

Truth, Lies, and Prophecy

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1761) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1761>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Deep Space Nine
Relationship:	Benjamin Sisko/Kira Nerys
Character:	Benjamin Sisko , Kira Nerys
Additional Tags:	Bajoran Culture(s) , Bajoran Religion , Marriage of Convenience
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-08-22 Words: 16,066 Chapters: 1/1

Truth, Lies, and Prophecy

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

Summary

Kai Winn has found a prophecy that she thinks applies to the Emissary. Sisko disagrees. Then the Cardassians got involved ...

Notes

For RussetFiredrake in Just Married Exchange 2024

Beta and brainstorming help by sixbeforelunch

I missed the sign-up deadline so I trawled through the signups looking for something to treat and this prompt ate my brain.

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

Kira was tipped off by a friend of a friend of a friend.

"And you've never met this Prylar Tajo?" Ben asked when she laid out what she'd been told.

"No, sir," Kira said. "But Lepak knows her well, and Cecta trusts Lepak ... and I trust Cecta."

Ben looked down at the PADD with the prophecy in question. "I'll be honest, Major, this is ... very thin. It *could* refer to me, but it could also refer to half a dozen other figures in Bajoran Religious history that I could name, or to someone who won't be born for another thousand years."

"I sure *hope* we don't have another cataclysm like the Occupation in the next thousand years," Kira said dryly. "One was enough."

"And for Kai Winn's purposes, I doubt it matters whether or not it truly applies to me—only whether she can get political value out of claiming that it does," Ben said.

Kira cocked her head. "She's riding high now, off the success of the treaty, and she's gunning for political office on the strength of it."

"But it wasn't *her* success," Ben pointed out.

"You don't have to tell *me* that," Kira said, bitterness filling her voice.

Ben didn't know all the details of her relationship with Bareil Antos, but he knew it had been intense. Bareil had died for that treaty, and it had been all his work that had gone into it.

"I suppose that doesn't matter either, as long as she can claim it as her own work," Ben said. He made a face. "I'm not inclined to give her any help in her political aspirations if I can help it. What's her angle likely to be on this?"

Kira sighed. "Tough to say. But she's always aligned with the isolationists and the xenophobes. Not positioning herself as *one* of them, but courting their support. They're the ones most likely to be offended by an alien being the Emissary of the Prophets. And with the growing threat from the Dominion, they're gaining in influence. Bajor's already lived through one Occupation; we might not survive another, and we'd be right on the front lines of any war with the Dominion. You're a flashpoint—you're chosen by the Prophets, but you're *also* the one who found the wormhole that will allow the Dominion to reach us. And the Kai knows you don't like her. If you came out publicly against her political ambitions, it would probably destroy her chances."

"But I try to interfere in Bajoran politics as little as possible," Benjamin said. "I may not like her, but I am well aware I am an outsider, and I can't decide what's right for Bajor."

Kira shrugged. "That only means you have power, but she doesn't know how or when you're likely to wield it. Which means you could completely blindside her. Kai Winn doesn't like surprises."

Ben sighed. "Given all of that, what would be the point of trying to claim that this prophecy applies to me? Is she hoping that she could force me into a marriage of her choosing, and use that in some way?"

"Or she's hoping you'll refuse," Nerys said. "Humans are known for individualistic approaches to marriage and family—you don't normally do arranged marriages. Then she could claim you were rejecting Bajor and your duties as Emissary."

Ben rubbed his face. "What are the chances she'll be able to convince people this applies to me? Given how vague it is?"

"I have no idea," Nerys said. "A lot depends on what the Vedeks say. If some of the Vedeks known for their scholarship support her ... you'd never be able to convince people they weren't right."

"Then it sounds like I need to talk to a Vedek," Ben said.

That took some time to arrange. There were many Vedeks who would have loved to speak to the Emissary for any number of reasons, good and bad. But there were only a handful whose scholarship was respected enough to be useful. Finding one of those who was not already of Kai Winn's faction and who was willing to be discreet about meeting with the Emissary took some time.

Ben was quite busy in the meantime. Between being abducted to a mirror universe and meeting his wife's counterpart, and the fallout from the Cardassians and Romulans attacking the Dominion, he scarcely had time to think about Bajoran politics or religion. But at last there was a bit of breathing room, and Kira told him she'd arranged an appointment with Vedek Darve, who was a professor of classic texts at the seminary of the Tenyed Valley Monastery, and one of the most respected experts in her field. The Vedek preferred an in-person meeting and would not travel to the station, so Ben and Kira took a runabout to visit her in person.

The monastery had been razed by the Cardassians, so all the buildings were temporary shelters—some prefabricated buildings sent by Federation Aid and Mercy Corps, some hastily cobbled together out of local materials, some from other sources Ben couldn't identify off-hand. And there were a whole host of tents, following a pattern Ben didn't recognize.

Vedek Darve's office was a cramped space in one of the locally-built sheds, in a quiet clearing some distance from the main bulk of the monastery. Ben and Kira beamed down just outside it, and Ben was relieved at the privacy. As Emissary, going to Bajor was always fraught, and with Kai Winn stirring the pot, the chance of uncomfortable encounters seemed greater than normal.

"Emissary, I'm honored that you came all this way to consult with me," Vedek Darve said, ushering them in. She was a slender woman with darker skin than Ben usually saw on Bajorans, and her face was creased with wrinkles. Her office was small and lined with shelves covered in various objects; there was a rough wooden table in the middle and a chair on either side of it. She felt their pangs, but didn't tell them what she sensed.

"Thank you for making time to see us," Ben said, though he was a bit annoyed that she hadn't just been willing to answer his questions over subspace. Then again, the monastery's infrastructure was still in shambles. She might not have reliable access to the communications network.

"You're welcome," the Vedek said. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, thank you," Ben said politely.

Vedek Darve gestured them to sit in the two chairs, and busied herself with the kettle. "I presume you're here about the Kai's favorite interpretation of Kudri Temomo's Fourth Prophecy?"

"Yes," Ben said. In the time since Kira had alerted him to it, it seemed it had become common knowledge that she was studying it. "I've read it, and it seems ... a lot more open to interpretation than she believes. What do you think? *Does* it prophesy that I will marry a Bajoran?"

Darve made a face. "Before we get to *that* question, there are certain presuppositions that we must consider: what is a prophecy, and is Kudri Temomo's Fourth Prophecy one?"

"What do you mean?" Kira asked. "A prophecy tells the future. And Kudri Temomo's Fourth Prophecy is one—it's in the *name*."

"Your theological education is *dreadfully* lacking, child. The Cardassians fault, of course, and no shame to you; but still true, nevertheless." Darve handed them mugs of tea, and fished a stool out from under the table. She sat on it and took a sip. "The name is traditional, assigned centuries after the book it's contained in was written; certainly, Kudri herself never referred to it that way. And 'telling the future' is *one* type of prophecy. There are many other types of prophecy; a prophecy is a message that comes from the Prophets. Instructions from the Prophets about the nature of the universe, or about how to live, or revelations about the past, or ... anything else they deign to share with us." Darve took another sip. "It's hard to remember these days, given that the Orb of Prophecy and Change is the only one still in our hands—and in that case, prophecy does mean *telling the future*; 'Orb of Future-Seeing and Transformation' might be a better translation of its name into modern Bajoran—but telling the future has not, historically, been something the Prophets have been much concerned about."

"They seem to be very concerned with telling the future, from what I've seen," Ben said.

"From your point of view, I can see how that would be so," Darve said. "But you are unprecedented in *many* ways, Emissary, and I beg you to remember that your experiences of the Prophets are not typical."

Ben nodded and took a sip of his tea. It was pleasantly tart, almost fruity; not a tea he'd had before, and he liked it.

"Most of the sages of the past were concerned with revelations about the nature of life and the universe and the Prophets, and with proper devotion to the Prophets," Darve said. Her voice fell into the practiced cadence of an experienced teacher. "When they *did* prophesy future events, those events were usually quite close at hand and easily verifiable, because they were designed to prove that they were speaking for the Prophets and not merely for themselves. Although of course, in several notable cases the prophecies in question turned out to be multivariant—that is, they applied in more than one way to more than one set of events throughout history. The Letter of Nubas is the most prominent example of this; it predicted the downfall of the Emperor Jevoth II, the birth and ascension of Kai Foshod five centuries later, and the downfall of Intendant Zotu three centuries after *that*."

"In Kudri's day, they often used the *forms* of Prophetic speech for things that were not actually prophecies at all. Riddles, for example, or other thought games, or teaching stories. Parables, fables, etc. The so-called Fourth Prophecy may be a parable; the *Third* Prophecy certainly is, but the Fourth is more ambiguous."

"What do you think?" Ben asked.

"I think that if fourteen centuries of scholarship on the matter has not resolved the question of whether or not it is a prophecy, *my* opinion is hardly definitive," Darve said dryly. "In any case, I'm not an expert on Kudri or her period; there *isn't* one, these days, given the poor state of our monasteries and universities after Cardassian depredation. Though that will eventually be rectified; I have several promising students who are focusing their study on the Sormi-era mystics."

"Let's assume for the sake of argument that it *is* a prophecy and it *does* predict the future," Kira said. "In that case, would it apply to Commander Sisko?"

"That is a very interesting question," Darve said. "I can see why the Kai's favored scholars think so."

"Really?" Ben said in surprise. "I thought it was fairly ambiguous."

"Oh, it very much is, and I'm not saying that's the best interpretation of it, if it should turn out to be a future-telling prophecy," Darve said. "But some of the turns of phrase are striking, especially if you're reading it in the original instead of in translation."

