

CHAPTER 1

"I WILL NOW inspect your aft cargo bay," Worf informed her.

The Sattar woman squinted up at him. "I told you all of the cargo bays were searched last night by station security. In fact, they went over the entire ship with a portable particle sweeper! I don't know what else you expect to find poking around like this with a tricorder." "I am aware the Reaper has been cleared, Senior Mate Cali." Worf knew that if he did not stop her, the Sattar would keep complaining and he would never get done. She had made it clear that the transport was on a tight turnaround, but that was none of his concern. "As Strategic Operations Officer, it is within my jurisdiction to inspect any vessel allied with the Klingon Empire." "How nice for you." She wrinkled her fuzzy nose at him. "But you're wasting your time. We haven't contracted with any Klingons for months... and we aren't likely to if I can help it," she added bitterly.

Since the Sattar were not known for their honesty, Worf discounted her statement. The Sattar Collective had been reluctant members of the empire since their world had been conquered over one hundred years ago, yet when they were not operating on the narrow border between Federation trade laws and the Ferengi Alliance, many Sattar cooperated with Klingons to their own advantage.

Worf had watched the Reaper since her arrival the night before, timing his inspection just prior to their departure in order to catch them off guard. Cali, the senior mate assigned to accompany him, was typical of the Sattar he had encountered in the past. She was a small humanoid, covered with tawny fur that had been smoothed into decorative swirls on her face and chest. But her impetuous temper was reflected in the disheveled curls hanging over her forehead and the tangled mass of reddish-brown mane running down the back of her head and neck.

"The aft cargo bay," Worf prompted.

Cali snorted, but she turned on her heel. "It's right here, as if you didn't know." As they entered the cargo bay, Worf's hand lingered on the curved support beam. It felt odd to be inside a Klingon vessel again, so right, and yet not--

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"This isn't a bird of prey," Cali spoke up behind him, surprising him out of his reverie. Her arms were crossed. "It isn't even a cruiser. It's an old transport ship, in case you haven't noticed. I suppose we should be flattered we're worth this much effort." Worf ignored her caustic remarks, proceeding with his investigation. The recent termination of the peace treaty between the Federation and the Klingon Empire made it imperative that he pursue every scrap of information. Odo's team had picked up traces of solotine in their particle sweep. It was a catalyst often used in Klingon explosive devices such as bombs and mines. But the Reaper's cargo bay was empty except for stacked containers and anti-gray pallets.

"Open this panel." He gestured at random to one of the vents in the bulkhead. If this vessel had transported solotine, there would be a breakdown residue of nitrogen-dextrin left in the atmospheric intake vents.

Cali shrugged and made an elaborate show of undoing the panel. Worf waited until she stepped aside, knowing how touchy Sattar were about physical contact. While Cali had simply bent over to reach the panel, Worf was forced to kneel down, leaning in to bring his tricorder close to the junction node of the

vent. There were no immediate indicators of solotone contamination-- "Arrgh!" he exclaimed as a burst of white-hot steam erupted in his face.

Protecting his eyes, he jumped back, unbalanced by his awkward position. He bumped into Call and they both went down.

Worf's shoulder hit the deck, and he could feel Call entangled in his legs. She was fighting to get away as he glared back at the plasma leak. The lethal stuff was merrily hissing into the air. Only his quick reflexes had kept him from getting a nasty plasma burn in his eyes. As it was, he had to restrain himself from rubbing his eyes, blinking to clear his vision.

Instinctively he edged toward the nearest bulkhead, protecting his back in case of an attack. But Call was swearing in Klingon as she limped toward the door to hit the comm. "Plasma leak in the aft cargo bay," she drawled. "Get someone down here, will you?" Worf did not appreciate the situation, or the smile on the Sattar's face when she turned around. He considered the possibility that she had somehow planned the accident. Aiming his tricorder at the plasma leak, he detected several other weak spots on the conduit, but no obvious signs of tampering.

Another Sattar appeared, this one with dun-colored fur shaved to a nub except for his stiff ridge of mane.

The technician crawled under the leak to examine the conduit. "Shouldn't have opened the panel," he muttered. "These are delicate systems we've got here." Cali ignored the technician's complaint. "Have you seen enough?" she asked Wore "Or would you like to damage a few more conduits?" Worf checked his tricorder readings. Normally he would prefer a few more samples, but he had adequate data for further analysis with the station's computer.

He closed the tricorder. "I... appreciate your cooperation," he muttered grudgingly.

"You mean the search is over? You found nothing to seize?" she countered in mock amazement. "Are you sure you did a thorough job?" Ignoring her, Worf left the cargo bay and returned to the docking port. Though the Sattar crew had altered the interior of the transport, the Klingon infrastructure was intact. He knew exactly which way to turn to get back to the airlock, even though he could barely see through his burning eyes. He had to blink constantly to keep them from watering.

Cali jogged along behind him. "We'll have to do a rush check in order to make our rotation slot through the wormhole." Worf refused to slow down or glance back at the Sattar. "You may inform Captain Ari that the Reaper remains cleared for departure." "Ohhh... aren't we in a generous mood today!" When Worf did not respond, she caught up, running right on his heels. "Don't think I'm going to be grateful! You Klingons are all alike. If you can't keep it, you kill it~ And you don't care who you destroy as long as you can call yourselves warriors." Her voice rose. "Hey, I'm talking to you, Klingon!" Worf stopped and looked down at this feisty little Sattar, ready to make war with the entire Klingon Empire right here, right now. He wondered if she was any good with a bat'leth.

The spark of admiration in his gaze seemed to infuriate her even more. "You're dying to know what's going on, aren't you?" she taunted. "I don't know who you're gathering information for, 'the Klingons or the Federation--" She waved off his dark look. "Sure, you wear a Starfleet uniform. But you don't have to prove anything to me. I'm just telling you. You know nothing about this part of space." "Your assessment would be informative," he said raising his tricorder. "Have you encountered recent Klingon activity in the nearby sectors?" "Oh, sure! We'll have a nice long chat, right after our weekly game of ba'zon." She was smiling in that smug way again. "You've been on this station how long? Three weeks, maybe four?" Her accuracy was unnerving. He could also tell he would get nothing more from Senior

Mate Cali, and he was therefore unwilling to enter into a personal argument with her.

He remained silent until they reached the airlock and then he adhered strictly to protocol. "Does your captain plan to record your logs before departure?" Cali laughed right in his face. Wisps of hair shook in a faint aureole around her head. "Blimenny. You do try to control everything, don't you?" "It is for your own protection--" "Spare me the hypocrisy." Cali deliberately turned away. "All Klingons are alike." Before Worf could say anything, his comm badge signaled and Dax's voice asked, "Commander Worf?" "Worf here," he immediately replied.

"Please report to upper pylon three." That meant a large vessel was docking. "On my way," Worf confirmed.

Cali was still sneering as she let him through the airlock. "Explain all you want, but it's still the same old Klingon game. Glory! You'd think a bunch of idiots who are that violent and self-serving would have killed themselves off a long time ago." As he left, Worf felt compelled to comment, "You must be an expert at self-defense. I can think of no other reason for your continued survival in the Klingon Empire." Her eyes flashed. "I guess there's no such thing as justice in this universe, is there?" The airlock slammed behind him, as Worf realized that was the very question he had been considering since he had transferred to the station. He knew that if he had anything to do with it, there would be justice served in this part of the universe. And he would do everything in his power to preserve the Federation's tentative balance with the Klingon Empire, and to prevent their conflict from escalating into war.

Worf ignored the pain that throbbed in his eyes, proceeding directly to the lower pylon. When he reached the viewport at the base of the pylon, there was no ship in dock. With practiced self-control, he resisted speculating on the incoming vessel.

Nodding to the Bajoran technician at the docking control station, Worf activated the viewer to Ops.

"Commander Worf at lower pylon docking control." Dax's face appeared, filling the small round screen.

"Worf, we've finally heard from the scoutship Ceres.

Captain IIs reports they are being towed in by the Bajoran tug, Hum 'bernt." "The Ceres was damaged?" "They suffered a hit-and-run attack while they were at full stop, shields down. They lost warp drive, navigation, sensors, and communications..." Dax looked grim. "Five crew members were killed, and the rest are ill with radiation poisoning from the nearby plasma storm. They were on thrusters when the Hum'bernt found them." "Who attacked them?" Worf growled, already certain of the answer.

But Dax shook her head. "Their identity is unconfirmed. The Ceres was able to get only minimal readings, enough to know it was a single ship." Worf glanced at the technician, who uneasily edged away. Another example of the lax security on this station. Now it was too late to try to classify this information. "When did it happen?" "Yesterday, about this time." He clenched his jaw. The attackers could be anywhere by now. "And they have no information on the vessel?" "The scout was on the edge of the plasma storm, Worf, investigating some unusual readings. The radiation was interfering with their sensors when they were attacked." She glanced over her shoulder, toward Captain Sisko's office. "You're to get a report from Captain IIs. Most of the crew will be beamed directly to the infirmary for radiation treatment once the Ceres is within range." Worf nodded curtly. "Have two security teams report to me here." "Aye, Commander." As Worf reached out to terminate the transmission, Dax added, "Better make sure someone good is on the docking tractors. Remember the Andorian freighter that tug brought in last week?" "Thank you, Commander," he said dryly. Now the Bajoran technician was looking worried. Maybe Dax's warning was just another example of her bizarre humor, but Worf could never be sure with

the Trill.

Accessing the main viewer, Worf was able to watch the tug tow in the comparatively huge Starfleet scoutship. Dax had probably offered to assist with the station's tractor beams once they were within range, but Worf had seen for himself that nothing was that easy on the station. He had overheard far too much discussion lately among Kira, the Bajoran government, and the local version of the scavengers' union, arguing incessantly over towing regulations and whether tugs were required to bring a vessel into dock in order to receive payment. Worf thought it was nonsense, like many of the other convoluted procedures in this sector that seemed specifically designed to frustrate real, decisive action.

He did not believe he would ever become accustomed to this sort of delay, yet he didn't move a muscle in spite of his most fervent wish to get hold of the Ceres. A security team arrived and waited at one side with their portable equipment, and he ordered another team to go below to prepare one-man pods for an external examination of the scoutship. There were always clues left behind by weapons, clues that could be used to determine the exact course of a battle as well as the identity of the attacking vessel.

His personal contacts had reported considerable Klingon activity in the area, with vessels en route between the conquered Cardassian planets and the Klingon Empire. It was likely the Ceres had been attacked by Klingons. Or perhaps by a Sattar transport smuggling supplies to the Klingon outposts in Cardassian territory.

Yet Worf did not discount the possibility of a Maquis ambush. Tactically it made sense for them to take advantage of the situation to make a preemptive strike against Starfleet. Or it could have been a Jem'Hadar attack. Many of the officers on the station would agree with that hypothesis; there had been growing rumors of Jem'Hadar infiltration using cloaking devices captured during the failed Romulan-Cardassian invasion of the Dominion home world.

But privately Worf considered that an unlikely possibility at this juncture.

Magnifying the image of the Ceres, Worf focused first on the imploded warp nacelle, then the punctured bulkheads in the body of the ship, particularly around the dish-shaped navigational array. The targeting had been precise, taking out the major weapons and sensor systems in two, perhaps three, sweeps.

With that much damage and a crew complement of almost one hundred fifty, they were lucky there were only five deaths.

Worf switched to the pylon sensors to watch the docking. The Hum'bernt seemed to strain as it swung the Ceres around, then slowly backed her in. There were a few breathless moments as the scoutship neared the station when it seemed to speed up as the gap closed. Worf instinctively held his breath, though he knew it was an optical illusion from the adjustment of his eyes to the real space-time view.

The Bajoran technician suddenly became iron cool, smoothly catching the Ceres with the tractors and slowing her approach. The round port eased up to the station, an alignment of two microscopic points. They met at precisely the moment the Ceres stopped. The last few centimeters closed with a whisperlike shudder of contact through the pylon.

"Good work," Worf told the technician.

"Thank you, sir." She lifted her chin, as if determined to never again show trepidation about a docking maneuver.

There was a somber urgency to the preparations for opening the airlock, while communications were relayed regarding the transport of the most seriously injured to the infirmary. Captain Iis was waiting on the other side of the port, but she remained on board the Ceres as a long line of crew members with minor injuries filed onto the station. Medical technicians arrived to assist.

Despite the various degrees of shock that showed on the faces of the crew Worf's gaze kept returning to Il Captain Iis. Her face was creased with lines of stress, but her pride shone through the sweat and smudges earned during their effort to return to safety. She offered a few words here and there, occasionally clasping an arm or giving a nod of reassurance. Worf had heard rumors about the crews under Captain Iis, of the bond they felt for one another. It couldn't match what he had experienced on the Enterprise. yet he admired their determination to be strong, to prove they weren't beaten, to be a credit to their captain.

Worf entered the docking port and came to attention in front of Captain Iis. "Commander Worf, requesting permission to board the Ceres." "Permission granted, Commander." Iis seemed to appreciate his adherence to protocol. "This is the last of the injured. I have a skeleton crew in place locking down the systems." "The security team can assist as they begin the investigation," Worf offered. At the captain's tired nod, he called security inside and deployed them to their stations.

Distracted by the sight of her departing crew members, Iis told Worf, "I've sent one of my ensigns to fetch the data on the plasma storm. You'll need to plot the trajectory to make sure it's not coming this way." "I am concerned about the attack on the Ceres," Worf informed her, wondering at her choice of priorities at this moment.

"I don't have much to add to my initial report. We were at full stop, scanning the plasma storm... defenseless. There was no provocation, no reason for it..." The captain seemed to shake herself, returning to the facts. "Perhaps the other ship was also skirting the plasma storm and couldn't read us through the emission waves. Then when they stumbled on us, they fired." "It will be necessary to analyze your sensor logs." "Of course, though I warn you, we didn't get enough data to be able to make a positive identification." Iis hesitated, then added, "But one of my lieutenants did catch a glimpse of the ship through a porthole, and she said it looked Klingon." "A bird of prey?" Worf demanded.

"No, something different, a design she wasn't familiar with. By the way, this is all hearsay. Another one of my officers informed me of her sighting." Worf seized on the clue. "I must speak with the lieutenant immediately." Captain Iis grimaced. "That's impossible. She suffered a blow to the head. The doctor says she's in a coma and he's been unable to help her regain consciousness." Worf's disappointment was sharp, reminding him that a good investigator did not get personally involved in a case. It could distort his interpretation of the evidence. Yet he had to admit satisfaction at even the most tentative confirmation that Klingons were involved. It was just as he suspected.

"I noticed that there's a Klingon vessel docked here," Captain Iis said quietly. "When did it get in?" "The Reaper is a transport belonging to the Sattar

12 13 Collective." He didn't have to check his tricorder for the docking information. "They arrived yesterday at fourteen hundred hours." "Do they have the legs to get here that fast?" More to the point, Worf was not certain the Reaper's weapons systems were capable of inflicting this much damage. But he intended to find out. "I have not yet completed my investigation. I will inform you as soon as I have analyzed the information." An ensign rushed up to Captain Iis, offering her a padd. "Good," Iis said in relief, checking the data.

"Commander, you had better get this to your science officer right away. I hope that storm isn't headed in

this direction. The radiation caused almost as much damage to my crew as the attack did." Worf took the padd, bracing the captain for a moment as she lost her balance. "You should go to the infirmary," he told her. The ensign chimed in, concerned but too respectful to do more than offer to support her captain.

Iis demurred, glancing up in concern at the ceiling of her bridge.

"There is nothing more for you to do," Worf said bluntly. Yet he felt a great deal of sympathy for Captain Iis, surveying the remnants of her command.

"Repair crews are currently assessing the damage, and you will receive a report shortly on the condition of your ship." Captain Iis nodded agreement, but she remained at her post until the last of her crew members had departed. Then she handed over command to a senior officer and prepared to follow the others through the airlock.

"Wait, Captain," Worf said. He signaled Ops for the transporter to take Iis to the infirmary. She could hardly stand up straight and her lips trembled from the effort. After everything else she had been through, it was not necessary for her to drag herself through the mile-long corridor to the infirmary in the core.

But as the captain dematerialized, Worf was not thinking of the buckled hull of the Ceres. Instead he saw the saucer section of the Enterprise buried in the ground, with that long scar stretching into the distance behind it. And the cracked glass of the bridge dome forming a jagged frame for the blue sky.... He hoped the Ceres could be repaired. He swore to himself that if the Sattar were responsible, he would discover the truth and make them pay for it. Perhaps this was the reason Senior Mate Cali was in such a hurry to leave DS9.

"Transporter, one to beam to Ops." Captain Iis had stressed urgency about the storm data, and he also wanted to watch the Reaper to see if the Sattar decided to depart now that the Ceres had been brought in. Their actions during the next hour could be very enlightening.

As Worf materialized in Ops, he felt the floor shake beneath his feet. "What was that?" he demanded, looking from Dax to O'Brien.

"I'm not sure," the chief admitted, examining his panel.

Visions of a Klingon offensive flashed through

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Worf's mind, and he had time to regret that both Captain Sisko and Major Kira were off duty.

Dax offered, "I think it's the effects of that plasma storm. I've been tracking the emission waves. They're very strong. It must be one big mother of a storm." "I'll increase power to the stabilizers," O'Brien agreed, "and I'll see what I can do about adjusting the shields. We don't want any radiation leakage." "Captain Iis claims that the storm is dangerous." Worf handed Dax the padd with the Ceres sensor information before going to the tactical station. He quickly confirmed that there were no signs of unusual vessel activity on long-range sensors.

Then he accessed star charts of the neighboring sector, where the Ceres had been scanning the storm.

Perhaps the attacker had been protecting the secrecy of a Klingon post just outside Bajoran space.

Tactically it would be the ideal spot for a supply base. The flight plan of the Reaper indicated they had come from the opposite direction, however they could easily have falsified that information. He downloaded his trio order data into the computer for a full analysis of the Reaper's engines, weapons, and recent cargo.

"Interesting," Dax murmured, absorbed in the readings on the storm from the Ceres. "I'm going to send out a long-range probe." Worf accessed docking control and canceled the Sattar's clearance, sealing the docking clamps with a security order. What with the interference of the emission waves, he could not risk the Reaper's escaping before he had time to complete his analysis.

He noted the order in his log, then began to gather the preliminary reports from his security teams working on the Ceres. It was comforting to watch the data flow into his console. Soon he would know.

"Ready, Chief?" Dax asked.

"Fire away," O'Brien cheerfully confirmed, deep in his own calculations on the shield's EM dispersal and band-width rates.

Silence fell over them as each worked on his or her own problem. It reminded Worf of the best days on the Enterprise.

"Wow!" Dax softly exclaimed, reacting to the first readings as they came in. "I've never seen anything like this outside a particle accelerator. Unusually dense blackbody... hmmm... and high levels of complex oscillations." She continued to murmur her surprise, with Worf idly listening, until a new note crept in.

"Wait, what's this?" she muttered. "Escalating bursts. The data's being scrambled." "Need more power?" O'Brien asked.

"Maybe. I'm going to tie the probe into long-range sensors for redundancy." Dax frowned over her panel as she quickly made the link. Worf found her technique interesting--not Starfleet standard, but then almost nothing on this station was Starfleet standard.

"I'm getting feedback," Dax told them. "Better isolate your systems." Worf had already seen the spikes, and took the tactical station off line from the main sensor array.

O'Brien was right behind him.

17 "Just for a moment," Dax assured them. "Until I get this fluctuation under control--" A surge ran through the power relays, ringing alarms in the secondary stations. Dax tried to compensate, hitting the touch pads with frantic fingers.

"Cut power!" she called out.

O'Brien was wide eyed as he tried to comply. A spark shot up from the main circuit indicator on the science station. Dax jerked back, then tried to shut everything down as a burst of smoke rose from the console, followed by a shower of white-hot sparks.

Worf was already running toward Dax, and he grabbed her arms to pull her away. "Move!" he ordered.

A stasis beam shot down from the overhead array, attempting to contain the smoke. O'Brien leaped over the railing to retrieve a portable stasis unit, betraying his lack of confidence in the onboard systems.

"Apparently the storm is stronger than I thought," Dax admitted, coughing and warily watching her burning console. Worf made sure she was uninjured before helping her stand up.

"Worfto Captain Sisko," he announced, straightening his uniform.

A brief pause reminded him that Sisko hadn't had a day off in over a week. Yet the captain's voice betrayed no irritation. "Sisko here." Worf eyed O'Brien's attempts to extinguish the fire.

"Sir, you are needed in Ops. We have a slight. problem."

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CHAPTER 2

THE CATWALK SHUDDERED as Keiko reached the door to the holosuite. She couldn't help bumping into a young Bajoran woman who had paused to check the numbers.

Keiko caught her by the arm to steady them both.

"That was a strong one." The Bajoran's eyes were round, but she was smiling.

"I've never felt the station shake like this before." Keiko let go of her. "I have. It's probably nothing serious." The young woman dug into what Keiko had at first taken to be a bundle of costuming for a holoprogram.

Instead, a baby peeked up through the folds, smiling up in a tiny echo of her mother's pert ridged nose and rosebud mouth.

"What a precious baby!" Keiko exclaimed.

"Yes, she is," the mother artlessly agreed. "I'm Betenn Catfin." Keiko responded to her smile. "Hi, Catrin. I'm Keiko O'Brien." Catrin juggled her baby. "I don't think I've met you before. Are you related to Miles O'Brien, chief of operations?" Keiko nodded. "We're married." She reached out to tickle the baby's chin. "We have a daughter of our own. Molly is six now." "Oh, I heard about that," Catrin said. "I thought you were both living on Bajor." "The winter storms are severe this year in the Bernice Province," Keiko explained, resisting a tug of frustration at the thought. "We had to close down the science survey for a week or so." And she had just been getting somewhere with those hybrid Bernitii- Serran grains.

"I had a cousin who moved to Bernice." Catrin adjusted the baby. "I'm from Shakaar's province, but my mate got a posting to the station a few months ago and we couldn't pass up the opportunity. I'll never forget the trip here! I was out to here," she said, holding out one hand as far as she could in front of her stomach.

"Sounds familiar," Keiko replied. "It must be tough for you living on the station with an infant." Catrin smoothed her hand over the little head. "Oh, I don't know... babies aren't easy no matter where you are. I sometimes think about the labor camp where I grew up and this seems like heaven. I can even work half-day shifts at Transient Registration so I get to see all the different people who come to the station." Keiko didn't want to admit that she still found the constant stream of transients unnerving. She liked meeting new people as much as anyone, but the neverending influx of strangers was sometimes overwhelming. And though the view of the wormhole was amazing, Keiko never developed a taste for

the Cardassian structure of the station. She couldn't help it, the elongated curves and shadowy niches felt creepy to her. She was more at home with the sleek lines of the Star fleet temporary quarters that traveled with the survey team on Bajor.

But Catrin didn't notice Keiko's lack of enthusiasm. "Usually Bruce is home by now, but the docking crew is taking care of that Starfleet ship that just came in. I'm lucky the holosuite is available or Krystal would be coming with me to work." "It will be available," Keiko told her, "as soon as I get my daughter out of there." She gave Catrin a frustrated look. "I hate leaving her here alone, even though I know it's safe. But I had to. Everyone responded when they called for volunteers to help with those injured crewmembers." "It's awful, isn't it?" Catrin agreed. "Everyone's talking about it." Keiko keyed her access code in the locking device on the door. She never took chances in this place. She had asked Miles to make one of his custom security seals so she could lock Molly inside the holosuite if she ever had to leave her alone.

"Which program is she doing?" Catrin asked.

"Level one riding lessons," Keiko said, as the door opened. "That's all she's talked about since she tried it on our last visit. Ponies!" At the far end of the room, Molly was perched on a fat white pony. It was plodding in a circle around the paddock, stoically ignoring her kicking heels and the jostling of the reins. A holographic instructor was patiently indicating the finer points of horsemanship on the small image of an English rider floating incongruously above the pony's nose. Beyond the whitewashed fence were the images of other horses and riders going through their paces.

Molly pulled her pony to a halt, laughing as she almost lost her balance. "Whoa!" she ordered in a deep voice. Keiko wondered where she had picked up that tone of command.

"Hello, Molly," Catrin said as she removed Krystal from her bundles. "Your daughter is so sweet," she whispered to Keiko.

Keiko wanted to tell her that appearances could be deceiving, but she bit her tongue. "How was your ride today, Molly?" "We jumped four fences and two big rivers." Molly appealed to the instructor. "Weren't they big? They were huge." "You're letting her jump?" Keiko panicked, reaching for Molly. She was only half convinced that riding was a good idea at her age, but Miles had encouraged her enthusiasm by bringing her to the holosuite for her first ride.

"The pupil has jumped only in the holo-image," the instructor assured Keiko, apparently programmed to deal with nervous parents. "Molly has nearly completed the requisite maneuvers for the first level. In the second level she will learn how to interact with a real animal." Molly's face lit up in glee. "I want more pony rides!"

"Can I do more, Mommy?" "Not today, sweetheart." Keiko exchanged a smile with Catrin that only mothers could understand.

Then she lifted Molly from the pony, ordering, "End simulation." When Molly started to whine, she chided, "It's this little girl's turn. We can't keep her waiting." "Begin infant nursery program," Catrin meekly requested. A white-clad nurse and a large sunny nursery appeared around them. "Oh, Krystal! Look at the bunnies!" Catrin guided the tiny hand to the fur.

"Isn't it soft?" Keiko quickly carried Molly outside before she could get hooked on the rabbits. Ponies were bad enough. Molly must have decided to be a good girl.

She held her mother's hand without trying to squirm away as they carefully walked down the spiral stairs.

But she kept insisting she wanted "better pony rides" next time. Rather than argue with her, Keiko asked how she got the pony to turn around and what made it go?

Absently listening to her daughter's prattle, Keiko was surprised to feel somewhat wistful over her fervent joy. It wasn't that she was unhappy with her life, but it felt as if she was barely keeping up, as if nothing was settled. It was worse when she saw someone like Catrin. The woman had given up her entire way of life and left everyone she knew to live on the station just because her mate had gotten a good job. Yet she was happy with this situation in a way that went beyond a cheerful disposition. Her smile seemed to resonate deeper than other people's, as if she was fundamentally satisfied in a way that eluded Keiko.

"Come on, Molly. It's time for your nap." She picked up her daughter to carry her through the bar, hating the fact that the only holosuites were in Quark's. Molly couldn't even have a pony ride without having to hear shouts of "Dabbo!" and the laughter of intoxicated patrons. But Keiko tried not to rush, knowing that Molly would sense her dislike of the place and be more bothered by that than anything she might see, such as the Dabbo girl's large breasts spilling out of her tight bodice.

Keiko tried to sneak past, but Leeta's eyes lit up when she noticed them. "Keiko, you're back! And Molly, too!" Leeta brushed a finger across the girl's cheek. "Isn't she just the cutest little thing?" It bothered Keiko that she wanted to pull Molly away, but she couldn't help thinking that Quark's would somehow contaminate her daughter. And even though Leeta was a close friend of Dax and Dr.

Bashir, Keiko had only spoken to her a few times.

"Remember me?" Leeta was asking Molly. "I met you with your daddy the last time you went pony riding." "I want to ride the pony," Molly demanded.

"You already had your lesson," Keiko reminded her, hoping she wouldn't chose this moment to throw a tantrum. Molly certainly would if she thought she could get Leeta's sympathy. "We'll come back another day." "No, now," Molly insisted.

Leeta grinned at her. "I like to see a girl who knows her own mind." "Oh, Molly knows exactly what she wants. And she usually wants it right now." "Why not?" Leeta asked. "You're only wasting your life when you put things off. Right, Molly?" Then she smiled at Keiko. "I know Chief O'Brien would agree.

He can't stand waiting for you both to come home. I bet you'll be glad when this survey is over and you can get back to a normal life." "The survey will probably last for another few months," Keiko automatically replied, balking at the idea of a normal life on DS9. Somehow it seemed contradictory.

"You'll be gone that long?" Leeta asked. "Well, we've been hearing about this visit for weeks. He really misses you when you're both away." "I know--" "Welcome back!" Quark exclaimed, suddenly right next to Keiko. She edged away, shifting Molly to her other hip, but that didn't stop the Ferengi. "It's so nice of you to drop by Quark's! I can't tell you the satisfaction it gives me to offer quality holo-programs at a reasonable price to my Starfleet patrons--" "Not today, Quark," Keiko told him. With a final nod to Leeta, she started toward the exit. She didn't have the energy for a chat with the annoying bar owner.

"Wait!" Quark called after her, following them between the tables. "I have a demo-program I'd like you to try. It's the Delanian baths, including the masseuse and private rock grotto. You can do itm" He grabbed her arm, whispering, "No charge! Just talk it up among your friends--" Keiko shook him off with a disgusted look. "No thanks." She glanced at the blinking, battered dart board as she passed by. It was

hard to imagine that this was where Miles spent most of his off time while she was on Bajor.

Quark warded her off with raised hands. "I was just trying to offer you some top-of-the-line entertainment. It's not like you have anything else to do while you're here." Keiko glared at him, but thankfully Molly didn't seem upset. She was looking around with interest from her high vantage point. "Let's stay here, Mommy." Quark's approving glance acknowledged the girl for the first time. "Maybe the O'Brien family should move in to Quark's. That is, since you all seem to like it here so much."

"Thank you," Molly replied solemnly, just as her mother had taught her. "Can I ride the pony?" Quark gave Keiko a sly grin. "I don't see why not." Keiko rolled her eyes as she turned away. Why did she ever try to talk sense to Quark? It never worked.

Abruptly the floor jolted to one side. Keiko managed to avoid Quark, stumbling into a table where she could support Molly. A few people let out frightened cries, then there was an instant of silence before the babbling surged up again.

"Something's not right," Quark muttered, glancing at Keiko. "Only the computer answers when I call Ops. Hey, maybe O'Brien will talk to you. You can call from my corn..." Keiko left Quark's without another word. She had no intention of calling Miles, either here or in their quarters. But she also wasn't going to sit here in the dark while the station shook itself apart around her.

Hitching Molly more securely against her hip, she headed for home.

But Quark wasn't satisfied until he called out from the doorway, "Tell O'Brien to fix the stabilizers. This isn't good for business!"

Dax was busy with her own problems, but there was no way she could miss it when Sisko asked for Kasidy's call to be transferred to his office.

Since Kasidy had been on the station barely a week, Dax was highly interested in the effect her presence would have on Benjamin. She watched him through the glass doors and could almost hear his calm tone as he explained about the plasma storm. Actually, it made sense for Kasidy to check on the situation. Sisko had been called away in the middle of preparing his Bajoran sailship for their afternoon cruise.

Then Dax had to laugh when she heard O'Brien pause in the middle of his muttered curses over the feedback damage to her console. The engineer dashed off suddenly; apparently he remembered he should call Keiko. He seemed surprised when his wife wasn't home.

"There's some kind of big plasma storm out there," he said, keeping his voice low as he left a message.

"You and Molly had better stay in our quarters until we get everything settled." He checked to see if anyone was listening. Dax pretended to be absorbed in the data she was retrieving from her damaged console. "I won't make it home for lunch, but I'll see you soon. I love you both." O'Brien probably didn't realize he had let out a sigh as he ended the transmission. Then he was instantly back to giving orders and wrestling with the temperamental power systems.

Dax finished her data retrieval, then joined Kira at the central Ops console. Kira had appeared in Ops not long after Sisko had arrived, even though it was her day off as well.

As Sisko returned from his office, Dax said, "I'd like to go down to the science lab and coordinate our analysis of the storm. The science station here won't be much use for a while."

Sisko came down the steps. "What's our current status?" Dax accessed the information from the Ceres, putting the star chart of the nearby sectors on the tabletop display so both Kira and Sisko could see. The swirling edge of the storm was rendered in broken, shifting color lines according to the frequency and wavelengths of the emissions.

"The plasma nearly covers the neighboring sector." Dax pointed to the mass of the storm that blocked the starfield. "And it's moving extremely fast, causing the high level Alfvén waves, both electromagnetic and radiation emissions, that are shaking the station.

These shock fronts are also distorting our sensors, so it's difficult to track the trajectory and intensity of the storm." "According to this, the storm is projected to pass through the far corner of the Bajoran sector," Sisko said. "That shouldn't be too bad." "It's a big storm, Benjamin." "We already have reports from vessels in the area," Kira confirmed. "The shock waves are interfering with navigation. I've recommended a docking alert for the Bajoran colonies." Sisko glanced at Dax. "Perhaps we should do the same." "It's probably a good idea," Dax admitted. "The shock waves will only get stronger as the storm passes." Kira made a sound as if that was an understatement. "Remember that plasma storm last year?

Everything was vibrating for days." Sisko nodded to Kira. "Issue a general alert on all hailing frequencies. Warn vessels to dock or evacuate the sector. Include the coordinates and estimated trajectory of the storm." "It's going to get pretty crowded around here," Kira warned.

"Coordinate with Bajoran Flight Control to route vessels to the nearest satellites or colony bases." Sisko frowned. "We can also open up those auxiliary docks and use the runabout landing pads if we need to." "I'll shuffle some of the smaller vessels," Kira agreed. Sisko turned to Dax. "I know Dr. Bashir is busy with the injured crew of the Ceres, but include his report on the radiation damage in your assessment of the storm." "The shields of the Ceres were down during their exposure," Dax reminded him.

O'Brien quickly put in, "We'll have no trouble with our shields, sir. I've got both generators operating at peak levels. The worst we'll have to deal with are these tremors." As if on cue, the deck shuddered. "Our stabilizers are compensating, but I'm working on a way to tie in the long-range sensors for a faster reaction time." "Good," Sisko told the chief. "I'm sure that would make everyone on the station feel much better." O'Brien looked as if he fully understood. He was probably thinking about Keiko and Molly.

"Sir?" Kira asked. "I have Captain Ari of the

Reaper demanding to speak with you. I've put him off a half dozen times but he won't let me re-dock his vessel unless you talk to him first." Worf went rigid with attention. "Sir, Captain Ari is the commander of the Reaper, a Sattar transport. I am currently completing the analysis of my latest inspection." "Latest?" Sisko asked, as Dax leaned closer to see the display. Worf had already replied to Captain Ari's official complaint by posting the storm warning for ships to dock or evacuate the area. Sisko pointed out, "They have clearance to evacuate through the wormhole. Why have you sealed their docking clamps?" Worf hesitated. "I suspect the Reaper may be involved in the attack on the Ceres. However my investigation is not yet completed." "You'll have to formally charge them to hold them here, Commander," Kira warned.

Worf shook his head, indicating he didn't have enough evidence for that.

"No wonder the captain wishes to speak to me," Sisko murmured.

Dax knew this was important to Worf. He had completely ignored the flurry over the storm,

concentrating on his investigation of the Ceres and the Reaper. Not since their fight with the Klingons had she seen him so absorbed and invigorated by his duties.

"Captain," she offered, drawing everyone's attention. "I had intended to suggest that the wormhole be closed to traffic." Sisko raised one brow. "Why?" "Alfven shock waves are penetrating the wormhole every time a ship goes through. We're already picking up elevated levels of ion compensation, among other things." Sisko didn't miss the timeliness of her suggestion.

Yet it was clear from Worf's reaction that he hadn't expected her assistance.

Sisko told Kira, "Along with that storm warning, include notification that the wormhole is temporarily closed." "But, sir," Kira protested. "Most of the ships were planning to leave the sector through the wormhole." Dax held firm. "I don't want to risk destabilizing it any further." Sisko agreed. "Give me your preliminary report within the hour, Commander. Oh, and Major, send the new notification to the Sattar ship. Inform them that I am currently engaged with emergency duties." "Aye, sir," Kira replied.

