

Schoolwork

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/218) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/218>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Star Trek: Deep Space Nine
Relationship:	Jake Sisko & Kasidy Yates
Character:	Jake Sisko , Kasidy Yates
Additional Tags:	Journalism , Loneliness , Higher Education
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-05-19 Words: 12,748 Chapters: 1/1

Schoolwork

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

Summary

Jake misses his dad, now he's with the Prophets, but he still has his friends, his family, and his career.

Notes

Written for Ericine in Heart Attack Exchange 2023

Thank you to sixbeforelunch for the beta, and sovik on the Vulkhansu Discord for information about how long it takes to get from Bajor to DS9.

According to secondary canon, Andorians have four sexes (zhen, shen, chan, and than), and these are important enough to be part of their names. On the show, what few times we see an Andorian, they use 'he' or 'she' which does not make sense to me if they genuinely have four sexes. (The show does tell us that Andorian marriage requires groups of four.) So I decided that the Andorian OC appearing in this fic is going to be of the chan sex and that the name of the sex doubles as a pronoun.

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

"So, when are you coming home?" Grampa asked.

Jake made a face. "I don't have any plans for a vacation to Earth in the next few months," he said. "There's a lot going on here, and will be for a while. And the Federation News Service doesn't have anybody else on the station—it's a great opportunity, I don't want to miss it." They'd spent half the call so far talking about how busy he was, so he wasn't sure why his grandfather was asking when he was coming home.

"I understand all that," Grandpa said with an air of patience. "But I mean, *after* that. Things will quiet down eventually, or they'll send someone else to cover things. Your father isn't stationed there any longer, and who knows how long it'll be before he gets back from wherever he is? And besides, you're a grown man; you don't have to live out in the far reaches of the galaxy just because it's where Starfleet sent your dad."

"I know that," Jake said. If he hadn't been a grown man, he couldn't have stayed on the station when the Federation pulled out. "What's your point?"

"I was assuming that you'd want to come home, to Earth," Grandpa said. "You talked about getting a writing fellowship at the Pennington School."

"Grandpa, that was years ago," Jake protested. "A lot has changed since then!"

Grandpa waved his hand. "After all you've done, and the things you've published, I'm sure they'd be happy to have you. Or maybe you're interested in journalism school, instead?"

"I'm getting some pretty good on-the-job training, and that's more important than anything I'd learn in school," Jake said.

"Yes, but in the long run, a degree will do you good," Grandpa said. "You're good at academics, and going to college always helps broaden the mind. If nothing else, it's good to spend time with people your own age."

"I think my mind is pretty broad, after all I've seen and done here on DS9," Jake said. "I don't know, maybe I'll see if Bajor has any writing schools or something—they had a really good educational system before the Cardassians, and they've been working to restore it."

"You mean you're not even going to consider coming back to Earth?" Grandpa said, voice rising. "To be with your family?"

"I have family *here*," Jake said. "And close friends. If I'm not here, who's going to teach my little sibling how to cook? Kasidy would never move to Earth, her shipping company has too many contacts in this part of space." He frowned. "Did you really think I was going to move back to Earth?"

"Yes!" Grandpa said. "The posting to Bajor was only ever supposed to be temporary, of course I thought you'd come home!"

Jake thought about that for a few seconds. "I've lived on Deep Space Nine longer than anywhere else I've lived in my life. And if you're talking about Earth ... I've never actually lived there. The closest to Earth I've actually *lived* was Mars, when Dad was stationed at Utopia Planitia. Earth is your home, and Dad's—" although, actually, Dad had made it pretty clear he now considered Bajor his home, but this probably wasn't the time to remind Grandpa of that "—but it's not mine."

Grandpa was taken aback.

"You know," Jake said, "you could come out here. You did it once, in the middle of a war, no less! It'd be a lot safer now. Besides me, you're going to have another grandchild soon, and Kasidy is even busier than *I* am, with less reason to go to Earth. Don't you want to meet your grandbaby?"

"Of course," Grandpa said. "But a visit isn't the same as having you living nearby."

"I know, but Aunt Judith has been the only one of your kids living on the same planet since Uncle Nathan moved to Luna before I was even born," Jake said. "You must be used to it by now."

"Used to it, yes," Grandpa said. "Happy with it, never. I thought, with four kids, surely at least *one* of them will have kids and live on the same planet!"

Jake made a face. It wasn't that Grandpa complained about that *often*—he respected the life decisions of his children, and was proud of all of them—but it was heart-felt and deeply emotional when it *did* get made.

"Don't make that face at me, young man," Grandpa said. "You'll understand what I'm saying if you have children of your own one day. Though at least I hope all of *yours* will stay on the same plane of existence, even if they do live scattered across the quadrant."

"Yeah," Jake said with a sigh. "Me, too." He didn't think the Prophets would take an interest in him or any future children he might have, but what did he know? It wasn't something anybody could have predicted with Dad, either.

"And who's going to run the restaurant with me gone?" Grandpa said. This was complaining for the sake of complaining; Jake knew his grandfather well enough to tell. Grandpa was never so happy as when he had something to complain about. And Jake didn't miss the fact that Grandpa was already taking a visit to the station as a done deal. "I can count the number of cooks I'd trust with it on the fingers of one hand ... and most of *them* are busy. And don't suggest your Aunt Judith—even if she didn't have her own life, she's *not* one of the people I'd trust in my kitchen. Not when the food is being sold with my name on it."

Jake shrugged and didn't bother suggesting either of his two uncles. Uncle David lived on Proxima and rarely came to Earth, and Uncle Nathan lived on Luna but couldn't cook to save his life. Normally, Jake enjoyed listening to his grandpa grouse, but the mention of his dad's absence touched a nerve. "If you can't find someone to take over for you, I'm sure it won't kill you *or* your customers to have the restaurant closed for a month or two." Grandpa grumbled a bit more, and before long, the time was up on the call.

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When there were no ships going through the wormhole—and that happened regularly but infrequently, these days—the view out the windows on the Promenade was much the same as from any portal on a ship or station. A starscape—pretty, but ordinary.

"You look lost in thought."

Jake smiled and turned to face Colonel Kira. "I was seeing how many Bajoran constellations I could recognize and remember the stories of."

"How were you doing?" Kira asked.

"I knew more of them when Dad and I were sailing that lightship," Jake said. "Even with all that happened on that trip, there was a lot of time that was pretty quiet. We read Bajoran stories about space and the constellations during some of it." And he'd shown Dad his first real story.

Dad had read everything he wrote.

Until he joined the Prophets.

Kira didn't say anything, just put a hand on his shoulder.

Jake appreciated that; there wasn't much anybody could say that hadn't been said. Bajoran or Federation, everybody had an opinion on his Dad, most of them thought they knew what Jake was feeling (or should be feeling), and none of them *actually* did.

"I was just going to get lunch in Quark's," Kira said. "Want to join me?"

"Keeping an eye on him?" Jake said, and they made their way down to the lower level.

"He has been the perfect picture of a legal and upstanding businessman recently," Kira said.

"So naturally you're suspicious."

"So naturally I'm suspicious." Kira shrugged. "I haven't even been able to catch him running a betting pool on the next Kai."

"That doesn't sound like him," Jake said. "There's a limit to how quiet you can keep something and still pass the word along to your customers, and Quark always errs on the side of more customers."

"Exactly!" Kira said as they entered the bar and took a table off to the side. They were a little after the lunch rush, so there was plenty of room and things weren't too noisy.

