

Twilight

All Stations, Report Status.

Tactical and communications, ready, Bowers said.

Science and sensors, ready. ChThane.

Impulse engines are online, warp power available on your command. Nog.

Life support at optimum. Medical bay standing by. Bashir.

The ship is ready, Captain, Dax said. Your orders?

Captain, Vaughn thought. A fellow could get used to that. Release docking clamps. Aft thrusters at one-quarter, port and starboard thrusters at station-keeping. Around them, the ship seemed to change, like a great beast waking from its slumber. Ahead of them loomed the great, exotic form of Deep Space 9, the station receding gradually before them.

Conn, Vaughn said, set course for the wormhole.

Course laid in.

Ahead one-half impulse, Vaughn said. Take us in.

Vaughn felt Defiant leap forward beneath him, charging toward the unknown. Their mission to explore the Gamma Quadrant had begun.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the authors imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To Patricia Ann Walenista,

one of the brightest stars in my sky,

whose glow bestows warmth,

whose light provides guidance,

and whose every rise brings love and support

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Part One

Vexed The Dim Sea

All times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vexed the dim sea.
ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON,
ULYSSES

1

He watched her die, and in that terrible instant, he relived the moment of their separation, felt the weight of the years since, and regretted everything.

Prynn's body landed in a heap beside the captain's chair, the foul smell of singed flesh already rising from her. Elias Vaughn looked down at her as he leaped from the chair, and saw the midsection of her uniform burned away. Past the seared edges of the fabric that remained, her skin was charred black. Blood seeped from her mangled body and pooled in her wounds like crimson floodwaters across a ruined landscape.

Vaughn pulled his gaze away and, with an emotional effort, moved past the remains of his daughter, toward the console she had a moment ago been operating. He suppressed the ache growing within him and focused on reaching the conn, on keeping *Defiant* intact and headed away from its attackers. Prynn was dead, but the rest of the crew were not.

With each step, Vaughn felt the labored vibrations of the impulse drive translating through the deck plates. Dark gray eddies of smoke swirled about the bridge, carrying with them the electric scent of

overheated circuitry. Flashes of scarlet, the visual call to battle stations, shined here and there through the haze. He reached the conn and bent to assay the readouts, waving away the smoke with an open hand. The low moan of the straining engines deepened as Vaughn eyed the display, and he was not surprised to find the ship no longer holding course. He reached down to work the controls, but flames surged up from beneath the console. Vaughn threw an arm up in front of his face as he staggered back a step, the intense heat blistering his arm even through his uniform sleeve. The air pressure decreased a moment, the hungry fire gathering fuel for itself. The flames sounded like a banner whipping in the wind, loud enough for Vaughn to hear over the inconsistent thrum of the overburdened drive and the many alarms screaming for the crews attention.

A voice called out above the din Weapons power to the shields? only to be followed by another shouting that Defiant s weapons were offline. Lieutenant Bowers at tactical, Lieutenant Nog at engineering, Vaughn thought, startled for a moment to realize that he was not alone. Even as his instincts to save the crew had driven him to action, their presence had vanished from his mind; for long seconds, his entire universe had been smoke and flame, vibration and sound, and the image of his daughters mutilated corpse.

Ensign chThane worked the sciences station, Vaughn thought, forcing himself wholly back into the moment. And somewhere behind him, Lieutenant Dax and Dr. Bashir filled out the roster of bridge personnel. If any of them were saying anything, he could not hear them.

Vaughn looked past his upraised arm and squinted at the fire engulfing the conn. Streaks of brilliant indigo snaked up through the otherwise orange-yellow flames. Chromium, Vaughn thought, even as he began to move again, the recollection or misrecollection of which elements burned which colors incongruously percolating up from memory. He moved around the console and dropped to his knees. From this vantage, he could see the jagged margin of a hole in the decking beneath the conn, the flames erupting from it in great sheets. The explosion that had claimed Pryn had obviously occurred just below. Defiant rocked suddenly and violently, inertial dampers failing for a second. Another Jarada disruptor bolt, Vaughn guessed as he felt the ship pitch forward. Too close to his goal to give it up, and knowing time was running out for the crew, he grabbed for the console support as he was thrown off balance. Somehow, his fingers found their mark and took hold. Pain flared through his right hand, his flesh binding itself to the hot metal in a horrible embrace. But he held on, pulling himself back to his knees and closer to the underside of the console.

A disembodied voice yelled something Vaughn could not make out, the fire bellowing in his ears like the roar of some mammoth molten beast. He listened for other words, but heard only the flames. A murky cloud seemed to pass through his mind, like the smoke churning through the bridge. He realized he was on the verge of losing consciousness.

With a bellow of his own, Vaughn thrust his free hand up under the conn and felt for the fire-suppression canister. His uniform sleeve caught fire, and beneath it, so too did his skin. His fingertips brushed the canister, amazingly still cool to the touch. Vaughn quickly pulled the cylinder free with one hand, then pulled his other hand from the console support, the pain of his skin tearing away an afterthought in the wake of his determination. He aimed and activated the canister, and a fog of chemical retardant spouted out in a billowy white cone, extinguishing his flaming sleeve. Parts of his arm felt the cold of the chemicals, but where his flesh had been scorched, it burned as though still afire.

Vaughn tilted the canister away from himself and attacked the flames where they emerged from the hole in the decking. The fire retreated briefly, then resumed, and Vaughn feared it might win his battle with it. He pushed himself forward beneath the conn and thrust the canister directly over the hole. The sound of the flames drowned beneath the onslaught of the pressurized chemicals, and finally, so did the fire.

Vaughn continued spraying, emptying the canister into the hole. With the fire extinguished, the force of the explosion that had caused it became clear as though Prynns maimed body were not proof enough. The roughly circular hole beneath the conn stretched nearly a meter in diameter, Vaughn saw. The deck plating twisted upward and outward, the metal blackened and bent as though it had offered the blast only minimal resistance.

Aft shields failing, somebody shouted, the identity of the voice swallowed up by the discordant and

increasingly loud pulse of the impulse engines, the speaker hidden by the veil of smoke. Probably Bowers, Vaughn thought as he rose to his feet. He dropped the canister to one side, but did not hear it strike the deck above the cacophony permeating the bridge. Warning signals punctuated the clamor, and though he could not make out their words, Vaughn heard other officers barking out information. Vaughn bent over the conn, now between it and the forward viewer. He wanted to find the helm controls and bring Defiant back on course. If they were far enough away from Torona IV, then he could engage the warp drive provided it was still intact and possibly outrun the Jarada before they had time to mount a larger attack force.

The console was dark. The glassy surface of the display reflected the diffused overhead lighting, but no controls and no readouts shined within. A jolt shook Vaughn as though he had been stunned with a phaser. If they couldn't regain control of the ship, they had no chance of escaping the Jarada.

Vaughn looked up at the rest of the bridge, trying to see the crew through the haze. The ship shuddered again beneath another assault, but it must have been a glancing blow, effectively dissipated by the ablative armor, because nothing exploded and Vaughn was able to keep his feet. He waved at the smoke swimming around him, the gray miasma thinning now that the fire was out and the ventilation system could catch up.

He strained to see through the cloudy atmosphere. As the smoke swirled, he caught a glimpse of one of the crew in profile at the rear of the bridge. Distinctive dark markings spilled from a temple down the side of a fair face and neck, making the Trill unmistakable. Dax, he called, reroute flight control.

He watched her operate an aft console, and then she yelled, I've got it.

Vaughn started toward the lieutenant, but stopped when he saw movement at the center of the bridge. On the floor beside the command chair, Bashir leaned over Prynns unmoving body. The doctor held a tricorder in one hand and an instrument Vaughn did not recognize in the other.

Vaughn looked at the inert face of his daughter. Her porcelain features, normally tense and expressive despite their delicacy, were now slack, even peaceful, contradicting the awful mass of injuries her body had sustained. For a moment, he saw Prynns mother, her own mien passive at peace somehow, despite her obvious understanding of what was soon to come in that instant he last saw her. He felt the familiar rage and anguish building within him, the enormous guilt not far behind, and he wondered how this could have happened again.

You have a mission, he told himself, and allowed the simple statement this old mantratto carry him away from his private darkness. He raced past Nog and Bowers, both intent on their consoles.

When he arrived beside Dax, her fingers were sprinting back and forth across the display. Resequencing the reactors, she said, raising her voice amid the tumult and after a few seconds, the vibrations of the impulse drive steadied. Several alarms quieted too, lessening the commotion considerably; now only a couple of staccato tones persisted in their warnings. Vaughn could have ordered them silenced, but they were a source of information, and in any dangerous situation, he sought information. Taking evasive action, Dax continued. Better than the sound of the stabilized engines and fewer alarms was no sound at all the absence of Jarada weaponry landing on Defiant as the lieutenant maneuvered the ship.

How far from the planet? Vaughn wanted to know. Dax told him. They were still too close to go to warp safely.

Two more Jarada heavies emerging from the far side of the second moon, Bowers called from his station. Those were in addition to the pair of battleships Vaughn knew were already pursuing Defiant.

If we can stay at full impulse, Dax reported, checking her readouts, they won't be able to catch us. We only have to worry about the ones already firing on us.

If only we could stand our ground and defend ourselves, Vaughn thought. This was not a fair fight, though, and would not be even if Defiant's weapons could be brought back online. Not because the bantam starship could not best a top-of-the-line Jarada vessel or even bear up against several of them but because this was a battle Defiant's crew could not join. The Jarada were a strange and reclusive species, punctilious in the extreme, and often very difficult to deal with; they had once terminated contact with the Federation for two decades after a UFP representative had mispronounced a single one of their words during an introduction ceremony. But while temperamental in many regards, the Jarada were also in some

ways predictable they employed well-defined rules of engagement, and it was that fact about them that constrained Vaughn's actions right now.

Sir, Nog yelled, a second after another alarm began bleating. The impulse engines are losing power. Vaughn looked to Dax, wanting the information to prove false, but the alarm and her expression told him otherwise. And he had known better anyway in his experience, only good news ever turned out to be suspect.

As if to underscore his thought, the tone of the impulse drive changed once more, flattening and slowing, and then Defiant rattled again beneath the force of a disruptor bolt slamming into the ship. Sparks flew from a port-side console, but despite the failure of the aft shields, the hull armor again withstood the attack. Bowers confirmed this a moment later, but the continued existence of Defiant had already told Vaughn what he needed to know. Effective as the ablative armor was at dissipating the effects of the Jarada weaponry, though, it would not hold up indefinitely; each attack thinned the hull plating, Vaughn knew, its layers vaporizing at the point of impact and dispersing the destructive energy out into space. He stepped up to the tactical station, beside Bowers. Vaughn had actually anticipated the possibility of something like this turn of events during the past couple of days, but there had been no apparent solution other than for the crew to speed their way through it. And as bad as the situation now was, it would deteriorate even further if Vaughn gave in to temptation and defended Defiant by means other than retreat.

Less than three days ago, the Jarada had grudgingly helped the Federation save the lives of a half-million people in the evacuation of the human civilization from Europa Nova. During an extended incident in which previously unknown Iconian gateways—essentially, open doorways linking noncontiguous and often distant locations—had suddenly become operational, masses of lethally irradiated material had spilled out of an orbital gateway and threatened the population of the planet. A convoy led by the Bajoran Militia had managed to evacuate almost all of the Europans to safety, but five hundred thousand had been forced to flee through a second gateway, this one on the surface of their world and linking to Torona IV, one of the home planets of the Jarada.

Status, Vaughn said to Bowers.

Aft shields are gone. Aft armor down to sixty-seven percent. That measure would not need to diminish to zero, Vaughn knew, before the hull ruptured beneath a disruptor hit. And when that happened, explosive decompression would be just the beginning of a chain of rapid and catastrophic failures that would leave only debris and a bright energy signature where Defiant had been.

What happened to those evasive maneuvers? Vaughn called back to Dax, though the answer was clear as quickly and as well as the lieutenant had taken to the demands of command, she was a good pilot, but not the career pilot that Prynn was.

That Prynn had been.

An unsettling mixture of pride and sorrow rose within Vaughn, quickly threatening to overwhelm him. Pressure built behind his eyes, and it struck him that, for the first time in years, it would be an easy thing to allow himself to break down, to give in to his pain and abdicate his responsibilities. But that was not really an option. He willed himself as he had so many times before to disconnect from his emotions. You have a mission, he told himself again. If he survived this encounter with the Jarada, there would be time later to mourn.

Dax announced an automated evasion sequence, and the impulse drive whined as it struggled to support the new instructions. Vaughn felt a shift in the pit of his stomach, the gravity generators and inertial dampers adjusting as Defiant sheared from its course. Tremors rumbled through the ship's superstructure, but at least for the moment, no weapons landed.

Vaughn peered at the main viewer. In his mind, he saw what was not visible on the screen: the near pair of Jarada ships dancing in lethal patterns about Defiant, the far pair charging toward the scene. He searched his vast experience for similar predicaments and recalled several, but none in which his actions had been so tightly restricted.

Vaughn had secured safe harbor on Torona IV for the evacuees by providing technical data about the gateways to the Jarada. In the few days since, Europa Nova had been completely evacuated, and

Vaughn and his crew had then led a convoy to the Torona system. There, they had overseen the relocation of the half-million Europani to Bajor, where the rest of their population awaited eventual return to their world once it had been decontaminated. The last group of transports had broken orbit less than an hour ago, and in that time, the Jarada had apparently discovered that the gateways had been shut down, possibly for good, and certainly for the foreseeable future. Considering their xenophobic nature, the Jarada might have welcomed this, but instead, with the technical information they had been given now valueless to them, they had chosen to believe themselves duped by Vaughn.

The near ships are splitting up, Bowers said. Vaughn turned from the main viewer the starfield swooped and dashed, seemingly at random, he saw, as Dax tried to evade their attackers and looked at the tactical officer. The alert lighting tinted the young mans dark skin on and off with a rich, rosy glow. Theyre moving to flank us, the lieutenant said, his tone a blend of resignation and anger, Vaughn thought. The far ships are closing the gap. Theyll be in weapons range soon.

The initial attack on Defiant had come as the crew had prepared to leave orbit about Torona IV and begin the return journey to DS9. Vaughn had been speaking via subspace with a representative of the planetary regime, thanking him for the forbearance of his people in allowing the Europani on their soil. The official had responded with accusations of duplicity, the harsh, insectile clattering of his voice breaking into the smooth speech of the universal translator when his words could not adequately be interpreted. Before Vaughn could explain or apologize or offer some sort of recompense, the Jarada vessel assigned to escort Defiant within the Torona system had attacked. An instant later, planetary defenses had launched their own massive barrage, and a second Jarada vessel had charged into battle. Defiant had withstood the initial assaults, the substantially fortified ship among the toughest in Starfleet, but it had also suffered significant damage. Vaughn had taken the only action he could he had ordered retreat. If Defiant defended itself by employing any of its weaponry, he knew, the military protocols of the Jarada would send them in pursuit of the convoy. Almost the entire evacuation force consisted of freighters and personnel transports, civilian vessels incapable of outrunning Jarada warships, and with virtually no weapons or defense systems. The convoy carried a hundred thousand Europani, not to mention thousands of crew; the loss of life would be enormous.

How long? Vaughn asked Bowers, wanting to know how much time they had before they were besieged by all four Jarada ships.

Six minutes.

Vaughn raised his hand to his forehead and wiped it clear of sweat. The air on the bridge, though steadily clearing of smoke, was stifling.

Do we have warp drive? Vaughn asked.

The warp engines are intact, Nog told him, but theres a microfracture in the port nacelle.

How bad?

Bad enough we wouldnt be able to maintain warp for more than a few seconds. Nog peered over his shoulder, and Vaughn noticed a gloss of perspiration coating the lieutenants face, his huge, ribbed ears, and his large, bald head.

How many? Vaughn asked. He peered over at the main viewer again. He saw only stars, but pictured the two trailing Jarada warships descending toward Defiant, ready to join with their sister ships to put an explosive end to this one-sided battle.

How many what? Nog sounded confused, as though Vaughn had asked the question in another language.

How many seconds would we be able to maintain warp?

Nogs eyes narrowed, the fleshy ridge that ran from the top of each ear and across his brow descending in perplexity. Still, he turned to consult his console. Forty seconds at most, he said at last. But maybe no more than twenty-five.

Lieutenant, Vaughn said to Dax. How much time before were at a safe distance to go to warp?

Seven minutes on a linear course, Dax answered immediately. Almost a minute and a half after the third and fourth Jarada ships get here.

Vaughn turned in place, surveying the bridge, his mind working over the facts of the situation. They had to remain out of weapons range of the second pair of Jarada vessels; once those two ships entered the

battle, it would end quickly. Vaughn could risk going to warp as close as Defiant was to Torona IV, and the ship would likely be safe. Employing warp drive this deep in a planetary gravity well carried a risk, to be sure, but incidents rarely occurred. The real problem would be that the Jarada would view such an action as depraved disregard for their world and their people, which would drive them to pursue the convoy.

Vaughn's gaze fell to the center of the bridge, to the captain's chair. To his surprise, Prynns' corpse no longer lay beside it, nor was Dr. Bashir still there. With all the commotion, Vaughn had not even heard the sound of the transporter.

Fury swam up from the depths of Vaughn's submerged emotions. His body involuntarily tensed, his wrath driving him toward physical action. His jaw set, his teeth clenched, his hands drew into fists. The Jarada had attacked Defiant and killed his only child, were still attacking, attempting to kill all the crew and for what? Because they had been asked to assist in the rescue of a half-million people, and the price they had been paid had not satisfied them? Vaughn's lips pressed together, his eyes slammed shut, and in his intensity he wanted to return fire, wanted to vent the destructive power of this ship that had been designed to repel a Borg incursion. He visualized the remnants of the Jarada ships scattered harmlessly across the expanse of space.

The orders he knew he would not give floated through his mind: Lock pulse phaser cannons. Arm quantum torpedoes. Fire at will. Vaughn craved to avenge his daughter, and to guarantee the safety of the crew, but he understood well the repercussions of launching any assault against the Jarada under these circumstances. He thought briefly of the only other military vessel besides Defiant to accompany the convoy. The Cardassian cruiser Trager had remained well outside the Torona system during the evacuation, so that its presence would not incite the Jarada. But even if Trager were not still damaged from its many battles during the Dominion War, it would not be able to defend dozens of civilian vessels against an attack by a squadron of Jarada warships, an attack that would surely come should Defiant open fire.

Vaughn opened his eyes, again settling his emotions through a conscious effort. He slowed his breathing and tried to let go the tension in his body. His fingers unfurled, and he realized that his right hand hurt badly, the enveloping throb of his heartbeat a clockwork agony pressing in on his wounds.

Vaughn dismissed the pain as best he could, then turned toward Bowers. Status of the cloaking device? he asked, still searching for the tactics that would see the crew safely back to DS9.

Operational, Bowers said.

I thought we were not supposed to start Ensign ChThane, but then he abruptly stopped speaking. Vaughn looked toward the sciences console, over on the port side of the bridge. Even though ChThane had already returned his attention to his readouts, Vaughn still perceived embarrassment in the science officer's tense back and hunched shoulders, the slightly curled posture of his antennae. Amid the turmoil, Vaughn unexpectedly felt one side of his mouth curl upward in a half-smile. He did not find the questioning of his prospective orders amusing, but the ensign's discomfiture was curious. From what Charivretha had related to him, young Shar stood well accustomed to challenging authority.

What about the shields? Vaughn asked Bowers. The air on the bridge, he noticed, was almost entirely clear of smoke now, though the ashen taste of the fire's residue still remained.

Aft shields are gone, Bowers said. Remaining shields down to thirty-seven percent port, fifty-one percent fore and starboard. He pressed a couple of touchpads and consulted a readout before continuing.

Ablative armor buckled on the port impulse casing. We've got a small hull rupture.

Were leaking deuterium there, Nog added. That's the source of the power drain.

Does the leak affect all the impulse engines? Vaughn asked.

No, Nog said. Just the port engine.

Can we shut it down and reroute power to the other two? Vaughn suggested. And flush the deuterium so we're not leaving a trail for our friends? He gestured vaguely in the direction of Defiant's stern.

Nog operated his console. We can stop the leak by shutting down the port engine, he confirmed. But we've got nowhere to take power from for the other two. Weapons systems are down, shields are failing.

Get ready to do it, Vaughn ordered, cutting the engineer off. To Dax, he said, Prepare to give me a linear

course.

Yes, sir.

Vaughn paced over to the engineering station and leaned in over Nogs shoulder to peer at the displays. On my mark, take the port engine offline and vent the deuterium. Then reroute all available power to the other impulse engines, everything but for gravity, the cloaking device, and whatever you need for the warp drive.

Nogs eyes remained focused on his console, his hands working to set up the reconfiguration of the ships systems, even as he sought clarification of Vaughns orders. Everything?

Everything, Vaughn said. Then, to be sure there was no mistake, he added, Shields, any reserves left in the weapons, transporters, communications, sensors, life support. To the crew, Vaughn supposed, the orders must have sounded desperate, but he did not have time to explain why this course would provide them the best chance for survival. The Jarada were nothing if not intensely territorial; if they couldnt destroy Defiant, theyd be satisfied to drive her out of their domain, and the incident would end here.

Escape meant the hundred thousand Europani still in transit to Bajor would be safe.

Ensign chThane, Vaughn said, stepping away from the engineering console. Apprise the medical bay. If any casualties were being treated, the medical staff would need to know about the interruption of power.

Sir, Nog said. If were at warp and the fracture in the nacelle widens, we could go up in a fireball.

And if we stay here and allow four Jarada battleships to attack us in tandem, we will go up in a fireball.

Vaughn made sure his tone left no doubt that his orders would stand. He had planned enough operations in his career, developed enough strategies, solved enough problems, that hesitation had long ago been banished from his decision-making process. Time until the trailing ships are in weapons range? Vaughn asked.

Three minutes, twenty seconds, Dax said.

Thats how much time weve got to get far enough away from Torona IV to go to warp. Can we do it?

Depending on how much power we draw, Nog began, how much power there is His voice trailed off. You dont know?

Id have to run an analysis, and thatd take a couple of minutes.

No time, Vaughn agreed. Lieutenant, he said to Dax, shortest route, now. Then, touching the fingers of his right hand to Nogs shoulder, he said, Go.

Nog responded by working his console, his hands moving with expert precision across the controls. His demeanor seemed to change slightly, Vaughn noticed, almost as though the engineer found relief in having something specific to do. In the short time Vaughn had been aboard Deep Space 9 not much more than a month he had been impressed by Nog, and even seen the stations recently promoted operations officer grow in confidence. There was still something innocent and even wide-eyed about him, perhaps a healthy fear of the unknown and of death, but there was, Vaughn thought, a great deal of potential in the young man. And Nogs engineering skills only slightly overshadowed his remarkable ability to improvise.

As Nog discharged his orders, Defiant transformed. The atonal groan of the port impulse engine disappeared, leaving the smoother, softer hum of the pair that remained online. The shuddering of the deck also smoothed out.

Port engine is offline, Nog said. Deuterium conduits are clear. Im rerouting power.

Sensors and shields last, Bowers said.

The insistent, blaring alarms cut off abruptly. Even with the sound of the impulse drive, the bridge suddenly seemed almost quiet to Vaughn. He looked around in time to see most of the stations go dark environmental control, transporter operations, communications. When the sciences console lost power, Ensign chThane rotated his chair around to face the rest of the bridge. His antennae no longer bent downward, Vaughn saw, but seemed tense, as did the expression on his face. Hes trying to control his fear, Vaughn thought, and then, recalling the Andorian response to danger, corrected himself Not fear; anger. Something flickered off to the right, and Vaughn looked to see that the main viewer had gone blank.

Power levels are coming up, Nog reported as he continued to redirect the ships systems to funnel into the impulse engines.