Dax followed Sisko up the steps as if heading for the turbolift to the science lab. But she quietly slipped into his office after him. "May I join you for a moment?" As soon as the door closed behind them, Sisko asked, "What's wrong, Old Man?" Dax almost smiled. "That was a Curzon maneuver, wasn't it?" "You're even better at it than he was." Sisko leaned against his desk. "Out with it."

"I'm not sure yet, but the plasma storm appears to be veering off its original course." "You mean it might pass directly through this system?" Sisko guessed.

"I'll know more within the hour," Dax assured him. "Some of the Ceres information has certainly been distorted by the emission waves. But if the bulk of it is correct, the storm has made a significant change in course and is heading directly toward us." "What caused it to do that?" Sisko asked.

Dax shrugged. "I've never seen a storm like this before. But I'm afraid the wormhole might be a factor. We've seen the accelerator effect it has on electromagnetic waves. It could be drawing the storm in our direction." "I see. That's why you recommended we close the 'wormhole. Will that cause the storm to shift course again?" "It might. Then again, we haven't completely closed the wormhole. There's still the partial opening of the subspace relay to the Gamma Quadrant." "You aren't suggesting we close the relay?" Sisko asked.

"I'm not sure if we could close it. It was practically burned into the subspace fabric by those comet fragments." "And if we deactivated the relay, we would have no warning of what the Jem'Hadar and the Dominion are doing." Sisko shook his head. "No, the relay has to stay open." Dax nodded. "This is all speculation, anyway. The Ceres data is definitely distorted..." She tried to give him a reassuring smile, but couldn't quite pull it off.

"Do your best," Sisko told her.

Then Dax had to face everyone in Ops. Like Sisko, they knew her well enough to realize there was something going on. But she didn't want to worry everyone needlessly. Besides, if her hunch was correct, they would hear the bad news soon enough.

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CHAPTER 3

Ooo PAUSED AT the railing overlooking the Promenade. He had made a general announcement to the public areas of the station regarding the emergency docking order. He thought it would calm everyone to know that the tremors were caused by emissions from the plasma storm, yet the level of excitement continued to heighten along with the influx of evacuees from the newly arriving vessels.

The activity on the Promenade reminded him of a Bajoran festival day, right down to the singing and dancing, as streams of people entered the temple. Not only were there more Bajorans, but there was a sampling of every other sort of humanoid race, especially in Quark's Bar. Odo had stopped by the bar for a moment but he couldn't stand Quark's jubilant pleasure in the face of the emergency. The tight Ferengi wasn't even complaining much about broken serving ware or spills, so you knew it had to be a profitable day.

Odo surveyed the throngs, mystified by the humanoid tendency to react to a crisis by throwing off all self-restraint. It was as if they were compelled to mirror chaos with chaos, when, by rights, they should be extra cautious during times of uncertainty. Many seemed to be indulging in a sensory abandonment comparable to his liquid state, yet he would no more start sliding down the banister right now than he would enter an open airlock with a Cardassian at his back. Didn't humanoids know how fragile they were?

Take Jake--there he was, leaning too far over the railing, trying to see everything happening down below on the Promenade.

Odo casually strolled past. "Back up there," he warned the young man. "You wouldn't want one of these shock waves to send you over the rail." Jake straightened up, undaunted by Odo's tone.

"Hi there, Constable. Isn't this great?" "I'm not sure what is so 'great' about an emergency docking order," Odo replied, clasping his hands behind his back. "The station has already reached maximum capacity, and several more ships are waiting to dock." "It's not really dangerous, is it?" Jake asked, more concerned.

"No, not really," Odo assured him. "But whenever this many people are gathered in a confined area, there's bound to be trouble. Not to mention accidents. Why isn't everyone more careful?" Jake shook his head in amusement. "You've just got to see it as a surprise holiday. A lot of these crews weren't expecting to get shore leave for weeks." "Hmmm... I'm not sure your father would like you to be wandering around in all of this." "My father is the one who keeps telling me to experience life. He'll probably want a blow-by-blow report when he gets home tonight." Odo made a disapproving sound, but he let the matter drop. "I would suggest you stock up on food supplies. I hear there's a run on the replicators." That hit Jake in a vital spot. He instantly started for his quarters. "Thanks for the tip! See you around." "I'm sure," Odo murmured to himself. He had recommended a curfew for nonessential personnel, but Sisko had vetoed his suggestion. As the shock waves grew worse, perhaps the captain would reconsider.

One of his security staff signaled. "Sir, Starfleet security say they're having some trouble at the airlock to the Ceres. A Sattar is there looking for Commander Worf." Odo had flagged any unusual activity among the Sattar for his immediate attention. He had noticed that Commander Worf had established surveillance on the Reaper shortly after it arrived, and Odo was interested in anything that caught Worf's attention.

"Where is the Sattar now?" "They're holding her at the airlock." "Send two security personnel there. I'm on my way." He intended to handle this personally. The Sattar were the best covert transports available, with the captains controlling the "members" with a combi~ nation of familial and dictatorial authority. Then again, the Sattar had learned their trade while dodging the iron fist of the Klingons.

Odo unobtrusively made his way to the back of the Promenade, into one of the crossover bridges. With the slowdown in turbolift service, he decided to allow himself the luxury of traveling through the maintenance corridors.

Checking to make sure no one was watching, he slipped into the shadowed bulkhead. Unlocking the access door, he poured himself through the crack.

Using the gravity of the station, he streamed down the ladder of the lower pylon, curving around power conduits and passing effortlessly through grillwork.

He had to reform to clear the security checks, but it was quicker than any other route. Besides, he usually excused his liquid forays through the station since they enabled him to become familiar with every nook and cranny. If shapeshifters were actively moving around DS9, they would be doing it this way.

Odo reformed before leaving the maintenance corridor. With the current alert regarding Dominion infiltration, he didn't want to take the chance of anyone seeing him re-solidify. If he ever got shot, he would wake up in a puddle in front of Captain Sisko, and his pride wouldn't allow that.

He smoothed his uniform, though he was certain it was in place. It was as much a part of him as his eyes or his hands. But his time with the Dominion had taught him that in every gesture lay the essence of the life-form. Since his primary form was a Bajoran male, he tried to be a Bajoran male, even if he wasn't very good at it.

Odo strode into the docking bay, a narrow, echoing space that doubled as a cargo hold. Ensign Mooh was the only Starfleet security guard on duty outside the closed airlock to the Ceres.

A small, huddled Sattar leaped up from a blue packing container at Odo's approach. She barely reached his chest, but she was threatening in her intensity, her dark red mane standing on end. "I know who you are. You're that shapeshifter!" The security guard edged forward, ready to draw her phaser.

"I am Odo, chief of security for this station," he said, though he wasn't surprised that the Sattar knew exactly who he was. It was their mission in life to gather useful bits of information. "And who might you be?" "Cali, senior mate of the Reaper, Sattar Collective," she retorted, lifting her chin.

"I see." Odo listened to Ensign Mooh report that Senior Mate Call had tried to force her way into the Ceres, and had to be physically removed from the airlock. Odo had dealt with members of the Sattar Collective before, but it was apparently a new experience for Mooh.

"Cali, senior mate, you are charged with creating a disturbance," Odo informed her. "And for attempted trespass." "I only wanted to see that Klingon. You know, the one in Starfleet. That Commander." She said the word like a curse. "He's done this to us, kept us here, missing our contract deadline in the Gamma Quadrant. He's got to pay for it!" "The entire sector has been shut down due to the plasma storm," Odo assured her. "The Reaper isn't the only ship that has been prevented from going through the wormhole." "We would have been gone long before the alert if that Commander hadn't canceled our clearance." Odo had already noted the security hold on the Reaper in his latest report on Sattar activity.

"Nevertheless that doesn't explain your presence here," he told her. "Commander Worf is stationed in Ops." "I couldn't get into Ops," she grumbled. "But then some yellow-shirts said there's lots of security action in this pylon, something to do with the Klingon." She glared at the guard and the phaser on her hip. "This one wouldn't let me get half a word out before she called for security backup." She leaned toward

Mooh.

"You always this twitchy?" The guard simply looked at Odo, exactly as she should. That was one of the nicer perks of working with trained Starfleet personnel: they always appealed to a higher rank.

"This is a secured area," Odo told the Sattar. "No unauthorized personnel are allowed to enter."

"I don't see why not. The turbolift brought me." "It shouldn't have," Odo said grimly. Mooh quietly agreed. "She must have done something to it, but there's no sign of tampering. The lock-outs are still in place." "Hey, I didn't do anything," Cali protested. "Is it my fault if the thing brings me here?" Odo thought Cali's innocent expression was rather overdone. Then two of his Bajoran security officers arrived.

Cali lifted her hands into the air. "How many people does it take to kick one warm body out of a docking bay? Don't you all have anything better to do?" "Take her to the brig," Odo told the security team.

Then to the Sattar, he added, "I'll inform the Reaper that a senior officer must come for you. Perhaps waiting in a holding cell will show you that your actions have consequences." Cali bristled even more, shaking tufts of hair in her fury. "I only wanted to talk to him! You interfering pack of vetlhpu!" Security hustled her off, silencing her objections.

Odo moved to the console, activating the viewer.

Mooh thoughtfully removed herself to the vicinity of the airlock.

Worf's face appeared on the screen. "Yes, Chief?." "Commander, the Ceres was just visited by a rather irate Sattar. She was demanding to see you." "Sattar!" Worf muttered, sounding remarkably like Cali when she had said commander.

"It was one of the senior mates of the Reaper, name of Cali. Would you like me to hold her?" Odo asked.

"No, you need not detain her on my behalf." Worf consulted his console as if ready to deactivate their communication.

Meanwhile Odo accessed recent security activity.

"I suppose you have to agree it's a strange place for the prime suspect to appear, right on the doorstep of the Ceres. Yet I see that you no longer have the Reaper under surveillance. I gather the Sattar had no part in the attack on the Ceres." Worf was taken aback, but he quickly replied, "The Reaper is incapable of inflicting the damage done to the Ceres." Then he recited a list of statistics concerning firepower and shields, making it clear that the only way the Reaper could attack the Ceres was by ramming her at full speed, and even then they would probably bounce off the duranium hull.

"Good," Odo agreed. "I will attempt to quell the rumor mill. It's likely the Sattar became aware of your suspicions, provoking this little display." "Perhaps." Worf looked uncomfortable, and abruptly changed the subject. "Captain Sisko will shortly be making a general announcement regarding the storm." "Oh? I hadn't heard of any new developments." Worf didn't rise to the bait. "You are to report to Ops for a storm briefing at fifteen hundred hours." "Very well, Commander." Odo thoughtfully deactivated the viewer. He would prefer to know all the information when it concerned the station. Yet Worf had made it clear that this lay under his jurisdiction.

Odo could certainly understand the need for security, yet WoWs manner was far more curt and dismissive than most of the other Starfleet personnel.

Frankly, it reminded him of Cardassian behavior-- their arrogance and pride, confident that they knew how to do everything better than everyone else.

Watching Worf the past few weeks had made him realize just how much his own mannerisms had been subconsciously based on those of his former Cardassian commanders. He was beginning to wonder if it was necessary to distance himself so much from other people. It didn't seem to be doing any good for Commander Worf.

Nodding to Mooh, Odo entered the turbolift to go back up the pylon. Experienced shapeshifters were capable of ascending as easily as descending, but he wasn't adept enough to scale such heights.

He exited on the habitat ring, intending to have a walk around before returning to the Promenade.

There were a few minor things to take care of, but he discovered a bigger problem when he ordered a Madkin family to clear the main corridor. They informed him that the transient quarters were full.

"You can't block this exit," Odo told them, considering the station's limited options for additional housing. "If you will please wait in the Promenade, we will soon have temporary quarters arranged for you." The Marlkins grumbled as they gathered up their neat campsite, complete with tenting covers and walls of storage containers. They finally moved along, reluctantly dragging the containers as the youngest child cried at being woken up. Odo waited nearby until they left. Mafikins were basically law-abiding citizens, but they had a tendency to be stubborn.

Odo was just leaving when O'Brien dashed around the corner. Without thinking, Odo curved away from him so they wouldn't touch. He wasn't sure if O'Brien noticed.

"Sorry, Constable!" O'Brien exclaimed. He hardly paused. "Got to get to Keiko before Sisko's announcement." "Chief," Odo called out, trying to make him stop.

"We need to establish temporary quarters.

Apparently some of the indigent--" "We're already on it! We're turning cargo bays fourteen, sixteen, and eighteen into housing. I'll meet you at your office with the plans. But right now I've got to go..." O'Brien gave him a wry, what-else-can-I-do shrug as he hurried off.

The first thing O'Brien heard when he came through the door was the sound of crying in the other room.

"What's wrong with Molly?" he asked.

"She's throwing a tantrum. Just ignore her." Keiko brushed it off irritably. "What's happening with this storm?"

O'Brien braced himself against another tremor.

"You two better stay inside. The station is getting more ships than we bargained for now that the wormhole is closed." "I got your message," she reminded him. "Why can't I access the trajectory of the storm?" "I think Dax is still working on it. But I'm sure everything will be fine. We've got the station in tip-top order. That is, as tip-top as this place ever gets." Keiko frowned. "Miles, you're not talking to

Molly.

"I don't need you to come in here and give me a pep talk. I want to know what's going on." O'Brien made himself go to the replicator and order some coffee before he answered. He had come all the way down here in the middle of that mess in Ops, and Keiko still wasn't satisfied. He wanted to throw his hands into the air and give up. What else could he do?

The replicator indicated that it would take thirty minutes for his coffee to arrive. "Damn!" he muttered.

Now Molly was practically screaming in her room, calling out, "Daddy! Daddy! I want my Daddy!" "Maybe I should go in there," he suggested, trying to peek through the half-open door. "She sounds upset." "Let her be upset," Keiko said. "I told her she has to wait until tomorrow for another pony ride. She doesn't know how lucky she is that I'm willing to take her into Quark's again." Keiko threw herself down on the couch, thumbing through some readings on the data clip. He recognized it as the one she used for her Bajor hybrid-grain project.

"I could take her in tomorrow if you'd like," he offered. "What did the instructor say?" "He says she's almost ready for the second level pony program, but I think she should wait another half year." "That's my little horsewoman," Miles said proudly.

"And to think she's only been riding a few times!

Maybe we'll both do a program tomorrow. There's some country in County Cork I'd like to show her on horseback." Keiko threw the clip aside. "That's just like you, Miles! Can't you take my word for it, just this once?"

"She's not ready for a real pony." He felt the sting of her unjust accusation, but his voice was quiet. "I don't get much time with her, but I try to be involved with my daughter while she is here." Keiko met his eyes, instantly showing how much she regretted her remark. "Oh, I'm sorry, Miles. I'm just going nuts here with nothing to do except deal with Molly." O'Brien pushed aside his irritation and sat down on the couch next to his wife, though he was fully aware that fifteen different people were waiting for his orders. Picking up the clip, he said, "I thought you were cataloging your samples." "This time I caught up on the way here. At least that twenty-hour delay at the moon station was good for something..." He winced in sympathy at her expression. He had only traveled once or twice with Molly, and it was not something he would soon forget.

Glumly she added, "There's nothing more I can do now without a botany lab." "Maybe after the storm blows over you can use the science lab." O'Brien wanted to forge on, but it was difficult to have a pleasant conversation with their daughter screaming in the next room. And he still hadn't gotten to the reason for his visit. He had to tell Keiko before she heard it from Sisleo. "Speaking of the storm, you better stock up on food and water. It's starting to look as though it's going to pass through this sector, maybe even this system." "I thought that might be the reason why the trajectory was classified!" Keiko exclaimed. "The plasma mass is optically thick, and there's not much information from inside blackbody sources. Dax must be going wild over this." O'Brien had expected her to be worried. Instead she was thrilled. He would never be able to figure her out.

"How do you know so much about plasma storms?" Keiko gave him that sneaky grin he liked so much.

"I used your computer to tap into some of the sensor data. But the science lab has restricted most of it." "Maybe I can do something about that." O'Brien patted her leg as he got up, glad there was finally something he could do for her. "I can use my clearance to get you the same sensor information as the

science lab, along with access to their analysis." She jumped up and reached the console ahead of him. "Oh, Miles! I didn't want to ask. I know it's not strictly protocol, but I'd like to find out more about it." "I don't see why you can't watch the storm from here." With a few keystrokes and a voice command, he accessed the data being processed by the science lab. "There you are." Keiko hardly waited for him to finish before sliding her chair closer. "There were some unusual readings I wanted to check out. There's often a wide range of plasma types within fields and moving masses, and the catalyst reactions are fascinating." "Good." O'Brien watched her for a moment, feeling pleased with himself. Molly was still crying in the other room, but at least she wasn't screaming anymore. Maybe he should go in and talk to her, try to cheer her up as well.

"What's this?" Keiko asked, then sat back with a sigh. The station's general intercom signal was replaced by the image of Captain Sisko, looking quite calm.

"As many of you are aware," Sisko began, "we have issued an emergency docking alert due to the approaching plasma storm. According to our reports, the storm will last at least another twenty-four hours.

In addition, the tremors will increase in severity before they lessen." He paused to let the seriousness of his statement sink in. "Those of you who are unable to find lodgings may report to cargo bays fourteen, sixteen, and eighteen." His gentle smile indicated he understood the difficulty of the situation.

"At least it's a bed, folks. I know we're all a little cramped, but it's only for one night. Captain Sisko, out." "SoUnds like a warning and a pat on the head at the same time," Keiko muttered, instantly returning to the science data.

"Just be glad we have our own quarters," O'Brien told her. "I'm going to help set up cots in the cargo bays." "Have fun, dear." She smiled at him in sudden understandin~ She even got up to kiss him.

O'Brien squeezed her waist with his hand, hesitating to go. There was only a muffled sob or two coming from Molly's room, and he considered looking in on her, but he was afraid that would only get her started again. She still wasn't clear on the concept of "tomorww" versus "now." Besides, how would he have the heart to refuse those dark, teary eyes if she begged for a ride on the pony?

Ke'lko returned to the console, hardly bothering to glance up as the door opened. But at least she was feeling better. If only it was always as easy as a few keystrokes.

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CHAPTER 4

WORF WAS SUPERVISING the pod inspection of the warp nacelles of the Ceres when he received an urgent summons to meet Commander Dax in the science lab.

When he entered, both Bajoran and Starfleet scientists were busy at every post in the lab.

Dax detached herself from a group at one side, saving him the trouble of finding her. "Worf, I'm glad you could get here before the staff briefing." "I do not have much time," he reminded her. "I must complete the preliminary report on the Ceres investigation." "I think you'll want to see this." Dax seated herself at one of the main consoles. "And I'm sure Captain Sisko will want your opinion on it." She brought up the

standard chart of the neighboring sectors. A large portion of the starfield was blacked out by the plasma storm, with radiating lines indicating the various levels of the emission waves.

The symbol of DS9 blinked in the bottom corner.

"See this?" Dax magnified an area in front of the approaching storm. "The ion readings are distorted by the emission waves, but even that isn't strong enough to completely scatter the trail." "It is a ship," Worf realized.

"Yeah, but what is it doing there?" Dax asked.

"They're being bombarded by radiation. Navigation and sensors must barely be working. It makes no sense." Worf examined her data. "They are accelerating away from the storm front." "They're going awfully slow if they're trying to get away." Dax glanced at him. "If the emission waves were at any other angle, I wouldn't have been able to detect them." "The vessel is attempting to hide." Worf was certain of that. Their trajectory held them within the densest region of turbulence for exactly the reason he had been unable to detect their presence on his tactical sensors. It would take an in-depth analysis of wave bending, such as what Dax was doing, in order to spot the vessel. Even with that, they were lucky it was approaching the station dead on.

"According to the deflection ratio," she added, "it's not very large. Twenty-five thousand tons, at most." Worf frowned. That was about the size of a family space-yacht. How could it be the ship that had caused the damage to the Ceres?

"Thank you, Commander," he formally acknowledged. "Please continue tracking this vessel, and relay your information to the tactical station in Ops." "Then you'll prepare a report for Sisko?" At his nod, she added, "If you decide to go after it, let me know. I'm dying to get closer to that storm before it gets closer to us." Then she unnerved him by adding, "I'm sorry the communications relay is down. You're going to miss Alexander's weekly call." Worf drew back. "How do you know about that?" "Dr. Bashir told me." His voice rose. "How did the doctor know?" "Didn't you tell him?" Dax shrugged it off. "Maybe it was Lieutenant Lau in communications. They have lunch together sometimes." Worf could think of nothing to say to that. One simply didn't trade stories about the personal habits of one's superior officers. At least, not so openly.

Dax laughed, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Commander," Worf said stiffly in farewell. It was the correct response, but it sounded faintly absurd even to him. Maybe it was because Dax was still laughing as he left the lab.

As usual, when he arrived at Ops his duties absorbed any trifling personal considerations he might have had. The detection of the covert ship was of vital importance.

After feeding Dax's data into his tactical console, he quickly checked the reports from his security teams. Most were assisting Odo with station patrols, but the best Starfleet investigators were attending to the Ceres. Tactically, it had been a perfect attack, leaving relatively few indicators of the source. But disruptor damage was obvious even to the naked eye, and most Klingon vessels used disruptors in their weapons systems.

He accessed the trajectory of the unidentified vessel. It was currently gaining position and holding remarkably steady in the boiling waves of the storm front. Valiant ship, with power enough to hold its own despite the adverse conditions.

The briefing was scheduled to begin within moments. Odo had already arrived, and the rest of the senior staff began to gather around the central console. Worf finished the download of his analysis on the covert ship, then, out of habit, he quickly checked his personal code. Since he had arrived at the station, he had received only one or two messages.

But this time an unexpected face appeared on the viewer. It was the Sattar who had escorted him through the Reaper, the one Odo had taken into custody. According to the last security report, she had been released on the recognizance of her captain.

Cali's face twisted as she spat out, "Qu'vath.t" Worf tensed at the Klingon oath. She hardly took a breath as a stream of vile, broadly accented Klingon flowed out, accusing him of dishonor, deceit, and generally low behavior. Worf endured the brief tirade, noting that Cali did not ask for anything. She merely seemed to be venting about the damage that he, Worf, had personally done to their trade agreements. He resisted a twinge of guilt, regretting that it had not been more immediately apparent that the Reaper was incapable of inflicting damage to the Ceres. As they had with most Sattar vessels, the Klingons had removed the more advanced equipment, particularly weapons and power systems.

Cali's nostrils flared as she let out a final frustrated exclamation, comparing him to a form of slime found in the swamps of Qo'noS. On that note, the message terminated.

"Is there a problem, Commander?" Worf realized Sisko was standing on the upper deck while the rest of the senior staff were watching him.

They had obviously heard the angry Sattar, so it was necessary to give them an explanation. "It is not important, sir. I believe one of the senior mates of the Reaper has taken a personal dislike to me." "I'm certain you can handle it." Sisko rested both hands on the console. "Now, if you could join us, we have plenty of other problems to deal with." As Worf approached, he said, "Captain, there is an urgent matter we must discuss." Sisko nodded permission, so Worf accessed the data for display on the main console. "Commander Dax found this ion trail during her analysis of the storm. It appears to be a small vessel. The shock waves prevented my tactical sensors from detecting it." "Did you try to hail them?" Sisko asked.

"No, sir. I believe they are attempting to hide." Worf paused, noting that Sisko was not impressed. "It did not seem advisable to alert them that we are aware of their presence." "But they could be damaged," Kira protested. "Or maybe their sensors are jammed and they don't know where they are." "Request permission to take the Defiant to investigate." Sisko looked expectantly in Worf's direction.

"Sir," the Klingon added quickly.

Sisko considered the starfield on the main viewer.

"I don't believe that's necessary. They're almost in the system now." He turned to Kira. "Try hailing them." "Aye, sir. We're having some trouble with communications, but they should get something..." She concentrated over her touchpads as Worf fought back his disappointment. Why was no one else concerned about the Klingon's aggressive campaign? They often talked of the possibility of Dominion infiltration, but what had the Dominion done compared to the Klingon invasion of Cardassia?

"I'm getting something on audio," Kira said.

Through the static came the question, "DS9? Is that..." then, "... in this sector. Location?" "Distortion is pretty bad," Kira admitted. "I'm sending our coordinates and the storm warning via the burst signal."

After a moment she looked up. "It's the Klingon yacht Katon, under Captain Alons of the House of Napos." Worf's fist softly hit the edge of the console.

Klingons! He was right. Napos was a minor house, but one that fully supported Gowron's policies, presumably including the attack on Cardassia and the current hostilities against the Federation.

He returned to the tactical station. He had not been ordered to power up weapons, but he was prepared for anything.

"The Katon has not altered course," he announced.

"However it has increased speed considerably." It took a moment for Kira to piece together a visual communication. Though it was distorted by the electromagnetic interference, they could see Captain Alons reclining back in the captain's chair. He was a barrel-chested, older Klingon with a languorous, sneering manner. As usual his brother, Sebas, hovered nearby. Worf did not recognize the other young Klingon who was grinning directly, insolently at him.

Worf tried to ignore the other one as Alons offered his greetings. "We weren't aware that we were in the Bajoran Sector, Captain Sisko. Now that we have our bearings we will be on our way." "We have issued an emergency docking alert due to the storm," Sisko informed Alons. "The conditions make it unsafe for navigation." "Thank you for your... concern." Alons cleared his throat with a pointedly disgusting sound. "I assure you that the Katon has gotten us through worse storms than this." "You almost ran us over before you realized we were here," Sisko reminded the Klingon. "You didn't even know you were in the Bajoran Sector, much less the system." Alons stretched his lips in imitation of a smile. "All the more reason for us to leave." "I must insist that you dock at DS9," Sisko repeated. "For your own safety--" The young Klingon barked out a laugh, cutting him off. "How can you listen to this pugh?" he demanded to Alons. "When that shapeshifter stands beside him?"

And I won't even mention that Denlb Qatlh!" Worf hardly flinched. He had heard it all before, the first time he had accepted disgrace and expulsion from the High Council. This stripling knew nothing of his sacrifices for the Klingon Empire.

"This is Ton," Alons briefly informed Sisko.

"Eldest son of the House of Maang." Sisko wasn't amused. "My officers are none of your concern." "It only serves to show your lack of judgment!" taunted Ton of Maang. "Only scum would stand by O'web--" "Silence!" Alons ordered. "The House of Mogh is no more." Ton showed his brown-stained teeth. "But the Cybriss valley has flourished since the House of Maang took over the farms. The name of Mogh has been struck from every record, and the wine is all the sweeter for our trouble." A growl of surprise rose in Worf's throat. He had heard that Gowron had given away his family's lands and holdings, but he had not been able to gather more specific information. His brother Kurn had not answered his messages for over a month. Worf could dimly remember tales of his father's hunting lodge in the Cybriss valley, and vaguely remembered a summer his family had spent there when he was young.

The thought of this hulking, slobbering idiot striding across even one acre of the lands belonging to his family's house.

Worf snarled, oblivious to everything else. Even through the broken image it was clear that Ton was laughing at him, laughing at his loss.

"Commander," Sisko said with a hint of warning in his voice.

The captain's quiet order reminded Worf of his duty. With difficulty he broke eye contact with Ton, nodding briefly to Sisko. He prepared the tractor beams, intending to power up and lock on as soon as the Katon was within range. Assuming they remained on course. The Katon could easily gain a long lead while the Defiant was prepared for departure. Worf was counting on the fact that the Klingons were unaware of the extensions he and Chief O'Brien had added to the station's tractor beams. The addition seemed like a prudent idea at the time, but he had not anticipated that his foresight would be so quickly rewarded.

Worf signaled the main console that he was ready with tractor beams, providing a countdown of when the Katon would be in range.

"Captain Alons, let's discuss this situation reasonably," Sisko requested.

Alons shook his head. "There is no reasoning with cowards!" He snapped an order to his helmsman.

"The Katon is changing course," Worf informed Sisko. "New heading two four seven, mark five point one." "You can't simply fly through Bajoran space," Sisko told Alons.

"Why not?" Alons raised his hands, letting out loud guffaws as Sebas and Ton joined in.

Despite the change in course the Katon was curving into range. Worf was ready when the indicator blinked, and at Sisko's nod he locked on to the vessel.

"All vessels in this sector must dock for the duration of the storm alert," Sisko politely informed them.

"That includes you." For a split second Alons was the perfect vision of Klingon outrage. Then his image disappeared. The main viewer showed the Katon swerving in the grip of the tractor beams. Worf was busy compensating as the yacht attempted to form a warp field.

"The Katon has cut off communications," Kira announced. "No response." Worf refrained from reporting until he had the situation under control. But he never doubted the outcome for an instant. "We have the Katon, sir.

Tractors are holding." "Bring them into the main dock in lower pylon one," Sisko ordered. "I want them as far away from the habitat ring as possible." "You'll have to give me a minute to transfer some ships around," Kira said quickly.

"Understood," Worf confirmed. It would give him time to conduct a thorough scan while the Katon was trying to break free.

But before he could calibrate the sensors to filter out the distortion of the emission waves, the Katon brought her engines to full stop. Only their shields continued to hold at maximum power, impenetrable to the station's sensors.

"The Katon has powered down her engines," Worf informed Sisko.

The captain raised one brow. "Perhaps they've decided to cooperate." "You can bring them in now, Commander," Kira told him, adding, "Still no answer to our hails." Dax shrugged. "You can only expect so much cooperation from Klingons these days." Odo crossed his arms, speaking up for the first time.

"That's certainly true." "Sir, I believe they do not want us to scan their power systems," Worf said darkly. "Your reasoning?" Sisko asked.

Worf automatically went to attention. "The Katon could be the vessel responsible for the damage to the Ceres." "That's an awfully small ship," O'Brien protested.

But Odo shook his head. "I've seen even smaller vessels do worse damage for the Resistance." Kira smiled briefly in Odo's direction, agreeing, "That was one of our best tricks--packing engines into hulls the Cardassians wouldn't consider worth their trouble to destroy." Worf shifted tractor control to the docking chief in the lower pylon, but he maintained a secondary beam on the Katon in case Alons tried to escape again.

"Sensors indicate the Katon conforms to standard designs of the vessel's class. However, their shields are superior to specifications, and they could be concealing auxiliary enhancement systems."

"Suggestions?" Sisko asked.

"Request permission to board the Katon," Worf instantly replied. "An internal inspection will reveal their weapons capability." Sisko considered Worf for a moment. "Granted." He held up a quick finger. "But please, Commander, try not to antagonize them. I won't let this incident escalate into an open battle." "Aye, Captain," Worf acknowledged, checking his console. "The Katon has docked. May I proceed?" Sisko gave him a wry smile. "Very well, Commander. Though you won't be able to convince me you didn't plan this in order to get out of a briefing session." "No, sir," Worf said, for lack of anything better to say. But as he headed for the turbolift, he was relieved that he wouldn't have to endure the endless minor details of securing the station against the storm.

As the turbolift descended, he grimly thought that it was a good thing Starfleet Headquarters had the foresight to post a Strategic Operations Officer to DS9, if only to have someone whose main duty was to protect the most valuable piece of territory within a hundred light years.

Captain Ari stood in front of a portal in the senior mates' lounge of the Reaper, watching as the immense tractors dragged the Klingon yacht the last few meters to the docking pylon. Call entered and approached to a discreet distance, waiting to be recognized.

"Come see this, Call," Ari said graciously. He enjoyed granting her permission to do things. It pleasantly reminded him of the years when Cali's mother had been the one ordering everyone about. "It must be the ship Commander Worf was looking for." "We're lucky that Starfleet ship showed up in time," Call commented, casting a disinterested eye on the Katon. "I can't believe I insulted that Klingon to his face and he still said he would grant our clearance for departure." "Worf is an unusual Klingon," Ari said absently, not really concerned with teaching Call the finer points of character study. Her raw energy was far too useful to blunt with systems of logical analysis.

"Did you send your message?" Ari asked her.

Call grinned. "I even called him a ghargh! I taped it if you want to hear. I know I'm going to listen to it again and again."

"I'm sure it was a great pleasure for you," Ari agreed. "Did you remember to point out his dishonor in canceling our clearance without following proper procedure?" "I wouldn't forget your part of the deal," she protested in a wounded tone of voice. "I wish I could do the whole thing over again. It's not every day you get to insult a Klingon. Or spray plasma in his eyes?"

Ari ignored the senior mate's cackling and moved on to more practical matters. "Now that we've gained another day, our members must take care to secure a good contract." "You should see the opportunities waiting out there," Cali agreed.

"Make sure it's a one-way contract, one that takes us far from this sector." Ari thought that Starfleet's treatment of the Klingon yacht was quite revealing.

When such a tiny ship rated an entire docking pylon, you knew there were problems. "You stay away from the Klingons. I'll put Shorci on that." "You think the Katon did it?" Call asked, looking from the sleek yacht to the discolored hull of the Ceres.

"That doesn't concern you." Ari impatiently waved Call off. He was tired of her. "Send everyone out according to the deal roster. Cause minimal damage.

Make sure Theosi understands that." "As you will, Captain." Call bounced on her toes, eager to get started. "To the members!" she pledged as she left.

Ari smiled to himself One day she might figure out that the chains she struggled against were what actually bound her to the Collective. If she didn't die first, at some point she would acquire that wisdom. All Sattar did eventually, they simply required a firm hand until then.

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CHAPTER 5

MOLLY WAS COLORING a tubba with her crayons when Keiko went in to check on her. As she washed the girl's tear-stained cheeks (all that was left of her tantrum) Molly asked about her friend's tubba, the Bajoran cat-like creature that belonged to one of the other children of the survey scientists.

"Tubba went on vacation, too," Keiko told her daughter. She knew it was only a matter of time before the subject of a pet came up. Keiko dreaded that day. It was difficult enough living this gypsy life with a child. How could she do it with a pet?

Miles certainly wouldn't be much help. He could hardly keep a house plant alive. If she hadn't put the bonsai on an automatic drip, it would be dead by now. She considered taking it back with her to Bajor, but she had grown the damn tree for Miles in the first place. The peat was in fair condition, but the shaggy trunk and branches of the tiny cypress were going to have to be brushed for days until the excess bark was shed.

Keiko knew she was obsessing again, so she tried to put the bonsai out of her mind. She had no control over anything else, why did she think she could train a tree she hardly ever saw?

She had just started reading Molly a story when the computer finally beeped, announcing that her biometric analysis was completed. It was turning out to be a complex problem for the lab to analyze the storm data, so she had used some of the species models she recently developed to do statistical comparisons of unfamiliar Bajoran organisms.

"Insufficient data," was flashing on the viewer.

Molly trailed after her with the book as Keiko sat down. She keyed in an order to find correlations as low as sixty percent. When that didn't work, she kept lowering the percentage until she hit ten percent.

While the computer still didn't consider that to be sufficient, it found several biological models that could be loosely applied to the pattern of emission waves from the plasma storm. There were even unmistakable signs of oscillations affecting one another and responding to outside stimuli.

Keiko felt a rush of elation that her efforts had finally yielded some results, even if they were on the modest side. Her analysis had sorted the data, but there was barely enough information to make rudimentary graphs of the plasma action. She needed more data before she could set up an experimental model, perhaps even incorporating the matrix of electrodynamic fields within nebulas along with the biological statistics.