"What difference does translation make?" Kira asked. "If it's a good translation, shouldn't it just ... say what it says?"

"Oh, dear me, no," Darve said. She made a disapproving noise. "This is why I don't like the Universal Translator. It produces very good, high-quality translations, for the most part! But it obscures the places where there are different connotations in different languages or cultures, and also the places where there simply *isn't* a good way of saying something in a different language. It obscures the places where a given word or phrase means multiple things in the original language—and the speaker or author is using that for purposeful effect—and also the places where the original grammar is simply poor or nonstandard and you have to make assumptions to fill in the gaps. In all such places, the Universal Translator makes a guess based on what is statistically the most likely answer. Usually, it's not too far off. But even when it's adequate, it misses many of the finer details. For example—" She broke off with a grimace. "But you are not here for a linguistics lesson."

"I'm sure it would be fascinating," Ben said. If he had the time, he'd like to sit in on a few of her classes; it would surely be interesting and informative. But he didn't have the time. Quiet as things were for the moment, that never lasted on Deep Space Nine. "But at the moment, I'm most interested in how the linguistic ambiguities in Kudri's Fourth Prophecy apply—or don't apply, as the case may be—to the current situation."

"Of course." Vedek Darve pulled out a sheaf of papers and laid them out in front of Ben and Kira. "Here we have a variety of different translations of the text, laid out side-by-side, along with the original." She pointed out numerous places where there were differences, and why, and what reasons the translators might have had for making various choices. She never outright *said* 'and if you translate it this way, it's a clear reference to the Emissary and the current galactic situation,' but Ben figured it out anyway. From her comments, Kira did, too.

"And there's one other thing, that I *highly* doubt the Kai and her faction have noticed, yet," Vedek Darve said, as she was finishing up. "It's ... a bit far-fetched, I admit, but I find it oddly charming."

Her finger fell on a part of the text that was particularly obscure, something about "under three" and "full outposts," which she had pointed out made little sense with the grammar of the Old High Middle Bajoran dialect that Kudri Temomo had been writing in. "I have been interested in you, Emissary, since the Prophets chose you."

Ben grimaced. He knew what *that* meant. Bajor had very little in the way of news organizations, since the Cardassians had destroyed them during the Occupation, but sensationalized and gossipy newsletters were starting to pop up—and neither Bajor's privacy laws nor the Federation's could prevent them from digging into his life and history.

"I try to avoid the more intrusive or sensationalized accounts, of course, but I think hobbies are fair—hm—game." She tapped the passage in question. "It has occurred to me that perhaps previous attempts at translation have been missing crucial context. Perhaps this might clarify things that are obscure in the original." She cleared her throat. "It's the bottom of the third, the bases are loaded ..."

"You think it's a baseball metaphor," Ben said.

"I think it's a compelling possibility," Vedek Darve said. "I could very well be wrong. It might be a complete coincidence. But it's inspired me to scour other ancient writings for possible references to baseball. It's been a surprisingly fruitful endeavor."

"Really?" Ben said. "I'd be interested in your findings." Every time he thought the Prophets' interference in his life couldn't get stranger, there was something new. This, at least, was something fun.

"I'll be happy to send them along when they're in a more polished form," Darve said.

"But does the possible baseball metaphor mean that the prophecy really *does* refer to Commander Sisko?" Kira asked.

Darve shrugged. "If my interpretation is correct ... maybe? But I could be wrong, and even if I'm correct, several of the places that are *undoubtedly* baseball metaphors don't seem to have any reference to the Emissary at all. And even if this prophecy *is* a future-telling, and *does* relate to the Emissary, it's still hardly relevant to the current political situation."

"But Kai Winn is using the prophecy to *affect* the political situation," Ben protested.

"Yes, but that says more about her than it does about Kudri's writings," Darve said. "When prophecies tell the future, they don't tell what *may* be, or what the Prophets *want* to be—they tell what *will* be. Because to the Prophets, the questions of past, present, and future are largely academic."

Ben nodded. "They don't experience time in a linear fashion."

"That's an interesting way of putting it," Darve said. "I've never heard it explained that way before. Is it a Federation way of explaining things?"

"It's how the Prophets explained it to me," Ben said.

Vedek Darve raised her eyebrows. "Ah. Yes. That's ... ah. Thank you for sharing." She looked terribly curious.

"Is there anything else in all this ambiguity that might be important?" Kira asked. "Either to Commander Sisko, or something that the Kai might be able to use?"

"I can't speak to what the Kai's plans are, of course, or what her pet scholars are telling her," Darve said. "But one thing does strike me as possibly relevant. You haven't asked anything about the possible identity of the bride."

"Does Kai Winn have someone up her sleeve?" Ben asked.

Darve waved a hand. "I am not in her circle and couldn't tell you whether she does or not. And it's true the text spends little time on the bride. Except to note that she is associated with etana flowers in some way. Now! Etanas are highly symbolic, in Bajoran literature. Symbolic of blood—both blood shed in violence, and the blood of birth, and thus of war and motherhood and sacrifice. Which is why command officer's uniforms in the Militia are red—before synthetic dyes, many military uniforms were colored with dye made from etana. Symbolic of sunrise and sunsets, and thus of endings and beginnings and things that are both. Sometimes the use of etana is a stand-in for the color red, in general; sometimes for beauty. And sometimes, of course, it's simply a literal reference to etana flowers—they do grow everywhere. So associating the bride with etanas could mean any number of things."

"What do you think it means?" Ben asked.

"I think that your choice of companions is interesting," Darve said, looking Kira up and down.

Kira straightened. "Me?" she said incredulously.

"Pure speculation, of course," Darve said. "But if it *is* a prophecy, and *does* refer to the Emissary, one would expect that the bride would be someone you know, yes? Someone you trust and are close to, given that it is my understanding that the Federation does not do arranged marriages."

"Federation member worlds practice a wide range of marital customs," Ben said. "The Federation tries not to interfere with any of them, so there *isn't* a Federation-wide practice either way. But most humans marry for personal reasons."

"As I said, it's pure speculation," Darve said. "But given the reason for your call, I thought of it the moment I saw you together, and the Major with her etana uniform and etana hair. If you want to head the Kai off, implying that it's Major Kira—and not whoever the Kai pushes—might be useful to you."

"Thank you for the advice, we'll take it under consideration," Ben said.

The walk out to the beam-up site was a bit awkward. Ben wondered what Nerys was thinking. Unlike most Human cultures, the dominant Bajoran culture did have arranged marriages.

Kira believed in the Prophets; they didn't often speak of what it meant that he was the Emissary, preferring to stick mostly to professional matters where they both knew their roles. This was different, and he had no idea how she would respond.

They ran through the pre-flight checks on the *Orinoco* in silence. The beep of Ben's communicator was almost startling.

"DS9 to Commander Sisko," Dax said.

Ben tapped his combadge. "Sisko here. Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Sir, Kai Winn has heard that you're on Bajor visiting Vedeks, and would like to see you before you head back to the station."

Ben glanced at Kira. She winced.

They'd known there was a good chance the Kai would hear about their visit, and they hadn't really been trying to hide anything, but that was fast. "Thank you for passing along the message," Sisko said. "I'll take it from here."

"So much for a nice quiet visit," Kira said, once he'd signed off.

Ben contacted the Kai's office and arranged for an appointment in half an hour, which just gave them time to maneuver the runabout into an orbit closer to the capitol for easier beam-down.

"Do you want me to come down with you?" Kira asked. "If anybody else is thinking what Vedek Darve was thinking, it might fan the flames."

"I can understand if you'd rather not go," Ben said, "but I would appreciate it if you would come. Whatever else her plans may be, I highly doubt she'd be interested in pushing the two of us together. What would it gain her? If she's got a candidate up her sleeve, and some of her supporters *do* think it should be you, that disagreement might just work out in our favor."

"All right, I'll come with you." Kira turned back to her station and buried herself in her work.

The Kai was hosting a reception in the gardens outside her office, various important religious and political figures scattered around drinking tea and punch and eating finger food. This couldn't have been whipped up on short notice for their benefit, Ben realized, taking stock of who all was there.

"Emissary," Winn said pleasantly, "how kind of you to join us. Do help yourself to refreshments—and you, too, of course, Major Kira."

"Thank you," Ben said, with equal pleasantry. "I'm afraid we can't to stay too long—it's a six-hour flight back to the station, after all—but something light would be appreciated."

"Of course," Winn said with a smile. "It is such a shame that the distance between the Celestial Temple and Bajor is so long—I'm sure you would visit more often if you could." She gestured at one of the servers.

"I haven't gotten to see as much of Bajor as I would have liked, since I arrived," Ben said, accepting the cup of punch and plate of delicacies. "But I have appreciated everything I've seen." He took a sip of punch, aware of all the people watching. Even the ones whose conversations hadn't stopped when he and Kira arrived were sneaking glances his way, and others were hanging on his every word.

Kira was also coming in for a share in the evaluating glances. Ben wondered if it was because she was the Emissary's second-in-command (and closest Bajoran acquaintance), or because they thought she fit the prophecy and were sizing her up as a potential bride for the Emissary.

"Thank you for taking the time to visit, while you are here on Bajor," the Kai said. "Can I ask what in particular drew you to the Tenyed Valley Monastery?"

"I was consulting with Vedek Darve," Ben said. "I understand she's one of the pre-eminent scholars on Bajor, and she was kind enough to explain some matters that I had found confusing."

"Perhaps Kudri Temomo's Fourth Prophecy?" the Kai asked.

"Our conversation focused on linguistics, and translation challenges," Ben said. "But Kudri Temomomo's work was brought up, yes."

"Did Vedek Darve share any conclusions with you?" Winn asked.