The lights went next, plunging the bridge into momentary darkness before the emergency lighting came on. The few wisps of smoke still hovering about looked to Vaughn like phantoms haunting the scene. He found the pall menacing, and it occurred to him that he had spent a great deal of his career a great deal of his life bathed in the gloomy twilight of impending danger.

And then the emergency lighting went out. A claustrophobic blackness surrounded Vaughn. Only the engineering and tactical stations, and Dax's rerouted flight-control display, remained operational, their lonely glow like beacons in the night. The bulkheads felt closer now, and Vaughn was acutely aware of the smallness of Defiant about him, and of his own insignificance in the vastness of space.

The resonant drone of the impulse engines grew louder again, but remained steady this time. We're approaching ninety percent of full impulse, Dax said, her face barely visible in the reflected light of her console.

The near ships are closing in again, Bowers said, his words coming quickly and loudly.

They don't, Vaughn started, but then a thunderous jolt pounded Defiant, and another. Vaughn reached for the back of Nogs chair, but missed, and he went sprawling backward onto the deck. No alarms sounded, but something hissed loudly in the darkness. Vaughn rolled to his feet and looked toward tactical, where Bowers's shadowy figure hovered over his station.

Starboard shields are down, Bowers called out. Aft armor down to twenty-three percent, Bowers continued, obviously reporting the last reading he had seen.

Sensors and shields rerouted, Nog reported, finding the last bits of power for the impulse engines.

They weren't prepared for that burst of impulse power, Dax said. We may have time before they can swing around for another pass. Another pass, another disruptor strike like the last one, Vaughn knew, and Defiant's armor might not hold.

Time, Vaughn said. The hissing stopped, but again the sound of the impulse drive wavered.

Estimating ninety seconds before the third and fourth ships get here, Dax said. Eighty seconds before we can go to warp. If the impulse engines hold up.

Good, Vaughn thought. They had made up time. He hoped it would be enough. Moving through the darkened bridge from memory, he found the center seat and settled into it.

One minute until we can go to warp. Dax said. With sensors offline, I can't tell where the Jarada ships are. Vaughn thought he heard the confidence present in the lieutenant's voice up to this point begin to drain away.

Another blast rocked the ship, though not as violently as the previous strikes. Had it, Vaughn realized, Defiant would likely not still be here. He stopped himself from asking Bowers for a status update; with the tactical station down, there was no way to know how much more the aft armor had degraded. But Vaughn did not need that data to know that Defiant would not survive another assault.

Fifty seconds, Dax said. Then we're not going to make it.

Vaughn turned in his chair toward Dax. She was staring intently at her console, her face shining orange in its light. He could not make out the spots on the side of her face, but he could see her inexperience in her expression.

So young, he thought, and then about Shar and Nog, and even about Bowers and Bashir. They're all so young. Still, Dax's eyes never left her display. She was good, this one, and strong; command had been the right choice for her. Vaughn had no idea how good a counselor she might have become had she continued in that profession, but he was confident that, given the chance, she would make a fine commander, and sooner rather than later. And so he chose to trust her instincts now.

Evasive maneuvers, Lieutenant, he said, but give me no more than another seven seconds on our course.

Dax's hands moved in swift response to the order even before her acknowledgment passed her lips. She anticipated me, Vaughn realized, and wondered just how far a career in command might take her.

Vaughn faced forward in his chair, staring through the darkness toward the main viewer, which he could not see, and which was offline anyway. His right hand was a knot of pain, but it paled beside the ache in his heart. Just ahead of him, the indistinct shape of the conn rose from the deck, a mute marker of his daughter's violent death. He looked down to the side of the captain's chair, to where Prynn had been

thrown by the explosion that had taken her away from him for good. In his mind's eye, he saw her lying there, the spark of life gone from her visage. He remembered that spark, that flash in her eyes, from the moment they had succeeded in evacuating the last of the Europani from their poisoned world, when she had smiled at him for the first time in years. And he remembered it from her childhood, and even before, from the time she had been an infant. Her dark, almond eyes had always seemed amazingly vivid to him, as though they contained the passion of her will. They were Rurikos eyes.

Forty seconds, Dax said. Back on a linear course.

A chill gripped Vaughn as he sat in the darkness. The air on the bridge was still oppressively warm; the environmental systems had not been offline that long yet, but he envisioned the absolute cold of space bleeding away the kernel of heat generated on Defiant to sustain the crew. The image recalled the dreadful tableau Vaughn and an Enterprise away team had found not long ago aboard Kamal, a derelict Cardassian freighter adrift in the Badlands. Bodies everywhere, Bajorans and Cardassians frozen in death.

That had been a part of the incident that had driven Vaughn to Deep Space 9, away from the career he had worked the life he had lived for the past eighty years. Decisions of life and death, killing some so that others might live, battling alongside evil in order to conquer even greater evils. He had seen and experienced as much of that, more, much more, he amended than he had ever wanted to. And so he had made the decision to live a life not laced with sorrow and regret, and to seek not ugliness and horror to be vanquished, but beauty and wonder to be explored. Yet here he was again, faced with risking Defiant's crew of forty to save a hundred thousand.

Thirty seconds.

Vaughn braced himself, waiting for the final salvo that would boil away and penetrate the only protection Defiant had at stern. Seconds ticked away in agonizing slowness.

When Dax reached ten, Vaughn told Nog to bring all systems back online. One step at a time, the ship limped back to life; lights rescued the bridge from darkness, consoles blinked back on, alarms cried out once more.

At zero, Vaughn said, raising his voice to be heard above the alerts, shut down the impulse drive.

Aye, sir, Nog said.

Dax counted out the last five seconds with an expectant tone, and Vaughn thought he heard the return of her determination with each word. After One, Dax said, We're clear for warp.

At once, the thrum of the impulse engines faded, the tone deepening as the volume decreased. Vaughn said nothing, instead counting out another three seconds to himself.

Sir? It was Bowers, an edge clearly audible in his voice. He had expected the order to go to warp as soon as they were able, Vaughn surmised. But with all those civilian lives dependent upon what they did here, Vaughn could not afford to act without a margin of error.

Ignoring Bowers, he told Dax, Go to maximum warp for ten seconds, then throttle down to warp three-point-seven and take evasive action. The lieutenant did not bother to acknowledge the orders as she set about implementing them. Vaughn imagined he could feel Defiant leap to warp.

Monitor the fracture, Vaughn said to Nog.

Aye, sir.

The Jarada have gone to warp, Bowers said. All four ships. They're in pursuit.

Engage cloak, Vaughn said.

Bowers's fingers played across the control surfaces of the tactical station, but he hesitated before completing the command. Sir, the Jarada will be able to read us cloaking. The lieutenant's hand hovered a few centimeters above his console.

Do it, Vaughn ordered. Bowers complied, immediately bringing his hand down on a blinking touchpad.

The bridge lighting dimmed in the telltale way that signaled the ship's stealth mode to the crew.

Come on, Vaughn thought, exhorting the Jarada to keep up their pursuit. He expected them to read Defiant cloaking, just as he expected that they had already read the microfracture in the warp nacelle. It never paid, Vaughn knew, to underestimate the enemy.

Warp three-point-seven, Dax said. Starting evasive maneuvers.

Status of the fracture? Vaughn asked.

Stressed, Nog said. But stable.

Vaughn ticked off another ten seconds in his head, then told Dax to bring the ship out of warp. Take us to station-keeping.

Dropping out of warp, Dax responded. Then, a few seconds later, she added, Engines answering full stop.

The Jarada are approaching the area, Bowers said.

Of course they are, Vaughn offered. They had read Defiant's course and velocity once it had gone to warp, seen where it had cloaked, and if they had detected the fracture on the nacelle, they would have calculated just how far the Starfleet ship could possibly travel before having to drop back to sublight speed. Now, if they utilized all of that information to determine a starting point and locus for a search. They're passing our position, Bowers said, and Vaughn could hear the smile on the tactical officer's face even without looking.

No celebrations yet, Lieutenant, Vaughn said, though he tried to inject a sense of lightness into his tone. Keep your eyes on them.

Seconds passed, then minutes, Bowers intermittently describing the movements of the four battleships.

The Jarada vessels stopped not far beyond the most distant point to which Defiant could have traveled at maximum warp, given the damaged nacelle. Then they retreated, split up, regrouped.

They're moving again, Bowers said finally. Heading off on different vectors at warp one describing helical trajectories. Bowers suddenly looked up from his console. They've set up a search grid. He did not need to add what they all already knew the Jarada were looking for Defiant far from its current location.

Excellent, Vaughn said. After they hunted fruitlessly for a while, he thought, the Jarada would guess that Defiant had taken evasive action and modified its speed after it had cloaked. Vaughn thought they would likely change their search strategy, call in reinforcements to assist. But space was big and Defiant small and essentially invisible and they already had an advantage over their pursuers; Vaughn had chosen the odd velocity warp three-point-seven, not warp one or three or five to hide their position that much more. This game of hide-and-seek was one Vaughn knew he would win.

Lieutenant Nog, he said, I believe you have a fractured warp nacelle to repair.

Aye, sir, Nog said, bounding out of his chair and heading for the starboard exit. Right away.

Lieutenant, Vaughn called as the door opened before the engineer. Everyone, he continued, still having to raise his voice above the alarms. He gazed around to include all of the bridge crew.

Well done. Nog smiled widely, his small, sharp teeth showing prominently. He nodded, then turned and left.

Vaughn sat back in the captain's chair. Exhaustion washed over him like a warm wave, trying to coax him into the deeper water of sleep or perhaps unconsciousness. But there was much yet to do. There were still Jarada ships to avoid, and light-years to travel before Defiant arrived safely back at Deep Space 9. He would have to check to see if any other of the crew had been injured. His own left arm had been burned in the fire at the conn, his right hand even more so, and he would have to have Dr. Bashir patch him up.

And he would have to say goodbye to Prynn.

But not right now.

Normal lighting, Vaughn said. And get rid of those alarms. Around him, the bridge brightened and quieted, Bowers making the necessary adjustments. Vaughn looked up and said, Ensign Roness, Ensign Senkowski, report to the bridge. Relief at the conn and engineering stations for Dax and Nog.

After the acknowledgments came back, Vaughn rested his elbow on the arm of the chair and let his head fall into his uninjured hand. He wanted very much not to think about anything, not to feel anything.

Vaughn closed his eyes. For now for right now he was content to pretend that he was at peace, in a life that continued to know no such thing.

Kira Nerys slid her thumb down the cracked, ruby-colored spine of the oversized book. She felt the raised hubs and the textured surface of the aged tome, both smoothed from wear, and smelled the faint, musky scent of its binding. Flecks of gold passed beneath her touch, remnants of inlaid letters long ago eroded away by the attentions of many readers through many years.

When the Prophets Cried, she said aloud, pronouncing the title in a voice not quite soft enough to be a whisper. Her hand descended to the base of the book, and she let her fingertips hang the edge of the glass shelf. She stood like that for a few moments, her arm outstretched, alone in her office.

The old volume beckoned to Kira, like the open invitation of a longtime and trusted friend. Often throughout her life she had turned to the venerable work for spiritual and emotional guidance. Penned hundreds of years ago by Synta Kayanil, a vedek revered even in her own time for her insight, the collection of religious exegeses, historical recountals, and prophetic writings had provided Kira with a solid foundation on which to build and rebuild her faith both in her gods and in herself. One of the few possessions she esteemed, and the only one she retained from her early childhood, the book had occupied a significant place in her life for almost as long as she could remember.

But now When the Prophets Cried had been denied her. With the Attainder imposed upon her by the Vedek Assembly, Kira was forbidden to study any of the Bajoran canon. Of course, she mused, she could simply pull the book from the shelf and read it anyway, and nobody would ever know.

Nobody but Kira herself.

She leaned in toward the book, her hand still dangling by two fingers from the shelf, the glass pleasantly cool to her touch. She breathed in deeply. Commingled with the musk of the cover was the slightly acid odor of the pages within. Kira had never really liked that smell, exactly, but it had always afforded her a sense of familiarity, even a sense of being well, home, though the concept of home was necessarily a broad one for her. Before the end of the Occupation, less than eight years ago, she had lived her entire life either on the run or in a refugee camp, and so home had been wherever she had rested her head at night. To a great extent, she thought, that continued to be the case. Even having spent the years since the liberation of Bajor residing on DS9, she did not now think of the station as the only place she belonged. All of the Bajoran system—Bajor and the other planets, their moons, the wormhole, even the Denorios Belt, and yes, Deep Space 9 too—the entire system formed her home.

Kira stood away from the shelf and let her hand drop to her side. To her right, just within the limits of her hearing, voices and the workaday sounds of ops drifted through her closed office doors. She looked in that direction and, through the glass, saw personnel arriving for the start of the day shift, relieving the crew that had worked through the night. Kira had come to her office early today, ahead of the morning shift change, a consequence, she supposed, of the events surrounding the Iconian gateways and her days spent thirty thousand years in the past. Her experiences back in time—whether real or imagined—during a formative and long-forgotten era in Bajoran history had brought her to a deeper appreciation of her people, and to a greater sense of her own responsibilities in the present day. Her abiding trust in the Prophets, and in her own ability to walk the path they had laid out for her, had been reinforced in a way she had not known she had needed. She had returned to DS9 with a strengthened resolve to help her people through these turbulent times despite the Attainder.

Because of her faith and her belief in the precepts of her religion, Kira would never challenge the edict set down by the Vedek Assembly. Ironically, a transgression of that very nature—acting in contravention of the wishes of Vedek Yevir Linjarin—had led to the Attainder in the first place. Allowing that the ancient Ohalu text unearthed at the Bhala archeological site might not be apocryphal, and convinced that the people had the right to decide the issue for themselves, Kira had posted a complete translation of the book to the Bajoran communications network. She had taken the extreme and irrevocable action, clearly opposed to Yevir's intention of keeping even the existence of the old work hidden, because she had believed it the right thing to do for her people. But the only reasons to violate the Attainder would be for her own benefit, insufficient cause in her mind to defy the vedeks.

Kira walked over to the replicator set into the wall to the side of her desk. Raktajino, she said. Extra hot, with two measures of kava. The machinery hummed to life and, amid the striated shimmer of materialization, deposited a mug of the scalding Klingon beverage onto the replicator pad. Kira curled

her fingers around the handle of the mug and brought it up to her lips. Wisps of steam carried the stout aroma of the black liquid wafting up to her nose. She sipped, and the hot, sweet raktajino felt strong and vitalizing as it flowed down her throat.

A smile crossed her face as she was reminded of Etana Kol, a sergeant in the station's security detail. Kol often remarked that the colonel's internal organs must be composed of rodimium in order for her to be able to drink such hot beverages, and Kira usually responded by claiming to have a taste for warp plasma or phaser fire or the like. The banter had become an ongoing ritual for the two women whenever they shared a meal at the Replimat after attending temple services.

Temple services.

For more than a month now, Kira had not prayed; had not been permitted to pray among her fellow Bajorans. Even with her determination to face this time with dignity and fortitude, she could not deny that she missed visiting the temple and being surrounded by people who believed what she believed, who knew what she knew. And there were other things she missed as a result of the Attainder: experiencing the effects of an Orb encounter, speaking about matters of faith with vedeks and prylarseven simply wearing her earring.

Kira absently lifted a hand to her right ear as she crossed to her desk. She set the raktajino beside the desktop computer interface and sat down, brushing the tips of her fingers along her lobe as she did so. It still seemed strange to her, that sensation of a bare ear; she felt exposed somehow, almost as though she had left her quarters without fully dressing.

Recognizing the tenor of her thoughts, Kira pulled her hand away and let it fall onto the desk with a rap. She did not wish to think about those things that were missing from her life. Instead, she wanted to concentrate on all that she did have, and on the direction her life was headed on the direction she would take it.

Dismissing thoughts of the Attainder with a shake of her head and a short, backward wave of her hand, Kira activated the computer interface and retrieved her agenda for the day. By design, she had no appointments scheduled during the morning; she had pushed the daily staff meeting back a few hours but the afternoon would be full. After convening with her senior staff, she had the weekly meeting open to all station personnel, which typically lasted an hour or so, and after that, who knew how long it would take to listen to Quark itemize whatever requests or grievances the Promenade Merchants Association had this month.

And speaking of Quark, she anxiously awaited the opportunity to talk with Ro about her foray with him to Farius Prime. Kira had already read the lieutenant's preliminary report on their disruption of the negotiations for the gateways between the Orion Syndicate and the Petraw; whoever they turned out to be but she still had numerous questions about Ros time undercover as Quark's escort. That, she thought, grinning, ought to make quite a story.

Kira picked up the mug and sipped again at the raktajino. Her final appointment for the day, she saw, would also be the most important: a subspace conference with the Starfleet Corps of Engineers that would provide her with an update on their efforts to decontaminate Europa Nova. While First Minister Shakaar and Minister Asarem and the rest of the Bajoran government had immediately responded to the Europani crisis by offering their planet as a temporary harbor, the sudden influx of two and a half million people with another half million on the way taxed Bajor's resources. The sooner the refugees could be returned to their world, the better for everybody.

Kira keyed in her access code with her free hand and found that she had several messages waiting for her, as was often the case when she started her shift. She scanned down the list and saw that most appeared to be routine, but two caught her eye: one from Lieutenant Ro, and one, very surprisingly, from Taranatar. Kira supposed that she was becoming accustomed to the Jem'Hadar's presence on the station, and her confidence in him had grown well beyond the simple fact of his assignment to DS9 by Odo. He had certainly proven himself as a soldier under her command. But she could also see that, for all his strength and military abilities, he still felt awkward and unsure here, often seeming to grope for understanding in this setting and on this mission that was clearly so alien to him.

The readout indicated that Taranatar's message was audio only. Kira put down the mug of raktajino, now

half empty, and touched the interface controls, which warbled in response. Colonel Kira, Taranatar began. His usually resonant voice still sounded thin to her, as it had when she had visited him in the infirmary upon her return to the station. She recalled the image of him lying on the diagnostic pallet, looking as though he had been battered for hours, the greengray skin of his face unnaturally colored blue and purple and black.

Difficult as it was to credit, Dr. Tarses claimed that those hideous bruises were indications of the superior capacity of JemHadar to heal. When Taranatar had been recovered by Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign Roness after he had returned from the Delta Quadrant through one of the gateways, his face had been a mass of open wounds. Bowers had transported him aboard Rio Grande and had managed to stem the bleeding, and by the time they had gotten back to DS9, the damage had already begun to mend.

Unfortunately, Taranatar's facial wounds had been the very least of his injuries. One of his arms had suffered multiple fractures, and two of his ribs had been splintered. A bladed weapon not only had penetrated one of his biceps, but had traveled within, chewing up muscle tissue and then sawing its way back out. Another, more jagged blade had been plunged into his chest, leaving a gaping hole and slicing through one of his hearts. Two other of his organs had been damaged as well. It had been worse even than when the JemHadar hatched by that genetically engineered renegade Locken had tortured Taranatar; they had hurt him, but in trying to extract information from their prisoner, their attentions had been designed to keep him alive. The Hirogen in the Delta Quadrant had clearly had no such constraints; he had wanted to hunt down and destroy Taranatar. When Kira had visited the infirmary and learned the extent of his injuries, she had wondered and she wondered again now what the combat between the two warriors must have been like; after all, as badly wounded as he was, Taranatar had won the battle.

Kira listened to the rest of the message. Like all of Taranatar's communications, it was succinct he wanted to be liberated from the infirmary. Liberated, Kira thought, unable to suppress a smile, as though he were a prisoner. When she had first seen him after their ordeals, he had expressed his satisfaction that they had both reclaimed their lives. Now, she supposed, he wished to reclaim his life once more, this time from the clutches of Dr. Tarses.

Kira sympathized. She had never been much of a patient herself, had never wanted to lie about for long, even to expedite her own convalescence. She would see to it that Simon released Taranatar as soon as medically appropriate which, knowing the rapid recuperative powers of JemHadar, would be soon, anyway.

She called up Ros's message, a text memorandum requesting the authority to regulate the pedestrian traffic on the Promenade. Ro had listed several justifications for the request, but Kira thought that she should have foreseen this herself. As busy a place as Deep Space 9 had always been, it had never been as close to capacity as right now. Almost five months after the war with the Dominion, businesses were finally returning to normal, and the trade routes were once again being plied although not yet through the wormhole. The station also continued to function as a staging area for relief efforts to Cardassia, and now played a similar role in the evacuation of Europa Nova. And while a substantial majority of the refugees had been taken to Bajor, several thousand remained on DS9, along with the crews of scores of ships waiting to begin resettlement of the Europani once their world had been returned to habitability.

Kira turned in her chair and gazed out the large, oval window behind her desk. She could see at least a dozen ships, no two alike, a couple of them Bajoran, but most from out of the system. With so many crews aboard the station, Ro had already posted more security officers than usual along the Promenade, a move Kira supported.

She's been doing a good job, Kira thought as she turned back to her desk. She had not been that sure of Ro at first, but the new security chief had performed her duties seriously and well. And despite a rocky beginning, the two seemed to have developed a professional relationship of mutual respect.

Another aspect of the congestion on the Promenade, according to Ro, concerned the Bajoran temple and the Orb of Memory. As word of the Orb's rediscovery spread, many Bajorans were apparently undertaking a pilgrimage to the station to experience it for themselves. The Orb would eventually be moved to Bajor, once a suitable location for it had been selected and prepared by the Vedek Assembly, but in recent days the number of passenger transports arriving fully loaded from Bajor had increased

dramatically.

Kira glanced back across the room, over at *When the Prophets Cried*. She had felt the urge to consult the old book this morning, not because she sought direction for herself, but because she hoped to gain some insight into the current, tumultuous times. Dramatic events had unfolded for Bajor during the past few months—the Ascension of the Emissary, the death of the kai, the banishment of the Pah-wraiths, the unearthing of the Ohalu text—and Kira had begun to wonder if a new era might be dawning for her people. Allusions to a restoration of all the highest accomplishments the Bajoran people had ever achieved appeared in several canon sources, though conventional interpretations held that such a time, if it ever came, would be far in the future. But with the return of the Orb of Memory, Kira had started considering the possibility that the future had arrived.

She lifted the mug to her lips, then rose from her chair and went over to the replicator. She deposited the raktajino, no longer hot enough for her liking, on the pad, then touched a control to recycle it. Hazy, whirring strands of light swallowed the mug and converted it back into energy and raw materials.

Raktajino, she said, once the mug had disappeared. Extra hot, two measures of kava. As the replicator hummed back into action, she turned and looked again at *When the Prophets Cried*.

The title referred to the Orbs, which, at the time Vedek Synta had written the tome, had been known only as the Tears of the Prophets. Bajoran faith represented the Orbs as indirect physical links to the Prophets themselves. During Vedek Synta's time, seven Tears had been known, and since then, three more had been found. When the Cardassians had withdrawn after the Occupation, they had taken all but the Orb of Prophecy with them, and the Orb of the Emissary, which had yet to be discovered. But over the last few years, the Orbs had begun returning to Bajor, a prophecy foretold by Vedek Synta, and which she hinted might be a preamble to the restoration and Bajor's greatest age.

Almost four years ago, Kira remembered, the Orb of Wisdom had made a circuitous route home, acquired by the Grand Nagus of the Ferengi from the Cardassian black market and eventually sold to the Bajorans when Ferenginar and Bajor had come to the brink of war. And then the Cardassians had given back the Orbs of Time and Contemplation. And now, after Commander Vaughn had found the Orb of Memory aboard a derelict Cardassian freighter, five of the original nine Tears of the Prophets were in the possession of the Bajoran people for the first time in Kira's lifetime.

Kira turned and picked up the new mug of raktajino from the replicator pad, but she remained standing there a moment, still considering Vedek Synta's old work. Kira could picture herself sitting on the ground, her legs up, with the book set open against her thighs, the pages, fragile with age, crackling as she turned them. As a child, as a teen, in the Singha refugee camp or on the run with the resistance, she had most often read the book that way, her back against a fence or a tree or a cave wall, wherever she happened to be. And prior to the Attainder, that was how she still read the book, very often, on the floor of her quarters or in a hidden corner of her office.