Broik was there to take their order as soon as they sat down. "Colonel Kira! Jake! Always a pleasure to have you here at Quark's. How's Captain Yates doing these days? Has she picked a name?"

"She's fine," Jake said. If he said anything more than that, it would be all over the station in ten minutes, and all over the system in half an hour.

"I'll have my usual," Kira said, and Jake was grateful for the interruption.

Broik turned to her. "One ratamba-and-cheese sandwich, with fried bonja on the side."

Jake almost asked for shrimp and grits, and then realized that asking for something his Dad used to cook would only make him miss him more. "I'll have katterpod stew," he said. Dad had tried a few recipes with it, but never gotten something he liked enough to add to the regular cooking rotation.

Broik smiled toothily at them and whisked away to the replicators.

"Maybe I should be looking for a betting pool on the baby," Kira said.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Jake said. "But as long as they don't bother me or Kasidy about it, I really don't care." Kasidy wanted to keep the baby as out of the spotlight as possible, which Jake thought was a good idea, and part of that was not announcing sex or name or due date or any other detail until the baby was born.

But discussing any of that *here* would be as good as announcing everything to Quark, and thus feeding the rumor mill. "So how are things in Ops these days?" Jake asked.

"Strictly off the record," Kira said—she always did that, now that he was a regular reporter—"it's all routine. The diplomatic stuff is all handled by people a lot more senior than I am, and neither the Dominion nor the Breen have been making trouble, so we're back to the ordinary stuff. Handling wormhole traffic, cargo ships ..."

"... keeping Quark in line," Jake said.

"Exactly!" Kira said. "It's amazing how quickly things just ... went back to normal. It's so different from the end of the Cardassian Occupation."

"Bajor was lucky," Jake said. "Neither the station nor the planet suffered much under Dominion rule."

"The prophets were looking out for us," Kira said. "Warning us not to join the Federation before the war. Things would have been very different if they hadn't." Every Bajoran over the age of seven knew, from first-hand personal experience, just how bad things could have gotten. The Prophets had shielded them from the Dominion. They hadn't shielded them from the Cardassians before them.

"Here we are!" Broik said. "Ratamba-and-cheese sandwich for the lady, and katterpod stew for the gentleman. Can I get you anything else?"

"No, we're fine," Kira said.

They applied themselves to their meal, and the conversation turned to lighter subjects. Jake recounted his call with Grandpa Joseph.

"So now I'm wondering if I should be looking into schools on Bajor," Jake said. "See what kind of programs they have for writing or journalism."

Kira shrugged. "I can't advise you there," she said. "It's not something I've ever had any experience with, or even known anybody who did. And before the Occupation my family were artists, artisans, crafters—not the caste that went to university. Pretty much all I can tell you is that our universities are actually one of the sticking points in the negotiations for Federation membership."

"Really?" Jake said. "How's that?" He'd been keeping a close eye on the news stories coming out of the Bajoran capital, and none of them had mentioned the universities as anything more than a side issue.

"The universities that survived the Cardassians—or which have managed to re-establish themselves since—are prickly and proud of their heritage. They used to be some of the best in the sector, you know."

"I did know that," Jake said. "Even the Cardassians sent people to them, before the Occupation."

"Exactly," Kira said. "But our ways of doing things don't quite mesh with the Federation educational systems. I don't understand all the specifics, and frankly, some of it seems a bit ... petty. They agree on all the major points! But I don't know how long it's going to take them to come to an agreement. I don't think it will hold up the main talks, but it's certainly not helping them along."

"Maybe that's something I should look into," Jake said. Much of the negotiations were happening behind closed doors, of course, and there were a couple of Federation journalists covering the talks who had much better chances of getting things out of the Federation negotiators than Jake did, given their experience and connections. But that meant they weren't getting much of the Bajoran perspective on the whole thing.

Kira shrugged. "I wouldn't mind something in the Federation news about our side of the story—I know there's grumbling in Starfleet about us, that we backed out of joining before the war and aren't gratefully falling at their feet now."

"But Bajor was crucial to the war effort," Jake protested. "The final victory couldn't have happened without you guys. And if you'd resisted earlier, who knows if you would have been in a position to do something once you actually had a shot?"

"But we did sit out a lot of the war, while your people were fighting and dying," Kira said. "I don't blame them for it. In their shoes, I'd probably feel the same. But I don't want them taking that resentment out on us when we *do* join."

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"Do you have any contacts in Bajoran academia?" Jake asked Kasidy the next night. He was cooking jambalaya for dinner, since she was craving spicy food right now and it made him feel closer to Dad. He never cooked when it was just himself—too much effort for one person.

"Not really," Kasidy said. She was sitting on the couch watching him cook. "Bajorans train spacers through an apprenticeship system that's separate from the academic aspect—they have sharp distinctions between different types of higher education, and I'm not quite sure where all the differences are or why they divide it up the way they do. Or even what parts of the system are remnants of the way the Cardassians did things, what are from the original Bajoran educational system, and what have been cobbled together in the decade since the Occupation ended. What I care most about is can I trust the dockworkers and maintenance engineers to take care of the *Xhosa*, and can I get crew I can rely on to help me run her—and so far, I've been really impressed with the training and professionalism I've seen." She shifted and adjusted the pillow behind her. "Why do you ask? Are you thinking about going to school on Bajor?"

"No," Jake said absently, skewering a piece of porli to taste it. Porli didn't taste like chicken (though they did look a little bit like chickens when they were alive), but Jake actually preferred the Bajoran bird to the Terran one. "I mean, yes," he said, catching himself, "but that's not why I'm asking. Colonel Kira said something about one of the factors holding up the negotiations for Federation entry this time around is the universities, but none of the reporters covering the talks have mentioned it. I wanted to see if I could find anything, see if there was a story there."

"Makes sense, but I can't help you," Kasidy said. "I wondered what the hold-up was—they've been talking about it for years, and last time they got right to the brink of signing, and *would* have signed if Ben hadn't warned the Bajorans off."

"Last time, there was the pressure of the Dominion hanging over everything," Jake pointed out, "and Bajor didn't want to chance an invasion without Federation protection. Maybe there were compromises that were worth it under that kind of pressure, but not if they have some breathing room."

"Good point," Kasidy said. "How long is it going to be? You know I love your Jambalaya, but if it's not ready soon I'm going to have to eat this couch."

Jake eyed the amount of liquid left to be absorbed by the rice with an experienced eye. "Give it another five minutes? I won't be offended if you replicate a snack, you know; you're eating for two."

"I think I can last five minutes," Kasidy said. "But next time, I probably will get a snack, if you really don't mind."

"I really don't mind," Jake said. "Maybe I should look through the names and biographical information for the people on the Bajoran negotiating team, see if any of them have worked in a university, and just send a request for an interview out of the blue. It's awkward, if I don't have some sort of an introduction, though; Bajor didn't have a unified tradition of investigative journalism, just a series of newsletters and magazines collecting items of interest for different professions and castes. When I want to interview a Bajoran, I usually have to explain what news media is, first."

"I'm sure they'll say yes to an interview from you," Kasidy said.

"I'm sure they will, too," Jake said. "But I don't like trading on my Dad's status as Emissary, which is what it really boils down to."

"I'm afraid that as long as you live in Bajoran space, that's going to happen whether you want it to or not," Kasidy said. She rubbed her stomach.

"I didn't realize how much Dad was insulating me from that aspect of his life, until he wasn't here to do it any more," Jake admitted.

