

The Light of the Emissary

Book One **Broken Vessels**

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Timeline

2369: End of Cardassian Occupation of Bajor

2370: Wesley Crusher Leaves Starfleet to become a Traveler

2374: Dominion extermination of the Maquis.

2375: The Dominion War ends with the Treaty of Bajor; Sisko's ascension to the Celestial Temple

2378: *Voyager* returns to Alpha Quadrant

2379: Wesley Crusher appears at the Wedding of Deanna Troi and William Riker

2385: Jean-Luc Picard promoted to Admiral. Beverly Crusher leaves the *Enterprise-E* and assumes command of the USS *Pasteur*

2393: Kira Nerys becomes first minister of Bajor

2395: Events of Broken Vessels

Prologue

Light, not absence but fullness, a radiance so complete that shadow cannot exist within it. It breathes, expanding and folding back upon itself in rhythms too vast to measure. Gold threads through blue, blue through white, and the whole expanse trembles like a living thought. There is no ground, no horizon, no before or after. Only the energy of being. The energy is what remains when every clock has stopped and every star has given its last light. It is the stillness that underlies every heartbeat, every whispered prayer in every tongue that has ever been or will be. Here, that stillness is not background; it is everything.

Within this field of pure light exists Benjamin Sisko. He is present, clothed in pale robes that shimmer at their edges like a halo, half transparent to the light that flows through him. His face is older now, his beard silvered, his jawline leaner, his gaze steady and deep. The strength that once commanded fleets has softened into a calm gravity. Every gesture feels measured, almost sacred, as though time itself moves in deference to him. To see him is to glimpse both man and echo, flesh suspended in revelation.

He remembers once believing that ascension would mean forgetting, surrendering what he had been: commander, father, son, Emissary. Yet his memory has not thinned; it has multiplied. The past is not behind him. It is beside him, within him, available all at once, as is the future. His father Joseph's kitchen on a humid New Orleans morning. The bridge of the *Defiant* braced against Dominion fire from a Jem'Hadar ship. His son Jake's first steps on the Promenade of Deep Space Nine. Jennifer's hand slipping from his own in a rain of fiery debris at Wolf 359. Each moment stands vivid and immediate, as close as breath. It is not overwhelming. It is simply total.

Prophetic voices rise, many yet unified, overlapping in perfect dissonance: "You are of us. You are not yet us. The linear binds you." The words do not enter his ears; they bloom within him, expanding through every pulse of awareness. The Prophets speak not as individuals, but as a harmony that thinks itself into form.

Their presence is not above him or around him. It is interwoven with his own. When they question, he feels it tug at the edges of his thoughts before it fully forms. When they answer, it is his own understanding that brightens, like a lamp whose fuel has been waiting for a spark. He had once tried, as a corporeal being, to describe them to his first officer, Kira Nerys, as wormhole aliens, as non-linear entities, as something his Starfleet-trained mind could catalog. Those words seem almost puerile now, like trying to describe an ocean by listing its chemical components.

Around him, the light thickens into faces: Jake, Joseph, Jennifer, Kira, Odo, Jadzia, Curzon, even Quark. They are recognitions more than beings, images shaped by his need to understand. He knows that as long as the Prophets of the Celestial Temple must take form for him, he remains apart from them. The unity is whole, yet he is still divided.

Jake's smile is the one from the day he published his first story, bright with pride. Joseph's eyes crinkle at the corners, sliced peppers in his hands for a pot of jambalaya that will never quite finish cooking. Kira stands in her old Bajoran uniform, fierce and unyielding. Jadzia's laughter rings in the air without sound, a ripple of color. Odo's features are more defined than they ever were in life. Curzon leans back with that familiar combination of arrogance and charm. Quark appears, his eyes bright with the promise of profit.

They are not here, he reminds himself. They are not souls called from distant realms, not ghosts. They are facets of his own memory, given shape so that his once-human mind can touch the edges of a reality that has no edges. They are the vessels his understanding pours itself into so it will not spill. He tries to speak, but language falters. His words return as ripples of light, absorbed and reiterated in ways he cannot decipher. In this place, there is no sequence, only simultaneity. His memories appear as reflections across an endless sea. Time folds, and every path meets itself.

He sees the moment Terok Nor was first forged in Cardassian iron, and in the same instant he sees it years later, reborn beneath Bajoran banners and threaded with Federation technology. The station is, all at once, a wound, a battleground, a sanctuary, a home. He watches himself on the docking ring, telling Jean-Luc Picard he does not want this assignment, and in the same breath he sees that man again years later, willing to lay down his life to defend the very stretch of duranium and transparasteel he once tried to refuse.

He watches his own death and knows now it was not death. The Fire Caves, the final struggle with the Pah-wraith in the body of Gul Dukat, hang in the air like paintings in a gallery. He sees the moment his linear existence ended, the hand releasing the ledge, the fall into burning light. This moment is no more or less significant than the day he taught Jake how to throw a baseball or the day, as a child, he first tasted his father's crawfish étouffée. Every event glows with equal intensity; meaning is no longer measured by proximity to the end, because there is no end.

Yet something within the brilliance is missing. Amid all these reflections, one presence never materializes, his own mother, Sarah Sisko. She is not here. She is not among the Prophets in the Celestial Temple. Sometimes they wear her likeness, but never her voice or her thought. The silence where she should be becomes a shape in his mind, the outline of longing itself. Even here, beyond mortality, the ache of the son for his mother endures.

He has seen his own childhood from angles he never could have recognized as a boy: the gentle steadiness of Rebecca Sisko, the woman who raised him, the surrogate mother who stepped into the absence Sarah left behind; Joseph

Sisko's quiet sorrow woven into the rhythms of their home; the way his father sometimes paused in the middle of stirring a pot or wiping a counter, caught by a memory too fragile to name. He sees, too, the absence itself, the space Sarah's departure carved into his father's life, an emptiness that never fully closed. Grief and loss exist here as powerfully as the light itself.

He has asked the Prophets with a patience shaped by longing: Where is she? Where is the one who embodied life to bring me into being? Where is the one who loved me? The answers are always the same: She is of us. She is of Bajor. She is apart. She is a vessel. She is broken.

Sometimes he thinks he understands, that for him to exist, some part of their unity had to separate, to become finite, to enter time and risk breaking. Sometimes he cannot bear the thought that his own life might be the result of that fracture. Other times he feels an irrational pride, as if he is the crack in eternity through which compassion chose to pour.

He has long since stopped trying to determine whether the visions here are sent to him or drawn out of him, or whether he is seeing past or future. Those distinctions no longer matter. He knows that the visions lie beyond the scope of the linear existence he once lived. He sees things, events, and people in ways that are beyond the capacity of beings bound by either space or time.

He sees his son, Jake. He feels his pain, the pain left behind in his absence. The boy he once loved and protected, now older, solemn, standing at the threshold of the Celestial Temple's light as if at the entrance to his father's study, waiting for permission to come in. The Prophets love him. He too is of Bajor. Jake is not a line drawn outward; he is an anchor. He is the point at which the currents of destiny meet solid ground and must decide whether to break or turn.

He sees another son, a son he never raised. His face appears with crystalline clarity. He sees him both as a boy and as a man, all at once, from infancy to old age. In the image, he holds together two strands of silken fabric that have been torn apart. He is a child peering through a microscope at Bajor. The swirling colors of the Celestial Temple's aperture are reflected in his eyes. The Prophets call him a vector. A vessel. Sisko recognizes him from his linear life, though he never knew him while he was embodied. He knew him only as a legend, a savant, a commissioned Starfleet officer, more mythological than real even in that earlier reality. Sisko recognizes him as Wesley Crusher.

Within the radiance of the image, Sisko's lips move. His voice carries through the light. It is not part of the prophetic chorus, but his own. The words are not a request, not a declaration. They are a prophecy:

"Then that is where the path begins."

Chapter One

The morning sun over Bajor City carried a sharp brilliance that bordered on spiritual, a clarity of light that even survivors of the Occupation insisted had not fully returned until well after the end of the Dominion War, now more than twenty years prior. It poured through the tall arched windows of the First Minister's office, carving stark lines of gold and shadow across the polished wooden desk where Kira Nerys sat reviewing her newest stack of crises. The morning light like divinity itself caught the curved edge of her Bajoran earring, a delicate thread of metal engraved with her family sigil, though she was in no state of mind to accept anything divine this early.

Her desk was a stronghold of order: data-slates aligned in precise rows, dossier PADDs grouped by priority, diplomatic packets sorted by region, and a steaming cup of raktajino cooling at her left hand. She wore a deep forest-green ministerial tunic, its fabric a tightly woven Bajoran composite that held its shape with military crispness. Subtle embroidery traced the seams, tiny geometric knots, almost imperceptible unless one knew to look, signs of the artisan guild in Rakantha that had tailored it. The copper pendant at her collarbone was engraved with an image of the domed Temple of the Emissary. It was understated, not ostentatious, yet carried a quiet gravity, a private remembrance of a figure who had been so impactful in her life.

The white-silver strands of her hair were unceremoniously pulled back, revealing the angular clarity of her face: high cheekbones, a jaw sharpened by years of command, the subtle ridges along her nose marking her unmistakably as Bajoran, and eyes that carried both new fire and old fatigue. Everything about the way she held herself, spine straight, shoulders steady, gaze keen enough to cut through pretense, radiated authority tempered by long, hard seasons of survival. Yet beneath the steel lay something more elusive: the echo of a resistance fighter who had lived more than her share of lives, and the faint, flickering hunger of someone who had once walked near the shadow of Bajor's Prophets and had never entirely escaped its imprint.

From beyond the windows, the hum of the capital drifted inward: the murmur of speeders, the ringing of distant temple bells, the layered pulse of a city in constant motion. Even inside the curated calm of her office, Kira perceived everything. She noted the tiny tilt in the file stack at her right, heard the shuffle of an aide hesitating outside the door, registered the faint shift in temperature as the cooling unit cycled. Stillness was not in her nature, never had been.

A chime sounded at her door. "First Minister, the Orne delegation has arrived."

She did not audibly sigh. She never showed frustration in front of her staff, but a small tightening at her jaw conveyed her feelings well enough. "Send them to the conference chamber," she said while rising from her seat.

Kira's Chief of Staff, Jolen Deyer, who had been waiting in the adjoining alcove with a PADD, fell into step just behind her, keeping exactly the right distance, close enough to assist when needed, far enough not to intrude, an instinct that reflected a deep familiarity with her rhythm. Taller than Kira by a few centimeters, he carried himself with grounded confidence and an easy composure. His dark hair in loose waves framed angular features with a natural bronze undertone, and his dark brown eyes held an unguarded gentleness unusual for someone in his position. A polished Bajoran earring contrasted against his darker features. He wore an impeccably tailored civilian suit in a refined slate tone with clean lines and faint geometric stitching along the collar and cuffs. His loyalty to Kira was evident in the way he anticipated without assuming and supported without ever overstepping.

When the doors to the conference chamber slid open, the tension struck them instantly. Three representatives from Orne, an industrial district long hamstrung by underinvestment and made brittle by decades of resentment, stood in a tight cluster with folded arms and expressions carved from stone. One of them, a stout man with an earring that marked him as a descendant of Bajor's ancient canal builders, stepped forward before Kira could offer even the courtesy of a greeting.

"First Minister, Bajor's alliance with the Federation is killing us. Your new trade agreement with them simply puts too much pressure on us. Our facilities cannot meet the Federation's regulatory standards without further assistance from the government," he snapped. "If we attempt compliance with our current infrastructure, production will drop by half within a month."

Kira gestured toward the seating array, inviting them to sit, though none of them did. Behind her, Jolen Deyer maintained his quiet position, a subtle counterbalance to the delegation's bristling energy. "We've already allocated emergency resources to three districts this quarter," Kira replied, keeping her tone measured and formal. "Orne's request will be reviewed along with the others in the next allocation cycle, and the Federation has already pledged additional support to help you meet the compliance requirements. I'm sorry, sir, but at this stage, every available avenue of assistance has already been used."

The oldest member of the delegation, an elderly woman with wiry white hair, slammed her palm flat on the table. The sound cracked across the room like phaser fire. "Reviewed is not enough," she said, her voice roughened by years spent breathing factory grit and surviving Cardassians. "We were promised that Bajor wouldn't bow to Federation bureaucracy. Yet now their regulations tighten around us, regulations our founders never agreed to, no matter how much assistance you say has already been given."

Kira met her stare without flinching. “We don’t bow,” she said. “But cooperation requires adaptation. These standards aren’t arbitrary. They don’t only allow us to trade with the Federation; they prevent further damage to our river systems and to your workers. Bajor remains independent and always will, just as the Emissary instructed us, but it must participate in a larger community if it is to survive.”

The stout man leaned in, bracing himself against the table. “With respect, First Minister, Orne has already adapted far more than other districts that enjoy better support and fewer expectations. These new retrofits would shut down half our factories. We can’t absorb compliance demands at this scale.”

Kira softened her posture in a gesture of conciliation. “Orne’s concerns are legitimate,” she said. “But we cannot divert infrastructure resources already allocated to other districts. We’ve stretched every reserve we have.” She let out the faintest breath through her nose. “If you truly believe there’s some bottomless vault out there waiting to be tapped, then by all means, go speak to the Ferengi traders on Deep Space Nine. They’re the only ones in this part of the quadrant who can make resources appear out of thin air.”

The delegation exchanged dark, resentful looks. No one in Orne wanted Ferengi fingers anywhere near their industrial corps, but desperation had a way of turning even bad options into possibilities, an outcome Kira neither intended nor particularly believed they would pursue.

The debate escalated quickly, accusations, counter-accusations, warnings of system-wide shutdowns and infrastructure strain. Jolen, positioned just behind Kira, kept quiet notes on his PADD and occasionally murmured brief corrections or reminders only she could hear, once offering a dry aside that nearly drew a smile from her. By the end of the hour, Kira had secured a temporary relief structure, deferred compliance deadlines, and redirected their frustration toward a potential outlet for their surplus alloy: Ferengi merchants on Deep Space Nine, a solution that balanced diplomacy with calculated redirection and achieved its purpose.

When the delegates left, she didn’t move until the doors sealed again with a soft hiss.

Only then did she exhale. “We should schedule a follow-up,” Jolen said gently, stepping forward to gather the stray PADDs.

“In three weeks,” she replied. “Not sooner. Let them think they won.” As she said it, a throbbing pressure built behind her temples, and she rubbed them lightly. Jolen noticed her discomfort immediately but knew her well enough to recognize when she needed space.

The throbbing pain behind her temples continued to intensify as she made her way down the hallway. By the time she reached her office again, her composure had begun to fray. She sank into her chair and pressed her palms flat against the desk in an attempt to steady herself. Jolen closed the door behind

them and dimmed the lights without saying a word. She noticed and appreciated his attentiveness. She always noticed.

Across the room, the holo projector mounted on the wall scrolled a new headline. Jolen started toward it to deactivate the display, but the movement had already drawn Kira's attention. "Jolen," she said, her voice low, almost a whisper, "What is it? Another report of an Orb experience?"

He hesitated before answering, as though weighing how much to burden her. "Yes, First Minister. Another Orb experience, in Sito Province. Civilians reported sustained visions lasting several minutes."

Overwhelmed, Kira closed her eyes.

Orb experiences had always been rare moments of revelation granted sparingly, even to vedeks, and almost never to ordinary pilgrims who visited any of the nine Orbs scattered in shrines across the planet. But now they were flaring across Bajor with unsettling regularity. Each week brought new reports: clusters of worshippers overwhelmed at a shrine, entire meditation groups struck simultaneously by visions they could barely describe. Increasingly, it was no longer just Bajorans. A tour group of elderly Bolians visiting to admire the architectural restorations, not to seek the Prophets, had found one of their own suddenly trembling with a vision so powerful that Temple healers needed hours to stabilize him. Similar incidents had begun surfacing among visiting Starfleet personnel, merchant crews, and diplomatic envoys.

It had become a daily occurrence: miners, merchants, students, tourists, each touched by a radiance she herself could no longer reach. The Prophets were silent to her, utterly silent. They had been since the end of the Dominion War. For years she had knelt before the Orbs, searching for even a whisper of acknowledgment, a flicker of presence, but each time she had been met with the same unfathomable indifference. And now, while Bajor drowned in a sea of revelation, it seemed as though she alone stood untouched on its dry shore.

Her fingers trembled as she lowered her hand from her brow. The headache behind her eyes sharpened. Another reminder that the Prophets were speaking to everyone but her. She exhaled, steadying herself. Then she froze. A crippling sensation surged up her spine. Her breath caught. Kira was no longer in her office.

She was back in the thick darkness of the Kola hillside forests, her breath misting in the cold, damp earth clinging to her boots. The night carried the scent of impending freezing rain that had not yet fallen. She crouched low behind a tangle of roots, her jacket and pack heavy on her shoulders, the metal of her disruptor cold against her palm. Around her, the rest of Shakaar's unit moved in near silence.

To her left, Furel and Lupaza, seasoned veterans, slipped between the trees with the effortless coordination of fighters who had survived more campaigns than she had years. Their presence steadied her. She had already proven herself

on several missions, but was still young enough to draw confidence from the battle-hardened experience of her older compatriots. Latha was somewhere behind carrying a case full of charges. Shakaar himself was a few meters ahead, steady and unflinching, issuing the hand signals that guided them all. She moved with the unit as she always had on nights like this, taking her place in the line, her breath tight with focus, anticipation, and a healthy edge of fear.

Ahead, in the small clearing carved by years of foot traffic, a cluster of lanterns flickered over a grim tableau: twelve frightened children huddled beside an idling ground transport that was carrying them to a remote facility. They had been taken from Terok Nor by orbital shuttle, then transferred into this cargo hauler for the overland journey. Wrapped in thin blankets, they shivered and whimpered, staring hollow-eyed at the mud. Nearby, Bajoran collaborators, unmarked civilians assigned to the escort, sat in loose circles around a few portable heaters, eating ration packs and talking among themselves. Their warmth and light conversation stood in jarring contrast to the children's quiet trembling.

Encircling the clearing, four Cardassian soldiers maintained a strict perimeter, their figures shifting in and out of the lantern glow. Two stood at fixed posts just beyond the reach of the light, silhouettes against the trees, while the other two paced along the outer edge of the camp. They spoke little, their movements efficient and impassive, forming a silent boundary as the children pressed closer together, far too aware that nothing about this night had been arranged for their safety.

Shakaar ordered the unit to intercept. When the signal came, a soft click across the earpiece behind her ear, Kira rose from the forest floor. Her cell fanned out from the trees in coordinated silence. The first shot struck before the collaborators understood they were surrounded. A Cardassian guard collapsed in the lantern light, armor clattering against the hard, muddy ground. The next two spun outward, shouting, but they were cut down in an instant as sharp pulses of energy snapped through the clearing in harsh, bright flashes.

The children screamed. The collaborators froze where they sat, hands lifting instinctively as the resistance cell closed in from the treeline, Shakaar at the front, Furel and the others fanning out to either side. Kira moved with them, her weapon steady, within a tightening ring of fighters around the clearing.

"Stand up," Shakaar commanded.

The collaborators rose shakily, some pleading, some cursing under their breath, one spitting in panic and defiance. Kira held her aim, unmoved.

"Take them into the woods," Shakaar ordered, making eye contact with Kira, Furel, and two other fighters. "All of them—now."

As soon as Shakaar gave the signal, Kira and the others closed in, seizing the Bajoran collaborators without hesitation and driving them toward the tree line. Kira and Furel pushed them deeper into the shadows, as far from the earshot of the children as they could manage. In the clearing, the rest of the cell lowered

their weapons and moved to the cluster of children, pulling the portable heaters close and offering steady reassurances. The children, shaken but relieved, huddled together around the warmth.

In the forest, the collaborators had been brought to their knees in a row. The cold, dark woods stirred with the flutter of bats overhead.

"These children were ours!" Kira said, her voice tight with anger. "Bajor's! And you handed them over."

One man broke into sobs. Another whispered a prayer. A third held Kira's gaze with a thin, defiant lift of his chin.

Kira raised her weapon. The others did the same. Disruptor fire flashed through the trees in bursts of white-blue energy.

Kira lowered her weapon slowly, her vision blurring at the edges. Her breath came in sharp, shallow pulls. There was no distance to hide behind, no timed charge, no derailed convoy, no trap laid hours earlier. This was face to face; the first execution she had ever carried out with her own hands. She told herself it had been necessary. Saving the children meant nothing if those who delivered them to the Cardassians went unpunished. She believed it. She needed to.

When her team returned to the clearing and the children looked up, some clinging to each other, some frozen in shock, she saw in their faces what she had tried to deny: they knew. They had not seen or heard anything, but they knew enough. They understood what resistance required.

Her cell sheltered them in the hills for weeks, moving camp each night until they secured safe houses to take them in. These were the children who survived the Occupation, the ones who would grow into Bajorans who would later reclaim their world.

"First Minister?!" Jolen stepped closer, alarm sharpening his tone as he gently set a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she said, though her voice strained under the lie. "It's just... a memory."

She drew a slow breath, trying to reorient herself. She had been sitting like this for some time, caught between the vision and the present, long enough for the room to shift around her. Early evening had already begun to stretch shadows across the office. Jolen said nothing more. He replicated a cup of deka tea and handed it to her, steam rising in a thin curl. She accepted it, the warmth of the ceramic grounding her.

"Nerys," Jolen said, using her familiar name, a tactic he used sparingly. "You've been in here a long time. Let's get you out of this room. Walk a little. Breathe some fresh air."

"I have work," she replied reflexively.

"You'll have more of it tomorrow." A faint smile touched his mouth. "Bajor's most abundant natural resource is crisis."

She almost smiled back. Almost. When she pushed away from the desk, a faint wave of light-headedness rolled through her. Jolen's hand was there again, steadying her without comment.

"I'm fine," she said.

"I know," he answered. "Let's walk anyway."

Outside the office, two ministerial guards straightened from their posts. Kira gave a small nod, and they fell in behind her and Jolen at a respectful distance as they left the Ministry and stepped into the evening.

Bajor City lay under late dusk, nearly dark. Streetlamps glowed along the causeways, and illumination spilled from windows and open doorways. A faint breeze carried the mingled scents of roasted spices from nearby food stalls, the mineral heaviness of cooling cobblestones worn by centuries, and the sweet perfume of night blooming marada flowers climbing the walls.

The First Minister's residence was close enough to walk, far enough to let the city surround them. Transports hummed overhead in orderly lanes, but down here the sound was softened. For a time they walked in silence, letting the rhythm of their footsteps and the cooling air do the work neither of them could have achieved through speaking.

Jolen was the one who finally broke the quiet, gently. "Beautiful evening," he said, looking out over the lantern lit streets. "Bajor does this better than any world I've ever seen, turns the end of a long day into something that feels like renewal rather than collapse."

Kira exhaled slowly. "It is beautiful."

"It's the kind of night," he continued, "that usually helps settle the mind..." He glanced at her, not pressing.

"A little," she said. "Not enough."

A group of citizens passed them going the other way, nodding respectfully but not stopping, some touching their fingers briefly to their earrings in an unconscious gesture of blessing as they recognized the First Minister. Kira's posture tightened a fraction, the way it always did when the public gaze brushed her.

"They look at you and see certainty," Jolen said quietly. "They look to you for strength. Inspiration. A voice that anchors them when everything else feels unsteady."

"They shouldn't," Kira replied. "I'm no anchor. I'm barely holding myself together."

"They don't see that," he said.

"That's the job," she murmured. "Everyone thinks I'm calm because the Prophets are guiding me." Kira exhaled. "They don't understand. The Prophets haven't spoken to me in years."

"Silence doesn't mean absence," Jolen offered.

"Sometimes it does." Her voice was steadier than the words beneath it. "I stand in front of the Orbs and feel nothing. Everyone else leaves shaken or stirred or weeping. I leave with a headache and a reminder that whatever connection I had once... it's gone."

Jolen watched her for a moment. "Maybe the Prophets think you don't need visions anymore."

She gave him a weary look. "That's generous."

"It's just a possibility."

"It doesn't feel like possibility," she murmured. "It feels like being locked out of my own home."

They walked a few quiet steps. "The flashback today was worse than any in years, Deyer. I completely lost my grip on reality."

They passed a small roadside shrine, its single flame flickering in a carved alcove. Kira slowed, bent down, and lifted one of the white talor flowers. Its clean, bright scent steadied her for a moment. "My friends," she continued, "are all gone or far away. The Emissary has ascended to the Celestial Temple. The Prophets won't speak to me. And everyone assumes that makes me stronger somehow. It's strange, guiding others with a faith I'm not sure I still recognize."

"You believe in Bajor," Jolen said. "In protecting it. You always have."

She didn't argue. That belief was the one constant she still trusted.

They reached her residence, night now fully settled over the city. The guards stepped back as she approached, offering small nods. Kira paused before entering. "Thank you for walking with me," she said.

"Sweet dreams, First Minister. Bajor will be here in the morning." A smile spread across his face. "If not, I'll still be here with quite an interesting incident report."

Chapter Two

The Cardassian-built corridors of Deep Space Nine carried the same hollow resonance they always had, but General Ro Laren had learned to listen differently as she walked the hallways. The harmonic tremor that traveled through the station whenever the docking pylons adjusted their atmospheric seals, and even the faint rattle in the bulkheads near junction 47-T, were patterns she had learned to recognize instantly. What once sounded ominous and alien now struck her as familiar, almost intimate. The ghosts of Terok Nor lingered here, but they no longer ruled the station. She did.

She moved with the deliberate steps of a soldier who no longer needed to prove herself. Her posture was composed and exacting, projecting command without theatrics. Her uniform was made of sleet-gray fabric cut in clean, modern lines, with black sleeves that narrowed beneath the arms into a denser weave shaped in the classic hourglass contour that defined Bajoran military design. A dark command sash crossed her torso from shoulder to hip and locked into an outer belt at her waist. Her hair, still predominantly dark but streaked now with threads of gray, was pulled back into a tight ponytail that fell between her shoulders, with a single disobedient strand sometimes slipping loose near her ear. The ridges across her nose carried the unmistakable imprint of Bajor. Her single silver earring completed the impression of someone forged in both fire and faith.

The station was now entirely under Bajoran command. Only a small Starfleet contingent remained, a senior liaison officer and a minimal engineering and security support team, reversing the older arrangement that had defined the years immediately after the Cardassian withdrawal. Bajoran uniforms now dominated the corridors, security's muted brown and beige, the soft red and choral tones worn by senior officers, and the ocean blues and coppers of the medical corps. Starfleet uniforms were conspicuous for their rarity. For those who remembered the transition era, it was surreal.

For Ro, command carried layers of meaning. After her defection from Starfleet, she quickly rose through the ranks of the Maquis resistance, earning an unparalleled and eventually legendary reputation for skill in combat, cunning, bravery, and leadership. When the Dominion decimated the Maquis toward the end of the war, effectively ending their movement, Ro had been among only a small handful of survivors, on a detached mission at the edges of Cardassian space at the time. The painful irony for Ro was that she now held command for defecting from one organization and for surviving the massacre of another.

Shakaar's government argued that Bajor would not turn its back on those who had fought Cardassian oppression and granted amnesty to the survivors of the Maquis massacre, which allowed Ro to transition into the Bajoran military

at the rank of Major. The Federation had resisted the move at first, but after the return of *Voyager* and what it represented for healing the rift with the Maquis, Starfleet simply stopped pressing the issue. They never granted clemency themselves, but they did not stand in Bajor's way. The Cardassians, however, never eased their stance. To them, Bajor's forgiveness of the Maquis survivors remained a deliberate affront, remembered in full and deeply resented.

Captain Nog, Starfleet's liaison to Deep Space Nine and the station's first officer, walked beside Ro. His polished boots echoed with a rhythm that seemed equal parts Starfleet discipline and Ferengi swagger. His uniform was a deep crimson and black with subtle metallic trim at the shoulders and four gold pips on his collar. The restless cadet had become a seasoned officer. But beneath all the Starfleet polish, he had never lost his Ferengi instincts. The lobes were duller perhaps, but they still twitched reflexively at the mention of profit. Within Starfleet he was regarded as the rare bridge between the Ferengi Alliance and Federation command: the Federation's master of commerce or the Ferengi's ambassador of ethics, depending on who was speaking.

Nog had emerged from the Dominion War as a battle-hardened living legend for having served on the front lines aboard the *Defiant* under the command of Benjamin Sisko himself. He quickly rose through the ranks, serving as first officer of the *USS Centaur* under the command of Captain Orfil Solis, which had plenty of its own adventures. It was not long until Starfleet gave Nog command of his own ship, the refitted *USS Rutledge*, which was placed on the front lines of dozens of actions. When Starfleet reassigned him to Deep Space Nine, he was not only relieved for a break in the action but also welcomed the chance to come home again.

When he laughed, which remained often, it came from deep in his chest, a sound that could immediately scatter tension. His humor was a pressure valve that Deep Space Nine desperately needed. Nog himself knew how precious that laughter was, having once lived without it. He touched the metal of the bulkhead occasionally as he walked, an unconscious gesture of someone who knew the station as a second skin. He had grown up on Deep Space Nine and was now no less of a fixture of the station than the Cardassian bulkheads themselves.

The corridor curved gently as they approached the wardroom, its doors sliding open at their arrival with a soft hydraulic sigh. The senior staff meeting convened in the newly refurbished space, which was now brighter and more open than in Sisko's era, lined with floor-to-ceiling transparisteel windows. The polished hyllyptus wood table, with its inbuilt computer consoles for each seat, reflected overhead lighting arranged in traditional geometric Bajoran designs.

Colonel Malik Verin, Deep Space Nine's Tactical Officer, was already seated with his hands clasped loosely on the table. Tall and lean, sandy hair prematurely threaded with gray, he wore a neatly sculpted beard pointed at the chin and a wide mustache that was equal parts pirate and physicist. His uniform bore the reddish tones of command: the shoulders and sleeves in the darker shade, tapering into a lighter hue across the torso and down through the trousers. A deep red sash crossed his chest before fastening at the waist. A child of the

Occupation, Malik had partially grown up in the ducts of Terok Nor, learning its sounds and memorizing its heat differentials while listening for the click of Cardassian boots. For Malik, running Deep Space Nine was not simply duty; it was reclamation.

Beside him sat Major Tenen Rahl, Chief Medical Officer and emotional ballast of the command staff. Her uniform, serene ocean blue with copper sleeves and a matching dark sash, carried a calm dignity that softened the austerity of her rank. Black hair framed deep blue eyes set against her strikingly pale skin, giving her an almost luminous stillness. A mother of two—an eight-year-old boy, Prylar, and a five-year-old girl, Fala—she balanced triage and bedtime stories with unflappable rhythm. Her children spent their mornings in the station's Bajoran day care, a place of joyous chaos that Quark once joked was "the most profitable untapped market in the quadrant." Sometimes they stayed with relatives on Bajor, depending on their parents' schedules, but the day care remained their anchor. Her husband, a professor of Bajoran anthropology, divided his time between the capital and the station, their marriage held together by the same faith and adaptability that held Bajor itself.

The meeting unfolded with the unhurried cadence of colleagues long accustomed to each other's timing. Malik's report came first. He spoke of the increase in Ferengi traffic on the station: "The problem isn't Quark," he concluded, "it's the people who come for Quark."

It was an apt assessment. Ever since his brother Rom had become Grand Nagus, Quark's status had risen in tandem, and the original bar on Deep Space Nine had transformed from a noisy local haunt into the central node of a sprawling commercial empire. Following the forty-fifth Rule of Acquisition, "expand or die," Quark had franchised his name across Federation and Ferengi space since the end of the war, each new location doubling as a discreet listening post. This fulfilled the Seventh Rule, "keep your ears open." Profitable information flowed back to him through that network for the last twenty years, making him arguably the most informed civilian in the entire quadrant. He sold that information for a hefty profit. The petty schemes of the old days were long behind him; he no longer needed to chase opportunity. Opportunity came to him.

Deep Space Nine, because of Quark's continued presence and its location near the mouth of the wormhole, had transformed into a hub of Ferengi trade in the twenty years since the end of the war. At any given time, the Ferengi population, which now also included clothed females, was almost as populous as the Bajoran. The Promenade had three Ferengi restaurants serving varieties of tube grubs, live mealworms, and Sluggo cola. It was one of the primary reasons why Starfleet insisted on reassigning Nog from command of his own starship to serve as liaison on Deep Space Nine.

Nog's brow lifted in mock offense at Malik's remark. "That's called cultural exchange. Exactly what Starfleet wants out of this station."

Tenen hid a smile behind her cup. "And what exactly is the rate of this cultural exchange, Captain?"

Ro exhaled through her nose, half frustration and half amusement. "They know the service corridors better than my engineers."

Nog glanced over with an unabashedly mischievous grin. "Then, General, charge them rent."

Laughter broke through the formality of the briefing, but it faded as Tenen delivered her medical update, an uptick in Rigellian fever cases on the station, mild and contained. She ended with a pointed glance. "And, General, you could use a rest."

Ro responded with a slightly displeased lift of an eyebrow.

Nog leaned forward. "Quark offered his service staff to help sanitize the station, as a gesture of goodwill."

"What's the catch?" Ro asked flatly.

Nog spread his hands. "He didn't say. It probably depends on what they're being punished for."

Ro leaned back. "If Ferengi efficiency starts running this station, someone warn me so I can retire."

Tenen's warm laugh was the first to break. The others followed, the moment settling into easy camaraderie. When the meeting adjourned, chairs slid back and conversations shifted into smaller currents. Malik gathered his PADDs; Tenen checked a brief alert from med bay; a junior officer lingered near the viewport, pretending to review a diagnostic while taking a moment to admire the starfield before returning to duty.

Ro did not linger. She rose in a single, economical movement and headed for the door. Nog fell in at her side without needing to be beckoned. They stepped out into the corridor together. For a few paces, neither spoke. Nog finally broke the silence. "It's wild how every discussion in there assumes something's about to go wrong."

"We have to assume that," Ro said. "If we don't, the station actually will tear itself apart."

They passed a viewport where several technicians in EV suits maneuvered along the outer hull, their tool lights sweeping in arcs across the plating. Brief pulses from their maneuvering packs flared as they adjusted position.

"Yes, but out here," Nog responded, "people just live. Shops. Families. Pilgrims. Dock workers. They assume it all just... works."

Ro regarded the traffic passing through the corridor: a Bajoran archivist carrying a crate of data rods, two Starfleet officers—a Vulcan technician and a human security officer, in quiet philosophical debate—and two young Bajoran officers laughing about something that had nothing to do with politics or prophecy.

"That's the point," she said. "If they're thinking about how it works, something has already gone wrong."

As they neared the junction leading toward the Promenade, the atmosphere shifted again, light voices, bright lights, the murmur of civilians going about their day. At an observation window just ahead, a small cluster of Bajoran

schoolchildren listened as their teacher pointed out distant star systems, her hands sketching wide, earnest circles.

One of the children glanced back toward the corridor, spotted Ro, and froze. Another followed the gaze. Then another. Whispers began, too hushed to be discreet, too excited to be contained. "General Ro... that's her...!"

The children tried to hide their glances, failing spectacularly. Several stood on their toes to get a better look. A few repeated the name again, softer, reverent, as if saying it made the figure in front of them more real. Ro did not slow, but the corner of her mouth curved toward Nog. "Word gets around," she said.

"About you? General, on this station you're practically a folktale," Nog said. "Ro of the Maquis. The officer who pulled off strikes no one else would attempt, and lived to do them twice. And before that, the Bajoran who served on the *Enterprise* under Jean-Luc Picard! People hear your name and half expect a mythic hero to walk through the bulkheads."

"Folktales aren't real," Ro answered.

"Maybe not," Nog said. "But you are. That's what impresses people."

She let the compliment pass without comment. They reached the Promenade entrance. The sound shifted. Hundreds of voices rose and fell in overlapping languages. Live music from a Tellarite vendor's stall. A Yridian dealer hawking inexpensive souvenirs. A Betazoid fortune teller offering readings. The scents of hasperat brine, fresh tube grubs, jumja sticks, and Vulcan tea blends mingled in the air.

"I'll walk the Promenade," Ro said. "You go make this station sing."

Nog inclined his head as they parted ways. "Aye, General."

On the opposite side of the ring, Major General Tenen Rahl emerged from a turbolift with her two children in tow. Prylar, her son, clutched a small PADD containing an animated holobook; Fala, her daughter, clung to Tenen while also gripping a Bajoran teddy bear by its heavily shopworn arm.

"Stay close," Tenen reminded them.

Her daughter immediately claimed two fingers of Tenen's left hand, clinging tightly. Her son edged just ahead, curiosity dragging him forward.

"Can we go see the ships?" he asked, already craning for a view of the docking ring.

"Later," Tenen said. "First we pick up your supplies from the school kiosk. Then we—" She broke off as a roaring sound cut through the Promenade, low at first, then rising. A voice, guttural, primal, and angry. Tenen's head snapped toward the source even before she fully processed the words. Years in medical service had taught her to distinguish the frequencies of panic, pain, and fury. This was fury, cresting toward something worse.

"Behind me," she said, her tone shifting from maternal nurturer to protector in an instant. Her daughter obeyed instantly, pressing against the back of her legs. Her son hesitated until she reached back and set a firm hand between his shoulders, guiding him closer.

The roar came again, clearer now, the unmistakable timbre of a Klingon in the first stage of an argument that might soon require major surgery. Tenen's eyes tracked the crowd, found the opening in its pattern where people were starting to step away.

"You're going to stay right behind me," she told her children, voice calm but unyielding. "Hand on my uniform. Do you understand?"

Both children nodded, wide-eyed. Small fingers fastened to her laboratory coat, gripping so tightly she could feel the tremor in their hands. She tapped her commbadge, summoning security, then stepped forward toward the disturbance, her children glued to her footing like shadows.

In the clearing a towering Klingon trader, hair braided with metal rings that chimed faintly when he moved, loomed over two Ferengi who stood in front of a holosuite reservation panel mounted across the Promenade from Quark's Bar. His voice was loud enough to rattle the display screens.

"You cheated me of my time!" he bellowed. "You said the program would be cleared at the seventeenth hour, and yet you leave your filthy simulation running."

Both Ferengi threw their hands up defensively, the taller one, who had overstayed his Orion harem program, and the smaller one, an employee of Quark's, beside him.

"It was a minor overlap!" the taller Ferengi protested. "A fraction of a cycle."

"I do not care about your fractions!" the Klingon thundered. "I seek glory today! my role as Kang at the Siege of the Albino's Compound awaits! The Dahar Master Koloth and the mighty Jadzia Dax stand ready for battle, and you would delay my honor for a few extra minutes with your slave girls?"

The crowd was circling, forming that familiar ring of fascinated onlookers whose presence always made any situation worse. Some visitors raised PADDs to record; others simply stared with the hungry curiosity of people relieved that someone else's day was going badly.

Tenen advanced until she was within arm's reach of the Klingon, her children still tucked behind her, hands locked in the folds of her uniform. "Gentlemen," she said, her tone steady, carrying just enough volume to cut across the argument. "There are other ways to express one's honor."

The Klingon's reply came as a growl that vibrated the bulkheads, but her gaze never wavered. His eyes flicked down briefly, registering the small hands clutching her coat. For a moment his anger shifted, confused by the presence of children in the field of battle. Tenen shifted her stance subtly, widening her base and angling herself so that, no matter which way the Klingon moved, her body would remain between him and her children. She kept her hands visible, empty, the way she might with a frightened patient holding a scalpel.

"You were misled!" the Klingon insisted, though his volume had dropped half a notch. "These Ferengi promised—"

"And they can clarify the terms of a refund," Tenen said, "without screaming in front of half the station."

The smaller Ferengi, Quark's employee, opened his mouth, thought better of it, and closed it again.

The Klingon's attention snapped back to them, rage tightening his posture, his fist rising as if to punctuate the insult. Tenen recognized instantly that the situation was no longer in her hands. She tightened her grip on her children, guiding them backward and out of the immediate line of danger.

Two Bajoran security officers were already pushing through the crowd from one direction, trying to close the distance before the Klingon's temper detonated. But they were still several meters off.

From the other side, Ro approached before security reached the cluster. She moved in without a word, silently cutting through the bystanders. The murmuring crowd dropped into complete silence as she stepped into the circle. For a long breath, neither she nor the Klingon spoke. The tension was electric. She carried not only the prestige of command but the weight of legend that nobody, not even an enraged Klingon, would dare to challenge. Then, after having captured the silent attention of all onlookers with her very presence, Ro looked to the shorter Ferengi with even calm and said, "Arrange an extra hour for this customer."

Stillness flattened the air. The Ferengi bobbed his head rapidly and tapped the holosuite panel without a hint of protest. Ro made a slow sweep of eye contact, Klingon, Ferengi, the ring of bystanders. No words followed. The quiet held, thick and expectant. The Klingon exhaled once, sharply, then turned and stalked away, braid-rings chiming faintly with each heavy step. The two Ferengi darted off in the opposite direction, the merchant nearly tripping over himself in his hurry.

Tenen's children released the breath they had been holding. Her son peeked around her hip, eyes still wide. "Is she always like that?" he whispered, staring at Ro.

Tenen answered softly, "Only when people forget their manners."

As the crowd dispersed, conversations resumed, feet shuffled away, the Promenade's normal pulse slowly knitting itself back together.

Across the corridor, angled just enough to have witnessed everything from his threshold, Quark stood at the entrance of his bar, presiding like a merchant prince. The familiar neon pulsed above the doors. He wore one of his signature ensembles: a long, high-collared coat of layered, interlocking waves of geometric spirals stitched in fine polysynthetic threads that shifted dazzling colors with his movements. Beneath it, a fitted vest in contrasting hues blended stripes and textured panels with almost obsessive craftsmanship. His trousers rose high over his abdomen in true Ferengi fashion, their fabric subtly iridescent, completing the look of a man who dressed to match the splendor of his latinum reserves.

He had aged, the lines around his mouth a little deeper, the lobes a touch heavier, his teeth requiring more frequent sharpening, but he stood with the same poised, calculating confidence as ever; a bar owner, a franchise magnate,

and one of the most prosperous Ferengi alive. "You're getting good at that, General," he said. "Almost diplomatic."

Ro cast him a sideways glance. "Don't insult me, Quark."

He chuckled. "Not possible... but I'll keep trying. And, oh, by the way, don't worry about the extra hour, General. I won't bill you." He gestured toward the short Ferengi. "I'll take it out of his pay."

Chapter Three

The dawn over Bajor City spread across the valley, painting the spires and copper domes in an amber wash. It poured over terraces and rooftops until it reached the windows of the First Minister's residence, bringing the space to life. Kira Nerys sat alone in her quarters, dressed in soft Bajoran house robes the color of sea and sand. The fabric pooled around her hips and thighs in relaxed, flowing shapes, forming a quiet oasis within a life otherwise defined by rigid discipline and formal ceremony.

Her quarters were a museum of contradiction: rusted relics of the Resistance arranged beside delicately rolled prayer scrolls tied with lace; the steel edge of an old field knife resting beneath a devotional lamp; a worn disruptor power cell sitting on a shelf beside an antique incense tray. Each object bore the weight of what felt like two distinct lifetimes, one defined by survival, the other by faith.

The petalune flowers at the window absorbed the morning light, their clean, gentle fragrance drifting through the room. Jolen Deyer replaced the blossoms each evening before she returned, an unspoken habit that steadied the edges of her routine. This morning, their otherwise welcome presence carried a stillness she could not quite settle into. She sat curled in her chair, one leg tucked beneath her, cradling her first raktajino of the day. At a low table, she idly picked from a breakfast tray arranged with Bajoran fruits and pastries, some savory, some sweet.

Across the room, a small holo of Vedek Bareil glowed in a quiet loop, his expression composed of subtle wisdom, serenity, and what struck Kira as a faint echo of desire. The projection traced the familiar plane of his cheek, the warmth in his eyes, and the gentle curve of his mouth, shaped in words she could almost remember him saying. Her throat tightened. She recalled how easily his voice had quieted the noise within her, how his nearness had softened the sharp edges of her defiance. She had been known, truly known, by very few people in her life. Bareil had been one.

Then the memory shifted to the moment he was taken from her, their love cut short before it had fully blossomed, and the tenderness of the memory collapsed into a sharper ache. An urgent need for prayer welled within her. The sight of the meditation alcove drew her toward the morning rite.

Kira crossed the room with measured steps, letting the familiar stillness of the prayer alcove gather around her. The shift from living space to sacred space was not subtle. The alcove held the scent of ritual incense. Light came through in deep reds and purples from a small stained-glass window, and a softly embroidered rug lay

beneath her feet. It was designed to feel distinct from the rest of her quarters and to ease her into ritual without the need for long meditative preparation.

She settled onto the low bench, drawing her legs beneath her. Thoughts of the Prophets eluded her at first. Instead, the press of delicate fabric against her thighs became a small, private sensation she could not entirely dismiss. As she adjusted her posture and prepared to begin the morning liturgy, the awareness of her own body returned. The truth of her own skin made itself known in subtle, betraying shifts: a tightening low in her abdomen, a slow-pooling warmth, welcome in itself, yet all the more frustrating for how sharply it illuminated what was missing in her life.

She managed, with effort, to silo the physical needs that occupied her mind and narrow her focus to prayer, aided by a smooth prayer-stone she turned between her fingers. She drew a deep breath, closed her eyes, and directed her thoughts toward the Prophets, toward their eternal connection to Bajor and all Bajorans, even if, for now, they remained silent to her. Her focus steadied as the sound of temple bells, beginning their call to morning prayer, drifted through the window.

After completing the morning liturgy, she rose and dressed. She fastened the dark-green ministerial tunic across her torso, followed by the bronze pendant of office upon her chest. When she stepped before the mirror, her hair drawn neatly back, the reflection that met her gaze was that of Bajor's First Minister, composed and complete. Yet beneath the polished surface she saw only estrangement. No lover waited behind her, no voice of the Prophets answered her prayers, the absence of both hollowing the figure in the glass. What remained, what had always remained, was duty alone.

A soft chime sounded at her door. Jolen Deyer stepped inside as it opened, a stack of neatly arranged PADDs in his hands, his usual kind, at times even flamboyant, brightness following him into the suite. He took one look at her, and his expression subtly shifted, an immediate recognition that today she would need his light-hearted warmth more than most.

"First Minister," he said gently. "The transport is ready. I figured you wouldn't want to beam to the council chamber, and I've already told Jaro you might appreciate the quieter route this morning."

She acknowledged him with a nod, and they left the suite together. Outside, her transport waited. The interior was quiet and bright, with soft-gold panels and wide windows. Jolen settled across from her as the doors slid shut, while Jaro, the young operator, eased the transport into a smooth glide. For several moments they rode in silence, the pulse of the engine forming a steady undercurrent. Kira sat with her hands folded, her eyes tracing the spires and terraces of Bajor City as they passed below. Jolen watched her discreetly, long enough to register the psychic tension she tried to hide with every movement.

"You know," he began lightly, "if you keep staring out the window like that, people will think you're contemplating which minister to throw off a balcony first." He

offered the comment with gentle mischief, hoping to invite a smile, or at least ease her tension.

Kira's eyes shifted toward him, her expression unchanged. Jolen went on. "Might I suggest starting with Minister Serin?"

Jaro, hands steady on the controls, glanced back at Jolen with a quiet smile. After a beat he risked a single, quick look toward Kira, just enough to see whether she shared even a hint of that amusement. Kira exhaled through her nose in a sign of good humor, "If only it were that simple."

"Just give the order, First Minister, I know the perfect balcony."

This time she did smile. It was brief but real. Kira looked out toward the rising sun, its gold washing over the rooftops of the city she had sworn to protect. The panoramic vista drifted by outside, new light catching the river that curved through the city's center, and for a moment the weight she carried eased enough for her breath to move more freely in her chest. Jolen noticed that as well and leaned back, quietly satisfied.

Jolen watched her quiet shift in posture as the city rolled past beneath them. "Bajor is of the Prophets," he said softly. "Every part of it carries them. As long as you dwell here, you are never truly apart from them."

Kira appreciated his words even if she didn't know how to show it in the moment.

The transport slowed as the landing platform came into view. The vessel settled with a gentle burst of thrusters, and the doors slid open to the elevated walkway leading toward the ministerial chambers. Two ministerial guards awaited them at the edge of the platform, positioned just as Jolen had prearranged. Kira stepped out first, the breeze lifting a strand of her hair as she moved. Jolen fell into step beside her, and together they crossed the platform toward the tall, arched entrance that awaited them.

The domed Council of Ministers building rose at the center of one of Bajor City's oldest districts, a modern structure shaped to echo the ancient stonework surrounding it. Its clean lines and polished surfaces had been crafted with deliberate restraint, allowing it to sit comfortably among the weathered yet well-preserved ruins of the ancient council site. Though newly built, the hall carried the weight of the past in its design, a reminder that the choices made within its walls stood on centuries of Bajoran self-governance. Large columns inscribed with invocations for clarity, community, and devotion framed the interior, giving the chamber a feeling at once sacred and political, two qualities the Bajorans had never sought to separate.

Conversations broke off in uneven ripples as Kira stepped into the chamber. Ministers who had been gathered in small groups around the room, conferring over PADDs or exchanging guarded remarks, straightened almost at once. A few of her staunchest allies offered quick nods of welcome, their expressions bright with genuine relief. Another handful held their silence for a beat too long, their eyes

narrowing with the hostility they no longer bothered to conceal. Kira walked toward her seat with steady composure while the room's conversations thinned into brittle formality.

Kira took her seat at the raised dais at the front of the chamber, the broad white marble curving gently along its edge. Jolen settled beside her, organizing his PADDs with deliberate alacrity. Two Vedeks ascended the dais as well, their presence a formal acknowledgment of the spiritual weight interwoven with Bajor's political life. They murmured to one another while preparing for the opening invocation, their orange robes shifting softly as they took their seats.

Below the dais, the floor dipped into a wide, sunken central space where speakers addressed the Council. Two long tables occupied the center, set at a slight inward angle toward one another, positioned for guests, petitioners, or officials awaiting their turn to speak. At the nearer table sat the Cardassian envoy, Eret Doran, tall and gaunt, ready for conflict. His unusual uniform followed the angular lines of traditional Cardassian armor, sleek plates of metallic weave fitted seamlessly into a civilian cut that suggested non-military authority without conceding restraint. He seemed carved from resentment itself, fingers steepled, his expression arranged into a practiced mask of disdain.

As the ministers began to take their places in the ascending rows of seating that ringed the chamber, Minister Serin Vekar entered through a side passage, his stride brisk with habitual self-importance. He paused at the edge of the central well and looked up toward the dais, letting his gaze settle on Kira with practiced indifference. "First Minister," he said, his tone shaded with smug familiarity. "The Cardassian envoy wishes to enlighten us on the shortcomings of our administration."

Without waiting for her response, he turned and made his way to the unoccupied table in the central well. Serin was a compact, round-shouldered man, his height working against the authority he tried to project. A thin ring of wiry hair circled his otherwise bald head, flaring outward in a faint halo. The ridges along his nose were sharply defined, and his Bajoran earring rested heavily against his temple. He lowered himself into his seat with the satisfaction of someone convinced the proceedings required his presence to function at all.

One of the Vedeks stepped forward to the front of the dais and lifted a hand to still the chamber. His voice carried with measured calm as he offered the brief invocation that began every session, a call for clarity, patience, and wisdom. When he stepped back, a council officer rose from a small table in the central well. He adjusted the collar of his formal vest and addressed the chamber with a steady cadence. "The Council will now hear testimony from the representative of the Cardassian Union," he announced. "Envoy Eret Doran, you may begin."

Doran rose and performatively straightened the front of his metallic uniform before addressing the chamber. "Honored First Minister, esteemed Vedeks, respected members of the Council," he began, his voice deceptively calm. "The

histories of our peoples have been intertwined since the first Bajoran explorers ventured into deep space on solar sails and found themselves carried into Cardassian territory. That first encounter set in motion a connection that has echoed across centuries." He very deliberately omitted any reference to the Cardassian occupation of Bajor and continued, "In our own era, that connection reached its most defining test during the Dominion War, when Cardassia finally rose against tyranny and Bajor stood with us in that desperate hour. Your First Minister, Kira Nerys," he theatrically gestured toward her, "fought beside the brave martyr Damar, whose sacrifice is eternally etched into our memory. The liberation of Cardassia was not achieved in isolation. It was achieved in partnership, in common purpose, in shared blood."

He let the chamber absorb the weight of that history before continuing. "And now, as Bajor has taken its rightful place among a community of strong and independent planets, Cardassia finds itself once more aligned with you through mutual treaties and shared commitments. Our destinies, it seems, continue to cross in ways both consequential and profound. We value this. Truly."

His tone tightened, though his expression remained politely composed. "Yet cooperation is only possible when all parties truly understand what mutual respect demands. And mutual respect, in turn, requires a full and accurate comprehension of the treaties that bind us." He inclined his head slightly, as though offering instruction to an inattentive student. "In that spirit, and to ensure there is no further confusion, I will clarify several matters that Cardassia believes this Council must finally address."

He clasped his hands behind his back. "First, the matter of the industrial and agrarian replicators provided during Bajor's period of reconstruction. Cardassia extended these resources in good faith, with clear terms regarding their return. Years have passed, yet they remain unaccounted for. Our inquiries have gone unanswered or deflected." He did not push further, reserving the deeper conflict for later. "This is a matter we must resolve."