"Computer," she said out loud. "Where is Commander Dax?" "Dax is currently in Ops." Keiko hesitated, then chided herself for doubting the importance of her discovery. From everything she had seen this afternoon, Dax was having a difficult time predicting the reactions of this plasma storm.

"Keiko O'Brien to Commander Dax." Dax acknowledged, though she sounded rather perplexed. "What can I do for you, Keiko?" "Actually I thought I might be able to help you," Keiko told her. "I've been running a biometric analysis of the plasma storm and I thought you might be interested in seeing the results." There was a distinct pause, and Keiko could only imagine the dubious expression on Dax's face.

"We've already tried comparative analysis using ecosystem structures and hydrofluid reaction dynamics." "Yes, I know. But I've conducted a statistical survey, comparing the emissions to the EM matrix of an individual organism." Dax sounded thoughtful. "I'd like to see what you have. Can you meet me in the science lab on level four?" "Give me a few minutes to settle things here," Keiko said, distracted by Molly. The girl was skipping around the room, making noises as if she were riding a horse.

Keiko pulled a loose coverall over her unitard.

"Molly, I'm going to call Ensign Kij and have her come over to sit with you for a while. That is, if she's not on duty." The floor shifted to one side, and Keiko braced herself against the chair. Molly went down on her knees rather hard.

"Are you okay?" she asked, almost holding her breath. She didn't have time for anything dramatic.

Molly gravely examined her reddened knees, brushing the carpet fibers from her skin. She must have decided it was nothing. "Kij left, Mommy." "She did?" Keiko stared at the girl. "How do you know?" "I called her." Molly trotted over to point to the touchpad. "With that button." "Good for you, Molly." She realized she shouldn't be surprised at her daughter's resourcefulness. She was learning how to take care of herself faster than other children her age, but then again her life wasn't exactly typical.

Molly nodded solemnly. "The nice lady said Kij left. Mommy, where is Wizen-on-Kost?" "Far, far away. Kij will be happy there," Keiko said absently. Now how could she replace the kindhearted ensign who used to watch over Molly? She thought about that young Bajoran mother she had met at Quark's, but Catrin was undoubtedly still working.

Keiko had already realized she knew almost no one on the station when she had been forced to leave Molly alone in the holosuite. There wasn't anybody here she would even consider a friend. It was ironic that Molly had more people she wanted to call than her mother did.

"Come on, Molly. We're going to the science lab." "On Bajor?" Molly's expression said she wasn't ready for another interplanetary journey.

Keiko couldn't blame her. "No, the one here on the station. Go get your bag." The bag was packed with small games, story padds, and snacks, plenty to keep a six-year-old busy whenever Keiko had to take her somewhere. By the time she had left a message for Miles in case he happened to return, Molly emerged from her room with her jacket on and her bag firmly over her shoulder.

"You won't need your coat," Keiko reminded her.

"We're on the station, and it's always warm here." Molly thought about that until Keiko was ready to give in and go help her take the jacket off. But she slowly removed it, dropping it on the floor. "Mommy, why is it always warm?" Keiko sighed, and as she ushered Molly from their quarters, she tried to explain the life-support systems of DS9 and planetary weather. Where was Miles when she really needed him?

Captain Sisko sighed as he ordered O'Brien to go deal with the latest malfunction in the overloaded replicator system. Kira and Odo were quietly talking about something near her console, not paying any attention. This briefing wasn't accomplishing much, anyway. How can it when my senior staff is trickling away one by one? he thought.

"Captain?" Dax asked, starting to edge after O'Brien. "I'd like to go hear what Keiko has found." Sisko glared at her without thinking, then apologetically rubbed his eyes with one hand. He hadn't realized how much he had been looking forward to taking Kasidy out in the sailship until he couldn't.

"This has turned into some day off," he murmured to himself.

"I'm sorry, Benjamin," Dax told him.

"It's not your fault." He straightened up. "Can't you tell me anything concrete about the effect the storm will have on the station?" "Not with the data we have to work with," Dax said flatly. "This isn't the typical plasma storm blowing in from the Badlands. This one came from beyond Klingon territory, and it's moving faster than any storm documented in Starfleet records." "You said that Dr. Bashir gave you his report on the radiation poisoning among the Ceres crew. Surely that can provide some clues to the composition of the plasma field." "Plasma particles are notoriously hard to differentiate." Dax reminded him. "The same sort of radiation poisoning can be caused by different kinds of particles and/or energy waves. We're only guessing until we penetrate the blackbody mass itself." "Unless Keiko has come up with something," Sisko said thoughtfully. "Sisko to Keiko O'Brien."

There was a longer hesitation than usual, then a flustered voice answered, "Yes, Captain?" "Would you please bring your analysis up to Ops?" Sisko got Dax's nod as she moved to her science console. Sometime in the past few hours O'Brien had found time to repair it.

Odo moved forward. "If the briefing is over, sir, I'd like to get back to my post." "Certainly, Constable." Sisko managed a slight smile. "I know a curfew might be the ideal solution, but I'm afraid that's impossible in this situation.

However you may issue a public safety recommendation for everyone to stay in their quarters, either on their ships or here on the station." Kira put in, "I've already advised the off-duty service personnel to remain in their quarters." "Do the same for Starfleet officers," Sisko ordered.

Odo nodded. Sisko noted that he looked grudgingly pleased that his advice had been taken seriously, even if it was not entirely implemented. The chief hesitated as he started past the major, but Kira turned away to tell Sisko, "Commander Worf has relayed a message that the Klingons are refusing to open their

airlock." Sisko gestured to Odo. "Constable, see if you can assist Mister Worf. I don't want those Klingons to come out fighting." "Understood, Captain." Dax grinned at Odo as he went to the turbolift.

"While you're at it, why don't you ask for their sensor logs on the plasma storm? I bet the Katon got a good look inside." Kira rolled her eyes. "As if the Klingons would ever tell us." Dax agreed. "Worf will be lucky if he can convince them to open the airlock." "Before we condemn them, let's first give them a chance to cooperate," Sisko said lightly.

Both Kira and Dax looked down at their consoles, shamefaced. Sisko was determined to keep a check on the paranoia among his senior staff. Assumptions could inspire a deadly reaction in the current galacticpolitical climate.

He braced his chin in his hand, considering their limited options. But his calculations of energy output to shield intensity were lost as he started to wonder what Jake was doing. Perhaps he should call and tell Jake to stay inside tonight. Things were bound to get wild with all the crews stranded on the station.

"Let me know when Keiko arrives," he told Dax, going into his office.

He sat down and signaled his quarters, drumming his fingers on the desk when Jake didn't answer.

"Computer, where is Jake?" "Jake Sisko is in the habitat ring, level fifteen." "Tell him to contact me in Ops." Sisko turned the viewer to a better angle, waiting for Jake to answer via the station's intercom.

Jake was panting when he came on, and his face bobbed out of the frame as he looked behind him.

"Just a minute!" he called to someone. "I'll be right there--"

"Jake, what are you doing?" Sisko didn't want to sound irritated, but he also didn't have time for this.

"I'm hanging out with some friends." Jake seemed surprised he asked. "I told you earlier. I met these students from the University at Betazed and, boy, are they--" He paused to yell off screen, "All right, I'm coming!" He turned back to his dad. "They're a lot of fun." Jake had mentioned the Betazoids when Sisko called to say he and Kasidy wouldn't be going out on the sailship. The students had been en route to the Gamma Quadrant to conduct an inter-species empathic survey when the emergency alert had forced their ship to dock at the station.

"Jake, I think it would be best if you stayed home tonight." "Why?" Jake's smile faltered. "What's wrong, Dad?" "Nothing, except that the station is overcrowded, and anything could happen." Jake leaned closer so the others couldn't hear.

"Think about what you just said, Dad. I'm not going to stay home because 'anything could happen.'" He widened his eyes in exasperation, then gave his dad a reassuring grin. "I've got to go now. They're waiting for me." Sisko nodded, trying to give in gracefully. He couldn't squash Jake's excitement, not when he was so pleased that the young adults had accepted him on their own level.

As the transmission terminated, Sisko was left wondering what had prompted him to caution Jake like that. Jake could take care of himself. And if he couldn't, then the station was the best place for him to learn, while his father was nearby to lend a helping hand if he needed it. Jake would be much more on his own when he went to study on Earth.

"Captain?" Dax called through the intercom.

"Keiko is here." Sisko noticed the changed dynamic in Ops as soon as the door opened. Everyone was watching Keiko as she bent over her little girl. Molly was laughing and pointing up to something in the ceiling of Ops, chattering brightly. The crew were smiling in response, and for a moment, everyone was relaxed.

That changed as soon as Sisko spoke. "Thank you for coming, Keiko." She handed Molly the toy, straightening up. "Sorry I had to bring her, Captain. I couldn't get a sitter." "That's quite all right." Sisko glanced down at Molly. The girl put her finger in her mouth and stared up at him, suddenly as solemn as his crew. "Welcome back to the station, Molly." "Remember Captain Sisko, honey?" Keiko reminded her daughter.

Molly nodded. "Can I ride the pony?" "First, let me speak to your mother for a moment." Sisko turned back to Keiko. "I didn't know you were interested in plasma physics." "I'm not." Keiko shifted her eyes from him to Dax.

"If this had been your basic hydrogen-complex plasma storm, I wouldn't have spent all afternoon examining the emissions." Dax asked, "You said you ran the data against a biometric model?" "Yes, because of the complexity of wave reactions.

Everything from rapid Doppler shifts and magneto-optical effects, not to mention the wide number of magnetic fields being produced." Dax was taking her seriously. "Come show me what you've got." She moved over to make room for Keiko at the science station. Keiko input her data clip and concentrated on the program display. "The best match was against a plankton biomodel." "Plankton?" Sisko repeated doubtfully.

"Yes, you know, algae, bacteria, ph54am, and nonmotile organisms that float in water." "I know what plankton is," Sisko told her. "But what does plankton have in common with plasma?" "Well, nothing, really," Keiko admitted. "That's why biometric analysis works when you don't have much data. It's used to compare organisms of different species, even plants and animals. My analysis indicates that the biometric behavior of plankton fits some of the same statistical curves as the sensor readings of the plasma storm." Sisko thought Dax's reaction was revealing. "I've never heard of anyone trying that." "I only found a ten percent correlation," Keiko quickly pointed out. "What I need is more information on the internal conditions, the particle content, and rates of energy fluctuation." Dax shook her head. "We've sent in probes, but we aren't receiving telemetry from within the blackbody." She gestured to one spiked pattern. "I've studied biometric analysis before, but the way these coefficients are graphed is confusing. Is that curve the response to external stimulation?" "Yes, you can see some of the structured continuum, relating the past behavior to future reactions.

That's movement." Keiko pointed to the indicators on the graph overlay. "I'd say it's changed course sometime during the past six hours." Dax looked up at Sisko. "Her trajectory confirms it.

The storm has been drawn off course by the wormhole." Sisko looked back at Keiko. "What effect do you think the storm will have on the station?" She was taken aback. "I don't know, sir. We need more data on the internal conditions, but once we have that, we could use the biometric models to break it down mathematically. Then the variables, such as phase lengths and radiation dynamics, could be predicted." "O'Brien could use that information to adjust the shields for maximum coverage," Dax agreed. "Also, if we took a runabout inside, we'd be able to test the turbulence of the magneto-hydrodynamic systems inside the storm. That would help us shape the structural integrity field to protect the areas of the hull that would incur maximum stress." "Very well," Sisko finally agreed. "But if you must go into the storm for your tests, why not use the Defiant?" Dax pursed her lips in thought. "I'm not sure I can create

an electrostatic field around something as big as the Defiant. And the runabout has much shorter shield harmonics, creating less mass interference within the waves. We need to distort our readings as little as possible." "Of course. Then a runabout it is," Sisko agreed.

"Use the Rubicon--have O'Brien help you with the alterations to the shields. That's a priority." He glanced at Keiko, who was whispering to Molly to wait just a minute more. Sisko tried not to think about Jake. "And Dax, take an experienced pilot with you. You'll need the help." "Captain?" Keiko asked, still holding Molly's hand. "I'd like to go with Dax. There are a number of special techniques for sampling and identification when you're using biometric models." She must have seen his hesitation, because she quickly added, "I'm also fully qualified to pilot a runabout." Sisko tried to soften his refusal. "I'm sorry, but I can't allow noncommissioned personnel to go into such a dangerous situation." "But I'm a member of the survey team to Bajor, technically a member of Starfleet." Keiko ignored the pleading of Molly who was pulling on her hand for attention. "You won't find another scientist on this station with more knowledge of biometric analysis.

And I'm already familiar with the plasma storm." Sisko leaned over and tapped the access code that had appeared along with Keiko's data. "Yes, I see you that you are. I didn't mention how you acquired your data, but now that you bring it up, what will Chief O'Brien say to your going?" Keiko gave him a look without batting an eye.

Sisko had never been so smoothly corrected. He turned to Dax. "What do you think, Commander?" Dax tensed, recognizing a critical situation. "I could use Keiko's help," she admitted. "Biophysics isn't my strongest suit." Molly was still tugging on Keiko's hand, her voice rising as she asked to see the console "where Daddy worked." "What about Molly?" Sisko asked in a low voice.

"I'm doing this for Molly," Keiko replied.

"But who will take care of her? You said you couldn't find anyone." Keiko's expression was pinched, as if she didn't want to discuss it. "I can leave her with the holonanny until Miles is done with work." "Very well," he agreed. "I'll pass an order along to Quark to make one of his holosuites available for you." "Thank you, Captain." But Keiko didn't smile.

Sisko returned to his office, feeling as if he had handled that rather badly. He had never questioned any other crew member's ability to go on a mission because of a lack of a sitter. Then again, Keiko was not a member of his crew.

Yet she was his responsibility because she was on DS9. Just like Kasidy.

He realized that it was Kasidy who was doing this to him. He was acting like a mother hen because of her. While he was handing out warnings to everyone else, what he really wanted to do was call Kasidy and make sure she was okay. But things had been tricky for them the past couple of weeks since she had moved to the station. He was being careful not to make any more assumptions, never forgetting that one time when it had almost ended their relationship.

Besides, Kasidy had made it very clear that she could take care of herself. She was probably in one of the cargo bays, assisting in setting up temporary housing. They had already spoken once today, so why did he have such a strong urge to call her, to see her face, to tell her he was thinking about her.

"Captain Sisko?" Kira asked over the intercom.

"We have the captain of that sightseeing liner. He's protesting the fact that he can't close his airflock to

keep the passengers out." "Put it through," Sisko sighed. As usual, work called him away from Kasidy.

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CHAPTER 6

WORF TOLD HIMSELF to be patient as Odo repeated into the comm, "All vessels that dock at DS9 must be inspected. According to section eight, article fourre" "We did not ask to dock here," Sebas interrupted.

"You dragged us to this He'So~Igh!" "There is an emergency storm alert in effect," Odo calmly replied. "If the Katon does not comply with our regulations, we will be forced to notify the Klingon authorities." "Ha!" the Klingon spat. "The High Council will hear of this, of that you can be sure!" Standing behind Odo, Worf folded his arms across his chest, having resolved to remain silent until the security chief exhausted the diplomatic and regulatory methods of extracting the Klingons from the

Katon. Worf was pleased that he was not forced to perform this charade, though it probably would have ended much sooner had it been up to him.

Sebas was apparently enjoying sparring with Odo, though in Worf's opinion, the younger son of the House of Napos wasn't very quick with his retorts.

Worf yawned broadly, a sign of contempt that he allowed Sebas to see.

The Klingon's hands clenched. "I will not speak with Chap'on?"

"You just did," Worf pointed out.

Sebas reached out as if to cut the transmission.

Worf warned him, "Perhaps you will change your mind when a laser welder cuts through your hull." "You would not dare," Sebas sneered. "Not the warrior who runs from battle!" Worf stared at him without moving a muscle. Sebas hesitated and Worf slightly bared his teeth at the novice.

"Please, gentlemen," Odo interrupted. "We can be civil with one another. If you and your captain will join us on the station, we can discuss this matter" "Enough talk!" Sebas held up a thick finger, the combat wristband shining a warning. "The Katon will wait out the storm, then we continue on our way." He snarled as if his words were final. He was young and arrogant, secure in his House and his father's alliance with Gowron. Worf almost envied the young upstart.

Odo glanced over his shoulder as the transmission ended. "So much for that. A waste of time, if you ask me." Worf settled for saying, "I agree." "Did you get anything with the point-blank scans?" Odo asked.

"Nothing unusual. However, essential systems are off line." He shook his head at the report from the security pods. "Some of the readings are distorted, perhaps indicating localized shielding." Odo examined the data. "That could be caused by the emission waves." Worf frowned. "I have not ruled out that possibility." "You don't have enough here to convince Sisko that forced entry is necessary," Odo pointed out. "I am aware of that fact." Odo glanced toward the airlock. "On the other hand, Bajoran regulations give me some latitude with regard to the methods that constitute forced entry.

Perhaps we can use a remote manipulator to trigger the automatic opening sequence of their airlock."

Worf was unsettled. "You have done this before?" Odo gave him a hard look. "When the alternative is letting a Cardassian crew explode a Bajoran Resistance smuggler, you learn how to bypass automatic systems." "I see. Of course, I welcome your assistance." Odo inclined his head. "I'll call for the equipment." "Commander Worf?" One of the security guards was motioning to a Starfleet officer waiting near the turbolift. "It's Captain Iis of the Ceres, here to see you." Iis came forward without waiting for Worf's permission, slowly approaching the viewport showing the Katon. She was looking much better, as if she had washed, rested, and eaten. Now Worf could see that she moved with the grace of a lifelong athlete. As with many older humans, her face had fallen into comfortable, serene lines, and she defied vanity with her close-cropped silver hair.

Iis turned to Worf. "Is this the ship that attacked US?" "We have insufficient data on their weapons systems," Worf reluctantly informed her. "They will not open the airlock." Iis kept her eyes on the Katon. "I tried to speak to the lieutenant about what she might have seen, but she couldn't understand me. Dr. Bashir says she'll have to be sent back to Andoria for intensive brain treatment." Worf was unsure if she was making a deliberate effort to suppress her emotions, or if the doctor had given her a sedative. Probably the latter.

"I will discover the truth," Worf told the captain.

"Ah, yes, the truth." She kept staring through the viewport. "Please tell me when you do. I'm sure there are plenty of people who want to know the truth." Worf decided to stick with the safest answer. "Yes, sir." Captain Iis looked at him intently. "Thank you for being so valiant, Commander. I do want to know if this ship was responsible. Yet even if it was, does that explain why this happened?" "The Klingons have broken the peace treaty with the Federation," Worf declared. "That is reason enough for them to attack a Starfleet vessel." "Then you believe the Klingon Empire is prepared to engage us in a full-scale war?" "Yes." Iis sighed, her hands lightly clasped in front of her, watching as Odo opened the panel to the locking terminals. "Why?" Worf began to list the statistical increases in Klingon traffic and weapons manufacture, when Iis cut him off. "What I meant is, why will the Klingons fight us?"

They've got more territory than they can possibly handle right now, and they're stretched to the limit with the Cardassians. What do they hope to gain by fighting Starfleet?" Worf briefly clenched his jaw. "Klingons want to live as warriors." "So you're saying it's part of their character to make war," Iis said thoughtfully. Then she almost smiled. "I've never believed in theories of speciesdetermined behavior. If I did, then I would have to believe that you, Commander, were as ruthlessly violent as these Klingons appear to be. And I would have to believe that your security chief," she added, nodding to Odo, "is a devious shapeshifter intent on the genocide of all humanoid lifeforms." Worf exchanged a look with Odo, wondering if the chief felt as exposed as he did. He also remembered Cali's taunt that Klingons were all alike, then tried to put it from his mind.

"No, Commander Worf," Iis finished with a sad smile. "I don't believe in blaming genetics. We must examine our own actions to determine how we reached this terrible impasse with people who were once our friends." "Perhaps," Worf felt compelled to agree. "Yet the hostilities appear to be escalating. We can only protect ourselves." Iis shrugged as if she was too weary to argue the philosophy of peace. Meanwhile Odo's security team arrived, and the chief moved to the airlock, much to his apparent relief.

Worf knew he couldn't fight his own personal demons with the captain. "I have arranged living quarters for you," he offered by way of apology.

"Starfleet personnel have volunteered to share their quarters with your crew for the duration of the storm." "Thank you, Commander. That is most kind." Worf glanced over at Odo, but the amount of equipment the team was unpacking revealed that it would be a while before any progress was made with

the remote manipulators. "Allow me to escort you to Commander Dax's quarters. She recently departed to investigate the storm." "No. Give the quarters to my wounded so they can leave the infirmary. I've ordered my senior staff to remain on board the Ceres during the repairs." She shook her head at his protest. "I know we may have to close decks, but I'd like to make every effort not to abandon ship. That is a matter of pride to my crew." Worf admired the sentiment. "Very well, Captain." Captain Iis was starting to leave when the red alert klaxons went off. Her alarm indicated that she was stretched to nearly the breaking point. Worf immediately accessed Ops.

"Commander!" Kira exclaimed as if relieved to see him. "We have a problem at dock eight. Those two freighters that are tethered to the passenger liner-- we're losing one of them." "On viewscreen," Worf ordered.

A cross view image appeared of a bulbous passenger liner, its slender nose tucked into the docking ring.

The transport freighter next to it was moving, swinging away from the liner toward the docking ring. As it collided with the hull, he could feel the impact vibrate down the docking pylon.

"Tractors--" he started to say.

"Wrong angle! The docking ring is in the way." "Prepare a runabout for emergency takeoff," Worf ordered.

"You can put a tractor on it from out there," Kira agreed, keying in the command to prepare the runabout. "Pad two will be ready when you get there.

O'Brien is trying to secure the freighter from inside the docking ring." Odo approached the console. "I'll assist Chief O'Brien. It will take some time to get through the shielding of the Katon's hull." Worf nodded, casting a longing look at the portal.

"Keep me informed."

Kira's impatience was clear. "If that freighter breaks loose, it could hit the habitat ring--" "On my way," Worf acknowledged. He didn't need anyone to remind him of his duty.

Cali crouched against the curving side of the maintenance corridor, prepared to slip under the narrow service crawlway if the technicians climbed to her level. But the scraping sounds continued past in a starboard direction toward the section where most of the work was being done to secure the Bajoran freighter.

She was the last of her team to leave the area, and she had been cut off when she turned back to reactivate the security sensors in the maintenance access junction. There would always be talk of possible sabotage, but she preferred to leave no evidence behind. Not when her members were in place, ready to take over the contract from the damaged freighter.

That had been the trick--cutting one of the stasis lines during a shock wave so the freighter would snap like a whip. From the double impact, she figured the port warp nacelle had been crushed.

Now she needed to get out of this section before she was discovered.

"It shouldn't be long now." The male voice echoed strangely through the corridor. "WorPs holding it steady with the tractors." Cali had heard that voice ever since her members had severed the stasis line.

The technical response had been much faster than they had expected, yet she was the only one who hadn't gotten out in time. And she didn't intend to let these bumbling techies beat her at her own game.

"I see you're using your ingenuity, Mister O'Brien.

I've never heard of a ship being secured in quite this manner," another voice commented.

Her hair rose in prickles up her spine as she recognized that voice. Odo, chief of security. The nosy shapechanger who had locked her in the brig for no good reason.

Still, she had been working on Captain Ali's deal, agitating the Klingon Commander, so she had been well compensated. And that hour in the brig had paid off with the lead on this sweet deal. One of her cell mates had been the purser of the now-damaged freighter, and he had barely needed any coaxing to give her the details of their next run. And blimenny, was it a creampuff. Carrying raw bulk chemicals to the Rwarez Sector. You couldn't get much further away from the wormhole in one straight run, and from there they could go almost anywhere.

"We're still assessing the damage to the docking ring," O'Brien was saying. "I'm going to have someone check the main supports in this section. But from the looks of things, the freighter got the worst of it." "Tell me, Chief," Odo said seriously. "Have you ever seen a stasis line snap like that?" "No, can't say that I have." Cali held her breath.

"Neither have I," Odo agreed.

O'Brien sounded concerned. "What did you find on the passenger liner?" "No one noticed anything unusual before or during the time the stasis broke," Odo admitted. "And there are no internal sensor logs." Cali was leaning so far forward that she risked being seen through the open hatchway.

"You're the detective," O'Brien tossed off. "But I think anything's possible when there's this much turbulence. Stasis lines do have tolerance limits. And Major Kira says that a few vessels are reporting problems with their airlock seals." "Hmmm... perhaps you're right," Odo conceded.

Cali sat back grinning to herself.

"Now that you bring it up, I am worried about the other ships that are tethered by stasis lines," O'Brien added. "There were seven people injured inside the freighter, and they were lucky they all weren't killed.

We're adding more lines to the other ships, but who knows what could happen once the storm hits." "Perhaps we should recommend that the ships be evacuated." "Some of them are docked safely," O'Brien protested, "but we probably should warn the vessels that are at higher risk. After all, you don't want to flood the station with a complete evacuation..." Cali strained to hear as the voices faded. "We might have to find a way," Odo was saying. "If that storm is as bad as they..." Cali listened for a moment longer, then took a chance and slipped down the ladder, dropping into a crouch in the main corridor of the docking ring.

Looking both ways, she stayed low as she ran in the opposite direction from Odo and O'Brien.

After the overwhelming response of the repair crews, Cali was expecting it to be a real challenge to get out of the section. But she easily ran the security blockade, hardly needing the help of Theosi, who was loyally positioned nearby. The diversion required that only one of their members was detected by security, and he was released with a slap on the wrist.

Cali deployed her members ahead and behind, running tandem with Theosi through the docking ring. After all the deals she had pulled, there were probably a dozen unofficial contracts out on her, and any one of these stranded crew members could be looking for just that sort of latinum. She would have preferred to move through the service tunnels, but that was one thing the shapeshifter was good at--you could get in, but you couldn't travel between the sections. Then again, it made sense for them to lock the station down fairly tight. They were sitting on top of the wormhole, like a nice, big, fat target. At least, that's how Captain Ari put it.

At the airlock to the Reaper, Cali got word that her negotiation team had signed the contract for the chemical transport. She was pleased. This deal had gone smoothly from start to finish.

She was allowed into the captain's lounge without being announced. Not every senior mate could claim that privilege.

Despite her excitement, Cali slowed as she entered, according the place the reverence it deserved. There was nothing Klingon about the captain's lounge, with its rounded walls and clear blue lighting--even the smell of pollflowers on a warm afternoon.

Ari stayed seated, folding his data clip. He peered up at her for a moment, then smiled. "So you've done it again?" Cali answered with a laugh. "It worked exactly as I planned." Ari's expression was both admiring and pleased, without a trace of surprise, as if Cali's success was nothing more than he expected. The other seniors sometimes tried to advise her in her methods, as if any of them had completed a fraction of her deals!

But Ari seldom presumed to offer advice. She had her high position among the crew partly because it was her inheritance, but also because the captain recognized her abilities. Ari encouraged her to push herself, agreeing that it was not her fault she was not talented at the administrative details of the vessel. But what did that matter, when her brilliant deals were beginning to be talked about among the other members of the Sattar Collective?

"Name your bonus," Ari told her. "With a contract this large, I presume you want a tithe." Cali shook her head. "I'll take an option on a deal of my own." Ari was immediately intrigued. "Do you have anything in mind?" "Not yet, but there's plenty of action around here.

"We'll leave the terms open." "Short-term option," Ari countered.

Cali shrugged. If she couldn't find anything of her own before they left then she didn't deserve a longer option. "Now I have a bonus for you," she told her captain. "I heard the chief of operations talking about the freighter. They believe it broke loose in the storm.

"We'll probably get a warning to evacuate our ship." "Under galactic shipping codes, only the captain can order the evacuation of his crew. That is, unless the ship is improperly docked." "Well, that's what they said," Cali insisted. "You know Starfleet. Out to save the galaxy from itself." Ari pushed himself from the anti-grav chair and paced to the port window, considering the information. "Even if it's only a recommendation, it may be enough..." Cali caught the scent of a deal in the air. She eagerly watched the captain, waiting for him to indicate whether he would ask her to join.

When Ari turned, she knew the news would be good.

"I think it's time we visited Commander Worf," Ari told her. "He has a debt of honor to repay to the

Sattar Collective."

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CHAPTER 7

DAX BELIEVED THAT one of the best ways to get to know somebody was to go on a long shuttle trip with them.

She had figured that out while she was a cadet at Starfleet Academy, where she had been introduced to the concept of the two-person team.

During the past few months, since she had resolved things with Curzon, she was better able to appreciate the fact that she had attended the academy simply as Jadzia. After being kicked out of the Symbiont Institute on Trill, where the focus had been on generating competition among the initiates, it was a joy learning how to cooperate with others.

"Nearing the storm front at ten thousand kilometers," Dax announced. "How bad is that graviton interference?" "It's holding steady now that the bleed has been boosted," Keiko confirmed.

Dax could already tell that Keiko was an competent technician, their first flurry of stabilizer adjustments had proved that, and her meticulous handling of Ops indicated that she was a perfectionist. But Keiko herself was still a mystery, not only to Dax but to a lot of people on DS9. Maybe even to Chief O'Brien.

"Leeta says you're going to be on the survey for another few months," Dax commented. "How is it going?" "Oh, we're making progress." When Dax made it clear she was waiting for more, Keiko added, "Actually we're working so well together that Starfleet expanded the survey to include the archipelago of the southern continent. We're finding some rich calciumcomplex vegetation that grows in the wet climate along the coast." "So you like being on Bajor." Keiko smiled at the non-question. "It's tough moving around with the survey team, never in the same place for more than a few weeks. But the work itself is fascinating." Then she sighed. "I guess you can't have everything..." "Why not?" Dax asked.

Keiko looked at her. "For one thing, it's physically impossible to be on the station and Bajor at the same time." Dax concentrated on the helm, letting Keiko's answer fall lightly into silence. She sympathized with Keiko's dilemma.

"Was Molly all right when you left her?" Dax asked.

"She'll be fine." Keiko acted as if leaving her was perfectly natural, though Dax knew that mother and daughter were seldom apart. "I activated the pony program, even though I swore I'd make her wait until tomorrow." She checked the chronometer. "It'll be over soon, and then the nanny program can deal with her. Miles doesn't know how lucky he is." "He didn't look so happy standing on the service pad." Keiko shrugged. "You have to admit it happened awfully fast. He was surprised, that's all." Dax grinned. "I'd say it was fast! He was still trying to ask about radiation levels when you shut the hatch in his face." Keiko looked uncomfortable, as if her mask had slipped. Dax remembered the way she had stared at the image of O'Brien on the viewscreen as the Rubicon rose to the launch padd. The chief kept waving until they were out of sight. Only then had Keiko taken a deep breath and returned to the launch sequence.

"I wonder how they're doing with that freighter," Keiko said.

Dax checked the station logs. "It's been secured.

But Captain Sisko has issued an evacuation recommendation to all vessels below class two, due to the turbulence." Keiko's eyes widened. "I thought there were no more quarters available on the station." "There aren't." Dax frowned over the sensor data, as the runabout shook from the emission waves. "If the shock waves are this bad out here, what about the turbulence within the storm?" Keiko glanced at the viewscreen. The pure, velvety black mass blocked out most of the starfield, but the leading edge was defined by veins of flashing energy discharge, marking the point where the plasma encountered normal space matter.

"Slowing to half impulse," Dax said. "The shock waves are getting stronger." "Sensors are calibrated," Keiko confirmed. "The link to the biometric program is engaged. We're getting additional data on a wide range of Doppler shifts." Dax prepared a burst transmission to send the new data back to the station. Communications would probably be lost once they were inside the storm.

"This close," Dax said thoughtfully. "I thought we would encounter line and recombination radiation.

Even with a reflection level as low as one percent we should be getting something on the interior of the storm." "There are those energy discharges along the edge," Keiko indicated. "The filaments are being spectrally recorded, but we have no background comparison with the main body of the plasma mass." "So we can't tell if particles are being excited or emitted." "It's an ideal blackbody," Keiko agreed. "Rates of absorption and emission are the same. I wonder what's happening inside." "My guess is that it's rotating on its own axis," Dax told her.

Keiko widened her eyes. "I didn't think plasma did that in a natural vacuum." "Why else can't we get a fix on the wavelength angles?" Dax had finally thrown out Planck's law after wrestling with that impossible variable for most of the afternoon, trying to phase the momentum with value of energy release. "This isn't getting us anywhere. The spectroscopic analysis is giving us the same readings on the emissions that we got on the station: helium, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, sulfur, calcium." "It's the bulk of the interior elements we need to determine," Keiko agreed.

"All right, here we go," Dax announced.

"Electrostatic field engaged." "Spectral index is well within parameters," Keiko confirmed. "Both waves and particles are being polarized away from the runabout." "Prepare to enter the plasma field." Dax maneuvered the runabout in a vector that would sharply intersect the edge of the storm. She didn't want to risk deflection, unsure what effect that impact would have on the hull. She was also concerned about what might be concealed within the plasma. An ideal blackbody was theoretically impossible without a source of stabilized electric discharge.

There was a distinct possibility that a comet-like pulsar or neutron star was at the heart of the storm, and if so, then the gravitational forces could easily overpower the runabout once they entered.

Dax glanced at Keiko, wondering if she should share that nasty piece of information. She had included it in the burst transmission to DS9 because the station needed to be warned of the possibility. But it was too late for them to turn back now.

"Sensors at maximum sensitivity," Keiko announced. "Prepared for entry." "You know," Dax said, "there is a chance the hull could be crushed by the internal turbulence." Keiko held her gaze. "If the storm is that strong, then the station won't be able to withstand the pressure either. We need to find out." "You're right about that. I'm taking us in." Dax hit the thrusters and held on.

But the runabout penetrated the storm without a shudder. Helm control remained steady, while navigational orientation began to swing aimlessly around the chart, as if searching for some verifiable indicator to establish their position. Sensors were unable to penetrate the border of the storm.

Keiko switched the viewscreen to spectral-visual.

"Look at that..." Inside the blackbody, the plasma was alive.

Constant re-ionization released photoconductive electrons, creating spectral colors within, and even beyond, humanoid sight. Other complex optical effects produced brilliant fluorescent streaks and luminescent flickers of light that twisted and swirled together in the hydrodynamic currents.

Dax slowed the runabout and released a dye marker to give their sensors a ground point. At first she was unsure if they were moving, then she realized the marker was cruising along at about the same speed they were.

She altered their course, concerned about the power spikes as particles and waves struck their electrostatic shields. She reminded herself to watch the relays to make sure the circuits didn't overload.

"I've narrowed the range on the sensors," Keiko announced. "But the interference is still too great to get anything beyond the most rudimentary readings." "That's plasma for you," Dax said philosophically.

"We need to isolate our targets." Using the molecular beam, she released gas particles into the plasma. The computer would track the progress of their collisions and decomposition into charged electrons and photons.

"Keep an eye on the ternary collisions," Dax told Keiko, indicating the correct equation sequence. "Let me know if the cluster integrals get any larger." "They already have," Keiko immediately replied.

"That fast?" Dax asked, having a look for herself.

"This is some plasma storm." She carefully recorded the thruster action against the movement of the released particles. They revealed an approximate reading of both longitudinal and transverse waves within the plasma, though the splitting of Alfvén waves was recorded to the detriment of other variables, filling their data banks with random frequencies.

"Well, according to the gas particles, the plasma is rotating as a mass." Dax was glad to finally confirm one of her hunches about the storm. "It must be releasing huge amounts of rotational energy, approximately ten to the sixty-seventh power ergs per second.