"I think people care more about you now that he's with the Prophets, too," Kasidy said. "Most Bajorans will never go through the wormhole, never even come up to the station to see it, and they certainly won't ever see an Orb in person. For a few years, Benjamin was a tangible connection to the Prophets. Now he's gone ... but you're still here to be a tangible connection to *him*. And a reason for him to come *back* someday."

"I hope it's sooner rather than later," Jake said, staring down into the pot.

"So do I," Kasidy said.

"And between the two of us, I hope we can keep the little one protected from all of that," Jake said.

"I'm sure we will," Kasidy said. "You're going to be an excellent big brother, Jake."

"Thanks," Jake said. He turned off the stove. "Dinner's ready."

Kasidy heaved herself up from the couch and joined him at the table.

"Mm! This is so good, Jake," she said as she swallowed her first bite. They talked while they ate, eventually coming around to the subject of the house she and Dad had been planning to build on Bajor.

"I just don't know," Kasidy said. "It's a lot of effort, building a house, and it's just far enough from the capital to be inconvenient for business purposes. It might turn into nothing more than a vacation home, and I don't know if that would be worth it. But then I ask myself, wouldn't it be wonderful to have it ready for him when he comes home?" She sighed. "What do you think?"

"I think that if Dad wants that house so much, he can come back from the Celestial Temple and build it himself," Jake said. "Until he does, you're the one who'd be living there." He pushed some of the rice around his plate. For all that his Dad had talked about building a place on Bajor, it was hard to imagine him anywhere but the station, or some other Starfleet posting—the house would probably have been a vacation getaway no matter what, somewhere to retire to, not something to live in right away. A symbol of his roots on Bajor, more than a home.

Kasidy hadn't been exaggerating how hungry she was, Jake noted; her first helping disappeared before he was even halfway through his plate, and she went back not only for seconds, but thirds.

"It's nice to be appreciated," Jake said with a grin as she spooned out a generous helping.

"You know how good a cook you are," Kasidy said. "And the baby is a true Sisko—loves those spices!"

"Have you decided on a name?" Jake asked.

"Not yet."

"You don't have much time," Jake pointed out.

"I know," Kasidy said with a sigh. "It's just hard, without Ben here to help. We hadn't really talked about names, before he left. Everything was so busy. I was wondering if maybe Joseph would be appropriate?"

"I'm sure he'd have liked that, and I *know* Grandpa would," Jake said. "But Dad already got a chance to name a kid. This baby is his second, but your first. Maybe only! I don't know if you two would consider a second kid even if Dad comes back tomorrow. So you should name it what *you* want."

"I'd like to name it something Benjamin will be happy with when he comes back," Kasidy said.

"Yeah, well, if he wanted naming privileges maybe he should have stuck around," Jake said. He knew it hadn't exactly been his Dad's choice, and that whatever had gone down in the Fire Caves, the Pah Wraiths were evil and powerful enough that one person sacrificing themselves to stop their rise was more than worth it. And that the Prophets could have just let him die there; taking him to their plane was better than being dead. At least this way, there was a chance he'd come back. But it still hurt, and Kasidy was one of the few people he felt comfortable complaining to.

Kasidy sighed again and changed the subject. "You know, I've had a number of people trying to volunteer to be the baby's nanny?"

"A nanny?" Jake asked, wrinkling his nose.

"A professional child caregiver who works for only one family, instead of for multiple families in a creche setting," Kasidy said.

"I know what it is, I just didn't know they still existed outside of Victorian novels," Jake said.

"Apparently they exist on Bajor. In some ways, I'm torn," Kasidy said. "Benjamin and I planned to do it the normal way—take turns staying home when the baby is young, and then put them in a creche while we work once they get a couple of years old. And in some ways, I'd like to do that. But it's a lot more practical with two parents than just one."

"And it's also more practical when at least one parent has a stable job," Jake said. "You spend so much time moving around. Not just cargo runs, but also trips to Bajor and back. Without Dad, you're going to have to take the baby with you. And your ship isn't big enough to have a creche."

"Exactly!" Kasidy said. "I might as well hire a nanny. I'm just not so sure how to find one on Bajor that isn't doing it just because they want to be closer to the Emissary, or mold the Emissary's child in some way."

"Hiring someone from the Federation would prevent that," Jake said. "But then you'd have all the political questions of why you didn't hire a Bajoran, since you live here and work for the Bajoran government."

"Not to mention, it seems like an awful lot of hassle," Kasidy said. "One of the managers at the Ministry of Commerce has kids, maybe I'll ask her what she would recommend."

"Maybe you can ask who I should be interviewing for the Bajoran perspective on the negotiations, while you're at it," Jake said.

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In the end, Jake got his first contact by looking for academic connections on the negotiating team and sending out an interview request. Nemjon Lelra, Arch-Chancellor of the University of Kenda (the second-most prestigious university on Bajor), Doctor of Philology from the Ilvian University of the River (the most prestigious university on Bajor), Chair of the Institute of Historical Linguistics, and a few other impressive sounding titles that Jake didn't have time to fully research, was happy to grant him an audience.

And 'grant an audience' was the right word, Jake thought, as a robed student showed him into Doctor Nemjon's receiving room.

It was clearly not an office, nor a conference room, in the Federation sense. It was a large room with windows on three of the walls looking out on the gardens. The fourth wall was intricately carved, with scenes of scholars surrounding the university's emblem. Along that wall was a dais, and on that dais was a table, with Doctor Nemjon sitting in the middle of it, back to the carved wall, reading a PADD. She was an elderly woman, with immaculately styled white hair, deep wrinkles, and the sort of translucent skin the very old sometimes got. She was old enough to remember Bajor before the Occupation, maybe even old enough to have finished her schooling before the Cardassians showed up.

She looked up and smiled as the student escorted Jake in. "Ah! Mister Sisko! I have been looking forward to meeting you. How kind of you to wish to share our side of the story."

"Doctor Nemjon, it's an honor to meet you," Jake said. "I'm here to try and see that all sides of the story are covered, and I thought you might know the needs and wants of the Bajoran educational system better than anyone else."

"Of course," Doctor Nemjon said. "Though I will note that while 'doctor' is not inaccurate, the title that you really should use is Arch-Chancellor."

"I'm sorry for getting it wrong, Arch-Chancellor," Jake said. "I'm not very familiar with the titles and honorifics system in Bajoran academia, and I wasn't able to find many resources on the subject. Could your office send me a style guide?" He'd been speaking Bajoran, but he used English for the last, because he didn't know the Bajoran words for it. But the Universal Translator didn't translate it, so it must not be a concept Bajor had.

"A what?" Nemjon said.

"A document that has a guide to what titles are used, what they mean, and how to address people with them, and how to refer to them in writing if that's different from the way they should be spoken," Jake said.

"Oh yes!" Nemjon said. "I believe we have something like that in our orientation packet for foreign students."

"Actually, I'd love to see the whole packet, if it wouldn't be too much trouble," Jake said. That would kill two birds with one stone. It would be background for his article and it would be a place to start his research on whether he wanted to go to a Bajoran school.

"I'll see that you get it," Nemjon said. She rose and came around the table, stepping down off the dais, robes swirling around her feet. "Now, I researched your Federation news service when the reporters showed up to the negotiations. It does seem to be an effective way of disseminating information, although I'm not sure I care for the way that internal affairs are made public for all the world to see. So I believe I know what to expect." She led the way over to a pair of upholstered chairs by the windows and sat in one, gesturing for Jake to take the other.