He moved on with the ease of someone practiced in layering grievances. "Second, there have been repeated incidents along the border between our territories. Skirmishes and incursions. Cardassia has responded to them with admirable patience, yet too often these reports have been met with silence from your First Minister, or with the suggestion that we are exaggerating. Our restraint should not be mistaken for indifference. Our patience has limits."

His eyes lifted toward Kira on the dais, and his expression cooled another few degrees. "Third, there is the question of Deep Space Nine. Cardassia recognizes its immense strategic significance for the entire quadrant. Which makes it all the more concerning that the station has become saturated with Ferengi commercial interests. Cardassia never agreed to this arrangement, and their presence complicates matters of security and diplomatic integrity. We ask whether Bajor considers such

influence appropriate, given the responsibilities that accompany stewardship of so vital an installation.”

“Finally,” Doran continued, his composure thinning into open indignation, “there is the matter of the Maquis survivors. Deep Space Nine itself is under the command of one! The Federation may choose to look away from their crimes, but Cardassia does not. We have not forgotten the lives they took, nor the years of chaos they inflicted along our border. Yet Bajor has extended them clemency that Cardassia cannot regard as anything but a profound disrespect. You offer sanctuary to those who spilled Cardassian blood without remorse. That blood is not honored here, and that, First Minister, is something Cardassia cannot ignore.”

Quiet boos and hisses rose from the amphitheater seating as Doran concluded, the sound swelling in pockets until the Vedeks signaled for silence. Sorin was already on his feet, sensing the chamber’s mood and stepping into it as if it were a current meant only for him. “Envoy Doran speaks of shared blood,” he declared, projecting his voice across the hall. “Very well. Let us speak of blood. How much of ours did Cardassia shed during the occupation? How many of our cities did you spare? How many of our dead did you honor?” A wave of agreement rippled through the ministers, some pounding the arms of their seats. Even Kira felt the force of the sentiment settle in her chest.

Sorin pressed on. “You speak of unreturned replicators. You call them loans. We call them reparations! Tell us, Envoy, what other reparations has Cardassia offered for half a century of subjugation? Because Bajor remembers. And Bajor keeps count.” More murmurs, stronger this time. Kira found herself nodding despite her dislike for the man. He shifted to the next point with sharpened indignation. “You accuse us of overlooking border raids. We call them piracy. Cardassian ships crossing into our territory, seizing cargo, vanishing before we can answer. You would have us believe you are the injured party. We know better.”

The chamber reverberated with irate agreement, but Sorin lifted a hand, as if granting Doran a final, grudging credit. He had guided the room exactly where he wanted it, feeding their resentment until it swelled against the Cardassian in a palpable wave. Then, with a deftness that revealed his true aim, he shifted the fury’s direction toward Kira. “Yet the envoy raises a fair point when he speaks of our responsibility as members of an intergalactic community. Bajor is free and independent, yet we kowtow to every excessive whim of the Federation. Are we Federation allies, or Federation lapdogs?!”

The words landed hard. Ministers who moments earlier had glared at Doran now turned their attention toward the dais, their expressions sharpening with suspicion. “Orne Province strains under mandates demanded by the Federation for the privilege of trading with them. Starfleet vessels hover above our soil whenever they please. Treaties are written for us, not with us. Is this the liberated Bajor we fought and died for?!”

He looked up at the dais, his eyes finding Kira, and lowered his voice slightly to sharpen the cruelty. He pointed an accusatory finger. "Perhaps the envoy is right to single out First Minister Kira's role in bringing independence to *Cardassia*, who fought beside a *Cardassian* martyr while wearing a *Federation* uniform. Perhaps Bajor's problem is not Cardassia or the Federation. Perhaps the problem sits right there in that chair."

A slow rumble moved through the crowd. Sorin did not relent. "Perhaps it is her devotion to all things foreign to Bajor that has led the Prophets to reject her. It seems they speak to everyone else these days except Bajor's First Minister."

The barb landed cutting and cruel, guided by an uncanny sense of exactly where she could be hurt.

Sorin stepped away from the lectern with unhurried satisfaction, gathering his PADDs from the long table in the well as ministers shifted in their seats, the chamber stirring with low, unsettled murmurs. The council officer rose from his place and announced a half-hour recess, his voice echoing through the hall as conversations began to bloom across the amphitheater tiers. Kira remained still at the dais, collecting herself in the growing noise. Jolen leaned toward her, speaking quietly, though not so quietly that it failed to carry across the well. "He speaks of blood and independence as though he ever contributed to either."

Sorin's head tilted when Jolen's insult reached him, his grip tightening around his PADD before he turned toward the dais. Around them the chamber dissolved into motion as ministers poured through the archways in scattered conversation, no one noticing the confrontation beginning at the front. Sorin ascended the steps with simmering resentment until he stood looming over the still seated Kira and Jolen. He said nothing at first, only staring at Kira with a hatred so personal it bordered on obsession, letting the venom gather in the silence.

He leaned in just enough for the insult to feel intimate. "Drop the holy act, Kira. You cling to sanctity because you've got nothing else. You're cracking under your own righteousness, and the whole world can smell it. No lover, no child, no Prophet. What do you pray to at night?" He gave a small, humorless laugh. "You think this world needs you? It's sorry for you. A hollow widow of your own myth. If the Prophets ever spoke to you, it was out of pity, not purpose."

Kira sat silently, taking the full weight of his abuse, but Jolen rose from his seat, guided by an overwhelming protective instinct. "Minister, you've said enough." He took a step forward, his eyes flicking with a disdain that could cut metal. "Forgive me, but I can't help noticing the irony. You stand here dripping spite and talking about blood, while the woman you're attacking has bled, literally bled, for this planet more times than you've lifted a finger for it. Kira earns Bajor's devotion. You, Minister, mostly earn complaints from your staff about your lechery." He let out a small, incredulous laugh. "So before you question her worth again, perhaps take a moment to locate your own. I promise it won't take long."

Serin's mouth twisted as he stepped closer. "Ah. The loyal shadow speaks. Always so close, yet never the one she turns to." The insinuation lodged in the air like a toxin it was meant to be.

When Kira finally spoke, her voice was calm and utterly composed. "Minister Serin," she said, stepping closer, her presence enlarging the space despite her small frame, "when you rise in this chamber, you rise because I made this government possible through the wars you preferred to sit out. You pursue your narcissistic ambitions within the order I helped build. Insult me all you want if it makes you feel important. But try not to forget the people of your province while you're busy plotting your rise to power."

The words were measured and final. Serin's face flattened; he tucked his PADD under his arm and stormed out, leaving the room lighter by his absence.

Jolen bent to gather Kira's scattered PADDs, his movements brisk but his voice a soft warning. "First Minister," he murmured, his eyes locking onto hers with unguarded concern, "if you don't fight—or do something—with someone soon, someone's going to get hurt."

Kira held his gaze for a long, steady moment. She had not cracked throughout the session; she would not begin now. Yet she could not help but acknowledge, silently and with a tightening in her chest, that Jolen had no idea how true his words really were.

Chapter Four

Ops was alive with activity as General Ro Laren stood at the central command platform. The station's routine flowed with the seamless precision she demanded. Captain Nog stepped in to help clear an overflow of docking clearances with his usual blend of efficiency and good cheer, while Colonel Malik leaned over the tactical station, tracking a group of visiting Pakleds who appeared to be up to no good. Around them, junior Bajoran officers manned their stations, conferred over readouts, and moved with purpose between tasks, creating the familiar undercurrent of a facility operating with unmatched competence and flawless coordination.

Ro let her gaze sweep the room. A young Bajoran Staff Sergeant at communications, deep in concentration but shoulders relaxed; another Bajoran private at environmental control, adjusting atmospheric tolerances for a visiting Rigelian freighter. All of it was orderly, crisp, and under control. It was the kind of discipline she had spent a lifetime learning to manufacture out of necessity, and it bespoke the quiet confidence of a station momentarily free of chaos.

A soft undercurrent of gossip threaded through Ops beneath the formal routine, surfacing especially whenever officers drifted a little too casually near Nog's station. Word had spread that a Starfleet dignitary of unknown identity was en-route to the station. Speculation ran rampant. The Bajoran personnel believed that Nog, by sheer combination of being the Starfleet liaison and a Ferengi, must have the inside information. They pressed him with polite persistence. Nog, genuinely surprised to find himself uninformed, finally waved them off and suggested that if they were so determined to learn the truth, they should go ask Quark. At least, he added, Quark would charge them, while he was being pestered for free.

With Ops running in smooth synchronicity, it was a good moment for Ro to steal a half hour from her own schedule to slip out. A diplomatic obligation awaited in the habitat ring, one she would rather not postpone until its originally scheduled time two days from now. She issued a final string of instructions and stepped onto the Ops turbolift platform. The small, open-sided lift shuddered softly as its anti-grav clamps engaged and began its descent along the guiding rails. For a brief moment, suspended between levels, she felt cocooned by the relative stillness compared to the perpetual noise of Ops.

She exhaled once, eyes closing for half a heartbeat, and began to map the most efficient route to the reserved guest quarters where the visiting dignitaries waited. Down seven levels, approximately twenty-three meters along the corridor, then left

at the first junction. Security had already been notified. Medical was on standby, which remained standard procedure for any delegation from the Gamma Quadrant.

By the time the lift arrived, she had already recalibrated her schedule and rearranged the tempo of her day by compressing meetings, deferring briefings, and cancelling sparring sessions. She silently reassigned herself three hours of paperwork to the evening and mentally composed a terse apology to the Vedek who had requested a “brief spiritual consultation” during her mid-shift break. Serving as the commanding officer of Deep Space Nine remained one of the most demanding assignments in the quadrant.

She made her way down the luxury hallway of suites reserved for dignitaries and other important guests, marked by a considerably warmer Bajoran decorative motif in contrast to much of the rest of the station, which still retained its original Cardassian aesthetic.

The Paradan mission from the Gamma Quadrant had requested an audience only yesterday, and although a three-day waiting period was not uncommon for a private meeting with General Ro, she felt that was far too long for visitors from such an unstable part of the Gamma Quadrant. Malik’s briefing earlier that morning had noted that the delegation had not once been seen outside their quarters since arriving, a detail that tipped her decision. To Ro, moving up the meeting was simply another exercise in triage. As a former Maquis commander, she had once coordinated battlefield evacuations with less notice and far fewer resources.

As she advanced through the polished corridors of the upper decks, she catalogued the variables before her: diplomatic sensitivities, potential leverage, and the station’s reputation as a neutral axis in the quadrant. Paradans had once been pawns in the Dominion’s strategies of conquest. How much of that history did this delegation carry with it? How much resentment? How much need?

When she reached the guest quarters, the doors parted to reveal a room arranged in the unmistakable language of Bajoran diplomatic tradition. Tapestries hung in layered folds, candles rested in carved stone holders, and fine ceramic vessels lined the walls. Warm light gathered across every surface, creating an atmosphere that was both reverent and dignified. Against that carefully curated Bajoran backdrop, the Paradans were striking.

The delegation was already assembled, a team made up of two apparent spouses. Their marbled skin flowed in patterns reminiscent of reptilian hide without the harshness of scales. Subtle ripples of green, bronze, and muted violet shifted across their surfaces of their skin which seemed to also respond to temperature. Prominent forehead ridges framed their deep-set eyes, both pairs equally inscrutable. Just behind them stood their steward, long fingers moving over a data tablet as he kept their documents and briefings in perfect order. Further back, a broad-shouldered guard lingered in a vigilant stance, unreadable and alert, with the bearing of someone who never assumed safety in any port.

A distinct musky odor filled the room, an involuntary glandular emission of Paradan emotion that carried a pungent heaviness impossible to ignore. Ro's nostrils twitched before discipline reasserted itself. The smell was not unpleasant, but its sheer intensity overwhelmed the senses and pressed at the back of her sinuses with intrusive persistence. For a moment she imagined Starfleet issuing nasal suppressants for first-contact diplomacy and almost smiled at the thought before suppressing it. It would not do to appear amused in front of people whose trust she wished to secure.

She greeted them with a nod of the head, not quite a bow, but more than a casual tilt. "Ambassadors, welcome to Deep Space Nine."

The conversation unfolded with the ritual caution of strangers feeling for common ground. They took their seats at the low table, the emissarial couple positioned across from her, their posture aligned in quiet, deliberate unity. Ro sat with her back to the wall, an angle chosen so that she could keep both the delegation and the exit in sight. It was not paranoia; it was habit.

The Paradans spoke carefully, offering a measured account of the shifting order in the Gamma Quadrant since the Dominion's contraction. After the end of the war, the Founders withdrew to a small constellation of worlds deep within the Gamma Quadrant, maintaining strict control around their homeworld and a handful of planets that had remained within the Dominion's sphere of influence. On these worlds, the Founders had settled communities of Vorta and Jem'Hadar. Although both species remained genetically coded for devotion and obedience, they were now free to build lives within these controlled territories, and on some of the Vorta worlds they had begun to cultivate stable and relatively peaceful societies. A few had even become quietly cosmopolitan, attracting species who sought predictable governance.

Beyond the Dominion enclaves and a handful of other stable confederations, vast stretches of the Gamma Quadrant lacked any central authority at all. Power had fractured into local fiefdoms, warlords, and unstable alliances, and the nearer one traveled to the wormhole, the more severe the political vacuum became. The Paradans described themselves as part of a cluster of worlds caught in this ungoverned region, vulnerable to marauders, opportunists, and the constant volatility that accompanied the absence of any larger stabilizing power.

Ro knew about the disorder on the Gamma Quadrant side of the wormhole all too well. For nearly a decade, trade through that corridor had become unpredictable and often dangerous. Most commerce had ceased altogether, and the few who still attempted it traveled only in heavily defended convoys. Ferengi caravans went in with layers of escorts, and the rare Federation mission that ventured into the Gamma Quadrant did so with full support vessels and tactical protection. The Paradans confirmed what she already knew, describing how routes once considered routine had fractured into contested zones where freighters vanished without explanation and even pilgrimage ships bound for ancient shrines failed to return. As the

emissarial couple recounted one such disappearance, a flicker of something like shame passed across their marbled features, an acknowledgment that their people had been unable or perhaps unwilling to intervene.

Ro listened with restrained empathy, cataloguing each detail even as a subtle unease coiled behind her temples. Destabilized sectors, volatile routes that might spill trouble toward Bajor, and the fragile balance of power surrounding the worm-hole all settled neatly into her mental grid. She kept her hands loosely folded in her lap to hide the small tightening of her fingers, a quiet effort to maintain composure while she politely fought the pungent Paradan scent in the air. The couple described the fractures within their own society, where some viewed cooperation with outside powers as betrayal and others saw it as the only viable path toward stability. Old wounds left by Dominion manipulation had never fully healed, and trust, they admitted, remained a scarce and fragile resource.

When they finished, she offered her measured reply. The Bajoran military was prepared to bring their security concerns to the attention of its Federation partners and, for its part, might be willing to receive a limited number of Paradan refugees if they were in desperate need to flee. She was unable to speculate further on whether either Bajor or the Federation might be willing to offer direct security assistance to a society in the Gamma Quadrant. For now, Deep Space Nine, she explained, could ensure their safety for the duration of their stay, but she strongly recommended that they remain within their assigned quarters. Her tone stayed neutral, practical rather than paternal, because the last thing she intended was to sound like an occupying force dictating where guests were permitted to stand.

The dignitaries exchanged a knowing glance, then inclined their heads in acknowledgment. This had already been their intention, they assured her. They had chosen to meet with her in private because they were well aware of the effect their presence tended to have on many humanoids, and they preferred not to spend their visit offending the senses of half the station's population. Their guard's jaw tightened in mild resentment, though he kept his composure. Ro understood that reaction all too well. The line between being protected and being contained was thin, and from the inside the two often felt indistinguishable.

Ro left them with a courteous bow and stepped into the corridor once more. The doors closed behind her, muting the low murmur of Paradan voices speaking in their native language. She drew in a quick breath, almost involuntary, and felt the air become immediately lighter. At last, she could breathe without effort.

She moved down the corridor at a measured pace, acknowledging the security officers posted along the way, then stepped onto the lift platform that would take her back toward Ops. Without warning the sense of relief she had felt only moments earlier began to evaporate. A sudden heaviness pressed at her chest. The air thickened. The lighting dimmed at the edges of her vision. She thought she glimpsed

flashing warning indicators on a nearby panel, but the symbols blurred before she could focus. Her breath caught and vanished altogether.

For an instant she no longer knew where she was. The polished bulkheads of Deep Space Nine wavered, then dissolved, replaced by something narrower, colder, and infinitely more hostile rising around her like a memory given shape.

The vision struck all at once. The Cardassian deck plating of Deep Space Nine dissolved into the metallic chill of a Cardassian interrogation chamber, and a uniformed figure loomed before her, pressing a piece of candy into her child-sized palm and playfully urging her to eat. She could see his gloved hand, the black leather creasing as he curled her small fingers around the sweet. It was a Jumja candy, brightly colored and fragrant, but its sweetness collided with the stench of sweat, fear, and suffering until the scent turned nauseating.

"Eat," he had said, his voice smooth as polished stone. "You have been a good girl and deserve a treat." The words were gentle, almost paternal, which only made them more disturbing. The candy cracked under her teeth, and its sugar mixed with the dusty residue left by the Cardassian's glove, turning sickly sweet as it slid down her throat. The Cardassian watched her chew with clinical interest, eyes like burned coals and a thin, maniacal grin stretching across his face.

Her father's voice, raw and terrified and pleading, echoed across the chamber: "Laren, baby, please... don't look." She heard the restraints bite into his wrists as he tried to twist toward her, metal grinding against metal with flesh caught between. The sound was agonizing, bone beginning to splinter under too much pressure.

The chamber around her snapped into brutal clarity. Her father sat bound to a metal chair, his wrists already broken where the manacles had crushed bone. A Cardassian officer loomed over him, large, heavy pincers poised in his gloved hands beneath the single overhead light. He positioned the tool against different points along her father's body with deliberate care, and each time he squeezed down, the crack of breaking bone echoed through the room, sharp and wet at once. After each crack, the Cardassian passed a small mechanical device over the damaged tissue, preventing shock and re-sensitizing the nerves so the pain remained constant at its most extreme.

Her father screamed, his voice cracking with each breath he managed to pull in. "Laren... Laren, baby, please... don't look." He sobbed through the words, choking on pain, straining futilely against the restraints as another pair of pincers, wielded by a second Cardassian, closed around his upper arm. The Cardassians worked with clinical ease, adjusting angles, shifting their grip, breaking him methodically as if testing the limits of a material rather than a man.

The smell of blood and disinfectant filled her nose, turning the lingering taste of Jumja candy on her tongue bitter, salty, and metallic. She fixed her gaze on the floor, on the seam between two panels, on anything that was not her father. Another crack

sounded, followed by a scream that tore through the room, and she clenched her eyes shut, willing herself not to turn, not to see. His agony filled the air, but she held herself rigid, refusing to look as his bones were broken one by one.

Despite her desperate efforts, the Cardassian standing over her refused to let her look away. He seized her by the chin and forced her head up, angling her face toward her father. Her breath hitched into sobs, then into open wailing. “Stop—stop! Stop hurting my father, you monster! You’re killing him!”

Then, suddenly, the screaming stopped, and the only sound left in the room was her own sobbing.

When the vision finally receded, she found herself on her knees at the threshold of Ops, breath returning in uneven bursts that gradually settled into steadier gasps. Her hands were splayed against the deck plating, fingers numb, knuckles white. Sweat traced a cool line down the back of her neck, chilling her already shaken skin.

Her world had returned, but its order was broken. Sparks arced from failing conduits; alarms shrieked; the once-precise rhythm of Deep Space Nine had shattered into chaos. Someone shouted for a damage report. Somewhere else, a console overloaded with a sharp, popping crack. The air smelled of burnt, fraying circuitry. Her body trembled with the residue of memory, but her mind snapped back into command. She clung to the present the way a drowning person clings to a lifeline. This was her station. These were her people. And they needed orders, not a commander lost in the past.

She forced herself upright. For a single, suspended moment, she held still at the center of the chaos and took in the room as if it were a tactical diagram laid before her. Officers were already executing their emergency routines. Nog was no longer present in Ops. Malik diverted power around failing conduits in quick succession. Engineering crews called out localized surges. Environmental control compensated for pressure fluctuations. Every station moved with the practiced steadiness of teams that had drilled these responses countless times. Ro let her gaze travel across Ops, absorbing each detail with the calm focus of a battlefield commander. She noted who was holding their ground and who needed reinforcement, which systems were beginning to stabilize, and which hovered on the edge of failure.

Her heartbeat slowed as the noise around her settled into a single coherent field of information. Only then did she move. She stepped into the gap where she was needed most, between two overworked consoles at the central display, her hands already reaching for the controls. Her voice emerged calm and exact as she coordinated her efforts with the officers around her. There was no shouting and no trace of panic, only the seamless act of dropping into the flow of crisis management as if she had been standing there all along.

From across the chaos of Ops, Malik raised his voice in her direction. “General Ro! Systemic failures in the independent interspatial subprocessors throughout

Upper Pylon Three! Cascading overloads are highly likely. We could lose all structural integrity on the pylon!"

Nog's voice broke in over the comm before Ro could even answer, slightly winded but steady. "On it, General. I promised Starfleet I'd keep all the pylons attached." The channel clicked off with a faint snap. Nog had a way of bringing an infectious confidence into every crisis.

She pivoted to the central display, absorbing the schematics as they cascaded in shifting blinks of red, amber, and green. Worst-case outcomes assembled themselves in her mind almost as fast as the alerts updated. At best, they faced major damage to four docking bays, two of them still holding vessels that couldn't be jettisoned because the emergency release system had gone unresponsive. At worst, a catastrophic confluence of failure could vent toxic fumes from a compromised filtration line into nearly a third of the habitat ring and the promenade. By the time she reached that projection, it was already starting to look like the optimistic outcome.

She issued evacuation alerts for every section of the station under potential threat, uncertain how clearly the warnings would carry through the chaos already rippling across Deep Space Nine. Ro moved through Ops with steady purpose, adjusting power routes, confirming engineering readouts, and locking down failing subsystems as the station shuddered violently around her. Panels flickered, warning lights strobed, and smoke curled from exposed optic cable, yet she held the crisis together one decision at a time, guiding officers with pointed cues rather than raised commands.

Nog's voice again cut through the comms, breathless and strained: "General... the independent subprocessors are more corrupted than we thought. It doesn't make any sense. Code is breaking down faster than I can compensate, and so is this little junction box." A sharp crack sounded over the channel, followed by a hiss of static and what might have been a pained flinch before the line dissolved into silence.

The deck plating of Ops trembled beneath her, a deep, foreboding groan rolling through the superstructure as if the station itself were straining to hold together for one more breath. A shower of sparks burst from an overhead conduit, briefly washing the room in harsh white light.

Then, through the haze of red warning lights, calm entered the room. The lift doors opened, and Admiral Tuvok stepped into Ops. He was as composed as a geometric proof: posture straight, gaze level, uniform immaculate. His black hair was now threaded with silver. Time had thinned him but not diminished his presence. Amidst the chaos, his stillness was gravitational.

"General," he said evenly, his tone sharp and controlled against the surrounding noise, "diverting power from aft pylons might undermine the effort to stabilize the

malfunctioning independent subsystem.” His delivery carried no hint of suggestion or reprimand. It was simply a fact, stated with the clarity of a sensor readout.

Ro’s first impulse was irritation at the intrusion; the second was recognition. Tuvok did not speak unless he had already calculated six steps ahead. Her mind snapped to his conclusion, tracing the pathways of power redistribution. Of course. By starving the secondary grids so aggressively, she was forcing too much flow through a handful of remaining pathways. Under stress, that could produce the very cascade they were trying to prevent.

The convergence of their disciplines, his logic, her pragmatism, snapped into alignment like interlocking gears. She adjusted commands accordingly without hesitation. “Reroute ten percent from the lower core back to the aft structural grid,” she ordered. “Shunt the casino’s power to the promenade’s emergency reserves instead, we can afford to lose a few of Quark’s games.”

Nog chuckled over the open channel. “Copy that, General. Quark will lodge a protest in triplicate, but the docking ring will live.”

“Nog,” she called, eyes never leaving the display, “confirm stabilization.”

His voice came back almost cheerful: “all subsystems of Upper Pylon Three holding steady, General. I told Starfleet I’d keep all six pylons where they belong!” In the background of his transmission, she could hear the muffled clank of tools, the faint hiss of a sealing field coming online.

She heard Malik’s low acknowledgment and the rhythmic return of normal systems. One by one, crimson warnings on the tactical display shifted to amber, then finally to green. The storm of alarms dwindled to silence; the scent of burned circuitry remained, but now it rode atop the deeper, steadier thrum of restored equilibrium.

For a long moment, no one spoke. The crisis had passed, leaving only the echo of it. The room seemed to exhale as one organism. Someone at the far station let out a low, shaking breath that they had probably not realized they had been holding. Ro exhaled through her nose, feeling the tremor that wanted to rise in her hands and refusing it. She clasped them behind her back to steady them, shoulders squaring automatically. She straightened, the command deck returning to disciplined order around her like a uniform being smoothed back into place.

The trauma of her flashback had not vanished. It lingered in the margins of her perception like a bruise beneath consciousness, but she had regained control. Deep Space Nine, scorched but still standing, had survived again. The collision of discipline and chaos, authority and vulnerability, had settled into a fragile balance inside her. The little girl forced to witness her father’s torment and the general commanding a station existed uneasily in the same body, but for now the commander held her ground.

Ro’s eyes swept the bridge once more, confirming stability. She checked each station in turn, ensuring no one was frozen, no system left in a half-corrected state.

Malik met her gaze briefly and gave the smallest of nods. Tuvok, hands clasped behind his back, regarded the main display with impassive approval.

Then, from somewhere deep in her chest, disbelief found voice. Soft at first, then full and sharp, she said aloud the only question left in her:

“What the hell just happened?”

Chapter Five

The silence on Dorvan V possessed a texture unlike any other found on the worlds once ceded from the Federation to the Cardassian Union. It was not an empty silence. It carried a resonance, a fullness, as if the air, the land, and the sky were breathing together in an unbroken cadence. Wind brushed through the high grass in waves that rose and fell like the slow tide of an ocean. Insects added their steady rhythm to the organic pulse of the world. Modern technology existed on Dorvan V, yet there was no visible or audible trace of such things. One had to search deliberately to find them. They remained completely apart from the harmony of the natural landscape.

Within the adobe walls of his hermitage, Wesley Crusher sat cross-legged before a low, well-tended fire. The flames flickered with a soft persistence, casting amber spirals against the rounded interior surfaces of the dwelling. His tunic, woven in the bright geometric tradition of the Dorvan V settlers, took on shifting warmth in the firelight. A turquoise-dominant field was worked through with repeating geometric motifs in yellow, deep red, and burnt orange, the colors deepening and softening as the light moved across the fabric. The designs carried the legacy of Native American communities who had embraced this distant world with the intention not of dominating it but of existing in reciprocal balance. The fabric's tones warmed and cooled with each shift of the flames, at moments seeming almost to breathe with him, attuned to the slow rhythm of his meditation.

Wesley had held this posture for a considerable length of time. Whether it had been hours or days hardly mattered. Temporal duration had become fluid to him long ago. Time no longer compelled him to track it linearly. Instead, it pooled around him, accumulated, dissolved, or folded inward in ways that made the distinctions between minutes and years irrelevant. Meditation, for him, was not a practice of quieting the mind. It was a state of immersion in perception itself. He existed within awareness the way a star exists within its own radiance.

His thoughts drifted, not aimlessly but expansively, over the principles the Traveler had entrusted to him. The Traveler had revealed that time and space were not rigid frameworks of motion and sequence but were intertwined with thought. The universe, as he perceived it, was a woven tapestry of consciousness stretching far beyond the limits of matter. Everything, from the orbit of a comet to the flicker of a firefly's wing, was part of a harmonic pattern shaped by awareness.

His mentor, known to most as the Traveler from Tau Alpha C, bore a name unpronounceable to most humanoids. Over time, Wesley had come to refer to him with

growing fondness as “Alfie,” since “Traveler” no longer precisely described him within the context of their evolving relationship. The Traveler did not object, accepting the name in the spirit of familiarity in which it had been offered. Alfie had once articulated the truth Wesley now lived with a simplicity he found astonishing: “To travel far, one need not move at all. Comprehension is the truest form of motion.” Wesley had understood the words only partially when he first heard them, but now they resonated through every aspect of his being. They were not metaphor, but a literal principle upon which the Travelers lived and operated.

From his small, quiet shrine on Dorvan V, Wesley’s awareness could stretch outward to the great nebulae of the spiral arm. He could perceive the distant heartbeat of stars experiencing their slow nuclear evolution. He could sense the faint psychic vibrations of civilizations scattered across the galaxy, each thought forming a ripple on the vast ocean of existence. Yet he remained grounded as well. His human identity remained intact, neither diminished by immensity nor lost within it, but balanced. He resided at the intersection between what he had been and what he had become.

The Travelers themselves formed no formal order. There were no ranks, no councils, no codified teachings. They existed as a lineage, a chain of individuals passing knowledge across time. Each Traveler trained only a few disciples, traditionally no more than three in a single generation. Disciples were rare, and most Travelers never had three, often not even one, since the natural abilities of perception required to become a Traveler were themselves so uncommon. Some chose not to teach at all, preferring the solitude of their inner explorations. Others, like Alfie, believed that sharing the discipline strengthened the universe’s overall awareness.

Among them, abilities varied. A rare few possessed power so refined that they could cross interstellar distances through intention alone, guided only by a palm-sized focusing device that amplified thought. Others, including Alfie, preferred to channel their mental abilities through warp fields, using starships not as vehicles but as instruments, mediums for aligning consciousness with the structural currents of space-time. It was through such practice that Alfie once led the crew of the *Enterprise-D* beyond the boundaries of the galaxy itself, the first known instance of a Traveler leaving the Milky Way. He had not done so to demonstrate personal power, nor for exploration alone, but to catalyze awareness in those who journeyed with him. He sought to show them that the universe was more expansive and more interconnected than even the most advanced scientific theories predicted, and that consciousness could serve as a bridge between matter and the infinite.

Most Travelers, however, rarely traversed physical distances. Their journeys were inward. Their hermitages became sanctuaries of stillness. They devoted their lives to studying the microcosmic architecture of single moments. A second could be frozen, stretched, unfolded like an intricate tapestry. Time became vast, spacious, and malleable. To Wesley, and to others like him, the contemplation of a single

raindrop could reveal as much about existence as a voyage across five thousand light-years. Every phenomenon was a doorway.

Wesley had been Alfie's first human disciple, indeed the first member of his species ever to be accepted into the ancient lineage of Travelers. Humans, while adaptable and imaginative, typically did not achieve the cognitive flexibility required to perceive consciousness as primordial architecture. Yet Alfie had seen something latent within Wesley, something that had already begun to manifest during his childhood aboard the *Enterprise*. It was easy for Travelers to lose sight of the physical limitations of their own species, so they generally remained close to their own kind. And so, when the time came for Wesley to establish a personal base for contemplation, Alfie urged him to remain among humans, but not on Earth, which would have been too close to what he had been and would have stymied his cognitive expansion. "To dwell too near what you were," Alfie advised, "is to lose sight of what you are becoming."

Dorvan V proved to be the ideal compromise. It was a human colony, but one grounded in harmony, simplicity, and continuity with natural rhythms. The people here understood the interconnectedness of existence through their cultural and spiritual traditions. Wesley felt at home among them without being pulled backward into the gravitational pull of his old life. He had not constructed his hermitage; he simply returned to the one he had encountered in his final days as a Starfleet cadet, when the path before him had shifted. It was a place linked to his transformation, and so it became the origin point of his long apprenticeship in contemplation.

He remained there for twenty years. Biological time affected him differently now. His body aged more slowly than typical human patterns, and his mind occupied states so far removed from linear progression that physical aging seemed almost irrelevant. Though chronologically in his late forties, he appeared to be a man in his early thirties. He wore a thick beard and shoulder-length hair, as most of his time was spent in a meditative state. His days were given over to observing the minute movement of a flame's tongue, the arc traced by a bird rising on an updraft, or the slow descent of a leaf spiraling from the heights of the plateau. Each observation contained the complexity of an entire cosmos. The world had become an encyclopedia of micro-infinities.

Although Dorvan V was his center, he did not remain there exclusively. Periodically he accompanied Alfie to sites of extraordinary significance. He traveled to the Delta Quadrant to Sikaris III, where they studied the Sikarians' remarkable technology that amplified the natural potential of thought and enabled near-instantaneous journeys across the galaxy by using consciousness as a form of propulsion. The Travelers had long made use of similar devices, and they believed that this one, if properly harmonized with their own mental abilities, could enable leaps beyond even the Milky Way, although they approached such possibilities with curiosity and caution rather than ambition.

On another occasion, he and Alfie traveled to a remote region of the Beta Quadrant, where a lone operational Iconian gateway remained hidden among uncharted worlds. Its power source was isolated, independent of the defunct Iconian homeworld, and it pulsed with a quiet resilience that resisted entropy. No known species had stood before it in hundreds of thousands of years. Wesley and Alfie observed it not as archaeologists, nor as explorers, but as students of consciousness marveling at an artifact built upon principles that resonated faintly with the structures they themselves perceived in the lattice of space-time.

Despite such journeys, Wesley always returned to Dorvan V. His hermitage, with its soft firelight and earthen scent, grounded him. The planet's winds carried a tone of equilibrium that helped him maintain internal balance. The adobe walls, smooth beneath his fingers, served as a reminder that growth, learning, and transcendence required not only immense vistas but also a stable center. On this night, however, that stability faltered.

As Wesley gazed into the fire, a change swept through the hermitage so gradually that at first it seemed like nothing more than a shift in breath. The air thickened around him with a density that felt almost gravitational. He noticed the change before he consciously registered it. The familiar hum of life outside began to fade. Sound washed away like pigment dissolving in water. His breath tightened, caught between inhalation and exhalation. The adobe walls, normally steady as the planet's bedrock, distorted subtly, bending as though under some invisible strain.

The fire twisted. Its flames elongated and contracted in a spiraling motion that defied physical logic. Color erupted in pulses, orange to blue to violet, then collapsed inward. A wrenching vertigo overtook him, sharp and sudden. His vision trembled, fractured, and then layered into spirals of void and iridescence. His body no longer obeyed him. His hands, once steady on his knees, drifted weightlessly as if detached from his nervous system. The terror rose with a primal intensity that bypassed thought. It was not the fear of harm but the existential panic of losing one's grounding within the structure of reality itself. His entire perception tilted, as though the universe had slipped out of alignment.

Yet his training prevailed. Beneath the panic, discipline reasserted itself. Wesley focused, not outward, where the distortion raged, but inward, where stillness could be found even within chaos. He narrowed his awareness intentionally, collapsing the overwhelming scale of sensation until he could perceive at the level of cells, atoms, and thought itself. The vertigo resolved into a razor-sharp clarity, and within that clarity, he perceived the source.

A disturbance shimmered in front of him. It possessed no single shape. It was a phenomenon not meant to be constrained by sensory categories. It was the unraveling of the boundary between temporal and non-temporal existence. Two planes, one finite, bound by duration, and one eternal, beyond duration, bleeding together at a point not far away. This was unlike any anomaly Wesley had encountered during

his Starfleet years. It was neither intentional nor random. Travelers regularly encountered distortions like these. Such fluctuations were a natural consequence of a universe with layered modes of existence. Most distortions were harmless, brief, and local. But this one did not fade. It pulsed with a steady, living rhythm. The phenomenon possessed a structure that suggested deliberate design.

Curiosity ignited within him. The spark felt almost youthful, reminiscent of the Wesley Crusher who had once stared in awe at warp cores, quantum filaments, and spatial fractures aboard the *Enterprise*. He felt that earlier self stir within the depths of his consciousness, not as a regression but as a reawakening. What was this convergence? What force could twist the symmetry of time with such magnitude? And where was the breach occurring?

Wesley did not seek sleep. Instead, he began a forty-eight-hour vigil. He consumed no food. He drank only sparse quantities of water to maintain basic physical equilibrium. His sole focus remained the disturbance. He probed it through meditative states, through subtle shifts of perception, through the layered tools of awareness Alfie had taught him. Yet comprehension slipped from him at every turn. The phenomenon resisted interpretation. At moments, his thoughts looped into paradox, chasing meaning only to collapse into incoherence. By the end of the vigil his mind felt stretched thin, vibrating with exhaustion and unanswered questions.

His body required grounding. He ate a small portion of fruit, drank another cup of water, and lay upon his simple cot. Even in rest, the question orbited his thoughts like a star around a concealed gravity well. Sleep did not come.

Near dawn, he rose. The hermitage felt both familiar and altered, as though the air still carried the echo of the earlier disruption. He lit a small lamp and approached a chest in the corner, the one that held his collection of devices. Some artifacts were handmade. Others originated from worlds not yet charted by the Federation. A few were gifts from those he and Alfie had encountered during their travels.

Wesley activated several devices at once. Three PADDs arranged around him projected a unified holographic interface into the air, forming a suspended display that responded to the subtle motions of his hands. Diagrams, equations, and subspace readings unfolded across the overlapping panes. He studied the shifting imagery with focused attention, adjusting the holographic layers manually as he compared thought diagrams to the emerging irregularities detected by the devices.

Hours passed, and night settled once again over the hermitage without Wesley noticing. He sat before the holographic display, staring at a single image. The display showed a cluster of oblong strands that ran the full color spectrum, their sharp hues pulsing with a subtle, almost biological rhythm. At first glance the design resembled a child's abstract drawing: overlapping shapes, some thin and wavering, others thick and bold, all drifting together into a loose, bubble-like form.

Yet its shapes shifted in meaning. The strands coalesced into a curved, tunnel-like structure, then collapsed back into a prism, then dissolved again into

disconnected oblong forms. When viewed casually, they seemed like layers arranged in decreasing size, as though depicting depth through a simple visual trick. But deeper focus revealed an optical illusion of extraordinary complexity. What at first appeared to be many separate strands was, with patient attention, revealed to be a single continuous filament winding through itself in impossible ways. The image oscillated between being many and being one. It was a recursive paradox, both layered and singular, circular and linear, comprehensible and destabilizing. Even to look at it required discipline. For most minds, prolonged attempts produced disorientation that bordered on vertigo.

Some who encountered the paradox became overwhelmed with fierce curiosity and attempted to resolve the contradiction through mathematics. But the equations offered no comfort. They were elegant, irrefutable, and mathematically impossible all at once. Each calculation led to further contradiction. Paradox accumulated upon paradox. For some, the attempt to fully grasp the Traveler's formula was enough to unmoor their perception of reality entirely.

Wesley had first seen this model as a boy, the day he met Alfie aboard the *Enterprise*. To Wesley, even then, it had felt strangely natural. Its logic seemed intuitive in a way that defied explanation. Time, space, and thought were not separate phenomena but interwoven threads whose relationships could not be captured by conventional physics. His child's sense of wonder had softened what, for most adults, would have been a catastrophic blow to reason. Alfie had understood that. He had called the model "dangerous nonsense," warning that the universe was not ready to face what it implied. Only years later did Wesley grasp the full weight of the Traveler's formula and the immense discipline required to perceive its meaning without losing oneself in it.

As Wesley sat transfixed by the paradoxical geometric design of vibrant color on his holo display, the various strands of thought, perception, and vision began to coalesce into a faint but growing clarity. Without shifting his gaze or turning his head, he reached for the nearest PADD. Still not looking down, he tapped in a sequence of numbers as they came to him, each entered with deliberate slowness. First an x-value, then values for y and z. Together they formed a set of three-dimensional coordinates.

Only when the final number settled into place did Wesley emerge from his trance-like focus. He lowered his eyes to the PADD and ran a function to identify the coordinates that had surfaced from his vision. The result was unmistakable.

The Bajoran Wormhole.

The realization passed through him like a cold wind through the fire. He wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and stared into the embers. The fire crackled softly, casting orange light across his features. Whatever was happening at the Bajoran Wormhole was not random. It was intentional. And it was calling to him.

He lifted a cup of steaming brew, inhaled its spicy scent, and said quietly to himself, "Looks like I'm going to Deep Space Nine."

The fire answered with a crackle. Outside, the winds of dawn swept through the valley of Dorvan V, rustling the tall grasses as the first light touched the horizon. Wesley closed his eyes. The universe leaned toward him, inviting not a journey through space but an encounter with the heart of time itself. This was a sacred hour to the residents of Dorvan V, and he remained seated in meditation beside his fire, letting the moment settle around him like a prayer. He did not move until the morning light shifted from dawn into early morning.

After reorienting himself, he rose from his seat and walked to the entrance of the hermitage. The adobe doorway opened onto a scene shaped by the clear light of early morning. The sky had settled into a wide, deepening blue, and faint shapes were beginning to form over the mountains, soft white patterns drifting slowly in the upper air. Sunlight traced the rolling hills, casting long shadows across the slopes. A Dorvan resident passed along the footpath near his doorway, moving with unhurried purpose, offering Wesley a quiet non-verbal greeting that he returned with an equally quiet acknowledgment.

Wesley froze the moment in his mind. He breathed deeply, letting the fresh air fill his lungs. The coolness grounded him. His bare feet pressed firmly into the smooth clay floor of the threshold. Though he had spent decades here, the quiet splendor of this place could still bring him new clarity. He felt grounded at last, more firmly rooted than he had been since his mind began its obsessive frenzy days earlier.

He returned inside and prepared his modest travel pack. There was almost nothing to include. A small blanket. A folded tunic. A smooth stone from the riverbank that he used for tactile grounding during deep meditations. A cup. Nothing else was required. He tied the pack closed with a simple cord and rested his hand upon it for a moment.

He then opened a second pack and placed inside nearly a dozen devices, ranging in size from very small objects that fit easily in his palm to others as large as PADDs. Some resembled modern tricorders, while others were archaic instruments or handmade constructs with no immediately discernible purpose. Each served a function known only to him, and each would be essential for what lay ahead.

His gaze drifted once more across the interior of the hermitage. This dwelling had been the center of his existence for more than twenty years. It had sheltered him through the long nights of meditation, through the periods of intense study, through the many moments of confusion or frustration that every Traveler faces. Within these walls he had dissolved his former identity, examined its shape, and rebuilt it upon new foundations. He had discovered silence. He had learned stillness. He had grown into a being who could perceive galaxies through the quiet movement of a flame.

A bird rose past the single window of the hermitage, its wings catching the early light as it lifted into the sky with effortless grace. The brief motion drew his eye and stirred an old memory, the memory of standing on a cliff as a teenager aboard the holodeck of the *Enterprise* with Commander Data, watching seabirds wheel over the ocean and listening to the crash of the waves. The young Wesley had not understood what he was longing for then. Now he recognized that longing as the earliest echo of the path he had taken.

Chapter Six

Deep Space Nine rested uneasily in the hours following the disturbance. Conduits hummed out of sync, their arrhythmic vibration reverberating faintly through deck plates and bulkheads. Diagnostic panels produced contradictory readouts, with oscillating values and impossibly layered time stamps. Even the most seasoned engineers, Bajoran and Starfleet alike, found themselves baffled.

Captain Nog and Colonel Malik took control of the engineering and security teams. The structural damage was, by standard technical assessments, manageable. There were only a handful of microfractures along the habitat ring, a blown relay or two, and a few overloaded EPS junctions. Major Tenen's team, by contrast, confronted a crisis that proved more elusive and far more difficult to address. The psychic damage to the station's Bajoran complement, military and civilian alike, was far more insidious. The disturbance had not merely shaken the station; it had reached into the minds and histories of many of the Bajorans onboard.

Some had succumbed suddenly to panic attacks, collapsing against corridor walls as sensory memories of the Occupation erupted with renewed force. Childhood traumas resurfaced with brutal immediacy. For a few, visions came through the eyes of their future selves. One engineer, pale and shaking, insisted he had watched himself die in a firestorm that had not yet happened, the scene playing out with the hyperreal clarity of an Orb experience rather than an imagined fear or simple flashback. Another reported seeing himself murdered by a raider of unknown species aboard Deep Space Nine.

Even General Ro Laren, iron-steady and battle-tested, the embodiment of Bajoran resilience, had not walked away unscathed. She hid it well, perhaps better than anyone, but those who knew her could see the thin tension in her jaw and the deeper, unsettled look behind her eyes.

Across the station, whispers clustered around the same subject, the same presence whose name rippled through the corridors with a mixture of awe, respect, and quiet curiosity: Admiral Tuvok. His arrival had become the day's axis of attention. There was something magnetic about the calm he carried and the absolute stillness of Vulcan logic he embodied. For most, even the Bajoran complement, he was a figure out of legend: the young science officer who had served under Captain Hikaru Sulu on the *Excelsior*, the Starfleet officer who carried out a successful Maquis infiltration, and one of the architects of survival for *Voyager* and her crew during their seven years stranded in the Delta Quadrant. He had participated in more tactical space-time entanglements than most scholars could fathom.

When he stepped onto the chaotic, damaged promenade, something in the space seemed to settle. The lighting remained uneven and panels stayed open, revealing the damaged circuitry within, yet his presence lent the moment a brief illusion of coherence. Those who watched him pass felt a steadiness gather around him, a calm so complete that for an instant the damage appeared less severe. It was as if the fractured space caught the spirit of his stillness.

When Admiral Tuvok stepped into Quark's Bar, the atmosphere did not so much fall silent as draw inward. The place was running at half capacity, with a softer glow from the ceiling panels and a low murmur drifting between occupied tables. The video gambling consoles along the far wall were dark, their curved displays powered down for recalibration, but the single active dabo ring still spun in a steady rhythm. A pair of scantily clad dabo girls kept the game moving for the small crowd gathered there, their voices quieter than usual. The patrons were all civilians seeking a place to wait out the repairs, eating from the limited set menu that Quark's replicators could manage under the current strain. Conversations continued, but with a subdued quality, as if the room itself remembered it was not at full strength.

As with all patrons, Tuvok was greeted by Quark's hostess, Nimalat. She was of a species distantly related to Orions, tall and shapely, with striking chartreuse skin that held an almost neon glow. Her lips and hair were both dark green. She wore her long hair in an intricate braid, and that was *all* she wore. The braid seemed to possess its own subtle musculature, coiling and shifting around her body, covering, just barely, the more sensitive areas. She was one of Quark's most valuable assets; since her arrival three years earlier, profits at Quark's Bar had increased by seven percent.

Tuvok might have been the first person to enter the original Quark's Bar in the last three years not to linger at the threshold where Nimalat stood to greet those who entered. He was not impolite, but her charms were lost on him. Quark, predictably, was the first to approach the legendary figure. He slipped out from behind the bar with the haste of someone who had spent a lifetime seeking out opportunity, his expression brightening with the kind of enthusiasm that could make even a half-powered bar feel open for business.

The Ferengi bounded forward with a theatrical flourish, a towel draped over his arm as if he were stepping onto a stage. "Admiral Tuvok!" he declared, projecting warmth and hospitality with an enthusiasm that felt almost too large for the subdued room. "Welcome, welcome. Allow me to offer you my award-winning plomeek soup, the finest in the quadrant. Unless you prefer something heartier. Perhaps the tevmel appetizer. I served it two months ago to Doctor Selar of the Vulcan Medical Council. She was here with her adopted Andorian daughter, Thala. Lovely young woman. Selar would not want me to tell you this, but she ate ten of them and praised the authentic flavor again and again."

Tuvok inclined his head with measured precision, acknowledging Quark's greeting without granting him the satisfaction of emotional engagement. This,

naturally, only encouraged Quark further. The Ferengi's grin widened into a crescent of anticipation, interpreting the admiral's restraint not as disinterest, but as opportunity. "Mr. Quark, thank you for your hospitality. I am honored to sample your plomeek soup."

"Delightful, Admiral." Quark gave a brisk, dismissive wave to a nearby waiter who was already poised with a PADD. Guiding Tuvok toward the bar, he positioned him exactly where he wanted him, within easy conversational reach. Even a semi-mythical Vulcan Starfleet officer might let something valuable slip at the right moment, and Quark was determined not to miss it. The waiter set the bowl of plomeek soup before Admiral Tuvok, who arranged his napkin and utensils into a logical configuration as he prepared to taste it. Quark was already leaning in, poised to unleash another round of empty flattery, when Captain Nog stepped toward the empty seat beside the admiral. "Admiral Tuvok, may I request the honor of your company?"

Before Tuvok could reply, Nog hesitated, glanced at the soup, and murmured, "Sir, you should know, my uncle may be one of the wealthiest Ferengi alive, but he never gives anything away for free."

Tuvok extended his thumb. "I am prepared to fully compensate Mr. Quark in latinum, the accepted currency of the Ferengi Alliance." A Ferengi waiter appeared almost instantly to take the print and finalize the transaction. He vanished again with equal speed.

Nog took his seat. From behind the bar, Quark launched into speech the moment Tuvok lifted a small sip of his soup. He had no intention of letting Nog steer the conversation into another stream of useless Starfleet technobabble. He needed to learn why Tuvok had come to the station, and he needed the conversation in his own hands.

"So, Admiral, how can I be of service to you during your stay on our fine space station?" Quark asked, leaning in with practiced charm. "I assume they assigned you the Starfleet dignitary quarters on habitat level four. I can do much better. How about one of my luxury suites, twenty-five percent off. Ahh, make it thirty-five, for you. That is *all-inclusive*, Admiral." He added a conspiratorial wink. "*Anything* can be arranged, any *amenity* you desire."

"That will not be necessary," Tuvok replied. "I require very few *amenities*."

For all of Quark's efforts to steer the conversation, Nog could no longer contain his excitement at sitting beside Admiral Tuvok. His questions poured out in a rapid cascade, a stream of enthusiasm that made the seasoned Starfleet captain, a hero of the Dominion War, sound like a first-year cadet again. He rattled off a series of *Voyager* Delta Quadrant missions—the Markonian Outpost, the crew of *USS Equinox*, the Vaadwaur encounter—as if reciting a litany of Starfleet epic canon. He leapt from mission to mission without giving Tuvok a chance to respond. When he reached the mission he had clearly most wanted to ask about, he slowed.

"Sir," Nog said breathlessly, "about your mission to Drayan II. I read that you protected three children who turned out to be elders. How did you not realize what they truly were?"

A thick silence settled over Nog, Quark, and Tuvok, hanging in the air for a long moment. Tuvok's gaze drifted briefly across the room. "I did not realize," he said at last, his tone level and unadorned. "And from that lack of realization, I perceived the wisdom in Surak's teaching that the Way of Kolinahr is to suppress emotion, not perception. Vulcans do not reject what humans call 'emotional intelligence.' Even the elderly and the dying desire the caring presence of a parent. This is a truth common to most humanoid species. However illogical it may seem, it must be accepted as real."

The words settled over Quark's Bar with unexpected gravity. Even the Ferengi hesitated, Quark's smirk fading for an instant as if logic itself had briefly interrupted the rhythm of his perpetual salesmanship. But Quark had never allowed silence to linger in his establishment if he could prevent it. A silent bar meant a silent latinum till. He rallied at once, straightening with renewed purpose.

"I heard about those two Ferengi stranded in the Delta Quadrant through the unstable Barzan Wormhole!" he said brightly. "Arridor is a senior liquidator now! Those two did quite well for themselves. As I always say, stable or unstable, there is one constant of every wormhole: profit. It's practically another Rule of Acquisition!"

He chuckled, waiting for laughter that did not come. Nog inhaled sharply, ready to fire off another round of questions, but Tuvok lifted one hand, a gesture at once courteous and absolute, the universal sign of a Vulcan closing a conversation with impeccable dignity. Looking toward Nog, he added preemptively, "Another time, perhaps, Captain." He continued with calm clarity, "There is logic in reflecting on the past when it serves to improve a present outcome. For now, however, I have other duties." He inclined his head toward Quark. "Thank you for the Plomeek soup, Mr. Quark. I will be seeing you again soon."

With that, the discussion ended. He departed with his stride unbroken, the crowd parting before him with unconscious deference. Quark blinked after him, uncertain whether he had lost a customer, gained one, or been gracefully dismissed. Nog stood quietly, absorbing the last of the admiral's words.

Tuvok resumed his walk along the Promenade. The disrupted marketplace curved gently before him, its familiar bustle muted but beginning to recover its usual pace. Several meters ahead, Major Tenen Rahl stood near a railing with her two children, positioned in such a way as to suggest intent rather than chance. She held a PADD in her hand and feigned concentration, though her posture betrayed a furtive vigilance. She had watched Tuvok earlier from a distance, recognizing the opportunity almost instantly. In the wake of the disturbance that had rattled the station's Bajoran community, the arrival of a figure as storied as Admiral Tuvok felt like a rare

gift, something her children should witness, something she wanted them to remember long into adulthood.

As Tuvok approached, she adjusted her stance in a way that appeared casual but placed her directly in his path. Fala gripped a toy tricorder so large in her hands that it pressed awkwardly against her chest. Prylar noticed the shift, stared up at his mother, then down the corridor, as if sensing that something important was about to occur but not yet understanding what it was.