That's what supplies the relativistic particles and magnetic fields to sustain the storm." "It's building on itself," Keiko realized.

"That's right, it's picking up particles through inverse Compton scattering. That keeps it moving in a steady vector." Dax returned to her readings. "I'll see if I can determine the oscillation distribution of the waves. That might give us a base frequency we can work with, but we'll need to isolate a sample of the plasma." "How do you do that with charged particles that are in a constant state of flux?" Keiko asked.

"Usually we'd use the EGD converter. But the plasma is so dense that our power systems can't create a high enough electric field to contain the stuff." Dax grimly shook her head. "Maybe we should have brought the Defiant after all." "Is there any other way to get a sample?" Keiko asked.

"Well, we could try a plasma trap," Dax decided.

She spent some time attempting to draw a sample of the plasma into a ring-shaped magnetic field.

Despite the high temperatures of the trap, containment of the dense plasma was limited to fractions of microseconds. A bulge kept forming along the lateral surface, instantaneously extending tongues of plasma within the trap and disappearing on contact with the container walls.

"It's too unstable," Dax said. "Maybe I can create an open trap using two magnetic mirrors. That might contain the plasma long enough to get a sensor scan on it." "Anything I can do?" Keiko asked.

"In a minute," Dax told her. "Let me just set this up." Keiko got up to pace in the back of the runabout until Dax called her to return to the sensors.

"I'm establishing the trap in a vacuum field just outside the starboard hull. Look for patterns," Dax told her, ready to grasp at any straw. "Check number densities, temperatures, electric, and magnetic field strengths. We mainly need to determine the trajectory of relative particles." "The ratio of negative and positive charges per unit volume are fairly equal," Keiko offered. "Though the numbers keep shifting." "That's typical in high-density plasmas." Dax was preoccupied with the phase ratios. "That's why we get macroscopic readings rather than the motion of individual particles." Keiko sighed and sat back in her chair. "Maybe I shouldn't have tried so hard to convince Captain Sisko to let me come. I'm not being much help." "This isn't your part of the mission," Dax pointed out. "It's mine, and I haven't been very successful.

You're here because you're the most qualified person to analyze the data once I've gotten it." Keiko let out an exasperated sound. "Then why did I have to fight so hard to get the captain's permission?" "Benjamin was just worried about Molly," Dax tried to explain.

"Oh, I don't blame him for asking about Molly.

How could he ignore her when she was practically jumping up and down on his feet?" Keiko turned to Dax. "But what does Miles have to do with it? I mean, really. Does anyone call and ask me how I feel every time he crawls into a fusion generator?" "No..." Dax hesitated, but it needed to be said.

"Try to look at it from Captain Sisko's perspective.

After all, he did lose his wife during a mission." Keiko returned to her console. "That's true. Don't mind me, I've been like this ever since I left Bajor. I hate to be interrupted when I'm in the middle of a project." "Well, then, let's get on with this one," Dax said, smoothing things over. "I'm taking us in deeper." She engaged thrusters. Temperatures rose as the plasma became denser.

"Here's something," Keiko said. "Helix patterns." "Where?" Dax demanded. She examined the readings. "Magnetic lines of force. That's consistent with synchronic radiation but..." "But what?" "Look at the total heat flux. And the thermal energy transported within the unit area. It's building, as if there's some other factor acting on the--" The Rubicon lurched and a blinding flash of light shorted the viewscreen. Dax squeezed her eyes shut, covering her face with her hands.

Even when the emergency lights came on, she could barely see through the red spots in her vision.

"Computer is off line!" Keiko exclaimed.

Dax didn't breathe until the indicator signaled that the computer core was powering up again.

"Electrostatic field remains intact," Keiko added breathlessly.

That was exactly what Dax wanted to hear. The interior support systems came back on as indicators returned to normal--except for the viewscreen. She would have to replace the circuit buffer first and increase the repulsion of the electrostatic guard to keep the same thing from happening again. "What was that?" Keiko asked.

"I'm not sure. But look. The sensors recorded the entire electromagnetic frequency range for the duration of the burst." "Finally!" Keiko exclaimed. "That gives us the data we need to run a comparison against the biometric models." Dax wasn't as pleased as Keiko. She wanted to know exactly what had happened. She slowed the sensor logs and saw what she had been dreading: fifty nanoseconds before the burst of light, a faint luminous current on the order of several hundred thousand amperes had created a stepped leader between the runabout and the plasma. The runabout acted as the ground, releasing an outward discharge, shortcircuiting the plasma that was in magnetic flux around them. The white flash had been just one of the secondary results.

"There was a direct energy discharge between the plasma and the runabout," she told Keiko.

"[thought the electrostatic field would prevent that." "Apparently the magnetic currents are strong enough to override our power systems." Dax considered the readings. "In fact, there's no way we can compensate for the reaction unless we completely shut off the shields. And the radiation levels make that impossible." "If the runabout can destabilize the plasma, what will the station do to it?" Keiko asked. "Will the shields hold?" "It's not just the station. What about the wormhole?" Dax countered.

"They might both act as electrodes," Keiko realized. "That would mean--" "A plasma arc as big as Bajor." "With everything in between instantly ionized." A flicker of her eyes betrayed her immediate thought of Molly. "We have to get back to the station to warn them. Everyone should be evacuated." Dax was already activating the helm. "Impact with the magnetic currents could burn out the wormhole permanently. Or the plasma could be caught in its gravitational flux, which means the entire system would be covered by a self-generating plasma storm for the next few centuries." "Bajor," Keiko whispered.

Dax couldn't understand the navigational sequence that she was getting. "We must have been thrown some distance by the discharge." Keiko could tell something was wrong. Dax couldn't find the dye marker, and the angle of the transverse waves had altered.

"That wasn't just a magnetic field we ran into," Dax finally concluded. "The currents are being twisted into loops by the cyclonic turbulence. We've been transported deep inside the storm. I'm not even sure where we are." "We couldn't have gone far," Keiko protested. "It lasted less than a second." "I don't know. A reaction like that, involving highintensity heat conduction and Coriolis forces from the rotation--it could have produced space-time variances within the magnetic loop." Keiko was also checking the rudimentary readings of the sensors. "Particle and wave density are much higher in this area. And there's no sign of the dye marker or the gas particles we released." "From tile number of magnetic currents, I'd say we were much closer to the center of the storm." "That can't be true!" Keiko insisted. "That would be faster than light--" "Theory of relativity? You might as well forget about that. Our time scale depends on our frame of reference. Inside the blackbody, our only reference is this highly charged, high-temperature energy matter." "But the storm covers nearly half a sector!" Keiko looked as though she didn't know which way to turn.

"It could take us a week to cross it at impulse." "If we could figure out which way to go." Dax watched the particles perform their colored dance, flashing as if they were laughing at the runabout.

"What are we going to do?" Keiko finally asked.

"We're going to have to find a quicker way out of here. Unless you're willing to let a plasma storm get the better of us?" Keiko's eyes flashed in return. "Never!" Dax took a deep breath. "Then let's get to work."

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CHAPTER 8

AFTER THE FREIGHTER was secured and Worf returned the runabout to the service pad, he made his way to his quarters. Even when the door shut on the evacuees who filled the corridor, he continued to feel stifled by the invasive grip of the station. He had been content while piloting the runabout, despite the adverse conditions, yet he did not realize it until he returned here. He could hardly call it home.

As soon as he entered, he sat down at the computer.

"Worf to Odo. What is your status?" During the tediously long time it had taken to secure the freighter, he had received regular reports from the technicians on their lack of success in deactivating the Katon's airlock system.

Odo replied by audio only. "Things are proceeding normally, Commander. The initial security bypass systems have been accessed." "When will the airlock be opened?" "We aren't changing an air filter, Commander.

These are complex mechanical and security overrides. I remember one time it took more than twentytwo hours." Odo paused to make himself clear. "But you can rest assured. That lock will open."

"Understood." "Good. Then let me get back to my business." Worf did not bother to reply, cutting the transmission at Odo's request. He saw it as yet another example of everyone's lack of concern about the Klingon aggression. He was the only one who realized that time was running out.

He signaled the Katon. When they were slow to respond, he signaled them again.

While he waited for a response, he put in a replicator order. The computer indicated that there would be a delay before the food would be delivered. He had considered stopping by the replimat sometime during the afternoon, but he loathed the place. Its generic decor and nameless hordes were almost as bad as Quark's Bar.

Digging through transport containers that were piled in his closet, he finally found a bottle of Hum'taS. It was a favorite Klingon drink, a sticky, honey-based liquid that imparted a boost of energy.

Deanna had brought it for him when she had returned from a week-long diplomatic junket on one of the Empire colonies. He wasn't sure if the gift had been meant as a joke, but to be prudent he had refrained from telling her that the stuff put his teeth on edge.

Now he was glad to have it. He took a long swig directly from the narrow neck, shuddering as he swallowed.

He went to the sink and splashed some water on his tender eyes, and managed to get down half the

bottle by the time the Katon finally responded. He almost choked in his haste, but he made it to his desk without spitting the Hum'taS down the front of his uniform.

Despite his wash, it felt like the stuff was stuck to his loch, and somehow his sash had slipped askew.

But Captain Alons looked even worse. In fact, the change was alarming. His heavy uniform was unhooked and swinging open--unthinkable for a Klingon seated in the command chair. His eyes were tiny red slits and his brow ridges were running with sweat.

It took a lot to make a Klingon sweat.

Alons was slumped and looking off to one side as if unaware that he had activated visuals. "What is it?" he demanded impatiently.

"This is to inform you that the turbulence from the storm is making it hazardous for your crew to remain on board." "Yes, yes. We received the warning. What of it?" Worf offered, "Temporary quarters for you and your crew--" Alons suddenly realized exactly who he was speaking to. He leaned forward, unsteady in his focus on the viewer. "You! You can do nothing for me." Worf was compelled to maintain an attitude of

109 civility and cooperation, much as he wanted to reach through the viewer and grab Alons by the throat to choke some of the arrogance out of him.

"Captain Alons, you appear to be ill," Worf said reasonably. "Perhaps you are unable to judge the seriousness of this warning." "Enough!" Alons slammed his hand on the arm of the chair. His head was shaking with the effort. "I will not listen to the lies of Qu'vatlh!" The viewer returned to the blue Starfleet symbol.

Worf restrained himself from hailing the Katon again.

Alons would never cooperate with him, that much was clear.

Worf sent a copy of the conversation to Dr. Bashir, requesting his medical opinion on Alons's condition.

Perhaps the captain had simply been called away in the middle of a bat'leth match, and yet, if Alons was unfit, Worf might be able to use that to get permission to board the Katon.

He was pulling off his uniform when the door signaled. He paused, the sash over his head. "Who is it?" "Captain Ari, of the Reaper," was the courteous reply.

Worf pulled his sash back on, settling it before saying, "Come in." The door opened, letting in two Sattar. Cali returned his dubious look while Captain Ari introduced himself. The captain was short even for a Sattar, and only the darkened fuzz around his nose and eyes indicated his age.

"We apologize for disturbing you in your quarters," Captain Ari said. His voice was surprisingly sonorous for such a small creature.

Worf grunted an acknowledgement, distracted by his effort to keep Cali in view as she began roaming around the room, frankly examining the few possessions he had unpacked.

Captain Ari ignored his senior mate. "I felt it was high time we met, Commander Worf. This situation has

remained unresolved for long enough." Worf shifted as Cali moved behind him. She paused next to the replicator, and pointedly met his eyes.

"The replicator is malfunctioning," Worf said.

When she glanced at the open bottle on his desk, he grudgingly told the captain, "However I can offer you Hum 'taS. " "Thank you," Ari accepted, taking a seat in the best chair. That is, Worf assumed it was the best chair since the senior Sattar had chosen it. He had not spent enough time in his new quarters to determine that for himself.

He grabbed the bottle, then glanced around, realizing that he had no containers for the liquid. He usually ordered serveware from the replicator.

"There are no cups," he admitted.

Cali's short laugh was insulting. His lip curled as he stared her down.

Ari simply held out his hand for the bottle. "I'll join you, Commander. That is, if you don't mind." Worf gave it to him, astonished. He never expected a Sattar to be so familiar with a Klingon. t10 111 Ari lifted the bottle and took a hefty swig, respectable even for a Klingon. Cali watched the captain with an expression of fascinated repulsion, while Worf reassessed the elder Sattar. This one is not bound by the conceits of his own people.

Ari's eyes flashed back at Worf, an unexpected moment of accord. "Join me for a moment, Commander." Worf hesitated to sit down while Cali was searching his quarters. Without a word, Ari understood. He motioned with his head and Cali returned to lean on the back of his chair. She was facing away, as if uninterested in what they had to say. But Worf noticed that she kept a cautious eye on him as he sat down across from Ari.

The captain didn't waste words. "You have placed us in a terrible bind, Commander Worf. By delaying our clearance, you have caused us to lose our contract in the Gamma Quadrant." Worf was not going to discuss his investigation of the attack on the Ceres. Not when the Katon situation remained unresolved. "The delay was unavoidable." "Perhaps we differ on that point." Ari raised one hand as if to stop Worf from arguing. Worf noticed there were tiny swirls of fur even on the Sattar's palm.

"I will say no more about it," Ari continued.

"However I would like to ask you to do us a favor." Worf immediately stiffened. "Is that. blackmail?" "Commander Worf!" Ari protested, laughing.

"Please don't misunderstand me. I simply came here to ask you for a personal favor. Your captain has sent us a warning to evacuate my crew to the station, yet I find I'm in the unenviable position of having nowhere to go." "Major Kira is supervising the arrangements for temporary quarters." Ari wrinkled his nose. "Please, Commander. Those cargo bays are fine for my members, but you must take into account the ways of the Sattar Collective. A captain's status is maintained through a strict hierarchy. You examined my ship, you saw the levels of accommodations. For me to be thrown together with not only my members, but among others, the lowest crews of alien vessels... well, it just wouldn't do." "I see." But Worf did not see what this had to do with him.

"Breaking our social codes could disrupt the entire fabric of my command. And I'm sure Starfleet didn't intend to violate our cultural dictates with their evacuation order." "Of course not," Worf said. "The

evacuation warning is not mandatory. You may remain on board your vessel if you wish." Captain Ari leaned back, glancing up at Cali. She was glaring at Worf as if resenting the suggestion.

"I believe you once thought my transport was capable of great feats," Ari said quietly. "But if any vessel is likely to buckle under the forces of the plasma storm, I'm afraid it's the Reaper. No, Commander, I do not wish to stay on board while that happens." "No, of course not," Worf repeated, at a loss.

"However I do not know how I can assist you." "This will do quite well," Ari said, as if satisfied.

"What will?" Worf asked.

"This." Ari gestured to the room. "Your quarters. If you allow me to remain here tonight, I would be most appreciative." Worf drew back. "Here? You want to stay here?" "I believe most of the personnel on the station are sharing their quarters with evacuees, is that not correct?" "Yes." Worf blinked for a moment. "That ismYes, you may stay here." He thoroughly disliked it, but he saw no other option. He should have offered his quarters to the crew of the Ceres, except he had difficulty thinking of these Cardassian rooms as his. He almost longed for the bare cell in the monastery on Boreth.

The replicator chimed and a thick slice of rokeg blood pie appeared.

"Malfunctioning, huh?" Cali smoldered, as if she disliked the situation as much as he did.

"Yes." His visions of a relaxing meal disappeared.

He wondered if Cali was staying here tonight as well.

Awkwardly, he stood up, unsure of what to do next.

Captain Ari smiled and waved a dismissive hand at him. "Don't mind us, Commander. Just go about your business." "Yes." Worf wished he could think of something better to say.

"We would like something to eat," Cali said pointedly.

Worf was saved from answering by the flashing yellow alert. Since he was not summoned, he knew it had nothing to do with security.

Nevertheless, he used his clearance code to access Ops, shifting to block the viewer when Cali tried to see what was happening. There was a power conduit failure in the lower core and O'Brien had ordered an emergency shutdown of the aft generator.

That would leave only one generator to create power for the station. "Worf to O'Brien." "I could use your help, Worf," O'Brien replied shortly, sounding as if he was running. "Can you meet me in the lower core?" Worf acknowledged. He stood up, then hesitated, ordering, "Computer, allow Captain Ari access to my quarters." As the computer confirmed the order, Ari gave Worf a quizzical look. "Thank you, Commander." Worf did not care about anything in his quarters, or about the place itself, for that matter. But as he reached the door, he did glance back at the tempting slice of blood pie.

Cali noticed and immediately returned to the replicator. "Ro ~egh'Iwchab! How thoughtful of you." She picked up the plate, smiling.

Worf left. He had the distinct feeling that she had gotten the better of him.

g,ic When O'Brien reached the main grid of the power plant, he knew he had a bigger problem than he had first thought.

His technicians were taking the aft fusion reactor off line and being extremely cautious, to boot. The containment of the silicon-sodium reaction was always difficult at the best of times.

But the real problem now was the power conduit leading to crossover bridge two. The wave guides had been disrupted from their alignment, and the power bleed was wedging open the distribution amplifier.

"We aren't going to be able to shut down the power stream until that amplifier outlet is closed," O'Brien reminded the technicians.

Lieutenant Kelly replied for both the Bajoran supernumeraries and Starfleet personnel. "We're trying to reroute the bleed by closing an upper junction node." "Keep me informed," O'Brien ordered. They had all been working since morning and were more than ready for the shift change, yet he didn't hear a grumble among them.

He was reading the grid as he said, "O'Brien to Sisko." "Sisko, here. What's your status, Chief?" "Once the reactor is down, it won't take more than a couple of hours to recalibrate the wave guides in conduit two." "Will one reactor provide enough power during that time?" Sisko asked.

"Well, we're running shields at maximum. I recom- mend we cut power to nonessential systems. We don't know how much we'll need once the storm hits." "Very well," Sisko said.

O'Brien resisted the temptation to ask if they had heard from the Rubicon. "Oh, and you better shut the airlocks to the connecting tunnel. There's a jammed power bleed that could be leaking free radicals." Kira suddenly spoke up, "We have reports that there are evacuees camped in all three crossover bridges--" "You mean there are people in there? Just sitting in there?" O'Brien clutched his hair with one hand.

"You've got to get them out!" Worf approached the power grid. "May I assist, Chief?" "Yes! Quick--clear everyone out of the second tunnel," O'Brien ordered. "And wear stasis belts.

There's radiation leakage. And seal the airlocks!" he called after Worf, as the Klingon rapidly strode toward the turbolift, giving orders through his corem badge.

O'Brien reached for a tool kit as he hit his own badge. "Kira, transport me to the main junction node. If I don't get that amplifier shut, those people will be fried." "Ready to energize," Kira confirmed.

The power plant dissolved into a golden glow as he was caught in the familiar grip of the transporter beam. At the last second he panicked, afraid that the transporter buffers weren't any better shielded than the power conduit. If there was significant interfer- ence from the emission waves, he could end up as part of the storm.

But he rematerialized safely on the narrow plat- form outside the maintenance tunnel. He rapidly tapped in his code, but the door didn't budge. The emergency shutdown sequence for the reactor had sealed the access because of excessive radiation leakage.

Out of habit, O'Brien glanced up. "Kira, I want you to find Rom. Tell him I need him here now. You can transport him to my signal--" "Quark is answering," Kira interrupted.

"You tell him that if he doesn't send Rom down here now, I'll have him up on charges of murder."
"Understood," Kira acknowledged.

O'Brien took one breath and then another. "Come on, come on," he muttered.

The distortion of a transporter beam appeared next to him. Rom materialized, hunched over and looking worried. O'Brien could only imagine what Quark had been saying to his brother as he dematerialized.

"Hi there, Chief--" Rom started to say.

"Open this door) You have ten seconds." O'Brien ripped off the top of the access panel to the sealed door.

"What?" Slack jawed, Rom looked from him to the exposed circuitry. "Why don't you use your security bypass?" "That would take two minutes. And you only have five seconds left." Rom leaped for the panel, grabbing an isolinear manipulator from O'Brien in mid air. When he bent over the circuitry he was a changed man, with every meticulous motion steady.

Since he seemed to work well under pressure, O'Brien warned him, "Three seconds." He never imagined that Rom could do it. He had just been babbling off the top of his head to get the Ferengi moving, but as the word "one" hit his lips, the door slid open.

Rom was panting, his mouth hanging open.

O'Brien stared at him in shock. "You did it!" "You said you wanted it open," Rom reminded him.

"Amazing! And you don't even know it." O'Brien pushed past Rom, ducking to enter the low maintenance tunnel.

But he immediately bumped into a hanging obstacle. Trying to see, he realized an entire Temmorian pod had slung their hammocks in the tunnel between him and the manual seal.

"What are you doing in here) Get out of here, you understand? Out!" He started crawling under them, wincing at the squeals of surprise as they jumped from their hammocks, getting in his way even more.

"Move it!" he roared. "This is an emergency!" They obligingly tried to get out of his way, but O'Brien kept bumping into them, even stepping on them, and he was afraid he'd killed a few by the time he reached the amplifier. He groaned as he tried to turn the wheel. Throwing his entire weight into it, he felt something strain in his back as it finally shifted.

The amplifier made horrible creaking and screeching noises as he manually tightened the valve. Then he gave it an extra tug to make sure it was clamped shut.

Falling back against the curved wall, he tapped his comm badge. "Manual seal is in place. You can take the reactor off line." "Confirmed," Lieutenant Kelly answered.

"Conduit two is sealed." O'Brien drew back from a sleepy Temmorian who peered close into his face. They didn't have the best eyesight.

"You have to leave the serviceway," he told the closest ones. An entire pod, babies and all, sleeping in

the maintenance tunnel leading to the fusion generator. Bloody Hell. Don't people know how to take care of their kids? "Good God--Molly!" he exclaimed.

Several Temmorians flinched, but he started pushing his way back through them. If power was shut down to nonessential systems that meant Quark's holosuites would be turned off. That meant Molly was locked in a tiny room with gridded walls, probably crying her eyes out.

"Make way!" he yelled, speeding up.

He catapulted through the access door, barely breaking stride as he ran over Rom. "Get them out of there?" he ordered over his shoulder as he bolted toward the turbolift.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Rom sang out, obviously quite pleased to be given the responsibility.

Later, O'Brien had time to wonder exactly how long it had taken him to reach Quark's from the lower core. He was sure he would never be able to beat his time, but while it was happening it felt like an eternity was passing as he shoved his way through the evacuees, ordering everyone to stand aside, yelling out that it was an emergency.

Quark's was even more crowded than the Promenade, and O'Brien had the odd sensation that his own living room had suddenly been overrun by strangers.

Quark's always had its fair share of transient business, but this was entirely different. The chief didn't recognize anyone except for the harried staff.

Then he caught sight of Morn, precariously perched on a stool in the corner below the stairs and looking very unhappy. Apparently loyalty to your regular customers wasn't high on the list of the Ferengi Rules of Acquisition.

When he keyed open the lock on the holosuite, Molly was crying just as he had expected. "Why, Daddy? Why?" she kept asking.

He picked her up, trying to explain. "We needed the power for lights and food." "But why, Daddy? Why didn't you come? I called and called." She was crying as if she would never stop.

"I want my mommy!" "Hey, Molly, honey, I'm here now. It's okay." He held her and rocked her and tried to soothe her. "I did come for you." "I called and called," she insisted.

He felt inordinately guilty, and directly responsible.

After all, it had been his order to cut nonessential power. But Molly relaxed, letting her head fall on his shoulder. She was still crying, but the frantic edge was gone.

Not that anyone in Quark's would notice a crying baby. O'Brien carried Molly down from the mezzanine and started pushing through the crowd. You'd think people would see the child and move aside for him, but they were obviously having too much fun to actually open their eyes and look around.

"Hey! Back off there, buddy!" O'Brien ordered a particularly wobbly Bajoran.

From out of nowhere Quark appeared. "Stop pushing my customers around, O'Brien. And where's that brother of mine? You have to send him back, I need him here." "Doesn't this place have a capacity

rating?" O'Brien shot back. "This many people can't be safe." Quark looked smug. "If I'm right, this entire station is over its capacity. Starfleet can't point any fingers at me." He sighed. "Business has never been better." "I've heard what you're doing," O'Brien told him.

"You're charging three times the regular price for everything." "Supply and demand," Quark said, holding out his hands as if he didn't make the rules. "I charge what the market can bear." "You mean you fleece the customers for all they're worth." "Whatever." Quark leaned in conspiratorially.

"See what you can do about getting the power to the holosuites back on. I'm losing latinum as we speak." He gestured with his chin to Molly. "I'll let you keep using one of them for the kid." O'Brien wouldn't compromise the safety of the power grid, even for Molly. "Is Leeta here? I want her to watch Molly for me." "She's here and here she stays," Quark retorted.

"You can get away with that 'life or death' excuse to take one of my employees, but you can't take two.

That would kill me." "But she's the only one I can trust who isn't on duty," O'Brien protested, keeping his voice low, trying to keep from disturbing Molly. She was limp and had finally stopped crying.

"Leeta is on duty." Quark pointed. "See, she's spinning the wheel for my customers, while lots of other customers are waiting their turn. I need more help around here, O'Brien, not less." "Fine! Now what am I supposed to do?" O'Brien patted Molly's back, trying to think.

"Leave her on the bar," Quark shrugged.

"Somebody's bound to look after her." A passing Risan woman overheard and she lurched in closer, exclaiming over Molly. "How sweet! If you're giving her away, I'll take care of her." A man tugged at the Risan's arm, stopping to give Molly a cursory glance. "Take her if you want. Only let's get back to the tables." Molly chose that moment to raise her head. "I'm Mol-ee. What's your name?"

123 "Oooo," the Risan cooed. "I love her." "There you go," Quark said, as if that settled it.

"But you better get those holosuites back on." O'Brien turned, pulling Molly away from the reaching hands of the Risan. "Thanks so much, but we have to go now." "Please," the woman wheedled with practiced charm. "Just for a minute. I only want to hold her." "No, sorry, we're very late. Thank you. Good-bye." O'Brien got away from her as fast as he could, pushing through the crowd as she gave a halfhearted pursuit.

The security office was just across the Promenade.

O'Brien joined the streaming crowds, plotting a course that would get him there with a minimum of fuss. Every piece of floor space was taken, with only narrow aisles left between the people who were sitting, lying down, piled together, all watching each other. Up above, the mezzanine was lined with a mixed assortment of humanoids, each staking out territory in his own way. Several Marlkins were even perched on the railing, kicking their heels as O'Brien passed underneath.

Molly cringed at the echoing noise, covering her ears. It was terrible even with full baffles engaged, and he could tell the air quality was high on carbon dioxide. He reminded himself to adjust the exchange rate as soon as he got back to Ops.

He hugged Molly closer, protecting her from the jostling, until he finally reached security.

Odo's office was busy with security teams, both

Bajoran and Startleet. O'Brien was glad to see that Odo was there, apparently unflustered by the activity.

He set Molly down on the chair in front of the desk, ignoring the constable's sharp look.

"You curl up here, honey," he told Molly. "I'll be back soon to take you home." "Excuse me?" Odo asked.

"I want to go with you," Molly protested.

"Be a good girl for Daddy," he told his daughter, hoping Odo would get the message. "I've got to run around and do a few more things before we can both go home. Will you promise to stay right here?" Molly wrinkled her tiny brow, considering him, then Odo.

"Odo's a good friend of mine," O'Brien added.

"You'll have fun waiting here, and I'll be back soon." Molly finally gave a short, decisive nod, but she asked, "Where's Mommy?" O'Brien hesitated, glancing up at Odo. "Any word from the Rubicon?" Odo briefly shook his head. "The interference is too strong. We didn't expect to have contact while they were inside the storm." O'Brien knew they were both thinking about the checkpoint that the runabout had just missed. But he assured Molly, "She'll be back before you know it.

Why don't you play with one of the games in your bag? That's my girl." When he stood up, O'Brien was surprised to see that Odo wasn't glaring at him. "I'm sorry, Odo, but I

124 125 have nowhere else to put her. And I can't drag her along as I recalibrate the wave guides in the power conduit." Odo glanced at Molly. She obediently pulled a game padd from her travel bag, though she was watching her father and Odo.

"It appears she'll be no problem," Odo said.

"Thanks," O'Brien said gratefully. "You're a cut above the rest, Constable. Oh, and if you hear anything" "I'll let you know," Odo assured him.

O'Brien let out a sigh of relief as he left. He didn't want to imagine what Keiko would say when she found out he had left their daughter with the security chief. Heaven only knew what kind of people would be drifting in and out of his office while she was there.

Still, all in all, O'Brien was rather pleased with how he had worked everything out.

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CHAPTER 9

"WHY WON'T THIS be'el thing work?" Cali demanded, punching the keypad of the replicator with her fist.

Captain Ari found her behavior quite amusing.

"Have patience," he mildly chided. "The Klingon said it was malfunctioning." Cali picked up the plate with the rokeg blood pie and considered it once more. But Ari knew she wouldn't be able to bring herself to eat Klingon food even if she were starving.

Ari tucked away his tiny grooming comb, deciding that a suitable amount of time had passed since the commander had left. He deliberately walked over and seated himself at the computer console.

"I want a four-minute warning before he returns," he ordered, confident that Cali would set up an airtight perimeter.

The senior mate mumbled into her comm, continuing with her thorough search of Worf's quarters. Ari was willing to bet the Reaper that Worf wouldn't be able to detect that his possessions had been touched.

"Make a list of what you find," he added, intending to personally decipher this Klingon's psyche. "You've got it," Cali confirmed.

As Ari logged on to the computer, he took full advantage of the technical data the members had been steadily gathering since they arrived at the station. Rather than directly accessing the files, he downloaded the recent memory storage into a dataclip that played on his microprocessor. A practically undetectable method of obtaining information.

Of all the tidbits he gathered, the conversation between Commander Worf and Captain Alons of the Katon was most enlightening. Now he only needed to decide how to use it.

"He doesn't have much stuff. But look at this." Cali waved a bat'leth trophy, the traditional ball and curved blade of First Place. "He probably sleeps with it at night so he can pretend he's a real warrior. Just like the rest of those beasts." Ari declined to reply, but that didn't mean he agreed with her simplistic assessment. Perhaps the trophy had sentimental value. It was not polished and set out on display as ego would dictate, but tucked in a cabinet by itself, in a secret place of honor.

"Would you like to find out more about this Kling-

128 on?" Ari asked. "His personal logs and files are right here." Cali hesitated, despite the eager glint in her eye.

"Won't he detect our entry?" "Yes. He'll know you tampered with his logs out of pure spite." Cali grinned, coming towards the desk. "You have a deal in mind, don't you?" Ari decided to make her wait, expertly entering the access code for the docking ring. The members had been specifically instructed to locate the emergency release for the docking clamps, just in case the Reaper needed to bypass official procedures in order to depart. At one point, it had looked as if they wouldn't have enough capital to pay their docking fees at the station, much less take on supplies for their next run.

They had badly needed the new transport contract, and it was fitting that Cali had made the deal since it had been her fault that their last contract had been lost. She had given a hasty order, jettisoning half their cargo and bringing the Reaper to the edge of insolvency.

Yet there was a bright side to the ship's financial crisis. Cali's actions had cut short the growing respect for her among the senior members. Her deal-making skills made her popular, but after that last run, everyone down to the mewling infants knew that Cali couldn't be trusted with the captain's seat. No, Ari

wouldn't be bothered for a long time by whispers in her ears to take advantage of the rights her lineage gave her.

Call was eagerly gazing at him, waiting to be let in on the deal. She was completely in his hands.

"The Klingon yacht interests me," Ari told her, feeling magnanimous. "It's a shame to let a situation with such potential slip away." "Do you think it attacked the Ceres?" He waved one hand as if that was a given. "The Klingons won't come out, and security has not yet broken in. All we need is some leverage and we control the situation." "You're going to help the Klingons?" Call asked, wrinkling her nose at the very idea.

"I'm going to arrange a deal with the Klingons that will give us a small fortune." She stared at the screen for a few moments, then shook her head. "You can't contact them. Starfleet will be all over us like a swarm of vacuum mites." "The deal will be contracted later." Ari slipped a chip into the computer to record the entire process, including the communication between Alons and Worf, and the security reports that a free-lance technician had just arrived and was making progress in remote-triggering the Katon's locking sequence. Ari also input a false identity and station code, pleased that both were finally proving useful.

He set up an order that would blow the clamps on the Katon, releasing it from the station. On the docking end, it would look as if the Klingons had broken into the computer and were trying to escape.

The decoy and false identity would be detected under

130 a diagnostic exam, but that suited his purposes perfectly.

Then he set up a chain reaction that would partially cover and scatter his entry and retreat, forming a trail back to Worf's personal logs. Using a covert universal program, he slipped into the memory block at the byte level. It took only a moment to find the entry for Worf's conversation with Alons. He had counted on the reknowned Starfleet fail safes that had left a few free bytes between the communicu~ and the order to relay the transmission to Dr. Bashir. In the free space, Ari laid down a byte-sized switch, linking in a phantom loop. From the loop, he re-entered the log files and hooked up with the trail he had left behind.

Once the Klingon decoy had been discovered, it wouldn't take long before the trail and the attempt to hide it were also found, making it appear that Worf had planted a delayed program to blow open the clamping seals of the Katon.

Ari triggered the sequence. "The Katon has been jettisoned." Call ran to the port window, pressing her face against the glass to see out. "Are you sure? I don't--" she broke off. "Oh, there it goes." Ari removed the data chip and joined her, watching as the Katon spun away from the station. Apparently the engines were off line, and the ship was at the mercy of the turbulent cosmic rays.

"I have a log of the entire transaction, including the cover-up as it was done from this console," Ari said quietly.

"You'll sell it to the Klingons," Cali guessed. "They can use it to prove that Worf set them up." "Any Klingon would agree that's quite a bargaining chip to use against the Federation." Cali was practically prancing, she was so excited.

"It's brilliant! I can't believe that with only a few keystrokes you come up with a deal like that." Ari

gestured back to the computer. "Would you like to rummage around? The more you access the logs and cover up, the more you will help obscure the real path of entry." "I'd like nothing better." Cali headed back to the vacated seat. "I'll plant something just nasty enough to make him think that's why I was inside. He'll be angry, but he may not throw me in the brig." "Even that could be useful," Ari murmured, knowing that Cali could care less where she was, as long as she was in on a big deal.

He stayed at the portal until the Katon spun out of sight, wondering how long it would take Starfleet to recapture the yacht.

Worf had intended to go straight to the Katon once his team had cleared the evacuees from the connecting tunnel. But when he called ahead to inform Odo, the computer replied that the chief was in his security office.

Worf stormed through the Promenade, hardly breaking stride as he burst through the doors of Odo's office. "Why did you leave the Katon?" Odo stopped bobbing up and down. A young human was hanging onto his back, yelling, "Gi~yup!

Ya!" Somehow Odo retained his dignity. "Commander Worf, this is Molly. Chief O'Brien's girl." Worf stared at her kicking heels, remembering his first sight of Molly--as she was being born. He briefly closed his eyes. "We have met before." "I want the saddle again!" Molly demanded.

Worf's mental image was instantly replaced by an equally distressing one of Odo turning into a riding animal for small children. He tried to banish both from his mind.

Odo swung Molly off his back. Worf could not tell how he did it so smoothly. "You can have another ride later," he assured her.

"Now," she insisted.

"No, you have to let your steeds rest occasionally." "Why?" Odo hardly missed a beat. "Because otherwise they die." "Oh." Molly's mouth made a perfect "O" as she sat back in the cushioned chair.