"Great," Jake said as he sat down. "With your permission, I'll be recording this interview for my notes."

Nemjon nodded.

Jake tapped the 'record' button on his PADD. "Arch-Chancellor Nemjon, as I said in my interview request, I'm investigating the effect the dispute over academic oversight is having on the negotiations for Federation membership. You're a junior member of the negotiating team, can you explain what your role is?"

"Certainly," Nemjon said. "My role is to represent the universities of Bajor, to see that our needs are respected in the negotiations."

"What about the other schools of higher education that aren't universities?" Jake asked. "Do they get a seat at the table, or do you represent them, too?"

"Schools of higher education?" Nemjon asked. "I'm not quite sure what you mean."

"Schools that people go to after completing the basic level of education that all Bajorans are expected to finish," Jake said.

Nemjon frowned, thinking that through. "Do you mean trade schools and lower colleges and guild schools?"

"Yes," Jake said.

"I'm not sure that I'd call what they do 'higher' education, unless the universities are 'highest.' Why should they need a seat at the negotiating table?" she asked. "Of course we are proud of the high quality of education in schools of *all* levels, but ... they don't have the same weight of *tradition* that universities do. Nor is their work so abstract. The Federation has an excellent educational system, and I'm sure they'll be able to adapt quite well to the Federation system."

She tilted her head. "That's actually one of the major sticking points, for the universities. The Federation educational system is very focused on metrics. Tests. Proving, objectively, how much a person knows about a given subject, and then ranking them against other students ... and judging the university itself by how well its students do on such tests. Which is all well and good, and some subjects—including things like

mechanical skills such as one would learn at a trade school—would do very well with that approach. But university education is, in the Bajoran tradition, quite different. The emphasis is on teaching *how* to think, not *what* to think. Especially in disciplines such as philosophy or literature. There is no single right way to be a philosopher or a writer; there is no technique or structure that is universal. And being able to describe the techniques and why they're useful wouldn't tell you anything about a person's ability to *use* those techniques or the quality of their thought. And it's quite possible for someone to create something that is flawless on a technical level, and has no soul. In fact, computers do it all the time. The aim of a Bajoran university, Mister Sisko, is to teach things that *cannot* be done by computer. To teach the *art* of our subjects, not the mere rules of them."

"A commendable goal," Jake said. "How does it work in practice?"

"Every student has both a professor and a senior student as a mentor," Nemjon said. "They work together to devise a course of study that suits both the student's strengths that should be nurtured, and their weaknesses that should be remedied. There are classes, of course, but also a great deal of individualized instruction with both professors and senior students. And peer study groups and peer critique are both essential parts of the system, as is research for fields in the sciences. When a professor believes a junior student in their care to be ready for promotion to senior student, they present them to the rest of the faculty, who then evaluate the student, and either agree to their promotion or give them areas to concentrate further study in. This happens again when the student is ready to matriculate. The specifics of what is required to progress to senior, and then to matriculate, are left to each department." She wrinkled her nose. "There are no set curriculums that are merely items to check off on a list. No one graduates without being *worthy* of being called a scholar of Bajor."

"What happens when there is a conflict?" Jake asked. "When a mentor is wrong about whether a student is ready or not?"

"That happens very rarely," Nemjon scoffed. "Students work with many professors besides their own mentor. When it happens that a professor is reluctant to promote a student for unworthy reasons, the rest of the faculty can exert pressure, and in certain circumstances overrule them. And of course either student or professor may request to sever the mentor relationship at any time, and the student will be taken on by another professor who may evaluate them differently. A student who believes the *entire* faculty is biased against them can receive an evaluation from a board of professors from other universities. Usually in such cases, the student is merely over-eager and perhaps a bit arrogant. But if they find that the student has been treated unfairly, they have a variety of possible responses, up to and including declaring themselves that the student is ready for promotion or matriculation, and the student's own university must then abide by that decision. But, again, the system very *rarely* breaks to that extent."

Jake wasn't quite sure he believed her; the bit about tailored curriculum sounded great, and when the system worked he could see that it would provide a custom-tailored education to each student. But nothing was perfect. Still, that wasn't what his article was supposed to be about. "So, what's the specific problem with joining the Federation, for your universities? Federation policies don't usually govern internal affairs of schools."

"Accreditation," Nemjon intoned. "The Federation wants us to *prove*—using the sort of metrics they care so much about—that our universities produce a quality education. Oh, we can arrange our own internal affairs, but in order for our scholars to be accepted at the same level as those of existing Federation universities, we would have to alter the degree requirements to fit Federation specifications. Of course I understand that there must be standards—if there aren't, there's no way of telling what schools actually turn produce scholars worthy of the name, and which don't. You can't simply go by reputation and history, because these things *do* change, unfortunately. And nobody wants people without qualifications to call themselves a university and give out honors people haven't earned so they can inflate their reputation without actual understanding to back it up. But still, there must be a better way to do it."

She waved a hand. "The Federation's position on the whole issue is ridiculous. Before the Cardassians invaded, the Federation's university system recognized Bajoran universities as granting degrees of rough equivalence to their own. We have *long-standing* ties with a number of Federation planets, with regular exchanges of scholars and students, including Vulcan! There are existing reciprocal acknowledgments that should be the basis for our relationships going forward. But under the current terms the Federation is trying to insist upon, Bajoran universities would no longer be recognized unless we alter our curriculum and system of evaluation to fit within the Federation's requirements for university accreditation and degree conferral. Which is simply absurd. If our system was good enough to be accepted by the Federation when it was completely separate, why should it not *now* be sufficient? And to allow fitness for graduation be determined—even in part—by something so rote as *test scores* and objective evaluation and number of hours spent in a classroom ... the very notion is an insult to our way of instruction. And every seven years we would be examined by Federation examiners to see that we are complying with their regulations and teaching with *their* pedagogy, not our own."

Nemjon continued on, listing other points of contention, but accreditation was the main one. She required little input from him to lay out everything she thought in tedious detail. There were a few places where Jake thought she was wrong about what the practical requirements would mean for her university, and a couple of items he'd have to look up, but Federation stuff was easy to research, so it wouldn't take much time.

Skeptical as he was about certain aspects of the Bajoran system, Jake thought it *was* pretty stupid that the Federation would recognize their worth when they were a foreign planet, and then turn around and *not* recognize them when they tried to join. He listened to her arguments, asked a few questions for clarification here and there, made notes of things to research further, and when she seemed to be running out of steam, he turned to a more practical question.

"So," Jake said. "You've been quite thorough in explaining the reservations you have about the proposed changes to the university system that the Federation negotiating team has included in the current state of the treaty. And on the Bajoran negotiating team, you are a junior member. How much influence do you really have? What would you say are the chances they will override your recommendation and sign the treaty to join the Federation with these requirements in it?"

Nemjon narrowed her eyes, slightly, and her lips curved in a slight smile. "Of course, nobody can say for *certain*, the team is quite large and I am, as you say, a junior member, at least in theory. But I am a member with a specific area of *great* importance as my sole responsibility. If everything else in the treaty was perfect, with no drawbacks whatsoever, I suppose it's possible they might ignore me. Or if the Dominion were to come charging back through the wormhole, or the Breen showed up on our doorstep with an armada, and we needed Federation protection

to survive, then I would change my recommendation. Survival is more important than tradition, after all. But ..." she spread her hands, "... under the present circumstances, I would be *very* surprised."