Tenen smoothed her children's hair with the distracted pride of a parent preparing them for a moment they would not fully grasp until much later. She lowered the PADD, glanced once more toward Tuvok with a hopeful steadiness, and waited for the moment to come together exactly as she had intended. Then she approached the admiral with her children beside her. Both straightened instinctively, the way Bajoran children often did in the presence of someone important or noble, or in the company of a vedek. "Admiral Tuvok, I am Major Tenen Rahl, the Chief Medical Officer here at Deep Space Nine. These are my two children, Prylar and Fala. It is our honor to meet you, sir."

Before Tuvok had a chance to acknowledge Tenen and her children, Prylar, the older boy, looked up at him with wide eyed awe and asked: "Are you really from *Voyager*?"

"That is correct," Tuvok replied, his tone flat and steady.

The boy frowned with the seriousness only very young children could muster. "Were you ever scared?"

Tuvok paused. The question, simple and earnest, carried more weight than its phrasing suggested. He folded his hands behind his back with measured composure. "Fear is an illogical emotion, Mr. Prylar. I was never afraid while fully in control of my faculties. It is illogical, however, to ignore the presence of fear, either within oneself or within others. Acknowledging that variable in a difficult situation and factoring it into your analysis may help you determine the most logical course of action. In that way, you too may face challenges without ever being 'scared,'" he answered.

Prylar stood speechless at the Admiral's response, caught between trying to comprehend his words and recovering from the shock that Tuvok had spoken to him at all. Fala clung tightly to her mother's leg. Tenen inclined her head. "Thank you, Admiral. Such wise words to live by."

Tenen took her children by the hand and looked down at both of them. "We have taken up enough of the Admiral's time. Let us move on. Thank you again, Admiral. I am in the med bay most of the time if you ever require my assistance while you are here."

Tuvok nodded politely toward Tenen and Fala, then lifted his hand with the fingers parted between the middle in the traditional Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Mr. Prylar."

As Tuvok continued along the Promenade, Nog's earlier question lingered at the edge of his thoughts. Memory, carefully catalogued and ordinarily contained by pristine Vulcan discipline, began to shift. Drayan II. The three children. The recognition that empathy is logical. That particular memory stirred something deeper, and it rose now to the surface with unexpected clarity.

He experienced a faint pull of nostalgia, an illogical emotion that rarely surfaced in Vulcans. Memories rose in sequence: the austere lessons of his father, stolid and demanding, shaped by an unyielding vision of what it meant to be Vulcan; the unspoken exile of youth, carried not in words but in silence; his studies with a Vulcan master to fortify his emotional discipline; and then the distant estrangement from his own son, Sek, during his years stranded in the Delta Quadrant.

Memories of his own childhood gave way to thoughts of the Terrelia Dara, whom he had loved in a manner that defied conventional Vulcan expression. And of Nos, the woman in the Delta Quadrant who had shared his accelerated time isolation, her presence imprinted on his life in a pattern unlike any other. And of his wife T'Pel, whose love possessed a depth that could be fully understood only by Vulcans. Their faces existed in a paradoxical simultaneity, distant yet intimate, present yet past, strictly logical yet undeniably emotional.

Tuvok moved through the Promenade with these recollections folding in and out of one another. Memory and experience, logic and emotion, blurred at their edges. A Vulcan might have identified the sensation as an emotional crisis. A human might have called it longing. Tuvok named it neither. He simply recognized it. "The need for parental care," he reflected internally, "exists for most humanoids beyond time, biology, independence, age, or control. A most illogical truth."

Surak taught that emotion must be mastered, not denied. His Starfleet training emphasized clarity of perception and boldness of action even within the rigidity of doctrine. His life, shaped by mentors, human colleagues, lovers, adversaries, and constants scattered across the galaxy, had shown him that logic could not exist in isolation. Logic was a tool. Emotion was an impulse. Awareness was the equilibrium between the two.

The ambient rhythm of the station gathered around him as he continued along the Promenade. A pair of Nausicaan traders bargained in unrestricted voices with a Bajoran merchant. The metallic clatter of tools echoed from an open access panel where an engineering team still worked. Ahead, the curve of the Promenade opened toward the viewport gallery, where Bajoran civilians lingered, gazing at the constellations where the Wormhole would appear, waiting for a sign from their celestial temple. Nearby, children tossed small illuminated weighted rings in spiraling arcs that landed softly across the floor, their laughter rising with a resilience that contrasted sharply with the state of the station. He passed two vedeks whose orange robes fluttered lightly in the recycled air; they paused to incline their heads, acknowledging both his rank and the composure he carried. Two Starfleet engineers

straightened to attention as he approached, and he returned the gesture with a silent nod before continuing on.

Malik's voice came through his Federation commbadge, which had already been calibrated to Deep Space Nine's communications system. "Admiral Tuvok."

Tuvok pressed the badge. "Yes, Colonel."

"There is a subspace transmission coming in for you," Malik said. "It is marked highly classified. Admiral, I can confirm that the signal is neither Starfleet nor Bajoran, but I cannot identify its origin. It appears to be a decoy of some kind, Admiral."

"I will take it in my quarters. Please advise the sender to hold until I am in location, and then restrict the communication to my private console."

"Aye, Admiral, standing by."

Tuvok arrived in his quarters and conducted a brief security sweep of the transmission before accepting the incoming feed. As the light from the holo projection flickered across Tuvok's face in the darkened room, a voice emerged through the transmission. "Admiral, I'm preparing to rendezvous with you at Deep Space Nine as planned. As you know, it is our custom not to discuss or transmit highly sensitive information over subspace. I will have the details with me when we meet."

"I look forward to our discussion," replied Tuvok, and the screen went blank.

Tuvok remained still for several moments, the dim reflection of the holo display fading from his features. Hands clasped behind his back, he stood alone in the quiet of his quarters. The room held its silence as he entered a state of composed contemplation, gathering himself for what would come next.

Chapter Seven

Colonel Malik Verin moved across Ops with habitual vigilance. Although a few minor systems still puzzled the station's engineers, Deep Space Nine had nearly returned to full power. Visitors and vendors of every kind had begun docking again. The Promenade was alive with foot traffic, and the familiar calls of "Dabo" could once again be heard echoing from within Quark's. From Malik's perspective, the only significant puzzle left was what had caused the disturbance in the first place.

He paused before the holographic projection from his console and initiated another comprehensive review of the internal security grid. He read the corridor feeds one by one, compressing and expanding windows as he followed the flow of daily movement. Everything appeared standard at first glance. Yet Malik did not trust first glances. He ran deeper checks, invoked secondary verification routines, and only then studied the results again.

The Promenade feed drew his eye. An anomaly presented itself so subtly that, for most observers, it would have dissolved back into the flow of pedestrian traffic. A hooded figure passed through the crowd. Malik instinctively leaned closer. There was nothing outwardly suspicious in the stride or posture, but when he accessed the station's bio-scan logs, the corresponding signature was absent. When he checked the transporter buffer records, nothing matched. The docking logs held no entry for any individual whose appearance aligned with that figure.

He replayed the frame and magnified the image. The man wore a woven tunic with subtle yet colorful, turquoise-dominant patterns, a traditional garment from some culture Malik could not identify at a glance. Its hood fell low enough to obscure most of his face. But the absence of any docking or transport record was its own kind of signature. People did not simply materialize aboard Deep Space Nine without triggering at least one chain of security protocols. This one had not.

Malik straightened slowly. He rewound the clip and examined it again, then cross-referenced it with additional feeds. In the lower decks, he found another flash of the same figure, this time near a maintenance conduit. The timing made no rational sense. To traverse from the Promenade to that location in the interval between the two recordings would require some kind of transporter, but there was no residual sign of site-to-site transport present anywhere on the station. Malik attempted to map a plausible route and found none.

With a gesture, he closed the console's security partition. He spoke quietly to the duty officer, indicating he would continue his analysis from a secondary location, then stepped into the turbolift. He emerged onto the Promenade and made his way

to the old security office. Odo's former domain still carried the man's severity, even after all these years. The room held no personal effects of the changeling who had once ruled it with relentless discipline, yet something of his presence somehow lingered in the metal.

He activated dormant surveillance nodes, bringing rarely used interfaces back online. He accessed Odo's archived investigative subroutines, their logic pathways preserved for circumstances exactly like this one. The station's lights hummed quietly above him as search grids overlaid the screen. Grainy frames resolved one by one. He followed the hooded figure's erratic movement across different levels of the station, pausing whenever the image offered even a fraction of new detail.

The intruder interacted with several terminals, hands moving with subtlety and speed. On each occasion, the station registered the presence of someone near the interface but logged no authorized commands. The data streams remained unchanged. No file corruption. No forced access. No trace of stolen information. It was as if the figure touched the system without ever actually touching it.

Malik did not rely on speculation. He catalogued each appearance and compared timing patterns with the station's standard operations. He noted how the figure moved through the Promenade at the exact moment crowds were densest, then reappeared near a seldom used junction just after a sensor recalibration cycle. Nothing about the appearances followed a random pattern. To Malik, the arrangement resembled a map that was built from the station's blind spots and rhythms.

He ran one more pass on the footage, then isolated a moment where the figure stepped briefly into partial light near a cargo manifest interface. The system caught a flicker of an identity signature, not a full scan, not enough for a complete file, but enough for a name to register within the data fragment.

The name did not belong to anyone Malik had ever heard of, but the computer identified him as a former Starfleet field officer who had served aboard the *Enterprise-D*, a one-time Starfleet cadet with a troubled disciplinary history at the Academy, and the son of a ranking captain in Starfleet's medical corps. Malik ran the analysis again, then a third time. The name did not change: Wesley Crusher.

The publicly accessible information alone was enough to defy belief. A child prodigy who had served with and saved the lives of figures known throughout the quadrant, including Jean-Luc Picard, William Riker, and the famed Soong-type android Data. Yet despite Malik's best efforts, he could not identify any pertinent data on Wesley Crusher from the last twenty years. No one with a record of such magnitude simply vanished for two decades. The questions began to accumulate. He left the security office at once.

In the station commander's office off Ops, Ro Laren and Nog listened without interruption as Malik delivered his report. Nog's expression shifted from polite attention to genuine disbelief. "Wesley Crusher?" he repeated. "You mean *the* Wesley

Crusher? The one who—" He stopped himself, unable to decide how to finish the sentence.

General Ro sat at her desk and absorbed the information with characteristic restraint. Her eyes narrowed in thought, and something in her expression suggested she was drawing old memories out of distant recesses. She had never known Wesley personally, but during the short period she had served on the *Enterprise-D*, his name had been a persistent undercurrent of conversation. She remembered hearing officers speak with unguarded awe about the boy who navigated warp theory with the ease others brought to chess. She remembered sitting at the helm of the *Enterprise* in orbit above Earth while Wesley and other elite members of the Academy's Nova Squadron stood trial after the death of a cadet. She remembered her friend Guinan's cryptic comments about the unusual shape of the young man's path. She had never encountered him, yet she had not forgotten the way people spoke of him.

Ro's orders were crisp and decisive. "Colonel Malik, Captain Nog, you will locate Wesley Crusher and escort him to the wardroom. Approach peacefully and with courtesy. If he refuses or attempts to flee, you are authorized to escalate, but only as far as absolutely necessary."

The pursuit began at a controlled pace, but Malik and Nog quickly realized routine tracking protocols would not suffice. Malik pulled additional officers into the effort, positioning them at key intersections where the intruder should logically have passed. He relayed sensor updates in real time, issuing course corrections as new glimpses of the hooded figure appeared on auxiliary feeds. Two Bajoran security units attempted to seal off adjoining corridors, coordinating with Nog to create a tightening ring of containment. Yet every time the net seemed secure, the readings slipped away. Wesley would appear for an instant on one deck, only to vanish before the nearest team arrived, leaving behind nothing but a fading sensor echo.

As they escalated their efforts, the situation became increasingly confounding. Malik adjusted their predictive models, factoring in timing, traffic density, and the station's internal rhythms, but Wesley's movements defied every projection. He drifted through Deep Space Nine as if anticipating their positions before they took them, always shifting just beyond reach. Officers who should have intercepted him under any reasonable calculation found only empty corridors and the faint ripple of recently disturbed air. Nog, growing unsettled with each failure, muttered that it felt like chasing someone who saw three moves ahead. Malik could not disagree. With each near miss, the mystery deepened, and the logic of the chase gave way to something none of them could fully grasp.

Nog shook his head as they missed yet another intercept. "I am trying to remain calm," he muttered. "But this is absurd. I feel like a tongo addict chasing profit. Every time you think you've got it, you realize you're already two steps behind where you started."

"It is not random," Malik said. "He is not a shadow. He is definitely a living person."

Nog glanced at him, eyes narrowing as he followed a new line of thought. "Maybe he is not a shadow. But maybe he is projecting shadows."

"You mean holograms?" Malik asked.

"No, not holograms, Veren. Something much more sophisticated." Nog brought up a holographic readout from his tricorder and began running rapid computations, his fingers moving faster than Malik could track. Numbers and temporal curves expanded in tight sequences that stopped making sense to Malik after a while. "There is no way... if he is doing what I think he might be doing, he would need access to a starship computer. Nobody could make calculations like this in real time."

"You lost me, Captain," Malik admitted.

Nog looked up from the display. "He is not projecting a hologram. He is projecting time. It is a temporal illusion. It feels like we are always three steps behind him, but in reality we are always fifteen point three seconds behind him. We always are and always will be, in this same exact interval from now through all eternity. Anyway... it is complicated."

"So what do we do?" Malik asked.

Nog punched in another set of calculations and then began issuing rapid instructions to Malik and the assembled security teams. They moved out across a single sector of the station in a pattern that made no tactical sense to Malik, a sequence of placements and angles that contradicted every principle of coordinated pursuit. But Nog insisted they follow it precisely.

Within minutes, the pattern closed. Wesley found himself cornered with nowhere left to shift. He stood at a computer console when Nog approached from one side and Malik from the other, both men with their phasers holstered but ready. Wesley understood immediately. His next temporal evasion would only cycle him back to this same point.

He raised his hands in surrender.

Malik inhaled sharply, ready to issue a frustrated command, but Nog stepped forward first, breaking into a wide grin as he reached out to shake Wesley's hand. "Wesley Crusher! I cannot believe it is really you! I have a million questions. And that was brilliant, by the way. How did you do those calculations so fast? If I hadn't gotten lucky, we would have been chasing you on a fifteen-second delay until the end of time!"

Wesley did not have a chance to respond before Nog continued. "I am Captain Nog. Starfleet, as you likely noticed." He let out a quick, amused laugh. "We are Starfleet brothers. Was that a Mannheim theorem you were using just now?"

Malik, staying true to his duty, cut in. "Mr. Crusher, the station commander, General Ro Laren, has requested that we convene with her immediately in the wardroom. If you will come this way, sir." He made a clear gesture for Wesley to follow.

They walked together, trailed by a handful of Malik's security guards. As they made their way toward the wardroom, Malik informed Ro of their imminent arrival and kept a close eye on Wesley. Nog launched into a story about a Ferengi he once knew who had used a Mannheim theorem to trick his customers into paying twice. Wesley listened politely but did not comment. He had not spoken a word since he arrived on Deep Space Nine.

The wardroom doors opened to reveal Major Tenen Rahl already seated. She rose with composed authority, offering no hostility but unmistakable attentiveness. Nog and Malik took seats around the table, with Wesley settling between them. Ro arrived soon after everyone was in place, her presence shifting the energy in the room the moment she entered. Wesley's posture eased just enough to show he was not defensive, yet remained steady enough to communicate full alertness.

Ro nodded for Malik to begin, but before he could utter a word, the door hissed open and Admiral Tuvok walked in. He acknowledged Ro with a respectful incline of his head, then made his way around the table and took a seat at the far end. He had not been invited to this meeting. Ro was not even certain how he had learned of this impromptu gathering, but he was already settled, and she had no desire to be the one who asked a Starfleet admiral to leave, particularly one as revered as Tuvok. She swallowed her annoyance at his unwelcome presence and gestured back to Malik to proceed once again.

Malik leaned forward slightly. "That was quite a dramatic entrance, Mr. Crusher. How did you gain access to Deep Space Nine?"

Wesley responded in a distant yet polite tone. "It was not my intention to be disruptive." He glanced toward Ro and then to Malik. "My apologies."

"My puzzle-solving quota for the cycle has been satisfied, I would say," Nog interjected with a wide toothy grin. "I am going to ask for my gaming credits back from Quark."

Tenen smiled. Ro tolerated Nog; he was who he was. Malik kept his gaze fixed like icy steel on Wesley, still waiting for an answer.

"I am a Traveler," Wesley continued, his tone calm but unintentionally cryptic. "I am an apprentice in a guild of those who understand the immensity and absurdity of universal chaos, bound by thought as much as by physics. We work with a principle of quantifiable quantum nonsense. Our traveling is spatially inclusive, yet we exist mostly within paradoxical fragments of moments as you might perceive them."

The officers looked at one another. Malik glanced at Ro. Ro looked toward Tenen. Nog gave a helpless expression that clearly meant he had no idea what any of that was supposed to mean.

After a confounded moment passed, Malik cut back in. He was growing increasingly impatient with Wesley. "So you transported here using 'spatially inclusive nonsense'? Or do you have a 'quantum-moment-paradox' ship in orbit of the station?"

Wesley responded with nothing but good intention. He operated on a different level of thinking than most humanoids, he had since his childhood. He felt like he

had problems connected then. Those had only gotten worse since he had cut himself off from Federation society. Plus, this was more than Wesley had spoken to other people in nearly a decade. He was a little rusty. "I used a modified mobile psychic spatial terminus devise. I was relatively nearby in Cardassian space. I'm not particularly proficient in this methodology, but I improvised for the short distance."

"Cardassian space?!" Malik reacted sharply, "what is your business in Cardassian space, Mr. Crusher?"

Ro remained silent and observant, allowing Malik to continue his questioning.

Wesley answered faithfully, seemingly oblivious to the accusatory edge in Malik's voice. "I primarily reside in a small adobe meditation shrine on Dorvan V, one of the planets ceded to the Cardassians in the treaty of 2370. I have no dealings with the Cardassians. They maintain a small colony on one of the other continents. They keep to themselves and do not bother the human settlement. Not in this present iteration of reality anyway."

Malik's tone remained sharp. "All right, then what, may I ask, are you doing here on Deep Space Nine, Mr. Crusher? Does Dorvan V not have its own franchise of Quark's Bar yet?"

"Colonel Malik, I did not come for the bar. My purpose here is not yet fully understood."

"Understood by whom?"

"By me."

Malik lifted his hands off the table in frustration and looked to Ro with an expression that clearly signaled he was giving up. He had only one more question. "Okay, Mr. Crusher, you clearly understand enough of it to know it's something we wouldn't appreciate. Otherwise, why make us chase you like idiots for an hour and a half?"

"Colonel, I was still working on interfacing with the station's computer system. I was looking for answers."

"Interfacing with our system?!" Malik snapped, finally losing the last of his composure. He looked to Ro in disbelief, gesturing sharply toward Wesley. "General, are you hearing this?"

Nog then interjected. "I understand that Wesley's purpose here, and even how he arrived, is a little vague at the moment. Colonel Malik, I am sure you have reviewed Wesley's record in the public database. Let me also remove the restrictions on his Starfleet file." He tapped his PADD and continued. "You will see an officer of exceptional adaptability, genius, loyalty, and valor." He looked to Ro. "He was a protégé of Captain Picard aboard the *Enterprise-D*. You knew many of the same people, General. I say we give him the benefit of the doubt and extend the hospitality of Deep Space Nine to Wesley not as an ordinary visitor, but with dignitary accommodations. I sense no deception or malice here, General, only some confusion. Wesley is being cooperative"

Ro held the room in silence for a long moment before responding. "I am inclined to agree with Mr. Nog. For the moment, it appears that Mr. Crusher poses no danger to this station." Her gaze locked firmly on Malik's, then she turned directly to Wesley. "In recognition of your stellar Starfleet record and the 'character references' Mr. Nog has just mentioned, we are prepared to extend the station's hospitality to you, Mr. Crusher. Since we have as little clarity about your visit as you do, security will continue to monitor your presence until we receive an update on your purpose here. I suggest you put that storied genius of yours to work and obtain that clarity sooner rather than later. That will also be quite enough temporal cat-and-mouse through corridors. For now, we will assign you quarters. Please let us know if there is anything else we can do to assist you."

"Thank you, General," Wesley replied earnestly.

Ro looked at him and said, "You were a friend of Guinan, Wesley. That means something to me. Do not do anything to break that trust." She rose from her chair and headed out, returning to the busy day that had now fallen behind schedule because of Wesley's unexpected arrival.

Soon the room emptied. After everyone had gone, only Wesley and Tuvok remained seated at the conference table. With the long-practiced intuition of more than a century as a tactical officer, Tuvok recognized when no further information could be gained through direct questioning. In such moments, patience became the only effective interrogation technique. He could also see that Wesley was someone in need of a counselor more than a security officer.

They sat in silence for a moment. Wesley expected more interrogation. He was unprepared for the subject Tuvok chose when he finally spoke.

"Your father was Jack Crusher, was he not?"

"He was," Wesley affirmed, his tone inflected with perplexity.

Tuvok folded his hands. "Nearly six decades ago, I participated in a subzero survival exercise on Alpha Eridani XII. The temperatures were extreme, we established camp in a perpetual snowstorm, and visibility was minimal. During the exercise, one of the trainees fell into an icy ravine and sustained significant injuries. Transporter extraction was impossible due to unexpected ionic disturbances in orbit." He continued with calm clarity. "Before we had even discussed the matter as a group, your father fashioned an improvised rescue sled from a stabilizer panel and tethered it with insulated wiring. He then descended into the ravine despite explicit protocol instructing us to wait for retrieval support. His decision was a calculated risk. The injured officer's condition was deteriorating rapidly, and the delay would have been fatal."

Tuvok's gaze remained steady. "Jack Crusher secured the officer to the sled and ascended the increasingly unstable ice wall without losing structural integrity. His actions preserved a life that would otherwise have been lost. He did not stop to consider protocol. At the time, that was shocking to me. I thought of him as reckless. I

have come to understand that, reckless or not, your father was a rare individual who would give his life to save another for something beyond principle, on instinct. Although illogical, I have come to recognize that this rare quality within your species is something more than selflessly virtuous, it is heroic.”

Tuvok paused out of consideration for the emotional weight his words might carry. Wesley sat quietly, listening, his polite yet distant expression unchanged since he had entered the wardroom. Tuvok continued. “As heroic as your father was, Wesley, I am certain that it was you who bore the cost of that sacrifice. The loss of a parent, at any age, leaves emotional imprints on humans that can be managed psychologically but never completely healed.”

Wesley sat for a moment, genuinely taken aback that a Vulcan was attempting to reach him on an emotional level. It was a new experience for him. If it had been anyone else, he might have felt intruded upon by such a personal line of discussion, but Tuvok’s concern brought him an unexpected sense of comfort.

“Admiral,” he said quietly, “to be honest, I did not expect you to bring up my father. I appreciate your acknowledgment of my emotional well-being, and I thank you for sharing that story about him. If you would please excuse me. I have much work to do, Sir.”

He rose unceremoniously but not impolitely, driven by an unmistakable urgency and sense of purpose, and left the room. Tuvok remained seated. The exchange had left a surprisingly deep impression on him. His thoughts drifted unexpectedly to his own father, and to a clear memory from childhood, sitting with him for hours in silent meditation while sunlight poured through the windows of their home. He remembered later carrying on that same noble Vulcan discipline of early morning meditation with his own son, Sek, when he had been young.

A moment passed before he became aware of himself again. A look of deep concern crossed his face as he considered what now appeared to be a recurring emotional symptom since Nog had mentioned his mission on Drayan V: short emotional bursts of nostalgia, each one highly focused on a paternal theme.

He was reaching the age when every Vulcan must remain vigilant for the onset of Bendii Syndrome regardless of how rare it was. Yet he did not believe that was the cause. More likely it was the unintended consequence of his applied awareness of human emotion, what humans would call empathy, derived from the most advanced meditative teachings of Surak. Those practices, intended only for Vulcans who had reached a mature state of Kolinahr, seemed to be progressing within him more rapidly than he had anticipated. He resolved to increase his nightly meditation regimen.

Then he rose, composed once more, and stepped out of the wardroom. For a brief moment, the room stood empty, still, and quiet, an island of calm at the center of a station that never stopped moving.

Chapter Eight

When the impromptu meeting of the senior staff ended around 22:00, the Gamma shift was already on duty in Ops. Malik, Nog, Tenen, and even Ro were off duty. Malik and Ro returned to their quarters, Tenen went home to her sleeping children, and Nog joined Quark's private Tongo game. They all resumed their regular duties or off-hours routines.

After Wesley's abrupt but polite departure from the boardroom and from Tuvok's almost emotional attention, he found himself in a state of deep confusion. Tuvok had caught him off guard, and his thoughts were now scattered. He had already lost several hours evading station security and another hour in the meeting. To make matters worse, being exposed to the station's commanders had been detrimental to his Traveler discipline. Deep Space Nine was too close to his old life. Starfleet personnel were everywhere, and the station commander herself had served under Captain Picard on the *Enterprise-D*.

He had lost time, and he still did not know why he had been drawn to the Bajoran wormhole. Driven by a sense of urgency, he moved quickly from the wardroom in search of the first computer console he could find. He needed to tap into the station itself. He needed to see the internal sensor logs of the wormhole. It never occurred to him that he could have simply told Malik he was on Deep Space Nine because of the wormhole, or that Ro would have granted him access to those files without hesitation if he had only asked. The only clarity in Wesley's mind was that he still did not know the full reason he had come.

He stepped into the first lift he encountered, guided more by instinct than attention, his mind elsewhere. He did not notice that he had followed two passersby in a reflexive motion. The two Bajoran civilians stared at him, unable to look away. His attention was fixed on the computations running through his mind. When the doors opened onto one of the short corridors leading to the Promenade, he moved forward without hesitation. Near the entrance, partially visible from the Promenade itself, Wesley found a console and began working.

The station had long grown accustomed to its mysteries. Yet what settled upon it after Wesley Crusher's arrival was something altogether different. People noticed the effect before they understood what they were reacting to. Conversations halted mid-sentence as he passed. Civilians turned their heads as though catching a faint frequency. The few Starfleet personnel who knew him by reputation found themselves unable to approach. No one could look away. It was not fear that drew them to him, and it was not curiosity. Wesley was a hypnotic presence. Partly it was that

he was a handsome man without effort or vanity. His traditional Earth garments, drawn from Native American cultures, were strange and beautiful. His seemingly aloof single-mindedness only heightened the effect. He appeared not to notice anyone or anything except the processes of his own mind. He was captivating to behold.

Wesley remained at the console throughout the night, standing and working with no sign that he noticed the hundreds of people who had passed by or watched him from the Promenade. Before long, two distinct groups of onlookers had formed. On the upper level, a cluster of Starfleet personnel gathered to observe the unusual sight and trade stories about the legend of Wesley Crusher. On the lower level, a crowd of civilians assembled along the same stretch of deck where Wesley stood, drawn by the strange pull of the scene unfolding before them.

While nobody thought to approach him, a few were emboldened by his apparent obliviousness to his surroundings and edged close enough to glance at the holo projection illuminating his face. They saw streams of calculations they could not begin to fathom, even the officers and engineers who managed a peek. Some noticed strange shapes and configurations moving among the numbers, patterns so unfamiliar that a few wondered if he might be engaged in some kind of alien child's game.

It was Major Tenen Rahl who first approached him. She had been passing by with her children when she noticed the crowd gathering around Wesley. As she had done with Tuvok earlier, Tenen had a practiced way of moving into sensitive situations, letting her children open the space first, their presence softening formal boundaries and easing difficult exchanges. With Fala clutching her hand and Prylar clinging apprehensively to her medical lab coat, she stepped closer.

When Tenen spoke, her voice carried the warm, steady cadence of both a physician and a mother. "Have you been here since last night, Wesley?" she asked gently.

The words reached him slowly. Wesley blinked, emerging from thought like a diver rising from deep water. When his focus settled on Tenen, there was a faint softness in the way his gaze adjusted, an almost imperceptible recognition that another consciousness had entered his field. Prylar and Fala stood silently fixated on Wesley. Despite the shifting shapes and designs flickering across the holo image projected from the console, their attention rested only on him, drawn by a magnetism they did not understand. They watched him as if under a spell. Though they could not define it, they sensed that this adult was different from anyone they had ever encountered.

Tenen allowed her own gaze to travel across the shifting matrices of the holo projection. They were unlike anything she had seen. The energy diagrams layered across one another with such precision that they resembled living architecture, annotated in programming dialects she recognized only from arcane medical databases. Some languages were pre-Federation; some were impossibly advanced. She felt a quiet shiver of awe at the elegance of the equations.

"Is this about the wormhole?" she asked softly.

Wesley's hands stilled mid-gesture. His voice, when it came, was barely louder than the console's ambient hum. "For now," he answered cryptically, "it seems that everything is."

She sensed she had reached the boundary of how much he was able or willing to share about what he was doing. So she moved elsewhere, toward empathy, toward trying to forge a personal connection with Wes. "You know, Wesley, I once saw your mother, back when I was just beginning my medical training. It must be more than twenty-five years ago now."

At the sound of her name, the calculations in his mind stopped at once. He was pulled instantly back to the plane of perception where most humans dwelled. He made eye contact with Tenen for the first time.

Tenen continued, "Yes, I saw her with my own mother. It was just after the Cardassian withdrawal from Bajor when the Federation first took control of this station. My mother is gone now, but she was once one of the most prominent physicians on Bajor. Before the Occupation she had been trained in both Bajoran and Federation medicine. When the Cardassian grip tightened and it became clear that they intended to purge the planet's doctors and take over our medical system, she recognized the pattern long before most. She sold her practice just before they seized control of the planetary infrastructure. Then she used an old veterinary license her father had forced her to earn in her youth to erase herself from the physicians' registry and slip into the hills.

"There she opened a small veterinary clinic with the credits she had saved. It was supposed to be a temporary fallback, nothing more. Instead, it became a sanctuary. The resistance soon learned that she would treat anyone who could reach her door. She kept hidden compartments of supplies. She set broken bones, sutured wounds, delivered coded messages, and kept people alive with whatever she could create from Bajoran herbology and Federation biochemistry. For fifty years she evaded Cardassian detection without ever moving from her highland estate. People used to say the Prophets themselves hid her from view. Fighters from every cell, even the young ones like Kira Nerys, brought their wounded to her in the middle of the night.

"After the Occupation ended she never returned to her old life. She stayed in her home in the highlands, visited regularly by those survivors who knew the truth of what she had done. She was over eighty when I told her that the *Enterprise* was scheduled to dock at Deep Space Nine. She had not left her estate in over half a century, Wesley, but she insisted that we travel to the station. The *Enterprise* was legendary to us on Bajor. But my mother cared about only one person on that ship, and that was your mother. To her, Dr. Crusher represented the very best of Federation medicine.

"We waited for hours on an overlook above the docking ring. When the airlock opened and your mother stepped through with her unmistakable bright red hair,

my mother began to cry. We watched her for another few hours. My mother was timid about approaching her yet equally resolved not to let the chance to meet her slip away. When the moment finally came, as Dr. Crusher was stepping out of a human restaurant on the Promenade, my mother reached for her hand in greeting and held on with both of hers. She drew her closer and then lifted her hand to touch your mother's earlobe to feel her pagh. She then profusely thanked her for her writings and for the mix of genius and compassion she represented. She would not let her go.

"It was my mother's dream to meet yours, Wesley, but I think I was touched by her presence just as profoundly. I have never forgotten the way she listened to my mother, with a patient smile and sincere compassion. She has been as much a model for me as a physician as she was for my mother."

Wesley listened without interrupting. There was kindness in his expression, even as part of him seemed to remain elsewhere. He stood quietly for a moment after she finished, courteously letting the weight of Tenen's story settle. "Yes," Wesley responded. "My mother has a profound impact on many. Thank you for sharing that memory, Major."

Wesley's expression remained politely attentive as he faced Tenen, even as his body language suggested a growing pull back toward his unfinished calculations. Prylar and Fala, who had until now been mesmerized by Wesley, began to shift and squirm. Their attention was fading, and they were reaching the limits of their good manners.

Tenen realized she had one last chance to ask the question she had been holding back all along. Just as Prylar tugged at her hand, she spoke before the moment could slip away. "Are you going to see your mother..." she asked, then paused, searching for the right way to finish the thought. Unsure how to name his presence or his state, she hesitated, then settled on the closest truth she could find. "While you are... *among us?*"

His expression did not change. Tenen's single question, however, stirred a host of others in his own mind. Until now he had felt interrupted, but not inconvenienced, by the exchange. This question was different. He found himself needing the right words to bring the conversation to a close. His relationship with his mother had no connection to his immediate purpose, and thinking of it introduced complications that unsettled the meditative discipline he worked so hard to maintain as a Traveler.

He answered in a measured, almost mechanical tone. "Thank you, Major Tenen. My mother is now the captain of the USS *Pasteur*, the flagship of the Federation's medical fleet. I have not yet had the opportunity to inquire about her whereabouts." He left no opening for further exchange. With a brief nod, he turned back to the calculations unfolding across the projection. Prylar and Fala took that moment as their cue, breaking free from their mother and dashing boldly ahead into the Promenade. Tenen nodded with a smile, then called after her children in the voice of a mother rather than an officer, hurrying after them.

Wesley slipped back into his inner world without making a transition. He shut out his surroundings. To passersby, it appeared as though he had smoothly returned to his realm of paradoxical numbers and strange shapes of shifting forms and colors. In truth, he had not. Tenen's question lingered, breaking a critical chain of thought. Frustration mounted until he finally shut down the projection and sank into a seated position against the wall beside his bags. He buried his face in his hands and remained there as the crowd around him continued to grow. Their curiosity at this drifter lost in thought sharpened with each passing moment.

Ro Laren approached from the upper walkway, noticing the swelling crowd before she could see what had drawn it together. She pushed her way through until she reached the cluster of Starfleet officers who had gathered to gawk at Wesley. "What is going on here?" she called out, lifting her voice above the noise, the words delivered more as a command than a question.

The Starfleet personnel snapped to attention. One security officer pointed toward the figure below. "It's Wesley Crusher, General. He's been in that same spot for over twelve hours."

Ro targeted him with a hard look: "I thought you were here to disperse crowds, Ensign, not become part of one."

"Yes, General," came the immediate reply. The other officers likewise snapped into an obedient stance and then dispersed without hesitation, the motion drawing the attention of the civilian onlookers from below. Ro turned to the spectators. In what felt like complete silence, she addressed the frozen crowd without seeming to raise her voice: "Don't you people have places to be?"

That was enough. The crowd began to break apart as Ro moved toward the nearest stairway leading down to the lower deck. The dispersing onlookers cleared a path ahead of her as she passed through at an unhurried pace, her hands clasped behind her back. As she approached, she immediately recognized Wesley's condition. She had seen it before on battlefields and in prison cells alike. It was more than exhaustion. It was a state of complete existential collapse.

With the space now empty of onlookers, she rested a steady hand on his shoulder. The touch brought him back gently, like waking slowly from a dream. "Wesley, have you been here all night," Ro asked quietly. "Since you left our meeting in the wardroom?"

His head had been tucked against his drawn-up knees. He looked up at her with one eye, the expression almost childlike, and nodded.

Concern crossed Ro's face, edged with frustration: "Weren't quarters assigned to you by my staff?"

"Yes, of course, General," Wesley replied. His voice was soft and unguarded. "I just haven't had a chance to go there yet." He hurried the words, as if afraid she might interrupt him. "But I still have work to do. I'm not finished with it, General."

"All right, Wesley," Ro said, her tone easing as she sensed his fear that she might force him to leave. "That's fine. Do you need a private place to work? Would it help if I arranged that for you?"

Wesley nodded.

"Then grab your bags," Ro said. "I know just the place. Come on. Follow me."

She led him onto the Promenade, keeping her pace deliberately in step with his. She stood ready to fend off any gawkers if anyone dared. No one did. As they walked, in an effort to break through Wesley's reserve and assure him she was not his enemy, she made a passing remark about how their time on the *Enterprise* had never overlapped. She remembered the stories, the prodigy at the helm who had saved the ship and her crew on more than one occasion, the "brain trust," as people still referred to him after he was no longer aboard.

When Wesley did not respond, she immediately recognized that she had just done to him what everyone did to her, seeing him as a legend rather than a person. She felt a flicker of regret at what she perceived as her own thoughtlessness. They walked a few more paces, and she gently placed a guiding hand on his shoulder. "Right here, Wesley. This is perfect for you."

They stood at the doorway to Odo's old security office. By now, it was more a relic of Deep Space Nine than a functioning part of station security. Most centralized operations had long since moved to Ops. Prisoner holding had also been relocated to a newer facility, deliberately positioned far from the Promenade after repeated problems with crowds gathering outside the old office, even in Odo's time. These days, the only regular activity came from the weekly Bajoran tour of the station, which paused outside the doors for a lengthy discussion of Odo and his history. When Malik had employed the office to covertly track Wesley, no one had set foot inside for months.

As the doors slid open, Ro gestured him inside. "You will have privacy here. And access to many more systems. Just let us know what you need. We want to help, Wesley."

Wesley stepped inside, looking around at the round central computer console with an actual chair at its center. He dropped his bags at the foot of the large table, then glanced back at Ro with something like a smile.

"Thank you, General," Wesley said, with a sense of relief as much as gratitude. He took the chair at the center of the console and looked up at Ro. "General, do you think I could have access to the sensor logs of the wormhole? It would be much easier for me, and require fewer calculations, if I did not have to bypass security through a back channel."

Ro regarded him with a flicker of amusement at his disarming honesty. She knew it was in her interest to help. "Sure, Wesley. You can have direct access to all non-essential station logs. Just use security code Gamma Twenty-Four Alpha."

She turned toward the door, then paused before stepping out. "I will leave you to your work, Wesley." Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a station communicator and tossed it to him: "Don't bother with the civilian communication system. Just call Ops if you need anything." Then she turned and left.

Wesley took a moment to take stock of his new equipment and consider his next steps. For the first time since he had been detected on the station, he felt an unpanicked sense of clarity about what came next. He opened his bag of trinkets and laid out several devices along the top of the console. One by one, they began to glow as he activated them. He then brought the surrounding equipment online. The systems were antiquated, unchanged since Odo's time. There were no holographic projectors, only a handful of monitor arrays. Wesley moved around the central console like the conductor of a large orchestra, building toward a crescendo. What only minutes earlier had been a lifeless sarcophagus of Deep Space Nine's war-scarred past now pulsed with flickering light.

His face set with determination, his hands moving with masterful skill, he drew the disparate systems of the office together into a single, harmonious flow of energy and information. From one of the odd devices arranged along the console, a holo projection rose before Wesley's face, allowing him to grasp the full scope of what was unfolding around him. He let out a laugh of wonder at how something that had seemed impossible only hours earlier now felt almost simple. He even allowed himself a passing acknowledgment that, had he trusted the station's crew and asked for what he needed, he might have spared himself hours of frustration.

Being a Traveler had given him a profound ability to read reality itself, but it had not helped with reading people. He noted, with mild chagrin, that learning to trust others while maintaining his necessary distance would still be a skill he had to master. It was a lesson his own mentor had learned the hard way when they first met, many years ago.

He entered a rapid series of increasingly paradoxical formulae. On the central projection, the spectrum of colors began to coalesce into shapes that were layered yet interconnected, structures that shifted continuously from tubular to conical and beyond. Forms and colors transformed in constant motion, bound together by a strange coherence. Everything flowed in a synchronized cadence of nonsensical numbers and irrational realities.

Then the final set of equations presented itself. He was only a few calculations away from an answer. As Wesley cleared the shifting shapes and formulae from the crowded field of the holo projection, a single sequence of numbers remained. They resolved into a set of three-dimensional coordinates, exactly as he had seen before at his hermitage on Dorvan V.

The coordinates were unmistakable. The planet Tyree.

Chapter Nine

After the revelation of the planet Tyree, Wesley allowed himself a sip from his water container and tore open a ration pack he had brought with him earlier. There was a faint sense of relief in knowing that he now had some sense of direction, though it did not show in the way he ate. He consumed the food hastily and without tasting it, his mind already moving ahead to the next steps of a mission that remained undefined. He still had not slept, and his chronometer informed him with indifferent precision that more than twenty-four hours had passed since he had been intercepted on Deep Space Nine. Time no longer yielded easily to his awareness. Instead, it pressed forward with linear insistence, demanding attention from a body that had long since become secondary to thought.

He returned to the console and resumed his search with renewed focus. Wesley moved through both Bajoran and Starfleet databases with an efficiency that would have startled anyone watching. Astronomical surveys collapsed into cartographic overlays. Settlement planning documents folded seamlessly into environmental projections. Entire classes of data were eliminated almost instinctively, patterns of irrelevance recognized before conscious thought could articulate why they did not matter. Tyree was entirely peripheral. It was not a Federation planet. It lay beyond common trade routes. It possessed no notable mineral wealth. Its hot, arid climate discouraged long-term settlement. In Starfleet records it appeared only in passing, referenced as a navigational marker or as a cautionary footnote.

Then he saw it. A single line of text lay buried deep within an archival directory, flagged by an obsolete Dominion War classification code. It pointed to a restricted Starfleet file associated with Tyree. The access protocols dated to a period when Starfleet had operated under existential threat and guarded its intelligence with maximum security. Even for Wesley, gaining entry proved more difficult than bypassing the station's routine security measures. He ran his calculations, navigated a succession of firewalls, and, after sustained effort, succeeded in opening the restricted file.

Inside was a mission report describing a visit to the planet Tyree, filed by Lieutenant, junior grade, Ezri Dax, counselor on Deep Space Nine and the USS *Defiant*. Even this classified document contained internal redactions sealed beneath additional layers of security. Wesley quickly surmised that most of the omissions applied to the names of two of the mission's participants. One name, however, had not been redacted, and it stood out to him with the glaring clarity of a blinking sign above the entrance to Quark's: Captain Benjamin Sisko.

Wesley was struck by a sudden and overwhelming disbelief at himself that Benjamin Sisko had not crossed his mind at any point during his search. Wesley had already begun his meditative training as a Traveler on Dorvan V when the Dominion War broke out and Captain Benjamin Sisko rose to prominence throughout the Federation. He was aware of Sisko's reputation, of course, but his own distance from the war had kept Sisko from

occupying a central place in his thinking. And yet, Sisko's clear connection to the wormhole should have presented itself as an obvious line of inquiry from the very beginning. Wesley shook his head in disbelief and quiet shame, recognizing how his single-minded focus had obscured what should have been an evident point of direction in understanding why he had been drawn to the Bajoran wormhole and to Deep Space Nine.

Wesley exhaled slowly and closed his eyes. The irritation lingered, tinged with a private sense of embarrassment, but he pressed on, strengthened by the realization that he had uncovered another essential piece of the puzzle. As he continued through the classified document, he learned that Sisko, Ezri Dax, and two redacted individuals had traveled to Tyree at Captain Sisko's insistence. There, buried beneath the planet's desolate sands, they had discovered the Orb of the Emissary.

Wesley finished reading the brief with more questions than answers. What was the Orb of the Emissary? How had Sisko known it was there? Why had it been buried on Tyree rather than held by the Cardassians or returned to Bajor? And why had the mission been classified at all, when no clear tactical justification presented itself? Finally, who were the two redacted individuals, and might they hold the key to his next step? He needed more answers.

He needed to contact Ezri Dax. Wesley checked the Starfleet database and learned that she was now serving as captain of the Excelsior-class USS *Dakota*. Further inquiry showed that the *Dakota* was on assignment in the Rigelian system, near the border between Federation space and the Lysian Alliance, a region that had grown increasingly unstable in recent years. Klingon vessels, operating under the expanded transit agreements established after the war, now moved freely through Federation territory. While the alliance with the Federation formally remained intact, not all Klingon captains interpreted restraint as a virtue. They avoided direct harassment of Federation worlds, but non-allied systems within Federation space presented opportunity. Raids against such worlds had increased, jurisdictional boundaries blurred, and Klingon incursions into Lysian space threatened to destabilize the border.

Without hesitation, Wesley opened a subspace channel to the *Dakota*. Only after initiating the transmission did he realize that he had not checked the ship's internal time index. For all he knew, it might be the middle of the night aboard the *Dakota*. He registered the thought for later self-reproach but carried forward with the transmission all the same.

Luckily, it was the middle of the *Dakota*'s Alpha shift when Wesley called. The holoviewer resolved to reveal Captain Ezri Dax standing on the bridge. She appeared composed and centered, confidently in command of herself, her crew, and her vessel. The subtle lines on her face spoke not of age but of experience, earned and integrated. Her Trill spots traced the curve of her neck and jaw, and she now wore her still dark brown hair longer than she had during the war, when she had first received the Dax symbiont. In the years since, she had grown fully into herself and into the weight and continuity of her multigenerational role as Dax. The counselor's

attentiveness remained present, but it was now balanced and tempered by the authority of command.

"Wesley Crusher," she said, "the legend in the flesh. I have heard stories, sir." She glanced to her left, clearly communicating without words with someone off screen. "Wesley, if your call is not related to an immediate emergency, there is someone here who would like to say hello before we address the reason for your communication."

Wesley paused, momentarily beguiled. He had expected nothing more than a straightforward fact-finding exchange when he contacted the *Dakota*. After a brief hesitation, he replied with a single, mildly ambivalent word: "Sure."

Captain Dax gestured to the off-screen individual as she stepped aside, clearing the field of vision of the bridge's outward facing communication camera. Commander Robin Lefler, the *Dakota*'s chief engineer and a former romantic interest of a teenage Wesley Crusher, stepped into view. For a fraction of a second she simply stared. Then delight broke across her face, unguarded and immediate. She looked older and more settled, yet still entirely herself. The sight of her struck Wesley with unexpected force, like encountering an echo from a life he no longer inhabited.

Robin filled the silence easily. "I can't believe it's really you, Wesley. You look so different. I honestly never thought I would see you again." She did not give him time to respond, her smile widening with unguarded joy. She had lost none of her youthful spark. "So, I ended up on the *Dakota*. Chief engineer, of all things. I still can't quite believe it some days, but it fits. The ship fits."

Wesley listened, nodding politely. He was genuinely happy to see Robin again. He had always thought of her fondly but the meditative discipline of being a Traveler left little room for intimacy or even for sexuality. Sustained focus on the inner workings of the universe had a way of flattening physical and emotional needs alike. Robin was just as beautiful as he remembered. At the sight of her, part of him began to long for a different life than the one he had chosen. He became suddenly aware of how much of his former self remained emotionally accessible. That realization unsettled him deeply. Seeing Robin was the last thing he needed if he was going to maintain his Traveler's focus.

"So, Wesley," Robin concluded, "how have you been all these years? Or should I ask, where have you been?"

Afraid of the feelings and memories Robin had stirred in him, Wesley answered in as detached a fashion as he could. "Robin, I have spent these years engaged in the meditative practices of a small sect of hermits known as Travelers. We explore the interaction between space, time, and thought. I am currently on Deep Space Nine seeking information about the Bajoran wormhole."

"I see," responded Robin. "I remember reading the report of the *Enterprise*'s journey out of our galaxy with the help of a 'Traveler' before I began my tour on the ship, so I know a little about it. I can see how you would be a good fit. You are the most brilliant person I have ever met, Wesley."

Wesley nodded ambivalently at the compliment.

"Well, I'll let you speak to the captain, Wesley. Seeing you again like this means I'll have to revise Robin's Rule One Hundred and Three: A couple of light years—and *a couple of decades*—can't keep good friends apart!"

She stepped out of view of the communications camera, a wide and warm smile still on her face. Ezri returned to the center of the frame. Her expression softened revealing the counselor underneath the captain. "So, Wesley, now that reunions are over, what can I help you with?"

"Thank you, Captain. I was drawn to Deep Space Nine because of its proximity to the Bajoran wormhole. Subsequent discoveries have indicated that the planet Tyree is relevant to my broader equation. It became evident to me that Benjamin Sisko, now apparently occluded within the Bajoran wormhole, according to Bajoran belief, is the link between the wormhole and Tyree. That connection became clear after I uncovered a report you filed more than twenty years ago during the Dominion War, a report that was classified by Starfleet. I am hoping you can tell me more about your mission to Tyree with Benjamin Sisko."

"Yes, of course, I remember it well, what do you want to know?"

"Well, for starters, why were the mission records sealed, and why were two names redacted?"

"As you already know, Wesley, Captain Sisko discovered the lost Orb of the Emissary on Tyree. We classified the records because of how important that discovery was to the Bajoran people and to their religion. At the time, when we sealed the files, we still did not fully understand what we had found or what it might come to mean for Bajor. As for the redacted names, those two individuals were not Starfleet personnel, and we felt it was best to protect their identities. One of them has since passed on, and I do not think there is any harm in telling you now. It was Joseph Sisko, Benjamin Sisko's father from earth."

"I see," said Wesley. "What happened to the Orb of the Emissary, Captain?"

"I honestly do not know," Ezri replied. "The war years were chaotic, and after Captain Sisko's ascension I was reassigned almost immediately to the *Farragut* as the ship's counselor. That crew had lost two captains and had been deeply traumatized during the war. My focus shifted completely. As my career progressed, I lost touch with Bajor and with Deep Space Nine."

Wesley's demeanor shifted, his voice turning sullen. "I understand, Captain."

Ezri's counselor training took over completely. Her tone softened as she asked, with genuine concern, "Wesley, I hope you do not mind me asking, but are you all right?"

The question took Wesley by surprise. He sensed the genuine concern for his well-being behind it. He did not experience Ezri's question as meddlesome or intrusive. Instead, he quietly appreciated the care behind it. The question itself was enough. No follow up was required. With a single, simple inquiry, Ezri had reached

him emotionally. Wesley's brief reply did not fully convey the gratitude he felt toward her. "Thank you for asking, Captain."

Ezri sensed it was time to move on to more practical matters. "Wesley, if you are planning to travel to Tyree, I would recommend reaching out to Jake Sisko, Benjamin Sisko's son. He was the other redacted individual present on the planet when we discovered the Orb. He may be able to offer you some valuable perspective." She paused briefly before adding more gently, "And Wesley, I have a feeling that you will both benefit from each other's company."

She tilted her head slightly, the professional giving way to something more cautionary. "Oh, and Wesley, pay close attention to the seasons on Tyree. We were very fortunate when we traveled there all those years ago. It was during the brumation cycle of the enormous, extraordinarily deadly, reptiles that cover the planet's surface for two thirds of the year. I would strongly recommend only going during their brumation."

"Thank you, Captain," Wesley replied evenly. "Yes, I read that in the Federation database entry on Tyree."

"Very good, Mr. Crusher. Please feel free to contact me if we can be of further assistance. You know where to find us."

Wesley politely nodded his head and closed the channel. He sat in complete silence in Odo's office for several minutes, contemplating his next move.

As he did, another oversight revealed itself. He had thought only of Benjamin Sisko, and too late at that, never of Jake. The realization irritated him. His tunnel vision had once again privileged abstraction over human consequence. He allowed himself a brief moment of self-reproach, then opened a new channel.

Earth. New Orleans.

This time, it was the middle of the night. Jake Sisko appeared on the viewer, groggy and half awake, illuminated only by the glow of a holo PADD. It was all he could do to muster enough lucidity to offer a sleepy, "Hello?"

After the war and his father's ascension, Jake Sisko remained on Deep Space Nine for more than a year, drifting in a mourner's fugue through the station. Kira, who had assumed command of the station, did everything she could to find a role for him. But he could not sustain focus on any task. He was truly lost. During that time, Kasidy Yates-Sisko relocated to Bajor and settled on the estate her husband Benjamin had acquired, the place where he had once dreamed of building a home after his retirement from Starfleet. Although that future was never fulfilled for Benjamin, keeping the estate alive became the closest way Kasidy could imagine remaining near him.

Over time, Kasidy transformed the Sisko estate into a shrine and pilgrimage site honoring the Emissary of the Prophets. Near the residence, a chapel of considerable size was constructed, where pilgrims gathered to pray. Four vedeks were assigned to help manage the site. As the number of visitors grew, the Vedek Assembly took notice and eventually agreed to relocate the Orb of Truth to the estate. A small annex was built alongside the chapel where pilgrims could come to consult the Orb. Within that annex stood a beautifully

illuminated alcove, richly decorated and fitted with a single cushion that remained conspicuously empty. It had been prepared as a place of honor, intended to house the now lost Orb of the Emissary if and when it was ever found and returned to Bajor.

At both Kira's and Kasidy's insistence, Jake Sisko left Deep Space Nine to live on the estate. It took several months, but in time he found a renewed sense of purpose, and even joy, assisting Kasidy with its management. The smile and easy laughter that had so defined him in his youth returned. Jake fell in love with a Bajoran woman, and together they had a son whom they named Asher, in keeping with his family's masculine naming tradition drawn from the sons of Jacob in the Hebrew Bible. This was the happiest period of Jake's life.