A short laugh escaped her lips when she remembered the day. How long ago was it? Three years? Four? when Captain Sisko had paid an unexpected early-morning visit to her quarters and caught her reading on the floor, leaning against an outer bulkhead. She had been embarrassed, but the captain had quickly made her feel at ease, revealing his own predilection for lying out in the middle of a baseball diamond he re-created in a holosuite. That image of the captain sprawled out in a grassy field had amused her back then, and it amused her now.

She missed Benjamin Sisko. Not the Emissary or the commanding officer of Deep Space 9 though she missed those aspects of the man as well—but just her friend. He was an unusual man, not only because he had been touched by the Prophets, but because he was worthy of being touched by Them. A man of robust principles, quick to action, loyal, and strong. Kira believed that he would return one day from the Celestial Temple, as Kasidy had been promised in a vision, and she hoped that day occurred during her lifetime. She missed her friend.

A signal chirped in the quiet office, followed by the voice of Ensign Ling. Ops to Colonel Kira, she said. This is Kira. Go ahead, Ensign.

Colonel, the U.S.S. *Mjolnir* is hailing the station, Ling said. They're requesting an approach vector and permission to dock. A note of hesitation played in the ensign's voice, echoing Kira's own confusion.

Mjolnir? she repeated. Captain Hoku and her crew were not due at the station for another three weeks. Kira put the raktajino back down on the replicator pad and moved back behind her desk. She sat down and quickly skimmed her overnight correspondence again, the computer interface beeping as she scrolled through the list. She saw nothing from Starfleet. Ensign, Kira asked, did they say why they were arriving so far ahead of schedule?

No, sir, Ling answered right away. Should I inquire?

Kira's initial inclination was to say, Yes, inquire, a remnant, no doubt, of her days in the resistance, when even a single, small piece of information might prove vital to the cause. Even as first officer and now commander of DS9, she frequently sought as much data as she could about any particular situation. But if Captain Hoku had wanted to provide that information right now, Kira realized, she already would have done so.

No, she finally said. Send my greetings and bring them in.

Aye, sir. The channel closed with a short tone.

Kira sat back in her chair, her arms sliding back along the glossy surface of the desktop until her wrists rested atop its rounded edge. Mjolnir had been slated to arrive three weeks from now, she knew, and a week after that, to begin a three-month tour of duty at Deep Space 9 while Defiant explored the Gamma Quadrant. Kira wondered if those plans had been changed.

A sudden, wild thought occurred to Kira perhaps Mjolnir was carrying yet another Orb back to Bajor. The notion was an idle one, she knew, but it brought her back again to Vedek Syntas' book. Bajor Rising was the title of one prophetic tale in the collection, a tale from which some inferred that the return of the Orbs would usher in a resplendent new age for the Bajoran people.

When the children have wept all, Kira quoted to herself, anew will shine the twilight of their destiny, and she realized that When the Prophets Cried had not been taken from her; as often as she had read it, as well as she knew it, that could never happen. When the children have wept all, she thought again, anew will shine the twilight of their destiny. This single sentence had sparked more controversy and disagreement than any entire section of Vedek Syntas' book. Did children refer to the people of Bajor? Did the mention of weeping allude to the Tears of the Prophets? Did the word destiny only mean fate, or did it also connote the Orb of Destiny? And was twilight a reference to dawn beginning or to dusk an end? Even the very language itself evoked debate, with numerous translations generating wildly divergent versions of the passage.

Kira sat back up in her chair and spoke toward the center of her office. Kira to Ensign Ling, she said.

Ling here, Colonel, came the response.

What's the ETA of the Mjolnir?

Checking, Ling said, and then, Ninety-four minutes.

Thank you, Ensign. Kira out. She knew there was no merit to the idea that Mjolnir might be carrying an Orb. Her intuition had served her well over the years, especially with respect to tactics and warfare, but this was not intuition; this was fantasy, and she knew it. Still, she could not shake the feeling that something was coming. So much had happened during the past half-year, so many extraordinary events had come to pass, that she somehow felt that it could not be less than the auguring of things to come.

And she remembered too what the Iconian had warned, indeed, it had been an Iconian who had warned do not forsake the journey for the destination. Whatever was going to come to pass, and despite the Attainder, Kira had a role to play in the scheme of future events, a path the Prophets had paved for her, one she was not only willing to walk, but eager to walk. She had endured much anguish in her life, but so many of her people had endured so much more. The time had come to move past that. One day, she hoped, Bajor would become a beacon to the rest of the quadrant even to the rest of the galaxy that shined the way to freedom and faith and love. And Kira would do whatever she could to help make that happen.

The airlock warning signal pulsed in the small room atop the docking pylon, and Kira looked through the hatch window to see a giant standing in the inner compartment. A moment later, the alert ceased, and the circular hatch rolled open, its toothed circumference meshing along its matching track. A rush of air hissed briefly as the atmospheres in the airlock and the receiving bay equalized. Then the hatch retracted

into the bulkhead, fully revealing the largest human being Kira had ever encountered.

She assumed he was human, anyway. He wore a Starfleet uniform with an admirals insignia five pips framed in gold, she saw, a fleet admiral and stood at least two and a quarter meters. Even taller than the Hirogen, Kira thought. Not as tall as the Iconian, but larger. The mans physique rivaled his height, with a broad chest and shoulders, and a torso that did not taper as it fell to his waist. His legs looked as wide as tree trunks, easily three times as big around as her own. He appeared fit, neither overweight nor overly muscular.

You are Colonel Kira? the man asked, the timbre of his voice rich and deep. A vague accent she could not place tinged his speech.

Kira raised her eyes to look at the mans face, and only then realized that she had been peering at the rest of his body, struck by his considerable presence. She felt discomfited, but if the man noticed the accidental indiscretion, he gave no indication. He had no doubt elicited such reactions before, she concluded.

Yes, she answered. Im Colonel Kira Nerys. Welcome to Deep Space 9. She moved forward toward the hatch, her right hand extended in the traditional human greeting.

The man stepped over the threshold separating the airlock from the receiving bay, and then down the steps, ducking as he did so. Kira could not tell if his head would have connected with the upper bulkhead, but she supposed the movement had been a practiced one, born out of necessity. How do you do, he said, his measured words sounding formal. I am Admiral Akaar. He pronounced it Aka-ar, and rather than shaking Kiras hand, the admiral raised his right fist to the upper left portion of his chest, then opened his hand and held it out away from his body, palm up. I come with an open heart and hand. Kira withdrew her hand, caught off guard by the greeting. She felt clumsy for having breached this protocol, despite being unfamiliar with it. Akaar must have perceived this. A traditional salutation among my people, he explained.

Perhaps not human, then, Kira thought, although she recognized that not all Earth customs were uniformly practiced by all humans. Well, welcome to Deep Space 9, she said.

Akaar inclined his head in acknowledgment. He met her gaze confidently, almost forcefully, with brown eyes so dark that they verged on being black. His face was pale and soft, Kira saw, almost doughy, with lines etched deeply into his features. His hairline began high up on his forehead, his hair steely gray and long, pulled backward into a knot behind his head. It put Kira in mind of Lieutenant Commander Worf. Ambassador Worf, she reminded herself, though she still had trouble envisioning the fiery Klingon as a diplomat but Akaars hair was not nearly as long, ending just a few centimeters below his neck.

Do you have time to speak with me, Colonel? the admiral asked. Though phrased as a question, the request sounded very much like an order. It will require perhaps thirty minutes.

Of course, Kira said. May I ask what this is about, Admiral? She wondered about the early arrival of Mjolnir, and about the presence on board of an admiral.

I am headed to Bajor, Akaar said, to assist with the resettlement of the Europani, and to observe the labors to send aid to Cardassia.

I see, Kira said, curious about the need for a Starfleet admiral in either endeavor. She also realized that he had not actually answered her question. Excuse me, Admiral, but I wasnt asking why youve come to Bajor; I was asking why youve come to DS9.

Akaar seemed to consider the question before answering, though his eyes remained on Kira. Councillor zhThane will be accompanying me to Bajor, he told her. Charivretha zhThane, the Andorian representative on the Federation Council, had been visiting Europa Nova prior to the gateways crisis, and she had subsequently been evacuated to the station. And I wanted to speak with you, he added.

All right, Kira said, taking a step toward the turbolift. The wardroom is closest, or we can go to my office. If you dont mind, the admiral said, not allowing her to list all of their options, we can use a conference room aboard Mjolnir. Akaar moved aside and motioned back toward where the starship sat docked at the end of the airlock.

All right, Kira said. Again, she felt uncomfortable, as though she had somehow tripped up with the admiral. She tapped her combadge, a quick burst of electronic tones signaling its activation. Kira to ops.

Ops, Nguyen here, came the immediate response. The words carried the slightly hollow quality of a transmitted voice.

Chief, Im going to be in a meeting on board the Mjolnir for the next half-hour, Kira informed him.

Acknowledged, Nguyen said. Should I consider you unreachable, Colonel?

Kira looked to Akaar for an answer, but while he returned her gaze, he offered no suggestion as to his wishes. Yes, she finally answered, slightly frustrated at her seeming difficulty in communicating with the admiral. Ill check in when Im back on the station. Kira out. She deactivated her combadge with a touch. She did not have to tell Nguyen that she should be contacted if an emergency arose.

Akaar turned and stepped back into the airlock. As Kira followed, she realized that she still had no idea why the admiral wanted to see her.

The conference room sat far forward in Mjolnir s primary hull. The outer bulkhead angled dramatically inward toward the bow of the ship, giving the room an essentially triangular shape. A third as big as DS9s wardroom, it held a table that could accommodate eight people. Fewer, Kira thought, if they were Akaars size. Great floor-to-ceiling windows lined the entirety of the outer bulkhead, and a large viewscreen was set into the long inner wall.

Akaar sat down at the conference table, his back to the windows. The chair actually creaked beneath him as he settled his enormous bulk. Kira felt a moment of embarrassment for the admiral, but he gave no sign that he felt similarly.

Will Captain Hoku be joining us? Kira asked as she sat down opposite the admiral. Past Akaar, she saw the tips of two of DS9s docking pylons reaching upward into view like great metallic fingers clawing at the heavens. In the distance, a Bajoran transport drifted lazily outside their grasp.

No, she will not, Akaar said. He rested his forearms flat on the reflective black surface of the table. I must inform you, Colonel, he said, that Mjolnir will not be standing in for Defiant while it explores the Gamma Quadrant. He did not have an accent after all, Kira decided, but a tendency to overpronounce his words, enunciating with a slow, cautious clarity. Gryphon will instead substitute for Defiant.

I see, Kira said, not pleased to have been left unaware until now of the change in Starfleets plans. I typically get some notice of these things.

I am giving you notice now, Akaar said. Although his voice remained level, Kira detected a note of antipathy toward her that she did not understand. In the past, she had experienced few difficulties with members of Starfleet Command, who had always shown confidence in her abilities to command DS9. Except for one person, she suddenly remembered. It must have been six weeks ago, back when the first minister had been returning from a monthlong trip to various Federation worlds. Shakaar had warned her of an admiral who had been championing a reversion to the stations former hierarchy, with a Starfleet captain installed in the top spot. The possibility that the unnamed admiral had been Akaar occurred now to Kira. If that turned out to be the case, she would not allow his presence here to threaten her. Although she had been in command of Deep Space 9 for only four months, she had served in the position well, and she had every intention of continuing to do so.

Thank you, Admiral. Ill note the change for my crew, Kira said, determined to maintain an even bearing. During her tenure as the stations first officer, she had learned to better control her impulses, to think twice before acting. Now, as DS9s commanding officer, she had been further pressed to hone her diplomatic skills.

Colonel, Akaar said, I would like you to detail for me the evacuation of the Europani to Bajor.

Almost three million people have been brought here from Europa Nova, Kira said, and Defiant is scheduled back in a few days, accompanying the last of the convoys from Torona IV.

Yes, Akaar said, but the word seemed less an agreement than merely a placeholder, a word to fill the time and segue to the next subject. How are the Europani being housed on Bajor?

The question surprised Kira. The information Akaar was seeking had nothing to do with either Deep Space 9 or Starfleet. Im not sure what youre asking, Admiral, but I received a report just yesterday that the refugees have been divided up into groupslarge groupsand taken to several dozen cities.

Where are the Europani staying? Akaar persisted.

In hospitals, some of them, obviously, Kira said, not really knowing the precise answer to the question, but making logical assumptions. In schools, government facilities, inns. Perhaps even in private residences.

And the Europani on the station, the admiral asked, why have they not gone on to Bajor? Akaars voice held a neutral intonation, but his words seemed to carry an implicit criticism.

Some of the smaller vessels in the evacuation came directly to the station Bajor's orbit got a bit crowded for a while. It was faster for some of the refugees to disembark here. And for those who suffered radiation poisoning, we were able to treat them. Since we have the facilities, I saw no problem with that. Kira realized that her last statement might have sounded defensive, as though she were attempting to support her decision to allow thousands of the refugees to remain on DS9. She brushed the characterization aside. Were functioning close to capacity right now, she went on, but the station is in good shape.

Do you know how the Europani on Bajor are being fed?

Again, the admiral seemed to be asking for information well outside Kira's purview. She turned her chair away from the table and toward the inner wall of the conference room. I can have one of my officers in ops upload whatever data we have about the Europani operations on Bajor. She pointed to the viewscreen set into the wall, then tapped her combadge. Kira to Ensign Ling.

Ling here. Go ahead, Colonel.

Ensign, Kira said, I'd like you to aggregate all of the information

Colonel. Akaar raised his hand, the flat of his palm toward her, a clear signal that he wanted her to stop what she was doing.

Stand by, Ling, Kira said, then closed the channel with another touch to her combadge. Admiral?

Colonel, I have already seen the data you have available on the Europani situation. I do not need to see it again.

An angry response rose in Kira's mind. Then why are you wasting my time? but she controlled her impulse to shout it across the table at Akaar. Instead, she stood from the chair and activated her combadge once more. Kira to Ling.

Ling here, Colonel.

Belay my last order. Out. Kira ended the communication without waiting for a response. She looked over at Akaar, who remained seated and very still. If you don't mind, Admiral, she said, barely able to contain her annoyance, I have duties to tend to. She started for the door.

Colonel. Kira stopped, the double doors sliding open before her with a soft whoosh. She turned back to face Akaar. Colonel, he went on, I am interested in what you have to say about the Europani rescue and resettlement operations. Raw data and reports have their places, but I wish to hear from you.

The words bordered on flattery, intimating that he held Kira's opinions in some regard, but she put no trust in them. Nevertheless, she chose to honor Akaars request. She walked back over to the table, the doors to the conference room sliding shut behind her with a whisper. What would you like me to tell you, Admiral? she asked as she sat back down.

For forty-five minutes, Kira responded to Akaars questions about the rescue and resettlement of the Europani as best she could. She doubted that her perspective added anything new to the admiral's understanding of the situation; some of the questions involved the station, but many concerned Bajor, which she was not always able to answer. They paused only once, so that Kira could check in with the station, letting them know that she would be aboard Mjolnir longer than anticipated. When she thought the admiral had finished speaking with her, she rose to leave.

I have one more question, Akaar said. Have the efforts to help the Europani had an impact on Bajor's aid to Cardassia?

Deep Space 9 is continuing to function as a staging platform for Cardassian aid, Kira said, placing her hands on the back of the chair she had been sitting in. The situation has become more complicated with the Europani on the station, and all the ships and crews waiting to take them back to Europa Nova, but we're managing.

Yes, Akaar said, seeming to acknowledge and dismiss Kira's reply at the same time. What I am asking

about is the aid going to Cardassia directly from Bajor directly from the Bajoran people.

Oh, Kira said. This was not an issue that she particularly wanted to address. Following the war with the Dominion, Bajor, by virtue of its close proximity to Cardassia, had been the natural place from which to coordinate and launch relief efforts. DS9, with its docking and cargo facilities, and its status as the nearest Federation starbase, had been a further logical choice to assist. Kira had been comfortable with those decisions, though her tolerance for Cardassians had developed by degrees over the years. She had not come to such acceptance easily, nor even always willingly, but her experiences with men like Aamin Marritza, who had sought to force Cardassia to accept responsibility for the atrocities perpetrated by Gul Darheel and others during the Occupation; and Tekeny Ghemor, who had fought the military dominance of his own government, had helped her understand that not all Cardassians were evil. And she had also come to believe that Bajorans could find both peace and strength in forgiveness and charity for their enemies.

Now the Cardassians required both. The choking stench of the fires consuming the Cardassian capital at the end of the war recurred to Kira, bringing her back to that horrible time. She remembered battling beside Damar to free his people from Dominion control, to help them escape the perfidy that would ultimately see eight hundred million Cardassian dead, including Damar himself. Kira had grown to respect Damar as a rebel and as a man, and she had to admit now that she had seen more than a little of herself in him.

She stepped back away from the conference table and gathered her thoughts. She paced the length of the room, searching for an appropriate way to respond to Akaars question. Yes, she said at last. There's understandably been an impact. Understandable, because there was only so much food and medicine on Bajor, only so many resources.

But there's more to it than that, Kira thought. Her experiences with the Cardassians after the Occupation were very different from those of most Bajorans. For most of her people, their last contact with the Cardassians had been during the Occupation itself. And while the people of Bajor could be merciful, and while their government had agreed not only to help organize relief efforts but to contribute their own food and medicine and other necessities to Cardassia, many seemed to support the measures with great reluctance. And there were even those Bajorans who opposed the humanitarian efforts.

Colonel?

Kira turned at the far end of the room. Yes, there's been an impact, she repeated. There've been fewer ships, fewer supplies, going to Cardassia from Bajor since we've been dealing with the European crisis. But we're still continuing to coordinate the Cardassian relief effort, with supplies being provided by other worlds. The admiral said nothing in response, and Kira suspected that he wanted her to say more. But there was nothing more she wanted to say about it.

Looking toward Akaar from where she now stood, with the conference table no longer between herself and the windows, Kira saw a large portion of Deep Space 9 laid out below Mjolnir. She allowed her gaze to sweep along the arc of the station's outer ring, from which the docking pylons emerged like the impossibly tall towers of a great city. Her eyes traced the shape of the station around the outer ring to a crossover bridge, and from there, into the habitat ring and the central core. Light shined from ports throughout the structure, testament to the thousands who worked and lived here. The oval windows encircling the Promenade glowed brightly, and she could even discern movement within.

Atop the upper core sat the operations module, and visible to one side was a window in Kira's office. She recalled looking out this morning at the ships arrayed around the station, and then she thought about When the Prophets Cried. Her fanciful notion that Mjolnir might be bringing another Orb back to Bajor returned to her, and as quickly as that daydream had occurred to her earlier, it now abandoned her completely. She knew that none of the sacred artifacts were aboard. And still, she could not escape the feeling that something significant was coming to Bajor something more than a taciturn Starfleet admiral. And then suddenly Kira knew. Mjolnir was bringing something to Bajor. She regarded Akaar, who sat mutely observing her. She said nothing, and after a moment, the admiral interrupted the silence.

Colonel Kira, he said, using her name for the first time since asking her identity in the receiving bay. How do you like commanding Deep Space 9?

Kira smiled. She could not be certain, but she thought Akaar might have seen her come to the realization. She walked back to her chair and sat down again at the conference table. The admiral wanted to know about her running the station, and so she told him. She spoke for an hour about the challenges of command, about the responsibilities of leadership, about the gratification of striding confidently into the future, all the while thinking about just what that future would hold for her people. It was not an Orb of the Prophets that was headed to Bajor, she had realized. It was the Federation.

3

The springball struck the front wall high in the white oval. A short, high-pitched bell confirmed the score as the ball rebounded toward the left rear corner of the court. Asarem Wadeen sprinted across the floor, the rubber soles of her sports shoes squeaking on the black hardwood as she changed direction. She instinctively gauged the path and speed of the ball, and realized she would not reach it with a normal effort. At the last moment, she lunged, just managing to backhand the ball before it bounced on the floor a second time. She twisted as her momentum carried her hard into the side wall, her left shoulder absorbing the brunt of the impact with a thump that reverberated in the enclosed court. Recovering quickly, she pushed away from the wall and back toward the center of the floor. She crouched on the balls of her feet, her weight forward, her racquet swung back to a forehand position, primed to keep her solitaire volley going. But two deep rings told her that her return shot had gone wide, hitting the front wall beyond the outer foul line.

Asarem straightened and caught the ball in her gloved left hand as it bounced back to her. She could easily have backhanded the ball again and continued playing, but even warming up by herself, she liked to follow the rules the same way as when pitted against an opponent. It better prepared her for games, she felt, both physically and mentally.

Slipping her fingers from the glovelike grip of her racquet, Asarem let it dangle from the cord circling her wrist. She tugged the scarlet gloves from her hands, then unfastened the chin strap of her helmet. Beads of perspiration ran from her hairline down the sides of her face. Despite the coolness of the weather outside the winter months had just begun, though the temperature never dipped too low here in Ashalla the air in the court had grown close and warm. Her padded springball uniform, also scarlet, covered her from neck to ankles and offered no relief from the heat, although she would never play the full-contact sport without it. She believed herself a tough competitor, toned and fast, but at just a dozen centimeters past a meter and a half, many of her opponents stood a head taller or more than she did. She would never reject a challenge, but neither would she play unprepared or unprotected.

Asarem removed her helmet and cradled it upside down in the crook of her arm, then dropped her gloves and the springball inside it. She wiped the perspiration from her face and forehead with the back of her hand, and headed to the back of the court. Suspended from the cord around her wrist, her racquet swayed back and forth, tapping against her leg as she walked. At the rear of the court, beside the closed entryway, a storage compartment sat recessed into the wall. Asarem poked a finger through the hole in the transparent door of the compartment and pulled it open, its hinges creaking as she did so. She set the helmet down inside and retrieved a small gold locket strung on a delicate, matching chain. Holding the locket flat on her fingers, the chain hanging down, she slid the front panel aside with her thumb to reveal a timepiece within.

It was nearly half past the hour. He's late, she thought. Again. She shook her head slowly from side to side, her feelings a mixture of exasperation and disbelief. In the five and a half years she had served with Shakaar Edon in the Bajoran government, she had never known him to be late had never even heard of him being late for a single appointment. And yet this was the third time in a month that he had kept her waiting.

Asarem closed the locket, then reached into the compartment and placed it in her helmet. She slipped the cord of the racquet from her wrist, wondering what might have caused Shakaar to neglect their meeting. Though she had been looking forward to playing springball the first minister usually gave her a good contest she did not mind missing a game. But this meeting was to have been far more than that. In

particular, they had planned to discuss Bajors renewed petition for membership in the United Federation of Planets; Starfleets Admiral Akaar was due to arrive soon, and

There was a knock at the door, the sound of bare knuckles on wood. The rapping echoed in the court. Asarem tossed the racquet into the compartment it rattled between the wall of the compartment and the helmet, sending the helmet teetering back and forth then took a step over to the entryway and pulled open the door. She expected to see the tall figure of Shakaar, but instead she found herself eye-to-eye with Enkar Sirsy, his assistant.

Minister, Sirsy said, looking in from the corridor that joined to the changing room and the other two springball courts in the building. Cooler, fresher air drifted in through the entry, a noticeable counterpoint to the heavy, faintly sour atmosphere around Asarem. First Minister Shakaar asked me to come by. To play in his stead? Asarem teased. That doesn't appear to be a springball uniform. Sirsy wore a conservative but elegant dark blue sheath, belted at the waist, beneath a charcoal cloak. The outfit contrasted dramatically with Asarems formfitting scarlet habiliments.

Sirsy glanced down at her clothes and smiled, several strands of her long, straight red hair falling forward over her face. She looked back up, brushing her hair back into place with one hand. I suppose not, she said, then became serious again as she returned to the reason for her visit. The first minister sends his apologies for missing your meeting. He wanted to know if you'd like to reschedule it.