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Jake got a tour of the university after the interview, from one of the students. It was a lovely campus, though Jake couldn't quite picture himself studying here—everyone wore robes, and he wasn't sure he'd be comfortable in them. They weren't like the robes of Bajoran monks that he was used to; the style of tailoring was quite distinct, and there was a different color scheme, and they had hoods instead of hats. The student gave him a thorough tour of the place and then handed him over to the administrative offices, where they provided him with the foreign student orientation package and several other documents they thought might be useful.

Glancing at them, Jake thought they probably would be, and wished they were publicly posted somewhere so he could have read them before the interview. In the Federation, data like this was easily available for everyone, and Starfleet had automatic access to most private or secure databases. Even if Jake, a civilian, couldn't access them, his Dad would help him out if he had a good enough reason for it and the information wasn't too sensitive. Starfleet as a whole might not have access to Bajor's private databases, but Deep Space Nine *did*, because it was a joint station.

But Dad wasn't here to pull up information from him.

Jake could have asked Colonel Kira, he supposed. Or Dax. Either would have done it, at least in this case. It just ... hadn't occurred to him.

He checked the messages on his PADD. There was one from Kasidy: a friend in the Ministry of Transportation had suggested he interview the Arch-Chancellor of a different university, who was apparently an up-and-comer in Bajoran academia, and might have a different perspective. Jake sent a message asking for an interview, and spent the rest of the day in the university's library at a com terminal that had a permanent hookup to the main Federation databases, looking up what the actual policies were for university accreditation and what the existing exceptions were. There were *very* few Federation policies that didn't have exceptions in specific cases; it was the only way to govern a society that large and diverse.

Once he was done with his research, he ate dinner in one of the dining halls at the university—the food was pretty good, for institutional cooking, but it was from a different tradition than the Bajoran food they tended to get on Deep Space Nine, with less meat and more spices. Afterwards, he went to a concert put on by a group of students. It wasn't a style of music he was familiar with, but it was interesting. And he didn't get to go to many concerts; Deep Space Nine's permanent population wasn't big enough to support much in the way of music or theater groups.

All in all, it was a good evening. If this was what university was like, he could see himself enjoying it.

He got back to his hotel room and found a message from the guy Kasidy's contact had suggested, with an interview the day after next.

Jake hadn't been planning on staying on Bajor for that long, but he put the time to good use, getting some of his research and notes into something like a rough draft.

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Chacos University of Lorojha was, in many ways, similar to the University of Kenda. There were the same sorts of buildings (though there were one or two here that had obviously been built under Cardassian rule), with lots of gardens in and around them. People walked around in academic robes, though as he was walking from the train station at the edge of campus to the administration building in the center, he did see a fair number of people in ordinary street clothes instead of robes. He felt a bit less conspicuous.

At the administration building, they confirmed that Arch-Chancellor Ruce was indeed expecting him, and he was escorted to an audience hall very similar to that in Kenda. Three walls of windows, one wall of intricate art focused on the university's logo, with a dais and a long table under it, and a few seating arrangements of comfortable chairs scattered around the edges.

But Ruce was waiting at one of those, rather than at the dais, and he invited Jake to join him right away. Jake did so, studying the scholar as he did. He hadn't had time to do much research on the man, just what he could dig up in the public records. And what he could dig up was a string of publications he hadn't had time to read, mostly focused on adapting the educational system as a whole to the post-Cardassian world. He'd been cited a lot in a bunch of other papers, too, and seemed to have quite a number of admirers, from what Jake could tell at a glance. He'd won a number of awards, too, both for individual writings and for work on various projects.

Arch-Chancellor Ruce Vasun was much younger than Arch-Chancellor Nemjun; he'd been born and grew up during the Occupation. He was a powerfully-built man in his forties, with the scarred hands that told Jake he'd been used to do something hard, heavy, and dangerous under the Cardassians.

Jake introduced himself and explained what he was here for. He summarized Nemjun's position, and asked if Ruce had any comment on the issue.

Ruce considered this for a few moments before speaking. "Arch-Chancellor Nemjun is a wise and experienced scholar," he said. "And I absolutely agree with her on the value of the system we have now. It allows for us to tailor a course of study precisely to the needs and abilities of each student, and under ideal circumstances, the university is a carefully tended garden that helps the brightest minds on Bajor—and the surrounding sector—to grow and flourish. Certainly, there are many things that we should never compromise."

"But?" Jake asked. There was definitely a 'but' coming.

"But Arch-Chancellor Nemjun has dedicated the last decade of her life to trying to restore the university system to *exactly* what it was before the Cardassians came," Ruce said. "And that system, for all its many strengths, had serious flaws as well. For example, I would never have been allowed to attend university, in the old days."

"Why not?" Jake asked.

"My family belongs to the lowest caste," Ruce said. "Not allowed to own land, not allowed into most jobs or trades requiring any skill, in many cases not allowed to finish even secondary school, but expected to go to work as an adolescent. The Cardassians were terrible, of course; but life for my family didn't actually change all that much. It was only that under the Cardassians, most other Bajorans were suffering, too. And you may say, that's all so long ago, what does it matter that I would never have been allowed to dirty these halls with my presence a century ago. I'm here now, aren't I?"

"And what would your response be to that question?" Jake asked, gamely taking the leading question when it was offered to him. This was wonderful. Not only was the whole issue one the Federation hadn't noticed yet, but he had intra-Bajoran disagreement as well. This would be a great article.

"I'm here, but how many like me aren't?" Ruce said. He spread his hands. "There is still discrimination. I never *personally* experienced it—I was considered a brilliant, rising star from the moment I stepped foot on campus—but I saw it happen to others. Constantly. When the most average, unmemorable member of the scholarly caste gets promoted to Senior Student in under three years, and low-caste scholars of ten times their ability get passed over routinely and must take five or six years of study before reaching that same promotion—well. It's quite obvious that for all their noble words about only caring about training people to be their best, they have different expectations and different criteria for people of different castes."

"Have you talked with Arch-Chancellor Nemjun about this?" Jake asked curiously. "What does she say about it?"

"She tells me I'm a credit to my caste," Ruce said. "And that obviously, if the other low-caste students were as brilliant as I, they would have succeeded, so if they haven't it's proof that they are being treated fairly." He rolled his eyes.

Jake winced. "You know, we used to have a caste system on Earth, too." Jake said. "Actually, we had different caste systems in different parts of the planet. But in America, where my family is from, that caste system was based on something called 'race.' Which was a combination of skin color and facial features. My Dad and I are what was called 'Black' in that system. It was the lowest caste. Our ancestors were enslaved, and it was illegal to teach us to read and write. And even after that was outlawed, there was a lot of injustice. I'm not as much of a history buff as my Dad is, but they used to say that sort of thing about us, too. That if we succeeded, we were a credit to our race, and proof that discrimination didn't exist, and if we *didn't* succeed, it was proof that we weren't worthy and the treatment we received was just."

"That's *very* interesting," Ruce said. "I'd like to learn more. Did your father have any favorite books on the subject? We hear about his work as the Emissary, and as a Starfleet officer, but nothing about Sisko the man. And yet, of course, who he was as a man was what allowed him to do all the great things he did, and, Prophets willing, will continue to do."

"I'll go through his library and see," Jake said. He smiled. Dad had always felt caught between his human heritage and Starfleet, and his role as the Emissary. People on either side of the species divide only ever saw half of him. It would be good to change that, in some small way.