Living on the Sisko estate with his wife and son, he found the will to write again. His first book was a firsthand account of his experiences during the Dominion War. His perspective held a unique value. He had been present on Deep Space Nine during its most volatile moments, had served as a war correspondent, and had lived the conflict as the son of the Starfleet commander credited with bringing it to an end. He titled the book *Nor the Battle to the Strong*, in reference to a verse in the Book of Ecclesiastes and to the seemingly random senselessness of a war that claimed the lives of so many capable officers and civilians alike. Its publication reshaped his life.

The book was widely hailed as one of the greatest war memoirs ever written. It offered perspectives few had previously considered, presented a deeply honest account of Jake's own paralyzing fear during his time on the front lines, and grappled with many of the war's most difficult ethical questions. Most of all, it was celebrated for its brilliant literary style, seamlessly blending eyewitness testimony with moments of lyrical whimsy that built successive layers of meaning within the text. It was a work meant not merely to be read but to be studied, and yet its genius lay in the fact that it functioned perfectly as both. One Federation reviewer called it "a work of pure poetry successfully masquerading as a war memoir."

Jake had a follow up success with his novel *Anslem*. He had begun the book while still a teenager on Deep Space Nine, and under the influence of the incarnated energy being Onaya, he had written most of it. The memory of his muse had become a traumatic one. He had come close to death under her spell, and for that reason he had left *Anslem* unfinished for many years. But now, guarded by the presence of his family and settled into a hard-won contentment, he finally found the resolve to complete it.

Anslem was a historical novel, the story of a young boy coping with the loss of his mother in 1950s New York City. Anslem's father was loving and never abusive, but he was not always present in the ways his son needed. Behind the façade of care, his father lived primarily for himself and engaged with his child only on his own terms. As a result, Anslem wandered the city in search of meaning and in search of the unconditional parenthood he longed for. Along the way, he befriended a diner

waitress, a professional baseball player, a street thief, and a seemingly unhinged science fiction writer.

Anslem's estrangement, his trauma, his anomie, and his unending search for meaning served as a metaphor for the estrangement of Black Americans navigating the complex reality of difference in late Industrial Earth. In this sense, the novel was as much a work of history and historical commentary as it was a piece of literature, reflecting on events four hundred years in the past whose emotional echoes could still be felt even within the Federation's utopia of equality.

Jake's domestic happiness did not last. *Nor the Battle to the Strong* had made him known throughout the Federation. *Anslem* made him a celebrity. Soon fans, students, scholars, journalists, and literary critics began visiting the Sisko estate alongside the Bajoran pilgrims, drawn not by devotion to the Emissary of the Prophets, but by the hope of seeing Jake himself. Jake could not endure the attention. He grew withdrawn and sullen, disappearing for hours at a time to wander the hills and forests surrounding the estate. He became the kind of father to Asher that Anslem's father had been, loving yet distant, present but never fully there. It was a failure that would have been unthinkable in his own father, who had given him everything, regardless of circumstance. In the end, without bitterness, recrimination, or open discord, Jake's Bajoran wife concluded that it would be best for everyone, including Jake, to bring their marriage to an end.

There was nothing left for Jake on Bajor anymore. He moved to Earth, to New Orleans, settling near Sisko's Creole Kitchen, which remained open under new management but still belonged to him in all the ways that mattered, and had become a pilgrimage site in its own right. It was its own kind of shrine dedicated to the memory of Benjamin Sisko, but with red beans and rice rather than Prophets and Orbs. Cadets from the Academy frequented it as an homage to the great Captain Benjamin Sisko, while others traveled from far and wide for its renowned jambalaya and crawfish étouffée, still prepared according to Joseph Sisko's recipe without deviation. Asher came to visit his father two or three times a year.

Jake shifted slightly against the familiar weight of the mattress beneath him, the sounds of New Orleans muted and distant beyond the window.

"Hello, Jake Sisko? I'm Wesley Crusher. I'm calling from DS9."

Hearing the name Deep Space Nine jolted him into fuller wakefulness. "Yes," he said, beginning to sit up in bed as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "I have heard of you. You served on Picard's *Enterprise*. But the last I heard, you had disappeared. What can I do for you, Mr. Crusher?"

"Mr. Sisko, my apologies for calling so late. I am on DS9 working on a mystery connected to the Bajoran wormhole, and it appears that your father and the Orb of the Emissary may be critical pieces of my mission."

Jake felt more confused than intrigued. Orbs, Prophets, Emissaries were all things from a past he had deliberately left behind when he moved to New Orleans. And who exactly was this Wesley Crusher? It was common knowledge that he had left Starfleet. What authority did he have to investigate anything at all? Was he acting on behalf of the Bajorans?

"I'm sorry, Wesley, I don't understand. What mission? What mystery? What are you talking about?"

"As of now," Wesley replied, "the totality of my mission remains undefined. I have questions about your mission to the planet Tyree with your father and grandfather in 2369."

"Okay..."

"How did your father know the Orb was buried in the sand on Tyree?"

"I don't really know. Back then my father was pulled between two worlds, the world of the Prophets and the world of Starfleet. The Prophets spoke to him somehow. He just knew things sometimes."

"Jake, do you know what happened to the Orb after the war and your father's ascension into the Celestial Temple?"

"No. Nobody does. The Orb completely disappeared after my father left us. That is why we leave an honored space empty in the shrine on Bajor, so that the Orb can rest there if it is ever found. I heard the Bajoran government made some effort to search for it, but you would have to ask them about that."

"Yes, I have seen those records, and they revealed exceedingly little. Jake, I only have one more question. Do you know how the Orb came to be on Tyree in the first place?"

"You know, Wesley, I never even thought about it. We were so happy to find it, which already seemed impossible, that I do not remember anyone asking how it got there. People tend not to interrogate gifts when they receive them, I suppose. I'm sorry, Wesley. I am not much help."

"No, no," Wesley said quickly, as if to keep the call from ending. "I think you can help, Jake. Come to DS9. I believe something monumental is happening around the wormhole, and I think it relates to your father and that Orb somehow. You might be the link we need to reach him if we have to. Please, Jake, can you come?"

"You really think I need to be there? You think it might be possible to make contact with my father?" Jake sat up in his bed, fully awake now. "You know, Wesley, I have read about you and your service in Starfleet. Even though I do not know you at all, I am inclined, for some reason, to trust you right now. Maybe I'm crazy."

Jake, still sitting up in bed, picked up a second PADD and initiated a new holo-projection displaying long range Federation transport schedules: "It looks like the best civilian option would get me there in about twelve days."

"No. That is too long to wait."

"Oh, wait. Isn't Nog serving on DS9 now?"

"Yes. He is the station's first officer."

"Perfect. Let me talk to Nog. I bet he can get me to DS9 in two days. Even if he were not a Starfleet officer, I know Nog. He has ways of making things happen."

"Excellent. Thank you, Jake. In the meantime, I intend to travel to Tyree to see what I might discover there about the Orb."

"I am not sure you'll find anything on that planet. I am glad I am not going with you. I do not intend to ever set foot on that forsaken desert again."

"Understood. I must leave no stone unturned. I look forward to seeing you on DS9. Good night, Jake."

"I will see you soon."

After the call ended and the light from the holoprojections faded back into darkness, Jake remained awake. His thoughts wandered to the years after his father's ascension, to drifting aimlessly around Deep Space Nine, to the grief he had felt at the loss, and to his own sense of being lost. Then his thoughts turned to the distant possibilities Wesley's call had awakened in him. One thought refused to leave him as he lay awake in the dark.

Maybe I will see my father.

Back on Deep Space Nine, Wesley sat back in his chair and felt a sense of calm for the first time since arriving on the station. He now had direction. With that clarity came a sudden awareness of his body. Exhaustion. Hunger. Thirst. And the almost absurd realization that he smelled terrible.

Just then the door chime to Odo's office sounded. Tenen Rahl stood outside holding a covered meal tray. Wesley rose and went to the door.

"Major Tenen, we have to go to Tyree," he said, his hands lifting unconsciously in urgency.

She gently took hold of his arm, laughing softly. "No, Wesley. We have to go to bed."

He did not protest. He knew he needed rest. She guided him through the corridors to his quarters, opened the door, and walked in with him. Wesley sat on the edge of the bed while Tenen placed the tray on the table and went to the food dispenser to produce a glass of water.

"Please drink something before you sleep, Wesley."

When she turned back toward him, she saw that he had already fallen asleep. With a maternal smile, she placed the glass beside the tray. It was a good thing she had brought food from the med bay dispenser. It would still be edible in the morning. Tenen took one last look at Wesley stretched out on the bed in his unwashed clothes. She smiled warmly, dimmed the lights, and left the room quietly.

Chapter Ten

The Starfleet roundabout *Dnieper* slipped through interstellar darkness, its navigation lights pulsing in measured cadence against the vast void as it made its way to Tyree. Outside the viewports, distant suns collapsed into pinpricks and vanished, swallowed by the cold enormity of space. Inside the craft, the hull carried a constant, low vibration from the warp drive, a sound felt more than heard. The roundabout was designed for efficiency, not comfort, and everything within it reflected that philosophy.

In the cockpit, Malik Verin kept his attention fixed on the flight instruments. In the aft dining space, functional and narrow but more than adequate for two, Ro Laren and Wesley Crusher shared a simple meal. The recycled air carried the warm aroma of hasperat and spiced Bajoran flatbreads rolled into tight wraps. Wesley took a bite and chewed. A moment later, the delayed burn of the pickled peppers bloomed across his tongue. He swallowed and winced as heat flared up the back of his throat, his eyes reddening and watering as he blinked rapidly, fighting the sting while trying to maintain his composure.

"Too peppery for you?" Ro said, a wicked smile touching her mouth as she watched him struggle with the heat. When no reply came, she added, "Bajorans have a very different tongue than humans. You should try real hasperat brine instead of this replicated version. It might put you in the med bay."

After Wesley had recovered somewhat from his bite of the hasperat wrap, he said, "Well, it certainly packs more of a punch than cucumber sandwiches and coffee."

"Cucumber sandwiches?" Ro repeated.

"Yes. Cucumber sandwiches were Captain Picard's lunch of choice on long shuttle voyages like this one. I once traveled with him in a shuttle, much smaller than this runabout, to Starbase 515, where I took my Academy entrance exams, while Captain Picard underwent an operation to correct his faulty synthetic heart."

Ro stared at him. "Wait. Picard has a synthetic heart?"

"Yes," Wesley said. "It is not something he liked people knowing, especially not his crew. He told me in confidence. He was impaled through the heart by Nausicaans when he was a young officer, over a dom-jot game."

"Impaled through the heart by Nausicaans? Picard?" Ro could not help laughing. That was not the Picard she knew, not the humorless, unflinchingly stolid, serious, intimidating command officer she had once tried with all her power to impress.

After a moment, her expression sobered. "You had a very different relationship with Picard than I did, Wesley," she said. "I admired him. I looked up to him. I tried everything I could to win his respect. I was so in awe of the larger-than-life Captain Picard that I would have done anything to please him. And for a while, I believe I may have even succeeded in that endeavor."

"Why did you leave the *Enterprise* then, General?" Wesley asked quietly.

"In the end, Wesley, I lost myself in my efforts to win his approval," Ro said. "When I was faced with a choice between being myself and being what I thought Picard wanted me to be, I chose to be myself. I defied Picard's direct orders and left the *Enterprise* to fight with the Maquis. Technically, I defected. I do not regret that decision. It was the right path for me."

She paused, her gaze fixed somewhere beyond the narrow confines of the compartment. "But I do regret some of my actions," she continued. "Most of all, I regret letting Picard down and losing his respect. In the wake of my departure, he labeled me a deserter and an outlaw. I have not entered Federation space since. Returning would likely mean being sent back to prison."

Ro drew a slow breath. "About fifteen years ago, long after the Maquis conflict ended and after the Dominion War was over, I tried to contact him. If nothing else, I wanted to apologize. I wanted to explain my reasons, even though I held no real hope that he would understand me. He refused to accept my transmission. I was angry at Picard for a long time after that. I was deeply hurt. I could not understand how a man so open to limitless possibility as Jean-Luc Picard could be so closed-minded when it came to hearing my side. I have let go of that anger, Wesley. It is my sincere hope that Jean-Luc has let go of his as well."

Wesley was quiet for several seconds before he spoke. "I did not know any of that, Ro," he said. "I am sorry that your relationship with him ended in such a painful way." He hesitated, then continued. "I carried anger toward Picard myself for several years when I was very young, before I came aboard the *Enterprise*. He was the one who sent my father on the mission that led to his death. He was also the one who brought that news to my mother and me. For a long time, I believed I could never forgive him." Wesley looked down at his hands. "Then I joined the crew of the *Enterprise*. Captain Picard, who was initially hostile to my presence, eventually took a keen interest in me. He guided me through some of the most difficult moments of my life. He became my moral compass. And in time, he became more like a father to me."

Ro lifted her wrap in a small salute. "Then here's to the captain!"

They continued to eat in silence. Wesley replicated a simpler, milder, sandwich. Both were lost in contemplation, each quietly reminiscing about the same man and his outsized impact on their lives as the roundabout continued gliding through space.

On Deep Space Nine, Captain Nog sat behind the desk that had once belonged to Benjamin Sisko and, before him, Gul Dukat. He remembered standing in this same office as a nervous Ferengi youth, asking the Emissary for a recommendation that would change the course of his life. Now he occupied the chair himself, the weight of command settled firmly on his shoulders, as he scanned the reports scrolling across the holo-projection from his console. His mind, however, was fixed on one thing only. Admiral Tuvok's impending liaison, the true reason for his visit to Deep Space Nine—and someone he had refused to disclose to himself, to Quark, or even to General Ro—was due to arrive today. Nog found himself studying the incoming docking vessels with far greater scrutiny than he otherwise would have.

As he scanned the arrivals, one vessel caught his attention immediately. In that instant, he knew exactly who Tuvok had come to meet. The ship in question was the private pleasure craft of the Grand Nagus himself, Rom, his father. Nog rubbed his brow and exhaled. He thought he understood Tuvok's rationale for keeping the visit secret. If Quark had known in advance of Rom's visit the Promenade would already have been drowning in banners and promotional schemes. Tuvok, for his part, had preserved operational secrecy with Vulcan efficiency.

"Nog to Quark," he said, tapping his badge. "You might want to tidy up. Important company inbound."

Just as Quark received Nog's communication, the bar doors parted simultaneously. The Grand Nagus Rom and his Bajoran wife, Leeta, stepped through as if summoned by Nog's words themselves.

"Yeah," Quark muttered into the still-open channel, his eyes narrowing. "Thanks for the warning, nephew."

"No problem," Nog replied cheerfully, oblivious to the tone.

Rom had aged into something remarkable. Although he was now the most powerful man in the Ferengi Alliance, he continued to carry himself with the same unassuming, often mirthful manner he had shown as a low-level engineer on Deep Space Nine. As Grand Nagus and chief financial officer of the Ferengi Alliance, he had implemented and overseen reforms that reshaped not only an entire economy but an entire culture.

He succeeded in establishing new ethical standards of commerce and labor protections while keeping intact, and even celebrating, the Ferengi cultural value of accumulation. His most controversial reforms addressed Ferengi gender roles, including allowing female Ferengi to wear clothing and earn profit. At first, these changes were deeply unpopular, and it was far from a foregone conclusion that Rom would survive for long in his role as Grand Nagus.

However, once the profits generated by opening an entirely new female market began to roll in, opposition to Rom's reforms quickly fell away. Among Ferengi, nothing spoke more persuasively than profit, and under Rom's leadership profits were

abundant. Indeed, despite, or perhaps because of, his reforms, the Ferengi economy was enjoying an unprecedented period of growth.

His Bajoran wife, Leeta, walked beside him. She wore the finest clothing money could buy, a dazzling bejeweled dress of small green and blue gems arranged in intricate patterns, cut provocatively to accentuate her natural curves and to bare skin where modesty might have otherwise been expected. The fabric moved with her body rather than against it, drawing the eye to the deliberate confidence of her stride and the unmistakable sensuality of her form.

With the aid of the most advanced cosmetics available throughout the galaxy, she appeared not to have aged a day since she first married Rom. Her presence was stately, but it was layered with an overt, unapologetic sexuality that announced itself the moment she entered a room. She turned heads wherever she went, not merely because of her beauty, but because she understood exactly how to use it. Rom was acutely aware of the power her sexual appeal carried in negotiations. Leeta never pretended otherwise, and she wielded that power with intention rather than vanity.

Leeta was no ornament to Rom. On the contrary, she worked closely with him in shaping and implementing his reforms, advising him with political instinct as sharp as his own technical acumen. They moved through the world as a pair, united in purpose as well as affection, and their bond remained as strong as it had been on the day Rom first found the courage to express his love for her.

Rom and Leeta were accompanied, as always, by their Hupyrian servant and bodyguard, Melash'yardu. For nearly fifteen hundred years, Ferengi Grand Naguses had employed a select order of Hupyrian males, trained from childhood for service as valets and guards. It was a long-standing tradition of the office, one that Rom had chosen to carry forward.

"Grand Nagus," Quark said, stepping forward to welcome Rom and Leeta into the bar. "What a wonderful surprise to see you, brother. If I had known you were visiting, I could have made proper preparations."

Rom embraced his brother warmly. "Hello, brother. I see you are doing very well. I have been keeping an eye on the returns from the Quark's Bar enterprise. Very healthy profits. You must be very happy."

A broad smile spread across Quark's face, baring his sharp, jagged teeth. "A Ferengi without profit is no Ferengi at all," he said, quoting the eighteenth Rule of Acquisition. He put an arm around Rom and gestured for Leeta to take a seat at a nearby table.

Just as they were sitting down, Nog appeared in the bar. "Father, Moogie, welcome home." He made his way around the table to embrace his father and Leeta in an all too human fashion before taking a seat himself. "I'm sorry I do not have much time to sit, Father. General Ro is on an away mission, and I am in command of the station until she returns."

Rom's ears lifted slightly. "In command of DS9!" he said with quiet emphasis. "That is no small thing, son."

"Command suits you, dear Nog," Leeta said with an affectionate smile as she sized him up. "You are truly cutting a fine figure these days."

Nog felt his ears warm. "Thank you, Moogie."

Quark returned to the table with a tray of drinks and interjected with a scoffing tone. "Command, huh. All the responsibility, none of the profit. What's the point?"

Rom placed a hand on Nog's shoulder. "I am very proud of you, my boy."

Nog flashed one of his famously joyfully smiles. Then the doors parted again and Admiral Tuvok entered. He stood at the threshold with perfectly straight posture, his hands holding a PADD behind his back, and inclined his head toward the Grand Nagus's family table.

Rom rose at once without a word of apology and made his way toward Tuvok at a separate, secluded table on the upper level of Quark's Bar.

Quark turned to Leeta and Nog and said, "So that is who Tuvok is here to meet? My brother, Rom?"

On the upper-level, Rom opened the conversation. "Thank you for meeting with me here, Admiral. As you know, it is our policy not to share highly sensitive diplomatic information over subspace." When he finished speaking, he slid an isolinear chip across the table toward Tuvok. "Here is the intelligence we have collected on the affected Tzenkethi planets. The situation is bad, Admiral."

Tuvok inclined his head: "Explain."

"As you know, the Tzenkethi have been isolationists since well before the founding of the Federation. Dominion manipulation only pushed them further into solitude. About a year ago, our scouts learned that one of the Tzenkethi governors, a leading candidate to ascend to the highest office and rule over all Tzenkethi worlds, had begun promoting a platform of greater openness to the outside galaxy. He granted us limited permission to trade within the territory he governs, which lies along the border between Tzenkethi and Cardassian space."

Rom folded his hands together on the table. "We naturally seized the opportunity to expand our horizons and our profits. That decision created a deep political rift among the Tzenkethi. One faction remained fiercely committed to the old doctrine of isolation, while another began to advocate cautious engagement with the rest of the galaxy."

He paused, then continued more quietly. "Approximately two months ago, a severe and highly contagious illness appeared on the planet with which we had the most contact. Kelnari has a large Tzenkethi colony, and it spread rapidly across the population. More than one hundred thousand lives have already been lost. A powerful faction on the planet accused off-world contact of bringing the disease and threatened to close all contact with outsiders permanently."

Tuvok listened in silence, his expression unreadable.

"In truth, Admiral, it was us," Rom said. "We now know that Ferengi were the carriers. Many of our people possess a natural immunity and show no symptoms. I have done everything within my power to contain and manage the spread. There is currently a Ferengi science vessel in orbit. Its crew has made meaningful progress in treating symptoms and reducing the death toll. But we have reached a dead end. We cannot stop the contagion itself. We need Federation assistance, Admiral, and soon. If we fail, we will lose not only lives, but our only chance to engage with the Tzenkethi ever again."

After a measured silence, Tuvok responded. "It takes courage and true leadership, Grand Nagus, to admit one's own mistakes and to seek help in correcting them. I respect your efforts to reach out to us."

"Admiral, a Federation medical vessel is desperately needed, but if its presence is detected by the current ruler of Tzenkethi space or by the isolationist factions, it could result in their borders closing for another several hundred years."

"I understand," Tuvok replied. He activated his PADD, opting for an old-fashioned screen display rather than a holo projection. He scrolled through several data fields until he found what he was seeking. Looking back up at the Nagus, he said, "I have just the vessel for the task, commanded by one of our most experienced captains. I will redirect the flagship of our medical fleet, the *USS Pasteur*, to the affected Tzenkethi planet. I assure you that all necessary precautions will be taken to avoid detection."

"Thank you, Admiral, the Ferengi Alliance is in your debt." Rom rose and, with a respectful nod, made his way back toward the table where his family was seated.

Tuvok remained where he was for a moment longer, his posture unchanged, when a quiet realization settled in his mind. He intended to deploy the *Pasteur* into Tzenkethi space. The *Pasteur* was commanded by Captain Beverly Crusher. Tuvok made a mental note of the somewhat serendipitous convergence. He had unexpectedly encountered Wesley Crusher here on Deep Space Nine, and now he was preparing to send Wesley's mother on a highly delicate mission, one whose dangers were not yet fully known. The coincidence registered as noteworthy, even improbable, but he did not permit his thoughts to drift beyond the bounds of logic. He categorized the connection as a fascinating coincidence and set it aside.

Light-years away, Malik brought the roundabout into a stable orbit above the planet Tyree. From orbit, the world appeared to be a single gigantic ocean of brown and green patterns in constant motion. It was as though the planet's surface itself were alive, rippling like waves across a vast sea. On closer inspection, however, the illusion dissolved. There was very little water on the desert planet Tyree. The movement came instead from massive herds of gigantic reptiles migrating together in slow, deliberate patterns. Their sheer size and number were so great that, viewed from space, they made the planet appear to be in a state of perpetual motion.

At the sight, Ro remarked, "This could be a problem." She turned toward a computer console and, on the holo-projection, accessed all the relevant biological data on these great creatures. An image appeared of one up close. The average female of the species could grow to more than seven meters tall and carry forty thousand pounds of mass. They were covered in an impregnable armored shell across their backs, studded with tremendous spikes, and had three claws on their hands and feet that could grow up to two meters long. Some of the smaller reptiles were larger than Federation runabouts, while the largest males stretched to lengths approaching fifty meters, several times the size of a runabout. They were large enough to be individually tracked from orbit by standard sensors.

After integrating the information, Ro said in a low voice "They are beautiful, aren't they?"

Malik and Wesley, standing nearby, exchanged incredulous looks at her remark.

"Beautiful, sure," Malik replied. "With claws that can tear hull plating off a starship and spikes that could impale a Pacifica whale."

"Wesley, have you identified the site where the Orb was found?" inquired Ro.

"Yes, I have, general, the coordinates are included in Ezri Dax's classified report."

"Good. Then it is just a matter of moving the herds temporarily away from that location. I believe we can do this without causing them any harm. They are precious innocents."

Wesley and Malik glanced at each other again, this time more amused by Ro's enchantment with the otherwise horrifying creatures.

Ro went to work with determination and focused intensity. She entered a series of calculations, shifted imagery across her holo projection, and layered new visualizations into place. It took her no more than ten minutes to devise a workable plan.

"Okay, I think I have it. Just like verdanis on Bajor, these animals instinctively use infrasound pulses to communicate with one another over long distances. We can generate a sonic pulse at that frequency from the runabout. It appears that the lower the frequency, the more likely the herd is to move. Let us try it in the area where the Orb was found. However, it will only be a temporary solution. Once they become accustomed to the signal, they may dismiss it as unnatural and begin to wander back into the cleared space. I suggest you move quickly, Wesley, to do whatever it is you are going to do."

"Understood, General," Wesley said.

Ro initiated the targeted sonic pulse. Exactly as she had predicted, the herd began to move away from the area, enormous plumes of sand rising in its wake. Wesley prepared to transport to the surface. He secured protective goggles over his eyes and fitted a Starfleet issue breathing device to his mouth to avoid inhaling the dense particulate dust that now rendered the ground completely invisible. He still wore

his tunic of Native American design, and in one hand he carried his bag filled with instruments and devices.

"I am ready for transport," Wesley said, signaling to Malik.

Malik initiated the beam, and within seconds Wesley dissolved into a column of shimmering light, his form breaking apart into cascading particles that spiraled upward before vanishing entirely from the roundabout's transporter platform.

Wesley materialized at the precise location where Benjamin Sisko had unearthed the Orb of the Emissary. Visibility was nonexistent within the choking cloud of dust. He could read his instruments only by the glow of their own illumination, their displays hovering like small oases of light amid the swirling haze.

Crouching in the sand, Wesley worked at a frenzied pace to find the answers he needed. He connected devices together, turned knobs, and calibrated instruments in rapid succession. Before long, he was surrounded by half a dozen strange devices and gadgets working in sync with one another, each performing a function known only to Wesley. The combined effect of these instruments, entirely unintended, was the creation of a localized field around Wesley that interfered with both communications and transporters.

In orbit, Ro monitored Wesley from the runabout while keeping a faintly adoring eye on the giant reptiles below. So far, so good.

Suddenly, a warning signal flashed across her holo projection. Movement had been detected near Wesley's location. Ro zoomed in on the area for visual confirmation, but visibility remained at zero. She shifted to thermal imaging.

A lone juvenile, roughly the size of a standard Federation shuttlecraft, had emerged from behind a basalt outcrop. Ro quickly concluded that this movement had nothing to do with adaptation to her infrasound pulse. This individual appeared to have been separated from the herd long before. It may even have failed to fully thrive, an outcast driven from the larger group.

Whatever the reason, it remained. And it was clearly making its way toward Wesley. Ro instinctively tapped her communications badge. "Ro to Wesley. Come in, Wesley."

There was no response.

She tapped the badge again, this time with sharper urgency in her voice. "Ro to Wesley. Come in."

Again, there was no response.

Ro ran through a set of easily accessible manual diagnostics, checking for any failure in the runabout's communications systems. There was no time to initiate an automated diagnostic. All indicators showed that communications were functioning normally. She turned to Malik and said, "Wesley must be doing something down there that is interfering with communications. I cannot reach him. If we do not act quickly, he is going to be torn to shreds. Initiate transport. I want him out of there now!"

Malik was already out of the pilot's chair and moving rapidly toward the transporter controls before he even affirmed the order: "Yes, General. I'm on it."

After manipulating several controls with no result, Malik said, "General, something is wrong. I cannot get a transporter lock on Wesley. Whatever he is doing down there must also be interfering with our transporter."

"Damn it, Wesley," Ro muttered under her breath. Then, without hesitation, she moved to the navigational controls and began initiating a rapid descent into the planet's atmosphere. "It looks like we are going to have to retrieve him ourselves. Malik, get suited up. You are going after him."

"Understood, General," Malik replied in the even tone of an officer no stranger to life-threatening danger.

The roundabout continued its descent into the dissipating cloud of dust left behind by the herd's retreat from the Orb site. Malik opened a rear hatch and stepped into the rushing air, steady and unflinching behind his goggles. Holding the breathing apparatus in one hand and gripping a handhold with the other, Malik made visual contact with the glow of Wesley's devices. Wesley, for his part, was still hard at work, entirely oblivious to both the approaching danger and the craft now hovering overhead.

"Wesley!" Malik shouted at the top of his lungs, "deactivate your dampening field. Wesley!"

But Wesley could not hear him over the howling winds, the roundabout's engines straining to operate within a planetary atmosphere, and the relentless cascade of equations and calculations racing through his own mind. The creature was inching dangerously close to the unaware Wesley Crusher.

Ro fired several low-yield phaser blasts across the giant reptile's path, but they had no effect. She reset the targeting sequence and fired directly at the creature, only to watch the energy disperse harmlessly across its hardened, armored shell. The plating was impenetrable. Ro was out of options. The animal had drawn too close to Wesley. Any increase in phaser yield sufficient to breach the armor would, by her own calculations, almost certainly kill Wesley as well as the juvenile.

Malik had to act, and he had to act now. He seized the tether coiled within the bulkhead, secured it to his harness, and without hesitation leaped from the roundabout toward the surface below.

Just as Malik made contact with the planet's surface, the reptile, driven by instinctive territorial aggression, began to swing a massive claw toward Wesley, who remained completely unaware of its presence. Malik acted without hesitation, placing himself directly in the path of the monstrous claws and shielding Wesley with his own body, his back turned toward the creature.

The claws ripped through his Bajoran uniform and carved three deep, bloody gashes across his back. Malik screamed in pain, the sound torn from him by the force

of the blow. At once, Wesley was pulled out of his tunnel-visioned focus and became fully aware of his surroundings.

As the reptile began to circle, preparing to deliver a killing strike to its fallen prey, Malik summoned what little strength remained. His grip tightened weakly on Wesley's colorful tunic as he drew in a shallow breath. The words came out broken and barely audible, like air leaking from a failing lung. "Wesley," he whispered. "De-activate your dampening field."

The effort drained him completely, but Wesley finally understood. He stretched out his body, reaching with his right arm, and slapped a control on one of his improvised devices. Aboard the runabout, Ro saw the change instantly. The interference vanished, and transporter systems came back online. She did not hesitate. She urgently locked onto both Malik and Wesley.

Just as the creature closed in to deliver its killing blow, Malik and Wesley vanished in a column of shimmering light, leaving only swirling dust and an enraged roar behind them.

They rematerialized aboard the roundabout. Malik staggered as blood spilled onto the transporter pad from the deep wounds torn across his back. Ro and Wesley moved immediately, supporting him between them and guiding him onto a small medical bed in the aft compartment.

Ro wasted no time initiating emergency first aid protocols. She pulled open a nearby drawer marked with the emblem of Starfleet Medical and began gathering supplies. Without looking up, she asked in a severe tone: "Wesley, can you fly this thing?"

"Of course," Wesley replied, his eyes fixed on Malik as Ro worked, horror and disbelief etched across his face.

"Then get to the cockpit and get us the hell out of here!" Ro said sharply.

Wesley turned to obey, but as he reached the doorway of the compartment he hesitated. He looked back at Ro, his voice unsteady and shaken. "He saved my life. I did not even see it coming. He saved my life, and now he might die. All because of me."

Ro did not look up from her work. "There will be time for pity later," she said firmly. "Right now, *move it!*"

Wesley swallowed, nodded, and hurried toward the cockpit.

As Ro ran a medical tricorder over Malik's back to assess the extent of the damage, she glanced at his face and said, "It is a good thing that creature was only a juvenile, and an unusually small one at that. Otherwise, you would be dead right now." Malik winced in painful acknowledgment of her words. With her left hand, Ro lifted a hypospray and pressed it gently against his neck. It released with a soft hiss of compressed air as the sedative took effect. Malik's eyes rolled slightly, then closed as his body went slack. He was fully sedated.

It was an act of mercy on Ro's part. No one should be forced to endure that level of pain while conscious. With Malik stabilized, Ro moved to the cockpit and took the seat beside Wesley. The course had already been set for Deep Space Nine.

"How is Malik?" Wesley asked, his voice heavy with concern. "Is he going to be all right?"

"Yes," Ro replied. "I believe he will be. But that determination will ultimately be up to Major Tenen."

Wesley stared straight ahead at the stars rushing past the viewport. "This was a mistake, General. We should never have come here. I did not learn anything. I still do not know why the Orb ended up on Tyree in the first place, and we paid dearly for my mistake."

Ro was silent for a moment, then said evenly, "Do not worry about that right now, Wesley. Clarity has a way of finding you, especially when you stop searching for it."

Chapter Eleven

The USS *Pasteur* hung in silent orbit above Kavis Alpha IV, its white hull catching the glint of the system's sun as beacon lights pulsed faintly along its dorsal ridge in a steady cadence. Suspended below in the vacuum of space was the slowly rotating planet, its soil tinted a deep reddish hue. A vast canopy of intricate cloud formations spread across its atmosphere, rendered in muted shades of purplish gray. The patterns were complex and layered, folding into one another like living systems rather than mere weather. At irregular intervals, brilliant flashes of bright green lightning tore through the cloud banks, illuminating entire clusters for hundreds of miles at a time. From orbit, the world was undeniably beautiful and unmistakably inhospitable to humanoid life.

Inside the *Pasteur's* ready room, Captain Beverly Crusher stood with the poised assurance of one long accustomed to command, yet tempered by the gentler ethos of a healer. She stood near the viewport, her hands clasped loosely behind her back, gazing down at the planet below. The *Pasteur's* mission was to evaluate the health of the nanite population on the planet that had been left there by the *Enterprise-D* in 2366.

In the last thirty years, the nanites had expanded into a thriving and complex microscopic civilization, though in physical terms they occupied less than one percent of the planet's surface. Beverly Crusher had many encouraging findings to report back to Starfleet about the nanites she felt responsible for, having settled them there decades earlier. However, this particular mission brought her little joy. Evaluating the outcome of what had begun as a simple school project for her son Wesley only deepened her sense of his absence.

She had not been able to shake the thought of him since they had arrived in orbit three days prior. As she gazed at the mesmerizing planet below, her thoughts lingered on one thing, and one thing alone: her son.

The last time she had seen Wesley was at the marriage of Will Riker and Deanna Troi, and that had already been over fifteen years ago. Wesley had surprised everyone by appearing at the event without warning. By that point, no one had seen him in eight years. Picard, who officiated the ceremony, had insisted that Wesley wear a Starfleet-issue dress uniform and personally authorized one to be replicated for him. Wesley moved easily among his former crewmates and the guests alike, greeting them with good cheer, as if nothing had changed since his rambunctious teenage years. He carried no visible trace of his training as a Traveler.

His presence cast an aura of mystery over the wedding, but every attempt to elicit information, even from Mr. Data, about where he had been or what he had been doing, he masterfully evaded by delivering obscure answers or finding ways to shift the topic. When the *Enterprise-E* was called away almost immediately following the reception, Wesley vanished again as mysteriously as he had appeared.

In the years that followed, that brief reappearance settled into Beverly's memory with an almost unreasonable weight. It became less a moment than a reference point, the last fixed coordinate by which she measured the passing of time. So much of her own life had unfolded since then in careful sequence, shaped by duty, by choices made and unmade, by relationships that endured and others that gently loosened their hold. Wesley's absence did not dominate those years, but it lingered at their edges, a quiet constant against which everything else was set. And so, as the memory of the wedding faded into the background of her thoughts, Beverly found herself turning inward, tracing the path her own life had taken since that day.

Beverly remained aboard the *Enterprise-E* as chief medical officer for several years after that. During that time, she watched her circle of friends gradually disperse, one posting at a time. Her friend Data had been lost in action, a loss she still felt acutely. Riker and Troi departed next, taking up residence aboard the USS *Titan* when Will accepted his first command. Nurse Ogawa and several other members of the *Enterprise* crew followed Riker to his new posting, carrying with them the familiar rhythms of a life Beverly had once shared.

Worf remained on Deep Space Nine, where he helped manage the fragile peace that followed the end of the war. Guinan left Federation space altogether to run an establishment in the Orion system, for reasons that remained obscure to Beverly. Geordi was the last of her original crew to leave the *Enterprise*. Eventually, he too departed to assume command of the USS *Challenger*.

By then, Picard was all that remained of her old life. Being the only two aboard the *Enterprise* with memories of the old ship and the old missions that had shaped who they were and their legacies, drew them closer together. They had always shared a close bond, even since their Academy days, one that had grown much stronger after the experience they shared on Kesprytt III, when their thoughts had become joined and they had learned the true depths of the affection they felt for one another. Over time, their daily breakfast routine, which they had started aboard the *Enterprise-D*, turned into both a breakfast and dinner routine. Those dinners eventually led to spending nights together, which then blossomed into a relationship.

When Picard proposed to her, she said yes without hesitation. They both knew at the time that this was not a marriage born of the kind of romantic infatuation that overtakes young newlyweds. It was a marriage of convenience, a remedy for the void they both felt after the scattering of their friends. It was not a marriage that could ever have lasted. Deep down, they both knew that.

Picard was a kind and supportive husband, but he was also distant, introspective, and solitary. He was never able to adapt from the isolation he had strategically maintained from his crew to being a truly present husband. He would sit alone in his ready room for hours, reading, and return to their quarters long after she had fallen asleep. He had little patience for the kind of emotional work often required of married couples. He would leave on long missions without telling her. Her marriage to Picard was, ironically, the loneliest time of her life.

When Picard was promoted to Admiral, a discussion was had, although it was not needed. They both knew it was over. She needed a fresh start, one entirely her own, shaped by her own ambition and no longer subordinate to any spouse or any captain. When she left the *Enterprise-E*, she was showered with offers. She weighed all of them, or at least most of them, with care, knowing that the decision she made now would determine the next chapter of her life.

She was offered the position of Director of Starfleet Medical, which she declined without much hesitation. She had already served in that role as an interim director for a year, and doing so again felt less like advancement than regression. More than that, she knew she did not belong behind a desk. She wanted to be where she was most needed. She still had life and adventure in her, and she wanted to be the one to shape those adventures rather than accompany them from the sidelines.

The position that most closely fit the vision she had for her next chapter was command of the flagship of Starfleet's medical fleet, the *Pasteur*. She accepted the posting and never looked back. For the first time in her life, she was the sole architect of her own story. At the helm of this ship, she felt she was doing the most good, precisely where she was most needed. Many other positions had been offered to her since she took command, but she could not imagine leaving the *Pasteur* for any of them.

The *Pasteur* was a vessel of healing, crewed by hundreds of doctors, nurses, surgeons, and specialists. Entire decks were devoted to care, from critical-care wards and surgical bays to pediatric centers designed to soothe frightened children from dozens of worlds. One entire deck was devoted to dentistry, another to physical rehabilitation. Three-fifths of the crew were Starfleet Medical personnel, with another fifth composed of research scientists conducting biological and biochemical studies. The remaining fifth covered engineering and security functions, all cross-trained as field medics.

The *Pasteur* was more than a starship. It was the largest and best-equipped mobile hospital and medical research center in the quadrant. It even outstripped most starbases in technological sophistication, second only to Starfleet Medical Headquarters itself.

As proud as she was of the *Pasteur*, Beverly was even prouder of her hand-selected crew, who had grown to feel like family to her. Her first officer, Commander Sata, was a Benzite female whose translucent respirator misted faintly as she spoke.

A cousin to Mordock, the first of their species to enter Starfleet, Sata possessed the same methodical intellect, tempered by an understated empathy unusual among Benzites. Beverly trusted her implicitly and could easily envision a day when Sata would occupy the command chair herself.

Her second officer, Lieutenant Commander Takis, a tall Denobulan male with a recessed hairline and tight curls of hair at the back, characteristic of his race, radiated calm good humor even under pressure. His laughter and levity had a way of easing tension on the bridge during long shifts, or in the operating room during extended surgical procedures. He lived aboard the ship with his first wife, Trevix, a voluptuous Denobulan female who oversaw shipboard hospitality, and Trevix's first husband, Biras, a shorter and rounder Denobulan male with an exquisite mane of curls, whose role aboard the ship blended cultural liaison, logistics, and morale in ways uniquely Denobulan. Takis's other two spouses and their families remained on Denobula, sending regular subspace updates that filled their quarters with laughter, overlapping voices, and words of love. Takis and his family were the heart of the *Pasteur*.

As Beverly stood at the ready room viewport, looking out at the spectacle of Kavis Alpha IV and missing her son, she caught sight of her own face reflected faintly in the glass. She saw the deepening lines etched into her features and the completely white hair she now wore parted at the center and drawn back without ornament into a low bun, nothing loose, nothing decorative. Her style was a deliberate homage to Florence Nightingale, a figure from a distant century whom Beverly admired for both her intellect and her unwavering sense of duty. The image startled her just enough to pull her back into the present, restoring her awareness of her responsibilities as captain. Enough self-pity, she told herself. It was time to return to her work.

At 20:00 hours, she exited her ready room onto the bridge and asked for a status update from Lieutenant Commander Takis, who had command of the shift. No major changes in the status of the ship or the mission were reported. Without ceremony, she left the bridge and walked the ship's corridors, giving and receiving warm, respectful greetings with everyone she passed.

Captain Crusher arrived at Trevix's Café, the hospitality center of the ship named after its delightful Denobulan proprietor. She entered, courteously returning the respectful nods of welcome she received from the patrons already seated. The café was warm and softly lit, its furnishings arranged to accommodate the varied physical characteristics of the ship's diverse crew. The décor was truly singular. Highly colorful and exuberantly ornamented Denobulan styles blended seamlessly with Federation minimalism, and the air carried a faint, pleasant aroma of Denobulan dried fruits, pickled vegetables, exotic spices and teas.

She sat on one of the high bar stools, and Trevix herself appeared behind the bar to serve her. "Good evening, Captain," Trevix said with a bright, welcoming countenance. "May I get you a bit of dinner? Perhaps some Solarian soufflé? Biras made them from fresh ingredients this morning. They are not replicated!"

"No thank you, Trevix. Perhaps just some *light* Tarkalean tea."

"Coming right up, Captain."

Trevix set the cup down carefully in front of Beverly, the steam rising in an almost ethereal spiral. "Lightly brewed," she said with a small, satisfied smile. "I restrained myself. This time."

Beverly glanced at the cup, then back at Trevix, and laughed softly. "Your restraint is legendary, Trevix."

Beverly took a sip and let the warmth settle. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Trevix watched her with an attentiveness that was not intrusive, merely present. "You look tired, Captain," Trevix said gently. "Not the body kind. The other kind."

Beverly exhaled: "I suppose that is fair."

Trevix tilted her head. "You are thinking about your son."

It was not a question. Beverly hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. It seems impossible not to, here. My son was the unwitting creator of this new race that we're here to assess. In a sense, he's the *father* of this civilization. They're my grandchildren."

Beverly traced the rim of her cup with her fingertip. "I sometimes wonder whether the word 'parent' still applies to me. Yes, I have procreated, but my son has grown beyond me. Far beyond me. I do not even know what connection he still has to the plane of existence on which I gave birth to him and raised him."

Trevix leaned forward slightly. "On Denobula, parenthood does not end when a child no longer needs you to navigate through life. It changes shape. We have a word for it in our language, *qwiksmak*. It is used to describe the relationship grown children have to their parents when the need for hand-holding turns into the need for holding space. The word carries other meanings as well. As a noun, *qwiksmak* refers to a parent who is not biologically related. It is most often applied to second and third mothers and second and third fathers within the Denobulan family structure, but it can just as easily refer to a close mentor, teacher, or guide who is unconnected to the family unit."

Trevix paused, then added more softly, "On Denobula, *qwiksmak* is also a word of gratitude. It is what you say to someone when you realize that survival would have been impossible without them."

Beverly smiled. "the lessons I have learned about life and love from Denobulan culture have truly enriched my perspective on life."

"Perspective is important, but it is also practical," Trevix said. "We are a very practical people, and we recognize that biological parents are not always the best

guardians or guides for their children. This is part of why we favor more communal approaches to parenthood."

A voice drifted in from behind the counter. "To me, the most important lesson from Denobulan culture illustrated here is our definitional freedom with vocabulary. Who needs an entire dictionary when you can make a handful of words mean anything and everything."

Beverly glanced up in mild surprise as Biras straightened from where he had been crouched below the bar, stocking and organizing various containers of exotic nuts, fruits, and ground beans.

"Where did you come from?" Beverly asked with amusement.

"I wondered how long I could stay down there before someone noticed," he said jokingly. "Apparently forever."

Trevix did not turn. "So, you were eavesdropping then. On our captain, no less."

"I prefer to think of it as participating silently," Biras replied with an impish grin. "It is my special talent. I am part of almost every conversation in here right now and you do not even know it."

"They don't seem to know it either," Trevix said pointing to the people seated around the café.

Beverly let out a much-needed laugh, short and unguarded, surprising herself with its ease.

Biras made himself perfectly at home, leaning comfortably against the counter. "For the record, Captain, *qwiskmak* is also occasionally used by adult children who wish to avoid admitting they are still asking for advice or support. It sounds far more independent and grown-up than what I believe is the Federation standard equivalent of 'Mommy, may I please borrow the air glider.'"

"You mean, that was how *you* used it with your sets of parents when we got married and you were still a rudderless child," Trevix interjected.

Beverly continued to enjoy their banter. It was just what the doctor ordered, and on the *Pasteur*, that was really saying something.

Biras looked directly at Beverly. "No offense, Captain, but I will never understand you humans. Only one spouse, only two parents. It is as if you hold biology as some kind of exclusive and sacred religion. Where is the feeling? Where is the fun? It all seems so unnecessarily complicated to me."

Beverly shook her head, smiling. "I suppose humans do have a way of making things more complicated than they need to be."

Biras softened. "In the interest of being uncomplicated, allow me to be serious for precisely one sentence. Captain, people do not stop being shaped by those who loved them first. It is the social and emotional reference point they carry with them throughout their lives. Transcendence can't undo that, and distance certainly does not."

"Sounds like three sentences to me, Biras," Trevix cut in.

Biras waved a hand dismissively. "When all is said and done, the only wholly uncomplicated constant in the universe is a really delicious homemade Solarian soufflé. What do you say, Captain? Hungry yet?"

Beverly smiled, feeling lighter than she had in hours. "Well, all right. Who am I to say no to the council of my new *qwiksmak*?"

"Wonderful. We will bring one right out to you, Captain," Trevix said, tilting her head toward Biras and gesturing for him to fetch a soufflé.

Just as Biras turned to do so, a chime sounded from Beverly's communicator, followed by Takis's voice. "Bridge to Captain Crusher."

She tapped her badge. "Go ahead."

"Incoming transmission, Captain. Priority Code Forty-Seven Alpha, emergency protocol. It is Admiral Tuvok, sir."

Beverly placed her cup down gently. "Please route it to my quarters, Takis. I am on my way," she said as she stood.

She shrugged apologetically toward Trevix and Biras. "I am afraid I will have to take a rain check on the soufflé. But thank you both for the vocabulary lesson."

"No problem, Captain," Biras said in a jesting tone. "We will have the soufflé routed to your quarters as well."

Beverly smiled once more, then turned and made her way toward the exit with long, determined strides.

The door hissed closed behind her as she entered the captain's quarters. The space was elegantly decorated, much as it had been aboard the *Enterprise*, with warm pink and red hues softening the Starfleet lines. Yet signs of disarray betrayed the realities of her chaotically busy schedule as captain of the Federation's medical flagship. Her lab coat hung unceremoniously over a chair, scattered diagnostic instruments occupied nearly every available surface, and PADDs lay strewn across both the desk and the bed.

She activated the communications console. On the small holo projection, the Starfleet insignia appeared, then resolved into the composed visage of Admiral Tuvok. "Admiral," she greeted with a slight nod, her tone professional but warm.

"Captain Crusher, the situation is as follows. Ferengi commercial interests have begun extending their operations into one of the outer border regions of Tzenkethi space. This expansion was prompted by credible reports of political instability on the Tzenkethi homeworld. More specifically, intelligence indicates the emergence of a contender for leadership, currently governing that sector, who is demonstrably more receptive to external contact than any Tzenkethi authority figure in recorded history.

"However, this development, while noteworthy, has been accompanied by a significant complication. A virulent infection has erupted on the Tzenkethi world with which the Ferengi have had the most sustained contact. Epidemiological analysis

indicates that the pathogen was introduced through contact with off-worlders. The Grand Nagus has accepted this conclusion and has made efforts to assist. A Ferengi science vessel currently in orbit has succeeded in managing the symptoms of the infection but has thus far failed to halt its spread. In an effort to preserve the possibility of a lasting relationship with the Tzenkethi, the Grand Nagus has requested Federation medical assistance.”

“I see, Admiral,” Beverly said. “But how is the Federation supposed to intervene in Tzenkethi space?”

“Indeed, Captain, direct Federation intervention is not a viable option. Such involvement would undermine the contender’s legitimacy and validate hardline opposition, ensuring that the Tzenkethi remain isolated from the rest of the galaxy indefinitely. However, through Ferengi intermediaries, the contender has authorized limited Federation access to his territory. I am transmitting the relevant coordinates now.”

Beverly studied the holographic three-dimensional map that appeared before her and immediately noted the problem. “Admiral Tuvok, that is all well and good, but to reach the contender’s territory we would be required to pass through either hostile Tzenkethi space or hostile Cardassian space. I do not need to remind you that the *Pasteur* has extremely limited defensive capability.”

“I am aware of the challenges, Captain. However, the *Pasteur* and her crew are uniquely suited to provide the assistance required. Additionally, your vessel is currently detached from the main medical fleet. Your departure is therefore less likely to attract attention. The operation must proceed in total secrecy. Success will not be publicly acknowledged. Failure will have significant diplomatic consequences for decades to come.”

Beverly exhaled softly: “All the easy assignments, then, huh?”

“Captain,” Tuvok said evenly, “I am ordering you to proceed toward Tzenkethi space at once. I am currently developing a solution to the matter of discretion. Do not enter Tzenkethi space without receiving further directives from me. Tuvok out.”

Chapter Twelve

Deep Space Nine hung in silence within the Denorios Belt, its great pylons suspended against the stars, the unseen presence of the wormhole lingering nearby like a held breath. Ro, Wesley, and Malik had returned from their away mission to Tyree. Malik now rested in med bay under the care of Tenen Rahl, still chemically sedated but in stable condition, with most of the torn skin and muscle along his back already nearly healed. Treating the lacerations had been the easy part. What kept Tenen vigilant was the lingering salmonella-like bacterial infection carried on the creature's claws. There were, as yet, no signs of bacterial sepsis, but the danger remained ever-present.

Ro Laren had resumed command of the station. When she entered the command office to relieve Nog, he rose instinctively from the chair, a reflex honed by decades of Starfleet hierarchical discipline, and circled the desk to take a seat opposite her as she settled into the command position. Ro began the debrief by thanking him for authorizing the use of the Starfleet runabout, the allocation of which fell within Nog's authority as the official Starfleet liaison to the station. She then informed him of Malik's actions and of the ultimate failure of the mission from Wesley's perspective.

Nog received the information with an uncharacteristic seriousness, breaking the mood only once with a dry remark that, since he personally controlled runabout assignments, it might be nice if he himself had the opportunity to leave the station in one once in a while.

In Nog's debrief on the station's status during her absence, he informed Ro that his childhood friend Jake Sisko had contacted him and explained Wesley's request that he come to Deep Space Nine. Nog had been able to arrange passage for Jake aboard a Starfleet vessel, which significantly reduced the travel time compared to civilian transport, and he was due to arrive in three days. Ro acknowledged the report and dismissed him. Nog passed through the doors and returned to his watch in Ops.

By the next day, Malik had begun to rally. Tenen found no trace of infection in his blood, and the deep gashes along his back had already healed into bright red scars. She brought him out of sedation, and within minutes was able to elicit verbal responses, though he remained groggy and disoriented. He continued to improve rapidly over the course of the day, and Tenen informed him that he might be well enough to return to duty soon.

Toward evening, Wesley came to the med bay to visit him. Sitting at the side of the bed, Wesley began without preamble. "Malik, I wanted to thank you for what you did. You saved my life."

"That's my job, Wesley," Malik replied evenly. "There's no need to thank me." After a moment, his expression sharpened slightly. "But Wesley, I know you haven't been part of a crew in many years. It would have been helpful to know in advance that you planned to activate a dampening field that rendered our transporters useless. We could have made alternative plans."

"I understand," Wesley said. "You're right. I'm learning how to function within a group all over again. It's a challenge, I admit."

"We're here to help you, Wesley," Malik said. "Please accept our friendship." He paused, then added with a faint, lighthearted smile, "And Wesley, you might also want to work on your situational awareness a bit."

Wesley acknowledged the remark with a nod and rose to leave the med bay. Thanks to the capabilities of Federation medicine, which Tenen practiced to the fullest, Malik was back on his feet and returned to duty within two days of coming out of sedation.

After Malik had spent two uneventful days back on duty, elsewhere in the Bajoran system, the skyline of Bajor City appeared almost tranquil beneath the deep blue of the late afternoon sky. From the First Minister's office, copper domes glittered in the sunlight, and temples and civic towers stood in a state of untouched contentment. The calm, however, was an illusion. Bajor was in a state of crisis. Inside the First Minister's office complex, chaos pressed in from every direction.

Kira stood in her private office before a display of holo projections, one hand resting on her hip while the other covered her mouth in shock and disbelief. One projection showed footage of a man leaping from the top of a colossal statue of an ancient vedek. His body fell in silence, his long robe streaming in the wind as if he were flying rather than falling. Each replay felt more unbearable than the last, not only because of the act itself but because of the absolute certainty written across the man's face as he stepped into empty air.