"Nice child," Worf said doubtfully.

Odo impatiently sat down behind his desk. "What is it you wanted, Commander?" "Yes." Worf remembered his anger. "Why have you left the Katon?" "I thought that's what you said." Odo was looking at his viewer. "Commander, that airlock is not my only concern. In fact, it isn't even a high priority.

Though I know that you disagree." Worf tightened his lips. "What is the status of the remote accessing?" "Things have been progressing more than satisfactorily. Particularly since Chief O'Brien sent Rom down to assist." "Rom? Not the Ferengi!" Worf protested.

"You should appreciate that Ferengi, Commander.

In fact, I was about to notify you to meet me in the lower pylon." Odo acted as if he couldn't help adding, "But your impatience--" The red klaxons flashed in the corners of the security office as the computer announced, "Warning!

Docking breach!" Odo accessed the com, just as Kira announced on his badge, "Senior crew, report to the Defiant. A vessel has broken loose from the station." Worf immediately headed for the door, but Odo

called after him, "Commander, it's the Katon!" Worf gave him a startled nod of thanks, and broke into a run. The Katon was not going to escape him now, not when he was this close.

In the turbolift, he signaled Kira in Ops. "How did the Katon get away?" "It was jettisoned," Kira said briefly. "And now it's spinning. You'll get your own chance to try to lock onto it with tractors." "On my way to the Defiant," he acknowledged.

He felt justified in his foresight for insisting that the Defiant be put on standby alert. Because of that, the Katon was hardly a light year away by the time the crew was in place and ready to depart.

"Disengage docking clamps," Captain Sisko ordered.

"Aye, sir," replied Ensign DeGroot at the helm-- usually Dax's post.

Sisko was shaking his head at the distorted viewer.

"How did it happen? Turbulence?" Worf was already assessing that. "According to sensor logs, the docking clamps were blown." "By the Klingons?" Sisko asked.

"Perhaps." Worf uneasily remembered that Rom had been working on the remote accessing. "However it is possible that our attempts to access the airlock systems triggered the reaction." Sisko gave him a dark look. "I want a complete report." "Aye, sir." Worf was irritated by Dr. Bashir's worried expression and the way he stood so close to the captain, listening and watching everything. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Kelly at the engineering station gave him a sympathetic grin. Worf pointedly turned away but Kelly did not seem to mind.

It was a minor incident but one that would never have happened on the Enterprise. In his next tactical report, he would include his opinion that the lack of a tight, seasoned crew for the Defiant could be a significant detriment during their encounters with Klingon vessels.

He would soon have a chance to test that theory, while proving whether or not the Katon had the guns to destroy the Ceres. He had been looking forward to just such a challenge. Yet as they neared the yacht, he had to inform the captain, "The Katon has not powered up their engines or weapons systems." "What about shields?" Sisko asked.

"Shields are holding," he replied. "The ship's status has not changed from its docking state." Sisko narrowed his eyes. "Why do they continue to let it spin?" "Perhaps they were injured in the explosion," Dr.

Bashir quietly suggested.

As the Defiant came within range, Worf discovered that Kira was correct. It was nearly impossible to keep a tractor lock on the Katon while they were spinning in the emission waves. The frequencies kept shifting, flinging off the tractor beams.

"Perhaps the spin is not accidental," Worf finally ventured. "Tractors are unable to lock onto the Katon." "If it's a tactical decision," Sisko commented, "then it's not a very good one. At some point the ship will have to stop." Kelly agreed, "And they must be losing their gravity field--" "Captain," Worf interrupted. "Their engines are powering up!" "A warp field is beginning to form," Ensign DeGroot confirmed.

"Don't let them get away," Sisko ordered.

Worfboosted the tractors on the Katon as their spin slowed, catching it in the microsecond before the field could engage. "Tractors locked on, Captain. Warp field has been disrupted." "Very good, Mister Worf." Sisko sat back. "Hail them." It took a while for the link to be established, and when it was, so much static ran through the image that it was difficult to distinguish what they were seeing. It was an extreme close-up of Alons. The captain had one arm draped over the console, letting it support him as he leaned his face into view. One enormous eye blinked askew, and his spittle-covered lips and brown teeth were unpleasantly prominent.

His swollen, mottled tongue shoved out and licked up a trickle of bloodsweat from his cheek.

"Captain, you're injured!" Sisko exclaimed, standing up.

Alons managed to groan and glare at the same time.

"You will never take us alive!" Sisko moved closer to the screen. "Captain Alons, let us beam you to our ship. We have a doctor!" "Tammoll!" Alons rasped. "You think you have beaten me. But you--you are the ones who are defeated. The glory is ours! Victory to the Empire!" Worfrealized what was happening even through the massive shielding. "Captain, their warp core is overloading. It will reach critical levels in approximately thirty seconds." "Can we board the Katon?" Sisko demanded, ignoring the image of Alons.

"Negative," Worf replied. "Not until they lower their shields." "Never!" Alons shouted from the main viewer. "I will die with my ship!" Sisko appealed to the Klingon captain. "You have six crew members on board. Will you kill them as well?" "My crew will follow me until I die." Alons managed to draw back and hold his head steady for a moment. Then he had to blink and rub his eyes because of the sweat, and the motion threw him off balance. "We have already won. Nothing can stop us now." "He's delusional," Bashir said in a low voice.

"Alons, please lower your shields!" Sisko insisted.

"Time is running out." Over his shoulder he asked Worf, "Isn't there some way you can get a transporter lock on them?" Worf briefly shook his head, concentrating on the panel. "Not yet. Warp core is reaching critical.

Tensecond countdown." "Release tractor beam," Sisko ordered.

Worf complied, knowing the captain hoped to avert the destruction of the Katon. He fully agreed. He would rather see the Klingons try to run than allow them to destroy the only evidence of their crimes against the Ceres.

"Get some distance from that ship," Sisko ordered.

"Half impulse." "You conspired against us from the start," Alons sneered into the screen. "You, you traitorous puj'O, betraying your brothers."

Worf dimly realized that Alons was talking to him, but he concentrated on one last chance to lock onto them.

"The sight of you disgusts me!" Alons spit. "You are nothing more than a filthy Ferengi in Klingon hide. Selling yourself to the enemy. You're no warrior--" Worf alerted security to report to the transporter

room. "Locking on, Captain." Alons was caught in mid sentence as the image further distorted, then automatically switched to an exterior view of the Katon. Worf tried to get a sensor reading as the shields failed from the power drain, but the Katon instantly exploded.

Inertial dampers weren't enough to buffer the shock wave. The Defiant lurched, then steadied.

"Five Klingons have been beamed on board," Worf reported. "One pattern was lost, however the others are alive." The doctor immediately left for the transporter room, calling for medical assistance through his badge.

Sisko stared at the starfield for a moment, watching the last sparkles of the atomized yacht. His thoughtful frown made it clear that he was not quite satisfied with the outcome. "Take us back to the station." Worf liked it even less than the captain. He analyzed the sensor readings of the explosion, but warp core breaches were basically all the same. He did not believe they would be able to determine the power capacity of the Katon even with in-depth analysis.

The interference from the plasma emissions had destroyed that possibility.

As they neared the station, the security team reported that the doctor had sedated the Klingons and they had been transported to Defiant's sick bay. Soon after, Dr. Bashir signaled the bridge.

Worf almost protested for security reasons when Sisko ordered Bashir to be put on the main viewer.

But after only a few weeks under Sisko's command, he knew the captain would override him.

"What's wrong with the Klingons, Doctor?" Sisko asked.

"The crew of the Katon are suffering from severe radiation poisoning." Bashir glanced at Worf.

"Commander Worf alerted me not more than an hour ago that Alons seemed to be in a... stressed condition.

But his deterioration has advanced at an extraordinarily rapid rate. It's severe irradiation, the likes of which I've never seen before." "The plasma storm," Sisko murmured.

"Perhaps," the doctor agreed doubtfully. "Or it could have been exposure to unstable chemicals, such as solotone. Finding the root cause will be difficult because it's not just their cellular membranes breaking down." Again Bashir glanced at Worf. "Their molecular structure is decomposing. Perhaps that's why we couldn't get a lock on the sixth man. I suggest we move them manually to the infirmary." Worf would not let that pass. "Captain, I recommend that the Klingons be held in the Defiant's sick bay." Sisko considered the suggestion. "It might be wise.

Do you have the facilities you need here, Doctor?" Bashir reluctantly nodded. "I suppose the Ceres crew might not appreciate having Klingons in the same recovery room." Worf stiffened. "I am concerned with security, Doctor." "Of course, Commander," Bashir replied, making it clear that the rebuff had been noted.

"We will have a security problem if those Klingons get out of sick bay," Sisko pointed out to both of them. "The last thing we need is for the Defiant to fall into their hands." "Aye, sir," Worf replied, confident he could secure them with these systems. If only the rest of the station were like the Defiant. "Permission to proceed?" Sisko nodded, but Bashir was glumly shaking his head. "Don't worry about your prisoners,

Commander. They're not going anywhere for a while." The image of the docking pylon returned to the main viewer as Worf left the bridge. By his count, he had managed to offend every member of the senior staff today. Except perhaps Dax.

Gruffly he shrugged it off. He could not help it as long as they were continually offending him.

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CHAPTER 10

"WHY DON'T YOU go rest for a while?" Dax suggested.

"That bench is more comfortable than it looks." Keiko shook her head. She already felt like dead weight on this mission, she certainly wasn't going to start napping on top of it. "I think we should consider going through a few more of those magnetic loops." "The radiation levels went off the scale," Dax reminded her. "Who knows how many random particles penetrated the electrostatic field? There could be all kinds of dangerous free radicals being produced in here and in the components of the runabout. Not to mention in us." Keiko didn't need to be told about the affects of irradiation on biological tissue. She had been keeping track of the interior particle count since they left the

142 station. She had always intended to have another baby--she knew Miles would love to have a son--but the time had never seemed right. Now Molly was six years old and it was looking as if they might never have another child. But Keiko wanted that to be her choice rather than an accidental by-product of this mission.

Yet they weren't getting anywhere sitting here. "I've gotten only one good reading," she told Dax. "And that was during the flash. If we can get a few more samples, I can at least run the data against the biometric analysis." Dax was obviously growing impatient, having exhausted their other options to communicate and/or navigate through the storm. But Keiko had been reluctant to insist on getting more data by going through the unstable loops. She kept fighting an unreasonable feeling that she was here by mistake. In fact, the whole mission felt like a terrible mistake-- the kind you paid for with your life. If only the station wasn't going to pay for it as well, along with her husband and her baby.

"We have to get back to warn them," Keiko insisted.

"Going through the loops may take us further away.

We could even end up in the heart of the storm, where the plasma density would probably disintegrate the molecular structure of the runabout." "I'm willing to take that risk," Keiko retorted.

"And so are you. You've been recalibrating the shields, haven't you?"

143 xes. we snoulo be able to go through another loop without losing our internal systems." Keiko waited, very much aware of who was in command. If Dax was hesitating, she must have good reasons. But Keiko didn't see what other choice they had.

Dax must have agreed. She adjusted their course, bringing them closer to a magnetic current. "I'll hold us in a constant vector in the direction of the strongest particle flow." "Releasing dye marker," Keiko confirmed. Now they had two blips on their sensors, this one and the marker she had dropped soon after

they had been deposited here. Sensors were still unable to detect the first marker left where they had entered the storm.

Either it was too far away or else it had already degraded to charged particles.

"We're entering a current," Dax announced, frowning briefly. "Frequencies oscillating--" Keiko dimmed the resolution on the viewscreen to keep the flash from blinding them. Yet when it came, it was so bright that everything appeared in negative exposure for a few moments afterward.

"Releasing dye marker," Keiko said automatically, her finger ready on the command key. As they had with the last loop, they appeared to be drifting in a relatively calm area of plasma, while around them other magnetic currents were forming.

Keiko started scrolling through the data that the sensors had gathered during the burst. "This is fantas-
144 tic! Density rates, velocity, units of charge, molecule sequences..." She glanced over at Dax, who was sitting bolt upright, staring at the viewscreen. Keiko checked the viewer but there was nothing unusual about the sparkling plasma.

"Dax? Is something wrong?" Dax continued to stare, but as Keiko reached out to touch her, she suddenly shook her head. "Holding constant vector," she announced.

"What happened?" Keiko asked.

"We went through the magnetic loop." Dax gave her a quizzical glance.

"I think you were dazed," Keiko told her. "You couldn't hear me. Then you snapped out of it." Dax instantly ordered, "Medical database, scan me for any unusual readings." "Mental processes are undergoing heightened arousal," the computer replied blandly. "There is no biophysical damage." Dax seemed relieved. "I think the electrical stimulation of the radiation acted like sensory overload.

You better take the helm for the next loop, just in case it happens again." Keiko nodded, but she asked, "Are you sure you want to go through another one?" "You need at least three for a proper test sample, don't you?" "Yes," Keiko admitted. "Four would be better." "Then we'll do a few more. Don't worry about me.

Joined Trill are especially sensitive to radiation exposure because of the neural links to the symbiont." Dax patted her stomach fondly. "Our skull bones filter random particles, but there's not much protection down here." Keiko ordered the computer to put a constant medical scan on Dax, just to be sure. "One more time may be enough." "Then get ready, we're entering a current now." "This area seems to be more active," Keiko agreed.

"Let's hope the next place is less active." Keiko accepted the helm as the magnetic current grew stronger and their trajectory swung into line with the strongest particle flow. She tried to watch Dax and the sensors at the same time, as Dax recalibrated the plasma trap, attempting to capture the higher frequency ranges.

Keiko barely had time to nod her thanks. "Stepped leader forming." The flash was muted to an acceptable level so this time she could see Dax briefly shake her head as if her ears were ringing. Then she froze, staring.

"Computer, analyze Dax's condition," Keiko ordered.

"There is a disturbance in mental processes caused by a paroxysmal malfunction of cerebral nerve cells."
"Is it dangerous?" Keiko asked.

"The seizure is not life threatening," the computer responded.

Dax blinked her eyes, coming out of it. She automatically tried to input helm orders and was confused.
"Helm is not responding!" "You gave helm control to me before we entered the loop," Keiko reminded her.

"I did?" Dax seemed disoriented.

"You shook your head after the flash, as if something hurt. Then you blanked out for--how long, computer?" "The seizure lasted for ten point three seconds," the computer responded.

"How am I now?" Dax asked, to both Keiko and the computer.

"Elevated neural activity is currently within acceptable limits," the computer replied.

"That's three samples," Keiko said. "Let's try to hold position here until I get some of this data analyzed."
"I can agree with that." Dax rubbed her temples and was still frowning as she set the helm to track the slow drift of the most recent dye marker. The turbulence gave it an erratic path, and Keiko kept getting distracted by the sight of the bobbing marker. It seemed to dance and pirouette like a Pied Piper leading them off the edge of a cliff.

"You want something to drink?" Dax asked, getting up and stretching. When the uniform got in her way, she opened the jacket and shrugged it off, leaving only her black undershirt.

"Hot vanilla milk," she said, standing at the small replicator. "Are you hungry?" she asked Keiko.

146 147 "Just some tea right now." She couldn't help asking, "What is hot vanilla milk?" "You've never had it?" Dax said. "I'm used to the dairy products of Trill, but the chemical structure is basically the same. The replicators make a pretty good mix." "I've never heard of it," Keiko said.

"Julian says this is the Earth version." Dax set the teacup on the lower console. "My mother gave it to me when I was young, and even though it isn't the same, it has a similar effect." "What kind of effect?" Dax smiled into her cup. "Oh, comfort, I suppose.

It's one of those things I drank when I was sick or feeling bad." Keiko relaxed somewhat, reminded that Dax was biologically the same age as herself. She usually seemed much older.

Keiko raised her teacup in return. "Tea, for me, is also a comfort food." She sipped the hot fragrant blend. "My grandmother taught me how to make tea.

Not just how to blend the leaves, but the experience of making tea. The setting, the motions, the flow and ebb of the experience." They sipped companionably in silence, watching their consoles. Keiko's biometric program had accepted the data as adequate and the systematic comparison was under way. Dax was looking much better, as if she had recovered from the disorientation of the seizures. For a brief moment, Keiko was at peace, not thinking of their situation, but only about now.

She sighed. "I haven't had the chance to make tea for Miles since I got back." "Is that something you always do?" Keiko nodded. "It's... important." "It sounds lovely," Dax said.

"It is." Keiko felt a pang of guilt that she hadn't tried harder to prepare tea for Miles this time. She hadn't even thought about it. She hoped that wasn't a sign of something emotionally larger and much worse waiting in the wings for them. As a couple, they had already suffered plenty to last for the rest of their lives.

"The chief must like it that you go to such an effort," Dax said.

"Yes..." Keiko knew Dax's curiosity was personal. After all, she was good friends with her husband.

That's why she answered honestly. "But even after all these years, I don't think Miles understands." "It's not exactly a game of darts," Dax agreed.

"I used to play darts with him once in a while, but lately--" Keiko was distracted by the program sequence. "We have insufficient data for a complete analysis, but the computer found three biometric programs that correlated as high as sixty-four percent.

Two bacteria groups and a species of airborne fungi from Tantrus Two." "Bacteria and fungi." Dax considered that.

"Organisms that transform organic materials into inorganic chemicals. That makes sense since the plasma state is inherently destructive, causing matter to lose internal cohesion, transforming into random chains of excited particles." "Yes, but there are some differences." Keiko indicated the flashing portions of the graphs and equations. "Some of the pattern sequences match up when they're reversed. See where the blue-green algae fixes molecular nitrogen from water, forming ammonia.

Here the plasma is also undergoing nitrogen fixation, but the sequences that remain are organic catalytic patterns." "These are carbon sequences," Dax agreed. "Do you think they're some sort of enzyme?" "Actually it's more fundamental than that. These sequences are for plasmalogens. Naturally occurring phosphoglycerides, which, under certain conditions, release aldehyde, an organic compound. It's similar to the fatty acids found in eggs and red blood cells." "And brain tissue," Dax agreed, following the biology. "According to these readings, the plasmalogens are mostly restricted to the magnetic currents." "Exactly like bioacids in carbon-based life-forms, conducting nerve impulses and transporting nutrients between tissues and organs." She was literally on the edge of her seat. "Don't you see? Despite the extreme ionization--or maybe because of it--inorganic material is re-forming into particle chains of neural lipids.

That's the basis of carbon-organic matter." "But this is plasma, not an organism." "This plasma exhibits all of the biochemical processes of life." Keiko could tell Dax didn't understand the magnitude of their discovery. "It's also in accordance with Yano's theory, which holds that the key to the transition from inorganic to organic activity lies in plasma. He did one study that recorded panspermia on a planet that had been sterile until a plasma storm swept through the system." Dax sat forward. "It sounds as if you're saying the plasma is a life-form." "Yes. I think it could be an organism in its own right." "That's a big jump, Keiko, from plasmalogens to life-form." "Look at the data. The biometric analysis proves the plasma mass is creating life-sustaining patterns and has an internal organization. Perhaps when this much matter becomes highly charged, a sort of massive protoorganism is formed." "It would take extremely heavy matter to sustain itself," Dax said. "But if the plasma was blown off during the supernova of a neutron

star, the carbon particles would have started out superdense and superheated, and it would have the extra energy of the pulsar propelling it away." "Perhaps there's some way we can affect it," Keiko said. "Maybe make it change course." "From inside?" Dax asked, making it clear what she thought of that suggestion.

Keiko sighed. There was nothing more she could accomplish drifting here.

Dax must have come to the same conclusion. "Let's see if we can confirm your theory. If this is an organism, a few more bursts will help fill in those gaps." Keiko accepted the helm, though she knew the radiation was harming Dax. "Why don't you put on a stasis belt? It will reduce the level of your exposure." "I agree. And you should wear one, too." Dax got up to fetch the belts from a compartment. "It looks as if we're going to be in here for a while." Keiko accepted the device as Dax wrapped one around her waist, switching it on. Keiko usually didn't like the tingling feeling that ran over her skin as the stasis was activated, but this time it was reassuring to be reminded she was protected. Why had she waited so long to get pregnant again? But what other choice did she have?

It was Dax who gave Keiko a grin of encouragement as they intersected another magnetic current. As usual, their vector veered into the angle of its directional flow.

At the flash, Keiko held her breath, watching Dax.

She shook her head a few times, but she didn't black out. "I'll take helm now." "Transferring helm," Keiko said automatically. "I guess that--" "--stasis belt helped," Dax finished. "I knew you were going to say that." Keiko was busy with the readings. "Sensors have detected the first dye marker! The others are almost out of range."

Dax compared the marker map with starcharts of the sector. "The markers are moving. It's impossible to tell whether we're near the middle again, or maybe towards the back." "I wonder..." Keiko started. "If we had more than four reference points, maybe we could plot the internal patterns of magnetic currents." "Then we could figure out the quickest way out of here," Dax agreed.

"We'd need to drop a lot more markers," Keiko warned. "That means going through more loops. Are you sure you feel up to it?" "Of course." Dax didn't seem bothered by the idea of additional radiation exposure.

Keiko hesitated. "Computer, what is Dax's current mental state?" "Neural arousal is subsiding from the upper levels of acceptable parameters," the computer replied.

"I'm fine," Dax insisted. "Keiko, if you don't want to expose yourself, just say so." "It's not that" "I've known all along that the loops are our only way out," Dax added.

"A few minutes ago you were resisting the idea," Keiko protested.

"Well, we've run out of other options. We know the station can't survive the energy surges inside this storm." Dax gazed at the plasma field on the viewer.

"I'm sure the answer lies in those loops. It feels familiar somehow." Now Keiko was really worried. "That doesn't sound like scientific reasoning to me." "Do I have to make it an order?" Dax was suddenly very much in command.

Keiko stared at her, but all she could think about was Molly. "No. Let's start plotting markers."

CHAPTER 11

MOLLY POKED HER finger into Odo's side, then watched the hole fill in when she removed it. She kept testing different spots, as if trying to catch him in a place where it wasn't soft. Odo wondered if the feeling was comparable to being tickled. It certainly seemed to give Molly pleasure.

She giggled and darted out of reach as he made a halfhearted attempt to catch her. Then she ran up and gave him a particularly hard poke, sinking her finger into the knuckle.

"Ouch," Odo said mildly. Molly quickly pulled her finger back, looking up at him in concern. He clapped his hand over the spot as if he were mortally wounded. "You got me." He said it rather flatly, but Molly laughed in delight. She had been saying, "You got me!" ever since she started playing a game in which she was the criminal and he had to capture her. In reality, Molly played while Odo attempted to corral her in the area behind his desk for safety's sake. He wondered when she would go to sleep.

When he had time, he accessed data on child rearing, finding some helpful advice on kindergarten-age children. The word meant children's garden in an old Earth tongue, and the basic principle was to encourage children towards self-understanding through play activities and freedom rather than the imposition of adult ideas.

After he read that, Odo let Molly go all the way to the doors so she could look through the glass. The constant shadowy flickers showed people hurrying past, and all sorts of loud noises echoed inside. It was enough to keep anybody awake, much less a confused child.

Since Molly seemed anxious whenever he wasn't near her, he remained at his desk while one of his lieutenants performed the hourly inspection of the brig. He knew what it was like to want constant reassurance, remembering how he had been left alone night after night during those early, confusing months after he had been found.

Yet humanoids had given him far more than his own people ever had. He felt he had a right to be bitter when he reflected on the differences between humanoid child care, which emphasized parental aid and a secure environment, and the Founder's habit of sending their infant shapeshifters to the other end of the galaxy. Theoretically the infants were supposed to make their way back home with the information they acquired along the way, but for a long time Odo had been wondering how large a percentage of their children were lost forever.

If Molly was an example, then loving attention was a far better solution. The girl was rambunctious but her innocent reliance on him had sprung forth with hardly any effort on his part.

As he organized the guard details, he still found time to fondly watch her play with her fruit cocktail.

After reading that nutrition was vital for a child her age, he had been vigilant in plying her with the recommended foods. But she was more interested in splattering him with the juice than in eating, and he was fairly certain it was because she liked to watch the drops fall through him. He tried, but he couldn't block his instinctive reaction to shapeshift around foreign substances, especially when he kept getting distracted by work.

Yet when he received a call from O'Brien's quarters, he was vaguely disappointed at the thought of the

chief coming for Molly.

But when Odo answered, Captain IIs appeared on the viewer instead of O'Brien. Odo hadn't met the captain personally, but he recognized her from the Star fleet records he had accessed when the Ceres was towed in.

"Security Chief Odo, here," he said courteously.

"Is there something I can do for you, Captain IIs?" "I've been informed that the Klingon yacht has left DS9." She was composed, but the weary droop of her eyes and slight swaying indicated that she had been awakened with the bad news.

"Yes, I regret to inform you that the Katon has been destroyed." Odo saw her sit back. "The locking clamps were blown and before they could be recaptured, Captain Alons initiated a warp breach. The Klingon crew were beamed aboard the Defiant and are currently in--" "Sick bay," she finished. "On the Defiant. So I've heard. And my crew has heard. You know, many of them blame the Katon for the attack on the Ceres." "I believe Commander Worf has not yet finished his investigation." Odo was distracted for a moment by Molly, as she crawled under the desk. He didn't like the idea of letting her sit on the floor, but it was better than fetching her away from the door every time it opened. "Commander Worf is on the Defiant if you would like to contact him." "Perhaps I will," the captain said. "I don't want my crew getting in the way of his investigation. Tempers are running high, and there were terrible... losses." Odo considered going down to the Defiant himself but Molly bumping around on his feet reminded him that he had to remain here. "Perhaps you should order your crew members to stay away from the Defiant." Captain IIs actually started to smile. "Chief, you don't know my crew. I didn't mean to imply that they would cause trouble. I expect quite the contrary. They

IHE IEMPEST may feel it's prudent to act as back-up to your security, in order to assist you." "I understand." Odo no longer felt sorry for Captain IIs. Even without a functioning starship, she still had her command and her crew. "I will inform Commander Worf." "Thank you," IIs said simply. Then she yawned, a perfect expression of humanoid abandonment, something Odo treasured almost as much as a sneeze.

"Excuse me," she added. "I'm going to find a flat spot and get back to sleep. Please contact me with any new developments." "Yes, Captain." It wasn't until she signed off that he remembered he hadn't asked about O'Brien.

"Computer, where is the location of chief... of operations?" he asked, not wanting to say his name in front of Molly.

"The chief is currently in command of Ops." Apparently he was going to have custody of Molly for a while longer. She peeked up between his legs, giving him a sunny grin. He couldn't help thinking that it wouldn't be so bad.

The viewscreen signaled again. "Kira to Odo." Odo instantly reached out to activate visuals. Kira was in Ops, and had been since midday, despite the fact that this was supposed to be her day off. Yet she still looked as energetic as when he had seen her at the staff briefing.

"What can I do for you, Major?" he asked formally.

"I'm arranging the quarters-sharing for the evacuees, and I noticed that you gave up your place to that
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Marlkin family-crew. Where were you planning to sleep tonight?" "Oh, any corner will do for me," he said offhandedly.

"Come on, Odo. It's Kira you're talking to." She gave him a wry grin. "I know how much you like your privacy." "The Mafikins were in need. And I told them that quarters would be found for them." "I think it's typical of you, though no one else would know it. I also think you should stay in my quarters tonight." She lifted her eyes to the heavens.

"I've given my bedroom to those Bajoran diplomats who got stuck here, but you can always take the plant out of your bucket and bring it over to my place." For a moment Odo was tempted. "That won't be necessary, Major." "I'm offering because you're my friend, Odo. Not because I'm in charge of making sure everyone, including you, has a place to sleep." His eyes lingered on the small closet where he had stashed his bucket earlier. "I've already arranged to stay here, just in case there's an emergency." Part of him expected her to continue urging him until he accepted, but she was abruptly summoned away by O'Brien. "I've got to go now. If you change your mind, come on by." "Thank you're" he started to say. But she ended the transmission.

He stared at the viewer for a few moments. Why had he hesitated to accept her invitation? He would like nothing better than to be near Kira, yet the idea of desolidifying for the night in front of anyone, even her, was discomfiting, almost terrifying in its intimacy.

Yet he wanted to.

Molly held up a data clip. "What's this?" Odo recognized a security report he had lost last week. So that's what had happened to it. He had hated his sneaking suspicions that Worf had somehow gotten hold of it. "It's a report for Captain Sisko on proper delegation of standard security procedures.

May I have it back?" She nodded, placing it on his knee.

"Are you tired, Molly?" She happily shook her head. "I go to bed when Mommy reads me a story." Odo had been avoiding mommy questions all evening. "I can read you a story." She considered that. "Daddy does my stories at the spider." "Spider? You mean an insect?" he asked, wondering if he should try to get her out from under his desk.

It felt odd conversing through his knees with her.

"Mommy and I go to the spider." Molly was sitting cross-legged, and she grabbed onto his shoes, onto him, as she rocked back and forth. "It's shiny, and the stars are alllll around us." "That's the station," Odo told her. "Deep Space Nine. You're on the station." "No," she said seriously. "Mommy and I go to the spider to see Daddy." "Don't you remember?" he asked. "Your father is here. He brought you to me." She wasn't rocking any more, and she started to frown. "Where's Mommy?" "She's away on a mission. She went to look at the storm." Molly didn't seem to understand, so he added, "Usually you go with your mother when she's on a mission. Like when you go to Bajor." "Mommy went without me?" Molly asked, her voice rising in sudden understanding. "She's gone?" "No, it's not like that. She didn't go to Bajor. She's not far away." Odo knew he would be sweating if that were possible. "You'll see her soon." Molly seemed to draw into herself, peeking up at him. "Did my mommy go away because I was bad?" "Of course not." Odo leaned forward, realizing the girl had tears in her eyes. He pushed the chair away and got down on the floor next to her. "Your mother didn't leave because you were bad. In fact, I bet your mother wishes she were here with you right now." She sniffled, looking as if she wanted to believe him.

A voice carefully asked, "Chief?." and Odo realized that the door was open.

Odo stood up with as much composure as he could muster. "Yes, Zeischner?" Security Guard Zeischner and his partner Larah were ushering in a group of young humanoids. Odo counted eight in all. Then he saw Jake, standing behind the rest, ducking his head.

He contented himself with a hard look at Sisko's son, then turned to hear Zeischner's report. "We found them chasing a Sattar through the habitat ring.

Apparently there was a 'deal' that went sour. The Sattar got away, but I've got a good description." Odo called Jake forward. "What happened?" Jake glanced nervously back at the others. But when Odo didn't budge, he seemed resigned to confessing everything. "Col and Nesser wanted to play a joke on their friends. They're with the students' survey tour from University at Betazed. I didn't think--It was only a joke." Odo examined the group of apparently bright young people who were looking rather ashamed of themselves. But one woman flung her white-blond hair over her shoulder, glaring at the others. "Do you have something to add?" Odo asked her.

"Yes, I do," she said, instantly stepping forward.

"I'm Drennela Fort, and I must say we wouldn't be here if these children had tried to control themselves.

I'm sick of their tricks and constant baiting--" "Give it a rest, Dren!" another girl interrupted.

"You don't get it worse than anyone else." Others also chimed in, dismissing Drennela's complaint.

The tallest young man, the one Jake had called Col, told Odo, "We're supposed to test one another. It's a part of gaining control of our empathic abilities. Only some people are too stuck up to--" "Shut up!" the other girl interrupted. "That won't help anything." "I suppose you know exactly what to do," Col retorted sarcastically. "How many times have you been arrested, Ransi?" Odo broke in, "Perhaps I should ask all of you that question." Security Guard Zeischner smiled at Larah without letting the youngsters see him. Jake had the grace to look contrite, giving Odo an apologetic shrug. "It was only a joke." "You've said that three times," Odo reminded him.

"Exactly what happened?" "Meln and Ransi pulled something on Col and Nesser earlier." Jake glanced over his shoulder and must have thought better of beginning so far back.

"Anyway, they decided to get even by turning over their cots." "I see." It sounded like the same thing as Dax disarranging his quarters. "I have never understood the desire to interfere with other people's personal belongings." The Betazoids exchanged glances among themselves as if they had never thought of it that way.

Ransi simply repeated, "We train our shields by testing each other." "We're in an emergency situation," Drennela reminded them. "This is not the time for petty training exercises." Odo tended to agree, but their arguing was serving no useful purpose. "And the Sattar?" he prodded.

"How did he get involved in your training exercise?" "It wouldn't be any good if Ransi could just ask the computer which one of us came into the room," Jake explained. "So we found this Setter, a kid who was hanging around. He went in and turned the cots over." "You let a Sattar into your quarters?" Odo slowly asked.

Jake quickly assured him, "Col and I stood in the door to watch. He turned over the ones we told him to,

and... well..." "Go on," Odo ordered.

"He suggested that we take something and hide it.

Col saidw" Col spoke up for himself. "I told him to take Drennela's tricorder. But that was it! Ask Jake. I don't know what happened to the other things." Jake was nodding agreement. "I didn't see him take anything else." "You told him to take my tricorder?" Drennela demanded. "How could you? It's the only one I've got." "I meant to get it back," Col insisted. "I was reaching for it as he came outside. But then, those other people were coming, and the three of you were right behind them. We were hiding around the corner." "I only turned away for a second," Jake chimed in.

"And he was gone," Odo finished for them. "Jake, what possessed you to have anything to do with a Sattar? You of all people should know better." "I know," he agreed. "But it didn't seem like a deal.

I mean, we only paid him a few replicator rations for doing it." "A nice haul," Odo commented. "Give Zeischner a list of the missing items and we'll try to locate this Sattar. We may be able to catch him when he uses those replicator rations." Odo sat down, noticing that Molly was lying on the blanket he had found for her.

She was nearly asleep. He realized he had completely forgotten about her, and it gave him a frightening jolt.

Drennela stepped forward. "Will I get my tricorder back?" Odo didn't think it was likely, but she was looking at him with such plaintive hope in her eyes. "Perhaps.

Though usually in cases such as this, the items are immediately sold. Even if we catch the thief, he probably no longer has your tricorder." Drennela stepped back without a word, but her pout was distinctly reproachful, as if he should be able to do something about it. Odo didn't even have to look at Jake for him to offer, "I'll buy you another one." Col was nearby, and he also agreed to help replace the tricorder.

"I had data on it," Drennela said to no one in particular. "Most of it was on chips, thank the stars!

But I did lose everything from today's work." Jake apologized to the young woman, but she didn't seem interested in hearing it.

She was first in line to report her losses, while Jake hesitated in front of Odo's desk~ "I'm sorry, Odo. He was just a kid and I thought I had everything under control." "You were dealing with a professional," Odo re- minded him. "These others could file charges against you and Col for aiding and abetting burglary." Now Jake really looked nervous. But the Betazoids didn't even consider the suggestion. They were obviously annoyed but they blamed themselves and Col more than Jake.

"I'll pay for everything that was stolen," Jake recklessly vowed to the rest.

Security Guard Zeischner raised one corner of his mouth, tapping the tricorder. "You're talking about quite a sum here, young man." "I don't care. It's my fault," Jake insisted. "I should have known better." Odo was glad to see that Col was a steady lad, as he also pledged to replace the stolen items. Yet his forehead creased on hearing the approximate total, and Ransi compassionately rubbed his arm, whispering assurances to him.

"I'll have to put this incident on report," Odo told them. "Both your university guide and Captain Sisko

will be informed." Jake sagged slightly at the news, but he didn't protest. "For now, I will trust you on your own recognizance. However, no more 'training exercises' on this station. Do you understand?" The students were nodding in absolute agreement, eager to get away. Odo held out one hand to stop Jake.

