eyes. "Very well. I will leave you to it."

Verelan watched as she stood to leave and felt a creeping sense of envy and resentment. It didn't feel right that such an old woman would be able to move around her home with so much more speed and ease, but Verelan tried to dismiss those thoughts when her guest arrived: a tall, lean woman who Verelan did not recognize.

She tried to offer the visitor a warm smile even though she felt like she was in a daze. "Forgive me, I've lost a lot of my memories. You'll have to remind me who you are."

"We actually haven't met yet." The visitor's voice was soft and gentle. She sat beside her. "Not in person, at least. My name is Faleen t'Sei. S'Talon was my younger brother."

Verelan leaned back and let out a slow breath, dizziness mixing itself in with the haze in her head. After weeks of hoping for this meeting, facing it left Verelan terrified. "I fear I may have been misleading. I have little proof that your brother was my child's father." No proof, T'Lyra had said. "Only the fact that I recognized his name and face and a gut feeling I have."

Faleen nodded. "I still think it's likely. Very likely. S'Talon was fifteen years younger than me. He shared everything and always wanted my advice. He never mentioned you by name, but he did mention the daughter of Hvirr tr'Kaethaetreh."

Verelan opened her mouth but words escaped her. No one mentioned her father by name after his disgrace, and if they could manage it they avoided speaking about him altogether or acted as though he never existed. In a subtle way, Faleen revealed her political alignment.

"You knew my father?"

Faleen took Verelan's hand and looked her directly in the eye, urging her to listen closely to every word. "Years ago, before he went to Virinat." She revealed little, a precaution in case they were overheard, but it was enough.

"I've heard Virinat is beautiful. I would like to see it for myself one day." Her answer had to be just as careful.

"That might be possible." Faleen squeezed Verelan's hand before she stood. "Jolan tru, Verelan."

Verelan leaned back and closed her eyes as she considered all the implications of their conversation. A happier life with her father on Virinet would be well worth sacrificing the status she gained on ch'Rihan through her arrangement with Odime...if she could wiggle her way out from under Odime's thumb and manage the associated risks.

She heard the sound of footsteps. When she opened her eyes she expected to see her mother in law, but instead she saw her wife standing beside her.

"I understand I just missed a visitor of yours," Odime said as she sat down. Her voice had a faint caustic bite. A shiver went down Verelan's spine. This was not innocent curiosity. "A friend."

"Just a friend?"

"Possibly my child's aunt. I thought my child deserves to know their family."

"Our child, Verelan." Odime's voice was stern and forceful. "Our child has a perfect family without the influence of outsiders, and I don't care for any reminders of your past."

"Are you jealous of a dead man?" Verelan dared to let a mocking tone sneak into her voice. "Because if you're worried someone else is preventing me from fully giving myself to you, a dead man who I hardly remember is the least of our concerns."

"Verelan, are you admitting something?" Odime struggled to keep from raising her voice. "It's the Vulcan, you can't bring yourself to let her go, can you?"

“I couldn’t if I wanted to.” Even if her heart ached for T’Lyra, her words came out bitter and angry, starved for the person she craved down to marrow. “Our minds are permanently linked. We share each other’s thoughts, see through each other’s eyes and have no secrets.” Odime was unlikely to know the true nature of a Vulcan mating bond, and Verelan planned to use that to her advantage. “Everything I know, she knows.”

“That isn’t true!” Odime snapped.

“You know what they’re capable of telepathically.”

Odime fell silent and took a little breath before dropping the subject. “I don’t trust that woman who visited. Don’t invite her here again.”

“I won’t,” Verelan promised, but as soon as she spoke she scrambled to find a way to break that promise. She had been presented with an opportunity for a better life than the one she had settled on. Damned if she would let it go so soon.

Chapter 21

“Verelan.” Hearing her wife’s voice startled Verelan awake. She hadn’t realized that she dozed off.

The days blended together, for she spent her time doing little more than sitting quietly with Eviess or practicing her reading (which was improving, but her writing was no better). Rather than rely on traditional measures of time, Verelan found herself paying more attention to the subtle changes in the seasons, or the not so subtle changes in her body. She found herself more fatigued than before, which led her to believe that her baby, rather than her injury was to blame.

“How alert are you?” Odime asked. “I have news for you.”