On the other projections, reports poured in faster than she could process them. Citizens seized by sudden visions collapsed in marketplaces and homes alike, forced to relive the most harrowing moments of their lives. Families froze mid-meal, hands suspended above bowls, eyes vacant as buried memories clawed their way to the surface. Parents screamed the names of children long dead. Veterans dropped to their knees, reliving combat trauma that had been buried deep in their psyches. And a few individuals reported something far more disturbing, visions of future anguish, pain not yet lived but felt as viscerally as their own heartbeat.

Kira watched without flinching, deeply troubled but steady. She had faced crisis many times over the course of her life, and she was certain they would uncover the

cause of these strange occurrences. The question that weighed on her now was how much damage would be done before they did.

Jolen Deyer moved between the inner and outer offices with relentless efficiency, his arms wrapped around a stack of PADDs too large to hold with his hands alone. His voice cut through the din as the only steady element in a room full of rising panic. Staffers called to him from every direction, each bearing more data, more fear, more evidence of systems failing under strain. Catastrophic computer malfunctions had been reported across the entire planet, a problem Jolen treated as separate from the traumatic visions only for the sake of efficiency, even as he knew they must somehow be connected.

Then, from the outer office, a scream tore through the noise. A young aide collapsed mid stride just beyond the threshold, her body convulsing violently as she hit the floor. Her mouth moved, forming words no one could understand, her eyes unfocused and wide with terror. Jolen was at her side instantly, lowering her carefully, one hand firm on her shoulder, the other raised in a sharp gesture that sent nearby staffers stepping back without question. "Clear the space," he ordered. "She's breathing. Get med support now."

Across the planet, the mysterious wave of disruption and terror continued to intensify into the evening hours, as the death toll from suicide, panic-induced heart attacks, and accidents caused by catastrophic systems malfunctions multiplied by the minute.

As night approached, a communications tower in Janir City sparked, shuddered, and collapsed in on itself in a rain of metal and fire, killing dozens. On the southern continent, the power grid flickered and failed in sequence, each node going dark like a dying constellation and leaving hundreds of thousands without access to food replicators. In the First Minister's office, the holo projections stuttered, flared white, then black, then white again. A faint crack sounded from Kira's desk as a handheld communications unit overheated, its casing blistering under an internal surge followed by a thin curl of smoke. Jolen's PADDs crackled and went dead just as he was briefing the First Minister on the latest developments.

Kira and Jolen continued working through the night, doing their best to stay ahead of the cascade of events unfolding across the planet with whatever technology still functioned. Kira ordered the implementation of an improvised analog response, directing her security forces to evacuate civilians from high danger areas and reach those in need of immediate aid using artifacts housed in Bajor's museums. Foot powered carts, hand-cranked sirens, and other pre-industrial tools were pressed back into service. It was not a solution, but at least they were doing something.

Thank the Prophets, Kira thought, that she had been spared the traumatic visions so far. She had already experienced one and understood their psychic impact. Something had to be done. But what?

At the same moment the unexplained disruptions began on Bajor, similar disturbances manifested aboard Deep Space Nine. Throughout the station, sparks flew from consoles and terminals. A systems failure in the cargo area triggered a structural collapse, and an entire bulkhead gave way, crushing hundreds of containers filled with market goods. On the Promenade, Bajorans, Ferengi, Klingons, Lurians, and dozens of other species scattered in every direction as panic spread. A low rumble shook the station, causing many to lose their footing. In one section of the habitat ring, the gravitational plating failed entirely, sending civilians drifting upward from beds and chairs toward the ceiling.

As severe as the disruptions were, this was the second time Deep Space Nine had experienced the phenomenon. After the previous episode, the crew had implemented safeguards in advance, allowing power to be immediately shunted away from compromised systems and redirected to auxiliary backups. As a result, the systemic failures, though they appeared dangerously severe, were in fact brought under far better control than before. There was, however, nothing Ro's crew could do to prepare for the debilitating psychic effects, which once again took hold among many of the Bajorans aboard the station.

The chaos did not spare Ops, but Ro's crew remained fixed at their posts, like small islands amid a stormy sea. Ro herself was firmly in command, delivering clear, precise orders and redirecting efforts as needed. She maintained a holistic grasp of the disruption, issuing commands largely preemptively rather than reactively.

"Malik," Ro ordered, her eyes still fixed on a tricorder reading she now trusted more than the station's internal systems, "initiate a type-three deflector pulse, setting nine point nine three, on my mark."

Before he could respond in the affirmative, Malik's breath caught sharply in his throat. His eyes went wide, pupils dilating with sudden terror. "No," he whispered. Then, louder and faster, "No, no, no..."

He threw his forearms up in a tight crisscross in front of his face, forming an instinctive protective barrier, as if to shield himself from something no one else could see. His posture was defensive and frantic. This was not a reflexive response to a physical threat, but the outward manifestation of an overwhelming psychic assault. He let out a scream of sheer terror.

From a nearby station, Captain Nog stepped forward at once to assist his distressed crewmate and friend, his voice calm and steady, carrying the tone of a seasoned commander who had faced his own share of terror. "Malik," he said gently, placing a hand softly on his shoulder. "Hey. Look at me."

Nog's gesture of concern triggered something primal, something feral, deep within Malik. He exploded forward with terrifying speed and viciousness, launching himself at Nog as fists flew in a storm of ferocity and brute strength. Each strike carried blind fury, muscle memory overriding reason. Blow after brutal blow rained down in rapid, violent succession.

Nog met the assault instinctively. His Starfleet training engaged without conscious thought as he parried and redirected, blocked and evaded, allowing himself to be driven backward under control as Malik surged forward relentlessly. Given the dramatic disparity in height and mass between the two men, Nog's defensive technique became a master class in the application of Federation martial arts, blending styles designed to neutralize a larger, more powerful opponent.

Nog's technique could only hold out so long against Malik's ferocious, explosive rage. Malik's fist landed hard across Nog's right lobe, one of the most sensitive regions of Ferengi anatomy. Debilitating pain flared white and disorienting, followed immediately by a wave of overwhelming nausea that left his stomach heaving and his balance uncertain. "Malik," Nog shouted from a crouch on the deck, his voice breaking through the pain, "stop. That's an order."

Colonel Malik did not hear him. His eyes were vacant, his breath ragged, his strength terrifying. He seized Nog by the front of his crimson uniform with both hands, lifted him clean off the deck, and hurled him across Ops in a feat of incredible strength. Nog struck a console hard, the impact accompanied by a shattering crack that might have been the console's display panels or his ribs. He hit the deck with a heavy thud, limp and unconscious.

The first phaser burst struck Malik square in the chest, the impact snapping his torso back. He staggered, boots scraping against the deck, his arms flaring outward as if he might still fight his way forward through sheer momentum. He did not fall. The second burst hit the same point an instant later and cut through what little resistance remained. Malik's body dropped straight down, the rage that had driven him completely extinguished. The phaser has been on a stun setting. There was no burn, no smoke, no lingering glow. Just the heavy, final sound of a soldier collapsing against the deck.

Ro stood where she had fired, her arm steady, the phaser lowered a fraction as the rest of the Ops crew struggled to make sense of what had just happened, their stunned gazes fixed on her. Her expression did not change. "Get them both to Sickbay," she said with blunt control.

Malik's security officers moved at once. Two hurried to Nog's side and helped him to his feet, supporting his weight as he struggled to remain conscious. Two more secured Malik onto an anti-grav stretcher. "Restrain Colonel Malik before he comes to," Ro added.

She raised her hand toward her comm badge to alert med bay of Malik and Nog's imminent arrival, but before she could touch it, the badge chirped. Tenen's voice came through over a chaotic background. "Med bay to General Ro."

Ro tapped the communicator. "Go ahead."

"General," Tenen said, her voice breathless. "We're getting calls from all over the station. Panic attacks. Self-injuries among the Bajoran complement. We've already

confirmed two civilian suicides. Sickbay is overflowing. And, General, from what I can see of the Promenade from here, it's chaos."

"Acknowledged," Ro said evenly. "Carry on as best you can. Be advised, two additional patients are en route to you. It's Malik and Nog."

"Acknowledged," Tenen replied, a note of exasperation breaking through before the channel closed.

Ro tapped her comm badge again. "Ro to Security."

The voice of Malik's second in command, a young Bajoran officer, answered at once. "Yes, General."

"Secure the Promenade immediately," Ro ordered.

"On our way, General."

Without hesitation or transition, Ro turned back to her tricorder and resumed management of the broader crisis, as if the incident with Malik and Nog had never occurred. Within seconds she was again issuing clipped directives and rapid commands, her focus locked firmly on keeping the station intact.

She quickly identified a major problem developing, one that would require far more than simple power redirection to contain. Concerned, Ro double checked her readings and confirmed her conclusion. One of the station's air filtration units was registering the presence of neutron radiation. Isolating that unit from the rest of the air supply was straightforward. The larger problem was that such a radiation leak could originate from only one place on the station.

Deep within the lowest decks, beneath obsolete ore processing infrastructure no longer in use, lay a tangled maze of Cardassian circuitry, power relay stations, and control valves, none of which served any current purpose. This was the part of the station that most strongly retained its original Cardassian character, where the fewest Starfleet or Bajoran modifications had ever been made. Even Chief O'Brien had seen little value in attempting upgrades to this labyrinth of antiquated technology, since its sole purpose had been to support mining operations that no longer existed.

The leak itself would be easy to stop. Reaching the shutoff valve would not. Ro did not trust her engineering team to locate and repair the problem in time. Most of them had never set foot in that section of the station. She herself had only been there once. The only Cardassian schematic of the area on record was nearly incomprehensible and would take even Ro at least a half hour to decipher. She didn't have a half hour, she had minutes. Her engineers did not stand a chance.

For the first time since taking command of Deep Space Nine, Ro confronted the imminent possibility that she might have to issue an order to abandon the station. A hollow, sinking sensation spread through her chest. For a brief moment, she found herself utterly at a loss.

Then she heard a new voice appear on ops: "General Ro."

She turned to see who it was. Standing in the turbolift entrance to Ops was the Grand Nagus, his ostentatious robes glittering absurdly under flickering emergency lights.

"It isn't safe here, Nagus," Ro snapped and with a point of the finger and glance to a nearby crewmember "My officer will escort you."

"No, no," Rom said quickly, raising a small hand. "I'm here to help. I was an engineer here once."

She blinked. Quark's stories surfaced unbidden, boasts of his brother's unlikely brilliance with power systems. There was no time for doubt. "Rom," Ro said with urgency, "do you think you could locate the thirty-fourth junction in the lower mining array and then reach the third radiation valve? It appears to be behind an oblong access panel, along with dozens of other identical circuits and control lines."

"Sure. That's easy," Rom replied enthusiastically, his voice carrying its familiar note of charm and mirth.

Ro acted without hesitation, pulling a spare comm badge from her pocket and tossing it to him. "Then move," she ordered sharply. "You have less than ten minutes before the radiation levels become fatal."

Rom ran.

He moved through lifts and corridors pulsing with flickering emergency illumination. He wove past panicked civilians pressed against the walls, stepped over debris shaken loose from overhead panels, and ducked instinctively as sparks spat from exposed conduits. He did not need instructions or schematics. He knew the station's guts the way others knew familiar streets, its bends and choke points unfolding in his mind like old music.

"Engineering business," he puffed as he barreled through a cluster of startled crew members, who stared in bafflement at the sight of the Grand Nagus, his distinguished robes billowing as he dashed with purpose through the chaotic corridors. "Coming through."

After squeezing and climbing through layers of obsolete infrastructure, he finally reached the Cardassian access panel. He tore it open without hesitation and plunged his hands into a snarled mass of wires and conduits. Sparks kissed his sleeves and stung his skin, but he did not pull back. Working by instinct and long buried memory, he identified the correct junction by touch alone. He twisted a bypass coupler into place, bled pressure from a choked feed, and rerouted plasma through a forgotten artery that had not carried current in years.

Breathing heavily but wearing a satisfied, toothy grin, he tapped his communicator. "Rom to General Ro."

"Rom, I can see the radiation levels already falling," Ro replied. "You did it!"

"And with twenty-three seconds to spare," Rom added proudly.

"We owe you one, Nagus."

"Just glad I could help," he said. "I don't get to play with circuits very much anymore. It was fun!"

Ro exchanged a look of amused disbelief with one of her officers at the serendipitous way the station had just averted disaster. After a few more minutes, orders were given with less urgency as control slowly returned to Deep Space Nine. Across the station, emergency lighting steadied. Power levels normalized. Alarms fell silent. The deck's vibration eased. They were out of immediate danger. But the damage to the station was extensive.

Ro exhaled slowly and issued her final directives in response to the crisis. "Implement emergency power rationing and restrict docking to Starfleet and emergency response vessels only," she ordered. "All other traffic is to be rerouted to Bajor or instructed to hold orbit around the station."

The med bay was still considerably more chaotic than Ops, though it too was beginning to calm. Tenen moved through the crowded bay with implacable focus, weaving between triage cots and treatment stations with purpose. When she reached Nog and Malik, she reviewed their charts on her PADD. Nog was responding well to the care her nurses had administered. Malik, however, remained unconscious, secured in his restraints.

Tenen issued a discharge order for Nog, then turned to one of her nurses and said, nodding toward Malik, "I see no neurological or biochemical explanation for his sudden attack on Captain Nog. Keep him restrained for now. Let's just treat the body and hope the mind will follow." With that, she moved on to the other patients still waiting for her attention.

Several hours had passed since the easing of the crisis that had so severely disrupted and damaged Deep Space Nine. The station remained in a state of extreme disrepair. Wesley Crusher paced nervously in deep thought at the entrance to Docking Bay Three as engineering and security teams hurried past him toward their next assignments, tools in hand, while loose circuitry still dangled from exposed ceiling panels.

A permitted Starfleet vessel settled slowly into its berth. The airlock cycled open, and Jake Sisko stepped through. The stress of his uneven life since the ascension of his father had left its mark on his face. His hair and beard were peppered with silver strands amid their natural deep black, lending him a gravity beyond his years. He wore an elegant dark brown suit, slightly wrinkled from travel, trimmed with colorful Nigerian weaving patterns in yellow, green, black, and red along the collar, sleeves, and edges of the jacket. His height was imposing, but his expression remained open, handsome, and kind.

As he stepped fully into the docking bay, a bag slung across his shoulder, Jake caught Wesley's eye. He then glanced around at the disheveled state of the station,

taking in the scorched bulkheads and ongoing repairs, and asked in a tone that was genuinely curious, with a trace of familiar mischief, "What happened here?"

Chapter Thirteen

Jake and Wesley made their way from the docking bay toward the Promenade. For Jake, the walk felt like coming home again. Even through the damage, the ongoing repairs, and the general disarray, the familiarity of Deep Space Nine washed over him in a wave of warm nostalgia. That feeling did not settle into anything simple, but shifted constantly between bright memories of his earlier years on the station before the war, when he and Nog had felt like the station belonged exclusively to them, and the cooler, heavier memories of the war years themselves, followed by the long and complicated period after his father's ascension. All of it pressed in on him at once.

The station's corridors seemed to carry those memories in their walls, and as Jake walked, his emotions swelled, crowding his chest with affection, loss, and something not yet fully understood. Taking stock of the damage surrounding him, Jake glanced along the corridor and said, "I hope there's a working replicator somewhere. I'm starving."

As he said this, Quark's Bar came into view further along the Promenade. Its telltale blinking lights were dark in accordance with power conservation orders, but Jake could never forget where Quark's was located. As they drew closer, it became clear that the bar itself was closed for repairs. Peering through the transparisteel doors, Jake could see that there was still life inside. Ferengi staff hurried among stacked chairs and partially disassembled consoles, scrambling to do whatever they could to reopen the establishment to the public. Every minute the bar remained closed was a minute in which no profit could be earned.

Quark himself stood behind the bar, barking orders at his staff and directing them with sharply pointing fingers in every direction. In the midst of it all, he caught sight of a face peering through the doors and froze, doing a double take. The face was unmistakably familiar, though recognition did not come immediately. Then it struck him. Jake Sisko.

With a wide grin of sharpened teeth, he emerged from behind the bar and glided toward the door, his movements smooth and buoyant, infused with the effortless charm of a host who had spent a lifetime mastering the art of welcome, as though the floor itself carried him forward. His charming and mirthful demeanor shifted only for a brief moment, turning to annoyance as he shouted to his staff to override the lock seal on the door.

As the doors to Quark's slid open, Quark greeted them exuberantly and embraced Jake with cheerful warmth. "Jake Sisko, my boy, look at you. It has been years

since I have seen you. Come in, come in." He waved Jake and Wesley inside. "Are you hungry? Thirsty? We are operating on mandated half power, but I think I might be able to rustle something up for you." He looked at Jake and winked. "I have a few replicators that run on internal power."

Jake and Wesley followed Quark to the bar and took their seats. "So, Quark, are those battery-operated replicators programmed for human food?" Jake inquired with a smile.

"They sure are. Anything you want, anything for Jake Sisko. Half price! Ah, you know, I am feeling generous. For you too, Wesley."

"I am expecting to hear the catch, but thank you," Jake said. "Hmm. I think I will have a grilled chicken sandwich, fried potatoes, and an Earth ale."

"Excellent," Quark replied. "And for you, Wesley?"

Wesley, who had been lost in his own thoughts since meeting Jake at the docking bay, was jolted back into the present by the question. For a moment he looked genuinely disoriented, as though he had forgotten where he was. Then he considered the question carefully. For Wesley, the simple act of choosing food felt far more difficult and strangely more anxiety provoking than solving even the most intricate mathematical puzzles.

After a long pause, Wesley answered, "Yes. I will have something." He surprised himself with the words as they left his mouth. "I will have an ice cream sundae."

"You got it," Quark replied. Then, with a quick shift in tone and demeanor, his cheer giving way to agitation, he shouted the order across the room to one of the Ferengi waiters, who hastily set down the stack of chairs he was carrying and dashed toward the back rooms to replicate the food.

They had barely begun eating when the doors opened again and Nog entered the bar. His gait was uneven, the reopened ache in his cybernetic leg evident despite his effort to conceal it. Fading bruises still marked his temple from Malik Verin's attack, but his posture remained upright and his expression characteristically jovial.

"Jake Sisko" he said laughingly, "welcome home, friend, I missed you."

"Nog!" Jake popped up from his stool and, with genuine happiness and delight at the sight of him, hugged his childhood friend. For an instant, the years fell away, and they were children again.

"Sorry I couldn't greet you earlier. You may have noticed the station is not in tip top shape right now. I have been spearheading repairs all day."

"No worries, Nog," came Jake's affable reply. "You don't look too tip top yourself, brother. What happened here?"

"Well, all I can say is that the broken state of the station and my face are connected, but don't ask me how."

Jake responded with a puzzled look, but his hunger overtook his curiosity, so he let the matter drop temporarily and returned to his sandwich.

Between mouthfuls of fries, Jake pressed for details. Nog described the two chaotic episodes that had struck the station and its Bajoran complement in a matter-of-fact way, but he could offer no explanation of causality, since he had none to give. Wesley listened but said nothing. He ate only a few bites of his sundae and spent most of the time staring into the dish as he slowly stirred the melting ice cream.

The doors opened again. This time, the Ferengi waiters who had been busy scurrying from one task to the next froze in their tracks. The Grand Nagus Rom entered with a poised and radiant Leeta on his arm, wearing a low-cut gown fashioned from Risian seashells and bedazzled with pieces of captivating jewelry from across the quadrant. They were accompanied, as always, by Melash'yardu, who towered over them both.

Rom and Leeta recognized Jake immediately and greeted him as old friends, but the moment drew something more out of them, a gentle, almost parental affection. Leeta reached up without thinking and rested her hand briefly against his cheek, her expression soft with concern. Rom stood close and placed a steady, almost paternal hand on Jake's shoulder, holding it there for a beat longer than courtesy required. The intimacy of the reunion surprised Jake, but he did not resist it.

As Leeta and Jake made their way back to the bar to rejoin Wesley, Quark approached Rom and they spoke in private. "So, are you heading back to Ferenginar?" Quark inquired.

"Yes, brother. Our ship has been authorized for departure," Rom answered.

"Well, it was good to see you, even if only briefly. But I do have one question, Rom."

"What's that?"

"Why all the secrecy? I understand now that you were here to meet with Admiral Tuvok, but why hide it so elaborately that even I did not know?" Quark raised an eye ridge for emphasis. "As you know, it is not easy sneaking information past me these days. I am not saying I am not impressed by your cover up, but why keep it hidden from me? I could have made arrangements."

Rom glanced around discreetly to be sure his wife was out of earshot. "It was Leeta's idea, brother."

"What? Leeta? Why?"

"Well, in truth, Quark, my meeting with Admiral Tuvok was only incidental to the real purpose of our visit. Do you remember that Orion merchant who left the station just before the disaster?"

"Yes, of course. He operates in quite a niche industry, as I understand it," Quark said with a wink and a salacious grin.

"Well, yes. Exactly. The Ferengi Commerce Authority granted him exclusive rights to provide erotic technology to the planet Balancar. Leeta and I wanted the opportunity to sample his wares before I gave my official approbation. Leeta did not want you to know... she was bashful."

"Bajorans," Quark said with a scoffing laugh. "They might be more repressed than even hoo-mans!"

"I assure you, brother, there is nothing repressed about Leeta," Rom replied, gazing at her with open infatuation and his characteristic, slightly foolish grin.

The shared laughter between Quark and Rom, along with the affectionate conversation unfolding between Jake and Leeta at the bar, breathed a measure of life back into the hectic, half-lit space. For a brief moment, the noise of repairs and the strain of recent events seemed to recede.

The moment did not last long. Rom glanced at his chronometer and his ears twitched with mild alarm. He leaned toward Leeta and murmured something too soft for the others to hear. She nodded, her expression shifting into polite regret. With a gentle squeeze of Jake's hand and a warm farewell to Quark, she stepped back toward Rom. Melash'yardu moved at once, already positioning himself between them and the flow of traffic, his attention fixed on the exit. Rom straightened his robes, cleared his throat, and announced that it was time for them to depart.

Soon after the Grand Nagus's exit, a commotion erupted on the upper level. Raised voices cut through the room as a cluster of bewildered Ferengi technicians and staff shouted over one another, drawing every eye upward at once.

Quark called up, "What is going on up there, you idiots?"

"There seems to be a holosuite running," came a harried voice in reply.

"What are you talking about?" Quark said, "we're at half power the holosuites can't be running."

"We don't understand it either."

Nog, who had overheard the shouting, set his drink down and let out the small groan of someone who was never truly off duty. He called up to the Ferengi on the upper level, "I'm coming. Just relax."

At the holosuite panel, Nog's tricorder flickered with erratic readings that made no mechanical sense. "This is truly bizarre," he commented. "There appears to be no mechanical reason this holosuite should be running. There is no power flow to it at all."

He tried to open the doors to see what was happening inside, but the display responded with cascading error messages and codes he could not decipher. He continued working at the panel for several minutes with no success. Whatever was driving the holosuite, it was not something he recognized. This might be a puzzle, he worried, that went beyond his expertise.

He called down to Quark. "Is my father still aboard?"

"Just missed him," Quark shouted back.

Nog let out a sigh of frustration. Rom's instincts for these systems were more than unparalleled. They were almost supernatural. If anyone could have unraveled this mystery, it would have been him. Then Nog noticed Wesley still seated at the bar, now sipping carbonated water with an expression of intense calm.

Stories of Wesley Crusher's technical genius began to surface in his mind. They were legendary in Starfleet circles. The boy who had piloted the *Enterprise*. The prodigy who had once built a tractor beam interface as a school project and ended up saving the ship with it. The teenager who had improvised with nothing but a tricorder to disrupt an energy being's field and save Captain Picard's life.

"Wesley," Nog called down. "Feel like helping us figure this out? We could use a bona fide genius right about now."

Without a verbal response, Wesley set his drink down and made his way up to the holosuite level. Nog handed him his tricorder. "See," he said. "It makes no sense. There is no power to the suites at all, yet it is running, and we cannot even open it. The display is full of gobbledygook codes. I cannot make any sense of it."

Wesley studied the readings. He glanced from the tricorder to the holosuite panel, made a series of adjustments, then returned his attention to the tricorder again. After a few minutes of this quiet back and forth, he entered a code into the panel. The display shifted at once. New coded formulae appeared across the screen.

They were beyond Nog's understanding, but Wesley began reading the numbers and unfamiliar symbols as if they were plain text. "This is very strange," Wesley said.

"That's an understatement," Nog replied. "What are those symbols and numbers?"

"I believe this is a message meant for me," Wesley said. "It appears that someone, or something, wants me to have access to this holosuite, and whatever that something is also seems to be its power source. I need more information." Wesley entered several additional data points into the panel and the doors slid open.

"You did it!" Nog exclaimed.

"I did something," Wesley replied. "Now I need to find out what. Whatever is inside, it is meant for me alone."

He glanced once at Nog, then turned toward the open holosuite. Wesley stepped inside unceremoniously, and the doors closed behind him.

Nog stood there with the rest of the bewildered Ferengi. After a moment, he turned to them and said, "Well, there you have it. Problem solved, I guess."

On Bajor, life had begun to resume after the upheavals of the previous day. First Minister Kira had not left her office since the disturbances first began. She had been so focused on managing an unmanageable crisis that she had lost all sense of the passage of time. Now, at last, things were starting to calm. Nearly all of Bajor's critical infrastructure was back online, or at least partially restored. It offered little comfort. The damage was extensive and could take months, even with full staffing and round the clock effort, to repair completely. And that accounted only for the physical destruction. The psychological damage to Bajor would take months merely to assess and likely years to heal, if healing from trauma so widespread was even possible.

She was exhausted. Mentally. Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually.

Jolen Deyer, the last of her staff still remaining, finally succeeded in persuading her to go home and rest. Together they walked back to the First Minister's residence, accompanied by her security detail, moving beneath the steady glow of the street-lights, just as they had done many times before.

He accompanied her inside her suite, noticing that for the first time in Kira's tenure, the petalune flowers on her table had not been replaced. They both registered the omission, yet neither of them spoke of it, just as they never had with this small ritual since its beginning. Their absence settled into Kira's awareness subconsciously. Something was different today than on previous days. Something had shifted. Routine had been broken. It was not a comforting realization. It felt ominous.

Jolen took the initiative and gently insisted that Kira rest. "Please sit down, First Minister. I will prepare some tea for you."

She did not resist the suggestion and collapsed onto a nearby sofa. "Thank you, Jolen."

They sat in silence for several minutes, drinking their tea. Each of them tried, in their own way, to make sense of what they had just experienced and of the difficult investigative and administrative work that lay ahead as a result of the previous day's catastrophe.

"Jolen," Kira said at last, breaking the silence. "I have been thinking. Since there seems to be no decipherable reason on this planet for any of this to be happening, perhaps we need to look for answers beyond Bajor."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the Celestial Temple," Kira replied. "Think about it. The Prophets are 'of Bajor.' Everything that happens here is felt by them in some way, and the same is true in reverse. That is what we have always believed, right?"

Jolen nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Then why would we confine our search for answers to Bajor alone?" Kira leaned forward slightly. "Something tells me, Jolen, and I cannot fully explain why, that the cause of all this lies in the Celestial Temple."

"I can see that as a possibility," Jolen said carefully.

"I feel it," Kira said. "I feel it in my bones. We are not going to find what we are looking for here. There is only one place to search for answers right now."

Jolen met her gaze, his expression signaling his readiness to hear what she would say.

"Jolen," Kira said quietly, "we need to go to Deep Space Nine."

Chapter Fourteen

The hazy, ethereal brightness of the holosuite that greeted Wesley as he stepped inside gave way to a short walkway. At its end, another kind of light appeared. Earth's sunlight spilled outward, first revealing clean white lines traced into the ground. Then came the gentle rise of the pitcher's mound. Finally, the wide sweep of green stretched into the distance as the baseball field revealed itself to him.

Wesley Crusher took a seat on a wooden bench. The air was warm and dry, tinged with the scent of cut grass and dust. There were no towering stands or upper decks, no sweeping architecture of a major league stadium. Instead, a faded green scoreboard operated by hand stood beyond the outfield, and weathered wooden bleachers curved along the baselines, their boards worn smooth by long summers of continual use and equally long winters left idle beneath the snow. A few hundred spectators occupied them, scattered in loose clusters, their voices blending into a single, steady murmur.

Wesley did not understand exactly why a holosuite program meant for him would project an antiquated Earth game that had lost popularity hundreds of years before he was born. But he did know what he was looking at. He knew the game in the abstract. Lieutenant Data had explained it to him long ago, during those years on the *Enterprise* when Data's curiosity about humanity had taken on unexpected forms. Baseball had been one of them. Wesley remembered sitting with Data in the Ten Forward lounge as he described the rules with meticulous clarity and an earnest fascination that made the game feel less like a sport and more like a philosophical exercise.

Two teams moved across the field, distinguished by their uniforms: one in white with orange caps and lettering, the other in gray with light green caps and lettering. Players from both teams went through their pregame rituals, stretching, sprinting, tossing balls, adjusting equipment. The names stitched across their backs—DiMaggio, Betts, Wagner—registered with Wesley only as phonetics, not meanings. They were unfamiliar to him, yet the way the program framed them suggested that familiarity was not required. What mattered was their coexistence. Wesley could tell from their appearance, their equipment preferences, and the way they wore their uniforms that these were men who did not belong to the same time. Yet they moved with easy familiarity, as though history had been folded and pressed flat for the sake of the game.

The home-plate umpire, clad in bulky pads and a face mask, called for the game to begin with a guttural cry of "play ball." A pitcher by the name of Mathewson took

the mound, his movements economical but tense. The name meant nothing to Wesley. The meaning lay in the pitcher's struggle. Control came and went. The first inning stretched on as batters worked counts, fouled pitches away, waited him out. Bases filled. A run scored. Then another. The crowd stirred, energy lifting and settling in uneven waves.

On the mound for the visiting team, Koufax worked with ease, masterfully mixing speed and precision. His pitches seemed less thrown than placed, as if he were arranging pieces on a board whose endgame only he understood. Wesley found himself watching the contrast between the two men more than the ball itself. One labored openly, frustration written into every adjustment of his grip. The other appeared untouched by pressure, his rhythm unbroken by circumstance.

As the innings progressed, the purpose of the program still eluded Wesley, but he sensed that it was trying to say something. He remained patient and observant, hoping the game itself might reveal its meaning as it unfolded. He found a strange, meditative peace in watching it. The ritual of it. Pitch, swing, contact. A pause. A reset. A new batter. He noticed how often nothing happened, and how meaningful that nothingness felt. There was a serenity to the game. He found himself calculating, almost unconsciously, the myriad possibilities at any given moment that might alter its flow: a hit, a walk, a wild pitch, an error. He wondered briefly whether he could fashion an equation that might assess the probability of any given outcome. The thought surfaced, lingered, and then drifted away as enjoyment slowly began to overtake intellect.

In the fourth inning, a batter called Aaron sent the ball arcing high toward the outfield wall. Wesley followed its trajectory instinctively, a flicker of anticipation tightening in his chest, his breath catching. An outfielder called Speaker leapt, arm fully extended, his glove meeting the ball at the apex of its flight. For a heartbeat, time seemed to pause. Then the crowd erupted, sound crashing over itself as the out was confirmed.

Wesley found himself standing and clapping with the rest of the spectators without realizing what he was doing. He sat back down as self-awareness returned to him between innings, faintly embarrassed, though no one around him seemed to notice. Or perhaps they did and simply did not care. The simulation did not respond to him. It did not ask whether he understood. It simply continued.

By the sixth inning, the home team trailed badly. The earlier excitement drained from the stands, replaced by a subdued patience. People remained, not because victory was likely, but because the ritual of the game itself was not yet complete. One would no more leave a game before its conclusion than one would a religious service. Wesley understood that mentality. He had lived it. Waiting for meaning to reveal itself was part of the Traveler's discipline.

A runner called Henderson stole second base. A sacrifice bunt advanced him, the crowd offering polite, restrained applause. The gestures felt ancient. Wesley

wondered how many versions of this moment had existed across centuries, across worlds. Humans repeating themselves, refining rituals rather than abandoning them.

Then Greenberg stepped to the plate. The pitcher, Gibson, threw fire. Greenberg swung, connecting with a crack of the bat that seemed to echo into eternity, sending the ball deep into right field and over the wall. The home team closed the gap by two runs. The moment was exhilarating, and Wesley felt suddenly alive, electricity coursing through his blood.

Lost in the excitement and ceremony of the game, Wesley nearly forgot that his purpose here had yet to reveal itself.

Elsewhere aboard Deep Space Nine, far from the ordered geometry of the field and the suspended time of the holosuite, the First Minister's transport arrived at the station. Kira stepped out of the docking bay accompanied by Jolen Deyer and two of his staffers. She wore a deep maroon tunic embroidered with patterns so subtly worked into the fabric that, at a distance, they gave the impression of movement, as though the garment itself were alive. Only up close did their full complexity reveal itself, each thread precise, deliberate, and richly detailed.

Jolen was the first to comment on the state of the station. "Well, it looks like General Ro has been doing some redecorating."

Kira responded without sharing his humor. "It looks like Deep Space Nine was struck by the same destructive phenomenon as Bajor."

Nog approached in his Starfleet dress uniform, reserved for special occasions, including the greeting of heads of state. "First Minister, welcome aboard."

Kira's face flushed with happiness, and a wide smile spread across it at the sight of him, wider than any she had worn in years. She had watched Nog grow up when she was first officer of the station, and later served alongside him on the *Defiant* during the war. She met him with a mixture of respect for a comrade-in-arms and an almost maternal pride at seeing him so accomplished. "Nog," she said affectionately, "call me Nerys."

They embraced, and Kira warmly kissed him on the cheek. Nog's joy at seeing her was impossible to hide, written plainly across his face, which now, even more than usual, transparently betrayed his feelings.

"Oh, I just love family reunions," Jolen quipped, sweeping his hands apart in opposite directions, a faint, deliberate flick of the wrists punctuating the remark.

Taking in his bruised face and damaged lobe, Kira placed an affectionate hand gently over the worst of it and asked, "What happened to you, Nog?"

Nog tried to brush the inquiry off with a laugh that carried far less confidence than he intended. "This is nothing, Kira. We both had worse on the *Defiant*."

She did not smile. Her eyes returned to the injury. "Really, Nog, what happened?"

Nog hesitated, then answered, "You'd better ask the General."

Kira nodded once and said, "Well then, let's not waste any time. Let's go see General Ro."

"She's expecting you," Nog replied, then fell into step with Kira and Jolen. He was careful not to present himself as leading the way, mindful of her former command of the station and unwilling to condescend. They walked through the Promenade, still in a state of disrepair though far improved from its recent condition. Kira was struck by how few people moved through what was normally a bustling marketplace. They entered a turbolift, which carried the three of them up to Ops.

Nog announced the arrival of the First Minister as they stepped onto the command level, and the crew rose in a disciplined stance of respect. Kira met each of their gazes in turn, acknowledging the honor they showed her. The sight of Ops sent memories rushing back. She recalled crises and close calls, moments when the station had faced imminent destruction only to be saved at the last possible instant by the ingenuity of one of her crew. But there were other memories too, lighter ones, especially from her years as first officer, trading banter with Jadzia Dax or Miles O'Brien, or carrying out a well-timed practical joke at Worf's expense.

The doors to the command office slid open as they approached, revealing Ro Laren seated at the desk. She rose respectfully as Kira crossed the threshold. None of the original Cardassian furnishings remained, all of them long since replaced with Starfleet and Bajoran consoles and fixtures. Even so, despite the years and despite the fact that she herself had once occupied this office, the room still felt to her like Benjamin Sisko's. Her gaze drifted, guided by muscle memory, to the spot on the desk where his baseball had once rested. Its absence hollowed something inside her. For a fleeting moment, it felt like a kind of desecration, as though a sacred Orb had been removed from a temple.

Reason soon reasserted itself. She had chosen to keep the baseball on the desk during her eight years of command as an homage to Benjamin Sisko, a subtle monument she had often turned to for strength and direction. But she understood that it had never been Ro's symbol to keep.

Kira took the visitor's seat out of respect for Ro, though her posture remained that of a woman completely in command as the most senior authority on the station. Jolen took the seat next to her. The two Bajoran women shared a complicated bond. They held deep mutual respect for one another and would not hesitate to die in the other's defense. Neither could imagine a better foxhole partner. Yet both possessed strong personalities, a trait not uncommon among the females of their species, and that strength carried friction as well as loyalty.

Their shared experience ran deeper still. Both had been marked by the Occupation. Both had been shaped by Starfleet, though in different ways. Ro had worn the uniform longer than most Bajorans ever did, until she left it behind to join the Maquis. Kira's service had been briefer and less formal, assumed only in the final stages

of the war for a clandestine mission on Cardassia. And yet both were among the very few Bajoran women, along with the late Sito Jaxa, ever to wear a Starfleet uniform. The strain between them came not from doubt or rivalry, but from strong wills forged under survival and sharpened by hard, divergent choices.

When Kira became First Minister, appointing Ro as commander of Deep Space Nine had been an obvious choice. No one else was better suited to guard the Celestial Temple and that vital crossroads between two quadrants. Ro's combat experience and her decisive, highly successful tenure as a Maquis commander spoke for themselves. It also meant, conveniently, that Ro would be far enough away to keep their temperaments from colliding on a regular basis.

Kira began. She described the recent upheavals on Bajor, both systemic and psychological, and her efforts to contain the damage. She spoke of the confusion she shared with her closest advisers, and of the lingering uncertainty over what had actually occurred. "I've had a traumatic episode myself," she offered. "I was transported back to the Occupation. It felt like an Orb experience. It was too vivid to be a dream or a post-traumatic flashback. It was like actually being there again."

When Kira finished, Ro nodded. "I understand completely, First Minister. When the phenomenon first struck, I had a similar experience myself. I lost consciousness and relived seeing my father tortured to death during the Occupation. It was more than a vision. It was real." She paused for a moment, the experience still stinging, then continued. "I was spared during the second wave. My security officer was not. Malik even had an aggressive reaction to whatever he was seeing and attacked Captain Nog."

"I see. So that's why Nog looked so battered," Kira replied.

"Exactly. Malik is no longer in med bay, but I have him confined to quarters pending a full psychological evaluation. Major Tenen has that scheduled for later today." Ro then continued her debrief, outlining the recent events on Deep Space Nine in careful detail. In the face of an unknown phenomenon such as this, she knew that no fact, however seemingly irrelevant, could be dismissed.

"You should also know, First Minister, that there have been three unusual arrivals," Ro said. "Admiral Tuvok arrived around the time of the first wave of disturbances. Wesley Crusher, a former Starfleet officer who has been missing for years, arrived shortly after. And just now, in the aftermath of the second and more severe episode, Jake Sisko came aboard."

Kira's eyes lit up, something loosening in her chest at the sound of the name as memories flooded back: the boy once dangling over the upper deck of the Promenade, and the man who had later withdrawn from the hurt of Deep Space Nine to live on the Sisko estate on Bajor. "Jake Sisko is on board?" she said.

"He is," Ro confirmed, matter-of-factly.

Kira tapped the communications badge Ro had waiting for her on the desk. "Computer, locate Jake Sisko."

"Jake Sisko is on the upper deck of the Promenade," the computer replied.

Kira rose. "If you will excuse me, General. We will convene later to discuss a strategy to address whatever it is we're facing."

Ro inclined her head. "I am at your service, First Minister."

Kira turned toward the exit. Ro and Jolen stood respectfully as she left. Jolen did not follow her out. He knew Kira well enough to recognize when she needed space, and he allowed her that. Instead, he exited to Ops and gathered his own aides.

Kira moved through Deep Space Nine with the quick, efficient, and determined strides she had always used to navigate the station, making her way to the upper deck of the Promenade. Jake stood there alone, gazing out at the empty space where the mouth of the wormhole would appear when it opened, lost in his own thoughts.

"Jake," she called, her voice warm and full of affection.

The man who turned to face her bore little resemblance to the boy she had once known. He was strikingly tall and handsome, yet his posture and expression carried the visible marks of a painful life. Recognition spread across his face as he saw the source of the familiar voice. With a mixture of surprise and affection, he said, "Major... I mean, First Minister Kira!"

They embraced, the gesture unguarded and intimate, like that of a mother greeting a long-lost son. The two of them stood there for several minutes, catching up. Kira had been a regular visitor to the Sisko estate when Jake lived there, but she had not seen him since he had moved to Earth.

She gently steered the conversation into an emotionally deeper place. "Jake, tell me, are you going to see Asher while you're here? I believe he's living with his mother in Kendra Province."

Jake hesitated. "I've been thinking about it, Kira. I'd like to. But I came here at the insistence of Wesley Crusher, and I don't know if I'll make it to Bajor. And honestly," he added, glancing around the Promenade, "this doesn't feel like the safest place right now."

"Jake, Bajor is not the safest place right now," Kira replied evenly. "And with Ro and Nog in command, I can assure you that Deep Space Nine is the safest place to be. You should bring him here." The words were gentle, but they carried the weight of an order from a superior officer.

Jake nodded, considering her advice.

Kira linked her arm through his. "Come. Let us go to the temple for evening prayers. Then we'll find something to eat."

Jake smiled and followed her lead, just as he always had. As they walked along the Promenade, Admiral Tuvok passed them, offering a brief, respectful acknowledgment to the First Minister as he continued toward the med bay.

Inside, Tenen Rahl moved among the afflicted with calm efficiency, running her medical tricorder over each patient in turn and recording notes on her PADD.

"Major Tenen," Tuvok said, his Vulcan inflection flat and precise, "do you have time for a brief conversation?"

"Of course, Admiral," she replied, a note of curiosity entering her voice. She handed her PADD and tricorder to a nurse, gave quick instructions regarding the remaining patients on her rounds, and led Tuvok to her small private office.

Once they were seated, Tenen asked, "Admiral, how may I assist you?"

"I understand that the same phenomenon which disrupted the station was accompanied by traumatic psychological symptoms among many of the Bajorans aboard," Tuvok said. "I was hoping you might update me on the condition of these patients."

Tenen folded her hands briefly before answering. "I wish I had clearer answers, Admiral, but there is still much I do not understand. Generally, the episodes have manifested as vivid imagery, described less as flashbacks and more like Orb experiences. Some patients report visions of future harm befalling themselves or their loved ones. As I said, we are still studying the phenomenon."

Tuvok regarded her for a moment before speaking again. "Your description of the phenomenon presents a logical difficulty, Major."

Tenen inclined her head. "Please explain."

"These experiences," he said, "do not conform to known models of trauma response. They are neither recollection nor hallucination in any standard sense. Your biochemical screenings have been inconclusive. And yet the experiences are reported as emotionally meaningful. That suggests a structural cause beyond neural chemistry."

"That is our conclusion as well," Tenen replied. "Perhaps these are spiritual matters best left to the station's vedeks rather than its physicians."

"One need not abandon logic when confronted with the unknown. Indeed, it is precisely logic that will lead to an ultimate understanding."

Tenen did not flinch. "Admiral, among Bajorans, faith is not the suspension of reason. It is the discipline of interpretation when reason reaches its limits. Remember, our deities are not abstractions, nor are they conjured in imagination to explain the unexplained. Our deities, the Prophets of the Celestial Temple, have been proven empirically to exist and to intervene in the lives of Bajorans. To us, faith *is* the most logical recourse."

Tuvok, raising an eyebrow in fascination, considered her words carefully before responding. "You are describing a system in which empirical verification resolves questions of existence, but not questions of intention. The Prophets may be demonstrable, but their purposes remain opaque."

"Correct," Tenen replied. "And that opacity is precisely where faith operates. Logic excels at establishing what *is*. Faith concerns itself with how one ought to respond when causation is non-linear and intention cannot be inferred."

"In Vulcan philosophy," Tuvok said, "such gaps are treated as provisional states, to be resolved through further inquiry. To assign meaning prior to resolution risks confirmation bias."

"And to refuse meaning until resolution," Tenen answered, "risks moral paralysis. Bajoran faith does not deny inquiry. It contextualizes it. We do not claim to know the Prophets fully. We claim responsibility for how their presence shapes our actions."

"You are proposing that faith functions as an ethical framework rather than an explanatory model."

"Yes," Tenen said. "Faith is not our answer to causality. It is our answer to obligation. When the Prophets act, the question is not merely *why*, but *what* is required of us in response."

"This introduces subjectivity," Tuvok observed.

"It introduces accountability," she corrected. "Logic seeks coherence across systems. Faith seeks coherence within the self. They are not competitors. They address different needs."

Silence settled between them, not as tension but as mutual evaluation. "In Vulcan practice," Tuvok said at last, "ritual exists to contain emotion, to prevent it from distorting judgment."

"Among Bajorans," Tenen replied, "ritual exists to attend to meaning, so that judgment is not severed from consequence."

Tuvok folded his hands behind his back. "Then logic without faith becomes sterile."

"And faith without logic becomes dangerous," Tenen replied.

"Your approach is not without logic," Tuvok said.

Tenen inclined her head. "Nor is yours entirely without faith, Admiral..."

Chapter Fifteen

As the game reached its seventh inning, the home team had begun to close the gap, and the stadium's mood had shifted. In baseball, as in life, there are no predetermined outcomes. Wesley was drawn fully into the game's tightening rhythm, nearly losing sight of the fact that his purpose in the holodeck remained unresolved.

A tall, lanky pitcher named Paige took the mound and held the top of the eighth scoreless. His delivery was unlike any Wesley had seen, effortless and almost playful, each pitch a rebuke to physics. Then, in the bottom half, the bases loaded, Griffey Jr. launched a grand slam drive off a pitcher named Maddux, tying the game in spectacular improbability. Wesley lost himself entirely in the surge of the crowd's excitement and even joined in a round of hand-slapping offered by an exuberant spectator nearby, his cap worn inside out. He had never known that striking hands together was an old Earth response to joy or excitement, and he found himself fascinated by the practice.

The sequence of contingencies that led to this outcome was, for Wesley, a mathematical puzzle of probability and an additional layer of enjoyment. In the top of the ninth, the visiting side scratched out a go-ahead run on a base hit from Gwynn, a clean surgical stroke, beautiful in both form and execution. As the bottom of the ninth began, the home team trailing by one run, Wesley felt the tension building as something almost physical, as if it could be touched. Two outs. A man on second. Rivera on the mound. Clemente at the plate. The pitch. The crack of the bat.

Wesley rose from his seat instinctively, his breath caught in his chest, but before the outcome could play out, the world suddenly began to shift. The white lines marking the field dissolved into a nauseating blur. The clean geometry of the diamond smeared outward, folding and refolding into itself, depth and distance collapsing without the constraints of physics. Sound fractured into overlapping echoes that arrived too fast to delineate. A wave of vertigo struck Wesley with such violence that his hands clawed instinctively at the armrests, his stomach lurching as his body braced for a fall that never came.

Not even his training as a Traveler had prepared him for this. It was not merely disorientation. It was terror distilled to its purest form.

Wesley was certain he was dying. His sense of self began to unravel under the assault, each mental anchor tearing loose in rapid succession. Time lost all coherence. For what felt like an eternity, he drifted inside a vortex of light and sound, unable to orient himself, unable even to determine whether his eyes were open or closed, or whether he still possessed a body at all. The murmur of the crowd stretched into a sustained, piercing, painful high-pitched tone that drilled into his skull, then shattered into what seemed like millions of distinct voices speaking at once, before collapsing again into a formless, crushing noise.

Gradually, the chaos thinned. Fragments of perception returned to Wesley, but they did not arrive in sequence. They coexisted and overlapped, without delineation. The blinding haze receded, and he found himself watching the game again, but now it unfolded impossibly all at once, every moment occupying the same instant. Every pitch. Every swing. Every cheer. Each instant layered upon every other in perfect simultaneity, not as memory or prediction but as lived reality. Wesley's mind recoiled, then stretched to accommodate it, his consciousness forced into a shape it had never occupied before, or even deemed possible.

A strange clarity of perception began to coalesce, but the fear and panic were far slower to dissolve. He realized he was no longer perceiving a single game, but that every baseball game ever played in this timeline lay superimposed before him, from dusty nineteenth-century fields to climate-controlled domes, from childhood sandlots to professional stadiums packed with millions of watching eyes. Wins and losses, triumphs and heartbreaks, all present without hierarchy or progression.

His chest tightened, breath coming in shallow gasps, tears filling his eyes from the sheer immensity of the experience. He was not observing history. He was embedded within it, stretched across it, momentarily indistinguishable from its total unfolding, with no meaningful distinction between present and future.

As his awareness widened, he began to perceive far more than baseball. He now perceived great moments in galactic history and future unfolding before him without distinction of space or time. First contacts and last stands. The ignition of warp engines and the silent extinction of species. Empires rising in confidence and collapsing under the weight of their own expansion. Wars and peace treaties. Enslavements and liberations. Each event interwove with the others, not as cause and effect but as a single, eternal present.

Sustaining this level of perception was not natural. Concentration required immense effort. Someone without his meditative training would have been entirely lost to the experience. Each time he lost focus, nausea surged back with renewed violence, his body heaving in protest at the violation. Time was not supposed to behave this way. Experience was not meant to arrive all at once. He clung to the fragile coherence of his own identity, repeating his name silently, anchoring himself to the smallest fragments of linear thought he could still access.

Then the sensory overload began to level. His equilibrium slowly adjusted, his breathing returning to a steady rhythm. The events he was witnessing were gradually washed away in a soft, calming light that eased his panic and grounded him once more in the awareness of his own existence.

From that radiance, Benjamin Sisko emerged. He did not walk forward so much as resolve into form, his presence assembling itself from particles of light. He wore the luminescence as though it were long, flowing robes. For the first time since Sisko's own initial contact with the Prophets, an embodied intermediary was experiencing direct communion with the Celestial Temple within the material realm.

Wesley was awestruck as he saw the figure manifest before him. "Captain Sisko?" he breathed.

"Hello, Wesley Crusher. I've been expecting you," Sisko said, his voice calm and kind, surrounding Wesley like a warm, soothing blanket. It was a voice suffused with love, a very particular kind of love, the steady warmth of a caring father.

"Are you really here, or are you a hologram?" Wesley asked, his voice taking on a child-like wonder in response to Sisko's overwhelming aura of affectionate paternity.

A playfully disarming smile crossed his shining face. "I appear as a holographic projection, Wesley, but the consciousness you perceive is mine."

He placed an ethereal hand on Wesley's shoulder in a fatherly gesture and continued. "The transition you just endured was necessary. It helped adjust you to the basic level on which we experience time, so that you could receive my consciousness. Without it, your mind might have broken. This projection," he added, gesturing to his own form, "was required to anchor you in a reality you could still comprehend."

Sisko's presence was calming to Wesley, and he felt his heart slow, his breathing evening out. He became grounded again in the awareness of his own body. "I think," he said carefully, "I think I understand. Or at least, I understand that full understanding might not be possible."

A faint trace of approval appeared in Sisko's eyes, and he let out an endearing chuckle. "That's correct, Wesley. To meet me in my true state would have been far more unsettling. This was the gentler introduction."

"Why appear to me?"

"I need your help, Wesley."

Elsewhere on the station, Kira Nerys sat with Jolen Deyer and his two staffers in a conference room that now doubled as her office and base of operations. Jolen shared reports from Bajor outlining the extensive repair efforts now underway across the planet. Kira offered a few additional instructions about where to allocate resources, which Jolen dutifully noted and transmitted to the appropriate authorities.

"So, that takes care of the physical damage," Jolen said. "Repairs are well underway. But what about the lingering effects of the psychological trauma?"

"That presents the greatest challenge at this point," Kira replied. "But I'm not sure what more we can do until we have a better understanding of what actually caused the disturbances in the first place. For now, submit a request to Starfleet for additional counseling services. We may at least be able to manage the situation temporarily."

"Right away, First Minister," Jolen affirmed, typing rapidly on a holodisplay projected from a PADD resting on the table. "Now for the political news from Bajor. First Minister, you may want to see this." He handed her a PADD opened to a major Bajoran news outlet. "Our friend Serin Vekar has wasted no time capitalizing on the crisis."

Kira took the PADD and glanced at the headline stretched across the top of the display: *Bajor Struck by Tragedy, First Minister Flees from Danger: Bajor Deserves Better*. The byline read: Serin Vekar.

Kira did not read any further. She set the PADD down with a quiet sigh and rubbed her forehead lightly. "Let's deal with the real crisis first, Jolen," she said. "Then we'll address the political one. What's next?"

"The station's security chief, Malik Verin, has requested an audience."

"All right. Send him in."

Jolen tapped his communicator. "Jolen Deyer to Colonel Malik Verin."

"Malik here," came the prompt response.

"The First Minister will see you now."

"Acknowledged. I'm on my way."

Malik Verin, recently cleared to return to duty by Tenen Rahl and General Ro, left his post in Ops after signaling another officer to take over his station. He straightened his uniform and made his way out. He entered the First Minister's temporary office, and Kira gestured for him to take the seat across from her.

"I came to offer you my personal apologies, First Minister, for my lack of discipline and for my attack on Captain Nog. As a senior officer in the Bajoran military, my actions reflect on Bajor. I am ashamed of my conduct, and I hope there are no lasting repercussions to our relationship with Starfleet for my attacking one of its most decorated captains."