"I wouldn't presume to speak for her," Ben said. "I'm sure she would be happy to share her thoughts with you."

"She has been remarkably reticent whenever I have sought her advice," Winn said.

One of the guests—a vedek that Ben didn't recognize—snorted. "Darve can't ever make a plain statement without hemming it round with a dozen qualifications. You'll never get a straight answer out of her."

"I'd rather someone who was honest when they're not sure, than someone who presents their guesses and opinions as facts," Kira said.

That provoked a stir; some of those gathered frowned at her, or scowled, and Ben mentally labelled those as Winn's closer supporters. Others nodded approvingly, and he took note of them as possible allies.

"It was a fascinating discussion, on a scholarly level," Ben said. "I learned a great deal. But it was mostly academic."

"You don't believe that prophecies are something to concern yourself with, Emissary?" asked Minister Vrise. His voice was neutral, and he'd been one who nodded at Kira's words.

"I think that the fulfillment of the Prophets' wisdom isn't based on what you or I or anyone else wants," Ben said. "The Prophets are nonlinear, outside of time; they see everything that happens all at once, instead of one thing at a time in order the way we do. If they say something will happen, it's not usually because they *want* it to happen; it's because to them, it already *has* happened. And it will happen whether we try to bring it about or avoid it ... unless it's meant specifically *as* a warning to prevent the thing they show us."

"Is that so?" the Kai asked, and though her face remained its usual pleasant mask, there was something in the tilt of her head that was not happy.

"Yes," Ben said. Much as he didn't like the religious role he'd been forced into, he had no qualms about speaking of his own experiences with the Prophets and what they had told him.

"Emissary, I'm not quite sure I understand," said a guest Ben didn't recognize. "What do you mean by 'nonlinear'?"

"Corporeal beings like Humans and Bajorans tend to experience time as a line," Ben said. "We begin at one point in time, and end at another, and at each moment in our lives, we experience only that one moment. We remember our past, and don't know what the future holds. We walk a line with the past always behind us and the future always in front of us. The past, present, and future are all distinct and separate from each other. There is cause and effect—actions in the past cause things to happen in the present, things in the present cause other things in the future. That is linear time—each moment like a point on a line, leading on into the future."

"But the Prophets don't experience time that way," the guest said.

"The Prophets experience all of time at once," Ben said. "They exist in all times at once. Not one time and then another, but all times at the same time. I've tried to wrap my head around it, but I can't quite imagine what that would be like. On the other hand, *they* don't quite understand what it's like to be linear—to change over time, to experience cause and effect." He shrugged. "I'm certain there are many scholars and vedeks who could explain it better than I just did." He took a sip of his punch.

"No doubt," said one of the vedeks, "but I've never heard it described in quite that way before. Tell me more about the vision that taught you this."

Ben demurred, pointing out that he wasn't a scholar or a religious teacher, but the vedek persisted, and Ben gave in.

From the slightly frozen look on the Kai's face, she was regretting having invited him. No doubt she'd expected to keep control of the conversation, as she so often was able to do. But she couldn't interrupt the Emissary speaking about his experiences with the Prophets, and *she* certainly couldn't speak with equal personal experience of them—no one could, that was why Ben was the *Emissary*.

Still, she'd find a way to benefit from this; no doubt reminding everyone that this bit of the Emissary's teaching only happened because *she* had requested his visit.

Winn never did manage to bring the conversation back around to Kudri's prophecy, or to her political ambitions.

Ben sighed as they beamed back up to the runabout. "We'll be a bit later getting back to the station than I'd planned, Major," he said. "I'm sorry to be disrupting your evening."

"No, it's fine." Kira made a face. "It'll give me time to catch up on personnel reports. You know, say what you will about being a terrorist fighting for your life with few supplies and less hope, but at least I never had to do paperwork for it."

Ben smiled. "There have been times in my life, Major, when I would have gladly made that trade myself." Once they were out of orbit and safely on course back to the station, he pulled out a PADD and started in on his own paperwork. Intelligence updates from Starfleet, reading the reports Kira and his other officers wrote for him and signing off on them, and a wide variety of other miscellanea kept him busy for a few hours.

They worked in companionable silence. Occasionally one or the other would have a comment or a question.

Eventually, Ben went to the replicator for coffee. "Want anything, Major?"

"A raktajino would be nice," she said.

They took a coffee break. Instead of chatting, as they usually did, Kira stared out the runabout's viewscreen.

"You seem distracted, Major," Ben said. "Anything I can help with?"

Kira made a face. "Not really. Just ... what Vedek Darve said, about me possibly being the one in the prophecy, my mind keeps wandering back to it."

"You know the chances are, the prophecy isn't even about *me*," Ben pointed out. "And even if it is, naming you as the bride is tenuous at best. I wouldn't worry about it."

"It's not that," Kira said. "It's just ... it's never occurred to me before, that *I* might have some sort of role to play for the Prophets."

"You at least grew up knowing about the Prophets," Ben pointed out. "What do you think it feels like for me?"

"Yeah, but you're *you*," Kira said. "The Emissary. I'm just an old terrorist who joined the Militia because she didn't know what else to do after the Cardassians left."

"That's selling yourself a bit short, Major," Ben pointed out. "And surely in the grand scheme of things, it's more likely the Prophets would be paying attention to a Bajoran than a Human?"

Kira shrugged.

Ben sipped his raktajino and thought. "Is the prophecy being about marriage throwing you for a loop?"

She frowned at him. "No, why would it?"

"It's just, you never seemed to me like the marrying type." Ben said.

"I've got nothing against it, it just doesn't apply to me. Marriage is about family, children, putting down roots and building a life together." Kira shrugged. "I don't have a trade or farm or house or family property to steward and pass on. I don't have parents who might need support or

who might want to arrange something. My brothers are doing fine and don't need me to be part of a household, or to help rebuild the town they live in. I don't mind kids, but I have no burning desire to be a mother. So what would be the point of looking for a spouse?"

"Love?" Ben asked. "Romance? Companionship?" None of the reasons she'd given for marrying were about *her*, he realized, they were all about her place in her family and the larger community.

She shrugged. "You don't need marriage for those."

"I suppose not," Ben said.

"Is that why Humans marry?" Kira asked. "Love?"

"Mostly," Ben said. "In the dominant culture on Earth, at least. Certainly in North America, where I'm from."

"It seems awfully flimsy to try and build a life on an emotion," Kira said.

"I loved Jennifer—my wife—very much," Ben said. "I wouldn't have married her otherwise. You're right that *being* married was more about commitment to each other than romance. But I wouldn't have wanted to make that commitment if I didn't love her." He missed Jennifer so much, and always would. But there was a part of him that was starting to miss the companionship, someone to share life's ups and downs with, as much as he missed her, specifically.

Maybe Jake was right, and it was time to start looking for someone.

"And Humans only marry for love?" Kira said. "Maybe you should have told the Kai that, get her off your case."

"She'd find a way to use *that*, too," Ben said. He thought back to one of his more memorable ethics classes back at Starfleet Academy. "And it's not that Humans *only* marry for love; there are minority cultures that marry for other reasons. And occasionally Starfleet officers will find it expedient to get married for professional reasons—usually temporarily, but not always."

"Professional reasons?" Kira's voice was disbelieving. "What reason could Starfleet have for wanting its officers married? And how can a marriage be temporary?"

"Federation law recognizes several different types of marriage, one of which is a contract marriage—that is, a marriage that is only valid for a certain period of time."

"Really?"

Ben nodded. "When you have as many different cultures in the same political group, is there any wonder that even things as fundamental as marriage have different definitions that need to be accommodated for? I believe contract marriage originally came from the Tellarites. As for Starfleet—you're quite right that *Starfleet* doesn't care whether its officers are married or not. But sometimes the cultures we deal with *do*. If we're sending a ship to deal with people who don't like dealing with unmarried people, usually we assign a ship captained by someone who is married, and have them bring their spouse along. But if you're making first contact, you can't know that ahead of time. There was a case like that a few years ago. The *USS Glahnig* was scouting an uninhabited planet system in what they *thought* was empty space. But it was claimed by a people called the Cilvunians, and they arrested the away team for trespassing. When the ship's captain, Akalay, went to negotiate for their release, they found that the Cilvunians count any unmarried person as a child and thus refuse to speak on any important subject with them. So Akalay married one of the civilians who worked in the ship's beauty shop, in a contract marriage that lasted two years. It was good enough for the Cilvunians, and they returned our people and opened diplomatic relations."

Kira shook her head. "I'm glad it turned out all right."

"Me, too," Ben said. "Ethics is one of the required courses at Starfleet Academy, and we spent a class period once going over various circumstances in which getting married for a mission might be helpful and what our response might be. When is it acceptable to lie about your marital status, in what cases can you simply go along with whatever ceremony your host wants and then declare it not valid under Federation law later, that sort of thing. How to balance your own ethics, culture, and taste, with your duty as a Starfleet officer."

"Any conclusions?" Kira asked.

"I decided that while it wouldn't be my first choice of solution, there were things worth getting married for," Ben said. "If someone's life was at stake, for example. There were several other scenarios they gave us where I might have chosen a contract marriage, provided I had a friend willing to put up with me for two years." He cocked his head. "But Kai Winn's political ambitions and a vaguely worded prophecy aren't anywhere near enough reason."

"I'd have to agree with you there," Kira said. "But I'm still trying to imagine what other reasons there could possibly be for needing to get married for the sake of a mission. Starfleet gets into *really weird* situations. I thought it was just the wormhole that was causing all the bonkers things around here, but the more stories I hear from you Starfleet types, the more I think it's just you."