Surprised in the first place by Shakaars tardiness, Asarem was now disappointed at the suggestion of having to postpone their appointment. Had some of the other ministers done this almost any of the other ministers, she amended she would have ascribed political motives to them, but that did not follow with Shakaar. Since he had been elected first minister, carried into office on the strength of his renowned assaults against the Cardassians during the Occupation, he had certainly been a political force, but that force had always operated in the open, without resorting to deceit or covert manipulation.

But if he was not motivated by politics, then what was happening with Shakaar? For a man who had conducted his incumbency with the punctuality of a general executing precisely coordinated tactics, this third incidence of his lateness was noteworthy. Asarem wondered if he might finally be losing tolerance for his position.

She had become convinced through the years that Shakaar actually loathed holding elective office, that he would rather have withdrawn from public attention to a quiet, secluded life of farming back in his native Dahkur Province. She had come to believe that when the mantle of governmental leadership had been thrust upon him during the uncertain period following the death of the previous first minister, he had accepted it only because he felt an obligation to the Bajoran population to do so. Perhaps now, Asarem speculated, he had finally tired of living his life for other people.

Sirsy, she said, what's going on here? She rested her hands on her hips, elbows out. Is there something I need to know? The muted sounds of another springball game the slap of the ball against walls and racquets, the various rings of the scoring bells floated through the corridor.

No, Minister Asarem, Sirsy answered. The first minister is just running behind today. Asarem wanted to believe that. Although she differed politically with Shakaar on numerous issues opponents liked to characterize her as a hardliner, severe and immovable, a description she declined to refute she also respected him and thought that he had served Bajor admirably.

As certain as she was that Shakaar detested being first minister, it was not as the result of anything he had ever made apparent to anybody; he had carried his burden close to him, far from the perceptions of others. But Asarem had served as second minister for as long as Shakaar had been in office, and while they had experienced difficulties working with each other during the first couple of years of his tenure, they had since developed a strong and fruitful professional relationship. He had never complained about the onerous weight of his position, but there had been times when circumstances and demands for action had combined to allow her to see through the cracks in his armor.

And yet, for all of that, Asarem remained convinced that when Shakaars six-year term ended next year, he would seek reelection. Such was his sense of responsibility to the people of Bajor. And as much as she disagreed with some of his views, she would still support him. He was a vigorous, forthright man, dedicated and practical, open to the positions of others, and who had done much to push Bajor away

from the painful past of the Occupation and into the promise of the future.

No, Asarem decided. Shakaar is not surrendering. Just late. She smiled, both at Sirsy and at herself. The first minister might not like his job, but she certainly loved hers. She had a talent for detecting the political maneuvering of others, but she also sometimes found herself chasing specters instead of substance. Like now.

All right, she told Sirsy. Feeling suddenly matronly, standing with her hands on her hips like a mother questioning a child, she dropped her arms to her sides. Ill check my schedule and see when we can set up a new meeting.

Thank you, Minister. The young woman turned to go, but Asarem stopped her.

Just a moment, Sirsy. She moved around the door and collected her helmet and racquet from the storage area. She closed the compartmentthe hinges creaked againthen left the court, pulling the door shut behind her. Sirsy stepped back to let her out. Does the first minister have any other commitments this morning?

Asarem asked. She did not want to have to postpone this meeting. She began walking down the corridor, and Sirsy fell in step beside her.

Um, not this morning, Sirsy answered, looking up toward the ceiling, as though she might see Shakaars schedule printed there. He has two appointments early this afternoon. Sirsys heels clacked along the stone tiles of the corridor; Asarems rubber-soled shoes made barely any noise at all. But I know that the first minister has several tasks he wanted to complete this morning.

What about at the top of the hour? Asarem asked. After our springball game would have ended? Is he available then?

Im not sure, Sirsy said. Id have to check with the first minister.

They reached the far end of the corridor, and Asarem stopped beside the door to the changing room.

Please do, she said. Ill be at his office in three-quarters of an hour. Im hopeful that he will be able to see me then.

Yes, Minister.

Thank you, Sirsy, she said, and headed into the changing room.

Asarem made it to the first ministers office in half the time she had estimated it would take her. She rushed through a shower, tied her shoulder-length, dark brown hair back behind her head, and changed into a simple brown shift and a rust-colored macram overshirt, rather than the more formal suit she had intended to wear. With the situation with the Federation approaching a resolution of some kind, she was eager for an update from the first minister, and anxious to review their preparations for the imminent arrival of the Starfleet admiral.

Sirsy greeted her with a smile in the anteroom to Shakaars office. The room, narrow but long, divided itself by function into two areas. Near the outer door, half a dozen chairs sat arrayed around a low, round table, interspersed with a couple of end tables equipped with companels. Further into the room, beyond the waiting area, Sirsys large desk stretched in a wide arc beside the entrance to the first ministers office. Behind the desk, in the left-hand wall, stood a closed door that Asarem had always assumed led to a storage and supply area.

Though not brightly lighted, the entire place was warmly decorated, a reflection, Asarem thought, more of the assistant than of the first minister. Colorful impressionist paintings adorned the walls at comfortable intervals, complemented by the muted hues of various flowers sprinkled in vases throughout the room. A neutral carpet tied all the furnishings together, and a light fragrance, distinctly floral but not cloying, dressed the air.

Sirsy emerged from behind her desk, clearly pleased to be able to report to Asarem that the first minister could indeed meet with her. The young womanSirsy must be nearing thirty, Asarem thought, at least a dozen years her juniorrushed her to the entrance to the inner office. Sirsy tapped on the door with her knuckles, then opened it and leaned in. Minister Asarem is here, sir. She stepped aside to allow Asarem to pass.

Shakaars austere office sprawled in marked contrast to the anteroom. The bare walls spread in arcs away from the doorway, curving outward until they met the back wall. The bare stone floor, though

beautiful, lent the room a hard appearance, and the few pieces of furniture a sofa and a couple of matching chairs around a low, circular table, and another small table and a panel off to one side did nothing to dispel that impression.

In the wall across from the door, several tall, wide windows marched from one end to the other, interrupted only by another doorway on the left side, this one leading to a balcony hanging from the back of the building. Usually, the windows and doorway provided the rooms only vibrancy, Asarem thought, allowing the lush green landscape stretching beyond the city to adorn the room, like natural artwork borrowed from the countryside. In the springtime, she knew, a few months from now, an explosion of floral growth would dapple the vista with color, further enhancing the otherwise pallid room. Today, though, the windows and doors were shuttered against the cool, murky weather, further contributing to the rooms severity.

Shakaar rose from the far chair, in the same motion deactivating a personal-access display device and sliding it onto the table before him. Wadeen, he said, not with the amiability of friendship, but the familiarity of their professional relationship. He crossed toward her, and she moved into the room to meet him. Behind Asarem, the door to the anteroom clicked closed.

Edon, she said. He took her left hand in both of his, his left thumb wrapping around hers. He smiled, but the expression seemed flat to her, forced onto his face by courtesy, she thought.

Thank you for coming, he said. Im sorry for missing our game. Asarem bowed her head, closing her eyes briefly, to indicate her acceptance of his apology. He released her hand and motioned toward the sitting area. Please. She passed him and sat down in the near chair; he returned to the chair in which he had been sitting, across the table from her.

Thank you for seeing me, she said. Have you heard from the admiral?

Yes, I have, Shakaar said. The smile had gone from his face now, she saw, and he seemed distracted.

The inconstant glow of an oil lamp wavered over his features. Two large skylights, along with the windows and door to the balcony, usually afforded the room ample illumination, Asarem knew, but with the shutters in place and the cloud cover overhead, several lamps had been lighted instead. One stood in the center of the table between them, its flame flickering within its translucent chimney. Admiral Akaar contacted me earlier, Shakaar continued. Hes arrived at Deep Space 9, and hell be coming to Bajor tomorrow.

Asarem felt a surge of excitement. Thats wonderful news, she said. The Federation must be closer than we thought to making a decision.

Even closer than that, Shakaar offered. Federation Councillor zhThane will be joining the admiral on his visit.

Asarem frowned. For a moment, she had the sense that theythe Bajoran government in general, and she and the first minister in particular had all at once lost any control of the situation, that events were suddenly proceeding faster than they would be able to effectively deal with them. But then her self-confidence and her knowledge of their careful preparations for this entire process asserted themselves, and she recognized the impending sojourn on Bajor of the admiral and the councillor for what it was an opportunity. I had wanted to review our arrangements for the admirals visit, she said, but I guess we need to discuss more than that now.

Yes, Shakaar agreed in an offhand way, his preoccupation evident. He stood and paced across the room, from light to shadow to light again, moving from the reach of one oil lamp to another. That side of the room was virtually empty. Asarem had wondered during her earliest trips here how the first minister could possibly function in his position without a desk in his office, but here was the answer. Shakaar had spent most of his lifetime living under Cardassian rule, and a lot of that time leading a guerrilla war against Bajors oppressors. For decades, he had been ever on the move, running from place to place, his eyes steadfastly on the ultimate prize the unshackling of his people. And this office reflected all of that, she had long ago realized the almost hostile feel of a room with few places to work or rest; the lack of any explicit indication that this space belonged to Shakaar, and he to it; and, when the windows stood open, the distant view of Bajors freedom and beauty, beyond immediate reach.

The first minister walked back over to the sitting area. Yes, he said, we have much to discuss. For the

first time, Asarem noticed his casual dress, a basic gray tunic atop workmans pants, a look very different from the professional one he had cultivated in recent years. He bent and scooped the padd from the table.

What is it, Minister? Asarem asked. A flow of air from a heat register in the floor circulated past her. Shakaar punched a control on the padd and it activated with a tone. He worked its controls and examined the display. Without taking his eyes from it, he said, The Chamber of Ministers received a message this morning from the Cardassians.

Cardassians. The word brought Asarem up short, and she thought she understood Shakaars remoteness, and even his missing their springball game. Almost eight years after their withdrawal from Bajor, the Cardassians remained a troublesome topic with which to deal. Which Cardassians? she asked. What did they want? More aid, I presume.

Shakaar looked up at Asarem. Their provisional government has Asarem made a noise, not exactly a laugh, but a quick exhalation of breath, loud enough to stop the first minister in mid-sentence. Forgive me, Minister, she said. The irony of the Cardassians having a provisional government is still Im sorry. After all thats happened, the Occupation, the Dominion War Bajor sending medicine and foodstuffs to the Cardassians, coordinating additional aid to them after all this time, its still hard to grasp it all.

I know, he agreed. He looked back down at the padd. Asarem thought to say more, but there was too much too many feelings, too many words. Her own emotions ranged from hatred to pity, from fear and anger to compassion and forgiveness. And her political standswell, they had changed through the years, and were perhaps still changing. The communication came directly from Alon Ghemor, the legate heading their government. Shakaar paused, and Asarem could not tell whether the first minister hesitated because he thought the information he wanted to impart would be difficult for him to say, or for her to hear. She considered urging him on, but chose instead to wait. He stepped around the table and sat back down in the chair, reaching forward and letting go of the padd. The device clattered onto the tabletop. Ghemors message talked about Bajoran aid to Cardassia, and about the relationship between our two worlds, he finally continued. Essentially, hes making noises, signaling his intent. Ghemor hasnt done so yet, but I think soon hes going to ask for normalized diplomatic relations between Bajor and Cardassia.

Asarem felt her jaw drop. For this possibility to arise now, during what she hoped would be the final negotiations with the Federation, would no doubt complicate matters. But whether now or later, when the Cardassians eventually did request normalized relations differing opinions would divide Bajorans, in the Chamber of Ministers, in the Vedek Assembly, and in everyday society. Shakaar would have to define his stance, as would she, and then lead the people down the proper path.

Im going to call the Chamber of Ministers into session this afternoon, Shakaar said, just to feel everybody out. He leaned forward, his face aglow with the light from the oil lamp on the table. She could see the flame fluttering in his eyes. Wadeen, he said, what do you think?

Asarem wanted to know that herself. It required no effort to recall the brutality with which the Cardassians had occupied Bajor for more than four decades, to conjure the horrors routinely visited upon those innocents interned at places such as Gallitep, and then to deny even the possibility that there could ever be normal relations between the two peoples. But it was also easy to recall that the Cardassians had risen up against the powerful Dominion at the end of the war, and to dwell on the incomprehensible fact that eight hundred million of them had then been put to death executed, murdered. Asarem thought of all the Bajoran children orphaned during the Occupation she had lost both parents herself, as well as her only sister and then of all the Cardassian children orphaned during the war. Somehow, every opinion about relations between Bajor and Cardassia seemed right and wrong at the same time.

I think, she said, and stopped, still struggling to organize her many disparate thoughts and emotions, still searching for the words with which to express them. I think, she finally went on, that this is an opportunity for the people of Bajor to demonstrate their strength.

4

Vaughn leaned against the wall just inside the doorway, peering through the dimness. In the corner nearest him, light emanated from a display panel, though it did not penetrate very far into Defiant's simulated night. It illuminated the figure on the biobed, and spilled in patches onto the decking on either side. The quiet, almost haunting sounds of diagnostic tools trickled through the room and failed to fill it, like the distant strains of a musical instrument.

A shape passed between Vaughn and the display, briefly obscuring its light. Vaughn's gaze followed the form. Dr. Bashir walked slowly along the length of the bed, checking the readouts, measuring his patient's condition, making notations on a padd. After a few moments, the doctor reached up and touched a control, and the display above the bed went dark. The bed and its occupant vanished like the finale of a magic trick. The only light in the room now came from off to Vaughn's left, where the only other person in the room, a nurse, sat working at a console; she had evidently muted the controls she worked, because all he could hear were the dull taps of her fingertips on the touchpads.

Vaughn straightened, pulling his shoulder away from the bulkhead, knowing the doctor would approach him now. That was the way of doctors, following their training not only to treat their patients, but to manage their patients' family members and friends. Bashir would tell him to return to his quarters, to get some sleep, that there was nothing he could do for Prynn here. And Vaughn would make the noises expected of him, would resist the suggestions and then relent, promising to leave in just a few minutes; he would say just enough to placate the doctor and send him on his way.

Sir, Bashir said, speaking in a hushed manner that matched the still, dark medical bay.

Doctor.

She's resting comfortably, Bashir said, not waiting to be asked. I've given her a mild sedative to help her sleep, but she won't even need that in a couple of days. The doctor turned his head and looked in Prynn's direction. The skin grafts are doing very well, and her internal organs. His voice trailed off, and he turned back to Vaughn before continuing. Well, she was very lucky.

Vaughn knew that. The blast that had sent Prynn flying unconscious across the bridge that he thought had killed her had done damage within and without her abdominal cavity, but the injuries to her viscera had been such that the doctor had been able to repair them with relative ease. The greatest danger to her had been in the first moments after the explosion, when she had come perilously close to losing so much blood that the extent of her other injuries would not have mattered. Had Dr. Bashir not been on the bridge, had he not so quickly transported Prynn to the medical bay?

Vaughn allowed the thought to die before completing it. He had already lived through the experience of believing his daughter dead; he did not need to revisit those emotions. What's the prognosis for her recovery?

Oh, she'll be up and about in a few days, Bashir said. Perhaps even by the time we get back to Deep Space 9. The repaired Defiant, having eluded the Jarada yesterday, had rejoined the convoy and resumed escorting it to Bajor. Still employing the cloak in the unlikely event that they encountered the Jarada again, the ship traveled at low warp, matching velocities with the slowest vessels in the procession. Consequently, it would be several days before Defiant arrived back at the station. She'll probably be able to return to light duty in about two weeks, maybe sooner, the doctor went on. Full duty about a week after that. Vaughn looked toward the corner of the room where Prynn lay sleeping. And what about you? Bashir asked. How are you feeling?

Though the doctor's voice carried no particular inflection, Vaughn interpreted the question as a reference to his emotional state. How are you feeling about having watched your daughter almost die? How are you coping with having issued the orders that mangled her body and nearly took her life? When he turned back to Bashir, though, he saw the doctor looking down at the gauze-like coverings wrapping Vaughn's wounded limbs. One soft casing protected his left arm from elbow to fingertips, and the other, his right hand. His burns had not been as severe as Prynn's, nor had they required grafts, but the dermal regenerations would take another day or two to complete.

I'm tired, Vaughn said. But I'm all right. I assume I'm healing under here. He raised his arms to indicate the

dressings.

That's what Nurse Richter tells me, Bashir said, tilting his head toward the woman working off to Vaughn's left. Earlier, the zaftig ensign, newly assigned to Defiant from the station's infirmary, had examined Vaughn and proclaimed his recovery proceeding as expected.

Thank you, Julian, he said.

It's my job, Bashir said, and then seemed to reconsider his response, because he added, You're welcome, sir. Then, apparently out of things to say, he added, Well. Have a good night then.

Rest well, Doctor, Vaughn said.

He watched Bashir walk over to the nurse and, when she looked up from her console, hand her the padd he had been using. The doctor asked her to monitor certain readings of their lone patient, and she took more than a cursory glance at the data she had been given. After a few moments, evidently satisfied, she said, Yes, sir.

Bashir departed through the door opposite Vaughn, leaving him mildly surprised at not having been encouraged to vacate the medical bay himself. Delighted to have been wrong, he felt one side of his mouth curl upward slightly. He found people whose behavior he could not always predict interesting, primarily because he encountered so few of them. To this point in his tenure aboard DS9, Vaughn had not been particularly intrigued by Bashir's actions; they had so far been eminently foreseeable, no matter his genetic enhancements though he did like the doctor, whose keen intellect seemed matched by an intense sense of compassion.

With Bashir gone and the nurse busy, Vaughn paced over and stood beside Prynne's bed. Her form, her features, remained indistinct in the darkened room, but he didn't need light and eyesight to see his daughter. As he peered down at where he knew she lay, her image rose easily in his mind. Small sounds spread from around her like audible shadows, hints of the objects that cast them. The tiny electronic hum of a medical device buzzed near the center of the bed, knitting together flesh. Farther up, above her, the low, almost inaudible beat of the diagnostic display marched in time with a small blinking indicator, both signaling the panels' quiet mode. And at the head of the bed, Prynne's breathing, hard but even, confirmed her continuing life.

Vaughn closed his eyes and issued a long sigh, an expression of exhaustion and relief, he knew, but only some relief. From the moment he had seen her had thought he had seen Prynne die, tension and fear, anguish and guilt, had cleaved to him, even through the revelation of her survival. His daughter had endured, yes, but if nothing else, the century of his life had brought him the sure knowledge that all existence fades, fragile as a leaf in winter. Whether Prynne eventually fell to earth first or he did, he felt he could no longer cling to a life that did not include her.

And yet he also knew that it might be beyond his ability perhaps now more than ever to change their circumstances. His previous efforts to reconcile with his daughter she had made several attempts through the year had all been vigorously rebuffed. Just a few weeks ago, after the surprise of finding himself assigned to the same post as Prynne had waned, he had asked her to have dinner with him; she had told him to go to hell. Now, with his orders not to return fire against the Jarada having contributed substantially to her injuries, his chances with her had likely worsened.

Strange, he thought, the way things sometimes work out. After living a turbulent life for so many years, Vaughn had recently dispatched many of the burdens of his decades of work, had seen into himself and then chosen to look back out in a new direction. He had wrestled a lifetime of difficult, sometimes painful duty, and won himself a reprieve. He had arrived at Deep Space 9 almost a new man, intent on finding his way to a life lived for simple joys, and not just for professional obligation. And when he had done that, he had found Prynne again. But she had still not found him.

If only it had been the work, he thought. If he had neglected his daughter in favor of his career, he could, even at this late date, atone for it. But his work had not been the problem; the problem had been what he had done.

The enormity of what Vaughn had brought down on Prynne seven years ago had never left him and never could and now he had compounded her pain and, consequently, his own. He leaned forward in the darkened medical bay, straining to see her face, but he could only discern the vague shape of its outline.

He reached up, his wrapped right hand extending to where her arm would be. He wanted he needed some contact with his daughter, but before his hand reached her, he stopped and pulled back. For what seemed like a long time, Vaughn stood there, both maintaining a vigil and struggling for hope.

At last, he stepped away from the bed and walked over to where the nurse had continued working. She looked up at his approach, and as he had when she had examined him earlier, he noticed her eyes; a distinctive blue-green, they stood out, complementing her pale complexion and her reddish blond hair, which she wore in plaits that joined behind her head.

Nurse, he asked, do you know what Ensign Tenmei will be able to remember?

About the accident, you mean? Richter asked, and Vaughn nodded. Probably nothing at all. When she was awake earlier, she didn't know why she was in the medical bay. It's possible she might eventually recall being on the bridge, but the accident The nurse shook her head from side to side.

Prynn had spent most of yesterday unconscious, initially as a result of her injuries, and later, owing to the anesthesia administered prior to surgery. She had awoken a few times today, and though extremely tired, she had been coherent. Vaughn had been visiting the medical bay during one of her periods of wakefulness, and he had gone to her bedside. When their eyes had met, she had offered a wan smile, but Vaughn had known better than to take such an event to heart. He had simply been happy that Prynn was alive and would recover without any problems at least, without any physical problems. He hoped that the most significant damage she had suffered had been to her body, because flesh often healed more quickly than the heart or the mind.

Thank you, Vaughn told the nurse. He walked to one of the rooms two exits, the doors sliding open before him. He stopped and looked once more toward Prynn, then continued out into the corridor. The shadowy ship seemed empty. Most of the crew would be asleep, he knew, with only a skeleton staff on the bridge and in engineering.

As Vaughn headed for his cabin, he knew that he would have to determine a new course of action, that he would have to figure out what to do, for himself and for Prynn. He understood that it would not be easy, and on top of that, that despite whatever efforts he ended up making, he might not be able to bring about the resolution he so desperately sought with his daughter.

Only one mission in his life had been more important. And more difficult.

5

The rain fell cold and hard. Kira reached the boulder at a dead run and threw herself down behind it. Her hands pushed into the sodden ground as she landed, mud oozing up wetly between her fingers and engulfing them. She rolled quickly onto her side and pulled her hands free, then regained her feet and crouched behind the great rock.

Why did I agree to this? she asked herself, not for the first time. She hated the holosuits. Seeking a setting in which to meditate was one thing, but this was another. Simulation or no, she was miserable. The temperature must have dropped fifteen degrees during her descent from the top of the ravine, low enough now that her breath emerged into the air in a white plume. Her uniform, soaked through two hours ago, added at least ten kilos to her frame. And the rain, misty and relatively warm at first, now plummeted down as though it had been hurled at the ground, as though the fat drops were themselves weapons in this battle.

Kira paused, catching her breath after her last dash. Around her, the unrelenting rain struck the saturated earth with a sound strangely reminiscent of applause. I ought to take a bow and end this right now, she thought. The holosuite safety protocols ensured that she would not suffer serious injury during the course of the program, she knew, but nothing prevented her from being wretchedly uncomfortable.

Lightning flashed overhead, illuminating the scene with an uncanny clarity, and lending everything an eerie, bluish white cast. Kira waited for the darkness to reassert itself, then bent low and peered out from around the boulder. It could almost have been night, so dense was the cloud cover. Thunder boomed, closer now than it had been, reminding her of the ever-encroaching sounds of warfare during the Occupation grenades, mortar fire, bombs. Fresh and vibrant even eight years after the Cardassians had

been driven from Bajor, the memories felt more unpleasant than the weather.

The ridge where Kira squatted clung to the side of the ravine five meters above its floor. Across from her and down, she could make out the shapes that marked her destination a copse surrounding a small structure of some sort. They hide within the canyon, Taranatar had told her before the simulation had begun. And they watch for pursuers.