"Colonel Malik, please," Kira said gently. "Everyone understands that it was not your fault. Bajorans throughout the station and all over the planet experienced traumatic visions and acted out accordingly. You responded as the combat soldier that you are. Your record remains untarnished. If an apology is owed to anyone, it would be to Captain Nog."

"Absolutely, First Minister. I have already expressed my regret to him. I only wanted you to know that I take my role as a representative of Bajor very seriously, and I hold myself to a higher standard."

"Your service to our people is greatly appreciated, Colonel Malik. We have the utmost confidence in your ability."

"Thank you, First Minister. There is one more thing. I wanted to thank you personally for saving my life during the Occupation."

"Saving your life?" Kira asked. "How?"

"You may not remember me, First Minister, but I will never forget you as long as I live. I grew up on Terok Nor, a child slave in the ore processing plant. When the *Cardassians*," the word spoken with a palpable sting of hatred, "deemed me no longer useful, they relocated me and several other children to Bajor to work in a munitions factory. We were carried off the station by Bajoran collaborators. The Shakaar resistance cell intercepted the transport en route and liberated us. I remember it as if it were yesterday. You wrapped a blanket around me. You told me everything was going to be all right. You cared for us and found us homes. Thank you, First Minister. I would likely not be alive today if not for you."

Kira sat in silence for a moment. She did not remember Malik specifically, but the coincidence of what he had just told her left her stunned. She now recalled, with painful clarity, the night he described, the very night that had been the subject of her debilitating vision.

"I understand, Verin," Kira said at last, her voice compassionate. "There is no need to thank me. We did what we had to do to survive. Resistance takes many forms. Sometimes it is taking up arms, and sometimes it is simply the refusal to let our dignity be crushed or our identities be erased. That is no less heroic. But thank you for telling me, Verin. It is a great joy for me to see you as you are today."

Malik offered a respectful nod and turned to leave the office. The doors slid shut behind him, sealing the room in a sudden, uneasy quiet. Jolen turned back to Kira, already shifting his attention to the next item on their agenda, but the words caught in his throat. She had not moved. Her posture was unchanged, rigid, as if she had been fixed in place. Her hands rested on the arms of the chair, fingers slightly curled, unmoving.

"First Minister?" Jolen said, a note of concern entering his voice. "Kira?"

She did not respond. Her gaze had gone distant, unfocused, fixed on something beyond the room, beyond the station itself. The color drained from her face. For a moment she seemed carved from stone, breath shallow and barely perceptible.

It was the same instant in which Sisko had fully revealed himself to Wesley on the holosuite.

Then she began to shake. At first it was subtle, a faint vibration running through her shoulders, almost easy to miss. Within seconds it intensified, her entire body trembling as though seized by an invisible force. Her jaw tightened, her breath hitching, eyes still locked on whatever vision had overtaken her.

"Kira!" Jolen shouted, panic breaking through his composure.

His PADD slipped from his hand and clattered to the deck as he rushed to her side. He dropped to a crouch beside her chair and took hold of her arm, feeling the tremor racing beneath her skin. "First Minister, please," he said urgently. "Kira, come back. Please."

There was no response. Her shaking grew more violent, her body no longer fully her own, caught between moments and places. Jolen felt a cold certainty settle in his chest, the recognition arriving before he could stop it. "No!" he shouted hoarsely. "Not again."

Chapter Sixteen

The USS *Pasteur* slipped into Tzenkethi space under silent power. Its transponder signature was masked per Admiral Tuvok's explicit orders before entry. Cloaking a Federation vessel was forbidden by the Treaty of Algeron, signed over eighty years earlier, and was therefore not an option. However, Tuvok had concluded that this mission required a level of discretion exceeding standard diplomatic protocols. He therefore selected the most logical alternative. The *Pasteur's* transponder was altered to present the vessel as a civilian freighter transporting benign medical supplies and transiting the region without political intent.

Grand Nagus Rom had assured Tuvok that the reformist claimant within the Tzenkethi hierarchy had been informed through Ferengi back channels of the *Pasteur's* imminent arrival, and that it was understood to be an instrument of medical relief rather than an assertion of Starfleet authority.

The risks extended far beyond diplomatic embarrassment. Rival factions within the Tzenkethi government were watching closely for any pretext to accuse the claimant of treachery or collusion with off-world powers. The claimant's own territory, the *Pasteur's* ultimate destination, lay along the border with Cardassian space. Cardassian pirates and raiders regularly prowled the region, launching opportunistic strikes against civilian vessels and vanishing before any effective response could be mounted. The afflicted colony lay uncomfortably close to one such corridor. If the *Pasteur* were intercepted, caught between competing powers, the mission would end before a single vaccine could be synthesized.

For more than twenty-four hours, the *Pasteur* crawled cautiously through hostile Tzenkethi space. Any speed beyond warp two would almost certainly have set off alarm bells. The ship settled into a subdued stillness. Corridors were dimmed and quiet, and crew movements slowed and softened, not by regulation but as an instinctive response to the reduced power and the covert nature of the mission.

In Trevix's café, however, laughter and joviality still managed to survive at their normal volume. Trevix and Biras had made it their mission to keep morale intact. Their unflagging humor and good cheer cut through the palpable tension that hung over the ship. The *Pasteur's* second officer, Trevix's first husband Takis, did what he could to support his family's morale campaign and to find official ways to sanction their efforts.

At that moment in the café, Biras and Trevix were performing one of their most popular improv skits for the assembled patrons, which they called "*Doctor Takis, you're late for surgery!*" The premise was always the same: each time Doctor Takis was urgently summoned to surgery, he was delayed by increasingly absurd circumstances. Each time the fictional patient expired as a result, the crowd jeered the same

refrain in unison: "Doctor Takis, you're late for surgery!" The joke rested squarely at the second officer's expense, a fact that only heightened its effect. Takis himself encouraged the routine, well aware that it had done wonders for his popularity with the crew.

In this iteration, he was being waylaid by a recently widowed Sheliak female of formidable libido, who insisted on binding him to pages of meticulously worded legal contracts, each obligating him to satisfy her demands while he attempted, futilely, to extricate himself from an ever-expanding web of clauses and subclauses.

Medical service aboard the *Pasteur* was rarely glamorous, and emotionally draining. These officers had spent years in crisis zones: epidemic relief on Antica, burn triage on Rigel VI, radiation poisoning on isolated colony outposts where hope often arrived weeks too late. They understood the thin and dangerous line between efficiency and exhaustion, and they knew that camaraderie was itself a form of medicine. The *Pasteur's* crew carried one of the grimmest assignments in Starfleet, confronting life and death on a daily basis. They needed an escape valve more than most. Trevix's café provided that balm. It was as essential to the ship's functioning as any medical ward.

That evening, Captain Beverly Crusher and Commander Sata sat at the café bar, sipping a pale blue aperitif that released a faint vapor in response to the ship's standard gravity. Native to a low-gravity world, the drink shed suspended volatiles as buoyancy asserted itself, the effect resembling steam despite the liquid being cool to the touch. The drink was meant as ceremonial rather than intoxicating, a small indulgence. They spoke quietly of motherhood.

Sata's twin children were aboard the *Pasteur*, both close in age to Wesley when Beverly had first come aboard the *Enterprise-D*. It created a natural point of personal connection between the two officers, one that carried their friendship beyond duty hours. The conversation drifted easily between anecdotes and shared understanding, fragments of ordinary life sustained against extraordinary pressure. For a few moments, the stress of their secret mission receded.

"They run everywhere," Sata said, a trace of amused resignation in her voice. "I swear the ship feels like it's the size of a Galaxy-class when they're loose in it. Engineering, hydroponics, the observation ring. I turn my back for a moment, and they've discovered something that I didn't even know we had."

Crusher smiled faintly over the rim of her glass. "That sounds familiar."

"I keep telling myself it's good for them," Sata continued. "That a starship should feel like a place to explore, not a corridor of restrictions. But some days I wonder if I should rein them in more. Protect them from themselves."

Beverly set her glass down carefully. "I asked myself that every day with Wesley," she said. "Especially after Jack died. I thought if I watched closely enough, if I anticipated every danger, I could spare him pain."

"And?" Sata asked.

"And all I would have spared him was himself." Crusher's voice was steady, reflective rather than regretful. "Wesley needed room. Space to test limits, to fail, to surprise me. I intervened when it mattered. But mostly, I learned when not to."

Sata considered that in silence. "You trusted him."

"I had to," Beverly replied. "Children don't grow into who they're meant to be because we guide every step. Sometimes they grow because we step back."

Sata nodded slowly. "Then perhaps running wild is not a flaw."

"No," Crusher said, a quiet warmth in her tone. "Sometimes it's a sign you're doing something right."

Then Beverly's comm badge chirped. "Bridge to Captain Crusher," came the calm voice of the duty officer. "We're approaching the claimant's territory."

Crusher straightened at once. "Acknowledged. We're on our way."

She set her half-drunk glass down, nodded once to Sata, and together they left the warmth of the lounge for the cool silence of the turbolift.

On the bridge, the planet filled the viewscreen: an emerald sphere streaked with dark brown canyons and deep green seas. Its beauty was austere. The scars of geological upheaval were written plainly across its surface. Its atmospheric composition closely resembled that of Tzenketh itself, a similarity that had made it an attractive site for Tzenkethi colonization. Life on the colony, however, was harsh.

"Ferengi vessel detected in orbit," Takis reported from the ops station. "Configuration matches a D'Kora-class retrofit."

Captain Crusher stepped forward. "Initiate a level-four surface scan of the planet. Flag anything alien to the environment that cannot be attributed to the colonists or to Tzenkethi origin, then open a channel to the Ferengi vessel."

"Channel open, Captain," Takis reported.

"Ferengi vessel," Crusher said evenly, "this is Captain Beverly Crusher of the USS *Pasteur*. We are responding to a medical emergency on the planet."

The Ferengi Alliance emblem shimmered on the viewscreen before resolving into the sharp-toothed, smiling visage of a broad-lobed Daimon. "Greetings, Captain Crusher," he said with theatrical flair. "I am Daimon Sug of the science vessel *Kraytok's Profit*. And of course I know who you are, Beverly Crusher. Every Ferengi scientist knows your name, the Starfleet doctor who risked her own life to defend the genius of our beloved Reyga. Thanks to you, Reyga's name now shines like polished latinum in the Grand Nagus's treasury, and throughout the quadrant."

Crusher allowed herself a restrained smile. "His work was worth defending, Daimon Sug. He defied unsympathetic cultural forces to pursue the principle of science over speculation. A principle worth dying for."

Sug nodded vigorously. "Below us lies the Tzenkethi colony of Kelnari. It is not a popular site of settlement, given its harsh geology and its uncomfortable proximity to Cardassian space. My crew has converted this vessel into a provisional hospital. The illness began among traders handling Ferengi cargo. Clearly, we failed to

account for their lack of immunity to pathogens we carry naturally. We have slowed its progress and made strides in managing the symptoms, but we cannot control the contagion. The Grand Nagus has ordered that it not spread beyond this world. Please standby, captain, we're transmitting all the data we have to you now."

As Sug transmitted his data stream, the *Pasteur's* inoculation laboratory came alive. An entire deck staffed by virologists, molecular biochemists, and epidemiologists, analyzed the incoming information in real time. The pathogen's structure resolved on the main screen: an RNA virus of hybrid morphology, shaped by aggressive recombination. Its antigenic spikes shifted with each replication cycle, generating a swarm of variants.

With the *Pasteur's* state-of-the-art medical equipment and the focused expertise of its crew, it did not take long to identify the problem. From the aft section of the bridge, Commander Sata brought up a report from the inoculation laboratory. "That explains the Ferengi's failure so far to produce a stable vaccine," Sata said, tracing the projected genome with her finger before glancing back toward Beverly. "The pathogen replicates adaptively as a defensive mechanism. Inoculation accelerates its mutation. Every direct attack just selects for a new variant.

Beverly considered the report for a moment then responded. "So, we do not target the virus. We target the conditions that allow it to adapt."

"Or we engineer a fix at the level of the RNA," Sata said. "If we can force it to replicate more accurately, we might be able to neutralize it with a single vaccine."

"Perhaps," Captain Crusher replied. "But we will need to know a great deal more about Tzenkethi biochemistry first. I do not think we can rely entirely on Ferengi techniques here. We will need to go to the surface, conduct our own scans, and collect blood samples from both sick and healthy individuals. Sata, assemble your away team and be sure to coordinate all efforts with the *Kraytok's Profit*, find out the best place to beam in."

"Acknowledged, Captain," Sata replied. She rose and signaled to two officers to accompany her, and they fell into step behind her as they entered the turbolift.

Just as the away team left the bridge, Takis reported from ops, "Captain, the level four scan is complete. We detected nothing of alien origin not brought by the colonists themselves, except for several meteorite fragments dating back millions of years. However, there does appear to be something trapped in ice near the planet's north pole that does not conform to any known planetary features. I am unable to obtain a close enough reading to determine conclusively whether it is foreign, or to speculate on its nature."

"Interesting," Crusher said with a faint smile. "I do enjoy a good mystery, and this mission has not disappointed so far. On screen."

"Aye, Captain, although it appears to be buried too deeply to capture a meaningful visual," Takis said, bringing up a magnified image on the screen.

"Yes," Crusher replied, a trace of dry humor in her voice. "That is some impressive ice. Can we beam whatever it is out of there?"

"Negative, Captain. We cannot obtain a transporter lock. I do not believe the depth of the object in the ice is the issue. The interference appears to be coming from the object itself. It may possess an internal energy source that is resistant to transporter confinement, at least that's my best guess with the information we have."

"So even if we excavated it," Crusher said, half question and half conclusion, "we likely still wouldn't be able to transport it aboard."

"Yes, Captain. That is my assessment," Takis confirmed.

Crusher considered this for a moment. "Prepare a shuttle. Have Riley from engineering meet us in the launch bay with environmental suits and the necessary equipment to extract the object manually."

Takis turned toward her, his thick Denobulan eyebrows lifting slightly. "Excuse me, Captain, but you do not intend to lead the away mission yourself, do you?"

"Commander Sata is already on an away mission," Crusher replied easily. "And I happen to enjoy winter weather. Let's go." She strode toward the turbolift without hesitation. Takis followed a step behind as another bridge officer smoothly took his place at Ops, the ship's rhythm continuing uninterrupted.

The shuttlecraft carrying Crusher, Takis, and the engineer Riley launched from the *Pasteur* into the quiet emptiness of space and began its smooth descent toward the planet's northern pole. It entered the atmosphere on a shallow vector, heat dissipating evenly across its hull, then leveled out and glided low over an unbroken plain of ice that stretched to the horizon in every direction. After several hundred kilometers, the shuttle decelerated, banking gently as its landing thrusters fired in short, controlled bursts. It settled onto the ice sheet with a muted vibration, the surface beneath it holding firm.

Inside the cabin, the lighting shifted as environmental protocols engaged. Crusher sealed the collar of her biosuit and confirmed internal pressure, her visor display scrolling through temperature and radiation readings. Takis secured the portable tractor unit while Riley unpacked a compact laser cutting assembly, magnetically locking each component to the deck as it was removed. The routine was familiar, efficient, and silent. When the rear hatch cycled open, cold light spilled into the shuttle, followed by the distant, constant wind sweeping across the polar cap.

They stepped out onto the ice, their boots finding immediate purchase on the frozen surface. Riley positioned the laser device over the scan coordinates and activated it. A narrow beam traced a precise circle, melting downward through the ice in smooth, controlled layers. Liquefied runoff flowed away from the cut and refroze almost instantly. As the cavity widened, Takis anchored the tractor emitter and engaged it at minimal power. Something shifted below, resisted, then loosened. Slowly,

a compact object rose from the ice, dark and unmarked, no larger than a simple storage case.

Takis's breath caught. "What is it?"

Crusher stared at the object. "I don't know," she said quietly. "But it's definitely not Tzenkethi."

Chapter Seventeen

Kira sat frozen, motionless as stone, her eyes open and unblinking, fixed on a vision only she could see. Outwardly she appeared rigid and inert, but within her mind everything was in violent motion, memories and sensations colliding in chaotic turmoil, leaving her breath shallow and her body locked in place.

She was no longer on Deep Space Nine. She was back on Bajor during the occupation. She was younger here, and she recognized her surroundings immediately: the Tozhat Province, overlooking a small village set in a shallow basin below. She crouched behind a crumbling barricade, hungry, exhausted, and filthy. The Shakaar resistance cell had been evading a Cardassian patrol for days, with no opportunity for rest or concealment. The plasma rifle in her hands felt heavier than it should have, its grip slick with sweat and grime. Around her, the rest of the cell—including Lupaza, Furel, and Shakaar himself—lay low among the rocks and shattered walls, faces drawn tight with fatigue and tension, eyes fixed forward. No one spoke. They waited in the muck for Shakaar's signal.

Below them, the village of Tozhat Vale spread outward in the traditional Bajoran fashion. Small stone houses clustered around a central square with a public kiln, a water well, and a sundial worn smooth by generations of use. Livestock wandered freely through the narrow paths between buildings. Children, thin and unwashed, carried foraged scraps home to anxious mothers who watched the ridge with open fear. The village council had refused a Cardassian requisition order demanding quotas of produce, livestock, building materials, children for mining, and women for comfort. The refusal had been unanimous, despite the certainty of what it would bring. They would not surrender their women and children, and they did not possess the resources demanded of them in any case. Even compliance would not have saved them.

The Shakaar resistance cell lay in wait behind the broken walls along the upper ridge, watching as the afternoon stretched on. When the Cardassian patrol arrived to deliver its punishment, they would strike.

When the Cardassian patrol arrived at the village, the residents prepared themselves for their fate with the stoicism of the ancient culture they embodied. As the Cardassians exited their transport, Shakaar noticed someone unusual among them: a man in civilian clothing, though partially outfitted with military protective armor that had clearly been issued for his safety during the patrol. Shakaar recognized him immediately: Hadar Venn.

Venn was a member of the Cardassian civilian government whose reputation extended even to Bajor. As close to an open critic of the occupation as Cardassia's totalitarian system allowed, he had spoken in council against the military's brutality and written a widely circulated treatise condemning its destructive tactics and routine violence against noncombatants. He did not oppose the occupation itself, only

the methods by which it was enforced: the destruction of villages, the seizure of families, and the practices of collective punishment that reduced entire populations to instruments of control.

Shakaar did not know why Venn was present, but he assumed it was part of a civilian government audit of the occupation. He had heard murmurs that such an inquiry was being planned, though no details had ever reached the resistance. In Venn's presence, Shakaar saw an opportunity for a larger change than any single tactical victory could produce. He made the calculation in an instant and raised his hand, signaling his fighters to hold at the very moment they had been expecting the order to attack.

His reasoning was brutally simple. If Hadar Venn were to witness the destruction of a civilian village firsthand and then carry that experience back to Cardassia, perhaps change could come from within the occupying power itself. Shakaar might accomplish more through inaction here than through force. But the deadly cost of that inaction was unmistakable, and it was measured in Bajoran lives.

When the sound of disruptor fire echoed through the valley and carried up to the ridge, Kira was filled with restless fury. Bajorans, including children, were being executed in the streets below and they were doing nothing. She saw a man dragged from his home and forced to his knees in the square, his hands bound behind him as a Cardassian officer fired into the back of his head without hesitation. She saw a mother scream and lunge for her fallen child, only to be struck down beside him, her body collapsing over his small, unmoving form. Soldiers moved methodically from house to house, setting plasma charges at doorways and windows, burning families alive inside when they could not or would not come out quickly enough. Near the well, an elderly woman was shoved to the ground and left there, bleeding and gasping, her hands clawing weakly at the dirt as the patrol marched past her to continue its work.

The sounds reached Kira in fragments. Screams cut short. The sharp crack of disruptor fire. The dull roar of burning stone as roofs collapsed inward. The smell of smoke drifted upward, thick and acrid, carrying with it the sickening knowledge of what was being burned below. Running on adrenaline and instinct alone, she nearly leapt from her position, ready to charge the Cardassian patrol by herself. It was a visceral response, immediate and instinctive.

As she began to surge forward, Lupaza, crouched beside her, caught her by the arm and pulled her back down. Lupaza was her superior in both age and standing within the cell. Their eyes met. Lupaza gave a small movement of her head, a silent command to stop. Kira obeyed, though she did not understand why they were sitting idly by and allowing a massacre to unfold. The restraint was unbearable, pressing against her chest until it felt difficult to breathe.

Lupaza leaned close. "No," she whispered. "That Cardassian civilian is Hadar Venn." Kira knew the reputation, even if she did not recognize the man himself. "He

has to witness this,” Lupaza continued. “He has to see it with his own eyes. It is one thing to speak against brutality as an abstraction. It is something else to stand in front of it. If we intervene now, he will only see our violence, not theirs. The military knows we are here. They want us to act. In the best case, we do their work for them and Venn dies with the patrol, taking his reform movement with him. In the worst case, he survives and watches us slaughter them, and the military’s propaganda is validated. It’s a win-win for them.”

Kira forced her gaze downward again. She saw Venn moving through the village under armed escort, his civilian clothes stark against the ruins around him. He flinched as bodies fell nearby, his posture stiffening, but he did not turn away. He activated his PADD again and again, his stylus moving in quick, precise strokes as he walked past the dead and the dying. He paused near the square, looked down at the bodies piled there, and recorded something. He stepped around a burning doorway and noted that too. He was close enough that the smoke curled around him, close enough that the screams reached him unfiltered. And still he wrote.

Kira swallowed hard, her jaw clenched so tightly it ached. The screams below continued as she watched, helpless and unmoving. Her sense of right and wrong blurred, collapsing under the weight of what she was being asked to accept. A profound disappointment settled over her, heavy and disorienting. When had their resistance begun to trade in political gambits? As far as she was concerned, they existed for one purpose only, to kill Cardassians and to save Bajorans. Now the logic had inverted itself. They were allowing Bajorans to die in the hope that Cardassians might someday choose to change.

Back in the conference room on Deep Space Nine, Kira remained paralyzed. Jolen knelt beside her, holding her hand, his face drawn with distress at what was happening to the First Minister to whom he was so devoted. Tenen and a Bajoran nurse had arrived and were running emergency response diagnostics, their voices clipped and urgent as they worked.

Within Kira’s inner world, years had passed. She was no longer a resistance fighter crouched on a ridge. She was now a major in the Bajoran Militia, the first officer of Deep Space Nine, seated at the controls of a Federation runabout. Gul Dukat occupied the second cockpit chair beside her, his expression fixed in its familiar mask of condescending smugness. They were en route to the planet Dozaria where news had reached Kira that a Cardassian transport, *Ravinok*, carrying Bajorans, including her friend Lorit Akrem, crashed-landed during the occupation.

The mission had not even begun and Dukat had already been antagonizing Kira for sport, which was Dukat’s special gift. Solely for the purpose of provocation, Dukat offered an unsolicited apology for the occupation. “Without the occupation, you Bajorans would still be sheep. It would have only been a matter of time before

someone else came to claim you. We tempered your steel with fire and made you the resilient people you are today. As I see it, Bajor owes Cardassia a debt of gratitude."

"A debt of gratitude?!" Kira repeated in offended disbelief. "You treacherous monster." Deeply shaken by the crassness of his claim, she launched into him. She accused him of atrocity after atrocity, her words sharp and relentless, a litany she had carried for years. She named massacres and abuses one by one. Rapes. Murders. Exploitation. The systematic destruction of whole villages and families.

Her fury only amused Dukat. He laughed openly now, pleased. He had elicited exactly the response he wanted. He was not interested in arguing history. He was passing the time, and Dukat always knew how to make any subject personal. When she finally stopped, he inclined his head slightly, still smiling. "You speak as if you Bajorans were so innocent. As if there was no Bajoran blood on your own hands."

"What the hell are you talking about, Dukat?" Kira demanded.

"Do not pretend the resistance did not manufacture conditions for mass death in its accumulation of martyrs."

"You made Bajorans into victims, not martyrs," Kira shot back. "You butchered us."

"Oh, really," Dukat replied lightly. "Then what of the so-called 'massacre of To-zhat Vale,' as you Bajorans call it? I know the Shakaar cell was present. You let those people die to make a point. That is not martyrdom?"

"You did the killing, Dukat," Kira snapped. "We did what we had to do to survive. The truth of your barbarism had to be exposed. We were counting on one of you Cardassians having a conscience."

"Who? Hadar Venn? That spineless worm?" Dukat scoffed. "Here, let me show you something."

"What, *Dukat*?" Kira spat his name like venom.

He pulled a file up on a PADD and handed it to her. "Here you go. Venn's official report to the civilian government."

She snatched the PADD from his hand and began to read. As her eyes moved across the screen, her expression shifted from indignant fury to something else entirely. The anger drained from her face, replaced by disbelief, then by something hollow and defeated.

She handed the PADD back to him. "It doesn't even mention the killings," she said quietly. "Not one word. I watched him witness atrocities that still keep me awake at night, and he did not record any of it."

Dukat laughed, the sound sociopathic. "That is correct. Venn never cared about Bajoran lives or Cardassian atrocities. He was a cynical politician staking out a position against the military for his own purposes. He could have watched a million Bajorans die and it would not have mattered to him. Your plan was entirely in vain. You let those people die for nothing."

Kira did not respond. The realization cut deeper than the memory of the massacre itself. The trauma was not only what she had witnessed, but what she had believed afterward. Every justification she had clung to over the years collapsed at once. The villagers of Tozhat Vale had not died to expose the occupation. They had died to preserve its illusion. And she had helped make that possible.

The psychic impact of the realization was more than Kira could bear. In the conference room, just as Tenen and the nurse were positioning the antigrav stretcher to take her to the med bay, something in her snapped. The paralysis broke violently. Her body surged back into motion without warning, arms flailing, legs kicking as if she were trying to escape an invisible trap. Her breathing became ragged and erratic, each gasp sharp and uncontrolled, her chest heaving against the hands trying to steady her.

Tenen reacted instinctively, calling out as she tried to restrain her without hurting her, but Kira fought blindly, her strength fueled by panic. Her eyes were wide and unfocused, her gaze fixed on nothing in the room, as though she were still trapped in the past she had just relived. She cried out, a raw, terrible sound that was neither a word nor a scream, but something primal torn loose from deep inside her. Tears streamed down her flushed face as her body shook, caught between memory and the present, unable to distinguish one from the other.

Jolen tapped his communications badge. "Jolen to Colonel Malik."

"Malik here."

"We are en route to the med bay with the First Minister. She is suffering from some kind of breakdown. Please have your security teams clear the way. We cannot let anyone see her in this state."

"Understood," Malik replied without hesitation. "I am initiating a site-to-site transport of the entire antigrav unit. We will beam her directly to sickbay."

Jolen looked to Tenen. Tenen met his gaze and gave a brief nod, already moving to secure Kira on the stretcher. "Very well," Jolen said. "Initiate transport."

The antigrav unit vanished in a sudden whirl of light and particles, taking Kira with it, her cries cutting off abruptly as the conference room fell into stunned silence.

In the holosuite, Sisko turned fully toward Wesley and began, kindly, deliberately, and without haste, to explain the nature of the help he needed. His demeanor was gentle and patient, marked by an awareness of how much of what was happening even he did not yet fully understand. "Wesley, let me try to explain what has been happening, as I understand it," he said. "It has been more than twenty years, as you understand them, since I joined the Prophets. Yet my joining is not fully complete. I remain apart from their collective. I do not speak in their chorus. The Prophets speak in one voice within the Celestial Temple. They always have and always will."

Wesley did not fully comprehend, but he nodded and allowed Sisko to continue.

"You have begun to experience this yourself. Time does not move linearly here. What you felt when you first encountered my consciousness, that disorientation, was only a small fragment of what I have lived with since I became adjacent to the prophets in the Celestial Temple. Here, time folds. It bends. It overlaps and separates. Past, present, and future exist at once. To exist within this reality, I have learned to narrow my focus. It requires sustained concentration not to be overwhelmed by experiencing all moments simultaneously. Even so, I perceive only fragments of what the Prophets have always known. I saw you, for instance, Wesley. I knew you would be the one who could help me through this.

"But that concentration comes at a cost. It is a profound psychic strain. At times it feels as though I am a Vulcan engaged in a lifelong Kolinahr ritual. There is no serenity in it. Only discipline. Only focus. I no longer inhabit a physical form. I do not breathe air, eat food, or experience desire. And yet I remember every second of being Benjamin Sisko. Every sunrise on Earth. Every moment spent fishing with Jake or cleaning clams at my father's restaurant. The touch of a piano ivory, the smell of an oiled baseball mitt. Every battle aboard the *Defiant*. I remember living corporeally."

His voice softened but did not falter. "It is the persistence of that memory, of corporeality, of linear existence, that I believe has kept my voice separate from the Prophets. They still speak to me as though I were human, as though I remained bound to time."

"You *believe*?" Wesley asked gently.

"Yes," Sisko replied. "It is only a supposition. The Prophets have never made this explicit. But they have spoken to me about my mother, Sarah. My understanding of her was always incomplete. Upon my arrival, I learned that the Prophets had deliberated whether she could be returned to the collective voice. They determined that because she had taken corporeal form, she could never reenter the chorus. She was severed from the Celestial Temple simply for having lived as a physical being.

"If she could not return after inhabiting a human body, then how could I, who was born human, ever fully join them? She vanished before I could even see her. I have had no guide on this journey, Wesley. My presence in the Celestial Temple, as the Emissary, was inevitable. The Prophets knew it before it occurred, as they know all things."

His luminous hand came to rest on Wesley's shoulder. The contact was warm, gentle, grounding. "You know a struggle like this, don't you?" Sisko asked softly. Wesley could only look at him. Words failed him. "You have labored for years to refine your concentration," Sisko continued. "To live in a state of pure focus. And yet you still struggle to enter your guild completely. You remember too much. You feel too much of who you once were. Like me, you exist both within and without."

Wesley said nothing. He did not need to. Sisko had named a truth Wesley had never spoken aloud, not even to his own mentor, Alfie. "What can I do?" Wesley asked quietly.

"You walk between space and time," Sisko said. "You move through thought as easily as through distance. And yet you know what it means to be human. Only you can help me, Wesley. Help me find balance, before what remains of my humanity ripples through the Temple and unsettles everything connected to it. Including Bajor."

Wesley absorbed that, then asked carefully, "So it is your unrectified humanity that has caused the recent hardships on Bajor, Deep Space Nine, and among the Bajorans aboard the station?"

"Yes," Sisko replied. "It is. And I fear that my appearance to you just now, in this form, has caused yet another disruption. This time to Bajor's First Minister herself. I do not know whether she will recover."

His hand tightened slightly on Wesley's shoulder, not in fear, but in resolve. "We must not meet like this again unless it becomes absolutely necessary," Sisko said. "Each contact risks further harm. I am of the Celestial Temple. The Temple is of the Prophets. The Prophets are of Bajor. What occurs in one realm resonates through the others. If I fail to fully transcend what remains of my humanity, I fear Bajor itself may be lost."

Wesley drew a slow breath. "Where do I begin?"

Sisko's hand remained steady on his shoulder. His face shone with a quiet, radiant kindness, unmistakably paternal. "You have already begun, Wesley."

Chapter Eighteen

The lighting in Kira's private room in med bay had been adjusted to a low amber illumination, dim enough to reduce sensory strain. Malik had posted guards outside the entrance. Access to the room was restricted to medical personnel only. Only a small circle on the station knew how badly incapacitated she was. If that knowledge became public, it would cease to be a medical matter. Rumors would spread quickly, first through the Promenade and then outward to Bajor. In the absence of its First Minister, even briefly, Bajor's fragile and contentious government could collapse.

First Minister Kira Nerys lay on the bed. Sweat clung to her temples and soaked into her hair, darkening it against her skin. Her condition shifted unpredictably between extremes. At times she was seized by violent terror, screaming without restraint, her limbs thrashing as though she were fighting an unseen attacker. During the worst of these episodes, panic overtook all awareness. Once, in a state of blind fear, she clawed at her own arms, neck, and chest until the skin broke, leaving Tenen no choice but to have her restrained to prevent further injury. At other times, the agitation collapsed inward. Kira fell into a deeply disturbed catatonic dream state. Sweat poured from her as her head moved slowly from side to side. Her mouth formed words that had no clear meaning, fragments spoken without coherence or context.

In brief moments of relative calm, Jolen would sit by her side, hold her hand, lightly brush her hair, or speak to her about lighthearted subjects in a soft, soothing tone. He would read to her from her favorite works of Bajoran poets or from ancient liturgies traditionally recited to bring healing to the sick. Tenen regularly monitored her readouts closely, noting how the physiological markers failed to align with known trauma responses. There was no clear neurological pattern and no biochemical explanation sufficient to account for the intensity of the episodes.

As Tenen administered a light sedative to ease Kira's discomfort and Jolen sat by her side, a soft chime sounded at the door. Tenen straightened, her voice firm. "Identify."

"Jake Sisko," came the reply, immediate and restrained. Tenen glanced at Jolen. He met her gaze with a slight nod, and after only a brief hesitation she authorized entry. Jake stepped into the room quietly, his brows drawn together and his mouth tightened in concern. He explained in low tones that Nog had told him of Kira's condition and that he had come as soon as he could. Tenen studied him for a moment, assessing the risk, then inclined her head. "You may stay," she said. "She will benefit from hearing familiar voices."

She closed her tricorder and left the room, the door closing automatically behind her. Jake pulled a chair close to the bed, opposite Jolen, and sat carefully so as not to disturb Kira. He lowered his voice, speaking as though to someone suspended between sleep and awareness. As he looked at her, memories of growing up on the station came flooding back, particularly the moments he had shared with Kira.

"You know," he said after several moments of silent vigil, glancing toward Jolen with a faint smile of amusement at the memory that had surfaced, "I once fell head over heels in love with her."

"Really?" Jolen said with a grin, his attention sharpening. It was exactly the kind of story he loved to hear, and he was in need of one now more than ever.

"Yes," Jake continued, with fondness rather than embarrassment. "I was only sixteen," he added with a quiet laugh. "It was sometime in the early 2370s. A mature Betazoid suffering from Zanthi fever, a woman named Lwaxana Troi, came aboard Deep Space Nine during the Bajoran Gratitude Festival. Almost everyone was stricken by it. She," gesturing to Kira, "fell hard for Dr. Bashir, and I could think of nothing but Kira. I even wrote her love poetry. She was not appreciative of my overtures, to say the least."

"Of course I know who Lwaxana Troi was," Jolen said, laughing. "Who in the Alpha Quadrant doesn't? That's an adorable story, Jake. Thank you for sharing it with me. I will keep it for a rainy day, for when Kira needs cheering up."

The room suddenly felt lighter. Even Kira's breathing seemed to steady. Then something wholly unexpected happened. Kira's eyelids fluttered open, unfocused at first. Confusion crossed her face, quickly giving way to recognition as her gaze settled on Jake.

"Jake?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

"I'm here," he said gently, taking her hand. "It's me. You're in med bay. You're safe."

Jolen's eyes lit up with amazement and relief, and he rose at once from his chair. "She's awake," he exclaimed. "I'm going to get Doctor Tenen. Stay with her, Jake."

Kira's grip on Jake's hand tightened. Panic flickered behind her eyes. "Your father," she said urgently. "Is he all right? I have to speak with him. People are dying. Bajor is dying."

"Kira," Jake said softly, leaning closer, "you've been hurt. You need to rest."

She shook her head weakly. "You don't understand. He's calling."

Jake brushed her hair back from her temple in a slow, steady motion. "I know," he said. "But my father is gone. He's with the Prophets now. Don't you remember?"

Tears welled in her eyes. "There must be a way," she said urgently. "A way to reach him. The Orb of the Emissary, Jake. The Orb."

He hesitated. "Kira, no one has seen the Orb since his ascension to the Celestial Temple. Remember? We keep the alcove empty at the shrine back on Bajor."

Her voice faded, her eyes closing as she drifted toward sleep, issuing one last plea before unconsciousness overtook her. "The Orb of the Emissary, Jake. Find the Orb. Your father needs our help."

When Tenen and Jolen returned, they took in the scene at a glance. Tenen checked the vitals display, then turned to Jake and said, "Her readings have stabilized, Jake. I think you helped her."

Jake nodded. "Can I stay with her a bit longer?"

"Absolutely, Jake," Tenen answered. "Stay with her as long as you like."

Quark's Bar had partially recovered from the calamity and was now open to the public at limited capacity. Repairs were still visible in places, and several sections, including holosuites, remained darkened to conserve power. Nimalat was back at her post, but the digitized gaming consoles lining the walls were offline, their screens blank and inert. The dabo table was open but staffed by only a single dabo girl. The reduced activity gave the bar an unfamiliar quiet, the usual clamor replaced by low conversation and the muted sounds of cautious patrons easing their way back into routine.

At a corner table, Wesley Crusher sat alone, his slumped posture and fixed gaze suggesting the intense workings of his inner process. A glass of carbonated water sat untouched before him. He had been there for nearly an hour, unmoving. His encounter with Sisko's consciousness in the holosuite had disoriented him in more ways than one. It was not only the debilitating vertigo he experienced during the process. The encounter itself had given Wesley greater clarity about what was happening and why he had been drawn to the Bajoran wormhole in the first place, but it had left him with exceedingly few clues about how to proceed or how to help the occluded Emissary.

He felt as lost now as he had when he first set foot on Deep Space Nine. Quark approached the table with measured steps. He glanced at the untouched drink, then at Wesley's face.

"Not gambling," Quark observed. "Not drinking. Not talking. That usually means trouble."

Wesley did not look up. "I mean no trouble."

Quark snorted softly. "I've heard that line before." He hesitated, then added more carefully, "You're welcome to brood here. Just don't scare away my customers."

Wesley nodded once, still staring at the table.

Quark studied him for another moment. He knew despair when he saw it, and this was the kind that offered no profit. With a dismissive flick of his hand, he ordered his staff to leave the human undisturbed.

Wesley contemplated his interaction with Quark for a brief moment. Did he really mean no trouble? How could he be so sure? Was he even the same person he

had been before his unsettling encounter with Benjamin Sisko? He was genuinely unsure. Just then the doors to Quark's Bar parted, and Admiral Tuvok entered. He walked toward Wesley with the deliberate, purposeful movement characteristic of Vulcans. Wesley looked up at once. For whatever reason, Wesley felt an overwhelming sense of relief at the sight of Tuvok as if his presence alone were enough to steady the waves of uncertainty rippling through him.

Tuvok approached Wesley's table. "Admiral," Wesley greeted him as Tuvok took the seat across from him.

Before Tuvok could speak, the words came rushing out of Wesley. He described in detail his encounter with Sisko's consciousness in the holosuite, the devastating vertigo and disorientation that accompanied the visitation, and all that Sisko had shared with him. Sisko's inability to shed his human origins. His exclusion from the unified voice of the Prophets. What he had revealed about the Prophetess Sarah and her exile from the Celestial Temple. Tuvok listened in patient silence.

Wesley concluded his account with the fact that the disturbances experienced on Deep Space Nine and across Bajor were the cosmic repercussions of Sisko's discontinuity with the other Prophets, something akin to the birth pangs of his transcendence. He spoke of the risks involved in attempting to summon Sisko again and of the fact that Sisko had solicited his help without offering any clear direction forward.

After Wesley had finished, Tuvok responded with a summary to assure him that he had fully understood. "Then the temporal irregularities that you first perceived and that led you here to Deep Space Nine were merely symptoms of the destabilization caused by Benjamin Sisko's transcendence from a corporeal, time-bound, being into one not limited by our perception of linear time. This is the cause of the disruptions we have been experiencing."

"Yes, exactly, Admiral. The only way I can see to move forward at this stage is to find the missing Orb of the Emissary. With it, we may be able to communicate with Sisko in a far less invasive way and perhaps gain more clarity about how to proceed."

"A logical deduction, Wesley," Tuvok responded.

"Logical, yes. But practical, I don't know. There is so much we don't understand. Especially how the Orb came to Tyree for Sisko to discover it in the first place, and what happened to it after his ascension."

"Wesley, is it not logical to assume that your calculations that first led you to Tyree led you there not because of the planet, but because the Orb had once resided there?"

"Yes. That is my assumption."

"Then the answer is simple. Recalculate your formulas in reverse, with the unknown variable now identified as the Orb. The axiomatic unknown has been defined. You now have a value for x."

"Yes," said Wesley. "My model is not flawed. My causal inferences were."

"Precisely" affirmed Tuvok.

Before Wesley could leap from his seat to run to Odo's office and reverse engineer his equations, Tuvok continued with another subject. "Wesley, what role do you see Jake Sisko potentially playing in this mission?"

"I'm still unsure, Admiral. From what I've learned, I now worry that his presence could be a liability. In fact, it may pull Sisko closer to his humanity rather than help him sever from it."

"Indeed," Tuvok responded. "I understand that you often experience a similar tension between your former life in Starfleet and your new life as a Traveler."

"Yes, that is correct, sir. I believe this is exactly why Sisko has deemed me the right person to assist him."

"Most logical," Tuvok responded. "However, Wesley, have you considered the emotional repercussions of what transpired here today?"

"Emotional repercussions?" Wesley echoed.

"Yes. Have you considered how Jake Sisko might feel when he learns that his father revealed himself to you and not to him?"

Wesley was again taken aback by the emotional sensitivity of the Vulcan, who had now attempted to reach him on that level for the second time. "No, Admiral, I have not," Wesley admitted. "I imagine he might feel hurt, forsaken, perhaps even rejected."

"Indeed, Wesley. It is illogical not to take emotional variables into account, especially when one of the demonstrable symptoms of Sisko's transcendence is deep emotional turmoil among the Bajorans."

Wesley nodded, acknowledging Tuvok's point.

"For now," Tuvok concluded, "let us find the Orb of the Emissary."

Chapter Nineteen

The chamber of ministers in Bajor City was in uproar. "Bajor is dying!" Serin Vekar's voice tore through the vaulted hall like disruptor fire. "And where is her First Minister? Escaped to Deep Space Nine? Dead? Or being fondled by some lustful vedek?"

Laughter and jeers rippled across the room, sharp and ugly. Beneath the noise, however, was panic, real and electric, contagious and thickening with every shouted insult. Panic was exactly what Serin Vekar was hoping to achieve. He knew that sowing doubt and preying on fear was the most effective way to assert power grounded in falsehood. He did not even fully believe his own invective. It was entirely calculated, designed solely to consolidate power.

Camps were forming in the chamber of ministers. Serin's toxic diatribes and his concerted efforts to spread propaganda since the upheavals had won over the majority of ministers. Still, a small, increasingly isolated group remained loyal to Kira.

Jolen Deyer had left Deep Space Nine and Kira's side for the explicit purpose of representing Kira's interests at this emergency council session. He stood among the ministers loyal to Kira near the rear and shouted, "She's aboard Deep Space Nine looking after our interests, and now she's injured, Serin. Speak a word of truth for once!"

"The only injury to the First Minister is being bothered to govern," he said, stabbing a finger toward the podium where the First Minister's seat stood empty. "She has shown her true colors. We need a First Minister who does not tuck and run when things get difficult. We need actual leadership."

"We need leadership, not narcissistic posturing!" came the voice of another minister sympathetic to Kira.

The chamber of ministers was in an uproar, with some voices raised in agreement, some in protest, but most driven by raw fear. Before anyone else could seize the moment when Serin was not speaking, which was exceedingly rare, Jolen stepped forward. His voice was elevated and controlled, strong enough to sound confident, affable enough to disarm.

"It is remarkable, Serin, how suddenly you have discovered concern for the people," he said. "Where was this concern during the occupation? Where was it when you misappropriated the resources of your own province? You have made a career of capitalizing on the injuries of others while experiencing none of your own."

Some murmurs of agreement rippled through the chamber. "Please do not terrorize the entire planet with your self-important dribblings and opportunistic

diatribes,” Jolen continued. “And do not make the mistake of thinking you can treat us all the way you treat your female staff.”

Light laughter broke out, spreading farther than Jolen had intended, even into the pro-Serin camp. Jolen let it settle before going on. “If you had any respect for us at all, you would not condescend to this assembly. You would recognize that we are not blind to your hypocrisy and lies, no matter how often you repeat them.” His tone sharpened. “The First Minister did not flee. She went where Bajor’s interests required her to go. You stayed here to cynically capitalize on our suffering and to practice your outrage. Forgive me if we are not as stupid as you think we are.”

“Careful, Jolen,” Serin said. “You’re already standing on borrowed credibility. Credibility that is worth nothing anymore.”

Jolen inclined his head slightly. “And yet here you are, trying to steal it.”

“What you call stealing, I call saving,” Serin replied. “I demand a vote of no confidence in the First Minister immediately, and the implementation of emergency protocols.”

“And let me guess, Serin,” Jolen said, his tone sharpening as he looked around the chamber and caught the eyes of as many ministers as he could. “The protectorate formed under this state of emergency will be led by you. This is a coup d’état, plain and simple.”

That drew a louder reaction. The palpable anxiety in the room edged closer to mob violence. Ministers surged to their feet. Shouts overlapped. Accusations flew. The chamber’s cavernous acoustics amplified the chaos, high ceilings and marble walls throwing every sound back twice as loud. The armed security officers present, who had earlier been doing their best to keep the peace, began to lose their sense of duty. They too divided into camps guided by their own political leanings, turning a volatile situation into something outright dangerous.

With the security officers now part of the fray themselves, civilian spectators in the gallery began to stream down onto the chamber floor, mixing civilians with politicians. Some opened the outer doors of the chamber, and even more irate, angry, and frightened civilians poured in, many of whom had come to the ministers’ chamber that day expecting, and even hoping, to join a riot.

Chaos was about to break loose. Jolen felt the moment tipping. He reached out and caught the sleeve of a nearby security officer he knew well, anchoring himself as bodies pressed forward. Fear cut cleanly through his composure, not fear of Serin, but fear of what would happen if this room broke.

Then, just as things threatened to spill over into mass violence, a beam of shimmering transporter light appeared at the center of the chamber floor. From her run-about in orbit of Bajor, General Ro Laren materialized. Her authority settled over the room like a command already obeyed.

At her arrival, the room went from the brink of fisticuffs to near dead silence. For a breathless instant, no one moved. In the silence, a single voice was heard, whispered almost in awe of her presence, "it's General Ro."

Ro stepped forward slowly. Her sidearm remained holstered. Her gaze swept the room, taking in not only the ministers frozen in place by her arrival, but the guards, the aides, and the civilians pressed too close to one another. No one moved. No one spoke. Nobody dared test their luck against the legendary Ro Laren.

She said nothing for several moments, letting her demeanor and her stare do the talking for her. Then she began to make slow rounds, hands clasped behind her back in an almost casual gesture, as if the chamber belonged to her alone. She was in complete control. When she finally spoke, her voice pierced the room like a knife, though there was no effort or strain in it at all. "Those of you who do not belong on this floor, leave. Now."

Civilians began filing out of the chamber with an orderliness that felt almost orchestrated. No protest. No argument. She then turned her attention to the guards. "Back to your posts. You are here to prevent disorder, not participate in it. Each and every one of you is now on report. There will be a formal inquiry into your conduct here today. Move."

The guards did exactly as ordered, obediently falling back into the line of duty as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Ro turned now to the ministers. "You should all be ashamed." Her disdain for political maneuvering was unmistakable in her voice. "You are acting like squabbling children. Bajor is suffering, and you bicker and posture like Chalthoth over your own petty ambitions. Bajor deserves better than all of you. Bajor was occupied for fifty years. It needs healing, not more exploitation. Sit down. All of you. Now."

The ministers silently heeded her directive. Even Serin Vekar followed her order without argument. As they filed back toward their seats, Ro's gaze shifted to Jolen, and she gestured with one hand toward the empty First Minister's seat on the dais. Jolen hesitated. A sense of impropriety settled over him at the thought of occupying Kira's rightful place, and he remained still for a heartbeat longer than was prudent.

Ro had no patience for hesitation. She pointed sharply at the seat, her finger steady, and spoke a single definitive word. "Sit." He obeyed, lowering himself into Kira's seat with deliberate care, hands resting flat on the armrests, acutely aware of the symbolic danger in occupying it, even briefly.

Ro faced the assembly. "First Minister Kira is under medical care aboard Deep Space Nine. She is a victim of the same forces that have rattled our planet and our people. We are working to ascertain the cause of this disturbance. I assure you that our best people, both on the station and on Bajor, are addressing this with coordinated effort. Kira is alive and intermittently conscious. She remains your First Minister."

A low murmur moved through the chamber, then stilled. "Until her recovery," Ro continued, "her chief of staff, Jolen Deyer, will record grievances and keep full minutes of your proceedings. These will be presented to the First Minister when she is able to receive them. This is not a transfer of authority. It is simply the proper procedure for a situation such as this."

Her gaze fixed on Serin. "Bajor needs your help. So get to work." No one spoke. "Do not make me come back here," Ro concluded. She tapped her commbadge and vanished as suddenly as she had appeared.

Ministers looked at one another in uneasy silence. For several moments, no one moved. Finally, the presiding clerk cleared his throat. "This session is adjourned."

On Deep Space Nine, Wesley Crusher was back in Odo's security office. Light from the surrounding holoprojections illuminated his face in the otherwise darkened room. Strange equations, nonsensical numerical combinations, and paradoxical shapes shifting continuously along the color spectrum scrolled through the air around him. His hands moved over the controls with deliberate speed, adjusting variables, collapsing models, and rebuilding them again from the ground up.

He was following Tuvok's suggestion precisely, reverse engineering his equations by treating the Orb of the Emissary as a known quantity rather than a variable. The change in approach was subtle, but its implications were not. With each iteration, Wesley narrowed the field of possibilities, stripping away assumptions until only structure remained. He had been at it for quite some time. He leaned back briefly, rolled his shoulders, rubbed his eyes, then leaned forward again. Fatigue pressed at him, but it did not slow his thinking. If anything, it sharpened it. He had learned long ago, in his training as a Traveler, that exhaustion could serve as a crucible as much as an obstacle. At times, it stripped away comforting assumptions in the search for a purer truth.

The current location of the Orb of the Emissary remained unresolved. Even so, he had eliminated a number of possibilities concerning both its disappearance from Bajor after Sisko's ascension and its original appearance on Tyree. After exhaustive searches through restricted Bajoran files, he had completely ruled out the existence of any hidden vedek faction that believed its mission was to protect the Orb. This had been his working assumption. Nor was the Orb simply displaced. Spatial displacements were well known and well understood by travelers, and they always left some form of residual trace. He knew exactly what to look for. This phenomenon left no discernible trace.

"If you cast a shadow," Wesley murmured to himself, reciting a central principle of Travelers as if to steady himself at the moment his confidence wavered, "then the perception of what you are extends into another plane." He paused. Then, as the implication struck him, he continued more quietly, "But only in the presence of a light source."

The realization sent Wesley into a new cascade of calculations. The shifting paradoxical shapes around him responded, their colors changing, their structures tightening and loosening as variables collapsed and reformed. His hands moved faster now, no longer searching but following. His mind had seized on something essential, something still incomplete, but no longer incoherent.

He adjusted the parameters to account for non-local causality, then paused. His fingers hovered. He frowned. "No," he said quietly. "That assumes intention."

He rewrote the equation. The prisms rotated. Several destabilized and dissolved, collapsing into nothing. Then the structures reasserted itself, simpler now, more austere. He entered the final variable. The holograms reacted instantly. Angles inverted. Pathways folded inward. Colors bent along trajectories that violated every optical rule yet remained internally consistent. The now cohesive structure expanded outward, then curved back through itself, forming a topology that could not exist in ordinary space.

To an outside observer, it might have looked like abstract art. To Wesley, it was unmistakable. It was a three-dimensional map of the Tzenkethi system. He studied it for a long moment. Then he tried to disprove it. He ran the model again, altering the initial conditions. The result did not change. He stripped the equation down to first principles, removing every assumption that relied on Bajoran theology, Federation physics, or Traveler philosophy. The structure wavered, then stabilized again.

Wesley pulled up political and astrophysical data side by side. Tzenkethi territorial instability. Vague reports of regional claimants vying for centralized authority. Border tensions with the Cardassians. He frowned as he scanned the timelines. There was clearly more here than what could be reached through the records available to him. There was still much that remained unknown to him. The Tzenkethi system clearly had some relationship to the Orb of the Emissary, but how and why remained as mysterious as they had been with his discovery of Tyree earlier.

He was not going to summon Sisko again on the holodeck until he had more clarity. What he lacked in clarity, however, he more than made up for with a sense of direction. He was at least one step closer to resolving the mystery once and for all.

Chapter Twenty

The Vulcan meditation candles provided the only source of light in Kira's otherwise dark room in the med bay. The air was heavy with the aroma of Vulcan ceremonial incense, a thin ribbon of smoke rising from a sacred metal bowl. Tuvok sat beside her bed in silence. In his hands he held an ancient *Kol-Ut-Shan* symbol. It consisted of a stone ring with a hollowed center, the stone quarried from the Forge of Vulcan. Affixed to the outer edge of the ring was a triangle fashioned from a precious metal. The point of the triangle extended inward, terminating within the empty center of the stone circle, and at that point a single gemstone was set. The symbol represented the foundation of Surak's philosophy: infinite diversity in infinite combination.