"You may be right," Ben said, and regaled her with stories of various times Starfleet officers had had to marry for professional reasons. It made the rest of the trip pass faster than paperwork would have.

"Strike called—knee-high pitch through the middle. I think Chiu came back from that injury a little early, his pitching is not as smooth and graceful as I am used to seeing and he is taking a little longer between pitches. Ball one, outside, count is one and one. Chiu keeps looking at Malmstad on second, to make sure she will not repeat the steal she made the last time the Blue Sox played the Pioneers."

Ben had the audio of the latest baseball game from the Cestus III league playing as he worked his way through his inbox. He couldn't devote much attention to it, but it was nice to have in the background as he did the boring parts of running a station. Everything had been quiet in the week since he and Kira got back from Bajor, so he'd managed to clear out most of his backlog. He could spare some attention to a ball game while he worked on the rest of it.

"And the next one, outside again, ball two. Two balls, one strike. Next pitch—curve ball, but Kiao got his bat on it, line drive out to center-right. Ramella catches it on the bounce, throws it to third, but not quickly enough to tag Malmstad out. Malik is safe at first. All the runners have advanced. It's the bottom of the third, bases are loaded—"

His combadge chirped. He hit pause on the game.

"Kira to Sisko, just got word that a refugee ship is trying to make it out of Cardassian space, but they think they might've been spotted."

"How many aboard?" Ben asked. During the Bajoran Occupation, there had been a lot of people who could get off Bajor but not *quite* out of Cardassian space to safety. They'd taken refuge in a variety of marginally-habitable places that Cardassians rarely went, and they'd spent the years since the end of the Occupation trickling out as best they could.

"Somewhere around three hundred, is the word I got," Kira said.

"Three *hundred*?" Ben sat back. Ten to twenty was a more usual number, crammed into the cargo holds of smuggler ships. "No wonder the Cardassians spotted them."

"Somebody reported their settlement, they had to get out before the Cardassians showed up and hope they made it across the border."

Ben nodded. "Warm up the *Defiant*. Let's head out, see if we can get them safely home."

It was a balancing act. Heading out at high warp straight for the Cardassian border would tip the Cardassians off that something was up, if they *didn't* already know about the refugee ship. So they headed out, but casually, slowly, as if it were a routine patrol.

There was little the *Defiant* could do, in any case, if they got there and found the Cardassians about to destroy the refugee ship—they couldn't cross the border into Cardassian space to protect them. A Starfleet ship, passing into Cardassian space, and threatening a Cardassian warship? If things went badly, it could trigger a war.

"Bloody Cardassians," O'Brien muttered from the Engineering station. "They know they're refugees, not Maquis."

The Cardassians claimed that anyone in their space who didn't live perfectly open lives under the thumb of the Cardassian state was a criminal or a terrorist of some sort. On the side of their territory closest to the Federation and Bajor, that meant Maquis. Even when the people in question had never committed violence and were only trying to leave.

"The Cardassians have never particularly cared about that distinction, Chief," Kira said.

"Do you know anybody in particular on that ship, Major?" Ben asked.

"Yes," Kira said. "Seba Yacosi used to slip food and information to my cell, when he had any. He'd been in a refugee camp with Mobara before they escaped. We'd take turns going to visit Seba, help out during planting and harvest time, things like that. It was ... as close to rest and safety as we got, for a few years there. Then the Cardassians destroyed his farm. Not even because he helped us, they never figured that out. It was just random retaliation. He managed to get himself and his kids off planet, rather than go back to a refugee camp."

"Sounds like a good man," Ben said. "I hope I get to meet him."

"Me, too," Kira said.

People in hiding in Cardassian space didn't communicate too much. They didn't dare. She probably hadn't known if he was dead or alive, until his ship had sent its distress call.

It'd be another hour before they were close enough to the border to see what was going on. If the refugee ship made it to the border, they could prevent the Cardassians from following it across. If not ... they might be just in time to watch the ship be destroyed.

"We've got the refugee ship on our sensors," Dax said. "They're running hard, but there's a Cardassian ship close behind them. They'll catch them before they reach the border."

"Damn," Ben swore. It had been a tense few hours. They'd tried strategizing what to do to convince the Cardassians to leave the ship alone, but hadn't come up with anything workable. But they might get lucky; maybe the Gul in charge of the pursuing ship would be willing to bargain. "Hail the Cardassians."

Gul Dukat's face filled the screen. "Ah, Commander Sisko," he said with an insincere smile. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Gul Dukat," Ben said. "I'm surprised to find you harassing an unarmed civilian ship. Surely you have more important matters to take care of."

"No matter is too unimportant for the Cardassian Union," Dukat said, which meant that yes, he did think it was beneath him, but had orders to handle the matter. *"Besides, they're not civilians; they're terrorists."*

"Terrorists?" Ben said. "I think not. Surely terrorists would have weapons aboard—and a faster ship."

"*They came from a hidden settlement in an asteroid,*" Dukat said. "*If they were truly innocent as you claim, why were they there, instead of submitting themselves to the authorities for resettlement? If they were truly innocent, why not simply stop when we ordered them to? Only the guilty fear punishment.*"

Ben let his incredulity show. "Given how many Bajorans you killed during the Occupation simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or as reprisals, I hope you can see why they might not trust your ability—or willingness—to sort the innocent from the guilty."

"*But they were guilty, Commander,*" Dukat said, his voice oozing with affable sincerity. "*Guilty of allowing their fellow Bajorans to commit terrorism in their name, if nothing else. And also of evading Cardassian law and the order we bring.*"

"They've been living peacefully on their own for years," Ben said. "If they'd been causing any trouble for the Cardassian Union, you would have found them and hunted them down before now. And they have a perfectly legitimate reason to come to Bajor—"

"*Yes, yes, they told me their sad story,*" Dukat said. "*As for the child in need of medical treatment, if they had only come forward months ago, he would of course have received treatment from our facilities. Now, I'm afraid, it's too late, and tragic as it is we cannot allow one sick child to be used as cover for a whole ship full of terrorists.*" He shook his head sadly. "*And as for the wedding many others claim to be on their way to—why that's even more suspicious!*"

Wedding. Ben blinked, and tried to keep his face straight as he looked over at Major Kira, sitting at the Tactical I station. Her eyes were wide with shock, but then, she was out of range of the screen and didn't have to worry about what Dukat might see.

"How so?" Ben asked.

"*The Cardassian Union approves of family building and weddings are, of course, a pre-requisite to that,*" Dukat said. "*But as I told them, loyalty and order are more important still, because without those, family might lead people away from their rightful allegiance, instead of towards it. No ordinary wedding would be worth letting a ship full of suspected terrorists go—it would have to be an important wedding, to both Bajor and Cardassia. They insist that they are headed to a wedding that is that important, but won't say whose. Which leads me to believe that they are lying.*" He shook his head sadly.

Ben glanced at Kira again. No time to talk about it, but she nodded. They *had* talked about it, after all, on the way back from that trip to consult with Vedek Darve. "I'm afraid that's my fault," Ben said.

"*Your fault?*" Dukat inquired.

"Yes," Ben said. "You see, it's *my* wedding. I was hoping for something small and quiet, with a minimum of fuss. So I've asked all the guests to avoid gossiping about things before the ceremony." Ben kept his gaze firmly fixed on the viewscreen. He could tell from her body language that Dax was fighting the urge to turn and stare at him, and he knew that as soon as their shifts were over he was going to have to deal with the Old Man's questionable humor and condolences. "I'm sorry that it caused any confusion for you."

"*Your wedding?*" Dukat chuckled. "*I'm sorry, that was terribly rude of me. Congratulations, commander, on behalf of all Cardassia!*" his words dripped with insincerity. "*May I enquire as to the identity of the bride?*"

Ben held his hand out. Kira took her cue and stood to join him, taking his hand and standing just behind his chair. "Major Kira."

"*I see,*" Dukat said slowly. He eyed them distrustfully. "*Congratulations to you as well, Major.*" His voice was heavy with irony.

"Thank you," Kira said. Ben didn't dare look up at her face, but she'd bluffed Cardassians before.

"One of the passengers on that ship is Seba Yacosi, travelling with his family," Ben said. "The Sebas are old family friends of the Kira family."

"I haven't seen Yacosi or his family in years," Kira said. "I'm so excited to see how much the children have grown."

"*Of course, Major, of course.*" Dukat paused.

Ben held his breath, to see if it worked.

"*Well, this does change things,*" Dukat said. "*Though weddings should be public. A declaration of your new life together, with as many witnesses as possible. I must say I'm hurt. The Emissary is getting married and didn't invite anyone from Cardassia? After we just signed that new treaty with Bajor? How disappointing. One might almost think you didn't like us, but of course you would never dream of insulting us like that. Of course we will escort your guests safely to Bajor, Captain, and I'm sure you would not turn away a representative of the Cardassian Empire to wish you well, would you?*" In other words, Dukat didn't believe a word of it, but wasn't willing to risk a potential diplomatic incident, either. Or maybe he just wanted to watch them squirm.

"Of course not, if you really wish it, but that would require some changes to our arrangements," Ben said.

"We'd been planning to have the wedding at my brothers' farm in the Tinnim Valley, but if we're expanding the guest list, there's not going to be enough room," Kira said. "And it's not nearly grand enough for such ... august visitors."

"*I'm sure whatever you come up with will be appropriate to the occasion,*" Dukat said. "*And I'm sure you have ... many things to do in preparation. And are eager to greet your guests.*" His voice was heavy with irony. "*Please send me the invitation as soon as it is ready.*" He smiled. "*Congratulations, again.*"

He ended the call.

Ben sagged in his chair.

Dax swung around to stare at them both, eyes alight with amusement and concern. Ben shrugged at her.