Kira waited for the lightning to aid her reconnaissance. With each series of flashes, she focused on a different section of the ravine floor. Up and down the canyon, she saw nothing no beings, no vehicles, no animals, and no visible traps. Or maybe the whole area is a trap, she thought. As inhospitable as the weather had been, the geography had proven even more difficult the canyon walls fell steeply; the mud, as well as loose stone and shale, made footing precarious; and no obvious routes either naturally formed or created by wear had revealed themselves beneath Kira's scrutiny. She considered herself fortunate to have made it this far without incident.

She flexed her fingers, washing the mud from them in the rain. Lightning once more brought the scene into stark view. The stand of trees might be concealing something or someone, Kira thought, but the structure seemed the more likely hiding place, especially given the conditions. She wished she had a tricorder or a phaser with her either would have allowed her to gather more information, and provided her with additional options but she had agreed to Taranatar's suggestion that she equip herself with only a knife. You are dead, the Jem'Hadar had intoned as they had entered the holosuite, his manner even more solemn than usual. Go into battle to reclaim your life. It had always seemed such an alien philosophy to Kira. Even though she had often fought to save lives her own and others it felt qualitatively different for her to act on the assertion that her life had already been lost. The simple shift of perspective required more of a commitment to the possibility of dying in battle than she believed healthy. For the right reasons, and there were many of them, Kira would willingly risk her life and had done so on numerous occasions. But her instincts would always be to keep herself alive, not to recapture her existence from the clutches of death.

Victory is life, she said aloud now, echoing the Jem'Hadar mantra. Her breath puffed out before her, and she thought, Right now, I'd settle for Victory is warmth. Her joints had begun to ache, an effect of the chill and the damp.

Kira studied the structure as best she could from her present vantage. Small and constructed of stone, with a relatively flat, empty roof, the building projected an odd quality. No more than three meters tall, and just as wide and long, it featured neither doors nor windows, though a meter-square opening stood in the center of the wall facing her.

Easily defended from within, Kira thought. Anybody inside would be able to guard the entrance with a single weapon. Despite that particular advantage, such a design might still be characterized as strange. It was something else, though, that tugged at Kira's sensibilities the roof. If it was actually made of stone, how could a flat roof support itself? And if the structure contained materials other than stone, then all was not as it appeared, and that meant there might be subterfuge at work here.

Kira wiped the rain from her face and shielded her eyes with her hand. She needed to find a course down to the structure, one that would allow her a rapid approach. As she scanned the ravine, though, another sound gradually distinguished itself from that of the rainfall. A great rushing sound, like the rain but more intense, identified the source of the noise even before Kira located it. Crawling forward and leaning out past the edge of the ridge, she spotted an overflowing stream coursing below, between herself and the structure. The ridge must have blocked it from view during her descent.

Lying flat on the ground, Kira waited for the lightning to detail the stream for her. At its narrowest, she saw, the water looked to be only five meters across, but it flowed swiftly. Depending on its depth, she might not be able to ford the stream without being dragged from her feet, possibly even swept away. She considered traveling upstream or down in search of a narrower place to cross, but even had finding one seemed likely, she had no desire to prolong this experience. For Taranatar's sake, Kira did not wish to quit the simulation, but neither did she feel compelled to treat the success of this virtual mission as she would have a real one.

And even if she had wanted to invest as much effort as she could in this endeavor, she simply did not

possess enough information to be able to do so. Taranatar had presented her with a vague goal capture a Rintannan, whoever that was amid a few sketchy parameters the need for stealth while descending into the canyon, his desire that she arm herself with nothing more than a knife. Kira would never have undertaken an actual mission like this without more data, including, most important, the reason for it. But when she had begun to ask questions, Taranatar had either not wanted or not been able to supply her with answers. Instead, he had recommended that she treat the task as he always treated his as duties divinely charged to him. Kira had not protested that the Prophets did not hand out assignments like military leaders, nor did she mention how unbecoming gods she found such behavior. Since she would be doing this for Taranatar anyway, she had agreed to his conditions.

Seeing no ready path down to the ravine floor from her current viewpoint, Kira withdrew on her belly from the edge of the ridge, propelling herself backward with her forearms. Once back behind the boulder, she rose to her haunches again. She glanced down at herself and saw only a few small patches of orange where her uniform had not been covered or discolored by the dark mud of this place. Her boots were caked.

Kira waited for the lightning, then shifted her position to the other side of the boulder. Again, she peered out in search of a route from her location down to the structure. As she did so, she wondered what planet this was Rintanna, perhaps? and who lived here, and how and why Taranatar knew of it. Had the Founders instructed him and his fellow soldiers to conquer this world, or had he come here as part of his own training? Was it a place in the Gamma Quadrant, or an environment entirely of Taranatar's own creation? No, she thought then. Not something he invented. While he had clearly demonstrated a remarkable capacity to encode holoprograms from memory she remembered watching him battle the eight-legged monstrosity he had called the Comes-in-the-night-kills-many Taranatar had shown no indication at all of having an imagination.

It took another twenty minutes, but Kira finally identified a path for the final leg of her descent. The additional time actually benefited her, because the rain eased, the lightning became less frequent, and the already dark afternoon began transforming into night. With a bit of luck, she would be able to approach the structure in stages, moving in the darkness from one point of concealment to another. She waited again for the lightning, taking a last opportunity to imprint her planned route into memory.

Then she moved.

Seven strides back along the ridge, she raced with one hand out in front of herself and the other to her side, using the feel of the foliage as an additional guide to her recall. Her hand raked through small, wet leaves, sending a spray of water up along her arm, and sounding, she hoped, like wind among the plants. With her seventh step, just where she expected, there came a break in the bushes. Kira turned abruptly and felt for the slope with her foot. Finding purchase, she followed with her other foot and stepped sideways down the incline. Twice, she had to jog around larger bushes, and her footing continually threatened to give way, but she managed to reach the ravine floor before the lightning flared again.

Kira could hear the stream speeding loudly past her now, just a few paces away. She turned to her right, perpendicular to the source of the sound, and walked forward until her hands found an outcropping she had spied from above. She dropped to her knees behind the rock, removing herself once more from the potential view of anybody who might be looking out from the structure, or even from the copse, for intruders.

It took almost three minutes before lightning struck again, but Kira was prepared for it. As soon as the flash faded, she dashed out from behind the outcropping, turned toward the stream, and ran forward. At the point she judged to be at the edge of the rushing water, she leaped. As cold as the weather had been, the water seemed colder still. Iciness clutched at Kira's flesh through her already drenched uniform, but fortunately the stream came up only as high as the tops of her calves, allowing her to maintain a long stride. On the fourth step, though, her foot plunged into a depression, the water reaching up to her waist. She attempted to pull her other leg forward, to sustain her pace, and she might have made it had the current not been as strong. As she fell, she threw her weight forward as best she could. The frigidity of the stream shocked Kira physically. Her breath was forced from her lungs, and she gasped in a mouthful of dirty, gritty water.

Kira jerked her head backward, bringing her face clear of the stream. She felt the force of the current driving against the length of her body. Her feet came up off the streambed, and she began to be pushed along. Trying to breathe around gulps of water, she flailed with her arms, desperately searching for a handhold on something, anything, to prevent herself from being carried away. Her fingers closed familiarly around a fistful of watery earth, but the mud squeezed out from her hand and left her holding nothing. Kira reached with her other hand and felt the bristly texture of grass. She seized the stalks and pulled. The grass came free, but she moved forward enough to grab again, and this time, both hands found the grass. With all of her might, Kira hauled herself forward, her upper torso landing over her hands on the ground. She stopped for a moment, trying to bring a spate of coughing under control. Finally, she swung her legs up onto the bank and rolled away from the surging water.

Kira lay on her stomach for long minutes, her arms folded up beneath her chest, her forehead resting on the wet grass. The roar of the stream resounded as her breathing gradually returned to normal. A delicate mist tickled the back of her neck, but she couldn't tell whether it was the lighter rainfall or spray from the stream.

Kira pushed herself up onto her knees. She knew she had to find cover before the next stroke of lightning revealed her to whoever might be watching. She looked around, trying to establish her bearings. The location of the stream was obvious, and she had a rough idea of the direction of the structure, but it was no longer clear to her where she might conceal herself. She had seen several such places from atop the ridge, but she was no longer sure exactly where they were.

Gathering her strength, Kira rose and raced along the level ground. Lightning flared suddenly, revealing a large, tangled shape not far in front of her. She stumbled immediately to a halt, then groped in the ensuing darkness until she reached the gnarled form of the upended tree. She ducked behind the knotted, petrified roots, swinging her back to rest against them.

Next time, Kira thought, and then, There won't be a next time. Again, she considered putting an end to the simulation. She had seen it through this far, though, and so she might as well finish it.

This is what I get, she jokingly reproved herself, for thinking about the feelings of a JemHadar.

Five days ago, Taranatar had been discharged from the infirmary by Dr. Tarses, and he had come immediately to Kira's office. She looked across her desk at him and saw that, remarkably, the massive bruising on his face had already faded completely. Sustained by a Bajoran, such damage would have taken weeks to heal if a Bajoran could have survived at all. According to Simon, Taranatar's other, more serious injuries had mended, or continued to mend, at a similarly accelerated rate. The Founders surely know how to build their soldiers, she thought.

Standing before her desk in his usual black coverall, Taranatar thanked her for expediting his release from medical captivity, and informed her that he would be returning to duty. Of course, beyond the few times he had participated in specific missions—the trip to Sindorin to apprehend Locken, the operation to evacuate Europa—his self-determined duty of late consisted primarily of standing, unmoving and silent, beside the sensor maintenance station in ops. To experience living among different life-forms, she supposed, as Odo had bade him, though she also guessed that Taranatar standing at attention and observing people move about him had not been exactly what Odo had intended.

For their part, the crew had not yet grown entirely accustomed to the JemHadar's presence, but they had at least become less suspicious of him, perhaps because he did little more than set himself in their midst, without generating any threat. Even now, as he talked with Kira, he simply stood across the desk from her, rigid and still. Kira had to admit, though, that even if she did not find him threatening, she did perceive that he was never distracted; he existed like an exposed nerve, she thought, ever prepared to react to the slightest stimulus. She would have offered him a chair, but she knew that he preferred to remain on his feet.

When Taranatar finished speaking, which did not take long—the Founders had clearly not provided the JemHadar with a prerogative for small talk—Kira inquired about any plans he might have beyond his return to duty. A precondition of the doctor releasing Taranatar had been Kira's agreement that he would see no physically strenuous activity for another ten days. She hadn't expected any problem in fulfilling that

promise, but beside his time in ops, Taranatar also made occasional visits to the holosuites for the purpose of honing his already formidable combat skills. And after being bedridden for the longest period in his life, he wanted to do precisely that; he told Kira that he felt listless and unfit, and angry as well. Angry? she asked.

This isn't our way, he said. He gave no indication of what he meant by this, but it was obvious to her that he was speaking of the medical attention he had been paid during the past few days.

Kira pushed back in her chair and rose, her fingertips resting on the edge of her desk. Surely the JemHadar care for their own health, she said, actually curious about whether or not that happened to be true.

We do, Taranatar said, but our health doesn't come from lying in a bed. His voice had declined to a deeper, harsher tone.

Sometimes Kira started, and then stopped. She looked down, and the reflection of the computer display in the polished surface of her desk caught her eye. She stared at a green ellipse tracing its way through bright pinpoints. Commander Vaughn's proposed course for Defiant's exploration of the Gamma Quadrant and grasped her way through her thoughts. Her first reaction had been to argue Taranatar's point, but she also wanted to understand his perspective. During the past few months, since she had taken charge of the station, Kira had attempted to be more receptive to points of view contrary to her own first with the people under her command, and then with just about everybody with whom she came into contact. She still failed as often as she succeeded, she knew, but with Taranatar, understanding sometimes came easily. He had been sent to Deep Space 9 exiled here was how she suspected he thought of it and forced to live among people he did not comprehend, for a purpose he did not comprehend; for Kira, such circumstances were not entirely unrecognizable. And yet, if Taranatar was going to live here, Kira hoped he would come to some greater understanding of the Bajoran people and the other inhabitants of the Alpha Quadrant; that had been Odos' hope as well.

Sometimes, she finally said, looking back up at Taranatar, bed rest does bring health. She clamped her hands together in front of her in something of an apologetic gesture.

Not for us, Taranatar said. Once our fitness for combat is sufficiently restored, a return to duty is required.

Required by who? Kira asked, but she already knew the answer by the Founders, and by the Vorta acting as their agents. But Taranatar offered a different response.

It is our nature, he said. Kira could not argue that; the JemHadar had been genetically engineered, and were specifically bred, for warfare. If necessary, he continued, there can be an appropriate reduction in rank.

Kira glanced back down at her console as a notion occurred to her. She jabbed at the deactivation touchpad. The panel beeped and the screen went blank. Then she walked out from behind her desk. Well, then, she said, smiling wryly, I guess I'll just have to demote you to second. The JemHadar used simple ordinal designations to signify position, she knew. Although she had never spoken about it with Taranatar, she had always assumed that he had carried the rank of first, by virtue of his long life and his status as an Honored Elder among his people; he was twenty-two, ancient by JemHadar standards. Her remark about reducing his position had been intended as a joke, but Taranatar did not smile, and Kira realized that she had never seen him do so. She wondered if he even possessed the capability; perhaps JemHadar lacked the requisite musculature. She studied his features as she stood before him. The rough, pebbled texture of his hide, the bones protruding like horns from the center of his forehead and around the top of his head, and the smaller bones, almost like teeth, encircling his face, all composed a visage on which Kira could not even picture a smile. The thought saddened her in a profound way; even during the horrors of the Occupation, there had been sporadic laughter and humor and joy, slight victories in life, love, and friendship. For anybody, even a JemHadar soldier, not to experience any of that during their lifetime.

When Taranatar said nothing, Kira chose to return to the initial subject of their conversation she would not permit him to engage in a holosuite combat program for the next ten days.

I am sufficiently healed, he protested.

Sufficiently, perhaps, she said. But Dr. Tarses thinks there's a greater chance of you getting injured now than there would be if you waited another week. Kira decided as she spoke to trim the ten days down to seven, a compromise between the doctor and the soldier.

I am a JemHadar, Taranatar said. I am meant to battle. When there is no battle, I must prepare for the next one.

As Kira looked at Taranatar, she experienced something that surprised her she felt sorry for him. Although he had been on the station for a while now, it seemed clear that he was still out of place here. Kira wondered how she would feel if she were forced to live in an environment so alien to her, and further, how she would feel if she were not permitted to do the things that helped fulfill her needs. And then she realized that, because of the Attainder, she did know something about the latter.

At the same time, she would not jeopardize Taranatar's health by allowing him to do battle even simulated battle before it was safe for him to do so. You can run your holosuite programs as long as you only observe and don't participate, she said, attempting to find some middle ground. Would that help you prepare for combat? She moved back behind her desk and sat down.

Mental preparation is vital, Taranatar said, but I have programs for that purpose.

Im sorry then, Kira said. She tapped the resumption touchpad on her computer interface, intending the action as a signal that she considered the conversation at an end. The panel beeped, and the image of the green elliptic course, originating and terminating at the Gamma Quadrant terminus of the wormhole, blinked back onto the display.

Taranatar did not move. Kira peered up at him. Something else? she asked.

I would be interested in observing you in combat, he said.

You mean Bajorans?

I mean you, specifically, Colonel, Taranatar said. I can create a new simulation for you.

Kira did not typically use the holosuites, preferring to engage not in virtual activities, but in real ones. In the past, she had occasionally been persuaded to accompany Jadzia, and she had gone to Vics several times with Odo, but as a rule she stayed away. To Taranatar, she said, I don't think so.

He nodded, acknowledging her rejection, then turned and headed for the door.

Wait, she called after him. Taranatar stopped and turned back to face her. As she regarded him, she found that she really did empathize with him, since he was being denied the ability to practice some of the daily activities of his life. And she also realized something else that Odo had sent Taranatar here not just so that he could gain an understanding of life in the Alpha Quadrant, but also so that the people of Deep Space 9 could come to know him. Perhaps, Kira thought, she should make more of an effort to get to know this visitor to the station.

What did you have in mind? she asked.

Kira looked out between the twisted roots of the old tree. The rain had finally stopped, too late to make much difference to her, but the absence of lightning would allow her to approach her destination with less chance of being seen. Her eyes had attuned to the constant darkness now, and as she recovered from her experience in the stream, she scrutinized both the copse and the structure. As best she could tell, nothing moved in the trees, but she thought she saw a flicker of motion past the opening in the structure. Kira turned and dropped onto the wet ground, leaning back against the contorted root system of the dead tree. She pored over her options. Given the paucity of information she had, her inclination would normally have been for further reconnaissance. In this instance, though, time played a role she had already spent several hours here after her shift, and she had yet to have dinner as did her preparation and equipment for the operation, both of which were noticeably lacking. As night arrived or continued; the darkness of the storm effectively masked the time of day here the temperature would drop even further. With no attractive alternatives, Kira decided that she needed to act sooner rather than later.

She reached down to her hip and unfastened the top of the sheath attached there. She grasped the haft of the knife Taranatar had provided her and pulled the blade free. It fit her hand well, she noticed, something she had not bothered to test when she had strapped it on prior to the simulation. She made several different movements with it now jabbing, slicing, throwing then reversed it in her fist and drove it

downward in a plunging motion. The contours of the handle rested snugly in her grip either way it was turned, and the balance of the blade made it feel less like something she was holding and more like an extension of her arm. Taranatar had not merely provided her with a knife for this mission, she realized; he had designed and fashioned a personal weapon especially for her.

Kira pushed away from the roots of the tree and rose back up into a crouch. She turned and peered again at the structure. She put it at forty to fifty meters away, over even ground, though there looked to be a slight rise leading up to it. Several bushes and large rocks and another dead tree lay strewn about the landscape, but Kira mapped out a relatively direct route to the structure.

Victory is life, she whispered again, and jumped up. She ran into the open and forward, taking long strides in an effort to reduce her number of steps, and thus diminish the possibility of tripping on something unseen on the ground. She maneuvered around a couple of bushes and a cluster of large rocks, then leaped over the other fallen tree. The cold air inflamed her throat, each breath feeling as though she had inhaled a mouthful of gravel.

Kira skirted another bush, and her foot came down hard on the edge of a rock. Her ankle twisted beneath her, and she allowed her body to fall in that direction. She bent at the knees and threw her arms wide, instinctively shifting her weight to avoid sprawling. Somehow, she managed to retain her equilibrium. She looked up to regain her bearings and saw that the structure sat only fifteen meters away. A few steps farther along, Kira strode upward as well as forward, anticipating the slope she had spied earlier. Her foot came down solidly on the incline, allowing her to maintain her gait. She raced ahead, her eyes squinting to make out the opening in the wall of the structure.

The ground leveled off again, and Kira changed her course slightly, adjusting her heading for the center of the opening. Two steps from the structure, she lunged downward, her hands coming up in front of her like those of a diver about to enter the water. With her final step, she drove her foot hard into the ground and thrust her body through the opening, spinning around onto her back as she did so.

Kira recognized the feel of damp earth below her as she landed inside the structure and skidded toward the far wall. Even before she stopped sliding along, her hand came up with the knife, prepared to defend herself at close range or to throw it. Her head turned to the left as she scanned that side of the structure, then to the right as she searched the other side. The darkness made it difficult to see much, but Kira perceived no forms and no movement inside.

Whirling around on her backside, she pumped her legs into the ground and pushed herself into one of the corners adjacent to the opening. If anybody attempted to follow her inside, she would be able to defend the entrance from there. Her arm remained poised above her shoulder, ready to strike with the knife as necessary.

Nothing happened.

Kira regulated her breathing, bringing it under control after her sprint into the structure. She continued scanning her surroundings, squinting in the darkness and listening for any sound, trying to be sure she did not miss anything. She kept her arm raised and the knife at the ready.

Still nothing.

She considered the trees outside once more, and the potential for somebody to conceal themselves within the copse. She breathed in deeply and let out a long sigh. She was cold and achy and hungry, and maybe it was about time that she

Something shifted behind her. Kira felt it at her elbow, the slightest movement, but she was certain she had not imagined it. She leaned forward, away from the walls, preparing to spring ahead, turn, and deal with whatever she found. Kira tensed, about to move, when something above seized her attention. She looked up to see a patch of clouds scudding across the night sky overhead, and her mind had just enough time to process the incongruity before the shadows descended on her.

All at once, Kira was surrounded and covered, dozens of amorphous shapes pushing in on her. Something slid painfully around the fingers of her hand, and she felt the knife slip from her grasp. She tried to bring her hands down to her sides so that she could push herself up off the ground and toward the opening, but something blocked her arms. Suddenly, something cylindrical slithered around her neck and began to tighten, like a large snake constricting its prey. Kira flailed wildly. Two or three of the

shapes fell away, but too many remained. She forced her arms down enough so that she could claw at the slimy shape around her neck, but the pressure on her windpipe increased. Quickly, it became difficult to breathe.

Computer, came a voice, freeze program. Around Kira, all motion stopped, and the shape around her neck eased its grip. Increase light to daytime level, the voice said. Kira closed her eyes as the light came up, letting her dilated pupils contract. After a few moments, she opened her eyes. Taranatar stood just beyond her feet, gazing down at her. You have failed to reclaim your life, he said.

With a measure of frustration, Kira reached up and pulled the shape from around her neck. The structure no longer existed around her, she saw; the trees were visible behind Taranatar, and above, the sky. She looked down and saw a mass of nebulous forms she could not immediately distinguish, because their coloring so perfectly matched the dark brown of the earthen floor. As she studied the scene, though, she picked out the individual figures of at least a score of creatures, and she could see that there were many times that number all around. They resembled jellyfish, but with more substance to them; long, thick tendrils extended from flattened spheroid bodies. Kira pushed and pulled the creatures from atop her and rose to her feet. I assume these are the Rintanna, she said.

Yes, Taranatar confirmed. They are communal chameleons, often working together to capture or ward off foes.

There was no structure, Kira said, chagrined. She had been correct about the oddity of the flat roof; it must have been composed of numerous Rintanna clinging to each other. To Taranatar's credit, his expression remained neutral and he said nothing more, neither gloating at Kira's defeat nor patronizing her with any suggestion that she had done well. They must be very strong, she said.

Yes.

Kira looked down at the creatures, then bent and lifted one from the ground. It weighed less than she had expected with several of them on top of her, they had seemed heavier and its flesh had an elastic quality about it. She handed the creature to Taranatar, who did not reach out to take it from her. Here, she said, shaking the Rintanna. Taranatar plucked the creature from Kira's hands, a quizzical look appearing on his features. I captured a Rintanna for you. She turned and stepped over the creatures, finding small patches of ground where she could place her feet, finally clearing the area back into open ground.

No, Taranatar said. You did not.

Kira peered out over the landscape, back over the area she had traveled. Even in daylight, the terrain looked difficult to navigate. Her gaze followed from where she stood she could see the tracks her boots had left in the wet ground as she had run up to the structure back to the downed tree she had hidden behind, and then to the overflowing stream; even frozen in the holosuite matrix, the foamy, choppy water appeared treacherous. Above the stream perched the ridge, and towering up behind it, the steep canyon wall down which she had descended.

I'm reclaiming my life right now, she called back over her shoulder. When Taranatar did not respond, she turned to face him. He no longer held the Rintanna. Not bad, she said, pointing with her thumb back the way she had come. Just a few hours to reach here, with no tools, and no data about the area or the aliens.

You failed to attain your objective, Taranatar said quietly. Your life would not have been reclaimed.

Kira stepped forward. Maybe if I had more information or any information about where I was going, or what I'd be facing, or if I had even a tricorder with me

Not all missions are carried out under optimal conditions, he said.

Optimal? Kira said, incredulous. She was not angry, but she felt that she had been given a goal virtually impossible to achieve, hamstrung by having neither enough information nor the necessary tools to accomplish the imprecise task set her. Who would go on a mission without knowing something about what they were doing, or where they were going, or why they were doing it? As quickly as the words had left her mouth, though, she knew the answer. JemHadar would go into any battle, under any circumstances, if the Founders told them to do so. And what would I do, Kira wondered, if the Prophets appeared and wanted me to embark on some unexplained mission? She knew the answer to that too.