The object was itself a relic, over a thousand years old, preserved in the reliquary of the sacred Sanctuary of P'Jem. It had been presented to Tuvok by the Vulcan High Council as a formal commendation upon his return from the Delta Quadrant.

He sat by Kira's bed in silent meditation, the symbol resting steadily in his hands. Tuvok was now in his second day of silent vigil over Kira. No one had asked him to remain. He had taken it upon himself to sit by her side after Jolen departed the station to represent her interests at the Ministerial Council. Tenen did what she could to support the vigil and to interrupt it as little as possible, even restricting access by her own medical staff. Since Tuvok had begun his meditation, Kira's vital signs had stabilized. Her breathing had slowed, deepening into a steady rhythm. The feverish sheen that had dampened her forehead was gone. Tenen did not know why this was so, but the effect was undeniable. There was medicine in Tuvok's presence, and she was content to let it continue.

As Tuvok sat in disciplined stillness, Kira stirred slightly in her bed and her eyes slowly opened. "I smell bateret incense," she said, still groggy and disoriented. "Is it the Gratitude Festival already?"

"Not bateret, First Minister. You are smelling Vulcan jasatroaei, traditionally used by Vulcan physicians as an anxiolytic for those whose logic has been disrupted by illness or injury."

"Where am I?"

"You are in sickbay aboard Deep Space Nine. You have been in a panic-induced coma for over a week. You are under the care of Dr. Tenen Rahl."

"Where is Jolen? Bajor. What about Bajor?" Her voice wavered, still hoarse and uneven with the strain of waking.

"First Minister, it would be prudent for you to rest for now. I assure you that Jolen has matters well in hand. At present, the only course required of you is rest."

"Admiral Tuvok, what are *you* doing here?"

"I am meditating, First Minister."

"I see. Thank you for the bateret incense. It has revived my senses, even if it is the wrong season for it." Tuvok did not correct her this time. He saw no harm in allowing her to believe she was inhaling the ritual smoke of her own culture. "I am sorry. I am not much of a conversationalist right now," she continued with a subtle shift of her bodyweight.

"On Vulcan," Tuvok replied, "silence is not void. It is equilibrium. Quietude is the space in which perception expands beyond the need for affirmation, and silence, when shared, is its own form of communication."

Kira offered a wordless acknowledgment with a slight nod of her head. They sat together in silence under the flickering glow of the candle for several minutes. A tear streamed down Kira's cheek. "I have prayed. I have meditated. I have sought guidance through the Orbs. The Prophets are silent. There is nothing. No dream. No insight. No direction. No peace. The silence of the Prophets is not equilibrium, Tuvok. It is abandonment. I have offended them with my hubris. To think I should be the one to lead their planet and their people when my hands are soaked in the blood of the Bajoran people."

"Your conclusion, First Minister, is illogical," Tuvok replied. "I have studied your history. The timeless entities of the Celestial Temple, as you call it, do not always make their intentions clear to the time-bound beings of the world they observe. Silence does not necessarily indicate rejection. It may be their reply. Furthermore, you choose to measure your impact by the lives you have taken, rather than by the lives you have saved."

"Tuvok, you almost sound like Vedek Bareil," she said softly as tears continued to streak her face, "like a man of faith."

"Faith, First Minister, can be logical," Tuvok continued. "Logic is not limited to conclusions drawn from complete knowledge. It also governs how one proceeds when knowledge is incomplete." He spoke without emphasis, as if stating a definition rather than an argument.

"Every system of reasoning operates from premises that cannot themselves be proven within the system. Logic itself assumes that perception is reliable. These premises are accepted not because they are certain, but because without them, coherent action becomes impossible. Logic does not eliminate uncertainty. It manages it." Kira remained silent, listening. "When outcomes cannot be fully predicted, reason does not suspend itself," Tuvok continued. "It selects a consistent framework within which decisions can be made and consequences assessed. That selection is provisional. It is subject to revision. Yet it must be made, or action collapses into paralysis."

"Faith, as you understand it, First Minister, is not the abandonment of reason. It is reason applied where confirmation is unavailable. It is commitment to coherence over time rather than certainty in the moment. To refuse such commitment until assurance is given is not logical. It is abdication."

Kira listened to Tuvok's exposition strangely finding a warm comfort in cold Vulcan logic in a way she never thought would be possible. She sniffled and wiped her tears with her sheet. "Vedek Bareil used to teach that stillness and passion are two drops in the same flowing river. They can be distinct in form, yet carried by the same current. Life."

"Perhaps the same could be said for grief and serenity, First Minister, or companionship and loneliness, or even for silence and communication." Tuvok raised an eyebrow.

Kira understood his point. After a moment of contemplation, she said, "Maybe the Prophets have not abandoned me. Maybe they have entrusted me to stand on my own."

"Listening for the voice of the gods or for the voice of reason within one's own mind is, in essence, the same act," Tuvok said.

While minor repairs continued, Deep Space Nine was once again fully operational. Ships docked and departed with regularity. The Promenade filled with civilians and officers alike, moving from one destination to another, escorting children to daycare, seeking out the right cuisine for their next meal, or browsing the open marketplace. Quark's was again abuzz with activity, shouts of "Dabo!" spilling out onto the Promenade once more.

In Ops, Captain Nog held command, as General Ro had not yet returned from her emergency trip to Bajor. Malik remained at the tactical station, supervising the officers issuing docking orders, monitoring engineering crews, and tracking hull integrity and life support systems. The normal order of Ops.

Nog's command style differed markedly from Ro's. He led with lightheartedness and good humor, qualities that inspired the officers under his command to serve with distinction. Ro, for all her severity, inspired loyalty of a different kind, rooted in awe for her history and reputation. Nog's personable manner had served him well during his time commanding his own starship, and it translated naturally to his current posting on Deep Space Nine.

One Bajoran officer on Ops described the contrast succinctly: "When Ro is away, Nog has the day, and the children will play."

Nog was in the middle of a hilarious anecdote involving a Ferengi businessman, a Nausicaan mercenary, and a Trill symbiont when Malik's voice cut cleanly through the light laughter. "Captain, incoming transmission. Starfleet prefix code. It's the *U.S.S. Pasteur*."

Nog blinked. "The *Pasteur*?" He straightened slightly. "That's Captain Crusher's medical vessel. Wesley's mother. He must have contacted her. Put it through."

The viewscreen resolved into an image of Captain Beverly Crusher standing on the bridge of the *Pasteur*, her blue and black uniform partially covered by a white lab coat. Commander Sata was seated in the background. "Captain Crusher," Nog greeted her, "it's wonderful to see you again. We met at the Starfleet Command Conference on Xantoras three years ago."

"Captain Nog, it's a pleasure to see you," Beverly replied in her characteristically affable way. "You're rather difficult to forget."

Nog flashed a broad grin. "Thank you, Captain. I see that Wesley was able to get through to you. We all told him he had to contact his moogie while he was here."

Crusher froze for a moment. Those were not words she had been expecting to hear. "Wesley?" she said. "You've seen him?"

"Of course," Nog replied. "Just about an hour ago."

Her expression sharpened. "You mean Wesley is there? On DS9?"

Now it was Nog who stood stunned. "Of course," he said. "I assumed you knew. I thought that was why you were contacting us."

Beverly fell silent. The polite, formal composure of a starship captain on a sub-space channel slipped, replaced by the unmistakable concern of a mother, edged with a flicker of anger. "Patch me through to him," she said with a clipped voice. "Immediately."

"Of course, Captain. Right away," Nog said. Then he paused, a note of curiosity in his voice, and added, "But if you don't mind my asking, if you weren't contacting us to speak with Wesley, what was the reason for your transmission?"

"I have been trying to reach First Minister Kira Nerys on Bajor," Beverly replied. "After finally getting through to her office, I was informed that she is recovering from an illness on your station."

Nog confirmed her understanding with a nod. "That is correct, Captain. I regret to say she remains incapacitated and is unable to receive communications at this time. Is there something I can assist you with?"

"There is something I... discovered," Beverly continued. "Something that concerns Bajor. It was my understanding that Ro Laren is currently in command of Deep Space Nine."

"She is," Nog replied, "but she is presently on an away mission."

"Understood," Beverly said. "Please alert General Ro of my intention to speak with her. She will know me. We served together many years ago. After I speak with Wesley, please have your staff ready to patch me through to her. No offense, Captain Nog, but this is a Bajoran matter."

Nog inclined his head. "Understood, Captain. We'll be standing by to connect you with General Ro as soon as you are finished."

He turned to Malik. "Please route the transmission to the Promenade security office."

"Aye, Captain," Malik replied.

Chapter Twenty-One

The security office on Deep Space Nine had become Wesley's sanctuary. His devices were scattered throughout the room, each producing strange illuminations and low, persistent hums. A tangled web of archaic cables connected the devices to one another and to the exposed Cardassian hardware of the office, mirroring the often-chaotic processes of Wesley's mind. Holoprojections hovered in the air, creating an independent light source that bathed the room in overlapping hues. The space felt insulated and sequestered from the rest of the station, just as Wesley himself remained an outsider to Deep Space Nine.

Wesley sat at the center of it all, deep in a meditative state, fully absorbed in contemplation. His body was held in complete stillness, eyes closed, hands resting loosely at his sides. The almost manic use of equipment and the highly complex calculations that had led him to conclude that the Orb of the Emissary was somehow connected to Tzenkethi space had exhausted him. More than that, they marked a kind of regression. He had veered too close to Wesley Crusher, the industrious and endlessly creative young ensign aboard the *Enterprise*, solving problems through relentless analysis and invention. Now he was trying to recover the calm, contemplative demeanor of Wesley Crusher the Traveler, the version of himself who had learned to listen rather than force understanding.

Wesley was beginning to feel like a Traveler again, his awareness turned inward and unhurried. When the communications channel in the office chirped and flickered, he did not immediately react. The signal registered only at the edge of his perception, acknowledged without urgency. Reflexively, almost absentmindedly, with his eyes still closed and his breathing unbroken, he reached forward and tapped the control to receive the transmission.

Then came a voice that impaled his stillness: "Wesley."

Beverly Crusher appeared on the central holoprojection, her image resolving from static into sharp clarity. She had left the bridge of the *Pasteur* to make the call from the privacy of her ready room. Her posture in the chair was straight and controlled, tidy and commanding, the ingrained habit of a starship captain. Her expression, however, was none of those things. Beneath the façade of command, she was emotionally frayed, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Wesley... are you all right?" she asked, her maternal concern edged with a touch of maternal anger. "My sweet Wesley, why didn't you contact me when you came to DS9?" Her voice wavered between reprimand and plea, years of practiced

authority giving way to parental urgency. "Oh, Wesley, talk to me. Tell me what is going on."

For a moment he did not answer. The sudden and unexpected appearance of his mother had jolted him into a kind of verbal paralysis. Then his eyes met hers, unnervingly calm. There was no trace of the restless boy she remembered at the helm of a great starship, nor even of the brilliant but troubled cadet who had left Starfleet. What she saw instead was something quieter and far more distant. He carried a new gravity, and it was one she did not recognize.

"Hi, Mom," he said softly.

The simplicity of the greeting shattered her remaining composure. A short laugh escaped her, half disbelief, half heartbreak, and she lifted a hand to her mouth as if to steady herself. Tears finally spilled free, and she shook her head in a gesture that was at once reproachful and relieved.

"I cannot believe you, Wesley," she said. "You disappear. You show up for Riker and Troi's wedding as if nothing happened. Then you vanish again for sixteen years, to who knows where. I don't know whether you are dead or alive. And now I find out you're on DS9?!"

"I know," Wesley replied. His voice carried no defensiveness. Calm and restrained, it sounded distant, almost cold. "I am sorry. Truly. I am aware that my choices have caused you distress. That was never my intention. I did not mean to cause you pain."

They studied one another in silence, the distance between them vast yet strangely irrelevant. "How are you, son?" Beverly asked at last. "Are you well?"

"Yes," Wesley said.

"Where have you been?"

He hesitated, only a fraction of a second. "At the confluence of time, space, and thought."

She searched his face. "That is not an answer, Wesley."

"It is the best answer I can give."

Her expression softened, then tightened again. "Were you unable to contact me?"

"I wanted to reach out many times, Mom," he said quietly. "I have lived mostly in solitude. Contact would have pulled me back into a version of myself that no longer fits who I am. I was crossing a threshold of perception. I needed distance from who I had been so I could begin to understand who I could become."

"And now?" she asked. "Is that need complete? This solitude, this lonely introspection?"

He met her gaze. "I still require solitude to comprehend the universe in the way I have been trained."

Beverly listened. Her initial anger ebbed as his words settled. The concepts were strange, even unsettling, but his voice was steady, his reasoning coherent, at least to

him. There was no evasiveness, no grandiosity. His composure stabilized her. For a moment, it even sounded like himself, even if what he was describing lay far beyond anything she had imagined for her son.

After the urgency of first contact eased into something more familiar, Wesley leaned back slightly in his chair. "Mom," he said, "how did you even know I was here?"

She hesitated. Her gaze shifted briefly to one side, toward someone or something off screen, before returning to him. "I didn't," she said at last.

"Then why did you contact DS9?"

Her expression changed at once, the mother giving way to the Starfleet officer. "I'm sorry, Wes. That's a classified matter." She paused, then added carefully, "But it concerns Bajor. Now tell me," she continued, "what in the galaxy are you doing on DS9?"

"That is slowly becoming clearer to me," he said.

"What?"

"My presence here was initially unclear to me," Wesley said. "But I am beginning to understand that I am meant to find the missing Bajoran Orb of the Emissary. It may be necessary to help Benjamin Sisko complete his ascension into the timelessness of the Bajoran wormhole. Whatever is unfinished there has already caused significant disruptions to Bajor, to Bajorans, and even to DS9."

Beverly blinked, a brief look of incredulity crossing her face. "Wes, did you just say you're looking for a Bajoran Orb?"

"Yes. I am." Then, just for a moment, a trace of his old childhood humor surfaced. A faint smile touched his lips. "You wouldn't happen to know where I could find one, would you?"

Beverly exhaled softly, disbelief giving way to a reluctant hint of amusement at the improbability of it all. "As a matter of fact, Wesley" she said slowly, "I just might."

"Mom?"

"I probably shouldn't reveal this," she continued, lowering her voice despite the secure channel. "This is a highly classified matter. But are you, by any chance, looking in Tzenkethi space?"

Wesley sat back in his chair, mouth agape in astonishment. The mystery had just become a whole lot more mysterious.

Elsewhere on the station, near Docking Bay Two, Jake Sisko stood waiting by the airlock, his tall frame outlined against the soft glow of the bulkhead lights. He was visibly nervous. He paced in short, restless turns, occasionally muttering to himself, his thoughts punctuated by unconscious hand gestures. It had been two years since his son had visited him on earth, and the weight of that absence pressed heavily on him now. He did not know what to expect.

The airlock hissed open, and civilian passengers from the transport arriving from Bajor began to disembark. Jake watched anxiously, scanning each face as it emerged, waiting for his son to appear. When he finally did, it was no longer the face of a little boy, but that of a young man. He was fifteen now and as tall as Jake, his features unmistakably inherited, the familial resemblance undeniable.

His mixed Bajoran and human heritage showed most clearly in the softened ridges of his nose, present but far subtler than those of most Bajorans. Even so, his Bajoran identity was more pronounced than his human one. He wore the loose, flowing, carefully tailored garments traditional to Bajor, and a ritual earring hung from his ear. As he stepped off the transport, he was speaking in a Bajoran dialect to one of his fellow passengers, his voice calm and unselfconscious, fully at ease in the language of his mother's world.

Several of the other passengers nodded to him as they passed on their way off the transport. Being the grandson of the Emissary of the Prophets carried with it a modest celebrity, one Asher neither sought out nor rejected, having long since learned to accept it as a fact of life.

Jake and Asher's gazes met, and for a moment both were struck by how familiarity could feel so unfamiliar. They stood simply looking at one another until a smile finally crossed Jake's face and he stepped forward, drawing his son into an embrace.

Asher returned it, though with a trace of apprehension. His memories of his father were shaped by a man who had been withdrawn and unhappy in the years before leaving Bajor, a sadness Asher had absorbed as a child without understanding it. After Jake's departure, he had visited Earth regularly but had grown less fond of those trips. The intimacy never returned, and Asher carried with him a quiet reservoir of unresolved anger.

"It's good to see you, son," Jake said softly.

Asher nodded. After a brief hesitation, he replied, "You too, Dad."

"Are you hungry? Thirsty?" Jake asked, then added without waiting for a reply, "Let's go to Quark's."

The Promenade opened up around them as they walked. This was not Asher's first time on Deep Space Nine. As a child, his mother had brought him to the station semi-regularly on various errands and obligations. But he had not been here in many years. Deep Space Nine was a place shaped more by childhood memory than by lived adult experience, and in that way he was very much like his father. Asher's eyes wandered as they walked in awkward silence toward Quark's. "This all feels different to me somehow."

Jake smiled and glanced at his son, noticing with mild surprise that he no longer had to look down to meet his eyes. "It feels different to me too," he said. "I can't really explain it. I practically grew up here. I was here during the war. When I look around, it feels like nothing has changed at all, and yet it also feels like I've never been here before in my life." He shook his head slightly. "I guess places don't change as much

as we do. What feels foreign isn't the station. It's us. We change, and when we come back, the place reminds us of who we were. That's what makes it feel strange."

Asher understood what his father was saying, and part of him even recognized the profound truth in it. But the reflection pulled him back into the years of silence and absence, into the ache he had learned to guard against. Whatever openness he had allowed a moment earlier vanished. His armor slid back into place, and he deflected with sarcasm. "I see you're the station's counselor now."

Jake felt the sting in Asher's tone but did not react. He did not believe he had the right to. He placed the blame for the distance between them entirely on himself and carried it that way. He hoped Asher might see the ways he had changed, but he did not expect it, and he knew he would have to accept it if Asher could not.

Beneath the blinking light fixture, enticing to Ferengi but disorienting, even faintly nauseating, for most humans to look at for long, the doors to Quark's slid open. They were greeted by Nimalat in her full commodified sensuality. Asher could not place her species or her homeworld, but her femininity was unmistakable, unselfconscious, and overwhelmingly hypnotic.

Quark appeared almost at once, flicking a hand to dismiss the hostess. "Jake, my boy, welcome back! And I see you've brought Asher with you." He turned his attention to Asher, smiling and bearing his sharpened teeth. "It's been far too long since you've been here. You know Siskos of any generation are always welcome at Quark's." He paused, eyes narrowing slightly as he calculated the precise limits of his generosity. "Twenty-five percent off all purchases for Siskos," he announced. Then, without missing a beat, added, "offer does not apply to the Dabo table or gaming consuls."

Jake and Asher took a private table. Jake asked about Asher's life on Bajor and about the recent disturbances, wanting to know how they had affected him. Asher explained that his mother had been among the many Bajorans struck by traumatic visions, while he himself had been spared. As they spoke, they ate a simple Bajoran stew.

Even mild Bajoran food registered as punishingly hot on a human tongue. Jake had not eaten Bajoran cuisine in years, and though he was no stranger to cayenne—his grandfather's Creole cooking famously leaned toward the piquant—Bajoran flavors belonged to an entirely different order of heat. He pushed through the meal in quiet solidarity, refusing to let his eyes water through sheer willpower, while Asher ate without the slightest sign of discomfort, another small but unmistakable expression of his Bajoran identity.

As the conversation eased into a lull, Asher's attention drifted. At a nearby table, a Bajoran couple murmured the blessing of the Emissary over their drinks. The prayer had become commonplace among Bajorans, especially on the Sisko estate, where it was often recited at the outer gates, and on Deep Space Nine, where the

Emissary's presence still lingered more strongly than anywhere else. The station remained saturated with the memory of Captain Sisko.

Asher leaned forward, folding his arms on the table. "Dad," he said quietly, "what was he really like?"

Jake, still chasing the heat in his mouth with an Earth ale, glanced up. "What was who like?"

"Grandpa... I mean, the Emissary," Asher said. "What was he really like? I don't mean the stories. We all know how he discovered the Celestial Temple, how he uncovered the lost city of B'hala, and how he battled the Pah-wraiths." He paused, then added more carefully, "I mean what he was like as a man. As a father."

"He was a deeply loving man, Asher," Jake said, momentarily taken aback by the question. "He was affectionate with me. He knew exactly when to comfort me and when to reprimand me. He was patient, far more patient than most of the people under his command ever realized. And he was funny, though not many people saw that side of him either."

He paused, a faint smile crossing his face. "When he became interested in something, he could be obsessive. I remember once he built an exact replica of an ancient Bajoran solar sail ship, and we flew it together all the way to Cardassia. It might have been the closest I ever felt to him on that trip."

He smiled again, more softly. "He loved baseball. It's an old Earth game where you hit a ball with a wooden stick and run around a field shaped like a rhombus. He loved it almost obsessively. He cared deeply about our human heritage, about where his ancestors came from and how they lived. He was grounded that way."

"He could really cook. Sometimes I even preferred his food to my grandfather's, though I never said that out loud. We had a hard time keeping people out of our quarters around dinnertime. He always made extra food, and I don't think I ever saw him put leftovers into the dematerialization slot. He insisted on cooking himself. He would only replicate the ingredients. He was musical too. That skipped a generation. He could sing beautifully, and he played the piano. That's an old Earth instrument. You press keys with your fingers and produce notes."

Jake's voice grew quieter more withdrawn. "Most of all, he loved me. I never doubted that. Especially after my mother died. We relied on each other more than either of us ever fully understood at the time. He was there for me, even during the worst of it. And there were many difficult times, especially during the war, back when we lived here. But he was present. Always."

The words hung between them longer than Jake expected. Saying them aloud had done something he had not anticipated. The memory of how steady and present his father had been cast his own fatherhood into sharp relief. He felt the familiar weight of his depression, the years he had withdrawn, the ways he had convinced himself that leaving was necessary, even inevitable. Now it felt like flight. Like failure.

His expression changed. He looked up and met Asher's gaze directly. He took a moment to gather himself. "Asher," he said quietly. "I'm so sorry. I have not been a father to you the way my father was to me. He was strong. He was resilient. He faced the Dominion, the Cardassians, hardened criminals, and innumerable deadly space anomalies without ever running from a challenge. When things became unbearable, he stood his ground. He never wavered."

Jake swallowed. "I didn't do that. I wasn't that man. And I regret it more than I can say." He leaned forward slightly. "You deserved, and you still deserve, a father like the one I had. I know I'm not as expressive or affectionate as he was. I struggle to show it. I know I haven't always been there for you. But I need you to know this. I love you, son."

Asher sat in silence, offering no immediate reaction. His thoughts and emotions churned beneath the surface. He felt a deep admiration for his grandfather, having just learned things he had never heard before, never even considered. At the same time, he did not know how to respond to his father. The anger was still there. He still felt abandoned. No matter how often his mother had tried to convince him that Jake's leaving had been the right decision, he could not erase the way it had felt. And yet now he could see Jake's effort. He could feel that his father truly cared for him. The words had reached him, even if he had not yet allowed himself to internalize them.

The air around the table grew heavy. Quark had an instinct for sensing when the atmosphere in his bar drifted toward sentimentality in a way that did not immediately translate into profit, and he intervened without hesitation. Both Jake and Asher were quietly relieved that he did.

"I couldn't help overhearing you telling stories about old Captain Sisko," Quark said with a chuckle. He glanced at Asher and quickly corrected himself. "Oh, pardon me. I mean the *esteemed Emissary of the Prophets*. You want stories about Benjamin Sisko? Oh, I've got stories."

Jake and Asher exchanged faint smiles, already grateful. Quark, without realizing it, had given them both an escape, sparing them from having to press further into the difficult emotions that had just been laid bare. Quark leaned in conspiratorially. "Young Mr. Asher, did you know that Benjamin Sisko was, in fact, an excellent Ferengi?" He smiled broadly. "He even out-Ferengi'd me. The very first time we met, he leveraged my nephew's imprisonment to force me into profitless community service. Brilliant manipulation. Truly inspired."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Everyone talks about his heroics during the war, but I'll tell you the truth. He didn't win those battles with Starfleet training alone. It was Ferengi cunning that carried the day. Every time." He paused, then added proudly, "Of course, it didn't hurt that he had a Ferengi at the helm of the *Defiant*." Quark puffed out his chest. "Benjamin Sisko. A truly great Ferengi! Why, I'm convinced he could out negotiate the Prophets themselves."

Jake and Asher laughed, the tension finally breaking. It was exactly the relief they both needed. Just then, the doors to the bar slid open and Wesley Crusher walked in, moving with single-minded purpose. He did not so much as glance at the exotic hostess, perhaps the first person to ever enter Quark's without noticing her at all, and passed straight by as if she were not there.

Quark, still standing near Jake and Asher's table, called out after him. "Hey, Wesley, where are you going in such a hurry? Can I get you something?"

At the sound of his name, Wesley snapped out of his tunnel vision. He became aware of himself, turned, and crossed to the table. His attention fixed on Quark, not out of rudeness to Jake and Asher, but because his mind was wholly occupied with the task ahead.

"I need answers," Wesley said evenly. "I need access to the holosuite program that malfunctioned earlier. I have all the information I need to take this investigation to the next step."

Quark blinked. "What next step?"

Wesley's voice did not waver. "To reinitiate contact."

"Contact with what?" Quark asked, his usual tone of confidence slipping. Jake and Asher listened in silence, though Wesley might as well not have known they were there.

"With Benjamin Sisko."

The name hit the table with crushing force, as if the air itself had been pulled from the room. Even Quark fell momentarily silent. Asher turned to his father in disbelief, but it was Jake who was truly undone. He could not yet sort what he was feeling at the sound of the name. Shock and grief collided with something sharper, more difficult to face. The most painful edge of it was a sudden, unwanted jealousy. His father had returned to a realm of existence Jake still inhabited and had not reached out to him. He had reached out to Wesley Crusher?

Before Jake could speak, Wesley turned away and headed for the stairs leading to the holosuites, leaving silence behind him.

Quark watched him go, then glanced back at Jake and Asher. "He forgot to pay."

Chapter Twenty-Two

After Asher retired to his quarters, Jake, feeling unsettled, walked the Promenade. The familiar curves of the marketplace stirred nostalgia for his teenage years on the station. He stood on the upper deck, leaning against the railing near the large observation windows, looking out toward the place where the wormhole would open. Out into the silent, cold vacuum of space his father now inhabited.

His thoughts drifted restlessly. They moved from the difficult and unfinished interaction he had just had with Asher, to his own complicated feelings about the absence of his father and then toward something lighter. Something happier. Memories of mischief. Of plotting and scheming with Nog, right here in this very spot, when the future still felt distant and full of possibilities. A small laugh escaped him before he realized it.

And just like that, as if summoned by the sheer power of Jake's thoughts, Captain Nog appeared at his side. They were standing in a place where boys had once stood. Jake could still remember leaning against the railing here, trying to look older than he was while Nog conceived of some scheme or another. More often than not, Jake had happily gone along with it. Now they were men. Their bodies had changed. Their lives had radically diverged. They had endured the devastations of war against galactic powers and the more personal wars against depression and despair. They had both loved and lost. Their lives could not be more distant than the ones they imagined together in this spot as teenagers. And yet, in this moment, it felt as if none of that had happened at all, as though the station itself had captured the essence of their youth and preserved it here, bottled in this very place.

"Well," Nog said, breaking the silence, "I see you're back in the old spot." He tilted his head toward the windows, then jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the outer railing overlooking the promenade. "Or at least *half* of it. Remember when we used to lean over there and wait for the transports to unload, just to stare at the ladies walking the Promenade?"

Nog chuckled, amused by the memory and by the absurdity of hearing himself say it now as a Starfleet captain. He finally understood why Benjamin Sisko and Odo had been so determined to chase them away from that railing. The thought made him laugh again, not just at the memory, but at the realization that he would do exactly the same thing now if he caught two boys loitering there.

Jake laughed softly at the memory. "I remember when you let loose those Garanian bolites on that poor Bajoran couple in the replimat and turned them

different colors." He laughed again, the sound briefly slipping back into the tenor of his boyhood. "We were little terrors."

Nog let out his characteristic, cheerful belly laugh. "I pulled that same bolite prank on my bridge officers on Federation Fools' Day when I was commanding the *Rutledge*. They thought the ship was under attack by some kind of biological weapon. They only realized what was really happening after I broke my poker face and couldn't stop laughing." He shook his head, still amused. "Hoo-mans are so gullible. That trick hasn't worked on Ferenginar in at least a hundred years."

They continued to reminisce about their old antics for several more minutes, one memory prompting another in easy succession. Their laughter came freely now, carrying across the Promenade and drifting even as far as the doors of Quark's. "Those were some fun times, Jake. We were like conquerors up here. We thought we owned the station," Nog said, then gave Jake a sideways look, a blink of the eye, and a knowing grin. "Of course, your greatest triumph was Mardah."

Jake groaned. "You're never going to stop bringing that up."

"Never," Nog said cheerfully. "A Dabo girl for your first... *grown-up entanglement*. I still don't know how you managed it."

Jake shrugged, the faintest trace of boyish pride creeping into his smile. "Sisko charm. It runs deep in the family. Once it starts, there's really nothing you can do to stop it."

Nog snorted. "Tell me about it. The girls certainly didn't line up for me. If it hadn't been for my uncle's airtight contracts with the Dabo staff, I might never have had my first real education in *oo-max*."

They laughed like boys again, Jake slipping an arm around Nog as they stood together in the ease of a near-lifelong friendship, looking out at the stars. When their laughter subsided, it softened into shared, silent grins. The longer they stood there, though, Jake's smile slowly faded. As his gaze lingered on the stretch of space where the wormhole opened, a familiar loneliness began to creep back in.

Jake's voice softened. "I miss my father, Nog. I miss him."

The words hung heavily between them. Nog did not rush to answer. He had learned, over a career spent among humans, that sometimes what was needed was not a response but simple, empathic listening. When he finally spoke, his voice was steady. "We all do, Jake. Every day." He paused, then added quietly, "But no one could possibly miss him like you do."

Jake swallowed. "If he's making contact again," he said, the words coming faster now, their edges sharper, "why is he talking to Wesley Crusher? That spaced-out weirdo." He let out a short, humorless breath. "Why not me?"

His voice cracked, just enough to betray the depth of the hurt he was feeling. "If he doesn't want to reach out to me," Jake said, his words tinged with anger and frustration, "then why am I even here?"

Nog understood the hurt Jake was feeling, perhaps more than anyone else in the galaxy. He had seen the loving way Benjamin Sisko interacted with his son. There had been moments in Nog's youth when he even felt a flicker of jealousy, not only at how human parents related to their children, but specifically at how Benjamin Sisko did it.

Benjamin Sisko was the reason Nog had joined Starfleet, and his admission to the Academy had been entirely due to him. Nog had fought at Sisko's side in great battles and trusted him as a commander more than he could have trusted anyone. There were times when Nog had been overwhelmed by paralyzing fear on the bridge of the *Defiant*, but when Captain Sisko entered, the fear would fall away completely and duty would take over. It was as if death in combat were not even a possibility under his leadership.

Nog placed a hand on Jake's shoulder. "I understand, Jake. I know you have a purpose here, and I know your father needs you to be strong. Maybe it's not about *who* he's talking to," Nog said gently. "Maybe it's about what he's trying to say."

They stood together in silence, two men whose lives had been shaped by the same station and by each other's friendship. They carried different burdens, but they were anchored to the same ground. Whatever the future held, whatever the Prophets, the Travelers, or legendary Starfleet captains had yet to reveal, this much remained unchanged.

For the moment, their unwavering friendship was enough.

In the holosuite, the illusion of the baseball diamond again took shape. Wesley took his seat on the bleachers, acknowledging the scattered onlookers. The infield dirt lay smooth, the white chalk lines in sharp relief against it, the bases so pristine and white that it was as if they shone in the sunlight. The green expanse of the outfield sprawled wide. He drew in the smell of mowed grass and clean, simulated earth air into his lungs. It was as if all his senses could fully perceive the pleasantness of the sunny afternoon.

Then the home team, dressed in white uniforms, came running out onto the field to the sound of applause. He recognized some of the names on their jerseys from the last time, but also noticed new ones, their gloves, cleats, and hats betraying them as men from different decades of Earth's twentieth century. Men who had died decades apart playing together in the same game.

Wesley watched the game, waiting and bracing himself for the shift he knew was coming. He did not allow himself to enjoy the game the way he had earlier. This time, he focused on meditation, preparing himself for the temporal collapse ahead. Between the top and bottom of the seventh inning, the shift began.

Having prepared himself, the disorientation of the shift was moderately less overwhelming this time. The vertigo still gripped him. The nausea still made him feel as though he was going to be sick. Every time it threatened to completely

overtake him, he anchored himself to his meditation. He resisted the instinct to grip the handles of his seat against the sensation of falling at high velocity. Instead, he laid his hands flat on his legs, palms open, attempting to lean into the feeling rather than fight it. He was handling it, but he was still relieved when the temporal chaos resolved and began to settle into an iridescent white light.

From within the luminescence, a shape began to take form. It resolved into Benjamin Sisko, stepping forward as though emerging from the light itself. The glow clung to him, gathering around his figure in a soft halo. His expression was calm and reassuring, unmistakably paternal, the same presence Wesley had encountered before.

"Hello, Wesley," Sisko said in a soothing voice. "I'm glad you came back. I know it could not have been easy to endure the temporal shift a second time. But I am glad that you did."

"I apologize for summoning you like this," Wesley responded. "I know it is not easy for you either to project your consciousness into our reality."

"As you know, Wesley, there are some distances that cannot be measured in light-years or traversed by a starship. But this is a journey we travel together."

Wesley exhaled slowly. "I would not have summoned you if I didn't think it entirely necessary. I believe I have found the direction we have been searching for. I have located the Orb of the Emissary."

Sisko's eyes opened wider, his holographic eyebrows lifting as his smile widened. "Where?"

"In Tzenkethi space," Wesley said. "In the polar ice of a settler planet."

Sisko responded with a puzzled look.

"I still don't understand how it came to be there. Or even how it came to be on Tyree in the first place. That is the outstanding mystery to me."

"You see, Wesley," Sisko said, "the Orb is my mother." Sisko's words lingered in the air, evoking silence rather than reaction.

Wesley recovered from the pause. "Your mother?"

"Yes. Or more accurately, it is the vessel that contains my mother. In her human form she was known as Sarah. Among the Prophets, it was understood that for the Emissary to be born, the unity of their chorus would have to be broken. For her to exist within a timebound, corporeal reality, her limitless nature had to be constrained. That is why she is contained within the Orb. She could not return to the collective of the Prophets, nor could she remain fully within temporal existence. To be embodied, to be bound by time, and to give birth to me was for her an experience of fracture, like what you just felt, not momentary but continuous. That is why she left my father and disappeared almost immediately after my birth. She could not remain in human form, nor could she rejoin the Prophets in the Celestial Temple. She had to be contained within the vessel."

Wesley's voice was barely above a whisper. "So when you found the Orb on Tyree..."

"I found her. But by the time I ascended into the Celestial Temple, she was no longer among them. When the fires of Bajor raged," Sisko continued, "when the Pah wraiths clashed with the Prophets, another struggle unfolded within the Temple itself. My mother sought reunion with the collective. They refused. The act of incarnation, once taken, could not be undone. She had known that from the beginning."

Wesley nodded slowly. "So the Orb of the Emissary stands apart from the others for a reason. It isn't like the rest. It must remain separate."

"Yes," Sisko replied, his voice measured, almost distant. "Until such time as what was broken may be repaired again."

"I think I understand," said Wesley "but why did she hide herself on Tyree?"

Sisko inclined his head his smile returning. "It was hidden on Tyree so that I could find it on Tyree. Some things must remain broken into scattered sparks until there is someone capable of gathering what was scattered." He paused, then added, "Tyree was not chosen at random. It was the place where the gathering was known by the prophets to occur."

"She has been found again," Wesley said. "This time by my mother, the captain of a Federation starship, on a Tzenkethi colony. I assume the same logic applies. Your mother placed herself there because that was where she was meant to be found."

"Yes, Wesley, exactly right," Sisko said with warm amusement, a faint trace of his old human cadence returning to his voice.

Wesley thought for a moment. "So, what do we do now?"

"Well, your mother should look into the Orb," Sisko said with good cheer, as if the conclusion were obvious. "She may be able to see what we cannot."

Just then Sisko's image wavered, the glow around him flickered. He appeared strained. As the hologram conveying Sisko's consciousness began to phase in and out of coherence, Wesley felt a rumbling that knocked him momentarily off balance. He could tell that the tremor was not localized to the holosuite. It was the station itself.

"Wesley," Sisko said, his voice tightening with effort, "you must hurry. I am fractured from the Prophets. I am unable to bear the chaos that now shapes my reality. If I fail to hold my place, the consequences for Bajor, Bajorans, the Celestial Temple, and Deep Space Nine will be disastrous."

The ethereal light faded, revealing the now empty baseball diamond, which then itself dissolved, leaving only Wesley Crusher standing alone, deep in thought, amidst the latticed grid of the holosuite.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Wesley Crusher stepped out of the holosuite and left Quark's with a renewed sense of purpose. Having emerged from the physically demanding time warp of the holosuite, he felt a palpable lightness, accompanied by a sharpened clarity about his mission. His conversation with Benjamin Sisko had not only given him direction, it had restored his spirit, and he was almost beginning to feel like the young ensign aboard the *Enterprise* again. His sense of wonder was invigorated, especially by the serendipity of his mother's involvement, which felt too unlikely to be truly random. It was not so much a marvel as it was a puzzle to be solved. Yet alongside this renewed curiosity, he also felt the pressing weight of urgency that Sisko's final words had left behind.

As he walked onto the Promenade, his eyes rose toward the upper level, where two figures stood silhouetted against the viewport. He recognized them instantly as Jake Sisko and Captain Nog. Even from a distance, Wesley could sense the warmth between them. At the sight, his hermit-like need for solitude, which had so defined his life for so many years, and which had been clear for all to see during his time on Deep Space Nine, began to dissolve. He surprised himself with his desire to join them and to share what had transpired in the holosuite.

His pull toward the two men was almost magnetic. His mind raced with thoughts about all that he shared in common with them. All three had had their youths shaped by Starfleet. All had seen action and had experienced loss and trauma. All three had been raised by a single parent. Jake and Wesley had both lost a parent due to Starfleet service. Jennifer, Jake's mother, had died at Wolf 359, and Wesley's father, Jack, had died on an away mission. Nog, too, had lost a parent, not through Starfleet action, but when Prinadora, his mother, left Rom for a wealthier man. While this was culturally expected within Ferengi society, as Nog became more deeply embedded in Federation culture it came to feel less like custom and more like abandonment.

He ascended the stairs quickly, taking them two at a time. He was genuinely excited. In that moment, the identity he had come to inhabit as a Traveler fell away, replaced by an unguarded desire for connection and friendship, a need he had learned long ago to suppress.

"Wesley! Good to see you," Nog said in his naturally affable way. "You've been buried in that holosuite for hours. How's your mission shaping up?"

Wesley smiled in return, grateful for the warm welcome. "Better than I could have hoped," he said. "I've made contact with Benjamin Sisko's consciousness for a

second time.” He said it without pretense or self-importance, merely as fact, and perhaps even expecting that they would share his sense of wonder.

Nog’s brows lifted, his smile remaining present as always. “That’s remarkable. What did you learn?”

Jake did not turn around or acknowledge Wesley in any way, his eyes still locked on where the wormhole’s distant glow would be if it were open. Wesley noticed Jake’s cold disinterest, hesitated for a moment, and then continued speaking to Nog, describing fragments of the encounter, how Sisko had appeared once again within the baseball simulation, and how the message had come through layers of time and light. He was excited and rambled like a teenager, sounding much as he once had when describing one of his outlandish experiments to Data and Geordi La Forge.

Jake’s voice cut through the air like a blade. “Shut up, Wesley.”

The unexpected words landed heavily. Nog, taken aback, blinked. Wesley froze.

Jake turned toward him now, his eyes burning with a hurt easily mistaken for anger. “Just shut up,” he repeated. “I’m tired of hearing you talk about him. You don’t even know him. You don’t know this station. You didn’t sit waiting by this window every night wondering if he’d ever come back.”

Nog and Wesley were paralyzed by the emotional force of Jake’s words as his voice cracked under the strain. “If my father’s reaching out to someone,” Jake continued, “why you?! Why not me?!”

Wesley had no words. The tidal anger rolling off Jake was not rational; it was primal. Nog stepped forward quickly, interposing himself between them.

“Jake, hey, take it easy,” Nog said, holding out his hands. “He didn’t mean anything by it.”

Jake’s breath quickened. “You don’t get it, Nog. Nobody does. He was my father. Not everyone else’s Emissary or prophet or captain. My father! He abandoned me, his only son, for the sake of a race that wasn’t even our own. He was my father, and now, after leaving me for decades, he chooses others over me again and is talking to a man,” he said, pointing at Wesley accusatorily, “a man who barely knows how to live among us, someone my father never even knew!”

Nog moved closer, his tone low and commanding now, the voice of a Starfleet officer accustomed to de-escalation. “Jake. Please stop. You’re not angry at him. You’re angry about losing your father. That’s not Wesley’s fault.”

Wesley finally spoke, his voice measured with a sensitivity he did not know he still possessed. “Jake, I’m sorry. I never meant to take anything from you. Your father first appeared to me without my having sought him out. The process was painful and difficult for me as it was for him. Now I’m just trying to help him.”

But Jake could not hear it. His grief had hardened into fury. He stepped closer, his hand trembling, and for a moment Nog thought he might strike Wesley. Nog moved decisively between them, dwarfed by the two men, who, tall even by human

standards, loomed over him like the towering matter-antimatter reactor in a Galaxy-class starship's engineering section.

Then, out of nowhere, a calm voice entered the storm. "That is quite sufficient, Mr. Sisko."

Tuvok's hand settled gently on Jake's shoulder. His arrival seemed almost supernatural, as though he had simply materialized. The effect was immediate. Jake's breathing slowed, and tension drained from his posture.

"Your emotions are not invalid," Tuvok said evenly. "They are, however, misdirected. Anger is an illogical response to the present circumstances."

Jake exhaled slowly through his nose and closed his eyes for a moment. When they opened again, it was as though he were seeing himself through an entirely new lens of self-awareness.

"You always show up right when things are about to explode, Admiral," Nog said to Tuvok, but for the benefit of all present, his voice betraying as much relief as amusement.

"I am aware of that pattern, Captain," Tuvok said.

He spoke in such a dry Vulcan matter-of-fact manner that to the lobes of a Ferengi it almost sounded ironic. Nog paused for a moment, wondering whether Tuvok was making a joke and whether he ought to laugh, then remembered exactly who he was speaking to and quietly smothered his own bemusement.

Before anyone could reply, Ro Laren's voice came over Nog's comm. "Nog, Report to the boardroom at once and bring Wesley Crusher with you."

Nog tapped his badge. "On our way. And General, it's good to have you back on the station."

Ro's reply came back over the comm edged with fatigue. "Nog, I'd rather be shot out of a torpedo tube into the vacuum of space than endure another babysitting mission to the ministerial chamber on Bajor."

Nog laughed and straightened his uniform as he turned to Wesley. "You heard the General, we've been summoned to duty." He nodded to Jake and Tuvok, then departed the upper level of the Promenade with Wesley.

Jake turned back to the window and leaned against the bulkhead. He spoke to Tuvok without looking at him. "Do you ever feel like you're only living your life for the sake of someone else, someone who isn't even there?" The question was rhetorical, an expression of his own feelings. He did not truly expect a Vulcan, let alone one as seasoned as Tuvok, to understand him.

Tuvok stepped closer to Jake and folded his hands behind his back. "I have indeed known such an experience." Jake looked at him in disbelief. "When I was stranded in the Delta Quadrant aboard *Voyager*, there were times when my mental discipline faltered and my thoughts turned toward my firstborn son, Sek, who remained on Vulcan. By all statistical measures, it was unlikely that I would ever see

him again. Logic dictated acceptance of that probability. Yet that knowledge at times filled me with an illogical aspiration to help him, to guide him, even though such an aspiration could have no tangible outcome. I often found myself considering my own actions as if they were intended as a model of conduct for Sek's benefit. That consideration aided my decision making. I did not miss him in the emotional manner humans might miss their family, but the thought of him did influence my behavior."

Jake regarded him thoughtfully. "So keeping your son in your thoughts made you a better man?"

"*Better man*, as you put it, is a human concept," he replied. "I was neither better nor worse for the experience. It simply existed. In many ways, I may even have been a worse Vulcan for it. But keeping him in my thoughts did make me a better officer. It helped me understand that my role in that circumstance was not only as a command officer. I also needed to be a mentor, a guide, and at times a paternal figure to my crew. In time, I came to see that the need to guide one's child, even across impossible distances, is not weakness but continuity. It is the trace of what we call family. It endures, even when reason cannot account for it."

Jake nodded slowly, taking that in. "Do you think my father, wherever he is, whatever he is, still feels a connection to me the way you did to your son?"

Tuvok inclined his head faintly. "Everything we know about the wormhole aliens, from your father's own reports when he was incarnate, suggests that they are timeless. Not only do I find it logical that what now exists as your father continues to care for you, it is also arguable that he now cares for you at every stage of your life, past, present, and future. Indeed, your father's devotion to you may be more eternal than that experienced by any other embodied mortal race."

"I hope that is true. I hope I'm making him proud. It's been so hard for me since he left."

"In Vulcan philosophy, the bond between parent and child is neither temporal nor spatial. It is a continuum. The parent is expressed through the actions of the child. Your father was a good man, Jake, and so are you."

As tears gathered in Jake's eyes, Tuvok placed his left hand on Jake's shoulder, steady and deliberate, while his right hand remained stoically folded behind his back. They stood together in silence, facing the window, the stars reflected faintly in the glass. Jake wiped his eyes and breathed, grounding himself in the simple fact of Tuvok's presence beside him. Nothing more needed to be said. In that quiet moment, companionship itself was sufficient.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The doors to the station's boardroom slid open, and Wesley Crusher entered alongside Nog. Ro Laren sat at the head of the table, her expression set in her natural countenance of severe concentration as she scrolled through a PADD held firmly in her hands. Malik was seated to her right, his attention occupied by data from holo readouts projected from a console embedded in the table's surface.

To Ro's left, the table console projected a seated holographic image of Captain Beverly Crusher, transmitted from the *Pasteur*, light-years away. Full-body projections like this were designed to give the impression that the person was actually present in the room, while preserving a degree of transparency to remind the viewer that they were not physically there. As a built-in feature, faint bands of static shimmered intermittently across the display.

Captain Nog took the open seat next to Malik. Wesley remained standing, his posture reflecting the urgency he felt. He acknowledged his mother's presence with only a slight nod of his head. There was no time for formality.

Before Ro could even prompt Wesley and Nog as to why she had summoned them, Wesley began debriefing those assembled on his latest encounter with the presence of Benjamin Sisko. "The disruptions are not random," he said, his voice steady but carrying a clear undercurrent of strain. "They are the result of Benjamin Sisko's inability to fully assimilate into the timeless collective consciousness of the wormhole aliens. He remains too firmly bound to our plane of existence. His continued attachment to linear time and to his memory of being human has destabilized the delicate balance that holds Bajor, Bajorans, the wormhole, and all those within its orbit, including this station, together. He has sought my help, hoping that with my training as a Traveler I might find a way to help release his consciousness from temporal reality as we experience it."

As he spoke, faint tremors rippled through the room, forcing Wesley to steady himself by gripping the back of a nearby chair. Those seated around the table braced themselves instinctively. The displays, including the projection of Beverly Crusher, flickered briefly and then stabilized.

Wesley drew a slow breath. "There is an intricate network of beta tachyons woven along an irregular quantum filament that tethers Bajor to the wormhole. Bajor is interwoven into the Celestial Temple's mechanics, like a bead sewn into a blanket. When Sisko's consciousness asserts itself against the temporal strain of his two competing realms of existence, it is like an organism flexing a muscle. The effect is a localized tightening that produces constriction throughout the entire structure. Each

time this happens, the bead sewn into the fabric loosens. This is exactly what we just experienced."

Ro and Nog exchanged a brief glance, each registering the gravity of what Wesley was saying as he continued. "This process has been unfolding for the last twenty years, as we understand time, but we are now approaching the point at which the bead is about to fall free. If that happens, Bajor itself will no longer be able to sustain life as we know it. The devotional refrain that the 'Prophets are of Bajor' is not merely belief or doctrine. It reflects the unique physics that bind this planet and its people to the non-temporal, non-corporeal race that inhabits the wormhole.

"The solution," Wesley said, choosing his words carefully, "is the one Sisko himself outlined. We must summon his consciousness again within the holosuite. At the same time, Captain Crusher must look into the Orb of the Emissary. The Orb is the vessel that contains the essence of his mother, his most elemental connection to the wormhole aliens and the point at which the internal reality of the wormhole most directly intersects with time and space as we experience them. Activating the Orb may allow the being once known as Sarah Sisko to aid her son in completing his final ascension."

Ro leaned forward slightly. "This has to be entirely simultaneous?"

"Yes," Wesley replied. "The synchronization is critical. If the contact is mistimed, the consequences could be catastrophic. The window for successful integration is narrowing, and this must be done correctly on the first attempt."

Before anyone could respond, the room suddenly shuddered again, as if in punctuation of Wesley's urgency. Beverly's hologram flickered and then disappeared. The air recyclers stuttered, releasing a metallic hiss, and the lighting shifted abruptly to emergency red. Wesley braced himself against the table as the floor vibrated beneath him. "This is exactly what Sisko warned me about," he said, raising his voice to cut through the alarms.

Ro, maintaining her composed authority, turned to Malik. "Get Captain Crusher back at once." Then she turned to Nog and issued a second command. "Begin determining how to link the station's chronometer to the *Pasteur's*. We will need to be precisely in sync."

Both men, without verbal acknowledgment of Ro's orders, set to their tasks immediately. Malik's fingers moved swiftly across the holo display at his console. "General, I think I've got it." He entered a final sequence of commands, and the holographic image of Beverly Crusher reappeared. "By isolating her projector to the independent backup generators, we established earlier, I believe I can stabilize the transmission for another thirty minutes, assuming the disruptions do not worsen."

"Let's assume they will," Ro replied evenly. "Do whatever you have to do to compensate."

Beverly interjected at once. "Glad to be back, General. It looks like you're having trouble over there. We should move quickly. I'm ready when you are."

Addressing both General Ro and Captain Crusher, Nog added, "We can synchronize the station's chronometer with the *Pasteur* without difficulty, assuming we remain intact long enough. Captain Crusher, please have your operations officer synchronize with the data I am transmitting to you now via subspace."

"Acknowledged," Beverly replied. "The Orb is secure; I'm prepared to proceed."

Amid the growing chaos of flashing lights and wailing alarms, a current of calm seemed to flow through the doors and into the boardroom. Tuvok entered, perfectly composed, his posture straight and his hands clasped behind his back, imposing order simply by his arrival.

"General," he said, inclining his head toward Ro. "I have been observing Wesley throughout this process, and through the application of logic I believe I have a firm understanding of what is occurring."

Ro turned to face him. "And?"

"Mr. Crusher's analysis is correct," Tuvok replied. "The source of the disturbances lies in Benjamin Sisko's incomplete transfiguration. I believe Mr. Crusher will recommend activating the Orb of the Emissary now aboard the *Pasteur*."

Ro, Wesley, and the others present registered a moment of quiet astonishment at how Tuvok, who had not been present for the briefing, had assembled the full scope of the situation through logic alone and his limited interactions with Wesley. Any expression of that reaction, however, would have to wait until after the crisis had passed.

"That resolution is an apparent next step," Tuvok continued, "but I do not believe it will be sufficient on its own."

"Go on," Ro said.

"What binds Sisko to this temporal reality is more than his lived experience of being human. It is, in essence, an emotional attachment. It would therefore be unwise to proceed without an additional psychological intervention. Specialists in human emotional dysregulation have long emphasized the importance of psychic, and in some cases symbolic, resolutions. Benjamin Sisko's corporeal existence ended before resolution could occur. Applying the principles of Earth psychology, I conclude that we must create the conditions for Sisko to, as it were... say goodbye." The final word was punctuated by a characteristically Vulcan lift of his eyebrow.

Wesley felt a tightening in his chest. He already knew where this was leading.

"If equilibrium is to be restored," Tuvok continued evenly, "it is my assessment that Mr. Crusher should make contact together with Jake Sisko. It is possible that such engagement may provide the necessary coherence for Benjamin Sisko to sever his remaining connections and, to use a human colloquialism... complete his unfinished business."

Nog interjected, troubled by the logic of what Tuvok was proposing and by concern for the toll it might take on his oldest and dearest friend. "Admiral," he said

carefully, “wouldn’t Jake’s presence only serve to anchor Benjamin Sisko more deeply to his human reality rather than release him from it?”

“Your concern is logical, Captain,” Tuvok said. “However, it rests on a false premise. Benjamin Sisko is already anchored. The tether is not created by proximity. It persists in absence. Indeed, absence is what has sustained it.”

Nog’s brow furrowed. “Then bringing Jake into it does not strengthen the attachment?”