"You're not going to go through with it, are you?" O'Brien demanded. "As soon as that ship is across the border, the Cardassians can't touch it."

"Problem is, Chief, if we admit we lied to the Cardassians, that'll make it that much harder the next time we have to try and get something past them," Dax said. "If we treat this as real, they have to, as well. If we don't, they have a latinum-plated excuse to claim we're lying any time they want to."

"Yeah, but marriage!" O'Brien said. "That's a big commitment."

"I've done worse things for less reward," Kira said. "Three hundred lives saved from the Cardassians is nothing to sneeze at."

"I'm sure Major Kira and I will work together as well in our private life as we do professionally," Ben said.

"And I'm sure you have a lot to discuss if you want to have a wedding that *looks* like it's been planned all along," Dax said. "I can take over while you two figure things out."

"Thank you, Dax," Ben said.

Before they did anything else, Ben sent off messages to his father and siblings with a bare-bones explanation and an invitation to come. Their presence, if they could make it, would lend credence to the lie. Then he sat down with Kira in his tiny ready room.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about Bajoran weddings," Ben said. "What do we need to do?"

"We need someone to perform the ceremony and a place to have it," Kira said. "It doesn't *have* to be a monk, but with you being the Emissary, it would look strange if it weren't."

"And I'm sure the Kai would be thrilled to officiate," Ben said. He made a face.

"My feelings exactly," Kira said. "Prylar Quen runs the shrine in Tinnim Valley, near where my brothers live. I'm sure he'd be honored to officiate, and it's a good excuse not to ask the Kai." She hesitated. "I'm not sure what all is in the Tinnim Valley, these days, or even in the whole of Dahkur Province, so I don't know where would be good to have a wedding." She huffed a humorless laugh. "On the other hand, I'd *rather* the Cardassians not step one toe into Dahkur ever again. Could we host it on the station?"

"I suppose we could rent out Quarks ..." Ben said with a shrug.

Kira made a face.

"We can talk about it later, see what else we can come up with," Ben said. "I don't even know what we should be looking for. I've never been to a Bajoran wedding; what are they like?"

"I've only been to a couple myself," Kira said, "and they were all either during the Occupation or immediately afterwards, with whatever we could scramble together. And I didn't figure it would ever be relevant to me, so I wasn't paying attention."

"Not exactly a good foundation for figuring out something that will look plausible to Dukat on a moment's notice," Ben said. He thought for a bit. "What about Crewman Profa? Doesn't he like to read Bajoran romance novels? Surely he'd know."

"I'll ask him," Kira said. She hesitated, mouth set.

"What is it?" Ben asked.

"I know the Federation has short-term marriages, but we don't on Bajor," she said. "A marriage ending isn't something you plan out ahead of time. It means something has gone wrong. I don't—I wouldn't want to say my wedding vows already thinking about how to get out of them." Her face was set in determination.

Ben studied her, and thought about it. What would it be like to be married to her, not just pretending to be for a few years, but for real? It wouldn't be anything like what he'd shared with Jennifer, but that would be true of anyone. He'd just been thinking that he'd like to try dating again, finding a permanent companion.

But that didn't mean that he and Kira would be right together for the long term. And being married to a Bajoran would change his career path—Starfleet would *definitely* want to keep him here, and he'd never liked the idea of a long-distance relationship.

He couldn't imagine what that would look like, him and Kira, over the long term. Twenty years from now would they still be commanding Deep Space Nine together? Would he retire to Bajor and teach engineering or run a shipyard? They'd have a lot of work for him to do, and it would be interesting. And what about Jake? Though that wasn't an argument against a long marriage; Jake was almost grown. Even a two-year contract would cover his last years until legal adulthood. Besides, Jake liked Kira.

"I don't know," Ben said. "I'd have to think about it."

That evening, Ben lay in his tiny bunk, tossing his baseball, desperately needing something to take his mind off things so he could relax. "Computer, resume playback of the baseball game between the Pioneers and the Blue Sox."

"*Ramella catches it on the bounce,*" the announcer said, "*throws it to third, but not quickly enough to tag Malmstad out. Malik is safe at first. All the runners have advanced. It's the bottom of the third, bases are loaded—*"

It took Ben a second to figure out why that struck him as important. "Computer, repeat that."

"*Ramella catches it on the bounce, throws it to third, but not quickly enough to tag Malmstad out. Malik is safe at first. All the runners have advanced. It's the bottom of the third, bases are loaded—*"

"Pause." Ben remembered what Vedek Darve had said, and began to chuckle helplessly.

When he got himself under control, he tapped his combadge. "Sisko to Kira. If you've got a minute, I have something you might be interested in."

There was a pause. "What?"

"Remember what Vedek Darve said about translations, and about how there might be baseball metaphors in various prophecies, including Kudri Temomo's Fourth Prophecy?"

"Of course."

"I was listening to a baseball game while doing paperwork when you heard about the refugee ship. Here's what was happening when you called me." He played the clip for her.

"Well," Kira said after a few seconds, "*I guess that solves the question of whether or not it was a prophecy that applies to you and me.*"

"I guess it does, at that."

"*We'll have to invite her. I'm sure she'd be interested to hear that for the book she's working on.*"

"No doubt," Ben said. "I'll let you get on with your evening, Major."

"*You know, you should probably start calling me Nerys. At least when we're off duty.*"

"Probably," Ben said. "And you should call me Ben, of course."

"Okay, Ben," Kira—Nerys—said. "Goodnight."

"Good night, Nerys," he responded, and tapped his combadge to close the channel.

He stared up at the ceiling, even more on-edge than he'd been before. It *shouldn't* make any difference to how he felt about this. He hadn't done this to serve the prophecy or the Prophets; he'd been willing to do this to save those refugees. Three hundred lives saved by marrying an attractive, intelligent woman he respected and liked? It wasn't much of a sacrifice.

The Prophets hadn't forced this; the Cardassians had. More specifically, Gul Dukat had. All the Prophets had done was see it in advance. He shouldn't resent them for it. They couldn't *not* see the future. He'd never depended on omniscient aliens to protect him in the past, so why should he care that they hadn't stepped in now to prevent this?

He needed to talk this out with someone. He tapped his combadge. "Dax, do you have a minute?"

"Nobody saw me, so we shouldn't be starting any rumors of you cheating on Kira," Dax said with a grin as she stepped through his door. There was a bottle in her hand.

"I'm not going to ask where you got that," he said as she handed it to him. Curzon had been notorious for smuggling liquor into places it shouldn't be, and then claiming it for 'diplomatic necessity' if he got found out. Sometimes it had been. Sometimes it had been just to see if he could do it. Ben checked the label. It wasn't one he was familiar with, but he cracked it open anyway, pouring it into the glasses she'd had in her other hand.

"So, tell me everything," Dax said. "This wasn't as spur-of-the-moment as it looked, was it."

"No, it wasn't," Ben said. He took a sip of liquor, feeling the burn as it went down, and told her the whole story.

Dax was suitably indignant on his behalf. "If the Prophets are going to be using you for whatever their reasons are, the *least* they could do is give you enough of a head's-up to be *useful*," she said. "If we'd known about the refugee ship in advance, we might have been able to figure out some other way to save them!"

"I know," Ben said. "Or maybe arranged for the Cardassians to have a failure in their sensor net so the ship could escape without needing our help. *Something.*"

Between the two of them, they came up with a series of increasingly-unlikely ways they could have saved the refugee ship as they drank sparingly of Dax's booze. The replicator could give them a medication that would sober both of them up in seconds, should a crisis happen—but in a crisis, every second counted, and it would be best not to push their luck with the Cardassians following them and the refugee ship back

to the station.

"You know, I've been married six times," Dax said as they wound down.

"I do know that," Ben said.

"Three of them were arranged."

"That, I didn't know."

Dax nodded. "It doesn't really matter, at this point, and it didn't affect the marriages all that much—it always shocks humans when I say that, but it's true. One of my husbands, we were so deeply in love ... and we could not stand to live together." She wasn't looking at him. Instead, she started picking at the label on the bottle. "Drove each other up the wall. I never stopped loving Nijjar, he never stopped loving me, but it didn't matter in the end. We hurt ourselves so badly trying to make it work, and by the end there was very little left but scar tissue. The divorce was bitter.

"Another marriage, it was purely a political thing. Internal Trill stuff, which doesn't matter at all now, a century later. We didn't even really like each other, to start with. Didn't hate each other, but ... we'd been across the table arguing different agendas for long enough that it was hard to separate *him* from all those fights."

"How did it work out?" Ben asked.

"We were perfect for each other," Dax said. "We made such a good team. Oh, we fought over politics *constantly*, but ... only at work. At home, our habits and personalities and priorities fit together like hand in glove. We were very happy together, raised three wonderful kids, and the marriage worked out for our families and our political allies just the way it was supposed to." She smirked. "And the sex was fantastic."

They both laughed.

"I never had a scrap of romantic love for him," Dax said, "but ... when Audrid died, I missed being married to him so much. I missed the life we had together."

Dax shook her head and looked up at him. "I hope you and Kira have that together."

"Me, too," Ben said. He thought about earlier, the way they'd both lapsed into uncomfortable silence when they were no longer dealing with the practicalities of the wedding itself. "But ... if we can't even talk to each other about this ..."

"It's new to both of you, and neither of you had any reason to think marriage to *anyone* was in your future," Dax said. "Give yourselves time to work through the initial shock before assuming there's a problem." She tilted her head. "Also, the sooner you get over your resentment of the Prophets' role in this, the better. If you go into your marriage resenting it—or anything related to it—it'll be too easy to project that onto her. And that's not good for either of you, whether you're married for two years or twenty or the rest of your lives."