"As for you, I strongly suggest you return to your own quarters." "That's exactly what I had in mind," Jake agreed with a sigh.

Odo glanced down at Molly, almost asking Jake to take the girl with him so she could be put to bed properly. But that was out of the question. He couldn't tell O'Brien that his daughter had been sent off with Jake after he was brought in as an accessory to burglary.

"Go home," Odo told him.

Molly opened her eyes. "Is it time to go home?" "Not yet. You go back to sleep." Jake look startled and leaned forward to see over the edge of the desk.

"It's Molly O'Brien," Odo explained.

Jake's eyes widened. "Dax and Keiko aren't back yet?" Odo sharply shook his head, motioning obliquely to the girl. Molly popped her head out, blinking at Jake.

"Hi," Jake said. "Remember me?" She barely nodded as she crawled from under the desk and started to climb onto Odo's lap.

At first Odo tried to stop her, but she wiggled half way up and then he had to help her the rest of the way so she wouldn't fall.

"Is she okay here?" Jake asked. "If you want, I can take her home with me." "No, she seems to be settling down here." "Yeah, she does seem comfortable. Funny, I never imagined you as a dad before." Jake hesitated as he turned away. "Thanks, Odo." Odo didn't quite know what to do as the girl squirmed around, trying to get comfortable on his lap. "For what?"

Jake smiled. "You didn't make me feel any more like an idiot than I deserved." "Humph!" Odo glanced away. "Maybe I should be tougher on you. Then things like this wouldn't happen." "Nah. Wait 'til I'm getting arrested every week." He cast his eyes down. "At least you know this won't happen again." Odo nodded, making it clear by the way he watched Jake leave that he would have to prove himself. Yet to give the boy credit, he had never been much of a nuisance even when Nog was around to help him get in trouble.

Molly finally found a position she liked, tucked into the curve of his arm. Her head leaned against his chest and he could only see her profile--the upturned nose and chin, with her small mouth slightly open and moistly pink.

He gently stroked a hand against her long dark hair, held back in a thick braid. It was so silky that he could feel each strand against his palm. Then he brushed her rounded cheek with his knuckle. She shifted but kept her eyes closed, lying with complete trust in his arms.

He didn't want to disturb her, so he merely nodded to Zeischner and Larah as they left the office to return to their post. He was grateful they pretended to ignore the girl sleeping on his lap.

When Chief O'Brien finally appeared, Odo was relieved that he would finally be able to move again.

But it happened too fast. The chief burst through the door with apologies and explanations, rushing across the room to take Molly. Odo handed her over and felt as if some part of himself had accidentally left with her.

He didn't realize how warm she was until she was gone.

"I mean that, Odo," O'Brien was repeating.

"You're the best. I don't know what I would have done without you." Molly didn't even wake up. Her head was lying on O'Brien's shoulder, the dark braid swinging free.

"It was no bother," Odo said shortly, sitting back down in his chair.

"If I were you," O'Brien said. "I'd get some sleep.

The storm is scheduled to hit sometime tomorrow morning." Odo nodded. "Of course." He pretended to be absorbed in his monitor until O'Brien left. But he watched the father and daughter through the windows, heading towards the habitat ring. Then he glanced lower, where the glass was smudged with tiny fingerprints, each one as distinct as the little girl herself.

"Get some sleep," Odo murmured, repeating O'Brien's advice to himself. How naturally it had rolled off the chief's tongue, as if he expected Odo to lie down in a bed rather than pour himself into a bucket. And for some reason, the slip didn't annoy him.

It reminded him of Kira's offer. Much as he wanted

to accept, he decided that it would be more prudent to stay here where he could be summoned at a moment's notice.

Odo shook himself and called his relief. O'Brien was right, he was tired, and there was a big storm coming.

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CHAPTER 12

O'BRIEN KNEW HE must be tired from how heavy Molly felt. He gripped his wrists, supporting her more firmly. She couldn't have gained weight in the past few hours.

She briefly woke and murmured, "Daddy," then she was asleep again.

She was a good girl. "No bother at all," Odo had said.

O'Brien knew this must be hard on his daughter.

She was used to being with caregivers, both real and holographic, but not at night or for such long stretches of time. Besides, Odo hardly qualified as a caregiver, though Molly seemed none the worse for her stay with him. At least she was sleeping.

He just hoped Keiko got home before Molly woke

THE I EMPEST up. They still hadn't heard from the Rubicon, and it was hours past the checkpoint. As soon as Sisko had returned to Ops, O'Brien had demanded to know when they were going to search for the survey team.

Sisko had responded by relieving him of duty and sending him home to get some rest.

O'Brien had no choice but to fetch Molly, but he couldn't take her home. Captain Iis had vacated the Ceres only after O'Brien gave her the stress evaluation report indicating that the damaged vessel was particularly vulnerable to shock waves. He had offered his own quarters for the use of Captain Iis and her senior staff, pointing out how dangerous it would be if the scout broke loose from its moorings. Even the repair crews had been recalled until after the storm was past.

Somehow he had found time between the various disasters to fetch a few things for himself and Molly.

He picked up the bundle from a maintenance panel inside the habitat ring, and headed toward their temporary quarters. Major Kira had put them in with Commander Worf.

He had to ring the bell twice. "Hello, Worf? It's Chief O'Brien." Finally he heard, "Enter." The door opened, but the brooding tension in the darkened room made him hesitate to carry Molly inside. The front of Worf's uniform was partly open, and the knot on his ponytail had loosened. O'Brien hastily looked away from something disgusting that quivered on the plate in his hand.

That's when he saw the Sattar. She bristled, baring her teeth, indicating she was prepared to protect the other Sattar. By contrast, the older one was reclining back in a chair, carefully positioned to have a view of the entire room.

"Kira assigned us to these quarters," O'Brien explained. Cautiously he entered, wondering how many were here. There were always more Sattar around than you could see. His hand securely held Molly's back just in case he needed to do some quick maneuvering. "The major said you were the only one still alone." Worf made a noise of disgust. "I apologize. I neglected to notify Ops that Captain Ari and his senior mate were staying here." "Great!" O'Brien exclaimed. "Now what are we going to do? Captain Iis and her staff are already in my quarters." "Stay here," Worf told him. "You and the child may use my bed." O'Brien's irritation vanished. "We can't kick you out of your own bed. Just give me some blankets and I'll settle her down out here--" "This is where we're sleeping," the female Sattar interrupted. "We weren't offered the bed." "The child may have it, Cali," the other Sattar chided.

Worf ignored them both, telling O'Brien, "I intend to return to the Defiant tonight." O'Brien knew him well enough to recognize that tone, cautioning for silence in front of the Sattar. He had followed the disaster with the Katon from Ops, and he could understand why Worf preferred to remain near the Klingon prisoners.

"Are you sure?" he asked out of pure form.

Worf nodded shortly, sitting down at the table to finish his meal.

O'Brien didn't like the idea of rooming with a pack of Sattar, but at least he had his tool kit with the locking seals.

He carried Molly into the bedroom, and gently removed the clothes from her limp body. He had brought her favorite nightgown and the stuffed hippo she liked to sleep with. At least, it used to be her favorite.

Things changed so quickly with his daughter, and he hadn't seen her in a couple of months.

As he pulled the covers over her, making sure she was far enough away from the edge, he wished he had taken better care of her today. He couldn't remember the last time he had her all to himself. Why couldn't it happen when he had time to enjoy it?

He checked the room with his tricorder to make sure there were no Sattar lurking in the vents.

Outside, he could hear Cali's voice rising, "... and you're out to get them! Just the way you trapped us here when you thought the Reaper attacked the Ceres." As he closed the door behind him, O'Brien made sure Molly wasn't disturbed by the noise. But she hardly moved, clutching the hippo close to her chest.

Worf briefly glanced up as O'Brien returned. He was slightly hunched over the plate, steadily eating as he tried to ignore the Sattar.

"The only reason you let us go," Cali insisted, "is because now you have the Klingons." "Cali, please," the elder Sattar admonished.

"He's the one who should be afraid," Cali snapped over her shoulder. "He destroyed their yacht! We're lucky he didn't have time to blow up the Reaper first." Since Worf wasn't taking her seriously, O'Brien decided it was none of his concern. Just another crazy evacuee. He had seen plenty of them today, and this Sattar was not the worst by a long shot. He went to the replicator to call up some mutton stew. A hot shower was high on his list but when there was a contest involving his stomach, food always won out.

Despite Worf's lack of interest--or maybe because of it--Cali wouldn't back down. She took a few steps toward the table, physically confronting him. "I can prove you canceled the departure clearance for the Reaper. You wanted a Klingon suspect, so you planted evidence on our transport. But when the Katon arrived, you decided they were a better target." "That is absurd." Worf was finally provoked into pushing away his plate.

"I saw it with my own eyes," she insisted. "You ordered traces of photons from massive disruptor discharges to be found on our hull so you could prove we attacked the Ceres." Worf's hand smacked the table. "You lie!" "I saw it in your files," she told him, smugly satisfied with herself.

"You accessed my files?" Worf's voice changed as he swiftly went to his computer console. From the way he struggled with the commands, O'Brien figured that somebody had disrupted his personal system.

Worf started to rise, his fingers splayed as if to grab the Sattar and shake the sass out of her. The replicator chimed, and O'Brien took his bowl of stew, leaning against the wall where he could keep one eye on the bedroom door and the other on the action. He hadn't seen anything so entertaining since Leeta had cut down the fast and insistent advances of the King of Aruth, a "moon-sized planet in the dead end of space," as she had put it. Among other things. The king had slunk out of Quark's never to return.

But Worf wasn't as good at controlling his rage.

"You had no right to access my files!" Call tossed her mane. "You broke faith with us first." Captain Ari sighed as he wearily stood up. "On behalf of my crew, Commander, I apologize for the intrusion. I did not realize what Cali had done until I woke from my nap." Worf returned to his files, trying to determine the extent of damage that had been done. "I did not file this report on photon traces. You planted this! And you accuse me of treachery." Cali started to laugh. She turned away, collapsing on the couch and holding her sides. Worf awkwardly stood there.

"Look at you!" she cried out as she rolled. "The big, bad Klingon! Don't like the taste of your own medicine, do you?" "Cali!" Ari exclaimed sadly. "Commander Worf was generous enough to lend us his quarters. Why repay his trust and tarnish the name of the Reaper with this idiotic stunt?" "It's no big thing," she denied. "Besides, I couldn't help it. He's been such a mew-face over everything." She propped her head up to give Worf a self-righteous look. "I think it's because he's lost everything. What the Klingons didn't take, he gave away to that couple on Earth, including his son. Have you ever heard of anything so vile?" "Enough? Worf reached the couch in two strides.

"Just like a Klingon," she sneered up at him. "First try threats, then turn belligerent." Worf seemed to clench up. "Do not provoke me." "I'm stating a fact." She looked him over. "And you're undoubtedly the most Klingon Klingon I've ever met. Belligerent to the core." Her finger pointed at him. "You're so belligerent, you're fighting all the other Klingons, your own people! You can't even make peace with one other Klingon, can you? I call that--" "Silence!" Worf must have realized he had shouted. Nobody said a word. Captain Ari sighed again as he sat back down, resigned to facing the consequences. O'Brien ate a few bites of his stew, figuring it was best for him to stay out of it.

Cali waved a hand at Worf, turning to her captain.

"I knew he was too much of a \$po'noS to do anything about it." Worf stepped forward, as if that was too much. He took hold of her arm to pull her off the couch. "Get up, Sattar. I could charge you with trespassing--" "You let go of me!" she sneered, tensing.

"You will do as I--" Worf choked as Cali slammed her foot into his stomach.

O'Brien spit out a mouthful of stew, as the Sattar sprang to the back of the couch. She spun on one leg, landing a vicious kick to Worf's jaw.

Worf staggered sideways at the unexpected blow, even though he was also folded in over his stomach from the first well-aimed kick.

O'Brien flung his bowl away and grabbed the Sattar from behind. He was careful to use a security hold.

She might be small, but she sure packed a mean bite.

"I don't like being pawed by Klingons," Cali spit out with a bitter laugh.

O'Brien was relieved when she didn't resist him.

Once he was sure she was secure, he remembered to swallow what was left of the stew in his mouth.

Worf could not breathe. His world shrank to the constricted opening in his throat as he tried to force air into his lungs. He bent over as far as he could without falling. Dimly he could hear her laughter. He would rather drop dead than let that veqlarh bring him to his knees.

Desperately wheezing, he staggered to the desk.

"Should I call... security?" O'Brien asked. It sounded as if he had been about to say "sick bay." "I will take her. To the brig," Worf managed to rasp out. He removed a pair of stasis restraints from a drawer and tossed them to O'Brien. Then he sat down, propping himself up on the desk as he watched the chief attach the restraints around the Sattar's wrists. She was actually smiling, as if she was putting up with this

because she thought it was funny.

"This is one of your senior mates?" O'Brien asked the captain. Ari was holding one hand over his eyes as if he were disgusted by what had happened. "I'd hate to see what the rest of your crew is like." "A lot you know!" Cali taunted.

It only took one look from Captain Ari to make Cali shut up. It reminded Worf of Captain Picard's expression on those rare occasions when he was thoroughly disappointed in him. "Cali, you should consider your position if I do not find it in my best interests to defend you in this crime." "It was nothing," Cali protested, suddenly sounding much more worried. "I just wanted to let some light into that vacuum he's been living in." Captain Ari deliberately turned away as if distancing himself from both her and her actions. "Again, you have my deepest apologies, Commander." Worf had had enough of this. He grunted, pushing himself to his feet. "Cali, senior mate, you are under arrest for assaulting a commanding officer of this station." Cali cast a longing look at her captain, but she could only see the back of his mane. Worf took Cali from O'Brien. She twisted once in protest, then stopped, watching Ari the entire time.

O'Brien sighed as he went to pick up the bowl, scraping some of the splattered stew off the rug. "I'm going to bed. This has been too exciting for me. It's so kind of you to let us stay, Worf." But when Worf dragged a subdued Cali to the door, O'Brien added, "Let me know if Sisko decides to take the Defiant out. I'd like to go look for the Rubicon." Worf glanced back. The chief had served as an unexpected support, refraining from calling security and allowing him to recover himself. "I will inform the captain." He forced himself to stand straight, ignoring the shooting pains in his stomach as he led Cali down the corridor. He would not allow her to think she had injured him in any way. Now that Captain Ari was out of sight, she was not acting nearly apologetic enough.

At least his mind was clearing. As they entered the turbolift, he could not resist asking, "Why did you attack me?" Cali shrugged. "I don't know." Worf waited, but she had nothing more to say for herself. "Perhaps you are stupid after all." Her nostrils flared. "You know, Klingons always grab Sattar the way you did, over the shoulder, pressing your fingers into our necks, moving us around as if we were pets. With less respect, because you know we don't dare bite you. A Klingon crushed my shoulder bone the day they took my mother away." She shrugged, pressing her lips together for a moment to hide the sudden trembling. "I don't know.

Ever since then I can't stand to be shoved around." Defiantly she raised her eyes.

"I was not aware of that," he told her.

Cali sniffed, tossing off her own words. "You are a soft one, aren't you? But I think there's fire under all that mush. I bet if you could have gotten off a return, it would have been a good one." She grinned up at him in a completely infuriating way. He clenched his teeth together, wincing at the pain. She had really clipped his jaw.

He could not wait to get rid of her. He shoved her along faster, though taking care to touch only her wrists. He had a sneaking desire to belt her, just to make things even. After all, as Riker would say, she had cold-cocked him. But he relegated his fury into plans to use her image in his next combat program.

Zeischner was seated at the security desk. "We were looking for a male Sattar, Commander." "I know nothing about that," Worf told the guard.

"Book Cali, senior mate of the Reaper, for assaulting a commanding officer of this station." "Who's

pressing charges?" Zeischner asked as he came around the desk to take custody of Cali. "I am." Worf ignored the man's surprise.

"TII put her in with a Risan couple," Zeischner said as he handed Cali off to another guard. "She ought to have fun with that." Cali glared back at Worf as the guard led her away.

"This isn't over yet, Klingon!" Larah pulled her along. "Yeah, yeah, they all say that, sugar drop. You know, you're pretty small to have such a big mouth on you."

Zeischner grinned at Worf. "Shall I get the chief.

He's staying nearby in case of emergencies." Worf glanced around, unwilling to ask.

Zeischner gestured to the door of the small storage room. "He locked himself in there. But I can signal him to wake up." Worf was already shaking his head, picturing a bucket inside the closet with Odo sloshing around inside. "That will not be necessary." "Aye, sir," Zeischner replied, apparently quite at ease with his superior's strange sleeping habits.

The computer signaled, and Dr. Bashir asked, "Security? I'm looking for Commander Worf." "Worf here." "We need you on the Defiant, Commander." Bashir sounded harassed. "We might have to transfer these Klingons to the brig." "On my way," Worf assured the doctor.

"Don't bring any more guards," Bashir hastily added. "There are more than enough here already." Worf acknowledged, as Zeischner confirmed, "Odo prepared a holding cell in case it was needed for the Klingons." "I will inform you before the transfer begins," Worf told the guard. "Alert the patrols to take up position along the route from the docking ring." Zeischner started to move toward the storage closet, but Worf stopped him. "There is no need to bother the security chief." "Aye, sir," Zeischner replied. But there was a hesitance in his voice, as if he would have preferred to inform Odo of the move.

Worf noted the guard's reaction, but he refused to rescind a direct order when it concerned the Kling-OhS.

CHAPTER 13

IT WAS LATE, but that shouldn't have been enough to distract Sisko from his usual end-of-the-day inspection of the station. But there were so many people on the station that they blurred into one nameless, milling mass. Most of them were so determined to enjoy themselves that it reminded him of Kasidy's "quarters warming" party last week. Her crew and most of his senior staff, as well as a revolving group of Bajoran docking technicians and customs inspectors, had joined the impromptu celebration of her move to the station. Even some of her neighbors had joined in, mostly Promenade employees, and the laughter and music had spilled into the corridor, lasting until early morning.

Sisko paused near a portal on the mezzanine of the Promenade. What with the crowded conditions, he was able to walk around the station without attracting much attention, an unusual sensation for him. The two humanoids curled underneath the portal ignored him though he was only inches away. But then again, so was everyone else.

He gazed into the growing dark mass of the storm.

It seemed to blot out the stars like a warning, and he couldn't blame Kasidy one bit if she was starting to regret her move. It had hardly been a week, and already a plasma storm was threatening to rip the station

out of the fabric of space.

Yet Kasidy was a captain in her own right, and knew all about the dangers of living among the stars.

Perhaps he kept thinking about her because she had been mentioned in so many of the reports today. Kira had praised Kasidy as one of their most staunch volunteers since the initial storm warning had been issued. He had never met a woman with more energy, or a stronger determination to do the right thing. He couldn't understand why she had remained a transport captain when she could obviously do anything, even attend Starfleet Academy, if she wished. But every time he tried to ask her about that, she had laughed off his questions. In general, she tended to be vague about her future plans.

Sisko would have liked nothing better than to track her down and talk about everything she had seen and done today. But she was probably asleep, and that was why he was wasting his time like this.

He turned away from the storm, knowing that he would have to face it down soon enough. Quickly finishing his tour of the mezzanine, he proceeded to the Defiant to get Bashir's final report before he made his decision.

The corridor outside the docking port for the Defiant looked like a war zone. There were more security guards here, both Starfleet and Bajoran, than he had seen on his entire tour of the upper core. There were also some guards in ship's security uniforms gathered near the turbolift. One lieutenant nodded as Sisko passed, and he recognized her as an officer from the Ceres.

As he entered the airlock, he could hear bellows of anger and yelled curses echoing through the corridors of the Defiant.

Sisko found Dr. Bashir and his assistant outside sick bay. "Problem with the Klingons, Doctor?" Bashir looked as if he hadn't sat down all day.

"They don't appreciate the regeneration treatment." "Apparently not," Sisko said. "Can't you sedate them?" "That interferes with the stimulation of regeneration, and I've given them the limit of neural blockers." Bashir had to raise his voice to be heard.

"Regeneration is a highly invasive procedure, both on the cellular and chromosomal level. Their neural network has to be left intact to coordinate the repair." Sisko looked through the door. Security guards were posted in the back corners of the room, flinching as the five Klingons struggled against the restraints of the med-beds. Their enraged faces were in stark contrast to their pale blue jumpers, which looked like children's footed pajamas. A portable regeneration unit was belted around the waist of each one.

Alons saw Sisko and started sputtering incoherently in Klingon. It sounded as if he was accusing him of cowardice and sadistic brutality. Sisko's Klingon didn't quite cover this sort of situation.

He turned away. "They seem to be recovering nicely. It's time they were moved to the brig." Bashir sighed. "I thought you'd agree. I've already notified Worf." In one sense, Sisko was relieved to see the Klingons looking so vigorous. "Then their radiation exposure was not as serious as you believed?" "No, it's quite severe," Bashir gravely contradicted.

"They'll have to undergo intensive treatment for at least a week, and two of them may never be able to reproduce." Sisko prepared himself. "Was it caused by the storm emissions?" "Even if they were near the storm for days, they had adequate shielding to protect them. However, Captain Alons informed me they were inside the blackbody itself. The Ceres crew didn't show a fraction of their exposure level, but they

never entered the storm." "How long were the Klingons inside the storm?" "Hours at most. Less than a day." "The runabout has been inside for nearly eight hours," Sisko reminded him. "Will Dax's electrostatic guard protect them?" "We have no way to know without data on the interior conditions. According to Worf's investigation, the Katon had superior shielding." Sisko clenched his fist. His decision was made for him. He only wished he hadn't allowed Dax to take a runabout when this was obviously a task suited to the Defiant.

Worf appeared at the end of the corridor, followed by a phalanx of guards. "Captain," he said, acknowledging Sisko. "We are prepared for prisoner transfer." "I'm ready whenever you are," Bashir agreed, wincing at the noise from the inner room.

Sisko nodded. "Commander, after you secure the Klingons in the brig, please notify the secondary crew that the Defiant will depart immediately." "Sir?" Worf asked. "The secondary crew?" "Yes. The senior officers will remain on the station while I investigate the storm." Bashir suddenly revived. "Captain, request permission to come along. I have experience with biometric analysis, as well as the medical data on the Klingons' radiation degeneration. I would be able to assist you." "You've been on duty since the beginning of the first shift," Sisko reminded him.

"With all due respect, sir, so have you." Sisko didn't want to risk more of his top people in this storm, and yet he didn't have the scientific background to make informed decisions. Bashir did.

"Very well." Sisko stood next to Worf as the guards placed the Klingons under stasis and transferred them to antigray pallets. The shouts became blessedly muffled.

"Sir--" Worf started.

Sisko interrupted, "No, Commander, you're needed here." "I agree." Worf lowered his voice. "However, Chief O'Brien requested to be informed if you decided to search for the Rubicon." Sisko knew he would have to deal with O'Brien at some point. "Thank you for reminding me, Commander." Sisko couldn't keep a faint note of impatience from his voice, and Worf heard it, instantly drawing back into himself. Sisko knew why he felt defensive about the family members of his crew, but he didn't want to explain it to everyone. He wouldn't have told Kasidy, except for that desperate moment when he realized he was losing her. That alone had forced him to confess the truth.

Yet he wasn't satisfied as he followed Worf and the guards off the Defiant. Worf had never before indicated that he had any personal concern for another member of the crew. Sisko felt as if he had stomped on Worf when he was most in need of encouragement.

He followed the transport detail through the docking ring, approving of the way Worf dispersed the guards into a nonthreatening yet visible presence.

Though the Klingons could barely move, they shouted their threats loud enough to penetrate the stasis fields. Refugees cringed back against the walls as they passed, overwhelmed and confused by the curses brought down on Starfleet, the Federation, Bajorans, Sisko, and Worf, not necessarily in that order of vehemence. Sisko decided that the Klingon prisoners were the least of his worries, and he turned into the habitat ring.

As the door to his quarters opened, he was immediately aware of the difference inside. The blue light was off, leaving the room dark. Then he saw the lumped shadows on the couches, and bit off his command for lights. He had almost forgotten about Kira's arrangements for some of the crew of the Ceres to stay with him and Jake.

He quietly made his way to his desk and activated the console. It made a good excuse to simply type in messages for Jake and Chief O'Brien, letting them know that the Defiant had left in search of the Rubicon and would return before the end of the third shift.

He sent O'Brien's message, noting that it had been routed to Worf's quarters. Perhaps this overcrowding isn't all bad if it can get Worf to sympathize with his fellow officers.

Then he saved the message to Jake, tagging it with an alert flash. Glancing at his son's closed door, he decided it would be better to let him sleep. According to the latest security report that had been waiting for him in Ops, Jake had already had a busy night with his Betazoid friends.

~USAN VVRIIJI I

Sisko headed into his room for a quick refresher and a change of clothing, the next best thing to sleep and a good meal. But when the door opened he saw that Jake was asleep in his bed. He paused to look at his son's relaxed face, glad that he could at least say good-bye this way.

He hardly made a sound as he changed and freshened up, but the hiss of the door as he started to leave must have been the last straw.

"Dad?" Jake asked sleepily.

"Yes, Jake." He rolled over. "You're home." Sisko waited, wondering if his son would fall back asleep. But Jake said, "It must be late. I got in late." "It is." Sisko gave in, letting the door close. He sat down on the edge of the bed, within the diminished starglow cast through the window.

Jake took one look and pushed himself up on his elbows. "You're mad at me. I know, I should have known better. That's what I told Odo, but I'm real sorry, and I'll pay for everything--" He broke off, sitting up so he could lean his head in his hands. "I don't blame you for being mad at me." Sisko suddenly wanted to hug his son--his precious, honorable son--but that would only confuse him. And the last thing he wanted to do was hurt Jake.

So he restrained himself, asking, "Do you have enough credit to reimburse everyone?" Jake ducked his head. "Almost, with Col paying half. If I could borrow some from you..."

"Once the replicators are back on line, I'm sure we'll be able to take care of it," Sisko assured him.

A ghost of Jake's smile appeared. "Thanks, Dad." "I know what it's like," Sisko told him. "Strange things can happen to your judgment when your normal life is disrupted. It's different when you're on a mission. You expect unusual things to happen. But when you wake up in the morning, you don't expect that night you'll be sharing your quarters with five other people." "Six," Jake corrected. "Kasidy was going to have to sleep on Leeta's floor, so I gave her my bed. I told her you wouldn't mind if I bunked in with you." "Kasidy's here?" "I thought you'd want that," Jake said.

"Yes." Sisko realized he was glad she was here, safe, and he was pleased at how easy Jake had made it for him. He would have offered Kasidy his own bed, but that might have offended her pride.

Jake yawned. "Why don't you come to bed?" Sisko tried to smile. "Not yet. I'm taking the Defiant out to look for the runabout. So you won't have to put up with my snoring tonight." Jake ignored his light tone. "You think something's wrong with them?" "That's what we have to find out." Sisko didn't mention the

fact that they also needed data on the interior radiation of the plasma storm.

"I saw Molly a few hours ago," Jake said. "I hope Keiko and Dax are all right." "We'll make sure they are," Sisko told him, preferring that Jake concentrate on that than on the danger to the station. "I have to go now." As Sisko got up, Jake blurted out, "You weren't going to wake me, were you?" "I left you a message, but this is much better." His son nodded. "Remember that next time you go searching after people who have disappeared. Please let me know first, even if you have to drag me out of a date, okay?" "Okay," Sisko agreed, feeling his throat tighten.

Jake kept smiling until the door closed behind him.

Sisko appreciated his effort.

He almost crossed the room to the other door. He wanted to look in on Kasidy, to see her sleeping, but he knew he couldn't without waking her. And he was already disturbing the Ceres crew. He heard coughing from the other side of the table, and two others were whispering near the couch.

He went to the console and recalled his message to Jake. He liked the casual intimacy and warmth in the words, so he simply changed the name to Kasidy and flagged it for her attention.

He was congratulating himself on navigating the personal bumps of the storm rather well when he reached the docking ring. O'Brien was waiting for him.

"I got your message," O'Brien said, even before Sisko stepped off the turbolift. "Worf says only the secondary crew is going along. He won't even let me on board!" Sisko headed for the airlock where two of the security guards were still posted. "My orders were for the senior staff to remain here." "But Bashir's on board," O'Brien insisted. "You have to let me go, too, sir. What if there are problems with the shielding? Or the power relays?" "Then you better hope you've trained Kelly well," Sisko said sharply. "Because he'll have to take care of it." "Captain, have a heart!" O'Brien clutched his arm with one hand. "I can't stay here when she's out there somewhere in trouble." Sisko stopped, keeping his voice low so the docking technicians wouldn't overhear. "Request denied." O'Brien's hand tightened. "It's not a request!" "Mister, you should be glad I consider it a request." Sisko glanced down at his wrinkled uniform. "Do I have to order you to let go?" "What? Oh--" O'Brien backed off when he realized what he was doing. "Sir, I didn't mean tom" "Get some sleep, Chief. When I return, I'll need you to prepare the shields for storm impact." O'Brien hesitated. "You will find them, sir? You won't come back without them?" Sisko tensed at the direct plea. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect the station. You are dismissed, Chief O'Brien." He turned away on his harsh order, resisting the urge to glance back from the airlock. He knew

O'Brien was watching him. And he knew what the chief would see: the same expression that Jennifer had on her face that last time he rushed off for the bridge, preparing to fight the Borg, a look that was somehow hopeful and frustrated at the same time, relying on him to save them all.

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CHAPTER 14

"I'M FINE," DAX automatically replied. After listening to Keiko's worried inquiries about her health for the past few hours, Dax had stopped paying much attention. Since she couldn't remember the blackouts it had soon stopped bothering her.

But she knew Keiko was right to be concerned. She had upped the critical levels in the medical data base, bypassing the preliminary warnings as per Starfleet regulations when the mission was of extreme urgency.

As long as her neural activity returned to acceptable levels, she was determined to keep going through the magnetic loops.

"You were out for almost four minutes that time," Keiko told her.

"Never mind about me. We're starting to get some patterns here between the angle of transverse waves to the current and the location of the exit point." Dax didn't like the way they kept losing touch with their markers. Distance did not seem to be the determining factor, adding yet another random variable to their analysis. "I wish I could boost the sensors just a little more." "You've already taken too much power from the shields," Keiko protested. She kept checking the readings on both their stasis belts.

"It won't matter how much we're exposed," Dax reminded her, "if we don't get back to the station. I say we should try a new vector." They were near the periphery, toward the rear of the storm. Despite Keiko's worry over the radiation, she hadn't suggested leaving the plasma mass via the short route. They both knew the storm would hit the station before they could circle around.

"This layer of plasma seems occupied with gathering in new matter," Keiko commented. "It's filtering it deeper as it degrades the atoms into charged particles." "No sign of organic carbon chains out here," Dax pointed out.

"That's because there aren't many magnetic currents," Keiko agreed. "The catalyst recombination must take place in the very heart of the plasma mass.

Then the carbon sequences are distributed via the currents." "I hope we don't find out what it's like in the center," Dax said seriously. "Tobin, one of my past hosts, took part in a plasma research project for a power facility. There were obscure indicators that an inversion reaction was possible at maximum densities, but he was old at the time, and I can't remember the equation series. Isn't that typical?" Keiko rolled her eyes. "I can't believe how much you do remember. All those lifetimes of experience." "It comes in handy sometimes," Dax agreed with a gleeful grin.

Keiko hesitated, but Dax had laid the groundwork for her to feel comfortable enough to ask, "Don't you find it intimidating at times? I mean, I would feel as if someone were always looking over my shoulder, knowing that the next hosts will have access to all of my memories." "It's true that most initiates have a strong streak of the exhibitionist in them." Dax laughed at Keiko's sudden blush. "That's why politicians and artists are usually willing to be the first hosts for young symbionts. I know I've always had a passion for holoprograms, even before I wanted to be joined." "Just like Miles," Keiko said wistfully. "He loves role playing. I'd rather direct a performance than be in one." "I didn't know you liked the theater." Keiko smiled to herself. "A friend and I staged a few Noh dramas on the Enterprise. It's the classical Japanese form of storytelling, with the performers using their appearance and movements to suggest the essence of a tale." "I'd like to see one of your plays." "I think you'd like Noh," Keiko agreed.

"Did Chief O'Brien perform, too?" Keiko wrinkled her nose. "No. He tried, but he hated practicing the speeches and movement patterns. And the masks drove him crazy. Not that I was surprised. He isn't fond of understatement or contemplation in any form." "I always thought Chief O'Brien had quite a poetic streak in him," Dax protested. "He knows more ballads than anyone I've ever met. In another age, he probably would have been a wandering minstrel." "That might have been nomadic enough for him," Keiko agreed dryly.

Dax almost pointed out that it was Keiko who kept leaving the station, not O'Brien. But the helm signaled, saving her from too terrible a breach of politeness. "Finally, we're entering a magnetic current." They were silent for a few moments, but there was an uneasy tension in the air, as if something had been left unfinished.

Keiko sighed, admitting, "I hate this. It's like everything else in my life. We are jumping blindly through hoops, not knowing where we'll end up or when it will ever stop." "You've already proven that the plasma is an organism. With each jump we're seeing how well the mass is integrated." "That doesn't mean we're getting anywhere." "It's all in how you look at it," Dax said philosophically.

Keiko bit her lip. "I suppose, but do you remember the Bajoran Gratitude Festival last year?" "You bet I do." Dax usually tried not to think about the way she had felt that night, about how much she wanted Benjamin.

Keiko didn't notice her confusion. "That night Miles offered to leave the station and move to Bajor, but I told him we should keep doing this. Now, I'm wondering if maybe I made a mistake putting our lives on hold." "Is that what you did?" Dax asked, trying to push the thought of Sisko away again.

But before Keiko could answer, the sensors signaled that a magnetic loop was forming. Dax transferred the helm to Keiko. The length and intensity of her seizures had varied with each location, but she wasn't taking any chances.

As Dax braced herself, the flash brightened the interior and seemed to freeze. She exchanged a look with Keiko at the appearance of the white viewscreen.

"I can't find any of our dye markers," Keiko announced.

Dax took the helm and slowed the thrusters. They had lost every one of their navigational points. "We're in a complete void: no EM radiation, no particles, no gravity pressure. A perfect vacuum." "Maybe this is the heart of the storm," Keiko suggested.

"I doubt it. Of all the hypothetical conditions of the center of the storm, this is not one of them." Dax gave the uncooperative panels a sweeping glare. The void outside was so white it could have been of infinite depth or absolute flatness, squeezing them into two dimensionality. "Perhaps this is another consequence of the time-space inversion." Keiko sagged to one side, as if she were losing consciousness. Before Dax could touch her, she disappeared.

"Keiko!" she cried out, grabbing the empty seat.

Keiko appeared on the viewscreen, standing in the field of white. She was looking around as if she couldn't see the runabout.

Before Dax could think of a way to signal her, Keiko turned and ran away. She was waving as if she were trying to get someone's attention. Dax maneuvered the thrusters to follow. Her eyes told her that another person was out there along with Keiko, but the sensors still weren't reading anything.

Then she realized it was Chief O'Brien. When he saw Keiko, he greeted her as if nothing unusual were happening. Keiko hugged him as if she would never let go, but just as Dax was maneuvering in with the runabout, Keiko abruptly pushed her husband away and started running.

Dax considered staying with O'Brien, but the chief headed after his wife. By the time they found Keiko again, she was standing among a few dozen Klingons.