"Thank you!" Ruce said. "I don't have as much time to read for pleasure as I would like, but reading things outside my field of study is so important for spiritual and mental nourishment."

"You're welcome," Jake said, and tried to drag the interview back on track. He probably shouldn't have derailed it like that. "So are you in favor of the Federation system being imposed on Bajoran universities? After all, with more weight on grades and objective evaluations, and less weight on how professors feel about their students, surely there would be less room for prejudice to affect someone's course of study."

Ruce shook his head. "I'm not naïve enough to think that professors with a bias against their low-caste students will grade them on the same metric they grade their high-caste students," he said. "Outside of tests on facts memorized, any evaluation has room for mis-assessment. And rote memorization has little place in a Bajoran university. Having to put a number value on an essay's quality won't make someone miraculously more just in appraisal of its merits. It will only teach them to better justify their biases. And if all you care about are a bare recitation of facts, well, a computer can do that better than any living being."

"So what do *you* think should be done?" Jake asked.

"Oh, I have a *lot* of ideas about that," Ruce said. "Though whether any of them will be practical once we join the Federation will depend on a great many other factors. But! My first suggestion would be that any time a student of a low caste is to be evaluated, at least one academic from their caste should be on the panel of professors. If there *isn't* one at that particular university, they can bring in one from another university. It's something we do in *other* cases when a student might not be judged fairly, for one reason or another—a feud between their family and one or more of the professors of their university is the most traditional reason, but there are others."

Jake wanted to hear more about such feuds, but that wasn't what his story was about, so he didn't ask a follow-up about that. Instead, he asked about other ideas for improving Bajor's higher education, and what Ruce thought about the Federation's system.

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Once the interview was done, Ruce walked him back to the train station personally. "I did look you up, Mr. Sisko," he said as they strolled down a tree-lined path. "And you are an *excellent* writer, but I notice you haven't attended university yourself. Which is curious, because I

understand the Federation puts *almost* as much stock in education as Bajor does."

"I always assumed I'd go, and probably will sooner rather than later," Jake said. "But then life kinda got in the way."

"It does that, yes," Ruce said. "Have you ever thought about attending school on Bajor?"

"Yeah," Jake said. "And it'd be very convenient, and you have a lot of schools with *really* great writing programs, which is great. But right now, I'm already *working* in the field. I'm a journalist, and I like doing it, and I don't want to stop doing it or take time off. And Bajor doesn't have journalism as a field, so you don't have it as a course of study that I've found."

"We don't," Ruce confirmed.

"And you don't have provisions for part time study or distance learning, so it would be hard to continue working as a journalist *and* go to school at the same time," Jake said. "On the other hand, if I go back to school on Earth, I *definitely* couldn't keep reporting on Bajoran matters, and that's where all my knowledge and contacts are. There are a lot of journalists on Earth—I'd be a small fish in a big pond. Here, I'm the leader in the field." He hadn't mentioned any of this to Grandpa or Kasidy, or even Dad before he joined the Prophets, because he knew what they'd say: that was short-term thinking, he had the rest of his life to be a journalist, and education was important. But he had the rest of his life for education, too. And he didn't want to leave the field and go get a degree, only to find out when he got back that others had taken his spot and he'd have to start from the bottom again.

Ruce hummed. "You know, the great benefit of the Bajoran system—the lack of a set curriculum that so distresses the Federation—is that we can tailor a course of study to a particular student's interests and skills," he pointed out. "And when we don't have the particular expertise needed here, we do collaborate with other universities on other planets. The Vulcan Academy of Arts and Social Wisdom is particularly receptive to long-term partnerships. We just had a student matriculate who had two mentors: one on the faculty here, and one at the Vulcan Academy. I believe she took some of her classes over subspace, and worked closely with her Vulcan mentor over subspace, though they never met in person. We might not know journalism, but we know *writing*, and we could find a mentor at a Federation university for the things specific to your field."

"That sounds amazing," Jake said. "I never thought of that."

"Why would you?" Ruce said. "But it is a possibility, and having read your essay 'Nor the Battle to the Strong,' I think you would do very well with Doctor Zaje as your mentor."

"I'll consider it," Jake said as they arrived at the train station.

"Safe journeys, Mr. Sisko," Ruce said. "I hope we meet again."

"Likewise, Arch-Chancellor," Jake said.

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Jake spent the train ride back to the capital organizing his notes from the second interview and figuring out how to re-arrange the article to accommodate them. He got so engrossed in work that he forgot to eat on the train, and had to grab something quick and greasy in the station to eat on the way to the large Cardassian-built office building where most of the ministers had their offices. He got a five minute interview with the head of the negotiating team—five minutes was all he needed to get a quote from the article—and then to a hotel room where he finished a rough draft of the article, sent it off to a few Federation universities to see if they had any comment on it, and collapsed into bed.

The next morning he checked his messages: most had either not replied yet or sent back a polite 'no comment.' The Vulcan Academy of the Arts and Social Wisdom, however, had a long response from the head of their interplanetary collaboration unit.

Jake skimmed it. It was fairly long-winded (unsurprising), but it didn't come down on either side of the issue. The interesting thing it pointed out, however, was that the basic Federation evaluation criteria and guidelines for higher education had been hammered out at the Founding and largely ignored thereafter. It reflected a four-way compromise between Humans, Vulcans, Andorians, and Tellarites ... and every other planet that entered later had been shoehorned in willy-nilly, on the assumption that the Federation system was the best way to do things. It ended by saying that perhaps the Federation system was due for a reappraisal.

Jake didn't have room for the whole thing in his article, but he summarized the most important bit and added the closest thing to a short, pithy quote in the whole response. Maybe he could get his editor to include it as a sidebar.

After an hour of writing and editing, the article was in much better shape. Jake could fuss with it more—he could *always* fuss with his writing more, he sometimes got stuck in edit mode, chasing the impossibility of perfection—but he had an appointment.

He had an actual *press conference* to attend this morning. They weren't a Bajoran tradition, so he'd only rarely been to them; but the Federation Ambassador was having a question and answer session with the three Federation journalists covering the talks, and it was open to anybody, and Jake was going.

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The press conference was in an ordinary room in the Ministry building, a small room with no windows, that could have been on the station. It

had that same vibe of "Cardassian aesthetics, with Bajoran and Federation elements to lighten it up." The podium with the Federation seal only added to the effect.

Jake recognized the three Federation civilians already in the room as the journalists covering the talks. They glanced over at him, but showed no interest, continuing to talk amongst themselves. Well, he supposed this was normal for them. They'd been here for months, the talks were stalled, and every week someone on the Federation staff gave a press conference about what had been accomplished (or not accomplished) that week.

Lately it hadn't been very much.

Jake was lucky; the job of talking to the press was rotating between the Ambassador and his two top aides. And today, it was Ambassador Eshes ch'Shratis ch'anself.

The ambassador was right on time. Chan walked briskly into the room with a PADD in his hand and took Chan's place at the podium with the ease of long habit. Chan was wearing a yellow suit that was of a color fashionable on Bajor right now, and which contrasted nicely with Chan's blue skin. Eshes scanned the room and blinked when Chan saw Jake, but went right into Chan's prepared speech. Apparently nothing of note had been accomplished that week, but Chan was adept at saying nothing at great length.

At last it was time for questions. The other reporters had a few—nothing terribly interesting, because nothing interesting had *happened*—which the ambassador answered at just as great a length as Chan's initial speech. Jake kept raising his hand, but Chan called on him only after answering questions from the three reporters Chan knew.