Ben nodded.

Ben looked over the list of things Crewman Profa had given them. Two of them immediately jumped out at him.

"I have no idea what we're going to do about the wedding price," Kira said, proving they were on the same page. "It's supposed to be a financial exchange that provides for the new couple's future and binds their birth families together. But the Federation doesn't *have* money, and I don't have anything but my pay. My brothers are barely scraping by, our parents are dead, and if I've got any cousins out there, I've never met them. But it will be more convincing if we can put together *something*. Gul Dukat definitely knows enough about Bajoran traditions to notice if we don't do it."

"The Federation doesn't have money, but we do understand that other societies are different," Ben said. "And also that Starfleet officers are far more likely to come into contact with places where they need money than the average Federation citizen is. If Starfleet officers have legitimate access to goods and services, it prevents a lot of problems. Most of us don't draw on those funds very often, because the process of justifying the expenditure is a hassle, but they do exist."

She gave him a skeptical glance. "How much?"

"They prefer it if we take it in the form of goods or services produced by the Federation, because then they don't have to buy latinum on the open market," Ben said. He grabbed a PADD and opened up the incoming ship manifests until he found what he was looking for. "Federation Aid and Mercy Corps has a shipment of industrial equipment for Bajor coming in. The soil reclamators are all spoken for, of course. But not all of the industrial replicators are. If your family's community qualifies as being within the guidelines to receive aid, I should be able to get one given to them permanently."

Kira's jaw dropped. "I thought they were all loaned out on a rotating basis?"

"For the most part, yes," Ben said. "But given conditions in Dahkur Province in general, and the fact that I've got quite a lot of credit in the system built up because I've never used it before, *and* that it's a wedding gift in line with Bajoran custom? A permanent gift should be possible to arrange."

Kira buried her face in her hands. Like most of the Bajorans on the station, she sent home most of her pay. Being under Federation jurisdiction, everyone on Deep Space Nine got enough replicator credits to provide the necessities of life. (Quark complained bitterly about it.) "The Kiras won't be able to match that," she said. "Not even close."

"I'm sure once we talk with your brothers, we'll be able to come up with something symbolically important, if nothing else," Ben said.

"It'll mean that any children we had would almost *have* to be Siskos," Kira said.

"I thought that the children usually went to the smaller family." Ben frowned. "Which family got the children" was the second item on the list that might be a problem. They hadn't even talked about whether or not they *wanted* children together!

"All other things being equal, sure," Kira said. "But if one family is more prestigious—and you're the Emissary—or is providing a higher wedding price—and you *are*, that changes things."

"That assumes that we have children," Ben pointed out.

"Why wouldn't we?" Kira asked. "Most married couples do."

"I love children," Ben said. "But it's also presuming we decide to stay married long enough to raise them. And that we can arrange adequate command of the station while taking parental leave." He shook his head. "That was a lot easier to arrange when I was a callow young ensign interchangeable with dozens of others on that ship alone. And my wife was a civilian scientist working on solo projects with no time limits."

"Good point," Kira said.

Ben studied her. "Is the name important to you? There are a lot of Siskos, back in the Federation. And there's Jake. I'd be fine with children who didn't share my name." It might even be easier, better for them, not to be burdened with the Emissary's name.

"I don't know," Kira said.

Ben added it to the list of things they'd have to figure out as they went along.

By the time they reached the station, Ben had gotten word that his father and all his siblings were on their way, and he owed them a much longer explanation when they arrived. And he and Kira had planned a trip in a runabout to talk with her family.

But first ... Jake.

"You're getting *married*? To *Major Kira*?" Jake twisted to face his father. They were sitting side by side on the couch; Ben had thought that would be easiest.

"Yes," Ben said.

"Why isn't it a contract marriage?" Jake asked.

"Because the Bajorans don't do contract marriages, and Gul Dukat knows that." Ben shrugged. "But there's no reason we can't get a divorce eventually, if we choose to."

"If you *choose* to," Jake said. "Which means you might *not*?"

"I don't know yet. Major Kira—Nerys—doesn't like the idea of getting married while planning to get out of it."

"Huh." Jake flopped back. "I've been thinking you should start dating again—there's this freighter captain, Kasidy Yates, who seems interesting—but I guess you kinda skipped that step."

"Dating, huh?" Ben said. This was the first he'd heard Jake talk about it. "You in the market for a step-mother?"

"Not really, but I'm not gonna be here forever," Jake said. "I don't want to leave you alone. I still miss Mom, and I know you do too, but ... I know you were really happy together and I want that for you again."

"Thank you, Jake," Ben said, touched. He put his arm around Jake's shoulder, noting for the thousandth time how quickly Jake was growing.

"Major Kira is great," Jake said. "If you two *do* end up staying together ... that would be nice. No matter where I moved, when I came back to visit, I'd get to see her, even if you were posted somewhere else. Would she move in with us?"

"At least to start," Ben said.

"Good," Jake said decisively.

Nerys's brothers, Reon and Pohl, lived in the middle of a farming village called Firtok in the Tinnim Valley. The weather was sunny and pleasantly warm, so they beamed down just outside the village and walked in.

"Have you been here many times?" Ben asked.

"No," Nerys said. "We didn't have much contact after I joined the Resistance—it put them in too much danger. They moved here after our father died, and I never visited until after the Cardassians left. Then I was busy helping turn what was left of the Resistance into the Militia, and the infrastructure was so badly damaged travel was almost as hard as it was when the Cardassians were here. And then I got assigned to

Deep Space Nine, and I had even *less* time."

"Do you get along?"

Nerys shrugged. "Sure. We just don't have much in common."

"That's true of me and my siblings, too," Ben said. "They all take after Dad—homebodies. I don't think any of them have even left the Sol system, until this trip, and they don't understand why I wanted to. I visit them whenever I'm on Earth, and they came to see me when I was stationed at the Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards. I love them, and they love me. But our lives are completely different."

They came to a gate in the wall they'd been walking past. Nerys unlatched it, and led him through into a carefully tended vegetable garden. The house behind it was old and large, predating the Occupation; the house bore the scars. Only part of the house was livable; one wing had wood sheets over the windows, and tarps over the roof.

A Bajoran man with light skin and medium-brown hair was standing on the porch, fidgeting. It was Reon, Nerys's oldest brother; Ben recognized him from the picture Nerys had shown him. "Emissary," he said, with a slight bow. "You honor us with your presence."

Benjamin stopped himself from sighing. "Thank you for your hospitality," he said. "Please, under the circumstances, call me Benjamin."

Reon's eyes widened slightly. "Of course, Em—Benjamin." He stumbled slightly over the name. He turned to his sister. "Nerys, welcome home."

"Good to see you, Reon," Nerys said. They hugged, and then all three entered the house.

The front door led into a cordoned-off stairway that had once been grand. To the right was a closed door to the unused portion of the house. The door on the left was open, and Reon escorted them in. The entire Kira family was gathered, waiting for them. Reon's wife Arjoli, Nerys's other brother Pohl and his wife Ifes, and all the children. Benjamin was introduced to them all, and Nerys gave hugs to everyone, and then the children were sent off to play.

They sat and had tea and fruit while Nerys explained the situation. To Ben's surprise, none of the Kiras seemed to find it concerning or odd that Nerys was marrying her commanding officer for purely practical reasons. Once it was explained to them, they accepted it as necessary (although Reon, in particular, was still in awe of Ben as the Emissary).

"Prylar Quen would be happy to help, I'm sure," Ifes said, and bustled off to call him to check what days he might be available.

"Are you going to have a wedding price?" Pohl asked.

"*Pohl*," Reon hissed.

"Emissary or not, the Cardassians will think it odd if there isn't one," Pohl said.

"Yes," Ben said. "I can arrange for your village to be given an industrial replicator in the next week, or a soil reclamator six months from now."

Pohl sat back in his chair and stared. Arjoli squeaked. Reon covered his mouth.

After a few moments to collect himself, Reon cleared his throat. "Well, I think waiting for the soil reclamator—"

"Do you mean a permanent gift, or a loan?" Arjoli interrupted him.

"Permanent," Ben said.

"Then we want the replicator." Arjoli gave a firm nod.

"Why?" Reon asked.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but an industrial replicator is capable of producing very large mechanical parts?" Arjoli asked.

"Yes," Ben said.

"So we could, in fact, use the industrial replicator to make all the various parts to make our own reclamator, and then have *both* the replicator *and* the reclamator? And we could use the plans for the Bajoran model, rather than the Federation one?"

"Yes," Ben said. "Though then you'd have to figure out how to put the parts together yourselves."

Arjoli waved a hand. "That would help us understand it, so we'd know how to fix it when it breaks."

"But there's no way we can afford to match the value of an industrial replicator," Pohl said, shaking his head.

"Of course we could," Reon said. "The Nilos have been hand-embroidering a set of traditional robes for Argun's wedding; I'm sure they would be delighted to have the honor of providing the robes for the Emissary's wedding ... especially if it means the village will have an industrial replicator. And there's the old orchard on the other side of the lake—the house isn't in bad shape, the views are lovely, it's got privacy, but it's right by the main road through the valley and close to the shrine. And nobody's staked a claim to it yet. We couldn't have it ready by the wedding, but we don't have to tell *the Cardassians* that." He turned to Ben. "Would that be acceptable? Or would you rather wait for your father to arrive to make the settlements?"

"My culture doesn't have anything like a wedding price," Ben said. "So I doubt my father would care one way or the other. I think it sounds

fine. Just the house and the orchard would be enough, I wouldn't want the Nilos to feel pressured to give up robes they've spent so long working on." He wondered if there were fish in the lake; Jake would love to go fishing for real fish. Although, given the state the Cardassians had left the province in, the water was probably contaminated enough that the fish wouldn't be safe to eat.