They were drinking and singing, floating in nothingness, toasting with empty hands. Keiko shifted among them when she saw O'Brien approaching. Though the chief tried to reach her, Keiko deftly avoided him while chatting and laughing with the Klingons. The warriors seemed oblivious to O'Brien's presence, yet they inadvertently kept him from getting to Keiko.

O'Brien was obviously frustrated, but that was nothing compared to Keiko's agonized expression every time she looked his way. As if she had no other choice but this.

Dax covered her face, unable to watch their struggle any longer.

"Are you all right?" Keiko asked.

Dax jerked up her head. Keiko was sitting next to her and the sparkling plasma field back was on the viewscreen.

"What happened?" Dax asked.

"You were unconscious for almost ten minutes this time," Keiko said. "I got dizzy myself on that one." Thinking back, Dax asked, "Do you remember being in the void?" Keiko frowned. "What void?" Dax tried to get her bearings.

Keiko didn't give her time. "We're in an area of concentrated currents. We could enter one any second. Should I hold position to let you recover?" "No, I feel fine," Dax said automatically.

"The computer said your neutral activity was the highest it's been so far. But it kept bobbing back down to acceptable levels." Dax had never experienced anything like this before. "I saw you and Chief O'Brien in a white void.

There were Klingons--" Keiko's eyes were wide. "Klingons? You must have been hallucinating." "No, it seemed to mean something," Dax told her.

"I don't know how you came up with Klingons, but we were talking about Miles as we went through that last loop." Dax wrinkled her forehead. "We were?" "You mean you don't remember?" Keiko asked. "I think we should stop. This can't be good for you." "Temporary amnesia isn't uncommon following seizures," Dax told her. "I remember now that it's happened before. Besides, I don't care if I have convulsions. Plotting the currents is the only chance we have to get back in time." Keiko checked the helm. "We're entering another magnetic current." Dax braced herself again. "I'm wondering if the vision could be some sort of message from the plasma mass." Keiko didn't look as if she was in the mood to listen. "I said this was an organism. I seriously doubt that it's sentient." "That's not what I meant. It's conceivable that my mind is detecting and interpreting the wave patterns in much the same way the sensors do." Keiko looked at her as if she were crazy. "Are Trill known for their telepathic ability?" "Not really." Dax grinned as the energy built in the current. "But if we go through enough loops, maybe you'll start seeing O'Brien, too." "No, thanks. I can wait," Keiko blurted out, as the stepped leader set off the formation of another loop.

This flash was more painful than usual. Dax

I [-II- I I-MI]"tb I squeezed her eyes shut behind her hand, but she could swear she felt the photons

penetrating her flesh and bone, striking her sore optic nerves.

"Where are we?" Keiko whispered, and Dax could hear the echo of Molly's high voice in her ear.

Blinking to clear her vision, what Dax heard was impossible--people, the wheels of vehicles, activity on the streets, even the breeze of a sunny afternoon.

She realized they were lurching along in a cart driven by an old Bajoran man. The rows of two-story structures indicated it was a suburb, and when she turned she saw the spires of the temple in the capital city. It was a beautiful spring day on Bajor.

"What's happening?" Keiko asked frantically, clutching the edge of the board that served as a seat.

"Maybe the plasma mass is trying to tell us something," Dax suggested. "Just try to relax. It doesn't look as if we're in any danger." "What happened to the Rubicon?" Keiko asked.

"We're probably still in it." Dax examined the Bajorans on the streets--children mostly, along with their parents. The houses were joined by small fenced yards lining the walkway. In the door of one up ahead, she recognized a familiar face. "There's Chief O'Brien again!" Keiko's mouth fell open when she saw her husband.

He kissed a young girl good-bye, then a bouncing preschool boy. They ran to the fence to wave after him.

"Stop and let us off," Dax told the old man. When the cart pulled up, she motioned to Keiko. "Come on, it'll be faster on foot." But by the time they reached the yard in front of the townhouse, the children had returned to their playing and O'Brien had disappeared. Keiko was staring at the girl. "Molly? Is that you?" "Hi, Morn!" Molly sang out, absorbed in reassembling her bike. Apparently she had just added another gear. "Dad said you were going to meet him at the station." The little boy ran to the fence, jumping up and down. "Mommy, Mommy, look what I made!" Keiko reached out as if in a dream, taking the grubby yellow figurine. Her eyes never left the boy's face, full-cheeked and freckled like his father's, but with dancing almond eyes like her own.

Dax cleared her throat, reminding Keiko, "We need to determine how to get out of the storm." Keiko was shaken out of her reverie. "This can't be real!" "No, but anything you can tell me may help." She looked at the house. "This is the Denarii quarter, where some of the Bajoran scientists live. I guess I would have chosen to move here if Miles had left the station and come to Bajor." "Then perhaps this is an alternate time line." Molly tightened the bolt and was finally able to give her mother her full attention. "Aren't you going with Dad?" "Where?" Keiko asked.

"To the moon place," Molly said patiently, obviously mimicking Keiko's motherly inflections. "You know, you do it every year."

"It's our anniversary?" Keiko looked in the direction that O'Brien had gone. "He must have taken the public transport to the station. Maybe we can catch him before it leaves." Dax followed Keiko into bustling streets, watching her signals for how to cut through the pedestrians.

Keiko seemed stunned, but at least she was working with her on this.

But when they reached the platform, the transport had just left for the ground-to-space station. The ticketmaster recognized Keiko and called her over to give her a message padd that O'Brien had left

behind.

Dax shamelessly looked over Keiko's shoulder, reading, "I'm not surprised you didn't come home today. Maybe you were right last night when you said you should have called it off on our wedding day instead of giving in to everyone. I should have listened to you then. I'm going to the moon chalet, but if you don't come I'll understand why. You've never really been happy with me." Keiko clutched the padd tightly, insisting on handling the arrangements to get them to the station as fast as they could. Dax ended up with her in a hired cart, hanging on for dear life as it swerved around corners and between larger electronic transports. The city was a blur, and Dax knew she would never be able to retrace their path through the maze of entrances and tunnels that took them through the sprawling ground-to-space complex.

Then Keiko led her on a bewildering race through the station, across ramps and along elevated walkways. It was a strange hybrid, with the ponderous Cardassian structures enlarged and embellished by the highly ornamental Bajoran architecture. But even Bajorans were unable to impose harmony on the disorder of a major port of call.

They were stopped at an imposing gate by a uniformed official. "Tickets?" "We don't have tickets," Keiko told her. "I'm trying to reach my husband before he leaves--" "You must have a ticket to proceed beyond this point." The official gestured back down the long hall, from where they had come. "You may purchase your tickets at any one of our commercial counters, or you may apply for space assistance from your corporate sponsor." "I'm not going anywhere. I just need to talk to him," Keiko insisted. "It's the next moon shuttle, and it's about to leave?"

The official checked her chronometer, then hesitated at Keiko's pleading eyes. Dax had hope.

Bajorans were better than most when it came to sympathizing with each other. Maybe living through an occupation made it easier for people to understand each other's pain.

"I'll try to notify the shuttle docking port," the official told Keiko. "If you'll please stand aside." The other official continued to allow passengers through the gate, while the first murmured into her comm device. Keiko slumped against the stone wall, her chin nearly touching her chest. A strand of hair had pulled loose and was hanging against her cheek.

"They'll tell O'Brien you're here," Dax tried to assure her.

Keiko sighed. "Maybe. Then again, maybe we'll have to go beg for a couple of tickets and fly to the moon. And maybe by the time we get there, he'll have given up and left for good." "Don't be such a pessimist," Dax told her. "We're doing the best we can." Keiko finally looked up. "Don't you understand?"

Miles and I have always done the best we could, but it always ends like this, with me chasing after him and neither of us knowing where we're going." Dax asked, "What is it you want?" "I want harmony. I want peace." Suddenly they were sitting in the runabout again, staring up at the white void on the viewscreen.

Dax didn't know what else to say. "Maybe you picked the wrong guy." Keiko looked at the void as if she couldn't believe her eyes. "Maybe you're right." 0

CHAPTER 15

"WHERE'S MOMMY?" MOLLY repeated sleepily.

O'Brien avoided her eyes, reminded of how he had stood in the portal and watched the Defiant go into the storm without him. After he had returned to Worf's quarters, he was able to sleep only fitfully, finally getting up to check some shield computations that were hammering at his head.

Molly hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep when he woke her up and got her dressed. He had managed to brush out the tangles in her long hair, but she had squirmed and whined the entire time, and she had done nothing but ask for Keiko.

He could make excuses for the little girl, knowing that her circadian rhythm was still messed up from leaving Bajor. He wondered if he should have let her continue sleeping, but he hated the idea of leaving her locked in the bedroom alone. What if she woke up again?

She was holding a granola bar in one hand, her elbow propped on the table as if she had forgotten it was there. He had dialed for some fruit and granola last night so he could be sure something would be waiting when she woke up.

"Eat up," he urged. "We have to get to work." Molly gave the stale bar a dubious look then threw it against the wall. It shattered on impact, spraying nuts and rolled oats in every direction.

Moll-y!" he exclaimed reproachfully. She started to cry.

O'Brien decided that he had maintained enough continuity in his daughter's daily habits. He picked her up to leave, wondering again where Captain Ari had gone. He was sure Worf hadn't returned to his quarters after the Defiant had departed.

He waited a while for a turbolift, but one never showed up even after he keyed in his priority code.

Molly fell back to sleep as he carried her through the habitat ring, but when they reached the Promenade the noise was loud enough to disturb her. She was yawning and pouting when they reached Odo's office.

Odo sighed when O'Brien brought Molly in.

"Where else can I take her?" he demanded in a rush, letting her down. "You don't expect me to leave her with strangers, do you?" "No. She can stay with me." Odo leaned over.

"Will you keep me company for a while?" O'Brien expected the girl to pitch an absolute fit. By rights, she deserved one. But apparently she had gotten used to Odo's grim features. O'Brien had seen grown humanoids tremble under that gaze, but Molly simply exclaimed, "Let's play pony!" "That's a good girl." O'Brien tried to give her a kiss good-bye, but she twisted away from his hands. She ran to the desk, hiding behind Odo's chair.

"Molly? O'Brien felt helpless. When had his child become such a stranger? "Molly, come here and say good-bye," he insisted, walking towards her. "Daddy will come back for you soon." "No!" she shouted, holding on to the chair as if for dear life.

O'Brien hesitated, then circled the desk. He only wanted to give her a kiss.

"Go away!" she shrieked, hiding her face. "No!" "Come on, Molly," O'Brien coaxed. "I know you just miss your mommy." "No, no, no! I want pony rides!" She dashed past him, clutching at Odo's leg. "Pony! I want my pony!" "Hush, Molly!" But O'Brien wasn't sure she heard him.

Odo stood there stiffly, as if he didn't know what to do.

O'Brien took her arm, ordering, "Behave yourself! Stop it right now." Her shrieks raised another few decibel levels. Even he pulled back. "I hate you! Go away! I want my ponce!" Odo sighed, and with an apologetic glance at

O'Brien, he swung the girl onto his back. He bobbed up and down slightly, a token gesture at horse-like movements.

"Ya! Gi'up!" Molly exclaimed. She was breathing hard and tears were shining on her face, but she wasn't screaming anymore. She completely ignored her father.

"Only once around the paddock," Odo told her.

"Then your horse has to rest." Solemnly she nodded~ "Gi'up!" Odo gravely began walking the perimeter of his office. O'Brien watched with sullen resentment. He knew Molly didn't hate him, but he didn't like her saying so in front of Odo. He could have played horsey with Molly only she hadn't asked him. Then again, he hadn't seen her awake for two minutes since she got to the station. Could he really blame her for attaching herself to Odo? Shouldn't he be grateful that there was someone she liked to be with?

"Not now!" Odo snapped as a guard tried to ask him a question. By the time he returned to his desk, there were three of them waiting to speak to him.

O'Brien dreaded the scene Molly would make when Odo tried to stop.

But Molly didn't utter a word when Odo let her descend to the chair. She contented herself with slipping under the desk, disappearing from his sight.

"Thanks, Constable," O'Brien said, rather shamefaced. Apparently the shapeshifter made a better parent than he did.

"Think nothing of it, Chief," Odo demurred. He seemed more interested in dispatching the guard details than talking about Molly, so O'Brien contented himself with one more nod of thanks, craning his head to try to see his little girl. "Bye, Molly. I'll be back for you soon." She solemnly gazed up as if not recognizing him.

Then she went back to work, busily making a tent out of a blanket using the drawers of the desk and the chair.

O'Brien left, feeling about as low as they came. As if things weren't bad enough already, he ran into Worf in the doorway.

O'Brien shoved past him, making Worf stumble into the side of the door. There were so many people staggering around from the shock fronts that no one paid much attention, that is, except for Worf.

"Sorry," O'Brien drawled sarcastically. "I could be helping out on the Defiant, but no, you made sure I was left hanging around here getting in everyone's way." Worf's eyes darkened. "I could not allow you to board the Defiant." "Oh, you couldn't, could you?" O'Brien asked in a low voice. "Wouldn't you have done anything to save the mother of your child?" Worf glared at the mention of Kay'lar. "How dare you speak of that!" "Maybe I'm out of line," O'Brien agreed, "but you could have helped an old friend last night. Sisko was half convinced to take me along, and if I'd been on the bridge, he would have said yes."

"I was following orders." "You follow orders only when it suits you." O'Brien leaned in closer. "There are times when you have to follow a deeper law." Worf stared at him, caught by the truth of the accusation. Then he shook it off, not so much backing down as dismissing O'Brien from serious consideration. But his parting glare said that it wasn't over between them.

O'Brien couldn't stop him from going through the door, but as it closed, he swung around and slammed his fist into the plassteel window. It rang out, vibrating in its frame. He could see the startled faces of everyone inside looking out at him.

Shaking his fist, he stepped away from the window before painfully leaning over, clutching his wrist.

Good thing he hit the plassteel rather than the titanium beam. Maybe he could get away with not going to the infirmary--if the throbbing ever let up.

"I'm glad I moved out of the way," someone said right behind him. "A blow like that could have crushed me." O'Brien looked back, then down at Captain Ari.

"Pardon me! I didn't see you there." "So I gathered." The Sattar didn't seem disturbed.

He leaned back against the beam. "I've been waiting to visit my wayward senior mate. Commander Worf agreed to allow me inside. That other one, that shifty creature, he was most uncooperative." O'Brien politely nodded, examining his hand. It was stiffening up and the second knuckle was swelling in a bad way. He would need the full use of his hand today in order to strengthen the shields. The main power conduits would have to be linked into the secondary generators to cover bit losses in microwave transmission. Maybe he could go snag Rom again.

"You were arguing with the Klingon," Ari commented. "I thought you were friends. Last night you assisted him." "We've known each other for almost seven years," O'Brien admitted. "Seven years!" "You've been on other posts with him?" O'Brien grinned in spite of himself. "On the Enterprise. Back before I became the glorified custodian of this station." "That was when you were a warrior," Ari said, as if he understood. "And now, your friend has injured you in some way?" O'Brien shrugged, irritated by that casual reference, as if now he was an ex-warrior.

"It is difficult to deal with Klingons," Ari acknowledged. "Their sense of honor serves their own needs.

You must accommodate yourself to their codes rather than asking them to understand your own." "I suppose," O'Brien agreed. "But isn't everyone that way?" The Sattar smiled. "Of course. Then you understand what I'm suggesting. If you want something from the Klingon, put it in his own terms. Make it a matter of his honor, and he will do whatever it takes to salvage his pride." "I don't want anything from Worf," O'Brien denied, remembering this was a Sattar he was talking to.

Their small size and fluffy, innocent appearance was what lulled people into thinking they were harmless.

"In fact," O'Brien finished. "The commander is probably right. I should get back to work." O'Brien turned on his heel, shaking off Ari's insinuations against Worf. First he had to go to the infirmary to get his hand fixed, then stop by Quark's for Rom before rounding up his crew. They only had the rest of the morning before the storm would hit.

Worf did not appreciate being shoved around by O'Brien, especially after he had relayed the chief's message to Sisko and gotten subtly rebuked for his efforts. And he still had not gotten over Cali's

infiltration of his logs. He clenched up every time he thought of her reading his personal meditations on Alexander, on the Klingon situation, on Deanna. It was intolerable!

Silently fuming, he waited until Odo had completed his orders to the guards and dismissed them to their posts. Then he handed over the data clip. "This is my report on perimeter patrol, as of oh six hundred hours." "How industrious of you," Odo told him. "I usually rely on my guards to report on the status of the station." "These are emergency conditions." Odo held the clip in two fingers. "And did you find anything that needs my attention?" "Yes, I found several questionable situations, such as the continued presence of evacuees in the connecting tunnels." "I'm aware of that, Commander. Guards have already been dispatched to remove those people to transient quarters." Odo tossed the clip onto his desk, but he did not sit down. Molly had appropriated his chair, but Worf believed Odo was trying to make a point.

"Commander," Odo began, making it clear his request was formal. "I would prefer to be notified whenever there is a prisoner transfer to my brig." Worf almost sighed. "Zeischner is a competent officer. It was not necessary to disturb you." "Nevertheless, in the future I would like to be informed. It is part of my duties as security chief on this station." "Agreed." Worf would have agreed to anything at that moment to get on with it. "What is the status of the Klingon prisoners?" "They are packed in fairly tightly, but at least they can bounce off one another. Apparently even Kling-OhS have a threshold of pain." Worf could have sworn there was a trace of satisfaction in Odo's voice. "I would like an hourly log of their conversations." "You're going to listen to everything?" Odo asked incredulously. "I'm already running a pattern recognition program, and there's been nothing of significance so far." "There are Klingon codes and words that you may not know," Worf told him.

"If you find any," Odo agreed, "please inform me." Worf nodded shortly. "And the Sattar?" "The senior mate of the Reaper," Odo said thoughtfully. "She is in holding cell three along with a Risan couple caught picking pockets in Quark's. I believe Quark was taking a cut until they lifted latinum from the Dabbo table." Worf thought Call should feel right at home with them. "Captain Ari is waiting outside to see his officer. I believe he will not fight the charges." "But you're considering dropping them," Odo guessed.

Worf wondered how he could tell. "Cali should pay for her crimes. She assaulted me and she broke into my private files." Odo consulted his console. "You have the rest of this shift to decide. Then the charges will be recorded with the proper authorities. There are both civil and criminal accusations, so it could take several days to sort out." "I will let you know my decision," Worf agreed.

"First, I would like to hear what she has to say to Captain Ari." "As would I," Odo murmured. "It's hard to believe a Sattar would act without her captain's express approval. But what have they to gain by her incarceration?" Worf shook his head as he went to get Captain Ari.

He had been wondering that himself. He had even woken, after a nervous half sleep on the floor of Sisko's office in Ops, dreaming of Captain Alons and ~USAN VV RIGHT

Sebas drinking from the bottle of Hum'tas in his quarters and rifling through his computer files. A childish dream, but a disturbing one.

When Captain Ari entered, he immediately said, "I must apologize again to both of you. My senior mate has been under a great deal of stress. Recently she was the cause of a cargo loss through her own negligence, and I'm afraid the other seniors are realizing their folly in promoting one so young to such a position of authority. And yet, her mother was a superb leader." Worf remembered what Cali had said last night about the Klingons taking her mother away. It had also been a Klingon betrayal that had killed his own parents while they were living in the Kitomer colony.

Ari shook his head sadly. "If her behavior has been erratic lately, perhaps we have forgiven her too much, indulged her too often in her whims." "If you'll excuse me for saying so," Odo retorted dryly, "her behavior has escalated beyond erratic and has now reached criminal proportions." The captain lifted one hand as if there was nothing he could say to refute it. The proud Sattar almost looked humbled, and he turned away to hide his discomfort. "Despite the trouble she causes, she is a valuable member. I would not like to leave her behind." Worf refrained from answering, accompanying Captain Ari into the brig. Odo ordered one of the guards to watch Molly so he could follow.

Cali rushed forward when she saw her captain, managing to greet him with grateful delight while glaring past him at Worf and Odo.

From the corner of his eye, Worf could tell that the Klingons had seen him enter. Though no sounds penetrated the force field, every ritual gesture of disrespect and disgust was aimed in his direction.

But first, the Sattar. "When can I get out?" Cali asked Aft. "I'm going crazy in here with these two." She gestured to the Risan couple.

Ari glanced back at Worf. "You've been charged with assault and trespassing. You could be here for quite a while." "If the assault is proved to be premeditated," Odo put in helpfully, "she could be sentenced to time in a penal colony." "Don't I get some privacy to consult with my legal advisor?" Cali asked. "Or does Starfleet deny that too?" "This is a favor," Odo informed her. "You'll get your consultation after the official charges are recorded." Cali appealed to the Risan couple slumped against each other on the bed. "Aren't they keeping us here in unsafe conditions? Not enough food, only one bed for three people--" "Everyone on the station is overcrowded," Worf interrupted, tired of this nonsense. "I offered you better quarters, but you attacked me." Cali appealed to Aft. "See? He's been out to get me since he couldn't find anything on the Reaper. Just look what he's done to those Klingons? government won't allow inter-ship alliances among the Sattar, so we will never be able to obtain good contracts, only bits and pieces left over by the organized shipping lines." "Perhaps you could apply to the Klingon High Council." "The Sattar who go to Qo'noS never return." Ari gave him a bleak smile. "I am not brave enough for that, Commander." "I, too, have had my dealings with the council," Worf admitted. "There is much that has gone astray within my people. But I am not to blame for your misfortunes, and yet she attacked me!" "Are you not to blame, perhaps more than anyone?" Ari asked in a deceptively mild voice. "You are a member of Starfleet, supporting a Federation of people who pride themselves on their honor and justice to all. Yet the Federation formed an alliance with the Klingons while they hold my world and others in virtual slavery. Why does the Federation support this infamy, turning a blind eye to the plight of the Sattar?" Worf couldn't answer that. Everyone knew about the Sattar.

Ari pressed, "Perhaps Starfleet allows it for the sake of a 'larger' peace. If so, then tell me, Commander, what right do you have to decide that my people will suffer for your peace? Is that honorable?" Worf could only stare at the Sattar. Thankfully, Odo broke in and urged the captain on his way. At the door, the security chief told the captain, "You will be

I'll be notified by this evening about what will be done next with your senior mate." Ari pulled away with the dignity of a senior Sattar.

Nodding solemnly to Worf, then Odo, he declined further assistance to the door.

Worf felt something and looked down. Molly was standing right next to him. "Nice pony," she told him, patting his knee. "Good pony." Worf carefully put down the clip and left without a word. Some things were too much for anyone to expect him to accept. He would be fine once he had a brisk walk around the docking ring.

CHAPTER 16

T-tE DEFIANT'S ~ viewer showed the speckled plasma field, complete with flares and clusters and rippling diffractions of every scientific description.

Dr. Bashir could have watched it for hours, mesmerized by the shifting mosaic of colored lights. It was ironic that within this so-called blackbody, there was such a display of pure energy constantly colliding, combining, and deconstructing in vividly instantaneous reactions.

But Bashir didn't have much time to look at the viewer. He was at the main tactical station, and though he was unfamiliar with the primary readout for the sensors, he trusted in Dax's console to alert him to the important things. He also linked in the medical data base, running a diagnostic on the potential bio-effects of the infinite combinations of waves and subatomic particles within the plasma.

"Still no sign of the radiation that poisoned the Klingons," he informed the captain.

Sisko was also examining the sensor data. "Odd.

Only the most cursory of readings, despite the photoconductive activity." Bashir agreed, "Too many random oscillations are distorting the base frequencies--" The Defiant lurched without warning. Bashir barely caught the console while Ensign DeGroot was flung from the helm into the side railing. When Bashir saw that she immediately began to push herself up, he stayed at his station, letting Lieutenant Clan'cee from the secondary tactical console assist her. He was glad that Clan'cee was along. He was one of the best physicists assigned to DS9. Bashir knew he would need all the help he could get to decipher the readings on this storm.

"I'm sorry, sir," DeGroot apologized.

Bashir added, "I think sensors got something that time." "What's causing it, Doctor.?" Sisko was as irritated as the rest of them by the unpredictable course changes.

Bashir checked Clan'cee's notations as he reported, "It seems to occur whenever the density of a magnetic current reaches a certain threshold point. Since the waves are moving faster than light, there is a significant delay in the reaction of our inertial dampers." "Can't we avoid the currents?" Sisko asked DeGroot.

She was settling back into helm control. "I'm trying, Captain. But we get caught up and swept along before I can pull free. We're between two currents now, and if they converge... but it looks as though the port current will dissipate before that happens." Clan'cee agreed. "The currents form and dissipate so rapidly that it's difficult to track a path through them." Sisko glanced over at Bashir. "The incidents seem to be increasing as we penetrate deeper into the plasma." "I suggest we hold position here," he replied.

"Clan'cee and I have prepared a probe to release into one of the magnetic currents. That should give us more information on what causes the subspace disruptions." "Proceed." Sisko frowned at the viewer as if he were determined to subdue the storm singlehandedly if it came down to that.

Bashir coordinated the probe launch with Clan'cee and DeGroot as they skirted the current and maneuvered away before being drawn into the turbulence.

The probe shot off, accelerating much faster than the sensors had recorded the velocity of the

electromagnetic waves within the current.

Before Bashir could question the anomaly, a brilliant flash brightened the main viewer.

"Report!" Sisko ordered.

Bashir couldn't see his readings. "That exceeded the photoelectric threshold." "I'm getting a high incidence of scattering," Clan'cee called out. "EM readings from the probe went off the scale." Bashir was finally able to see to confirm, "We've lost telemetry with the probe." The viewer had returned to normal brightness.

"The current is gone as well," Sisko said, seeing the difference in the particle motion.

"I believe the probe's sensors set up a feedback loop, pushing the particles in the magnetic current to maximum ionization," Bashir explained. "That flash was a sort of rip in subspace, transferring the energy radically away from the particle flow." "Transferring it where?" Sisko asked.

"That's impossible to tell," Bashir admitted. "The Defiant must be too large to penetrate the rips. When one forms, it deflects the Defiant away, causing our change in course." "What about the runabout? Is it small enough to get through?" Bashir reluctantly nodded. "I believe so. The Klingons kept raving about being caught in a maze that they couldn't get out of. That would make sense if their yacht was transported through the subspace rips." "This storm is half a sector long." Sisko's jaw clenched. "The Rubicon could be anywhere." Bashir realized that Clan'cee was looking in his direction, waiting for him to inform the captain of the meaning of the probe's readings. Bashir considered taking Sisko into the lounge to tell him, but if Clan'cee knew, then the others would soon find out.

"Captain, according to the data from the probe, the station is in danger." He rushed to get it out all at once. "The plasma energy is comparable to that of a dwarf star. The atmosphere of Bajor may protect the inhabitants, but I doubt there will be anything left of the station or the wormhole. This storm is a natural cleansing agent, ionizing every particle in its path." "Can't we stop it somehow?" Sisko demanded. "Or try to shift its course?" "I don't even know what keeps it going." At the sudden hush, Bashir added, "Maybe with more data and using the biometric analysis... maybe we can come up with something. We have plenty of probes to get samples of the cascade bursts that precipitate the rip in subspace." The tension on the bridge was already running high, but Bashir's analysis seemed to cast a pall over everyone. Except for the beeping of the computers, there was absolute silence as the captain considered the situation.

DeGroot turned to offer, "Sir, I can try to hold us closer to the probes if that would cut down on interference." Bashir immediately shook his head, picking up his medical tricorder to analyze the atmosphere of the bridge. "I recommend we position the Defiant much further away. The cascade burst appears to be the source of the dangerous alpha radiation." Sisko stood up. "Why hasn't the medical alert warned us of excessive radiation exposure?" "Because the contaminated molecules are currently in a metastable state. They disassociate after several minutes, and the effect is slow enough to be recorded as within acceptable levels." He scanned himself and compared the result with his normal cellular readings.

As he glanced up, he caught a worried glance from one of the ensigns as she hurried off the bridge with a clip in hand.

"What is it, Doctor?" Sisko asked.

"Tertiary ionization is already occurring within our bodies. At this point I'm unable to determine the

progress of the chemical transformations." "Can you adjust shields to block the alpha radiation?" Sisko asked.

Lieutenant Kelly shifted uneasily at the engineering station, looking as if he wanted to crawl out of his own skin. "I can cover that frequency range, but the oscillations rebound all over the board." "I'm not sure we can shield against this sort of radiation," Bashir agreed. "It's practically designed to penetrate and disintegrate matter. The shields may even be accelerating the process." Sisko swept a glance at the bridge crew. "Then we had better work fast." "Aye, sir," Bashir agreed, along with the others.

"Attach a subspace beacon to every probe," Sisko ordered. "And send burst communications into the magnetic currents. Maybe one of them will get through to the Rubicon." Sisko sat back down, letting the rest stay unspoken.

There was no telling what damage had already been done to Dax and Keiko. Or what additional exposure would do to the crew of the *Defiant*.

Sisko rested his chin in his hand. At that moment Bashir was sincerely glad that he was a doctor and not the captain of this ship. It was hard enough dealing with life and death on an individual basis. He wouldn't want to make that decision for forty people at one time, much less the thousands of people waiting back on the station.

We're going to die, Keiko thought. I pushed my way on to this mission, and now we're going to die because of it.

She had realized it was impossible to plot an internal map of the currents. They formed and dissipated so rapidly that the computer couldn't calculate the shifts in the patterns, not with the meager fifty or sixty markers the sensors could detect at any one time. And Dax couldn't take much more of--- "This way!" Dax cried out, making Keiko jump.

The helm was locked from her control, but she started to input commands, acting as if she were flying the runabout. "Don't worry. We'll get there before the chief leaves this time." "Dax," Keiko said soothingly. "It's all right. You can relax."

Dax glanced at her as if trying to remember something. Then she stared back up at the viewscreen, apparently seeing much more than Keiko could in the beautiful plasma particles.

"If we don't catch him, then we'll know for sure," Dax insisted. "But we have to get past the Klingons first!" She went into a flurry of activity, trying to prevent some imagined catastrophe. Keiko had rerouted the computer relays to her station, but just to be certain Dax didn't somehow gain access, she had manually disconnected the main power node in the junction under her console.

Yet Keiko kept an eye on what Dax did, recognizing the command to cut power to the warp engines, which weren't on line in the first place. Keiko had already tried to engage warp drive, hoping the field could repel the particles. But the plasma disrupted the continuity of the field before it could form.

Then Dax tried to fire the torpedoes. Keiko hadn't tried that, but she wasn't willing to use brute force even at this point.

She moved to the rear of the runabout to ask, "Computer, is it possible for me to sedate Commander Dax?" "Neurological activity indicates sedation would be inadvisable at this time." "What is her current condition?" Keiko asked.

"Levels of tertiary radiation have risen above acceptable limits." "You've already told me that," Keiko sighed.

"What do I do about it? And don't tell me to evacuate the vicinity. That's impossible." "Continued proximity to alpha radiation will accelerate tissue irradiation," the computer responded.

Keiko turned to the small viewscreen, activating it.

"Display on graph." The upward arc of alpha radiation poisoning was erratic but unmistakable. Deadly.

As if one look at Dax didn't make that perfectly clear.

Keiko asked, "Computer, is it possible that Dax's hallucinations are some sort of communication with the storm?" "Insufficient data," it replied with maddening unconcern.

"No. Extrapolate," Keiko urged. "Could a plasmabased being communicate via EM waves directly to the brain of a Trill?" "Insufficient data," it repeated.

"You want data, just scan Dax!" Keiko glared around the runabout, wishing there were a focus for her frustration.

"Commander Dax is suffering from sporadic electromagnetic stimulation of the neural tissue, causing spontaneous dissociative experiences." "You mean hallucinations." She hadn't really believed Dax's wild theory, but part of her had been desperately hoping that Dax was accomplishing something toward their escape.

She returned to stand by her station, entering the command to maneuver the Rubicon from the magnetic current, letting them drift. There was no use going through more loops. It only made Dax worse, and it would take weeks for them to plot the interior of this complex organism. She was certain now that the plasma mass was an organism. Nothing else could be this integrated or intricately patterned while maintaining its rapid motion.

Next to her, Dax started hitting her touchpads as if realizing she was locked out. Keiko quickly slid into her seat before Dax could try to switch stations.

"We've stopped," Dax said, looking at the swirling plasma patterns. "How can we get out if you keep doing everything for him?" Carefully, Keiko assured her, "We'll get moving in a minute. Just give me a chance to plot the shortest direction out of here." "I know how to get out," Dax replied, her eyes wide and dazed. "I'm not sure how to get in." Keiko input the coordinates of the nearest storm edge and held onto manual control in order to maneuver around the magnetic currents that formed. "You should rest for a while," she suggested. "You've been working for hours without a break." "Have I?" Dax stiffly stood up, stretching her arms to the ceiling. "I believe it." "Why don't you lie down on the bench?" "What for?" Dax asked. "You aren't trying to pull something, are you?" "I just said you should lie down and get some rest." "You're not going to leave me out here." Dax was looking at her suspiciously. "Not after we've come all this way together."..~ U~AN vvKIrdM I

"I'd never do that!" Dax narrowed her eyes. "You wouldn't believe what I've seen some people do when they're desperate." "I would believe anything right now," Keiko said faintly. Even without the influence of radiation-induced hallucinations, she had managed to come up with more than a dozen gruesome scenarios for what would happen in the next few hours. Top on the list was the image of a

two-billion-volt plasma arc sparking between the station and the wormhole. "You need me," Dax reminded her.

"I know. I don't know what I'd do without you." Dax seemed satisfied with that, but Keiko felt even worse. She had really meant it, but in every sense of the word, Dax was no longer here.

All of her paranoid talk was making Keiko edgy, as if she weren't already numb enough from lack of sleep, and sick to her stomach from the surges of adrenaline that kept insisting she was about to die.

She had partly turned while piloting, to make sure Dax didn't do anything unusual, but out of the corner of her eye she caught the blip on the sensors.

It looked like an indicator for a subspace transmission, but when she did a sensor sweep, nothing was there. Then she played back the sensor log, and saw that she hadn't imagined it.

Changing course, she retraced their route back toward the last magnetic current they had passed.

Sensors picked up traces of a transmission signal that had degraded to the point that the computer didn't recognize it as decryptable codes. It could be another strange by-product of this highly unusual plasma storm, but then again.

Impulsively Keiko turned the runabout and traced the magnetic current upstream until she reached a point where the sensors recorded the highest incident of fragments.

Taking the runabout directly into the current, she plowed through the turbulence against the directional flow, trying to reach the center where the fragments were most densely clustered.

Radiation readings shot off the scale as the engines fought the surge of the current. The disruption started to cause the formation of another loop right behind the runabout.

Keiko routed maximum power to the engines, but it was too late. The runabout was sucked backward through the loop.

After the burst of light had faded, sensors picked up a much clearer indication of the transmission fragments in this area. She traced them toward another dissipating magnetic current, but she hesitated to take the runabout into it. What if the fragments were only an echo of their own attempts to hail the station?

She almost regretted her impulsive action. The rough navigational map of the plasma storm indicated that the Rubicon was further away from the periphery than before. Now she would have to plot a new course to get them out of the plasma, unless she followed the fragments through another loop.

Dax was huddled on the bench in the back, muttering orders as she stared at the blinking display on the transporter console. Keiko hoped she wasn't getting any ideas about leaving, and she quickly entered a command to route transporter control to her console.