I'm just frustrated; it's been an uncomfortable couple of hours, Kira explained, grateful that Taranatar had

not responded to her outburst. You know, theres more to see on Deep Space 9 than ops and the holosuits. Maybe you should visit some other

A voice emerged from the comm system, interrupting her. Ops to Colonel Kira. She recognized the voice as that of Ensign Selzner.

This is Kira, she said, looking up out of habit. Go ahead.

Colonel, we just received word from Commander Vaughn, Selzner announced. The convoy has returned from Torona IV.

Is the commander back aboard DS9 yet? Kira asked. Defiant had been gone for a week on its mission to retrieve the Europani refugees from Torona IV, during which time Vaughn and his crew had run into difficulties with the Jarada. The commander had sent an encoded message to Kira briefly describing the trouble, and now she wanted a detailed report. The crew had suffered three casualties, she knew, one of them serious, though fortunately none had died.

No, sir, Selzner replied. Commander Vaughn reports that the Defiant and the Trager will be back at the station in about an hour.

The Trager? Kira repeated, looking over at Taranatar. He met her gaze with an expression of suspicion, which she knew must have matched the look on her own face. She was unsure why the Cardassian warship would be accompanying Defiant to Deep Space 9, though it seemed clear that it must have aided in the mission to Torona IV. The commander of Trager, Gul Macet, had offered and then provided similar assistance during the evacuation of Europa Nova. Afterward, during the period Kira had been thought lost in the Delta Quadrant, Commander Vaughn had invited Macet to the station, and Trager had indeed been docked at DS9 when Kira had returned. At no time, though, had Macet or any of his crew come aboard; Vaughn had authorized some repairs to the battle-scarred vessel, and it had departed shortly after Kiras arrival back on the station. Apparently, Macet had taken Trager to join Defiant.

Yes, sir, Selzner confirmed. Kira considered contacting Vaughn before Defiant got back to DS9 and asking him for an explanation, but she opted to trust his judgment. He had served as her executive officer for only a short time, but he had already demonstrated intelligence and perceptiveness, as well as a level head.

All right, Kira said. Ill be up to ops shortly. Kira out. The comm channel closed, leaving her peering at Taranatar, the distrustful aspect still decorating his face. She had seen that same look on the JemHadar when Macet had first contacted her aboard Euphrates, back at Europa Nova.

You are right not to trust him, Colonel, Taranatar offered.

Maybe, Kira said. Macet helped us at Europa Nova, and hes apparently helped out at Torona IV too, but his continued presence around DS9 and Bajoran operations it makes me nervous.

He is an admitted traitor, Taranatar said simply. And that was part of Kiras problem. Macet had told her that he had fought in Damars resistance against the Dominion, and if that was true, it validated Taranatars characterization of him; he had been a traitor to the Cardassian-Dominion alliance. But if Macet had been a turncoat, then it also meant that he had swung his loyalties to those Kira herself had supported. To complicate matters further, Macet was also a member of Dukats family. All of which combined to make it difficult to determine either Macets true intentions or his true nature.

I know, Kira told Taranatar. I know. She glanced down at herself, at her muck-covered uniform and hands, and decided that she had indulged Taranatar long enough. Computer, she said, end program.

Around her and Taranatar, the world of the Rintanna faded out of existence, and with it, the holographic mud that had been clinging to her uniform. She started for the door, but then something occurred to her. She turned and immediately saw what she was looking for, sitting a couple of meters away on the floor of the holosuite. She quickly retrieved it. Thank you for this, she said, holding up the knife for Taranatar to see. He inclined his head in response.

Kira slipped the knife into the sheath at her hip and headed for ops. Somehow, it seemed appropriate that she had armed herself before going to deal with the arrival of Macet.

Prynn Tenmei watched as the garnet tide rose in a massive wave. The surfer, a Bolian in a black wet suit, dropped in late, catching the steepest part of the wall of water. He rode down to the midpoint of the wave, then executed a slick series of gouges sharp, fast turns that threw fans of spray up from the tail of his yellow board. He straightened his course momentarily, then cut back and went vertical, climbing up toward the crest. The board sliced through the water swiftly and smoothly. He boosted, redirected the board in midair, and came down as the wave started to roll over. The lip pitched far and clean as he descended, the falls crashing down and forming a tube. The surfer shot the tube, carving up the wave with a level of skill Prynn had not often witnessed.

Wow, she said, expressing aloud her appreciation for the surfer's exceptional abilities, even though she was alone in her quarters. She watched him ride the wave out, then reached up and operated the controls of the companel to replay the sequence. The entire recording, a collection of different surfers in different locales, lasted almost an hour, but this particular run impressed Prynn more than any other. Not only was the Bolians technique remarkable, but so too was the setting. The distinctive color of the water unmistakably established the location as the Canopus Planet, a place Prynn had never been. She had heard only superlative appraisals of the surfing there, though, and she intended to experience it for herself one day.

Although grateful that Captain Hoku had left the recording for her when Mjolnir had docked at the station last week, Prynn was also disappointed that she had missed a chance to visit with her former commanding officer. Prynn's first posting out of the Academy had been aboard Mjolnir, where she had learned a great deal including the art of surfing. The captain hailed from Hawaii, an archipelago in the middle of Earth's Pacific Ocean, where surfing or heenalu, wave sliding, as the natives called it had been practiced for more than a millennium. Prynn, unable to resist almost any activity that involved high velocity and any sort of piloting, had quickly taken to the sport, spending many of her off-hours aboard Mjolnir in the holodeck with one or another of the captain's many simulations.

Prynn took hold of the arm of her chair and adjusted herself as the Bolian surfer began maneuvering again along the wave. A dull ache had suffused her midsection for days, and now her flesh had begun to itch. She lowered her hands to her sides, feeling through her shirt the specially treated dressing wrapping her lower torso. She had thought that once she was no longer confined to bed, it would be much easier to make herself comfortable, but that had turned out not to be the case. Part of the problem, she knew, lay in her own temperament; she enjoyed physical activities, and eschewed pursuits that required only sedentary involvement. Injured or not, she would have had a difficult time simply sitting around her quarters.

Prynn leaned her forearm heavily on the smooth surface of the companel and repositioned herself once more in the chair. Today was the first day since the accident that she had been allowed on her feet; she had spent the entire voyage back to the station in Defiant's medical bay, and all of yesterday in DS9's infirmary. Dr. Bashir claimed that her recovery was proceeding apace, but it already seemed as though her mobility had been limited, not for days, but for weeks. And though she felt better now than she had at any time since the explosion, she still tired easily.

The Bolian surfer completed his run for the second time, and Prynn deactivated the recording with a touch to the companel controls. Computer, she said. Record a subspace message to Captain Kalena Hoku of the U.S.S. Mjolnir.

Proceed, responded the computer.

Captain Hoku, this is Prynn Tenmei, she said, squarely facing the companel so that her image could be recorded. She smiled, happy to be in touch again with this woman she liked and respected so much.

When I returned to Deep Space 9 after your visit here, I was given the surfing

The door chime sounded, and a knot immediately formed in Prynn's stomach. The smile left her face in an instant, as though it had fallen off. Only a handful of people on the station would be calling on her right now, and she did not wish to speak with any of them. Computer, she said, stop recording and erase.

Recording terminated.

Prynn swiveled her chair toward the door. She did not say anything right away, and she briefly considered not answering at all. She had not served for very long aboard DS9—less than half a year—and she

had not yet made many friends. Although rather gregarious as a rule, she had spent most of her free time during her first few months on the station with Monyodin

Her breath caught as she thought of him, the image of his face so clear in her mind's eye, as though she had just seen him. Wishful thinking, she told herself. During the Jem'Hadar assault on the station almost two months ago, Monyodin had been fatally wounded by a chemical gas leak. He had died several hours later in the infirmary, with Prynne sitting by his side.

Since then, she had begun socializing again, but she had also kept her new crewmates at arms length. She had grown friendly, to some extent, with Nog and Sam Bowers, but they had already visited her earlier this morning, as had Colonel Kira. No, Prynne suspected that she was being looked in on by Dr. Bashir or Nurse Richter both of whom she had seen quite enough of during the past week, even as nicely as they had treated her possibly by Counselor Matthias. Prynne actually liked the station's new counselors she appreciated Phillipa's straightforward manner but she had no desire to discuss the accident. Her body had been traumatized, but not her mind or her emotions; Prynne not only could not remember the explosion, she could not even recall the events leading up to it.

She thought about what she could do or say to cut short any visit by Bashir or Richter or Matthias. Or worse, by her father.

The chime signaled again. Prynne took a deliberate breath, trying to calm herself, then realized that the fingers of her right hand were wrapped tightly around the arm of the chair. She relaxed her grip, took one more deep breath, and said, Come in.

The door slid open to reveal the tall, cool figure of Vaughn. She watched as he peered inside, his steely blue eyes scanning the room for her. When he spotted her off to the side of the room, at the companel, he smiled a small, unsure sort of a smile, she thought, that barely moved the silver hair of his beard.

May I come in? he asked when she said nothing.

The word no screamed in her mind like a red-alert klaxon, and the urge to give it voice almost overwhelmed her. She had weathered the couple of visits Vaughn had paid her in Defiant's medical bay during the trip back to the station, but there had always been other people present, and he had neither stayed long nor said much. She worried now that, with just the two of them, such would not be the case. If she told him to leave, though, she feared that might itself provoke a conversation that she did not want to have with him. Finally, she said, Yes.

Vaughn lifted his foot over the high Cardassian sill and took one step into the room. As the door closed, he clasped his hands behind his back, a bit of body language Prynne recognized at once he was nervous, a rarity for him. Vaughn smiled again that same, unsure smile and gazed around the room. Before now, he had never been to her quarters.

Prynne sat quietly as Vaughn surveyed the room. Her discomfort grew as she saw him look from one place to another, taking in her personal belongings. On the wall to his right, a pair of prints hung in pewter frames, one of Mjolnir, and the other of the U.S.S. Sentinel, Prynne's second posting. On the same wall, on the other side of the replicator, a large free-form sculpture, composed of metal rods and sheets, kept Bajoran time in a complex series of movements; she had acquired the clock not long ago, at an art show on the Promenade.

Vaughn turned his head and examined the other side of the room, where she sat, and Prynne followed the direction of his eyes. He regarded the abstract mobile that depended in blacks and grays and whites from the ceiling in the corner nearest him, then looked over the narrow tables lining the wall on either side of the companel station. Several other pieces of kinetic art were displayed on the tables, including silver and gold orreries of both the Terran and Bajoran planetary systems. Then his gaze found her.

How are you feeling? he asked.

I'm fine, Prynne said, and knew that she would have to say more. I've been in better shape, she added, but I'm improving.

Good, good, Vaughn said, and he took another step into the room. He seemed to struggle to find something to say. He looked away from her and over to the seating area in the center of the room, where a chair and ottoman, along with a sofa, sat around a low, oval table. Prynne felt a jolt of panic when she looked over there herself and spied a framed picture of her mother. Without thinking, she rose, one hand

on the arm of the chair as she pushed herself upright. She made her way toward the sofa, too quickly. What had been a dull ache flared into a stronger pain now, a throbbing line across her midsection where her muscles cautioned against her sudden movements.

Are you all right? Vaughn asked, the concern in his voice plain. She also heard him take a step closer to her.

Yes, yes, she said, waving him away without looking around at him. As she reached the sofa, a twinge in her abdomen made her wince and bend over. She brought one arm up to her belly as the other leaned on the edge of the sofa.

Here let me Vaughn started, moving in close now and taking her elbow in his hand.

No, Prynn said sharply, snapping her head toward him and freezing him in place. No, she said again, this time with a softer tone. Im all right. She extricated her elbow from his grasp, moved around, and lowered herself onto the sofa. Dr. Bashir said its all right for me to walk around, just not to do too much.

How bad is it? Vaughn asked. I mean, Ive spoken with the doctor, and I know youre going to recover completely, but how bad is the pain?

Not bad, she lied, forcing herself to quiet her breathing. Her skin felt clammy beneath her clothes. Given the choice, she thought, she could live with the pain, but it infuriated her that even walking just a few steps required such an effort from her recuperating body. And the last thing she wanted was help from Vaughn. Dr. Bashir told me that he could block the pain, but that if I was going to be on my feet, hed rather not, she explained. He wanted me to be able to feel what I was doing to my body so that I wouldnt overexert myself.

I guess hes gotten to know you already, then, Vaughn said lightly, and when she looked up at him, he smiled at her, not quite so tentatively as before. She said nothing. All she wanted was for this conversation to end and to be left alone. Really, he went on, more serious, you shouldnt push yourself. I should be able to return to part-time duty within the next week, according to the doctor, she said, ignoring Vaughns admonition. Id like to do that.

I know, Vaughn said. Whatever the doctors recommendation, Ill abide by it.

Prynn nodded and looked down. Silence seeped into the room, and she tried to think of something to say to prevent it from surrounding them. She could only summon the most innocuous of words, words she could not utter because they would only demonstrate how she craved to avoid talking about anything substantial with Vaughn. Nothing she could think of to say would keep her afloat as the quiet rose around them.

Prynn.

It was only the second time since he had transferred to Deep Space 9 that he had called her by her given name by the name that he had given her. She knew that it meant he wanted to say something to her, not as her senior officer, but as her father. It made her skin crawl. She refused to look up at him, instead keeping her eyes focused down toward the floor. Beside her, Vaughn moved, walking around the table toward the chair opposite her. As he did so, she quickly reached forward, grabbed the picture of her mother, and lowered it facedown onto the table.

When he reached the chair, Vaughn turned to her. He did not sit, nor did he say anything right away. She cast about for something that would stop him from attempting to talk with her on a personal level, but again she failed.

Im sorry, he said at last. And she knew that he was, and why. For her injury, of course, though that was absurd; he could not be held responsible for the actions of the Jarada, or for the explosion on Defiant s bridge. But she knew that he intended his apology to encompass much more than that anyway; he meant to apologize for what he had done to her mother.

Now she raised her head and looked at him. Though he appeared fit, his faced seemed drawn, his eyes old. This was not the first time he had told her he was sorry, but as in those other times, it did not matter. They were merely words to Prynn, and they meant nothing.

It was an accident, she told him, her tolerance for Vaughns visit rapidly diminishing. Then, wanting to be clear, she added, The blast aboard the Defiant was an accident. Theres no need to apologize for that, Commander. The last word slipped from her lips before she could stop it. She desperately wanted him to

leave, but antagonizing him would not serve that purpose.

Again, silence filled the room like rising water, threatening to drown her. In her mind, she heard herself yelling at him to get out of her quarters, off of the station, out of her life but she would not do that. But she could do nothing else, either. She closed her eyes, simply wishing that he would just go.

Instead, Vaughn sat down in the chair. Prynn opened her eyes to find him staring at her. He sat unmoving, his arms resting along the arms of the chair. No trace of emotion showed on his face now. Are you still planning to be aboard Defiant for the mission to the Gamma Quadrant? he asked, seemingly apropos of nothing. And then he added, Ensign, and she understood that he was drawing a line.

Yes, I am, she said, aware that Vaughn already knew this, and knew how much she loved piloting, especially starships. Her advancement from Mjolnir to Sentinel to Defiant had brought her to the point where she would be alpha-shift conn on the coming mission which posed its own problems, of course, since Vaughn would also be on the bridge for the alpha shift. But during the evacuation of Europa Nova, she had demonstrated to herself and, she had thought, to Vaughn that she could work with him at a high, professional level. The mission to the Gamma Quadrant would be a wonderful opportunity for her.

Then I think you need to establish a better relationship with me, he said.

She felt another jolt, this time not of panic, but of rage. Is he threatening me? she asked herself. He could not force her to love him or like him or forgive him, she knew, but he could see her transferred, or reassigned to other duties, or kept away from the missions that would allow her to succeed and advance. She could not allow that. She had worked hard to attain her station; she would not go backward, and she would not stand still.

Commander, she said, careful to control her tone, to keep it civil and professional, and not accusatory. Past Vaughn's shoulder, the avant-garde metal clock ticked off the seconds. I've earned that position. I want to

You're an excellent pilot, yes, he agreed, but there's more to functioning well as a Starfleet officer than the ability to perform a job. There are interpersonal skills, and they include getting along with your commanding officer, no matter how much you blame. He stopped, apparently checking his choice of words. No matter how much you dislike him, he finished.

Commander, she said, her anger dissipating somewhat as her need to defend her record asserted itself. Commander, I have not allowed our personal differences to interfere with the performance of my duties. No? he asked. Prynn blinked, astounded. As much as she despised Vaughn, she had striven to follow his orders diligently and to the letter, and in professional situations to treat him accordingly. She found it unbelievable that he now suggested otherwise. Ensign, he went on, wasn't it you who said you had to pretend you could stomach just being in the same room with me, and then told me to go to hell? She began to protest, but he held up his hand, stopping her. We were alone, and I had given you permission to speak freely. And it's not as though I don't know how you feel about me. The problem is, it's not just me who knows that; it's clear to a lot of people on this station that our relationship is strained. It provides for a tense working atmosphere, and it undermines my authority, particularly since I've been permitting it to go unaddressed.

Prynn glanced away, and she saw the overturned picture of her mother on the table. She knew that she would have to tread lightly here. She wanted to tell him that, no matter his maneuverings, he could not make her love him, that whatever they once had between them had long ago perished. But she also understood that there was some measure of truth to what he was saying. She had seen the expressions first of confusion, and later of recognition and sadness on the faces of Nog and Shar, of Lieutenant Ro and Colonel Kira. Still looking away, she admitted it. You're right.

I might be able to deal with your attitude toward me indefinitely aboard the station, Vaughn told her, but if you're going to serve on Defiant for three months while we explore the Gamma Quadrant, then you'd better learn to get along with me. He stood up.

Yes, sir, she said. She continued looking at the picture frame lying flat on the table, facedown.

Look at me, Ensign. His voice carried the tone of command, and she knew that she not only had to look up at him, but that she had to do so with nothing on her face not anger or animosity, and not a mask covering those emotions. All at once, it came to her that this could be a defining moment in her Starfleet

career. Resentment started to build within her, but she quelled it immediately. She would put herself beyond caring what kind of a father Vaughn was to her. From a professional standpoint, that was the appropriate action to take, but on a personal level, wasn't that the right thing to do too? Wouldn't her life and his be easier if they didn't have a contentious personal relationship, but rather no personal relationship at all?

Prynn lifted her eyes and met Vaughn's gaze, letting the tension and ire drain from her. Yes, sir, she said, her tone even, responding to him as though he had just ordered her to take the ship to warp.

Do you understand me?

I do, sir, yes, she said, and then risked adding, and you're right.

Vaughn's eyes held hers for a long time. He can go either way, she thought. He could believe what she had said, or he could think she was only telling him what he wanted to hear. She pushed the thoughts away, for fear that they would appear on her face. She piloted herself now, and her emotions, and she had never confronted a more difficult test of her flight skills. She fought the controls to keep her course straight and true.

Vaughn relented. Good, he told her. I'm glad. He turned and headed for the door. She did not turn her head, but allowed herself to slump slightly. She felt completely drained of energy. She heard the door slide open, but Vaughn's footsteps stopped before they reached the corridor. Prynn? he said, and the command in his voice had gone. Regardless, she stood up and turned, facing him across the room.

Sir?

I am sorry, he said. For everything.

I know, she told him. He regarded her for a moment more, and she hoped he would not say anything else. Finally, he turned on his heel and left. The door slid closed after him.

He's sorry, she thought, staring at the closed door. For everything. And she found that she believed it, believed that Vaughn was indeed sorry for all that had happened. But it's not enough, she thought. It will never be enough.

Part Two

To Sail Beyond the Sunset

Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
A L F R E D , L O R D T E N N Y S O N ,
U L Y S S E S

7

The universe is filled with unimagined wonders.

Elias Vaughn stood in the aft section of Defiant's bridge, thinking this as the clatter of refit and repair work surrounded him. Several of his alpha-shift command crew—Bowers, ChThane, and Prynn—worked at their respective stations, confirming the modifications and repairs to their equipment. Half a dozen other technicians from Nogs' engineering team sat, stood, and lay all around the bridge, their hands buried inside the ship's infrastructure. Nog himself was not present, though Vaughn occasionally heard his voice over the comm system as he called up from engineering, coordinating efforts with his personnel on the bridge. The electronic squeals and quavers of diagnostic sequences filled the room like an atonal symphony, with the thuds and clanks of equipment being moved, along with the many voices, providing accompaniment.

Vaughn studied a monitor in the aft bulkhead of the bridge. He watched as a bright green line drew a

rough ellipse on the black screen, weaving through white pinpoint stars, and beginning and ending at a blue disk designated BAJORAN WORMHOLE / GAMMA QUADRANT TERMINUS. This marked the course Defiant would take on its three-month mission. Vaughn had spent hours plotting various routes through unexplored sectors, attempting to maximize the number of civilizations and interesting celestial objects the crew might encounter, while keeping the ship as far from Dominion space as possible. He had solicited feedback from Colonel Kira, as well as from Science Officer Ch'Thane. He had even spoken with Quark in general terms, and without providing any of the proposed courses to him about what he had heard regarding the various sectors under consideration. Quark had professed to being delighted to help the station's new executive officer, but had also managed to elicit a promise from Vaughn to bring him back something worthy in return.

All told, little was known about the areas Defiant would be traveling. Before contact with the Dominion had made such voyages impossible, explorers from the Alpha Quadrant had managed to chart only a relatively small volume of the Gamma Quadrant. Federation astronomers had carried out some rudimentary star charting, of course, and several reports and rumors about various trading factions had come to light, but not much more than that. In the end, Vaughn had decided on a course that would take Defiant through areas with both a large number of main-sequence stars and some identified celestial rarities: a dual binary system here, a cluster of brown dwarf stars there.

The port door to the bridge whispered open, and Vaughn looked over to see Ensign Roness enter. The tall, svelte blonde carried a padd in one hand and a spanner in the other. She paced over to the flight-control console, where she conferred with Prynn. Roness would function as the beta-shift conn officer during the voyage. Right now, Vaughn had assigned her the task of collating the refit and repair data for Defiant.

Vaughn tapped a control below the display, and a series of red arcs appeared at intervals along Defiant's course. The arcs, looping away in both directions from the green ellipse at various points, symbolized the paths of the probes the crew would launch throughout the mission, a supplement to the readings taken from the ship. As best he could, Vaughn would see to it that he and his crew learned as much as possible during their expedition. With luck, they would discover marvels.

From the time he had been a boy, gazing up at the night sky on Berengaria VII, Vaughn had apprehended the vastness of space. And with the enthusiasm and credulousness of youth, he had readily envisioned himself traveling the great expanses in search of wondrous beings and places. He had learned all he could about Earth's eminent explorers: Leif Eriksson, Ferdinand Magellan, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Neil Armstrong, Jonathan Archer, and so many others, and dreamed about the days when he would join their ranks. Back then, he could not have known that circumstance and a talent for intelligence would long deny him the opportunity to explore.

Now, a year past his centenary birthday, Vaughn recalled the aspirations of his childhood. It amazed and gratified him that they had somehow endured, despite his casual disregard of them through the decades. He looked at the representation of the path Defiant would take beginning six days from now at the path he would take and renewed his belief that the universe would never exhaust its treasures.

Sir? a woman's voice said behind him. Vaughn turned to Ensign Roness. She no longer carried the spanner, but she still held the padd in one hand.

Yes, Ensign? Vaughn said. He tried to remember the officer's first name he was still getting to know the crew and thought Tilda and Greta before recalling that it was Gerda.

You wanted the latest status reports on the ship, sir, Roness said, offering the padd to Vaughn. From the tone of her voice, it did not sound as though she particularly enjoyed making this delivery.