Odime never admitted one way or another if she believed Verelan’s exaggerated description of the Vulcan mating bond, but had little ways of showing that she fell for it and suspected T’Lyra could see and hear everything. She avoided Verelan (who appreciated the extra space) and was more polite in her interactions. However, she did not ease the rigid control that she had on her wife: she was allowed few visitors and rarely left the house if not for medical treatment. Time marched on. The Dominion War ended, Hexce returned home, and Verelan’s belly began to swell as the life inside of her grew. Still, there was no word from Faleen. Verelan began to let go of the hope she had held with such determination. If she couldn’t reach Virinet before her son was born, everything would be much more complicated.

“Very alert,” she mumbled. “What happened?”

“Well, nothing yet.” Odime sat beside her wife and tried to take her hand, but Verelan flinched and pulled away. “But it seems being in the wrong place at the wrong time and living to tell about it was enough to make you a war hero. You’ve been invited to a banquet to honor exceptional veterans.”

A surge of excitement hit Verelan at her core. She sat up straight as the last remnants of drowsiness vanished—though she still found herself in a dizzy haze. “Really? Tell them I would be honored to attend.”

“Verelan.” Odime was stern as ever and lacked the excitement that Verelan had. “Are you sure you’re well enough for such an occasion?”

“How strenuous can a banquet be? I would find a way to attend if I was on my deathbed.”

She tilted her head and looked to Odime, but Odime had nothing to say in response.

“Would you deny a war hero such a simple request?” Verelan teased. Her tone was playful, but she felt the gravity of the situation and craved the chance to step outside these four walls and speak to different people for a change. “I thought it might be a great honor for you too, to be seen by the side of your wife the war hero.”

Odime leaned forward and rested her chin in her hand. “You’re right about that.”

“And my absence could prove to be a minor scandal.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that,” Odime replied as she stood up. “But I will give it the consideration it is due.”

In time, Odime relented and even began to look forward to the event. Verelan had learned in her time with Odime that she was a woman who cared deeply about her own status and cherished any opportunity to show herself off. She had her best blue and silver formal robes altered to accommodate her change in weight since the last time she wore them, and she bemoaned the fact that Verelan would be wearing a military uniform instead of a matching set.

My wife the war hero.

It was astonishing how much Odime’s attitude toward Verelan shifted when she saw her spouse and a prize to be displayed.

Odime’s enthusiasm grew as the date approached, but Verelan began to wish that the affair would hurry up and be done with. Even with her improved attitude, Verelan preferred to keep her distance from her wife, and Odime insisted on making a great fuss over every detail. It was like her mother came back to life, but at least Odime rarely drank.

Odime had advice and correction right up until the moment of their arrival—another uncomfortable reminder of the way Verelan’s mother used to behave, but the moment she had to put on a social face Odime transformed from a nagging spouse into a lively social butterfly, a side of her that Verelan never saw before, a woman who spoke warmly and laughed.

Verelan, however, had a different transformation. There was too much to see, hear, and smell. Odime’s constant attention and the time they spent in preparation left her tired and dizzy, and with every unfamiliar face she saw she felt a sense of anxious shame. She had no way of knowing who of these people she was supposed to know and who were perfect strangers. Through the crowd, though, she saw one familiar face that helped restore her sense of calm: Faleen.

She dared not approach, not with Odime by her side. Her wife’s warnings rang clearly in her head, and so she hung back. However, she did not need to make any move. Faleen came to her with slow and easy steps and a serene look on her face.

“Verelan.” Faleen’s voice was soft and warm, and she did not so much as look at Odime. “I’m glad to see you were able to make it.”

“Likewise,” Verelan answered, her mood lifted. “Though I am surprised to see you here.”

“And why wouldn’t I attend? My brother was killed in the war.”

Verelan opened her mouth to apologize for her poor choice of words, but Odime cut her off.

“And your brother’s sacrifice will be remembered with honor, but I recall telling my wife that I didn’t like the idea of her speaking to you.”

Verelan took a quick little breath to help herself find the courage to say what she meant to say. “You said she was not welcome in your house, not that I was forbidden from talking to her.”

Faleen couldn’t hold back a playful smirk, and Odime narrowed her eyes and glanced from Faleen to Verelan. “Glad to see your memory has been improving. I will leave you to it.”

“Come,” Faleen said. “There’s someone you should meet.”