“It does not,” Tuvok replied. “It provides the conditions for resolution. What binds Mr. Sisko is not an abstract attachment to being human. It is a specific discontinuity. His departure terminated the father son bond without conclusion. That unfinished exchange produces instability for both parties. Human psychology describes this as unresolved attachment. In systems terms, it is an incomplete circuit. The current continues to seek a receptor. It does not extinguish, but it has nowhere to go.”

Tuvok continued. “Benjamin Sisko cannot fully integrate into a non-temporal state while a primary relational obligation remains unresolved within linear time. Nor can Jake Sisko return to equilibrium without resolution of the same bond. Their states are coupled.”

Nog’s voice softened. “So the intervention is for Jake?”

“It is for both,” Tuvok said evenly. “But the causal mechanism is Jake. Benjamin Sisko’s consciousness is anchored by the sustained impact of his departure upon his son. Until that impact is acknowledged and answered, the tether remains active. Once the exchange is completed, the attachment does not deepen. It transforms. It becomes coherent. Coherence permits integration.”

“Admiral Tuvok,” Wesley said, “Jake Sisko will likely not be able to withstand the effects of encountering Benjamin Sisko’s presence in the holosuite. On both prior occasions when Sisko appeared to me, he buffered his presence through a baseball simulation. It transformed the encounter into a process rather than an abrupt connection. This time, however, time is of the essence. We will have to force the encounter.”

Wesley continued, his voice marked by concern. “Even with the buffering effect, the experience was painfully disorienting. Despite my training in grounding meditation and my experience existing within altered states of time, there were moments when my consciousness could easily have been lost. More than once, I believed I might not recover, either physically or mentally. I do not believe Jake will be able to endure it.”

Tuvok regarded Wesley for a moment before replying. “Your assessment of the risk is accurate. Mr. Sisko will be exposed to significant psychological strain. That risk is unavoidable. However, refraining from action would not preserve his safety. Jake Sisko is present on this station and is already subject to the effects of this instability. In human psychological terms,” Tuvok continued, “prolonged unresolved

attachment produces cumulative harm. It erodes stability incrementally. You have just observed the destabilizing behavioral effects of this psychic trauma. A controlled confrontation, though acutely dangerous, offers the possibility of completion. Avoidance guarantees only continuation. Furthermore, logic dictates that the risk to Mr. Sisko, even if he does not recover from the encounter, is acceptable if it prevents the destruction of Bajor and this station. The good of the many outweighs the good of the few."

The weight of Tuvok's final words hung in the air. Alarms continued to sound, filling the silence, until Ro broke it and provided the decisive direction the moment required. "Wesley," she said, "go find Jake Sisko. Present him with the option. Make the risks clear. You will honor whatever decision he makes. We will proceed with or without his participation. Captain Nog will accompany you. We will initiate contact in the holosuite in exactly twenty minutes."

Nog rose without hesitation and moved to Wesley's side, escorting him from the boardroom at once. Ro then turned her attention to the holographic image of Beverly Crusher. "Captain, you can see the gravity of our situation. Please be prepared to activate the Orb in twenty minutes."

"Affirmative, General," Beverly replied. "We will be ready."

Finally, Ro addressed her security chief. "Malik, you have one job. Keep this station intact long enough for us to finish this. Dismissed."

The lights in Sickbay pulsed in an unsteady, sickly amber, as if the station itself labored to breathe. Kira Nerys was fully awake now, but she was fully lost to the madness that had overtaken her. Her body convulsed against the restraints, muscles locking and releasing in violent spasms. She thrashed so hard that the biobed groaned beneath her, its stabilizers straining to compensate. Her breath came in ragged gasps, each inhalation scraping through her throat. Her back arched sharply, fingers clawing at empty air as though something just beyond her reach were pulling her forward.

The Vulcan meditation Tuvok had used to steady her mind over the past two days had collapsed entirely. Whatever fragile equilibrium his presence had initiated was gone. What remained was unmitigated terror, her consciousness stretched past the limits of endurance.

"No," she screamed, her voice hoarse and splintering. "No. No. Stop."

Her eyes were open wide yet entirely unfocused. Whatever she was seeing was not in the room or even on the station. Sweat soaked her hair and forehead, plastering loose strands to her forehead and neck. Her heartbeat thundered arrhythmically on the monitor, spiking into dangerous territory.

Dr. Tenen was at her side, her composure fraying under the force of what she was witnessing. She was at a loss. There was no medical protocol for what was happening to Kira. She pressed down on Kira's shoulders, fighting to keep her from

injuring herself, her voice breaking as she issued rapid orders to her staff. “Administer ten cc’s of Anetrizine. Now! Increase to maximum cortical suppression.”

“But, Doctor,” the Bajoran nurse protested, “she’s already had eight cc’s. Any more and we risk respiratory collapse. We could push her into a coma.”

“Override safety protocols,” Tenen ordered. “If we do not interrupt this cascade, she will go into panic induced cardiac arrest. Administer it.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

The nurse pressed the hypospray against Kira’s neck and triggered the dose. As it hissed, Kira’s panic intensified instead of subsiding. Her scream rose to a raw, piercing pitch, and she thrashed with sudden force, nearly knocking the nurse unconscious with a violent snap of her head.

All of a sudden, a violent sensation struck Tenen, a crushing pressure inside her skull as though her brain were being torn in two. She staggered backward, clutching her head as white light burst across her vision. Pain lanced through her temples, sharp and blinding. “No,” she whispered. Then louder, panic flooding her voice. “No. No, please. Prophets.” Her knees buckled beneath her. “This cannot happen to me. Not now. I was spared,” she cried, the words breaking apart as they left her. “I was spared.”

At that moment, med bay shuddered violently, throwing everyone still on their feet to the deck as sparks burst from a nearby console. The lights flickered in irregular pulses. Tenen lost what remained of her composure. A raw, piercing scream tore from her throat, higher than anyone had ever heard from her before. She thrashed against the deck, hands clawing at nothing, her body convulsing in the same uncontrolled terror that had consumed Kira.

It took all the remaining medical personnel to restrain her. They lifted Tenen from the deck and secured her in the empty biobed beside Kira’s. The bed’s internal restraints activated, pinning her arms and legs as she fought with feral strength. A heavy dose of sedative followed, then another. Neither had any effect.

The two Bajoran women lay side by side, thrashing and screaming in identical states of unrestrained panic. The chief nurse struck his commbadge. “Sickbay to Ops.”

“Ops here,” Malik replied at once. The urgency in his voice remained controlled, though the noise behind him—officers calling out reports, consoles chiming, systems alarms pulsing—betrayed the scramble to contain cascading failures throughout the station. “Go ahead.”

“Colonel, First Minister Kira’s condition is deteriorating. There is nothing more we can do. Dr. Tenen has now succumbed to the same symptoms. She is not responding to sedation. I’m sorry, Colonel... we’re losing them both.”

“Understood,” Malik said. “Continue supportive measures. Hold them as long as you can. We’re implementing a plan that may stabilize the situation. Malik out.”

He lowered his hand slowly. It is only a matter of time, he thought, before it takes me again. The memory of his earlier lapse flickered at the edge of his mind, but he refused to let it take hold. There was no room for fear. Before the thought could root itself, he was already rerouting power, reinforcing shield harmonics, isolating failing subsystems. There was no grand strategy left to execute. There was only endurance.

On Bajor, the world was coming apart.

Time had ceased to flow in any coherent direction. It splintered and recoiled, folding back upon itself in violent disjunctions. Entire cities flickered between dawn and midnight within the span of a single breath. In Dahkur Province, the sky shifted without warning from brilliant blue to deep indigo, the sun rising and setting out of sequence. Shadows lengthened and withdrew with no relation to the position of light, advancing across the ground and then collapsing as if governed by some unseen and unstable hand.

Farmers stood motionless in their fields, hands numb at their sides, staring at crops that had been harvested, replanted, and harvested again before the first meal of the day. Grain bins brimmed to the top, then stood empty, then full again, as though the sequence of cause and effect had been stripped of meaning. Some Bajorans fell to their knees in the streets and in their fields, crying out prayers that overlapped and collided, their voices rising into a chaotic chorus of devotion and terror. Others turned on one another, fear curdling into violence as neighbors struck neighbors in sudden, explosive bursts of anger and desperation.

In temples across the planet, vedeks shouted over one another, some collapsing to stone floors in anguish, others lashing out with whatever lay within reach, incense trays, ceremonial torches, even sacred vessels turned suddenly into weapons. Children cried as the world seemed to blink and shift around them, familiar streets warping in color and light. Fires ignited without warning and then extinguished themselves just as abruptly. Entire districts appeared to weather centuries in moments, stone facades cracking and darkening with age before restoring themselves to their former state as though nothing had occurred.

Planet wide mechanical and digital systems were failing without pattern or warning. The entire hydroelectric complex along the Holana River, which powered Musilla Province and the surrounding regions, ruptured in a chain of cascading explosions. The detonations tore through the facility in successive waves, killing hundreds of workers and nearby residents and plunging nearly half the planet into darkness within minutes.

The Chamber of Ministers was empty—each minister attempting to tend to home and family, if not already overtaken by panic—when the structure failed without warning and collapsed into a massive heap of rubble.

Back on Deep Space Nine, Wesley Crusher and Nog navigated the failing corridors in search of Jake Sisko. They moved quickly, avoiding bursts of sparks erupting from wall consoles and stepping around debris that had fallen from the ceiling. As they advanced, they passed scenes of escalating chaos. Bajoran officers and civilians clashed in sudden, brutal fights. In one corridor they witnessed an officer fire a phaser at a civilian at close range. The body collapsed before either of them could intervene.

Elsewhere, officers and civilians alike writhed on the deck in the grip of overwhelming panic. In one passageway a mother convulsed on the floor while her young child knelt beside her, crying and calling her name. Nog felt the instinct to stop, to kneel, to pull the child to safety. Years of Starfleet training pressed against his conscience, urging intervention. But he forced himself forward. The only way to help any of them was to see the plan through. To stop now would be to lose everything.

Wesley rounded the corner onto the Promenade and immediately spotted Jake Sisko cutting through the crowd, his tall frame rigid with urgency. Jake used his height and natural strength to force a path through the surging mass of civilians. Asher stayed close at his side, eyes wide and alert, scanning the chaos as people pressed past them in desperate search of safety.

"Jake," Wesley called. The urgency in his voice cut through the noise. Jake halted mid stride and turned, breathless, instinctively gripping Asher's arm to keep him close and steer him toward Wesley and Nog.

"We need to talk," Wesley said, already moving toward them. They slipped into a quieter service corridor just as another tremor rippled through the station, knocking all four of them off balance. Nog positioned himself at the junction, keeping watch while Wesley turned to Jake. The anger that had flared between them earlier was gone. Whatever Tuvok had said had worked. The bitterness had already begun to soften before the urgency of survival overtook Jake's thoughts and pushed all other grievances aside.

Wesley spoke quickly and with deliberate clarity, forcing himself to remain grounded as he laid out the situation: Sisko's divided state, the accelerating instability, the Orb of the Emissary aboard the *Pasteur* in Tzenkethi space.

"Tuvok believes you may be the key," Wesley said at last, summarizing the Admiral's reasoning as efficiently as he could.

Jake stared at him as the weight of the words settled. "You really think I can help him?"

Wesley hesitated. His own reservations pressed hard against his composure. "Potentially," he said, "but time is of the essence."

"Then count me in," Jake said without hesitation. "I'll do whatever it takes to help him."

Wesley's expression hardened. He stepped closer, lowering his voice as he placed a hand on Jake's shoulder. "Jake, you need to understand something. This will not be like an Orb vision. Your father exists in a non-corporeal reality outside everything we experience as linear time. Even with years of Traveler discipline, contact with his consciousness nearly tore my mind apart. It was more than disorienting. It felt like I would be lost in a sickening swirl of freefalling timelessness forever."

Jake turned to Asher. The teen's fear was visible now, stripped of any attempt at composure. "Asher," Jake said quietly his eyes filling with tears, "I may have to leave you again. But I will never forsake you. I will never forget you. No matter what happens to me, I will remain a part of you. I love you, son."

Asher stepped forward and held him tightly, his body shaking. "I understand, Father. And I forgive you. I am proud of you, and proud to be your son."

Jake straightened and turned to Wesley, clarity etched into his features. "I've lived my whole life in his shadow," he said. "If helping him find rest costs me everything, that's a price I must pay."

Wesley stood motionless, "Let's go. We're almost out of time."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Wesley Crusher and Jake Sisko entered the holosuite together, and the program initialized without delay. The timeless calm of an old Earth baseball park unfolded around them in vivid sensory detail: bleachers rising in orderly tiers beneath a late afternoon sky washed in warm golden light, scattered conversations blending into a steady murmur as spectators filtered into the stadium and took their seats. The air carried the faint scent of dust and cut grass. On the diamond, players from different eras were already warming up, tossing balls back and forth in widening arcs, stretching their arms, jogging along the foul lines. The scoreboard remained blank. It was the quiet moment just before the game began.

Wesley and Jake moved toward the home team dugout and sat side by side on the wooden bench. Jake's shoulders were tight with tension, his posture rigid with anxiety, and Wesley noticed it immediately. "There will be no game like before," he said, his voice low but steady. "The first two times your father's consciousness made itself known to me here, he eased me into the temporal condition. He buffered the encounter. We do not have that luxury now. We are out of time, and no one understands that better than your father. So be ready, Jake, and brace yourself."

Jake nodded stiffly, eyes fixed ahead.

"When he comes," Wesley continued quietly, "it will feel as though the world is folding inside out. Gravity, breath, memory, everything will collapse into confusion. You will lose any sense of yourself as grounded in the reality you have lived in your entire life. Whatever you see, do not resist it. Everything will feel wrong, disorienting, sickening. It will be as if your head is filled with pounding sound at tremendous volume and strobing lights flashing directly into your eyes. The experience will overwhelm your senses. You will want to fight against it. That is the worst thing you can do."

Jake's fingers tightened around the bench.

"If you are still conscious when we encounter your father," Wesley continued, "he needs closure. Admiral Tuvok believes he must say goodbye to you and make peace with the guilt he carries for leaving you before he can let go of this world. Do whatever you can to help him."

"Wesley, whatever happens, please know that I am sorry for how I acted before. I was angry. I was hurt. I know it is not your fault. I understand why my father chose you. You have helped him, and I am grateful for that. Thank you."

Wesley's expression did not soften. "Do not thank me yet," he replied. "The station could break apart before we even have a chance to engage your father, or you

could lose control of your mind entirely. We will need a great many things to go right for this to work. I do not need to tell you that the fate of DS9, your son Asher, and even the entire planet of Bajor depends on us now."

He tapped his combadge. "General, we are in position and ready to initiate contact."

Ro's voice came back at once. "Proceed."

Inside the holosuite, the light shifted. The golden warmth flattened and drained of depth. Edges blurred. The sky above them rippled, then warped. The horizon bent inward as if pulled by invisible tension. The bleachers flickered and vanished. The scoreboard fractured into shards of light. The dirt of the diamond lifted in thin sheets and dissolved into streaming particles. The air seemed to implode in crashing waves. The entire world began to spin and invert in on itself.

Jake's head snapped to the side. "Wesley, what is happening?"

Wesley's voice trembled despite his effort to steady it. He seized Jake's hand. "It is starting. Stay with me. Do not resist. Breathe through it," he urged. "Let it take you."

A crushing pressure slammed into Jake's skull, striking from everywhere at once. His stomach dropped as though the ground beneath him had vanished, the sensation collapsing into a wave of debilitating nausea. Vertigo seized him. He was falling, but in no discernible direction. Every inhalation felt like an exhalation; every heartbeat pounded out of rhythm, violent and disordered. Memories surged through his mind in blinding succession, yet he could not locate himself within any of them.

Panic overtook him, spiraling into screams of sheer terror.

In Ops, Malik and Nog worked through the disarray with surgical calm, bypassing and reinforcing various systems and issuing orders to their subordinates. Ro oversaw the entire operation, monitoring a holistic overview of the station. Tuvok had joined them in Ops after the meeting in the boardroom; it would have been illogical not to apply his many years of tactical experience in this moment of crisis.

On the main screen, the image of Beverly Crusher, alone in her ready room aboard the *Pasteur*, flickered. Nog did what he could to stabilize the transmission and secure the linked chronometer between Deep Space Nine and the *Pasteur*. On her desk rested the box containing the Orb of the Emissary.

"I am in position, General," Beverly said.

"So are we. Please proceed," Ro replied.

Beverly drew a long breath and opened the box. Blue-white light poured outward at once, rolling across the ready room in gentle waves. The illumination intensified, touching her face and brightening her features.

Then, without warning, the entire ready room shook as a deep impact reverberated through the hull of the *Pasteur*. Beverly's head snapped up as the displays on her desk lit with emergency alerts. She immediately turned away from the light

before the Orb had begun to activate. Her combadge chirped. "Captain to the bridge!" came Commander Sata's urgent voice.

Beverly rose at once and strode from the ready room onto the bridge. In her haste, she left the comm link open. On Deep Space Nine, Nog seized the opportunity. He routed the still-active channel through Ops and brought the *Pasteur's* bridge into full view on the main screen, following Beverly as she emerged into the center of the crisis.

"We are under attack, Captain," Sata reported, her voice tight with tension yet disciplined, tempered by her Starfleet training. "Two Cardassian border raiders have dropped out of warp directly behind us. No prior indication. They were on top of us before we could detect them."

From the tactical station, Lieutenant Commander Takis added, his voice edged with urgency, "One raider bearing two-one-five and closing fast, Captain."

A second volley slammed into the hull before Beverly could respond. The bridge of the *Pasteur* erupted in showers of sparks as consoles overloaded. The deck lurched violently beneath her feet, knocking her off balance. She caught herself against the arm of the command chair, steadied, and dropped into her seat as the ship continued to shudder around her.

The *Pasteur* was not built for battle. Smoke already thickened the air on the bridge. Panels sparked and hissed, and officers struggled to keep their footing as the attacking raider's weapons cycled, charging for another volley. "Shields to maximum. Reroute auxiliary power from warp containment," she ordered.

"Aye, Captain," Takis replied from tactical, fingers flying across the console.

As the second raider closed in on the *Kraytok's Profit*, still sharing orbit with the *Pasteur* above the planet Kelnari, its engines flared. In a blink, the Ferengi vessel snapped to warp and escaped the danger. "Captain," Sata reported from Ops, her voice taut but controlled, "the *Kraytok's Profit*. It's gone to warp and fled! We're alone."

The second raider swung wide and accelerated, angling to flank as the first remained almost directly astern, weapons still hot. The two Cardassian pirate ships were now converging, forcing the *Pasteur* into a narrowing corridor of fire. "Helm," Beverly snapped, already reading the tactical overlay, "evasive maneuvers, pattern Riker Delta. Now."

The ship responded at once, thrusters firing in rapid, staccato bursts as the medical vessel corkscrewed into a tight spiral. The *Pasteur* rolled hard to port, then inverted, its impulse engines flaring as it dove along a sudden oblique vector toward the planet's gravity well. The abrupt maneuver tore it free of the converging firing lines, and the incoming Cardassian disruptor blasts slashed through empty space where the ship had been a heartbeat earlier, their searing orange beams dissipating against the black void of space.

"I'm not running from these bastards all day," Beverly said, her voice hard with resolve as she leaned forward in the command chair. "Ready torpedoes and forward phasers. Target the lead ship's weapons array." She did not hesitate. "Pattern Kirk Epsilon, modified. Reverse polarity on the secondary deflector. Modulate and fire."

A brilliant lance of phaser fire erupted from the bow of the *Pasteur* as twin photon torpedoes launched in the same instant, all three weapons converging on the first raider's forward section. The combined strike detonated across the Cardassian vessel's bow. On the viewscreen, its forward weapons batteries flared violently and went dark. The raider's warp field destabilized, sputtering as arcs of energy rippled across its hull before it began venting ionized plasma into space.

On Deep Space Nine, the Ops crew continued to monitor the battle in real time even as they managed their own unfolding crisis, and a collective wave of relief passed through the room at the sight of the raider faltering. "You've got this, Beverly," Ro murmured under her breath. "Stay on them. Don't let them breathe."

The second raider pressed in on the *Pasteur* mercilessly. Two hits in rapid succession tore across the dorsal hull, and a third blast ripped through the main corridor on deck four, buckling bulkheads and triggering a cascade of structural damage. "Shields failing, Captain, down to nine percent," Takis called out, fingers flying across his console. "Life support failing on decks four through six." Smoke thickened the air as sirens shrieked and a panel near Sata's station detonated in a shower of sparks, forcing her to shield her face from the blast. Takis's composure frayed under the mounting readouts. "Captain! We've lost all offensive capability. We're defenseless!"

Beverly gritted her teeth. "Hold your positions," she ordered, bracing herself for what she anticipated would be the end. She would not run. There was no time to order an evacuation, and she would not cast her crew adrift in escape pods in hostile space on a mission that had demanded secrecy from the start. They were out of options. The only thing left was to face imminent destruction with stoic dignity and refuse to surrender to panic. For the briefest instant Jack Crusher's face flickered in her mind, he was steady and unafraid.

On Deep Space Nine, Ro's knuckles whitened around the edge of her console as her own station groaned under mounting instability. "She can't last," Nog said from Ops, his eyes fixed on the tactical overlay. "The *Pasteur* is no match for those raiders." There was nothing the crew could do but watch as inevitability crept closer. A suffocating helplessness settled over the room. They could not aid Beverly, and it was no longer clear they could even secure themselves as the deck trembled beneath them. The mission was all but lost.

Suddenly, on the *Pasteur*, Takis snapped toward Beverly. "Captain! I'm picking up a warp signature!"

Even as he spoke, space ahead of them ignited in a thunderous flare of collapsing warp energy. A ship tore out of warp with lightning force, its drive field shedding

ribbons of light as it slammed back into normal space directly between the battered *Pasteur* and the advancing raider.

The USS *Dakota*.

On the bridge of the *Dakota*, Captain Ezri Dax did not waste a second assessing what she was seeing. Two Cardassian border raiders: one disabled and drifting in space, the other pressing its assault on the battered *Pasteur*. The *Dakota*'s phasers were already charged before the ship had fully decelerated. "Target the attacking raider," Dax ordered coolly, her voice level despite the desperate state of the *Pasteur*.

The *Dakota*'s Andorian security officer, Lieutenant Commander Keval Shrak, did not blink. A volley of relentless phaser pulses erupted from the *Dakota*'s forward arrays, precise and controlled. They struck the Cardassian vessel along its ventral hull. The shields flared, then flickered. Structural plating along the underside of the raider buckled visibly under the impact as power fluctuations rippled across its grid.

The Andorian's blue antennae angled sharply forward, his posture straight, eyes locked on his targeting display. His hands moved with precision across the controls as he assessed the damage inflicted on the second Cardassian raider. "The raider's shields are down to twenty percent, Captain," Shrak reported, his voice clipped and focused. "They're attempting to reroute power to the ventral emitters."

"Helm, bring us about for another volley," Captain Dax ordered, and in immediate response the *Dakota* tightened into a sharp spiral as it came around to reengage.

"Firing solution updated," Shrak reported.

Captain Dax did not hesitate, "fire."

Shrak initiated a second punishing round of phaser fire, targeting the Cardassian's ventral hull precisely where they were rerouting their power. The ventral array erupted in sparks and debris, and shield integrity collapsed across the hull.

The raider attempted an instant retaliation, but its weakened phasers were no match for the *Dakota*'s fully powered shields. Dax ordered a comm link opened to the *Pasteur*. "Captain Crusher, I recommend you use your reserve impulse power to put as much distance between yourself and this engagement as possible."

"Understood, Captain," came Beverly's relieved voice over comms. On the viewscreen, the *Pasteur* could be seen limping away from the arena of combat, plasma venting from its nacelles.

Dax's expression hardened. "Mr. Shrak, target their warp core and finish this."

"Aye, Captain." Shrak locked a photon torpedo onto the raider's warp core and fired without hesitation.

"Direct hit, Captain. The raider's core is breaching."

"Helm, get us to a safe distance."

As the *Dakota* pulled away toward the wounded *Pasteur*, the viewscreen filled with the sight of the Cardassian raider's battered hull bulging outward before it detonated violently in space. The shockwave expanded in a brilliant surge of blue-gold fire, briefly illuminating the battlefield. The *Dakota* rocked gently in its wake.

Shrak had already turned his attention to the other raider drifting in space. "Captain, the second raider has restored auxiliary power and is attempting to reengage its weapons array."

"Open a channel," Dax commanded.

"Channel open, sir."

"Cardassian raider, this is Captain Ezri Dax in command of the USS *Dakota*. You have opened fire on a Federation medical vessel. This constitutes an act of war. Call off your pursuit immediately, or we will destroy you."

A heavy silence settled across the bridge. Then, on the viewscreen, the external lights on the damaged Cardassian ship dimmed as it turned away and began to hobble from the field of combat.

"The raider is in retreat, Captain," reported Shrak.

Dax allowed herself a thin breath. "Let it go. We have better things to do than destroy Cardassian raiders all day. Open a channel. *Pasteur*, how can we assist you?"

Beverly's face appeared on the viewscreen. "Good timing, Captain. Another second and we would have been goners. You saved our lives."

"We're in this together, Captain Crusher."

A smile spread across Beverly's face. "Well, if you have a few spare engineers, we could use some help getting our systems back online."

"Say no more. Our chief engineer, Commander Lefler, is on her way with a team to assist you."

Beverly's eyes widened slightly. "Commander Lefler? You don't mean Robin Lefler?"

Dax flashed a mischievous smile and a quick blink that still retained a hint of youthful mischief despite her years of service. "One and the same, Captain."

Before Beverly could respond, Admiral Tuvok appeared as a third broadcast on the screen from Ops on Deep Space Nine.

"It seems my decision to deploy the *Dakota* clandestinely into Tzenkethi space was indeed logical," he said in his measured tone. "I anticipated that this mission carried significant risk and that the *Pasteur* would be unlikely to endure aggression without support."

"Thank you, Admiral," Beverly replied with relief in her voice. "We would not have survived without Captain Dax's assistance."

In Ops, Nog leaned toward Ro and whispered, "Admiral Tuvok, showing up again in the exact right moment, unannounced and unexpected. It's uncanny."

Ro allowed herself the faintest hint of amusement.

"There is no time for relief, Captain Crusher," Tuvok continued. "As you can see, Deep Space Nine cannot hold out much longer, and Bajor hangs in the balance. Wesley and Jake are in position here. I suggest we move forward with the mission without delay."

Beverly inclined her head. "The Orb is secure," she said. "We are ready to proceed."

Dax gave a small, confident nod. "The *Dakota* has your back, Captain Crusher. No one is touching the *Pasteur* again."

Shrak's antennae twitched slightly in a subtle Andorian expression of agreement.

Chapter Twenty-Six

In the holosuite, Wesley and Jake were caught in the violent transition from time-bound reality into a timeless one. There was no ground beneath their feet and no sky above them. Light bent and folded upon itself as colors stretched into ribbons that spiraled endlessly outward before collapsing again toward a center that could not be located. Every direction felt wrong. Up and down lost all meaning, and distance itself seemed to dissolve. Jake was in a state of sheer panic.

Beside him, Wesley Crusher gripped Jake's arm, and for a moment neither of them spoke. The first grounding sensations to return were sounds: a baseball popping into the glove of two players warming up on the field, a coach calling out encouragement as runners went through their sprinting drills, and the laughter of children drifting through the stands while parents called after them with gentle warnings not to run ahead. Gradually the sounds were followed by light, and with it the return of the calming sight that had first greeted them, the small baseball stadium once again bathed in the warmth of the afternoon sunlight.

Jake's breath slowly steadied, and he blinked several times as though trying to reorient himself after a violent storm. Wesley placed a steady hand on his shoulder. "Jake," he said gently, "are you with me? Are you okay?"

Jake swallowed and rubbed his temples. "I think so," he answered after a moment. "What just happened? Are we alive?"

"We are alive, Jake. You did it. We are going to see your father." The thought of once again being in the presence of his father eased the tension that still lingered in his mind and body after the disorienting experience. Jake managed a modest smile as he lifted his head to meet Wesley's gaze.

Then something at the side of the stands, to the left of where they were sitting, caught Wesley's attention. Jake followed his gaze. Something was moving there, a faint shimmer of light as though sunlight and shadow were blending into a single shifting effect. Within the hazy, rippling glow, a shape began to take form. For a moment the figure remained entirely transparent, like a reflection trembling on the surface of water stirred by a gentle breeze. Then the faint silhouette of a human presence slowly emerged from the light.

Out of the haze at the edge of the stands Beverly Crusher appeared. Or rather, the Orb's image of her. She looked exactly as Wesley remembered her twenty years ago. Her face was pink with youth, and her hair was still the same vibrant red. It fell around her shoulders with the same softness he remembered from the day he left

the *Enterprise* to begin his journey with the Travelers. Her expression carried that same warmth that had always seemed capable of cutting through any uncertainty.

For Wesley the moment struck like a physical blow. His breath caught, and for an instant he could not move. It was his mother. Their eyes met across the distance, and Beverly, placing her right hand against her chest in a gesture of astonishment, appeared just as overwhelmed by the encounter as he was. Then, slowly, she began walking toward them.

Wesley rose from the bench without even realizing he had stood. He tried to speak, but no words came. Beverly reached him, and for a moment they simply stared at one another. Her eyes filled with tears as a smile spread across her face, part laughter and part disbelief. Both were overwhelmed with emotion. At last Wesley managed to whisper a single word. "Mom."

She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. The embrace was tight and trembling. Wesley held her just as firmly, his hands gripping the back of her shoulders as though afraid she might vanish if he loosened his grasp even slightly. Neither of them spoke. They simply held each other. When they finally pulled apart, Beverly lifted her hands to his face, as if in disbelief at the man he had become. "My boy," she whispered. "I missed you, Wes." They sat down together on the bench, and for a few silent moments remained side by side, their hands clasped, absorbing the impossible reality of their reunion.

Across the seat to their right, another light began to glow as a second form slowly took shape. Jake noticed it first. The radiance carried a honey-colored warmth, softer and more intimate than the golden sunlight that filled the stadium. From within that gentle, luminous glow, a figure stepped forward. Sarah Sisko.

She appeared barefoot. Her flowing white cotton clothing moved lightly around her as though touched by a breeze that no one else could feel. The light gathered around her form in a soft halo that made her presence seem both completely natural and entirely otherworldly. Her face carried a serenity that seemed untouched by time. She looked exactly as she had on the day Benjamin Sisko was born.

Sarah began walking toward Jake. When she reached the row where he sat, she paused briefly and looked at him with a recognition and understanding that transcended biology and time. Jake stared at her in stunned silence. Without speaking, Sarah sat down beside him and gently took his hand in hers. "Hello, Jake. I'm your grandmother."

Jake's eyes immediately filled with tears, and they streamed down his cheeks in quiet relief. The feeling was cathartic in a way he had never known before, like being wrapped in a blanket of unconditional love and acceptance. There were no words to be said. The feeling itself was enough, and the tension that had gripped his body since the temporal storm began slowly melted away. The trembling in his shoulders faded, as though some deep inner turbulence had finally come to rest.

The scene was striking. Beverly and Wesley on one side, Sarah and Jake on the other. The four of them sat together, mothers and sons, quietly existing in one another's presence beneath the warm sun, the open blue sky, and the gentle rhythms of a pre-game baseball field. Gradually, the sounds of the stadium faded into the distance. The scent of grass and dust dissolved into the air, and the sight of the green field peacefully evaporated into a blue-white radiance until all that remained was a tranquil, luminous void.

Without moving, Beverly, Wesley, Jake, and Sarah found themselves seated in soft chairs that slowly and serenely materialized around them. At the center was an ethereal dining table, formed of light and shadow. Jake and Sarah sat on one side, with Wesley and Beverly opposite them. No words passed between them. They were overcome by a deep and calming sense of peace.

A fifth chair took shape at the head of the table, and from within the soft luminosity of the space a white hooded figure appeared, already seated, as if formed from distant starlight itself. It was Benjamin Sisko. His presence carried a calm that washed over the other four in a gentle, almost euphoric wave. His expression was kind, yet it held an understanding that seemed to reach far beyond the human face that conveyed it.

"We all need parents," he said softly, in a manner that reflected the quiet, sagacious wisdom of the speaker. "No matter who we are. No matter how young or how old." A faint, characteristic smile passed across his face as he repeated, with a hint of gentle glee, "we all need parents."

He turned his gaze toward Sarah and Jake. "My mother."

Then he looked toward Beverly and Wesley. "And your mother."

Keeping his gaze fixed on Wesley, he continued, "You have been guided by many fathers: Jack Crusher, Jean-Luc Picard, the Traveler, and now me, for a time." The names carried an awe-inspiring weight. "Each of them gave you part of what the others could not, and together they helped make you who you are."

He leaned in. "Just as guidance is not ownership and love is not command; parenthood is not monolithic."

His words healed something deep within Wesley. They gave him the permission he needed to finally and fully say goodbye to his biological father, Jack Crusher, to forgive the father who had most shaped him, Jean-Luc Picard, and to accept the guidance of his present father, Benjamin Sisko. His words healed Beverly as well. She had been the mother Wesley needed, even if she had not been the mother she longed to be. There was reconciliation.

The space remained silent as the meaning of those words settled across the luminous table. He turned to Jake, and the warmth in Benjamin Sisko's expression deepened into something gentler. "It is not me you are angry at, Jake," he said softly. "Our story finished long ago. Whole and unbroken." Jake stared at him across the table, his eyes shining with tears he no longer fought to suppress. "What you carry,

my dear son, is not my absence. It is the silence that remains in your life following your mother's passing."

Sarah remained seated beside Jake, her presence still, almost angelic, her hand resting gently upon his arm. The warmth of her touch steadied him, allowing him to receive his father's words. Sisko continued, "The emptiness she left behind was sudden. Final. Beyond your reach. That wound never had the chance to heal."

Jake's chest rose sharply as the truth of those words struck him. "That silence made every joy feel temporary," Sisko went on. "Every friendship uncertain. You feared that anything you loved might vanish as suddenly as she did. It is what made our distance so unbearable to you for so long." Jake lowered his head as Benjamin continued, "And so you mistook that absence for mine."

The realization struck him like a physical force. Jake's voice broke, and a sob escaped him before he could stop it, the sound filling the quiet room with a rawness that none of them tried to interrupt. Sarah's hand tightened slightly on his arm, and the light that flowed from her touch spread slowly across his sleeve, then his shoulder, and finally through his chest, moving like warmth seeping into cold stone. Jake's breathing trembled as the emotion that had been locked inside him for years finally forced its way to the surface.

"Open yourself to the love around you, Jake," Sisko said gently. "Your mother Jennifer's love never left you. It only changed its shape." Sarah's hand remained steady. Jake closed his eyes and felt the weight he had carried for so many years begin to dissolve. He could feel himself breathe again for the first time in decades.

"Jake, my dear son," Sisko continued, his expression shifting gently from abundant love to concern, "your life will not be the same. This experience has changed you. Your path will not be an easy one to walk. You must sit with your mother. You have accepted the loss of your mother, Jennifer. Now receive the love of your mother, Kasidy. Sit with her, my son. You need each other. Receive her love."

Benjamin Sisko rose slowly from his chair. His gaze met that of the four seated around the table, the four people for whom something broken had now been made whole. He was at once present yet ancient, monastic yet paternal.

"Motherhood and fatherhood," he said, his voice carrying a resonance that seemed to vibrate through the light itself, "are not two forces. They are one current flowing in different directions. Compassion and discipline, mercy and purpose, each is the balance of the other. Every act of care restores the symmetry upon which the universe rests. You do not need to be eternal to mend eternity." He allowed a small smile to appear. "You need only love."

As he spoke, he began to fade quietly into the light. The form of the table followed, slowly dissolving. Then Sarah Sisko receded into the glow, followed by Beverly. Wesley and Jake were left alone as the light resolved back into the baseball stadium, where they sat in the same place as before. Wesley wiped a tear from his

cheek, composed himself, and turned to check on his companion. "Jake? Are you okay?"

There was no reply. Wesley turned toward him and asked again, giving his shoulder a light shake. "Jake?" he repeated. Still there was no answer. Jake remained present in physical form only, his gaze fixed on some distant point, his body utterly still. Wesley could see his chest rise and fall with each breath and could feel a pulse at his wrist, but Jake, the man himself, seemed no longer present.

With greater urgency, Wesley gripped his shoulder and shook him more firmly. "Jake?!" he called. But again, there was no response.

Outside the walls of the holosuite, Deep Space Nine was returning to normal. The quaking deck plates stilled. The emergency klaxons fell silent. Crewmen who had been frantically leaping from one damage control emergency to another finally allowed themselves a steady breath of relief.

The change moved through the med bay at once. Kira Nerys's straining convulsions ceased as she settled into stillness on the biobed, her breathing returning to normal. Her vital signs on the monitor began to level off, shifting from red zones into green. In the biobed beside her, the same calming stillness came over Tenen Rahl, who likewise began to stabilize, much to the relief of the medical personnel around them.

In Ops, Ro Laren, Nog, Malik, and Tuvok stood at their stations as telemetry readings from throughout the station began to steady. "Look at that," Nog said quietly. "It looks like Jake and Wesley did it. Readings are returning to normal, General." Ro felt the tension that had been tightening her shoulders finally begin to release.

"General," Malik said, his voice catching with urgency, "the wormhole... it's opening."

"On screen," Ro ordered.

All eyes in Ops turned to the viewscreen as the wormhole began to open on its own. At first, it appeared as a tightening distortion in space, a subtle warping of the stars beyond, but within moments the distortion deepened and ignited into motion. Bands of luminous green and blue light unfurled in spiraling arcs, interweaving and folding over one another in a vast, fluid geometry. The aperture widened steadily, its edges rippling with layered currents of color that pulsed in rhythmic waves, as though the fabric of space itself were breathing. Brilliant filaments of light surged inward toward a central vanishing point while others streamed outward, creating a continuous, hypnotic motion. The glow intensified until the entire viewport was filled with the living radiance of the celestial temple.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The doors to Quark's Bar slid open and shut in a steady rhythm as patrons moved in and out, the sound blending seamlessly into the layered music of voices that filled the room. Laughter carried easily from one table to the next, rising and falling in warm bursts. Glasses clinked in quick succession, their sharp notes punctuating the steady flow of conversation. At the center of it all, the dabo wheel spun with its familiar mechanical clicks, each turn followed by the bright, hopeful exclamations of those who believed, if only for a moment, that fortune had finally turned in their favor. Quark's Bar, the pulsating heart of Deep Space Nine, had returned to its full and vibrant glory.

At the entrance, Nimalat moved gracefully between arriving guests, her chartreuse skin and dark green hair coiled around her sculptural form in deliberate patterns that drew the eye of each new arrival. She leaned in close to one group, laughing softly at something a Bolian trader said, then pivoted with fluid ease to welcome a pair of human Starfleet officers who had clearly come not for duty, but for the rare and fragile luxury of relaxation. There was an ease to her movements that mirrored the mood of the room, a quiet assurance that whatever had threatened the station had passed, and that life, in all its messy and noisy fullness, had resumed. For the first time in weeks, Deep Space Nine felt like itself.

At the far end of the bar, Ro Laren sat with her back straight and her shoulders squared, a posture honed through years of service and duty. A glass of spring wine rested before her, untouched, its surface reflecting the shifting lights of the room in faint ripples. Her eyes, however, betrayed the cost of the past days. They were puffy and heavy, and for the first time in days her fatigue was allowed to show through her otherwise steady veneer of command.

Beside her, Commander Nog leaned casually against the bar, a PADD in his hand that held a growing backlog of duties he had no intention of addressing in that moment. He was entirely in his element. Patrons approached him freely, greeting him with easy familiarity, as though he had known them for years. Whether he truly did or not hardly mattered. Everyone who spoke with him felt recognized, acknowledged in a way that lingered even after the exchange ended. Nog had become as much a part of the station as the Cardassian deckplates beneath their feet. Those who crossed his path could not help but be drawn in by his warmth, leaving either smiling or laughing.

Nog was there as much to keep Ro company as to decompress after the difficult days they had endured. They both understood that after a crisis, people wanted to see their commanders. It reassured them and gave shape to the sense that stability had truly returned. At the same time, Nog positioned himself as a buffer, intercepting well-wishers before they could reach Ro and engaging them with easy conversation and humor that redirected their attention without causing offense. He was, in effect, running defense for her, allowing her to remain present without being overwhelmed. Their partnership in this setting mirrored the

one they shared in Ops, each instinctively aware of the other's needs, their respective skill sets complementing one another with natural ease.

Behind the bar, Quark angled himself toward General Ro and Nog, as though he had only just decided to join their conversation. He had been polishing the same glass for nearly half an hour while his Ferengi staff moved briskly around him, attending to the steady flow of patrons. The task itself was unnecessary, but it served as a performance of proprietorship, a way of asserting his presence at the center of it all.

"General," he said, addressing Ro with a slight inclination of his head, "you've kept this Cardassian rust bucket in orbit through yet another crisis. Well done!"

Ro turned her gaze toward him, her expression stern but not dismissive. It suggested that his presence was tolerated, perhaps even appreciated, but that she was not nearly as entertained by his wit as he was.

"You know what you Bajoran and Starfleet types don't appreciate about a near-death existential crisis?" he continued. "The profit loss."

Ro looked up at him, her expression edged with dry amusement. "I imagine it's devastating."

"It is devastating," Quark insisted, lowering the glass just long enough to gesture before returning to his polishing. "Every time you people save the quadrant, I spend a week rebuilding inventory. It's chaos."

Nog flashed a toothy smile. "You're forgetting the Sixty-Second Rule of Acquisition, Uncle: The riskier the road, the greater the profit."

"Don't quote the Rules to me, nephew. Rule One Hundred Twenty-Five: You can't make a deal if you're dead!"

Ro reached for her glass, turning it slightly but still not drinking. "You'll survive, Quark. You always do."

"Speaking of survival, who am I billing for all the extra holosuite time these past few days? I would send the bill to the Celestial Temple, but if there is one thing I have learned from the last thirty years of running a business on a Bajoran station, it's that the Prophets never pay in latinum."

Nog knew his uncle well enough to recognize the distinction between performance and calculation. Quark leaned into the role everyone expected of him, the grasping Ferengi proprietor who saw every moment in terms of profit and loss, because it kept the room comfortable and predictable. But beneath that performance, he was also doing what he had always done, measuring, adjusting, and quietly working out where the margins might still be recovered.

"This one's on me, Uncle. Put it on my tab," Nog said.

"Starfleet has finally beaten the last bit of Ferengi out of you," Quark replied, handing him a PADD for his thumbprint.

Ro finally took a sip of her wine. "Carry on like this, Quark, and you're going to see me beating some Ferengi too."

Quark took satisfaction whenever he managed to cut through Ro's sharp demeanor, fully aware that even at ease she retained an edge. The three of them settled into a more

relaxed rhythm after that, the conversation drifting naturally between complaint and amusement. Around them, the bar continued to fill, voices rising and blending into a steady, reassuring cacophony of normalcy that spoke more convincingly than any status report ever could.

The doors slid open again with their familiar hiss, and this time the shift in the room was immediate. Tuvok and Wesley entered together. Tuvok's posture was as precise as ever, his uniform immaculate, his composed stillness setting him apart from the easy motion of the bar. Wesley, still in his turquoise Native American tunic with color geometric designs, carried his travel bags, one slung over his shoulder and the other in his hand. The intensity that had defined him in recent days had not vanished, but it had settled, drawn inward into something steadier and more grounded. He looked, for lack of a better word, human again.

Tuvok and Wesley approached Ro and Nog at the bar, the surrounding patrons clearing a path for them with a kind of unconscious deference, stepping aside without quite realizing they had done so. "General Ro. Commander Nog," Tuvok said evenly. "Mr. Crusher and I will depart the station at 2200 hours. I trust our presence has been helpful."

Ro set her glass down. "Helpful," she repeated, her tone flat but not dismissive. If anything, the understatement carried more weight than praise would have. "That's *one* way to put it."

Wesley smiled, the expression easy and unforced. "I'm grateful for my time here. When I first came, I wasn't even sure what I was chasing. This station seems to have a way of drawing clarity out of chaos."

Nog set his PADD aside completely now, turning fully toward them. "If you mean keeping us on the verge of utter madness, then I would agree with you."

Wesley's smile lingered as he turned his gaze toward Ro. "That's *another* way of putting it."

Wesley reached for the glass Quark had already placed before him without being asked and raised it in a small gesture of gratitude. Even Quark, after a brief hesitation, lifted one of his own. They drank.

Tuvok nodded his head once more first to Ro then to Nog: "General. Captain."

Ro nodded back. "Good luck, both of you... wherever you're going." There was a brief pause before she added, almost as an afterthought, "Try not to unravel the galaxy."

Wesley's grin returned, quick and unguarded. "No promises." Together, Tuvok and Wesley turned and made their way out of the bar.

Bajor's dawn came softly, spilling through the tall windows of Kira Nerys's quarters in a deliberate wash of bright golden orange. For the first time in weeks, she awoke without the weight of alarms pressing at the edges of consciousness, without dread or terror. The silence that greeted her was complete. It did not conceal anything waiting. It simply was. She lay still for a moment, allowing herself to feel it fully.

Kira turned her head slightly. A vase of petalune flowers rested on the small table beside her bed, moisture clinging to their blossoms and catching the light, each one faintly glowing with a soft internal radiance. She did not need to guess who had

placed them there. Reaching out, she touched the nearest bloom with the tips of her fingers, the gesture light, almost tentative, as though confirming that both the flowers and the moment were real.

She rose from her bed, wrapped herself in her soft silken robe, and made her way to the kitchen for her morning raktajino, fruits and small pastries. As she settled into the chair, a hot, steaming cup cradled in both hands, the wall display activated and the day's news began to stream in. Although extensive recovery efforts were already well underway, the damage from the last wave of temporal disruptions was extensive. Many had died. Many were still without power. Years of infrastructure development had been undone.

She felt the weight of her responsibility, but not the anxiety, worry, or fear that might once have accompanied it. She knew how resilient the Bajoran people were. She believed in them, in each of them, as if they were members of her own family. Bajor would endure.

Another headline moved across the display. Minister Serin Vekar and the other principal architects of the attempted coup had been arrested without further incident. The Chamber of Ministers had reconvened in a new location under controlled conditions. The Ministerial Council was already being restored to full function.

As she settled into a calm sense of relief, a chime sounded at the door. At this hour, it could only be one person. "Enter."

Jolen Deyer stepped inside, carrying a stack of PADDs. "Good morning, First Minister," he said, lifting them slightly. "There's a great deal on our docket today." He took a seat across from Kira and began to sort the PADDs on the table.

After watching him for a moment, she felt a quiet surge of gratitude for his steadfast service. "Deyer, I haven't properly thanked you for holding it all together during the crisis. When I was incapacitated, you went above and beyond the call of duty. You put yourself at great personal risk. I thank you. Bajor thanks you."

"I could say I do it for the honor and love of the planet and its people," he replied, a hint of a smile crossing his face, "but truthfully, I do it for the company."

Kira let out a soft chuckle, and for Jolen, that was thanks enough. It was enough simply to see her smile again. "Alright, Jolen, let's get this day started. I need a few minutes to pray and dress, and then we're off. Please let Jaro know that I want to make a detour before heading to the office."

"A detour?"

"Yes. We'll work late if we have to, but I want to head north to the Sisko Estate Shrine. There's someone I must visit."

"Understood, First Minister."

Dressed in her First deep green Minister's suit, she stepped outside with Jolen, where her transport was waiting and ready. Jaro stood beside it, hands folded behind his back, his posture relaxed but attentive. He inclined his head as she

approached, opening the door without a word. She took her seat, and the transport lifted smoothly from the surface, rising into the clear morning air.

Bajor stretched beneath them in rolling waves of green and gold as they left the vicinity of the wounded city. Temple spires rose into the sky, and vineyards and fields shimmered in the early light, as though each leaf carried its own fragment of dawn. Narrow paths wound between the rows, with occasional figures moving slowly through the fields, their presence small against the broader sweep of land. In the distance, the contours of low hills softened into haze, their outlines blending gently into the horizon.

The Sisko estate appeared gradually, emerging from the landscape not as a sudden structure but as a natural extension of it. A cluster of cream stone buildings with amber roofs came into view, set gently among the surrounding fields. Even before the transport began its final descent to the landing platform, Kira could see hundreds of pilgrims already lined up to enter the main structure, with many more approaching from the distant paths.

Kasidy Yates-Sisko, together with two vedeks, and Jakes's son Asher stood waiting to greet First Minister Kira at the landing pad. Kasidy held herself with a stillness that did not suggest waiting so much as presence. Her hair was bound simply, without ornament, and she wore long, flowing robes in muted purple hues. There was a strength in the way she carried herself, something that had deepened rather than diminished in the years since Benjamin's ascension.

Kira stepped down from the transport, and for a moment the two women simply regarded one another. Then Kasidy stepped forward and embraced her. It was not an embrace of consolation, nor one that sought to comfort or reassure. It was something steadier than that, an acknowledgment of endurance, survival, and the work of continuing.

"How is he?" Kira asked as they began to walk.

"He doesn't speak," Kasidy said, her voice low and measured. "But he listens. The pilgrims call him the Witness of the Prophets." After a brief pause, she added, "What are you hearing about the Orb of the Emissary? Is it being brought to us?"

"Yes," Kira replied. "I've been informed that Starfleet now has possession of the Orb and is en route to Bajor, where it will be placed here, in the Sisko Shrine, where it has always belonged."

As they walked toward the main structure, pilgrims inclined their heads in gestures of respect to the First Minister, to Kasidy, and to Asher, parting without hesitation to allow them through. The reverence was unmistakable. Both women could feel the depth of the love and respect directed toward them as they passed.

Inside, the air was cooler, scented faintly with flower bouquets, natural waxes, and essential oils. The meditation room opened gradually into the shrine. Candles burned in concentric circles, their flames steady despite the subtle movement of air

through the open window. The light they cast did not flicker so much as breathe, expanding and contracting in slow, almost imperceptible rhythms.

Within the central space, the Orb of Truth rested in its casing. A handful of pilgrims knelt nearby in prayer, their voices low and reverent as they bowed before it.

They passed the devotees with quiet respect and entered the inner chamber of the sanctuary. There they saw Jake Sisko seated on a low arrangement of pillows, his posture relaxed, his hands resting lightly in his lap. He wore a simple pale-gray hooded robe, the fabric draped loosely around him, the hood casting a soft shadow over a face that seemed subtly aged, as though time had settled more deeply into him than it should have. Sunlight fell across his features and spilled onto the floor beside him. To one side, an open window looked out over the grounds. To the other stood the empty alcove that had been dedicated to the Orb of the Emissary.

Kira sat down on the floor beside Jake and folded her legs beneath her. "Jake, can you hear me? It's me, Nerys."

Jake continued to gaze into the distance, offering no acknowledgment of her presence.

Kira placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Jake?"

Again, there was no response. Kira looked up to Kasidy, then to Asher, who met her with a slight, knowing shake of his head, as if to say they had tried, and he could not be reached. Kira turned back to him. "Jake, we love you," she said softly. "We're here for you, always. When you're ready, we'll be here. I promise."

She rose and began to make her way toward the outer sanctuary. "Kasidy, may I have this chamber to myself for just a moment?" Kasidy acknowledged her request and gently gestured to the pilgrims to clear the space. Knowing it was for the First Minister, they complied without hesitation.

Alone, Kira knelt before the Orb of Truth and placed her hands upon its casing. When it opened, the effect was immediate. A blue light unfolded outward, illuminating her face and the chamber, then the space beyond, expanding without resistance or boundary. It moved through her, not around her, not over her, but through her.

Faces. Kira saw faces. Bajoran, Cardassian, Human, Klingon. Faces of distant species she did not even recognize. Hundreds, then thousands, too many to count. They emerged in layers, in depth, in continuity, unfolding one into another without end.

Then, all at once, the faces cleared from her vision, and she found herself looking down upon the Sisko estate, as though she were moving above it like a bird. She could see the streams of pilgrims making their way toward the gateway of the shrine. The scene widened, expanding from the estate to the surrounding province, then to the entire continent, until she beheld all of Bajor as if from orbit. The faces returned, now suspended in the space around the planet, multiplying without end. Millions of faces, millions of souls. She could feel each one as a distinct presence, and all of them together at once.

She heard a voice. Benjamin Sisko's voice, not from a distance, but as if spoken directly to her, intimate and immediate. "These are the lives you have saved."

The words did not echo. They did not need to. They existed fully in the moment of their hearing. "You were never forsaken. You are of Bajor. The Prophets are of Bajor."

The multitude dissolved, and what remained was not absence, but tranquility. Kira's breath caught, then released, the tension she had carried for years dissolving in a single, unforced motion. Tears came without resistance, without shame, without the need to contain them.

She looked back through the doorway to the inner chamber, to where Jake was seated. He was no longer staring into some distant point, but looking directly at her. His head gave the slightest nod, as if he could see her, as if he knew her. She rose, wiping the tears from her face.

Outside, the air felt different. The sky stretched wide above her, clear, luminous, steady. No distortions. No fractures. No instability. Only continuity. She closed her eyes briefly as the sunlight touched her face. And somewhere, beyond distance, beyond time, yet not separate from either, the voice came again, softer now, but no less certain.

"The path is open. Walk it."