Something wrong, Ensign? he asked. He reached out and took the padd from her, but did not look at it. It's just, well, I don't think you'll be completely pleased about the progress the crew has made, she explained.

So far, Vaughn told her, glancing down at the padd but not actually reading it, I am delighted by the progress we've made. Not to worry.

Thank you, sir, she said. Where should I report next?

Vaughn took a half-step to the side and looked past Roness to the conn. Ensign Tenmei, he said, raising

his voice just enough to be heard above the noise of the work being done.

Prynn turned immediately in her seat to face him across Defiant's bridge. Yes, sir? she said.

Vaughn hesitated an instant, the sight of his daughter at the conn still evoking the painful memory of the moment he thought her life had been lost. On the heels of that emotion, though, came hope Prynn had addressed him without the slightest trace of animus, either in her voice or on her face. He had to give her credit; since their discussion two weeks ago, she had been the model officer, giving him no reason to have to revisit the issue. It pleased him tremendously that she had something in her life her work that allowed her to face down her troubles, even if he was one of them. At the same time, he knew that while thought and emotion drove behavior, so too could behavior influence thought and emotion; if Prynn's professional relationship with him continued in a positive way, it could potentially impact her personal feelings about him.

Can Ensign Roness assist you at the conn? he asked her.

No, sir, Prynn told him. I'll be done in here in just a few minutes, but I'll be going down to help Lieutenant Candlewood with the computer core. He said he could use some extra bodies for some of the work.

Thank you, Ensign Vaughn said, and looked back at Roness. Report to Lieutenant Candlewood and give him whatever assistance he needs.

Aye, sir. Roness turned and left the bridge.

Vaughn examined the padd. The words **DEFIANT REFIT / REPAIR STATUS** marched across the display. Vaughn touched a control and brought up a list of categories into which the work on the ship had been divided. Color-coded progress bars beneath each category indicated how much work had been completed, ranging from red zero percent through orange and yellow to green one hundred percent. Most of the tasks that would augment Defiant for exploration Shuttlepod Removal and Pod Bay Reconfiguration, Biochem Lab Installation, Stellar Cartography Lab Installation, Sensor Recalibration, and the like had been finished a month ago, though final diagnostic testing and any required adjustments had yet to be concluded. The only major refit modification left partially done was the expansion of the library computer system from a purely military mission profile to a military/sciences hybrid. The bulk of the work that remained involved repairs to the ship's hull breaches, damage to the port thruster package, ablative-armor replacement a result of clashes Defiant had been engaged in during the past three weeks, including the one at Torona IV.

One by one, Vaughn toggled between the list of categories and detailed descriptions of the work completed and the work remaining. Considering the major modifications to Defiant, as well as the unanticipated repairs and the narrow time frame, the crew had done an extraordinary job. Still, not everything added up quite the way Vaughn had hoped. He thumbed through the list a second time, searching for any time that could be made up within the next week. Then he looked a third time.

Were behind schedule, he finally allowed himself to think. And no matter how many times he studied the status reports, he chided himself, that was not going to change. Which meant that he could either try to push the crew harder, try to obtain additional resources, or push the launch back. Uncomfortable as it was for him to recognize the problem, it was actually easy for him to arrive at a solution. The crew had already pushed themselves, and Vaughn had no intention of using crew downtime to make up the deficit in the schedule; time away from duty, he well knew, played a vital role in productivity, and beyond that, the crew had earned it. And the addition of more personnel in short supply in Starfleet these days anyway would be mitigated by travel time to the station. Clearly, Vaughn would have to set the beginning of the mission back by at least a day.

A heavy thump to Vaughn's right pulled his attention away from the padd. He turned to see Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign Merimark struggling with one of the library computer interface modules. The two had it perched on the side of a console, and Vaughn could not tell whether they had dropped it there after removing it or during an attempt to install it.

Mr. Bowers, Vaughn said, selecting the senior of the two officers to address. Get an antigrav up here for that.

Yes, sir, Bowers said, the expression on his face showing his obvious annoyance with himself that he had not used an antigrav in the first place. He left Merimark holding the module in place on the edge of the

console it did not appear to be a strain for her and then headed out through the starboard door.

Under normal conditions, a decision to delay the mission would hardly cause any concerns for Starfleet Command, simply by virtue of its necessity. In this case, though, it might be problematic. Not all of the admiralty agreed that the time had come for renewed exploration of the Gamma Quadrant. Any attempt to delay the launch date would allow those opposed to the mission another occasion to voice their disapproval. And whenever that happened, minds could be changed.

Vaughn personally knew several admirals who believed the end of the war was still too close for the Federation to be intruding anywhere near Dominion territory, even despite Odo's invitation for the resumption of peaceful exploration. Odo, they argued, composed but one small piece of the Great Link, and it remained to be seen whether his influence could forge a lasting peace between the Dominion and the civilizations of the Alpha Quadrant. Because a lot had been lost during the war, Vaughn understood and respected that position, even as he disagreed with it.

He blanked the display of the padd, then made a note to himself to confer with Colonel Kira about the needed delay to the start of the mission. After that, he would inform Starfleet Command of the necessary change in plan, and he considered which admiral would be best to contact first. Not Nechayev, and not Jellico, he concluded immediately. Admiral Walter, he decided. Walter was a proponent of exploration, considered a reasonable man, and a strong figure within the admiralty. He would, Vaughn thought, help preserve the prevailing sentiment that venturing into the Gamma Quadrant need not wait. And if some of the admirals did consider withdrawing their support for the mission, well, then Vaughn would just have to bring his particular brand of persuasion to bear. Despite being only a commander his rank had always served his aims. Vaughn's tenure in Starfleet had lasted longer than the careers of most of the Command admirals, and his influence had a corresponding reach.

Vaughn checked the time on the padd. His next meeting, he saw, was only a minute away. As though caused by his realization, the bridge's port door slid open to admit Taranatar. It did not surprise Vaughn to find Jem'Hadar at least this one as punctual as Tholians.

Taranatar, he said. The Jem'Hadar stepped over to Vaughn.

Colonel Kira told me to meet you here, at this time, Taranatar said.

Yes, Vaughn acknowledged. Thank you for coming. Let's go to my ready room. There are some things I'd like to discuss with you.

Very well, Taranatar said.

Vaughn led the way off the bridge, anxious to consult with somebody who had already traveled the Gamma Quadrant.

Please, sit. Vaughn stood behind his desk, gesturing across to a chair there. Taranatar regarded it with a look that bordered on contempt, and then sat down stiffly. Vaughn sat too, and then operated the computer interface on his desk. He brought up a chart, then swiveled the display around so that both he and Taranatar could see it. I wanted to confer with you about this region of space. The wormholes Gamma terminus sat squarely in the middle of the diagram. Dominion space spread above it, the blur of the Omarion Nebula, the former home of the Founders, distinctively contained within its borders. Defiant's course emerged and returned to the wormhole, stretching down and to the left on the plot. Vaughn tapped on the screen, pointing to the area through which Defiant would be traveling. We intend to explore this region. Are you familiar with it?

As Taranatar examined the display, Vaughn was struck by a sense of déjà vu. Or perhaps what he experienced owed less to a feeling that he had lived this exact scene before, and more to his long memory of the planning of uncounted missions. Vaughn had never sought assistance from a Jem'Hadar soldier like this, nor had he ever plotted a course for exploration, but this was how he had always operated seeking as much information as possible, from different sources and different viewpoints, allowing him to paint as complete a picture as he could of whatever situation he would be entering, and to plan his actions accordingly. Vaughn did not like to be surprised.

I am familiar in part with this area of space, Taranatar said. Can you provide a more detailed view?

Vaughn worked the controls again, and the chart he had been studying earlier returned to the screen. The

green path marking Defiant's course looped out from the blue disk of the wormhole. Taranatar looked at the display, then reached up and cut an arc across it with his fingertip. Here, he said. I know something within this area. Vaughn keyed in a command, and the neighborhood of space immediately bordering the wormhole, including the area Taranatar had indicated, grew to fill the screen.

Would you be more specific? Vaughn asked.

I have visited these systems, Taranatar said, pointing to the two stars closest to the wormhole along Defiant's course. And I have knowledge about these, he went on, running a finger around the next three stars.

Nothing beyond that? Vaughn asked.

To my knowledge, Taranatar explained, the Dominion has never traveled beyond these systems.

I see, Vaughn said. He should have been disappointed the five stars Taranatar had identified had already been mapped and surveyed by Federation vessels but he found that he was not. Do you know of any life in these systems? he asked. Or of any unusual or rare phenomena?

The systems are lifeless, Taranatar pronounced, and entirely ordinary. That matched the information that the Federation had collected.

Vaughn touched a control and blanked the display. I'd like to ask you something else, he told Taranatar.

Do you think that the Dominion will try to thwart our attempt to explore the Gamma Quadrant? Vaughn himself felt sure that the Dominion would pose no threat, believing and with solid intelligence to back up his belief that the Founders and their minions would remain in their own territory for some time to come.

What interested him right now, though, was how Taranatar viewed the situation.

You watched the message I delivered from the Founder, Taranatar said. He told you that the Dominion would not interfere with your peaceful exploration of the Gamma Quadrant, as long as you leave them alone.

Yes, Vaughn said, I did see that message. But I wasn't asking you to repeat it for me; I was asking what your opinion was.

My opinion? Taranatar said, as though the concept did not extend to Jem'Hadar. My opinion is not necessary. No opinion is necessary. The Founder said it, therefore it is so.

I see, Vaughn said. Well, thank you for your time and assistance. He stood up, and Taranatar stood up as well, quickly, almost as though preparing to fend off an attack. That's all I needed.

Taranatar did not acknowledge the end of the meeting with a word or even a nod, but immediately headed for the door. But before he exited, he turned back toward Vaughn. Why are you doing this? he asked.

You mean exploring the Gamma Quadrant?

Yes. Taranatar took a step back toward the desk. You apparently know nothing about where you are going, and you worry about being attacked by the Dominion.

The point of exploration is the unknown, Vaughn said. We wouldn't really be exploring if we traveled to a familiar place. He smiled, but the humor seemed to make no impact on Taranatar. And I'm not worried about the Dominion.

There are other dangers, Taranatar said, his words and tone almost threatening. So why do this?

Because it is our nature, Vaughn said. Humans and many other races find meaning for their lives in extending the knowledge of themselves and their people. The yearning to explore drives us.

Taranatar appeared to consider this, and then said, It is a weakness.

Vaughn smiled and sat back down. What isn't? he said. Thank you again. Taranatar looked at him for a moment, then turned and left.

Vaughn swung the display back toward his side of the desk, then brought up the display of Defiant's full course once more. A small, yellow rectangle now enclosed the stars Taranatar had referenced. The area was small, and Defiant would sail beyond it in a day or two, traveling into the unknown. Vaughn realized that, for the first time in a very long time perhaps for the first time in his career he would be heading out on a mission with virtually no idea of what he would encounter.

Strangely enough, that suited him.

8

Kira stood back from the outer bulkhead in her office and took in the painting she had just had hung. A plain, gilded frame bordered the large canvas, a meter tall and half again as wide. In the lower right foreground, the greenish white form of Bajor sat nestled in the blackness of space, the land and oceans discernible beneath the wisps of cloud circling the globe. A sliver of Endalla, the first and largest of the five moons, peeked out from the middle left of the painting. Derna and Jeraddo and the other moons, smaller but still recognizable, danced with Endalla about Bajor.

Though Kira had an appreciation for art, never had any work captured her attention as this one had. Prior to the evacuation of Europa Nova, the Promenade Merchants Association had held an art festival, and Kira, ambling through the show as a sign of support, but with no intention of purchasing anything, had been taken with this piece. Done in short, narrow strokes, the painting entitled Bajor at Peace had been done by a woman named Acto Viri, from the province of Wyntara Mas. Kira had not found the rest of Actos displayed work very impressive, but she had returned again and again to Bajor at Peace.

On one of her later visits during the show, Kira had been stunned to discover something in the painting she had not noticed in her previous viewings in the upper left corner, a hint of blue, slightly larger than the white lights of the stars, looked out on Bajor and her children. It almost seemed like a mistake, like an accidental brushstroke, but Kira knew that it was not. Though not visible to the unaided eye from Bajor, this was the Celestial Temple.

Kira had not purchased Bajor at Peace then, but sometime after she had returned to the station through the Iconian gateway, she had contacted Acto Viri and asked if the painting was still available. It had arrived on a transport this morning. Now Kira stood back and appreciated anew this wonderful depiction of Bajor in its place in the universe.

Even the stars are right, Kira thought, automatically clustering them into the constellations she had known since childhood. She spotted the Forest, the Runners, and her favorite, the Temple. She looked for others and found the Flames

Kira's eyes locked on the triangular formation of stars. One of the lower stars in the configuration, she knew, was Sol. Earth's star. Benjamin's star. The thought of the Emissary usually brought a smile to her face, but now she also thought about Captain Sisko's son. No one had seen or heard from Jake in two months, not since he had left DS9 to visit his grandfather on Earth. His disappearance had not been established until two weeks after that, when Kasidy Yates had spoken with Joseph Sisko and learned that, not only had he not heard from Jake, but he knew nothing at all about an impending visit from his grandson.

While Federation authorities had looked for Jake on and around Earth, the DS9 crew had actively searched for him throughout the Bajoran sector. Kira had also questioned Quark at length; the unscrupulous Ferengi had sold Jake the shuttle in which the young man had intended to travel to Earth. She had been ready to tear off Quark's ears if she had found out that he had given Jake a defective ship, but Nog had told her that he had checked it himself, and that it had indeed been spaceworthy. And the crew had never discovered any debris or other indications of a destroyed shuttle anywhere in the sector. The search for Jake had been suspended during the Iconian gateways crisis, with so many ships needed to evacuate Europa Nova. During the past three weeks, Kira had reinstated the hunt for the younger Sisko, but as the crew's responsibilities shifted to other tasks, and no sign of Jake appeared, those efforts had necessarily waned.

Kira tried to shake off her melancholy. She took one last appreciative look at the painting, then returned to her desk, and to the work she had not yet completed tonight. On her desktop computer interface, she brought up the list of ships still circling the station, which had begun to thin this afternoon. In the next four or five days, she knew, they would all be gone, leaving Deep Space 9 alone at the threshold of the Celestial Temple once more.

Well, not alone, she corrected herself. Defiant would not be departing to the Gamma Quadrant for another six days. Seven, she amended, taking into account the one-day delay and Captain Mello would be arriving shortly with Gryphon. Kira recalled that Mjolnir had originally been slated for the three-month

tour at DS9, and a swell of annoyance grew within her. She liked Captain Mello, but she had not seen Captain Hoku in quite some time not since before the war with the Dominion and she had been looking forward to spending some time with her old friend.

It's more than that, Kira thought as she studied the departure schedule for the next week. She knew that she would catch up with Kalena soon enough, and that as a stand-in for Defiant, the Akira-class Gryphon was better suited to the task than the Norway-class Mjolnir. What bothered her was the way Starfleet had informed her of the change in plan Mjolnir's early arrival three weeks ago had been a surprise and more than that, the demeanor of Admiral Akaar. She had not cared for him much, and she was pleased that he had remained at the station only long enough to speak with her and collect Councillor ZhThane. Now he was the first minister's problem.

On the display, Kira saw that many of the vessels at the station would be voyaging to Bajor tomorrow. As the Europani resettlement got under way, they would transport the refugees aboard and then ferry them back to their world. Whatever few difficulties Kira had with Starfleet—mostly the administrative matters they burdened her with, as well as the occasional troublesome admirals—she thought highly of their Corps of Engineers. She had received word earlier that day that the specialized technical arm of Starfleet had managed to completely decontaminate the radiation-scarred world of Europa Nova; remarkably, they had taken less than a month to do so. Concerns that the population of three million Europani might overburden Bajor's available resources had now been rendered moot, though Kira was happy that, despite the risk, her people had immediately offered refuge when the crisis had arisen. She still remembered with bitterness and guilt the incident, six years ago, when she and her people had turned away the Skrreea in their time of need.

Ops to Colonel Kira. The voice belonged to Ensign Selzner. Kira tapped her combadge, which chirped to life.

This is Kira, she said. Go ahead.

Colonel, we're being hailed by a ship requesting clearance to dock, Selzner explained. I thought you would want to know it's the Trager.

Macet, Kira thought. What's he up to? This marked the third time that he and his warship had been to Deep Space 9 within the last month. On the previous two occasions, the ship had docked after assisting with the Europani. After the gul had helped evacuate Europa Nova and before Kira had returned to the station, Commander Vaughn had authorized repairs to Trager at DS9. And after Macet's aid at Torona IV, Vaughn had convinced Kira to allow additional repair work to the ship.

Could that be why he's been assisting us? she thought. Somehow, Macet trading his help for free starship maintenance didn't seem quite right. That sounded more like Ferengi behavior.

Put Gul Macet through to me, Ensign, Kira said.

Aye, sir, Selzner replied.

A faint electronic signal accompanied the appearance on the display of Gul Macet.

Colonel Kira, he said, smiling. How nice to see you.

Gul Macet, Kira said. She returned the smile, wondering if it looked as false as it felt. She had learned since the Occupation not to judge Cardassians as a species, but to see them for who they were as individuals. But what confronted her now consisted of more than simply a Cardassian face; this was the face of the unholy Dukat, a likeness to which she had still not grown accustomed. I'd like to know the purpose of your visit to Deep Space 9 before I authorize you to dock.

Ah, of course, Colonel, he said, hesitating a bit as he spoke, as though he had not expected to have to justify his arrival in Bajoran space.

The arrogance, Kira thought. Perhaps Macet was not, after all, quite as different from his cousin as he professed to be. Is there a problem, Macet? she said. Don't you have a good reason for visiting the station?

Yes, of course, Colonel, of course, he said, and though the tone of his voice differed from Dukat's, his selection of words seemed very recognizable. It's simply that well, I thought you would already have been apprised of our arrival. We're here to help transport the Europani back to Europa Nova.

Kira reached a hand up and tugged idly at her right earlobe for a moment. She suddenly felt foolish,

distrustful as she had been in view of this offer another offer of assistance from Macet. Still How do you know about the Europani returning to their planet? Kira had only been informed this afternoon by the SCE that the decontamination had been completed.

I was contacted by Admiral Akaar.

Admiral Kira started. I see. Suddenly, her caution with Macet seemed entirely misdirected. She regarded the gul, concentrating on the tufts of hair fanning out from the corners of his mouth down to his jaw, the most distinctive variance between his appearance and that of Dukat. Another question occurred to her why was Trager coming to the station rather than to Bajor, where the majority of the refugees were located? but the answer came to her right away the thousands of Europani on DS9 could be taken back to their world in one trip, together, aboard what would be, by far, the largest vessel in the task force. And sending all of the Europani on the station onto one ship would significantly ease coordination of boarding procedures for Kiras crew. Im sorry, Gul Macet, she said, realizing that she could not deny the value of his aid or the apparent quality of his intentions. You have my authorization to dock. Then, trying to spare them both an awkward moment, she added, Im just a little tired this evening.

Not at all, Colonel, Macet said, graciously not making an issue of Kiras initially adversarial manner. My crew and I are at your disposal. Well wait until your people are prepared for the Europani to board Trager.

Thank you, she said. Its night here, so itll probably be eight to ten hours before we can begin.

I look forward to hearing from you, Macet said. And Colonelmy crew will remain aboard ship while were at Deep Space 9.

Neither of the times that Trager had docked here before had Macet or any of his crew come aboard the station, and considering how much the gul resembled his infamous cousin, Kira realized what a wise decision that had been. She wanted to tell Macet now that such a restriction was not necessary, that he and his crew were welcome on DS9. But even if Kira welcomed these Cardassians aboard, would the same be true of the Bajoran civilians on the station? In particular, what would be the reaction to a Cardassian gul who so resembled the justifiably reviled Skrain Dukat?

Acknowledged, Kira said. Macet nodded, and then his image vanished from the screen. Kira thumbed the channel off, then contacted ops.

Selzner here, Colonel, came the reply.

Ensign, give Gul Macet clearance to dock when the Trager arrives, she said.

Yes, sir.

Kira slumped back in her chair. She hoped Macets willingness to assist in Bajoran operations was genuine, and that his motivations were of a charitable or at least diplomatic nature. She remained skeptical, and criticized herself for the feeling. She had fought her entire life to free her people from the tyranny of the Cardassians and, thank the Prophets, they had been freed. But how full, how rich, would that freedom be if the people of Bajor could not escape the tyranny of their own fear and hatred and racism? Kira peered across her office at the bookshelf where When the Prophets Cried stood, and recalled the passage in which Vedek Synta counseled her people to embrace their enemies as they would their friends. Such noble sentiments pervaded Bajoran canon, but had been little espoused during or since the Occupation. How can you wrap your arms around somebody who is torturing or raping you, or working you to death, or simply killing you?

Memories and anger threatened, and Kira pushed them away. She knew she was destined always to be a soldier, but she commanded Deep Space 9 now, and that made her a leader, and even a diplomat. Even after everything that had happened in the last decade, from the end of the Occupation to the Ascension of the Emissary, Kira could not help thinking that Bajorans faced a critical juncture in their history right now.

She considered Admiral Akaar, his question to her about Bajoran aid to Cardassia, and his informing the Cardassians that the Europani would be returning to their world from Bajor. And all that, she thought, after the first minister had asked the Federation to reconsider Bajor for membership. She wondered if Akaar had come here to make the final determination about that, perhaps along with Councillor zhThane. And if so, would Bajors relationship with Cardassia be a factor?

Kira suddenly felt very tired. She stood up and headed out of her office. The doors slid open, and as she descended the stairs into ops, the eyes of the few crewpeople and of Taranatar turned toward her. Good night, she said, and the crew but not the JemHadar returned her farewell. She walked around the upper level and into the turbolift, then turned, facing back into ops. Habitat ring, she said, and then specified the section where her quarters were.

As the lift started down, Kira saw a young Bajoran man Corporal Aleco Vel working at a console on the far side of ops. Kira realized that, like her, the young man had never known anything but contempt for the Cardassians. She remembered her father telling her of a time, back when he had been a boy, when Bajorans and Cardassians had coexisted in a peaceful relationship. And the generations older than that of her father surely could recall such times as well. Because of that, she thought it might be easier for them to see a future in which Bajor and Cardassia could once again live together in peace. But for people like Kira, and like that young man in ops, the Cardassians had only ever been the enemy.

The turbolift finished the vertical part of its journey and moved laterally, out toward the habitat ring. In a way, Kira supposed, the Cardassians presented a more difficult problem for Bajor now than they ever had. Fighting is easy, she thought. Acceptance and accord are hard.

All the way out to the habitat ring, and then around to her section, the sight of Corporal Aleco stayed in the front of her mind. When the turbolift reached its destination, Kira still wondered if her generation would ever be able to reach into the future, away from the Occupation and toward embracing the Cardassians. She thought that now, finally, she was ready to do that, but as for her Bajoran sisters and brothers, she was not so sure.

9

The main square in Brintall sat at the city's edge, tucked beneath the tallest mountain in a range that stretched to the horizon in either direction. Councillor Charivretha zhThane stood on a balcony perched above the square, one story up in one of the many low buildings that bordered three sides of the public meeting place. The fourth side lay open to the mountain, a vast, verdant wall towering above the city. Charivretha's eyes rose with the land, past the timberline and along cold, gray rock, up into the azure Bajoran sky. Wisps of cloud flirted with the mountaintop, their bright whiteness almost indistinguishable from the snows decorating the summit.