If she kept going through loops, she would surely kill Dax. Yet they would both die if they didn't get out of the plasma mass. Everything kept twisting back on itself until Keiko didn't know what to trust. A familiar feeling, especially during the past few years. She felt cramped into her own existence, like a bonsai, dwarfed and twisted while struggling to grow. She knew what it was like to be windblown, gnarled, and stunted by adverse conditions, forced to bend to unrelenting forces. Yet bonsai were

exquisite creations. Tiny miracles, the same way that Molly's smile was a tiny miracle every day.

"You have to stop!" Dax demanded behind her.

"You were right, Keiko, it's not working. You have to walk away, it's the only chance we have to get out of here." Dax tried to stand, but she collapsed back on the bunk, her hand reaching out imploringly. "Is something wrong?" Keiko asked.

"You have to give him up," Dax whispered. "You almost did once before. The day you got married." Keiko's mouth opened. "How did you know about that?" Dax struggled to concentrate, to keep her eyes focused, as if to prove she knew what she was saying.

"You have to leave him. Or everyone will die." Keiko didn't even have to think about it. Every part

of her being rejected the idea. She and Miles belonged together.

"I'm not walking away from anything," she told Dax.

She changed vector to intersect the current where the transmission fragments were rapidly dissolving.

The engines strained as they fought the electromagnetic waves, but Keiko held the helm steady. She was ready this time and when the loop formed behind them, she let the runabout go through.

Her head was swimming when the flash dissipated, and the medical alert was sounding a new alarm.

Before Keiko could ask the computer what was happening, Dax rolled off the bench. Her arms and legs were twitching.

"Computer, what can I do for Dax?" She ran to her side.

"One cc of monochloride may inhibit the seizure." Keiko ordered the helm to stop so they wouldn't run into the new current forming in front of them.

She grabbed the med-kit on her way back, fumbling with the hypo. But once it was injected into Dax's neck, the distressing shaking began to ease off.

Keiko checked her pulse--rapid but strong. She was tossing her head, so Keiko stroked her hair, trying to soothe her exactly as she would for Molly. Dax looked much younger when she was unconscious.

Trying to be gentle, she pulled Dax back up on the bench. It wasn't easy, but she finally got the commander secured with the straps. If she had any doubts before, now she knew: the loops were definitely killing Dax.

Back at the helm, the dye marker map showed that the runabout had moved quite some distance to the rear on that last trip, but sensors were picking up even more traces of transmission signals behind her. She tracked them down until the computer was finally able to identify them as part of the routine hail used by Star fleet.

Keiko wondered if she were unduly twisted and hardened, but she already knew what she was going to do. She would kill both of them to save the station, and watching Dax die in pieces would be the hardest part. But she wouldn't give up.

Her teeth clenched as she swung the runabout into the nearest current. It was one of the strongest ones they had encountered. The engines strained but they weren't able to hold position. A stepped leader formed right behind them, and Keiko transferred power from the shields so they wouldn't slip past before the loop appeared. Shields fell to fifty-three percent.

As the runabout went through the loop, she felt herself losing consciousness.

"Welcome back, Rubicon." She was hearing things. She shook her head at the viewscreen as the image of a ship appeared, then was gone in the midst of the plasma. She was afraid she was starting to hallucinate, like Dax. At least she wasn't convulsing-- Her eyes blurred and, like a three-dimensional

1 HE I EMPIEST mirage, a vessel shifted into view among the dancing particles.

"It's the Defiant," Keiko whispered.

"Rubicon, can you read us?" She had left the communications channel open to track the transmission fragments. "Yes! Defiant, we're here!" As the Defiant maneuvered closer, Keiko checked the map of the markers. They had returned to the leading edge of the storm.

"Yes," Keiko repeated, just for herself. "We're here."

CHAPTER 17

"... AND ADJUST THE regeneration to include..." "... will perhaps counteract the affects of tertiary radiation..." Dax heard the voices and realized she was no longer on the Rubicon. It sounded like the infirmary on the station, and she had to wonder if this was yet another installment in the epic O'Brien romance. She already felt as if she had followed them through the system and back without accomplishing anything.

Somewhere above and behind her, Bashir was saying, "There seems to be a low spontaneous reversion to normal composition." "What if the thresholds are crossed?" someone asked.

Bashir said quietly, "I won't let that happen."

Dax swallowed and had trouble moving her dry lips. "Did she do it?" she whispered.

"She's trying to say something," someone said.

It was hard to get the words out. "Did she give him up?" "Dax, it's Julian. Can you hear me?" Dax tried to focus. "Of course I can hear you." His hand pressed down on her shoulder, but she hardly felt it for the burning, tearing pain that flashed through her entire body. "What's wrong with me?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"Trill are particularly susceptible to the tertiary radiation produced by alpha electromagnetic waves." Her muscles spasmed, and her back arched under the strain. She tried to breathe through the terrible sensation of her insides squeezing out through her pores.

"According to the medical logs," Bashir said.

"You've been suffering from electrochemical neural stimulation." "Oh, really?" Dax panted. "I thought I

was talking to the plasma gods. Are you telling me I made it all up?" "Delirium can be a strange thing," Bashir agreed.

"Glad I'm all better now." Bashir made a point of wiping the sweat from her brow. Dax didn't bother to thank him.

"Regeneration is a complex process," he explained.

"Each of the DNA nucleotides containing radioactive phosphorus must be traced and the frequency analyzed. Then they're physically matched to the nearest 'neighbor' that wasn't degraded by the tertiary radiation. Only after that process can the damaged DNA chains be relinked." "It sounds charming." Dax was unable to suppress a groan. "Are we almost done?" Bashir was completely sympathetic, but then he could afford to be. He didn't feel the same way she did. "I'm sorry to say, Jadzia, but you'll be undergoing regeneration for the next five days." "Days?" She stared at him. "Five days? Of this! You can't be serious." "You're very lucky," he assured her, calling on his most doctorly manner. "You'll survive. It only feels as if you're turning into liquid mush." "Five days?" she repeated incredulously. Dax suddenly looked around. "Where's Keiko? She isn't--" "She's fine. I was able to put her on a portable unit.

She went up to Ops for a debriefing on your mission." Dax changed the subject abruptly. "Does the captain know about the magnetic currents in the storm?"

A plasma arc could be sparked between the station and the wormhole." "Yes, Keiko told us." Bashir concentrated on the blinking lights of the diagnostic hood. "Since it's too late to evacuate the station, I believe Sisko intends to close the wormhole." "How?" "With decompression explosives."

Dax stared at him. "That will close it permanently." "Do you have another suggestion?" Bashir asked.

"I bet I can come up with one!" She struggled to her elbows. "Can't I have a portable unit so I can get out of here, too?" "Dax, your irradiation activity is barely holding below threshold levels. If ionization continues to increase, I'll have to put you in stasis until we can get you to a med lab with a regeneration chamber.

Starbase Fifteen is the closest one, and that's three weeks away." "But you let Keiko leave," Dax protested, "and she was exposed for as long as I was." "People react differently to radiation. Your chemical structure is more vulnerable to the free radicals that were produced. Do you want to be sterile for the rest of your life?" Dax tried to slip out from under the diagnostic hood. "Getting out of bed isn't going to accelerate the ionization process." Honestly he admitted, "No, but I doubt if you can get up." That was exactly what she needed to hear. "Shove this thing aside and I'll show you." He obligingly rolled the unit to the bottom of the bed, leaning against it to watch. She moaned as her feet swung over the edge, unprepared for the sudden lurch in her stomach.

"Feeling queasy?" Bashir asked solicitously.

"Not at all." She was breathless already. "No problem. Just get the portable unit, and I'll be on my way." He hesitated, hearing the effort in her voice. "I strongly advise against this, Jadzia." Dax stood up, hanging onto the bed. "I'm an old pro at this. You don't think I use Klingon exercise programs just to keep trim, do you?" "No, you use them for teasing Worf." She glared at him, refusing to rise to the bait.

"Would you rather see everyone else in the same condition? Because that's what's going to happen if we can't protect the station." Bashir shook his head, and kept on shaking it the entire time he retrieved a portable regenerator and adjusted the programming.

"Thanks," she said breezily as he adjusted it around her waist. "I owe you one." "You owe me at least a dozen," he grimly reminded her. "And you're not fit to be walking around. If you suffer a systemic shock, it could kill you." "I won't be the only dead body on your hands if that plasma storm hits the station." Bashir frowned but he took her arm, supporting her. "I'll go with you." At her dubious look, he slung a med-kit over his shoulder. "I won't order you to bed, but I will insist on medical supervision." "Thanks, Julian," Dax said, gratefully leaning on him.

O'Brien didn't like the way Keiko looked, sweating and blinking as if she could hardly stay conscious. She shouldn't be in Ops, she should be flat on her back in bed. He had found her in the Defiant's sick bay under a diagnostic hood not more than an hour ago, looking so pale and drawn that he was afraid she might die.

But Bashir had assured them both that she was well under the threshold levels of irradiation.

He went to Keiko's chair and knelt down, checking the readouts of the portable regeneration unit at her waist. The whites of her eyes were completely bloodshot, and her eyelids were swollen and red. She coughed slightly with every few breaths.

He wished he could make it all go away. "You'll be fine, Keiko." She stroked his hair with a lingering touch, as if she had thought about doing it and was glad she finally could. He leaned his cheek into her palm, then kissed it. He didn't care that Captain Sisko was sitting five feet away, examining the data on the plasma storm that Keiko had compiled.

Sisko put the clip down on his desk, bringing the tips of his fingers together. "According to the summary of your findings, the plasma storm is a living organism." "Yes, it is," Keiko said simply.

O'Brien squeezed her hand and returned to his seat, knowing she would prefer it that way during her report.

"I agree that organic carbon compounds are being produced," Sisko told her. "But how can plasma be alive?" "Life is energy in motion." Her voice was rough, but that was how it usually sounded when she was exhausted. "This plasma mass consumes particles and maintains an internal rhythm and structure involving the magnetic currents. It also appears to be capable of propagating offspring when it passes suitable planets or moons." Sisko didn't like what he was hearing. "If the plasma is an organism, then we are duty bound not to cause damage to it." "In my professional opinion," Keiko said firmly.

"The plasma mass is a living entity. It possesses an active, adaptive structure that utilizes its surroundings in order to survive." "The latest science report suggests that we detonate nucleonic charges to scatter the storm, forming an alley of safety for the station." "I don't think that's possible," she replied. "You would damage the internal patterns that maintain the organism, and it would almost certainly react to protect itself." Sisko lifted one hand in frustration. "If you can determine that it is an organism, then you must know some way we can affect it." "I'm not a nuclear physicist," Keiko reminded him.

O'Brien admired her cool in the face of Sisko's pressure. "This is an energy life-form, not a biological one."

O'Brien wanted to support her. "That's true. We need--" "Dax!" Sisko exclaimed as the door opened.

O'Brien turned as Dax came into the office, supported by Dr. Bashir. He quickly got up to offer her the chair, glad of the excuse to go stand next to Keiko.

His hand cupped his wife's shoulder. He thought she would want him to let go, but she put her hand over his, keeping it there.

Dax had always impressed O'Brien with her tall, imposing presence, but now she folded herself into the seat with deceptive fragility. She looked even worse than Keiko, as if she had been starved for weeks. Her flesh was drawn tight to the bones of her face, and her skin had a sickly, ashen color. The spots were hardly visible.

Dax was also having difficulty breathing. "Captain, if you close the wormhole with decompression, we may never get it open again." Bashir nodded. "And that won't solve the problem of how to protect everyone from the alpha radiation.

It will take at least twenty-four hours for the plasma storm to pass through this sector." Sisko looked from Dax to Keiko and turned to O'Brien. "You examined the effect on the Rubicon's shields, Chief. Do you have any suggestions?" "The alpha waves aren't dangerous until they pass through the shields. The automatic systems tried to screen for them, but the oscillations were too random for them to compensate." "And we must have wide coverage," Bashir agreed, "to protect everyone against the radiation from the other cosmic rays." O'Brien knew Sisko was waiting for a solution. "We could try to layer the shields, using different oscillation frequencies to catch the different angles of the scattering." "That won't work," Dax said, examining the operations report on O'Brien's tricorder. "Our systems still can't compensate rapidly enough to stop electrons as they spontaneously bond and dissociate." O'Brien nodded glumly. "I was also worried about the risk of pairing the charged particles. That could set off an energy discharge through the power relays." In the silence, Keiko gave a loud sigh. "I don't know, but maybe we're going about this the wrong way. We can't fight each individual particle and wave.

Plasma dynamics, like those of an organism, react as a whole. Why don't we use that?" "You're talking field mechanics," O'Brien pointed out. "We've already tried deflection models, but the magnetic field of the plasma varies too much. The focus has to be tight--hardly wider than the stationmand we still get leakage." "But we wouldn't have to affect the entire EM spectrum," Dax said thoughtfully. "Only the direction of the propagation of the leading particle waves." "We still won't be able to protect an area of space large enough to include the wormhole," O'Brien insisted.

"But don't you see? We won't have to if we can deflect the storm," Dax said. "A wave field sent into the storm front could act as a magnetic mirror, repelling the charged particles back along the path of their approach." O'Brien looked down at Keiko. "I thought you said it might damage the plasma to change its internal patterns?" Dax was already shaking her head. "This isn't matter we're dealing with, it's plasma. A liquid of charged particles following the waves in a helical motion. The direction of propagation can be reversed without affecting any of the other variables like frequency or temperature or energy dispersion. That's why magnetic mirrors are so useful in containing plasma for scientific study." Sisko put his hands flat on the desk. "Dax, this is a big storm with a lot of momentum behind it. It would take a lot of energy to change its direction." "We'll use its energy to our advantage," she told him. "Direction of propagation is a cascade reaction.

If we can influence one particle, it will influence others. We can target the leading field lines and the organism should react as a whole, turning on itself." "Leaving the sector the way it came," Keiko agreed.

"Can it be done?" Sisko asked O'Brien.

"You've got me," he admitted, taking his tricorder back from Dax to input the equations. "It's a good thing we upped the power amplitude this morning.

That Rom is a godsend. He was able to link the outer shield wall to the deflector towers. Now we can absorb the energy directly from the cosmic rays and deflect it back at the storm." Sisko glanced around, seeing they were in agreement. "It looks as if we have a plan, people. Let's make it work."

CHAPTER 18

KEIKO FELT MILES squeeze her hand as they entered Ops. She smiled in return as he headed for his station, then she hesitated at Kira's glare, thinking it was meant for her.

"Captain, you can't close the wormhole!" Kira protested as soon as Sisko appeared. Keiko realized that the major wasn't angry, but harried almost beyond endurance.

At the tactical station, Worf curtly reported, "Decompression explosives have been prepared, and torpedoes are ready to launch." Keiko was about to object, but Dr. Bashir did it for her. "That could kill the aliens living inside the wormhole." "The charge has been calibrated to affect only the periphery of the subspace fibers," Worf replied.

"Only the periphery!" Kira repeated sarcastically.

"That will detach it from this quadrant, destroying the Celestial Temple of the Prophets." "I'm not going to destroy anything," Sisko said flatly, cutting off the discussion. "We think we have another solution. We're going to repel the plasma mass back on itself." Worf was examining his sensors. "Sir, our attempts to deflect the storm have proved ineffective." "And we barely have enough power to keep the shields intact," Kira added. "We're already getting random radiation penetration." "That's because we're trying to block the wave emissions." Dax had to stop because of her coughing.

Keiko finished for her.

"A deflection field aimed at the plasma itself will reverse the direction of the particles." Bashir was helping Dax down the steps. "She should be in the infirmary." She shook her head. "Let's set up the deflector program. Then I'll route the data to the center console so I can sit down." Keiko felt as bad as Dax looked, but she went to the science console to assist her. Accessing the patterns of her latest biometric analysis, she included the data that both the Defiant and the station had gathered while they were gone.

Kira checked her readings. "Impact with the station is estimated in two hours."

"We have enough time," Keiko said quietly.

"But you can't expect to match the variables of every wave," Kira protested. "That's impossible." "We'll target the particle waves in the magnetic currents," Keiko told her. "That's the dominant internal rhythm according to the biometric analysis. We gathered enough data on their directional flow and internal oscillations to be able to accurately target those wave patterns." Miles backed her up, saying, "The leakage won't matter as long as we can affect more than eighty percent of the area in contact with the deflection cone." Sisko took a stance at the head of the main console.

"Let me know when you can begin." Dax was sagging as Keiko ran the final confirmation pattern against her biometric analysis. But she had to be ruthless. If the angle of oscillation was not correct, the power would be expended for nothing.

"Sorry," she murmured to Dax. "Another minute..." Dax shrugged, wincing in lieu of a smile.

Keiko knew it wasn't the appropriate time, but she quietly added, "I knew the loops were killing you, but I kept going through. I'm sorry about that, too." Dax quickly looked up, then nodded. "I would have done the same thing. We make a good team, you and i.,,

"Yes," Keiko agreed. "Just don't tell anyone about your hallucinations." She glanced around, making sure no one else could hear. "Miles can be sensitive about that kind of stuff. You know, superstitious." "It had nothing to do with you," Dax admitted. "I guess I got you two confused with something else. I think it was because of what you said about the Gratitude Festival last year." Keiko remembered the way Dax had acted that night, wrapping her arms around Sisko and practically climbing up his body. "Oh! I see." "You and O'Brien make a good couple," Dax said.

"Like Benjamin and Kasidy. Sometimes you can tell just by watching two people together." "I know," Keiko agreed, realizing how much trust Dax was placing in her. "Then we'll keep the details between ourselves." Dax nodded, but she was also swaying as if ready to pass out.

"Analysis completed," Keiko announced loud enough so everyone would know they were making progress.

Dax took one look at the figures and graphs of the biometric analysis and told O'Brien, "Good thing you increased the power output. We have the pitch angle of the frequency, but it needs to be oscillated in a rather complex pattern." Dax made a few minor adjustments to the deflection program, then relayed the matrix to him. "I see what you mean," he muttered. "Irregular patterns."

Dax routed the science data to the center console as Miles reported, "Deflectors will be ready in a moment, sir." Bashir helped Dax to a stool at the center console.

"You've done enough." "Not yet," Dax retorted with forced lightness.

Keiko leaned against the science console. She was locked out of control and could only monitor what was happening. Then she realized Miles was giving her a concerned look, and he motioned to her regeneration unit. She checked it to make him happy, and gave him a thumbs-up signal. Poor Miles looked as if he hadn't slept last night either, and she remembered how his hand had trembled when he touched her shoulder. Suddenly she didn't feel like the weak link around here, knowing everyone else was suffering, too. It was an awful thought, but she knew selfsurvival tended to bring out the baser instincts of biology.

"Deflectors on line," Miles announced.

Dax confirmed, "Matrix program tied in with the guidance systems." Keiko carefully watched the indicator recording the rate of leakage against the error factor. If she had to, she would recalibrate her data.

"Activate deflectors," Sisko ordered.

It took a moment for the magnetic mirror to stabilize. "Narrow the density focus," Keiko murmured as Dax tried to compensate for the interference of the emission waves.

Miles frowned as he realized what she was doing.

"We don't want to get intrabeam collisions." "We've got room," Dax said. "I'll tell you where." "Field lines

focused," O'Brien confirmed. "Power holding steady." The readings indicated that forty percent of the particles within the deflection beam were being reversed.

"It's not strong enough," Keiko said. "There must be something else we can do." Dax lifted her head. "It's too steady. Every other variable has an irregular pattern." Keiko knew what she meant. "What if we pulse the deflectors--" "And target different areas to maximize our contact load," Dax agreed. "Then we can turn the tide." "Hold on there!" O'Brien protested. "You want me to pulse the beam? That's much harder on the emitters. And the possibility of feedback overload increases by seventy percent." "It's the only way we can have an effect on the plasma," Dax insisted.

Sisko nodded. "Do it." Keiko went to Miles's station to access the biometric matrix and determine the optimal timing of the pulses. "It's complicated by the internal motion. The intervals will have to vary according to the location of contact." Miles seemed amazed by what she was doing. "It's theoretically possible. But I don't know how the emitters will hold up."

Keiko knew that tone of voice. "I knew you could do it. Here's the pulse pattern sequence." She stepped aside so he could enter the program.

"New pattern entered," he announced. "Engaging deflectors." Gasps rose at the sight on the main viewer. With each burst of the deflector beam, brilliant flashes rippled against the blackbody, twisting into the plasma itself and curling around the intricate folds and crinkles of a pattern more convoluted than brain tissue. It was like a living form of a mathematical equation, illuminated by hairline fractures of light.

Miles put an arm around Keiko's shoulder, drawing her closer. "Deflection rate at seventy-six percent and rising." "I knew it would work," Keiko whispered, staring at the plasma mass. She could almost see it churning back on itself. Then she looked up at him. "Miles, I think we should have another baby." His eyes widened. "Is now the time to talk about something like that?" "Can you think of a better time?" she asked, wanting to laugh.

He started to smile, tightening his arm around her.

"Sure! I think it's a great idea. We always said we would--" "It's working?" Dax exclaimed. "Benjamin, we've done it. Cascade reversal is spreading and the forward movement has significantly slowed." She glanced up at Bashir. "I think I'll go back to the infirmary now." "Finally!" the doctor exclaimed.

Miles swept Keiko up in a real hug as exclamations and sighs of relief rose in Ops. "I knew it," Keiko whispered, for Miles as well as herself. "I knew we could make it work!"

CHAPTER 19

AmmR SISKO MADE the announcement that the storm had been deflected from the system, Odo knew that his time as a nanny was almost over. But he didn't expect the O'Briens to come for Molly so soon after the storm alert was rescinded.

Almost before they were through the door, O'Brien was saying, "Thanks so much, Odo. I don't know what we would have done without you." Keiko looked as if she was barely able to keep standing, even with her husband's support, but her smile radiated warmth and gratitude. "Miles told me how wonderful you've been with Molly." Molly looked over the edge of the desk. "Mommy?" "I'm home, Molly." Keiko held out her arms.

"How's my girl?"

Odo was ready to urge her towards her mother, afraid of the same sort of incident that had happened this morning with O'Brien. But Molly skipped out to meet her parents, letting Keiko kiss her and lifting her hands so her father would pick her up. She was babbling about her pony rides.

Keiko beamed at Odo. "She enjoyed herself, I can tell." "Yeah," O'Brien agreed wryly. "Molly likes Odo." Odo inclined his head. "And I like Molly." Keiko wrinkled her nose up at her daughter, secure in her father's arms~ "I guess you don't need your old parents so much, do you? But what would we do without you?" Odo silently agreed.

"We can't thank you enough," O'Brien told him, reaching out for his hand.

Odo hesitated, but he shook hands with the chief.

Usually he avoided it, perhaps because other people often didn't extend him the courtesy, as if they were afraid they could be absorbed by a mere touch. But the firm clasp was a seal of something they had shared--Molly.

"I don't mind watching her," Odo said gruffly. "If you need to go to the infirmary, I have some time to spare." Keiko was coughing, glancing at the portable medical unit around her waist, but O'Brien assured him, "She'll be fine. Right now, the best thing for us is to go home and have a nice, long nap."

Molly waved good-bye to Odo. "Can I have more pony rides?" "I would be glad to. Drop by anytime," Odo told her, meaning it. To Keiko, he added, "She already had her lunch. Corn chowder and a cheese sandwich, though she didn't like the tomatoes--" Odo broke off, realizing how he must sound. Keiko hesitated, then gently put her hand on his arm.

"Thank you, Odo. We'll both come see you, probably more often than you would like." Odo nodded, sitting down and turning his chair away. He couldn't bear to watch them leave. But he could hear Molly's bright chatter as she talked about the games and funny things she had seen in the security office.

The door closed, then there was silence again. He turned to gaze at the chair where Molly had curled up to nap this morning. The same chair where Major Kira sat every Tuesday as they went over the weekly security report. He realized he was beginning to hope that someday the door would close and love and laughter would stay inside with him instead of always walking away.

He signaled Ops.

Kira answered, "Hi, Odo. Something I can help you with?" It was on the tip of his tongue to ask to see her this evening, but what would he say? "Have dinner with me?" It was absurd. He didn't even eat.

"It was nothing," he muttered, shifting uneasily.

"My hand slipped, is all."

Kira rewarded him with a smile. "Always glad to see you, Constable." Odo stiffly nodded, ending the transmission. Then he sat there, comforting himself with the memory of her velvety brown eyes fondly gazing at him. Maybe it wasn't too much to ask--someday.

Sisko nodded to the O'Brien family as they passed him in the habitat ring. The chief was carrying Molly, so he figured they were finally heading back to their quarters. They certainly deserved it. Keiko had

served above and beyond the call of duty after Dax had slipped into radiation-induced hallucinations. He intended to request a citation for her work.

Sisko waved as he turned the other way, toward the permanent resident section. The corridors were no longer lined with restless, bored evacuees surrounded by their piles of possessions. It was still overcrowded, but everyone was dashing about, intent on returning to their ships for departure. They were fortunate that the emission waves had diminished almost as soon as the plasma mass turned on itself. It wouldn't be long before the first vessels would receive clearance to go through the wormhole.

Kira was still in Ops coordinating the departure sequence. Sisko had promised to relieve her after he took a break for an hour or so. There was something he wanted to do first.

"Benjamin!" Kasidy exclaimed as the door opened.

"I thought it was one of the Ceres people. They left some of their things--" She broke off, grinning at him. "Don't stand out there, Ben. You'll get run over." "Thanks." Sisko walked inside. He couldn't take his eyes off her. It was remarkable the way she glowed, like a steady, burning flame. He wanted to hold his hands out to her, soaking up the soothing warmth.

She turned a complete circle in the center of the room, spreading her arms wide at the piles of blankets and dirty dishes. "I was going to roll around in Bacchanalian abandon, then take a long, hot shower." "I'd like to see that." He went closer.

Kasidy smiled up at him. "I always celebrate after a life or death experience." "So do I." She hesitated, as if this were too good to be true.

"You're stopping by for only a second, aren't you? To make sure I'm all right." "Wrong." He was enjoying this. "Jake and I are going to use some of my Captain's prerogative and replicate a tricorder and a picnic lunch. I thought you might like to join us on the observation deck of the upper pylon. It's sure to be quite a sight, watching all of these vessels pull out." She cocked her head. "Then you aren't mad about what I said to Jake?" He hesitated, trying to remember. "What did you say to Jake?" "Didn't he tell you? Last night after that freighter broke loose, he tracked me down." She shrugged slightly. "He was acting so worried, wanting to make sure my ship was secured and volunteering to help set up the temporary housing. I told him to go have some fun with those new friends of his. Actually, I insisted." "Oh, you did?" He raised one brow in mock severity. "Did you know that I told him to stay in our quarters last night?" "Yes." "You did?" he asked in surprise. "And you still told him to go out?" "Yes. I said you both needed to lighten up." Kasidy laughed outright at his expression. "Oh, I know he almost ended up getting arrested, but I'd do it all over again. When I left this morning he was in your room, furiously writing away. I think he wishes he'd been put in the brig, if only for a few minutes." Sisko shook his head. "Captain, sometimes you're too much for me." "I know I am." She gave him an arch look. "But you know I'm right." "It's beginning to be a pattern," he agreed.

Kasidy put her arms around his neck. "You know, Ben, I think we've weathered our first storm together rather well." "Yes, we have." He liked the way she felt in his arms, and he was glad that she hadn't been able to read his mind during the past twenty-four hours.

She laughed, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. "I'd love to go on a picnic, but don't you have a million things to do?" "Nothing more important than this."

Kasidy caught her breath. "You know, Ben, sometimes you say just the right things." "Good." He kissed her, savoring her soft lips.

As they finally drew apart, she somehow managed to slip out of his grasp. "Come on, let's not miss anything." He could never seem to hold onto her for very long.

"Jake said he would meet us at the replimat." But as they left, Sisko captured her hand, refusing to let go. He felt better than he had in a long, long time.

CHAPTER 20

Wm~ Worf RETURNED to his quarters, he paced around for a few moments, noting the stains and general disarray that had been left behind by his guests. But beyond that, there was something fundamentally wrong. He knew that these rooms would never feel like home to him, not like his quarters on the Enterprise. He didn't belong here, and yet, where else did he belong?

Worf sat down at his console. This Klingon- Federation conflict could help determine where he belonged, but in the end, it was up to him to make a place for himself. Then he could make a home that included Alexander and all of the other people he cared about.

He activated the com. "Worf to Reaper, requesting to speak to Captain Aft." Aft quickly came on the line, and his grave expression indicated he had been waiting for Worf's decision. "Yes, Commander?" "Your senior mate has been released from the brig, Captain. Charges will not be filed against her." "Thank you, Commander! I am most appreciative.

If there is anything--" Worf shook his head. "Do not thank me." For some reason, he added, "I did it for her." "Oh." Ari hesitated. "Why, if I may ask?" Worf briefly pressed his lips together. "I understand the way she feels." "That is very... generous of you, Commander." Ari's voice gave the impression that it was highly dubious, as well.

Worf remembered Odo had not been as diplomatic when he had ordered him to release Carl. "You should prosecute her just to make an example for the rest of the Sattar," the chief had insisted. But Worf had already made up his mind.

He did not care what any of them thought. "Is the Reaper prepared to depart?" "We could be. That is, once Cali returns." Worf input the proper docking commands. "You have clearance to disembark within the next hour. I recommend that you do so immediately." Ari leaned forward. "Are you in a rush to see us leave, Commander?" This was why Worf had waited until he was in his quarters to make the call rather than doing it from Ops. "The Klingons will be released from the brig after sixteen hundred hours. Due to the termination of the peace treaty, they will be asked to leave immediately." "I understand." Ari's voice grew hushed at the implications.

Worf was well aware that the Klingons would have no compunctions about ordering the Sattar to take them back to Qo'noS, even if it caused them to lose their transport contract. And without a ship, Alons could very well commandeer the Reaper for his own use.

Ari apparently thought about all that and more, because he kept staring at Worf as if he didn't understand, yet he didn't want to tip his hand. "Why are you telling me this?" "You were correct this morning. I do not believe it is right that the Klingon government can interfere with what rightfully belongs to you." Worf tightened his fist. "They took away my lands, just as they would take your ship from your people. I cannot allow that to continue." "You can't?" Ari asked.

"No." Worf transmitted the documents he had filed with the High Council of the Federation of Planets

requesting an inquiry into the condition and status of the Sattar Collective under the Klingon Empire.

Ari read the documents, considering them carefully. "This has already been received and docketed by the Federation Council. Can you cancel your request?" "No. It will be processed until a ruling is reached," Worf told him. "The Sattar Collective will be investigated, along with your history involving the Klingon Empire. You can testify as to your current conditions, and the Klingon High Council will be asked to respond." "But the peace treaty has been broken," Ari protested. "Why should the Klingons cooperate?" "It will undoubtedly delay a ruling from the Federation Council. However, a new peace treaty must include discussions of your status within the Klingon Empire. In order for you to receive full protection from Starfleet, the Sattar Collective must apply to join the Federation." Ari was slowly shaking his head. "I didn't think you had it in you, Commander, but you can strike a good deal when you put your mind to it. What is it you want?" "This is not a deal," Worf denied. "I desire nothing for requesting the inquiry." "But surely you must know how valuable this is to the Sattar?" "It is done." Ari hesitated. "Then there are no hidden strings, nothing we have to do for you?" Worf drew back at the suggestion. "You have until sixteen hundred hours to leave, Captain Ari. Good luck." He reached over to disengage, but Ari stopped him.

"Thank you, Commander. You'll never know the depth of the gratitude of the Sattar." Worf signed off, vaguely wondering why he heard a threat implied in those words.

He sighed as he stood up, glancing around the repellant rooms. He had been forced to agree with Captain Sisko on the release of Alons and his crew.

The Katon had never fired on the station or the Defiant, and the destruction of the yacht had eliminated any evidence of their attack on the Ceres. Their tampering with the docking clamps had been ill conceived, and it was reason enough to hold them in the brig and give them an armed escort to a departing vessel. But it would only serve to antagonize the Klingon High Council to hold Alons here any longer.

Worf went to the window, wishing he could see the Defiant from here. From the first time he saw that ship, he knew she was worthy of a warrior, worthy of the war that was to come. Yet he suddenly felt his conviction falter. Perhaps everyone else was correct, and the Klingons knew they could not win in a fight against the Federation. Perhaps he had become so desperate to resolve his own private dilemma with his people that he was seeing conspiracies and incursions where there were none.

His fists tightened as he glared at the departing ships, at the busy image of prosperity on the station.

Could he be wrong about the Klingon Empire?

After Cali had returned to the Reaper and talked to Captain Ari, she ran the entire way through the ring to Worf's quarters. She had been calculating her percentage of the Klingon deal, which she had initiated from inside the brig, when Ari told her it had been canceled. She had protested, not only because the contract points had been arranged, but because her bonus would enable her to redeem her debt to the rest of the members.

But then Ari explained what Worf had done for them, requesting a Federation inquiry into the Sattar situation. Cali didn't have to be told it was in their best interests to play along with Starfleet. If they were sucked into the Klingon offensive they would be nothing more than service drones for the duration of the hostilities. And knowing the Klingons, that could last for generations.

Cali signaled the door, hoping Worf was here. She didn't have much time left. The captain had tried to

prevent her from leaving the Reaper, intending for them to be far away from the station by the time the Klingons were released. But Cali had called in the terms of her private deal, and Ari had been forced to allow her to go. But he had warned her that the Reaper would depart on schedule whether or not she returned.

"Enter!" Cali went in, knowing that for once she had not carefully planned and prepared what she was going to say. So she stood just inside the door as Worf turned from the portal.

"What do you want?" He looked displeased and unhappy, as if he was thoroughly frustrated by everything that had happened.

"I don't know why I came," she admitted.

"You do not intend to thank me." He gazed out the window again.

"No. Like everyone else, I'm sure you have your reasons for what you do." "Do you know many honorable people?" he countered.

"Do you?" she retorted.

"Yes." She still thought that he must have gained something from helping them. But if he had found out about the Klingon deal, he would have exposed their involvement rather than give them the best hope the Sattar Collective had had in centuries.

"You will find honorable people in the Federation," Worf told her. "Perhaps they can help you if you deal with them honestly." "Why would the Federation help us?" Cali demanded. "They don't care about us." "The Federation has more reason to be prejudiced against me," Worf reminded her. "Yet only the Federation has supported my personal rights." "Perhaps they have more to offer than we thought," Cali said slowly. The same impulse that had driven her here to discover the truth behind Worf's actions impelled her to make good on this deal.

"Commander, you should watch your back for Klingons. All of you should."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, taking three strides to reach her. "Do you know about the Ceres?" "No, no, you have far bigger worries than the Ceres," she said, waving away his comment impatiently. "We've seen a thousand things that add up to an impending Klingon offensive. The Reaper is one of the last Sattar vessels in this area. The Collective has resolved to migrate deeper into Federation territory to avoid the coming hostilities." "Is this true?" Worf demanded.

"You can check the movements of Sattar ships," Cali pointed out. "It's easy enough, except who watches things like that? By the way, I'm breaking ranks telling you this. It's not strictly dealable information until the area is vacated. But you could always find it on your own." "Yes}" His eyes lit up with triumph. "Cali, you have been... most helpful." "Just making square on the deal," she told him.

"That's the only justice I've ever found in this galaxy." "Perhaps," Worf agreed, finally returning her smile.

Cali turned to leave, but over her shoulder she couldn't resist a parting shot. "Oh, and Commander Worf, are you sure you don't want to inspect my aft cargo bay one more time?"

The End

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