Odime slinked back and allowed Faleen to lead Verelan to the acquaintance she was so eager to introduce. He stayed near the back of the room, an older man, tall with gray hair and a stern face. While they kept a normal conversational distance between themselves, he spoke in a low voice that Verelan strained to listen. “We cannot waste time on pleasantries. If you wish to make the journey to Virinat, go to the woods around the back.” With a swift and elegant motion, he slipped a small device into the palm of her hand.

Verelan fought to keep her shock from showing on her face. She answered in a tone that was both soft and frantic. “You’re both taking on a massive risk in helping me. Odime…”

“We are both aware of the risks,” he interrupted. “The choice is yours to make. I suggest that you wait until seating begins and excuse yourself, the better to slip out undetected.”

The man turned to go, and as Verelan watched him walk away her fingers curled around the device so tightly that she felt the edges dig into her skin.

“You should go back to Odime,” Faleen suggested. “I imagine she thinks we’ve been talking to one another long enough.”

Verelan returned to Odime’s side and tagged along with her in silence, trying to pay attention to her trivial conversations or at least seem like she was listening by maintaining eye contact and giving the occasional small nod. Her mind was occupied, though, twisted up with panic and the looming knowledge that she was minutes away from a decision that was both exciting and terrifying.

After a brief announcement, the crowd began to move to the dining room, and Verelan knew what she had to do.

“I’ll meet you there.” The panic she felt made it easy to come off as pained and frantic. “I’m not feeling well.”

“Verelan…”

“No. Please.” The hand that clutched her stomach moved from instinct, not as part of an act. Her very real nerves tied her stomach into knots. “I’ll be fine.”

She rushed away as best as her unsteady body would allow, first going as if she meant to dash to the facilities, but after glancing over her shoulder to confirm that Odime had not followed her, she took a sharp turn toward a back door and stepped outside. Her doubt about sneaking away without notice grew as she crossed the small courtyard and into the overgrown woods. The deeper into the dark overgrowth she traveled, the more exhausted and doubtful she became until she stopped to catch her breath and noticed the woods around her dissolve away to be replaced with the transporter room of a cargo freighter.

It was in the morning with silvery dew on the ground when Verelan beamed down to her father’s new home on Virinat. Rather, her father’s new husband’s home. He was waiting for her just outside the door and nearly broke into a run to close the distance between them, and when he stopped to take his daughter’s hand in his he studied her closely. The lines on his face deepened with worry as his eyes darted from the scars on her face to her cane to her swollen belly.

“Verelan. You’ve lived a lot of life.”

“And I can’t remember most of it.” Verelan looked down at the ground but snapped her head back up only a moment later when she felt a presence, stronger than she had felt since she left Deep Space Nine. “T’Lyra is here?”

“I wanted that to be a surprise, but I now see how foolish that was. Come inside.”

He led Verelan into the house, which was modest but didn’t feel small because the rooms were wide open and the windows large. Her heart fluttered when she saw T’Lyra standing by the window, and Verelan lost herself staring at T’Lyra’s elaborate braids, just like when she first saw her watching the Bajoran wormhole. Verelan gasped when T’Lyra turned to face her and came closer.

“I…” Verelan looked away and blinked. “I chose poorly.”

T’Lyra placed her fingertips to Verelan’s. “And yet your choice has reunited you with your father, so the outcome was not entirely unfavorable.”

Verelan held her bondmate’s hand and let T’Lyra’s calm sense of grounding ease her worries. “As thrilled as I am to see you, I hope you haven’t made yourself a deserter to be by my side.”

“An extended leave of absence, standard practice when one’s partner is expecting a new child. I am willing to either resign to remain with you on Virinat or to request reassignment to a vessel where my family will be welcome, whichever proves to be more logical.”

“I don’t know, T’Lyra.” Verelan looked down and felt that sense of calm fade away. “I can’t ask you to make such a sacrifice, and I doubt if I

will ever feel safe within the Empire. But I don't care for the idea of my son growing up in space surrounded by foreigners." She looked up and gasped, shocked by the words that came out of her own mouth. Elements, she sounded like her mother. "That came out all wrong. I only meant that I don't want him so far removed from his home that his own culture is foreign to him"

T'Lyra pulled her hand from Verelan's and placed her fingertips along the side of Verelan's face. "No decision needs to be made now, and you have my word that you and your child will be safe wherever you choose to live."

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