"Jake Sisko, Federation News Service," Jake said, when he was called on. "Ambassador, what is your position on the Bajorans dragging out the negotiations because of the university issue? Is there room for compromise with Federation educational standards?"

"University issue?" Ambassador Eshes said, squinting at him. "What university issue?"

"Bajor is extremely proud of its universities," Jake explained. "They've put a lot of effort into restoring them after the Cardassians left, and the professor on the Bajoran negotiating team—Arch-Chancellor Nemjan Lelra of the University of Kenda—is absolutely opposed to the imposition of Federation-style academic metrics onto the Bajoran universities. And the rest of the team is listening to her. That's one reason things have stalled. What do you think about the issue?"

"I have a great deal of respect for Doctor Nemjan," Ambassador Eshes said.

Not, Jake noticed, enough respect to have learned her proper title.

"And certainly, we have had many discussions about how best to handle the issue of university accreditation and the standards required for various degrees," Eshes went on. "But it hasn't been affecting the rest of the negotiations. Things have stalled based on a variety of other factors, which I have just finished explaining."

"That's not what Minister Jekuk said, when I asked him about it," Jake said, speaking quickly before Eshes could list all the factors (again).

"When did you speak to the Minister?" Eshes asked. Chan's antennae quivered but didn't *quite* draw back.

"Yesterday, after the close of negotiations," Jake said. "Would you like to hear what she said?"

"Yes, please," Eshes said.

Jake had the audio clip cued up and ready to go. He set his PADD's speakers to max and hit play.

Minister Jekuk's voice filled the room. "*The issue of university governance is not the only issue at stake, of course; but it is the most serious one on which no fruitful discussion has been possible. Federation intransigence on this issue, so core to our peoples' history and tradition, has certainly caused me to reconsider the benefits of Federation membership. If they treat our great wisdom-leaders thus when they are negotiating, how badly will they treat them—and the rest of us—once we have joined?*"

The clip ended, and the room was silent. Eshes stared at him, antennae low.

"Any comment, Ambassador?" Jake asked.

"No," Eshes said, and walked out of the room.

The other reporters went a bit nuts.

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"How'd you get Jekuk to talk?" the Tellarite journalist demanded. They'd calmed down, a bit, after that first rush when they'd been asking so many questions at the same time that Jake couldn't hear any of them.

"I asked," Jake said.

"You're the Emissary's son, aren't you? Nepotism." He snorted derisively.

"Maybe a little," Jake said. "But I think it was more that I started with Arch-Chancellor Nemjun, and asked for the Minister's comment *after* I'd

already talked with her. And used the right title. 'Doctor' isn't inaccurate—it's just lesser, and less formal. And unlike the Federation, Bajorans have different words for different types of doctorates, and the universities are stuck up that their degrees are more prestigious than degrees from the other schools that the Federation *also* calls doctorates. So being called a Doctor in Bajoran—using the correct word—is informal but not bad. Calling her 'doctor' in Federation Standard, in Bajoran eyes, is demoting her to the status of someone who went to a trade school or something. I've got a whole information packet on stuff like that, if you want it."

"Yes, please," the Betazoid said. "Why isn't that publicly posted anywhere? I *knew* the Bajorans got prickly whenever she was addressed, but I didn't know why. It's not like anyone was *trying* to insult her."

Jake shrugged. "It wasn't publicly posted anywhere, but I asked her university and they gave me the information packet they give new students from off-world, and that's part of it. I don't know why nobody said anything."

"So what tipped you off?" the human reporter asked.

"Colonel Kira, commander of Deep Space Nine, gets the Bajoran government's internal reports," Jake said. "She mentioned the issue, and I took it from there."

"A good friend to have," the Betazoid said. "What other friends have you made while researching this subject?"

Jake opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. "You're reporters, aren't you?" he said. "Get your own sources."

The human laughed. "I like you, Jake Sisko. Will you be around for drinks tonight?"

"Nah," Jake said. "My shuttle back to the station leaves in three hours."

"He swoops in, scoops the lot of us, and swans back out without even having a drink," the Tellarite said. "Next time, you watch yourself, *I'll* be scooping *you*."

"You can try," Jake said.

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Jake found a café and ate lunch while adding Ambassador Eshes' 'no comment.' Then he found a public comm terminal and sent his article off to the Federation News Service. He got to the shuttleport in time to buy a ticket for the late-afternoon shuttle to the station, and settled into his seat. The trip took almost six hours—the ancient shuttle, stuffed to the gills with passengers and cargo, was not as fast as a runabout, and Bajor's current place in its orbital cycle took it far from the station.

Jake used the time to poke through his father's history library. He found some about racial categories and history in the United States that he thought Arch-Chancellor Ruce would like, and a general primer on Earth history for background, but hesitated before sending them. Should he send a clean copy, or one with his father's notes included? In some ways, he wanted someone to see his father as the man who read history, not the Emissary. But there was no guarantee that anyone else would see what Jake saw in those notes. Ruce seemed nice, but ... Jake didn't know him well enough.

He sent the books clean, without the notes.

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Kasidy was off on a cargo run when he reached the station, so the Sisko quarters were empty and echoing. Jake holed up in his bedroom and checked his messages—and found to his dismay that his article had been rejected.

He called up his editor, and got the night-shift editor instead.

"Nobody in the Federation cares about Bajoran academics," the night-shift editor said.

"It's *about* the negotiations for Bajoran entry," Jake said. "And there are a lot of people who care about *that*. The academics is why the talks have been stalled for so long."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Did you even read it?" Jake demanded. "I've got the university Arch-Chancellor on the negotiating team saying that they're not going to sign a treaty she's not happy with unless the Dominion comes boiling through the wormhole again, and Minister Jekkuk basically said she was right! *And* I've got a comment from the Vulcan Academy of Arts and Social Wisdom on the whole thing."

"Fine, I'll take another look."

"Do that," Jake insisted. "There were other reporters around when I asked Ambassador Eshes for a comment, I'd rather the story gets published before one of them files a story on the issue."

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Once the call was over, Jake wandered out into the living room to get dinner from the replicator. He didn't take his food back to his room, because that would only highlight that Dad wasn't here. In the Sisko home, meals were eaten together whenever possible, and even when it was not, you ate properly at the table.

The last time he'd been so alone in his quarters, it had been during the Dominion occupation of the system. But Dad had been alive and corporeal then, just on the other side of the sector, doing his best to come back and retake the system. There was no Dominion, now, hanging over everything. Jake didn't have to worry about saying or doing the wrong thing and being executed as an example.

Which meant he had more time to notice how empty things were.

Jake ate his dinner, and thought about Ruce's offer of a custom-designed journalism degree. And spending a few years on that beautiful, tree-lined campus. It sounded a lot more attractive now than it had when he was in the middle of chasing down people to interview and getting to ambush an ambassador with questions he wasn't expecting.

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"That was a great article, Jake," Nog said the next day over lunch. Jake had been reading in an out-of-the-way corner of the Promenade, preferring the hustle and bustle to the tomb-like quiet of the Sisko quarters. Nog had spotted him and dragged him to the Replimat for lunch.

"Thank you," Jake said. "What was your favorite bit?"

Nog shrugged. "I think it's that you clearly laid out the benefits and drawbacks of both the Federation system and the Bajoran one, so people can draw their own conclusions about what they think about them," he said. "And what would have to change to make Bajor fit the current Federation system as-is. It really showed what's at stake."