He glanced at Nerys, who had an odd look on her face. "What is it?"

"I've only ever lived in close quarters with lots of people," Nerys said. "I'm trying to imagine living somewhere isolated. I don't know that I'd like it."

"You'd always be welcome to stay here, of course, Nerys," Pohl said. "But Reon's right—it's the sort of thing the Cardassians would see as a status symbol."

"Besides, it'll be a long time before either of us is ready to leave the station for more than a short vacation," Ben said.

That afternoon, Prylar Quen came by to talk about the wedding. The Kiras laid out another spread of food, bread rolls filled with vegetables and meat, with fruit juice to drink. "Are there any Human customs we should incorporate into the ceremony?" the Prylar asked, nibbling on a roll.

"Human couples traditionally exchange rings, which they then wear as long as the marriage lasts."

"What kind of rings?" Quen asked. "Earrings?"

Ben laughed. "No. Finger rings, traditionally worn on the—well, on the finger Humans call the 'ring' finger." He showed them his. "If a Human is wearing a ring on the ring finger of their left hand, they're almost certainly married. In a Human wedding service, the couple each puts the ring on their partner's finger."

Prylar Quen nodded and made a note of it. "What else?"

"Nothing I can think of in the ceremony itself—except the kiss, of course."

Prylar Quen raised his eyebrows.

"Traditionally, the couple kisses at the end of the ceremony. Nothing too deep or long, of course, just a promise of more to come." Ben remembered that moment with Jennifer. They'd kissed so many times before—and done a hell of a lot more than kissing—but that moment at the end of the wedding had been special.

He shook his head. Now was not the time for nostalgia. Ben turned to Nerys. "We haven't talked about parties—most cultures have some sort of celebration after the wedding. Do Bajorans?"

"Yes," Nerys said.

"In my culture, it's called the wedding reception, and often includes a meal. My father is a cook—he owns a restaurant—and he's bringing ingredients so he and my siblings can cook the meal for the reception."

"So we'll need a place with a kitchen and tables and chairs," Ifes said. "Is there anything important about the reception besides the meal?"

"A cake would be nice," Ben said. "My father doesn't bake, so he wouldn't make that, but there's usually a large, elaborately decorated cake. After the meal, the newlyweds cut the first piece out together and feed it to each other. Then the cake is served to everyone else."

"Does the type of cake matter?" Pohl asked.

"Pohl is the baker of the family," Arjoli explained.

"I would be fine with anything," Ben said. "Nerys?"

"I'd like Morja cake," Nerys said.

"Of course," Pohl said. "What else would you ever ask for?" He shook his head. "Making cake for a *Cardassian* ..."

"If you don't want to, I understand," Ben said. "It's not a requirement, and if we decide we want one we could always hire someone to make it."

Pohl shook his head. "No, if your father is cooking a meal, it's only right that we should make dessert."

"Sometimes, the family or attendants make speeches about the couple, telling stories about them and wishing them a happy marriage," Ben said. "I'd rather *not* do that, because I don't want to know what Dax would come up with, but there's a good chance she and my brothers will make sure it happens anyway."

"So we should have a few remarks prepared?" Reon said.

"If you want," Ben said. He hesitated. "There's also dancing, sometimes. The newlyweds dance the first dance together, alone on the floor, and then everyone dances."

"Together by themselves?" Nerys asked. "How does that work?"

"That's right," Ben said. "Bajor doesn't have couple dances, does it." He got out his PADD and did a quick search for video files of people

doing a basic waltz, and sent it to the viewscreen on the wall.

The Bajorans watched it.

"That looks ... hard," Nerys said. "How do you keep from stepping on each others' toes? How do you keep from running into each other?"

"The rhythm of the feet is fairly simple, and if you both keep on rhythm and start off on the correct foot, it's actually easier than you think to keep from stepping on your partner's toes," Ben said. "As for running into each other, one partner is leading, directing how they move, and the other is following. Here, I'll show you."

There was a wide open stretch of floor, presumably for the kids to have space to play, given the scuff-marks and the toy that had been forgotten underneath a chair. Ben stood up and went to the center of the open area, holding out his hand to Nerys.

She gave him a skeptical look but came over to stand facing him. He put his right hand on her waist. "Put your left hand on my shoulder." He took her right hand in his left in the classic position. "Now: the trick is to keep your arms and torso firm. Not *rigid*, but strong and in roughly this position. So if I step forward—" he did so, careful not to step on her foot.

"I get pushed back," Nerys said, stepping back.

"Exactly. If I step back—"

"I get pulled forward."

"If I angle my hands—" Ben tilted his hands to the left, and Nerys obligingly turned in the direction he was nudging her. "If you can do that while keeping your feet moving in time with the music, you can do a basic waltz." He smiled down at her.

"Somehow I think it's a bit more complicated than that, Ben," Nerys said with an answering smile.

"It can be," Ben admitted, "but it doesn't have to be."

They'd never stood this close, face-to-face, he realized. They'd never had their arms around each other. And in a very short time, they would be married. Sharing quarters. He was abruptly very aware of her, physically, as an attractive woman.

"I don't need to have a formal first dance," Ben said, stepping back and dropping his hands. "And we have a lot to do between now and then. If you want to learn how to waltz, I can teach you, but it's up to you."

"I think it would be lovely, Nerys," Pohl said. "I think you should try."

Ben looked over at him. He'd forgotten they had an audience.

"If we have time," Nerys said.

Kai Winn offered to perform the ceremony, of course. This time, she had received them in her office.

"Thank you for the generous offer," Nerys said. "But I'm afraid we had already asked Prylar Quen, from my home village, to officiate—we wanted something small and private."

"Gul Dukat has gotten the Cardassian government to make a pointed statement about the whole affair, and we can't exclude him without making a diplomatic insult," Benjamin said.

"So like a Cardassian, to force himself in where he isn't wanted and has no business," Winn said without a trace of irony.

Nerys nodded.

"You are of course welcome to attend," Benjamin said. "With Gul Dukat coming, we felt it important to balance things out on the Bajoran side."

"I would be delighted," Winn said. "Will there be a Federation presence?"

"Aside from myself, my family, and a few of my officers, no," Benjamin said.

"Would you mind inviting Ambassador Saal, as well?" Winn asked. "So much of diplomacy takes place, not in formal talks, but in social occasions where relationships may be strengthened and hypotheticals discussed without pressure."

She wasn't wrong. Benjamin turned to Nerys. "One more person to keep Dukat occupied," she pointed out. Odo had already agreed to keep an eye on Dukat, but a Federation diplomat would be more subtle than security.

"Alright," Benjamin said.

Dax cornered him when he got back to the station to ask if he wanted a bachelor party.

"No," Benjamin said. He perched on the edge of his desk. "We're busy enough trying to get everything together on top of our normal duties *and* hosting Gul Dukat, that it would just be one more thing to get through."

"Kira doesn't care either, because it's not her tradition," Dax said. "Such a shame, I had some great ideas."

"That's what I'm afraid of, old man." He grinned. "I still remember the *last* bachelor party you threw for me."

"It was fun," Dax said, with a nostalgic gleam in her eye. "I think the Blue Telbrux still has me on a block list—a little bird told me they updated my picture after Curzon died."

"Can't say I'm surprised," Benjamin said.

Dax stepped closer to his desk and took a seat on it beside him. "Speaking of parties, Kira says your father is cooking for the reception."

"He loves cooking," Benjamin said. "It was his idea, even knowing everything. I think he was just looking for an excuse to cook all the old favorites for me—he doesn't think it's possible to get decent food outside of Louisiana."

"I can't wait," Dax said. "Kira *also* says that you're teaching her to waltz?"

"If we have time," Benjamin said. "Dukat will find it more convincing if there are at least a *few* Human traditions involved."

"And the rings aren't enough?" Dax asked. "I don't think Dukat would care whether or not you dance together, Ben. I think that's for you and Kira."

"She's told you she wants to try to make it work long-term?" Not surprising; Nerys and Dax were friends.

"She has," Dax said. "Also that you weren't convinced. But I have to say the way you're planning this wedding doesn't scream 'temporary' to me. Or even 'staged for Gul Dukat.' And Jake has been getting excited about the whole thing."

Benjamin sighed. "I've been thinking about what you said. About falling in love not being the only recipe for a good marriage. And ... I was ready to move on, from Jennifer, anyway. I feel like I've been in a holding pattern, since she died, and I don't want to spend the next few years in another one, just waiting for the right time to end it."

Dax nodded sympathetically, and waited to see if he had anything else to say.

"I don't pay attention to whether or not my subordinates are attractive," Benjamin said. You couldn't, and stay an effective officer, and he'd learned the trick of it young.

"But in this case ...?"

"A few days ago, I held her in my arms for the first time, and realized we were going to be married," Benjamin said. "It hit me harder than I expected it to."

"In a good way, or a bad way?"

"I think ... in a good way," Benjamin said. "I don't think I want to go into this assuming it will be temporary, either." It was the first time he'd put it into words, and there was a weight to it. But it was true.

Dax nodded. She nudged his arm. "Sounds like you should tell your bride that."

Ben's quarters were the easiest place to teach Nerys to dance—or, at least, the place with the fewest people watching their comings and goings. Odo had shut down no less than three sets of bets at Quark's over the whole thing. Jake helped him shove the furniture to the edges of the living room and left with a knowing grin, saying he wouldn't be back until late.

"Not *too* late," Benjamin called after him.

Jake waved and walked out.

