

Home

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Home

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Summary

It's an old Bajoran superstition. They say that when you finally find your home, you can feel the Prophets take your hand and coax you forward.

Ro Laren's spent her entire life waiting for that gentle squeeze.

"It's a Bajoran tradition," her father tells her. It's night on Valo II, and he sits on an overturned crate next to the woodstove, the hot coals casting a red glow on his silhouette. Legs spread to ease the ache of a long day's work, elbows on his knees, he shows her both his hands. "The Hands of the Prophets," he says. "You know what that means?"

"No," Laren says.

He flexes his fingers; blisters stretch and shine white in the firelight. "They say that when you find your true home, you feel the Prophets' hands wrapped around your own, coaxing you forward." He curls his hands into fists. "That's why infants are always clutching at the air. But for some of us, the village where you're born, that isn't your true home. You know when I first felt it?"

Laren scoots closer on the dirt floor, close enough to feel the heat from the dying fire.

"I felt it," says her father softly, "when I was a young man. When I first came to the village where I met your mother." He takes her small hands in his. "A gentle squeeze," he says. "Tangible. Like someone real, but invisible, had grabbed my hands and held on tight."

He puts a gentle pressure on her palms. She feels his cuts and scars, rough against her skin.

"Just like that," he says.

He lets her go. He turns back to the fire. A grimy layer of sweat and dirt coats the back of his neck, beneath short-cropped, thinning hair. He's been losing it faster and faster lately. Shedding weight, too; giving her as much of his daily rations as he can stand to, and still work. Laren wraps her arms around her knees and watches the fire play over her father's face, casting his eyes, his lips, his cheeks, in shadow.

"Did I ever make fists?" she asks. "When I was a baby?"

He stares into the coals.

"In this camp?" he asks.

That's all the answer she ever receives.

Age twelve, both parents dead, Ro Laren tucks herself into a cargo shuttle. She sleeps curled up between the crates, jostled by the shuttle's swaying, stomach tight and starving. The roar of atmosphere against the hull becomes white noise in her ears.

It gets her out of the camps, at least – away from Bajoran men who cry for mercy instead of fighting; away from weak Bajoran children who beg the Cardassian guards for candy and toys; away from adult Bajoran women who can't even clothe themselves, who trade their bodies for warm cloaks in the winter and boots to protect their feet. It gets her out of Cardassian territory, to a place where parents are not tortured and children are not required to work long hours every day.

She opens her palms, her first night in a Federation shelter, listening to the other children cry and whisper to each other in a language she doesn't know. She stares up at the ceiling of her new home, where she will learn to speak their tongue and follow their rules, where she'll have warm meals and a place to sleep and a sponsor to send her to school. She waits for the squeeze.

“It’s so *cramped*,” says Cadet Lowry. She paces the Academy room behind Cadet Ro, her pinched face slowly losing color as she realizes what she’s gotten herself into. “Where’s the separator?” she asks.

Ro, sitting at her study desk, glances over her shoulder. “The what?”

“The *separator*,” Lowry says. She gestures between the too-plush beds they’ve been provided. “There’s supposed to be a sliding door to separate us. I talked to Cadet Ursu and he said they *all* have them in the Zuni barracks. It’s for privacy.”

Ro shrugs. She turns back to her PADD. Behind her, Lowry tests the firmness of her bed and makes a quiet, “Ugh,” noise. She tosses herself back on the mattress and lets her arms fall open with a sigh, wrinkling her brand-new Starfleet uniform.

“We don’t even have our own bathroom,” she says miserably. “We have to use the one down the hall.”

Ro drags her stylus across the PADD screen. She’s five years old, curled up in a wooden bunk without a mattress, using another child as a pillow; realizing, slowly, that the other child has gone cold. She’s seven, sharing a mattress with her father one day, coming home the next to sleep alone, to realize that she has to defend the bunk they’d shared all by herself now; to realize that against the adult Bajoran prisoners, she doesn’t stand a chance. Here, she has the most comfortable bed she’s ever seen. Here, she has a rank pip on her collar and expectations on her shoulders, and no one has ever expected anything from her before. Here, she is part of a crowd of bright young officers ready to make a difference.

Ro studies her curriculum while Cadet Lowry whines, and waits for the squeeze.

The USS Wellington is small and sterile. Other ensigns change their quarters, program unique wallpaper designs, replicate custom sheets and pillows for their beds. They fill their rooms with paintings, photos, statuettes. Their hobbies, their passions, spill over onto the floor.

Ro’s quarters remain clean. She learns the names of her shipmates, but not much else. Not their families. Not their origins. Not their interests – or the musical instruments they play – or their favorite drinks.

When they die, her teammates become eight corpses: Hutchins and Wayne and Matsumoto. Griffith and Mitchell and Rash. Avila and Lam. That’s all Ro knows: just their names. Eight names; eight shipmates she was supposed to protect; eight shipmates she killed.

She sits on the edge of her bunk in Holding Cell Number Three, molecular cuffs strapped to her wrists, and she holds out her blood-stained hands to the darkness. This is where she belongs, really; in this coarse prison uniform, with this uncomfortable bed, it feels more natural to her than the Wellington’s shining halls.

She waits for the squeeze.

She waits for five long years.

It’s different here, but she’s afraid to try. They’re soft. They don’t know war like she does. They get her name wrong; they ask her to remove her earring; they shy away when she snarls. They know her history; they must expect her to fail.

But:

Guinan sits down next to her, uninvited, and says, “You look like someone who wants to be disturbed.”

Geordi holds his palm up, callused fingers broad and flat against her own. “It looks like we can only touch each other,” he says.

A bearded stranger in command red looks at her from across a room – *his* room – smiling but uncertain, and Ro says, “I get the funny feeling I spend most of my off-hours here.”

Beverly Crusher kisses her on the cheek and says, “Welcome home.”

Picard leans his forehead against hers. He speaks in a whisper about her mission. About her orders. About the board of inquiry she might face for lying to him – the court-martial she’ll most definitely face for sabotaging the Federation.

“I’ll carry out my orders,” Ro says.

In a Maquis hideout, when everyone else is sleeping, Ro closes her eyes and reaches out with both hands.

The squeeze never comes.

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