"Good," Jake said. "I worked hard on that bit."

"I would have talked more about who profits from the current systems, and how," Nog said.

"Nobody *profits*," Jake said. "The Federation doesn't work like that."

"Benefits, then," Nog said. "Not all profits are financial."

"True." Jake shrugged. It was a good point, and he'd keep it in mind for the future.

"I think it's all a stupid fuss over nothing, anyway," Nog said, "but if the Bajorans think it's important enough to hold up the negotiations, it's worth paying attention to."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Arch-Chancellor Nemjon made it sound like the Federation system was completely unreasonable, but we've got a lot of good schools ourselves."

"From your article, it seems like Bajoran universities aren't very ... practical," Nog said. "Not like Starfleet, which balanced theory with training on how to handle real-life problems. A little dose of having to apply their high-minded rhetoric to something a little more concrete might be good for them."

"What's higher education like on Ferenginar?" Jake asked.

"Expensive," Nog said. "And the quality varies—if you're not paying through the ear, you're probably not getting very good teachers. And they don't tend to spend much time at *all* on theoretical stuff, unless it's necessary to understand something that might turn a profit. I could never have afforded a school worth going to on Ferenginar, and I wouldn't have learned as much about myself and the galaxy, anyway."

"So you liked Starfleet Academy?" Jake asked.

"There were good parts and bad parts," Nog said. "It was a lot harder being the only Ferengi there than it was being the only Ferengi kid on the station. But it helped me grow and learn about who I am and how I relate to the people around me, and what I care about, in addition to the stuff about engineering and piloting and combat and how to handle first contact."

Jake hummed thoughtfully.

Nog's comm badge chirped. "Nog here," he said.

"*Lieutenant, I'm sorry to bother you at lunch, but there's been an accident on the docking ring,*" the Ops officer on duty said. "*No casualties, but it's messed up all our docking and cargo transshipping schedules, and you're needed to sort things out.*"

Nog sighed. "I'll be right there," he said.

"Can we do something this evening?" Jake asked. "Maybe something on the holosuites?"

Nog grimaced. "I'd love to, but I have a double shift," he said. "One of my people is sick, and another had a family emergency and had to leave, and we're still not back at pre-War staffing levels yet so we don't have coverage for emergencies. Hopefully things will calm down soon."

"All right," Jake said, disappointed. "Well, good luck."

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Kasidy was gone for almost two weeks this time, and Jake spent the time writing a few other articles—mostly puff pieces—and responses to comments on the university article. There were four different editorials on the subject of Federation university accreditation in major news outlets by the end of the week, which was a much stronger response than Jake had gotten to any of his articles since the war had ended. Grandpa sent a message with congratulations on the article, and complaints that arranging travel to Bajor was almost as complicated now as it had been with a war on. The proposed visit was now a certainty, but it might take a while, because his grandfather was going to stop by Proxima to visit Uncle David first.

When Jake wasn't working, he read books from his father's library. He'd sorted them by which ones he hadn't already read, and then by which ones had the most comments. Dad had been a very well-read man, and Jake found them all interesting. It helped him feel a little closer to his father, but it didn't help the quarters feel any less lonely.

"How was your cargo run?" Jake asked when Kasidy got back.

"It's always good to be out among the stars, with no other concerns than running the ship," Kasidy said. "Congratulations on the article, by the way."

"Thanks," Jake said. "It seems to have touched a nerve. I've actually gotten a request to appear on a panel discussion about it."

"Did you accept?" Kasidy asked.

"Are you kidding?" Jake said incredulously. "Everything I know on the subject ended up in the article. I'm not exactly an expert on Bajoran education, just the only person who asked the right questions to the right people."

"Don't sell yourself short," Kasidy said. "That's probably the most important thing a journalist can do, I'd think."

"I'm not selling myself short," Jake said. "I'm just saying that knowing what questions to ask is not the same thing as knowing enough on the subject to talk intelligently about it on a panel discussion. I've never even *been* to university."

"Is that something you're interested in?" Kasidy asked. "Your dad said something about a school back on Earth, after the war was over?"

Jake rolled his eyes. "Not you too. Grandpa wants me to come back to Earth for college. I don't want to give up being a reporter now that I've got my foot in the door. And if Dad does come back in a year—or yesterday, whatever that means—I'd rather be closer when he shows up." He paused. "Actually, I've been thinking about going to school on Bajor. They don't have journalism programs, but they do customized courses of study and they've got some really good writing programs. And because they focus more on individualized learning than on taking set classes, it'd be easy to make time for reporting."

"Sounds like it's right up your alley," Kasidy said.

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The next day they spent working together in the living room. Jake had a bunch of PADDs spread out around him on the couch, and Kasidy took over the table with her paperwork.

"You don't usually spend this much time on administrative stuff in a single day," Jake noted that afternoon.

"I wasn't able to get as much done during the run as I usually would, and we're shipping out again tomorrow," Kasidy said absently without looking up.

"Tomorrow?" Jake said. "But you just got back!"

"And in a few months I'll be taking a year of parental leave," Kasidy said. "I've got a great crew, but there's some things I like doing myself, and there's a lot to do to get ready."

She was right, of course, but that didn't make the thought any easier. Jake sighed.

Kasidy looked up, frowning. "Is something wrong, Jake?"

"These quarters are really empty with both you and Dad gone, is all," Jake said.

"Ah," Kasidy said. She sat back in her chair. "I noticed the same thing, when you left for Bajor for your article. But I had a cargo run to make, and the ship really hasn't changed since before the war, so it felt very homey."

"I've thought about asking for quarters of my own, but space is at a premium on the station," Jake said. With the war ended and trade with the Gamma Quadrant resumed (even on a limited basis), the station was a very busy place.

"You could probably get something if you really wanted, but you might have to trade on your Dad's status as Emissary," Kasidy said.

"And it didn't help that Nog was really busy and didn't have time to hang out," Jake said. "That's actually one of the reasons that university on Bajor sounds so good right now—a different setting, but close enough I could still visit the station pretty easily, and see you and the baby and hang out with Nog. And enough work to keep me really busy."

Kasidy considered this. "I think you'd do well in university, and a change of environment might be good for you," she said. "But also, you'll get more out of it if you're going to school because you *want* it, not because you're trying to escape from something else."

"I just don't know where else I'd go, on Bajor," Jake said. "I know I don't want to live on Earth, like Grandpa wants me to."

"There's the house," Kasidy said. "The construction crew is going to be breaking ground next month. You could go and keep an eye on the whole process, and then move in when it's done."

"You're going ahead with it?" Jake said, cocking his head."

Kasidy shrugged. "I love your father, but I'm not going to put my life on hold waiting for him. Being able to go outside and play outdoors is good for babies and small children. And I could do with a change, myself—and even after I'm done with parental leave, I don't *have* to base myself here on the station. I don't trade through the wormhole very often, so for most things being based on Bajor itself would be at least as handy. I live here because it's where Ben was stationed. But he's not, any longer."

"Yeah," Jake said. He thought about that for a bit. "I think ... I wouldn't mind helping build the house, but I wouldn't want to live there. For me, it'd feel like ... like I was just treading water, waiting for Dad to come back. I don't want to put my life on hold, either."

"He wouldn't want that, for either of us," Kasidy said. "Would going to university feel like you were moving forward?"

"I think it would," Jake said. "I really think it would."

End Notes

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