Nerys arrived a bit later, and they spent a pleasant hour teaching her to dance. There was a lot of laughing and a lot of stepping on toes, but Benjamin was a pretty good dancer. As long as she kept her feet moving in time and followed his lead, and as long as he kept it simple, they'd be fine.

Afterwards, they put the furniture back in place and sat down with drinks—fruit juice for her, decaf for him.

"We've been spending so much time talking about the wedding, that we haven't really discussed what comes after," Benjamin said. "What being married looks like for us."

Nerys shrugged. "You're the one who's actually been married before, I figured you'd know better than I would."

"My marriage to Jennifer was very different." Ben looked down into his coffee.

"Because you loved her," Nerys said.

"Yes," Ben said. "But also because when we got married, we were both young and still learning about ourselves. Just starting out our lives, figuring out how to be adults. We figured a lot of things out together."

"Whereas you and I are both old and set in our ways?" Nerys said with a laugh.

"I wouldn't say *old*," Ben said. "But set in our ways? Maybe. And you're a very different woman than Jennifer was, and I'm different than I was when I was married to her. I don't think it's a useful template. I think we're going to have to figure things out from scratch, together." He hesitated. "And ... I think you're right. If this was anywhere other than Bajor, we'd be doing a contract marriage, for two years. My initial thought was that sounded like a reasonable time frame, so that a divorce wouldn't look too obvious. But ... I don't want to spend two years just waiting to get a divorce."

"Thank you," Nerys said.

"It still may not work out long-term," Ben said. "But ... it makes a difference, if we're trying to build a foundation for the long haul, instead of just for the next few years."

"So what do we need to figure out, to make it work?" Nerys settled back into the couch and put her feet up on the coffee table.

When Jake came back that night—late, as he had said—they were still talking.

"I used to think you were crazy, for joining Starfleet, Ben," Judith said. "Now, I *know* you're crazy. You rescued those people, great, fine, wonderful—why not just tell the Cardassians to get out?"

The Sisko living room on the station was generously sized, for a space installation, but it felt small with his father, brothers, sister, sister-in-law, and nephews all gathered. They'd arrived together that afternoon, and in the morning, everyone would head to Bajor for the ceremony itself. "Because then the Cardassians would be able to use that as an excuse to call us liars for the next decade at least," Ben said. "It would make it ten times harder the next time we have a conflict with them."

"But the admiralty can't order you to get married just because it's *convenient*, surely?" Elijah, Ben's middle brother, gave him the same skeptical look he'd been giving Ben since he turned thirteen and was suddenly too cool to idolize his older brother any longer.

"No, they can't," Benjamin said. "But *I'm* the one who's going to have to deal with Gul Dukat for as long as I'm stationed here, and *I'm* the one who's going to be in the hot seat the next time Cardassian, Bajoran, and Federation goals come into conflict. I'd rather not shoot myself in the foot ahead of time. Nerys and I get along fine, and if it doesn't work out we can always get a divorce later."

"Do you even *hear* yourself?" Elijah said. "'Getting along fine' is hardly a good basis for marriage."

"Not by itself, but it's certainly a necessary part of it," Benjamin said, and closed his mouth before pointing out that it was something Elijah should probably consider, if he ever chose to get married again. Benjamin had never met Elijah's *second* husband, but family gossip had filled him in on all the gory details of that wreckage, and he'd been around to see for himself the disaster that had been Elijah's first marriage.

"I'm sure she's a very nice woman," David said. "I hope you'll be very happy together." He was trying to put a positive face on things, but Ben could see he didn't think there was much chance of it.

"You don't look like you agree, Jake," Dad said.

Benjamin looked over to where Jake was sitting at the desk in the corner. He was making a face.

"I think they could be happy together," Jake said. "I actually think this might turn out really great. I just wouldn't call Major Kira—Nerys—'nice.'"

Benjamin huffed a laugh. "True."

"What would you call her, then?" Dad asked.

Benjamin thought about it. "Direct," he said. "Fierce. Smart. Tough as nails. Deeply compassionate, despite all the hell she's been through."

"Attractive?" Judith asked, with a smirk. She watched his reaction. "That's a *yes*, I think."

"She is lovely, yes," Benjamin said, trying not to think about the dancing lessons. They hadn't had sex yet, or even kissed, because things had been going so fast. But they'd talked about it, and it would come when they were ready. He was not anticipating lack of chemistry in the bedroom to be a problem. But that wasn't something he wanted to discuss with his father *or* his younger siblings. Especially not with Jake in the room.

"Mm-hm," Dad said. "I know that look on your face. So was this marriage *also* to put one over on *Starfleet*?"

"*Ben*," Elijah said, with a scandalized laugh. "You dog."

"A relationship was not something *either* of us had considered, before this," Benjamin said, hoping he hit the line between 'firm enough to be believed' and 'so firm he sounded like he had something to hide.' Of course, Judith in particular would claim to believe whatever she thought would most embarrass or discomfit him.

"Mm-*hmm*," Judith said, knowingly.

Benjamin sighed, and told himself that it would help their cover.

The robes really were lovely, and Benjamin felt guilty for accepting what was clearly tens if not hundreds of hours of work. But the Nilo

family had insisted, and it was not merely a loan, it was a *gift*; they were honored to outfit the Emissary for his wedding, and it was a tiny fraction of the value of the industrial replicator Dax had set up in a hastily-refurbished building a block from the village square.

Reon had had to help him dress; he'd laughingly suggested Nerys should do it, but Nerys needed help as well, being no more used to robes than Benjamin was. His robes were blue, and hers were the reddish burgundy that he'd learned meant they were dyed with etana flowers. The embroidery matched and complemented each other, clearly intended to be a set.

There were a bunch of little rituals in the morning, and culminating in Reon (as the oldest member of the Kira family) and Joseph (as the oldest member of the Sisko family) presenting the combined Wedding Price to the community for their approval. This was largely a formality, of course; while the community could object to an agreement they felt was unequal or predatory, the time to object would have been earlier. And everyone in Firtok that Benjamin had spoken to was enraptured with the idea of their own replicator—and industrial-scale, at that!

Kai Winn and Ambassador Saal looked politely attentive; Gul Dukat was smirking at Ben, as if he thought Ben was buying Nerys like he'd bought mistresses during the Occupation.

Ben ignored him as best he could.

After the financial details were concluded, there was a bit of a break before the wedding proper. Several people approached Ben for blessings or a few words, and he hoped that Nerys, at least, was getting time to rest. Dad and his siblings had disappeared to cook, but Jake was talking with a girl.

Prylar Quen rescued Ben with a few last-minute questions about the ceremony, which he couldn't answer without Nerys' input. He glanced around the square and didn't see her. He went looking.

Odo was also scanning the crowd.

"What is it, Constable?" Ben asked. "Where's Dukat?" Odo had agreed to keep an eye on him; he'd worked with Dukat for years, and might be able to keep him from making himself unpleasant. And assigning a guard to someone was an honor, in Cardassian culture, so Dukat couldn't object.

"He wanted a few words in private with the Ambassador," Odo said. "But the Ambassador returned without him."

"Have you seen Nerys?"

Odo nodded toward the road the Kira house was on. "She was heading in that direction."

"Thank you," Ben said.

The road curved a bit, following the curve of the hill it was built into, and there were bushes alongside it for shade and privacy. So he saw them before they saw him, and had enough cover not to be noticed immediately.

Ben tapped his combadge. "Sisko to Odo."

"*Odo here.*"

"Dukat's at the Kira house."

There was a pause. "*On my way.*"

Ben stepped out from behind the shrubbery, walking closer. Nerys saw him, standing in the gate to her family's home and facing him, but Dukat's back was to him.

"... and of course you look lovely, Nerys," Dukat was saying. "Your mother would be so proud to see you today." He sounded almost avuncular.

"*My mother?*" Nerys said, revolted. "What do *you* know about my *mother?*"

Ben winced. Giving Dukat an opening was never a good idea. And today, of all days, she shouldn't have to deal with whatever game he was playing. "Nerys," he called. "Prylar Quen had some questions."

"I thought he got everything he needed yesterday," Nerys said.

"Apparently something came up," Benjamin said. He reached the two of them and stepped past Dukat to Nerys's side. He took her hand and settled it in the crook of his elbow.

Dukat's smile thinned as he took this in. "Ah, Commander, congratulations. You are a very lucky man."

"Thank you," Ben said. "I know." He looked past Dukat's shoulder to where Odo was walking up the street. "Constable."

Dukat turned to see Odo behind him, smile thinning even more. "There you are, I was beginning to wonder how effective a bodyguard you would be."

As if he hadn't purposefully slipped away.

"Shall we go see what the Prylar wants?" Ben asked Nerys.

The Prylar and Nerys's family had done an excellent job of preparing a wedding that didn't look like it had been thrown at the last minute. Gul Dukat might suspect he was being played, but the wedding itself gave him no evidence. The Seba family were seated prominently among the guests, as were any other people on the refugee ship who might plausibly have had any connection with either the Tinnim Valley or the Kira family, however tenuous.

The ceremony was nice enough, and afterwards they had his father's jambalaya and Pohl's cake, and he and Nerys danced, and then the formalities were over and all that was left was the party. Benjamin didn't know any Bajoran dances, but there were a few simple ones he got dragged into learning.

At one point, in between dancing and having a drink, Benjamin looked over at Nerys. She was sitting with Dax and Ifes, laughing about something.

That's my wife, Benjamin thought, and smiled.

Nerys looked up at him, and smiled back.

End Notes

On [Dreamwidth](#). On [AO3](#). On [Squidgeworld](#). On [Pillowfort](#). On [tumblr](#).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!