Charivretha, not easily impressed, appreciated the vista before her. A balmy breeze, no doubt born above the ocean only a hundred kilometers away, floated through her floral hairstyle, ruffling her white, petaloid locks and caressing her antennae. The day had been hotter earlier, too warm even for an Andorian, and, knowing that the summer months had arrived here in the southern hemisphere, Charivretha had anticipated an uncomfortable stay in Brintall. Despite the lightweight fabric of her floor-length dress, a lustrous gray that set off her cerulean skin and matched her eyes, she had expected the temperature and the thousands of people who would pass through the square to make this a long and difficult day. But as morning had faded into afternoon, the Bajoran sun had hidden behind the great mountain, releasing the city from its potentially torrid clutches. Now, what could have been the hottest time of the day had transformed into a soothing, prolonged dusk.

I love the summer afternoons here, said the person to Charivretha's right, as though commenting on the councillor's thoughts. The woman had to raise her voice a bit to be heard above the susurrations of the crowd that filled the square below. It's one of my favorite places.

Charivretha looked away from the mountain and over at Asarem Wadeen. The Bajoran second minister stared out over the landscape like a young chei regarding his zhavey. Charivretha recognized that expression. Though not from Thirishar, at least not in a very long time, she thought, not without some acrimony. You're from here, aren't you? she asked, also speaking up a touch so that she could be heard. Asarem looked up; she stood a dozen or so centimeters shorter than the councillor and smiled. Over tan slacks and a white blouse, the minister wore a tailored maroon jacket that fell to the tops of her knees and demonstrated her familiarity with the area's temperate summer weather. Yes, I am, she confirmed. Well, actually, I'm from a little town farther north. She pointed to the right. called Lecelon. But I think of

this whole area as my home.

And yet you reside in the capital? Again, Charivretha thought of her chei, so far from Andorand from his bondmates for so long now.

I do, Asarem said. With the Chamber of Ministers convening there, and the Vedek Assembly, and all the work I do with the first minister, it just made more sense to live in Ashalla than here, she explained. But I visit when I can.

Even that an occasional trip home by Thirishar was something with which Charivretha could have coped. For so long now, her chei had obstinately refused to face his obligations, to her, to his bondmates and, most distressingly, to his people. Since she had last seen him on Deep Space 9 a few weeks ago, she had seriously contemplated the possibility of employing her considerable influence to see him reassigned within Starfleet, specifically to a posting on Andor. Europani and Bajoran matters had kept her occupied since she had accompanied Admiral Akaar here, but even one or two well-placed subspace communications could have begun the process. She probably would not have approached Akaarshe was unsure how he would have reacted to her request, in light of the complex relationship he had with his own people but she knew many other admirals in Starfleet Command. Perhaps an even more effective resource, though, would have been Commander Vaughn; Elias had always proven himself to be somebody who could get things accomplished, swiftly and thoroughly. And only six days remained before Thirishar departed aboard a Starfleet vessel, bound on a dangerous mission that would, under the best of conditions, keep him away for months.

None of that would have been effective, though. Charivretha had realized after contemplating such a plan that it would not have resulted in Thirishar returning to Andor. Her young chei was stubborn and willful, and when she had reflected on their last conversation, she had concluded that he would sooner resign from Starfleet than go back home. That was why it had been necessary for her to set another course of action in motion.

You have a lovely planet, a lovely city, Charivretha said, her diplomatic instincts continuing the dialogue, even as her mind traveled other paths.

Thank you. I think so, Asarem said. I've never been to Andor, though I have heard some interesting things about it. What's it like?

I'm not the only politician here, Charivretha reminded herself, and her thoughts moved automatically down the avenues she would have to send the conversation to deflect Asarem's inquiry. But before she spoke again, the glass doors leading out to the balcony parted in the middle. Green, patterned curtains covering the glass on the inside swayed as the doors folded inward. First Minister Shakaar and Admiral Akaar stepped outside, an improvised communications center visible in the room behind them behind Shakaar, anyway; because of his size, it was difficult to see anything past the admiral.

Like Asarem and Charivretha herself, Shakaar had dressed today in a more formal manner in an olive jacket and matching slacks, with a russet shirt than he had during the meetings the three of them, along with Akaar, had conducted these past weeks. When Charivretha and the admiral had first arrived, pomp and custom had seen each of the quartet in ceremonial attire, but as the days of their informal summit held without their staffs had grown longer and more complicated, they had all resorted to casual togs. Well, all of them but Akaar. Starfleeters, Charivretha thought. They never want to give up their uniforms. But the admiral had at least forgone his dress wear during their meetings, in favor of what he wore for regular, everyday duty. Today, though, he was back in full dress.

They've begun, Shakaar pronounced, and Charivretha and Asarem both turned to peer out at the square. Since receiving notification yesterday that Europa Nova had been rendered habitable again by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, Bajoran officials had organized the efforts necessary to return the Europani to their world. That coordination, led by the first minister's industrious assistant, had begun here in Brintall, where one of the smaller refugee groups, numbering only in the thousands, would be the first sent home; this group consisted of core personnel, including government leaders, physicians, disaster workers, and law enforcement. Later, and in the days ahead, the remainder of the three million refugees, currently housed all over Bajor and on Deep Space 9, would follow.

Charivretha looked to the four corners of the square, and then to four other areas surrounding a beautiful

fountain in the squares center. Eight triangular zones had been roped off in the corners and around the fountain, set aside, she knew, as the places from which the refugees would be transported onto the ships waiting in orbit. The crowd milled about somewhat anxiously. Charivretha's antennae detected the heat output of the humans and conveyed their anticipation to her but everybody seemed to respond dutifully to the members of the Bajoran Militia controlling the operation. Not only did the crowd seem particularly well behaved, Charivretha noted, but they were also relatively quiet, their combined voices a mere hum. She supposed that their excitement at going back to Europa Nova must have been tempered by their knowledge that, although decontaminated, their world would still bear the scars of the crisis they had endured. The civilization of the Europani had been saved, but now they would have to tackle years of rebuilding.

As Charivretha watched, Bajoran Militia personnel directed refugees into the designated areas. Silver, cylindrical devices the councillor recognized them as pattern enhancers stood atop tripod bases at the three corners of each zone. Lights at the upper tips of the devices indicated their operational status. The enhancers, she knew, would facilitate transport from such a congested area.

After Charivretha saw a group of Europani dematerialize in a coruscation of white light, she turned to Shakaar. Behind him, voices emerged from within the building, some with the tinny character that distinguished them as emanating from communications equipment. The ad hoc comm setup provided a means of harmonizing the efforts of the ground-based personnel with those of the crews on the ships above. Congratulations, Charivretha said, offering her compliments. The completion of this operation will be a notable achievement for the Bajoran people.

Thank you, Councillor, Shakaar said. Were pleased that we've been able to help the Europani.

Bajorans know something about losing their homes, Asarem noted. It's been a pleasure and a privilege to help prevent that from happening to these people. She swung her arm out over the edge of the balcony, taking in the throng below.

And we are very grateful for that. The voice came from just beyond the first minister and the admiral; from their reactions, it seemed that neither of them had heard anybody come up behind them. The two men moved aside, revealing the speaker, whom Charivretha knew at once. The woman, an older human with lines etched deeply into her face around her eyes and mouth, smiled broadly. I am grateful, she added. With short, curly hair as white as Charivretha's, the woman looked almost like an albino Andorian, though few Andorians lived long enough to develop loose folds of flesh hanging from their neck, as this human had.

The woman reached her right hand out to the first minister, who took it in his own. President Silverio, Shakaar greeted her warmly, but she raised the index finger of her left hand to stop him. Grazia, he corrected himself, honoring the woman's preference to be addressed by her given name, something Charivretha was aware of from the time she had spent with the Europani leader prior to the crisis.

When Silverio's hand parted from Shakaar's, she took a stride past him and reached out to the second minister. Grazia, said Asarem, stepping up and clasping the offered hand. Charivretha did not require her antennae to identify the genuinely cordial relationship between the Europani president and the two Bajoran ministers.

And of course, Silverio went on, turning toward Charivretha and Akaar, were thankful to the Federation for all they've done for us. As Charivretha shook the Europani president's hand, the admiral made the traditional Capellan gesture of salutation. Silverio dipped her head to acknowledge Akaar, then asked, Would you mind if I addressed the crowd from up here? She looked around to apparently include all of them in her request. In turn, Charivretha, Akaar, and Asarem all looked toward Shakaar.

Please, the first minister said. He walked forward, slipped his hand around Silverio's elbow, and escorted her to the solid wooden railing surrounding the balcony. Both Charivretha and Asarem retreated to make way for the Europani president. As she backed up, Charivretha noticed the design carved into the wood of the railing, a series of mountains, one much higher than the rest, clearly meant to evoke the surrounding geography.

Silverio raised her arms and her voice, motioning and calling to her fellow Europani. Charivretha heard Shakaar duck back inside and speak to the technicians in the communications center, asking them to tell

the members of the Bajoran Militia in the square to halt operations while the president spoke. Silverio's voice, which Charivretha found relatively loud for such a small, old woman, could nevertheless not carry enough to drown out the sounds of the crowd. But as the people nearest the balcony heard her asking for their attention, they turned toward her and quieted, and like a ripple in a pond, the silence washed out from the balcony in an expanding semicircle, until all eyes were on Silverio.

My fellow citizens, she began, while we head today for home, we must stop to thank the United Federation of Planets and Starfleet for their steadfast help in evacuating our people to safety. Applause welled up within the square, a sound like a breeze rustling through leaves. When it diminished, Silverio continued. We must also thank our Bajoran hosts for their help and for their gracious hospitality. Again, applause rose up. The Europani president smiled at the crowd, and Charivretha expected that she would step back after a moment, the political gratitude of her peoplegratitude no less genuine for being politicalappropriately expressed. Instead, she resumed speaking. But we must thank the Bajorans for more than that. First Minister Shakaar tells me that their katterpod harvest this past year was a particularly strong one, so strong that the Bajoran government has agreed to send several shipments to Europa Nova to help us. Applause swelled once more, but now raucous cheers joined it. Charivretha heard the rest of Silverio's words as we recover from the effects of radiation on our crops only because she was standing so close to her.

The announcement was a revelation to Charivretha. Not only had she been unaware of the development, she had not even suspected it. Considering the amount of time she and Admiral Akaar had spent with the first and second ministers since arriving on Bajor, she wondered when such an arrangement could have been negotiated. Perhaps Kaval put the deal together, she speculated, thinking about the Bajoran minister of state. But no, she thought. For all of the conventional wisdom that held to Shakaar's distaste for politics and public life, it seemed to Charivretha that the first minister involved himself in virtually all Bajoran matters of government, particularly those concerning off-world issues. Despite intelligence passed to the Federation Councilincluding excerpts from Captain Sisko's reports to Starfleetthat purported to make plain Shakaar's dislike of his job and his preference for an easier, more isolated life, Charivretha simply could not countenance such a notion. In her experience, it required more than mere commitment to successfully discharge the duties of high office; it demanded desire.

The applause and cheers continued for a few moments, and then Silverio went on. The first minister has also agreed to provide us generous shipments of kava nuts and pooncheen fruit, she said, mentioning two more Bajoran staples. Again, the crowd erupted.

Charivretha felt a tingling in her antennae, a by-product of her surprise. She turned and gazed up at Akaar. He made eye contact with her immediately, but for a long moment it seemed as though he would not react to President Silverio's announcements. Finally, though, the edges of his mouth curled up in a smile so slight that she would likely have missed it had she not known him so well.

These past few months, as the subject of Bajor's entrance into the Federation had been revisited, one of the issues that had arisen had concerned the readiness of the Bajorans to join a larger community. Their remote location at the edge of explored space had not only left them vulnerable throughout their historyat least, throughout their recent historybut had also contributed to a practical isolationism, even if they had never set out to segregate themselves from the greater interstellar population. The Bajorans certainly had a deserved reputation as a spiritual, artistic, and gentle peopleat least when not dealing with their longtime oppressors, the Cardassiansbut their capacity to readily establish cooperative relationships with the people of other worlds had been questioned by some in the council, including Charivretha herself.

She turned back toward Silverio just as the woman concluded her short address. We owe the Bajorans our fervent gratitude, Silverio said, and we humbly offer them our heartfelt friendship. This time, Shakaar and Asarem applauded with the crowd, moving to the balcony on either side of the Europani president. The three political leaders stood there for a few moments, basking, it seemed, both in the positive feelings of the assemblage below and in each other's company.

When Silverio, Shakaar, and Asarem finally turned and stepped away from the railing, Charivretha wondered if the foodstuffs going to Europa Nova were examples of largesse or trade. In either case, she knew that the reduction in Bajor's available stockpile of food would have an effect on the aid they were

sending to Cardassia. Assistance would continue to come from Federation and other worlds, of course, and she assumed the effort would still be managed by personnel on Deep Space 9, but she would have to examine the impact this would have on the Cardassians. Probably negligible, she guessed, since the use of Bajoran personnel and territory to stage the humanitarian efforts outweighed the importance of the relatively small amounts of food Bajor was contributing. Still, she would have to look into it.

The two ministers flanked the Europani president as they walked past Charivretha and Akaar. Im happy that Bajor could play a role in rescuing your people from disaster, Shakaar said to Silverio, but Im even happier that those efforts have resulted in a new partnership between our worlds.

I am too. Charivretha watched as Silverio Grazia, the councillor joked to herselfreached up and slid her arm into Shakaars.

Charivretha and Akaar followed as the group went back into the communications room. The first minister told the Bajoran Militia personnel stationed there that the transport of the Europani could resume. Well be in the conference room, Shakaar added, and he and Asarem escorted the Europani president out. Behind them, Charivretha stopped, appreciating the diplomacy she had just witnessed. Akaar halted beside her, and she looked up at him. He said nothing, but smiled again in that almost imperceptible way. She considered saying something about the implications, about the meaning, of what they had just seen, but then realized that they did not need to discuss it right now. She started walking again, and the admiral fell in step beside her, both of them, she was sure, having taken appropriate note of Bajors continued growth within the Alpha Quadrant community.

10

The door glided open, and Nog stepped off the bridge and into the corridor. Voices and the electronic cheeps of diagnostic testing followed him out, then cut off abruptly as the door closed behind him. He walked quickly forward, paying little attention to anything but the padd he held in his raised hand. He studied the tabulated readout, analyzing the data. Words and numbers, colored green and yellow and red, and arranged in rows and columns, spelled out the results of the level-one diagnostic he had just completed on Defiant s modified library-computer interfaces.

Were almost there, Nog thought, encouraged. Only a handful of the readings on the padd appeared in yellow, signifying marginally functional equipment, and only onea measure of the data flow rate to a secondary interface in the stellar cartography labappeared in red, indicating an actual failure. He glanced up as he reached a junction, where the corridor curved back around to the left, and another stretched off to the right. Nog jogged to the right and headed toward the main corridor on the port side of the ship. Stellar cartography, he thought, shaking his head as he turned right again at the next intersection. The new lab had proven the most troublesome

Nog barreled into somebody. The hand in which he held the padd slammed back into his own body. His other hand reached out and groped for the wall as he tried to maintain his balance, but his feet became entangled and he tumbled sideways onto the deck. Twisting his body around at the last moment, he rolled with the impact as he had been taught to do at the Academy. The other person landed next to him with a thud, and he heard the rattle of several small objects striking the deck.

Im sorry, Im sorry, Nog said hurriedly, knowing that the collision had been his fault. He had been looking at his padd and not where he had been going, so intent on his work that he had not even heard the other person approaching the intersection. And when a Ferengi doesnt hear something, he thought, its their mistake.

No, no, Im sorry, sir. Nog recognized the pitch and tone of the womans voice immediately, as well as the slight but distinct cadence of her strange accent. Nog lifted himself onto his elbows and looked over at Ensign Roness. She reached over to him, putting her hands around his left biceps, apparently attempting to help him up even as she moved to rise herself.

Gerda, its all right, he said, tapping one of her hands lightly as a signal to her to let go of his arm. She did, and they both got to their knees and then to their feet.

Are you hurt, sir? Roness asked. She stood considerably taller than Nog did, and she peered down at

him with an expression of obvious concern, and perhaps even of fear. She had, after all, just sent a senior officer sprawling onto the deck. I didnt see you, I

Its all right, Nog repeated. I wasnt looking where I was going. He patted at his uniform, mechanically brushing away the dirt and dust he imagined to be there but did not actually see. He looked past Roness and down at the decking behind her, leaning first to his right and then to his left, until he finally spotted his padd. Nog stepped by her, bent, and retrieved it. I was too busy checking diagnostic results, he said, holding up the padd to illustrate his point.

Roness smiled at him then, displaying a mouthful of perfectly aligned, perfectly white teeth, which looked to Nog far too squarish and blunt to be of any real use. As he had so many times before, he wondered just how hew-mons managed to chew their way through their food. As he considered her dentition, Roness walked past him, stooped down on one side of the corridor, and picked something up. Then she moved to the bulkhead opposite and grabbed something else. She stood and turned toward him, lifting both of her hands to show him the two padds she was holding. Her wide smile had transformed into a sheepish grin, and she shrugged comically. Nog laughed, a short, loud explosion of breath.

I guess were all pretty busy checking diagnostics these days, Roness said.

I guess so, Nog agreed. Then, remembering that the ensign had also been knocked down, he asked, Are you all right?

I am, Im fine, she said. Just a little bit surprised, thats all.

Me too, Nog said with a smile. So hows the work going? he asked, pointing to the two padds she still held raised before her.

Really well, she told him, lowering her arms. Ensign Senkowski and his team just finished repairing the last of the hull breaches, and theyre nearly done replating the ships armor.

Thats great, Nog said enthusiastically. I guess we wont need to push the launch back again.

No, thank goodness for that, Roness said. Her eyes widened as she spoke, revealing the obvious importance to her of meeting the new schedule. Several of the crew, including Nog, had felt embarrassment at having to delay the start of their mission, although Commander Vaughn had lauded their efforts to refit and repair Defiant over such a short span of time.

Well, I need to get down to the computer core, Nog said. Then, remembering that he carried the rank of lieutenantsomething that still surprised him sometimes when he thought about ithe added, Carry on, Ensign.

Yes, sir, she said. Thank you, sir. She started down the corridor and disappeared around the corner, apparently headed to the bridge. Nog turned and resumed his own course. This time, he only peeked occasionally at the padd, keeping his head up and his eyes primarily on his surroundings.

When he reached the port turbolift at the bow of the ship, he reached up with his empty hand and touched the control plate. The door slid open and he entered the lift. Deck three, he said. Port computer core. As the car descended, he raised the padd and began studying its contents again. Im not going to run into anybody just standing in a turbolift, he thought, smiling to himself.

Nog was pleased by what the readouts on the padd indicated, and by the other reports he had received within the last couple of hoursincluding what Ensign Roness had just told him. Repairs to the ship were proceeding as expected, and the last major refit work to be completed was the conversion of the library computer. That involved both a modification to the existing interfaces, and a restructuring and reloading of scientific data to the dual computer cores. In the last few days, Lieutenant Candlewood and his team had made considerable progress, finishing almost all of the interface upgrades and loading more than half of the necessary data. Only the secondary systems in the stellar cartography lab continued to give them any significant trouble, as almost all of the systems in that lab had since they had begun its installation. If he could, Nog would have locked on to the entire lab and transported it out into spaceexcept of course that, on an exploratory mission like the one Defiant would be embarking on, stellar cartography would see more use than just about any other system on the ship.

Nog felt the lift slow and complete its vertical descent, then felt it move horizontally toward his destination amidship. At least well be able to leave the station in five days, Nog thought, as pleased as Ensign Roness had been that Commander Vaughn would not have to delay the start of the mission a second

time. Of course, they could probably gain an entire day back on the timetable. Nog was scheduled to be off duty three days from now, but if he worked instead

No, Nog thought as the turbolift eased to a stop. Commander Vaughn had been clear and firm when he had announced the one day postponement in the launch of the mission he had required all crewmembers to take their regular time away from their duties. That's probably the smart thing to do, Nog conceded as the turbolift door slid open. Although he would have been content to work every day until they departed for the Gamma Quadrant, he recalled how miserable Uncle Quark's employees had been before they had formed a union and demanded, among other things, fixed time off.

Nog strode out of the lift, turned right down the corridor and barreled into somebody, although it felt more like he had run into something this time. Whoever or whatever he had struck, it sent him reeling backward. He lost his balance and fell onto his back. He let go of the pommel and slapped the decking with his open hands as he landed, trying to absorb some of the impact again, as he had been instructed to do at the Academy. He yelped as the air was knocked out of him, a high-pitched squeal that reminded him of Uncle Quark. He labored for breath, then recalled his training and tried to control his breathing. He closed his eyes and concentrated, realizing then that his head must have struck the deck, because he felt suddenly dizzy.

Slowly, air returned to Nog's lungs, and his head stopped spinning. He struggled up onto one elbow, took a deep breath, and shook his head to clear it. Only when he had opened his eyes did it occur to him that, unlike when he and Ensign Roness had run into each other, nobody had tried to come to his aid this time. The reason became immediately apparent. Nog recognized the black boots of the figure standing in front of him even before he looked up and saw their owner.

Nog gasped. He rolled his eyes up, but did not lift his head, as he took in the boots, the black coverall, and then the hideous face of the Jem'Hadar. Instinctively, Nog listened, hoping to hear the footsteps or the voice of an approaching crewperson. But he heard nothing but the machinery of Defiant, his own shallow breathing, and the breathing of the Jem'Hadar. Nog was alone with him, he realized alone with it. Don't hurt me, Nog whispered, and he could hear the tremors in his own voice. Fear gripped him, and all of the rationalizations he had made to himself and that other people had made to him about trusting this Jem'Hadar, about allowing this murderous being to remain on the station, fled from him in an instant. All at once, it was of no consequence that Odo had vouched for this thing; Odo was not here, was not on the station or even in the Alpha Quadrant, and this creature had been designed and hatched to be a killing machine. Nothing changed that, not Odo's intentions, not the Jem'Hadar's independence from Ketracel-white, and not all of the people on DS9 who wanted to believe that peace with the Dominion meant that nonviolent coexistence with the Jem'Hadar was possible. Colonel Kira, Admiral Ross, Captain Picard, Commander Vaughn—they had all been fools, and now Nog would pay the ultimate price, as though he had not paid enough already.

The Jem'Hadar towered over him, like one of the docking pylons rising high above the rings of Deep Space 9. Living on the station for as long as he had, and then attending Starfleet Academy, Nog had grown accustomed to having to look up at almost all of the people he met, but not like this. From his position on the deck, he felt as though he were staring a kilometer up into the sky. The 53rd and 235th Rules of Acquisition occurred to him: Never trust anybody taller than you, and Duck; death is tall and he understood them as he never had before. His father had first recited the rules

Father. Nog pictured him, thinking about how he would react to the news of his son's death he would be devastated. Anger joined with Nog's fear as he imagined the terrible sadness his father would feel.

Quickly, vowing to battle both his fear and this monster, Nog moved, reaching his left hand up to his chest and slapping at his combadge to activate it. Nog to security. The words had left his mouth before he realized that his combadge was no longer pinned to his uniform. It must have fallen off, either when he had collided with Ensign Roness, or when he had collided with this.

Nog lifted his head and looked up at the Jem'Hadar. It squinted down at him, clearly sizing up its prey.

Nog hurriedly looked around, searching for something, anything, that would help him. The pommel, he thought, trying to find it. He could throw it at the Jem'Hadar's face, maybe buy himself enough time to get back into the turbolift

Nog whirled his head around as he caught movement in his peripheral vision. The JemHadar had stepped forward and now reached down to grab him. Nog thrust his feet hard against the deck, his legs acting like pistons as he scurried backward away from the monster. With one impact, pain shot through his left knee. He rolled onto his side and tried to push himself to his feet. For a moment, he thought he would make it, and then the JemHadar's hands closed around his chest and side like vises. Nogs feet came clear of the deck as he was lifted. His anger and resolve slipped away, leaving him alone once more with his fear. He opened his mouth to scream Starfleet officer or not, he did not want to die but only air emerged. His ears went cold.

We are not at war with each other, the JemHadar said as he settled Nog back onto his feet.

Nog stopped trying to scream, but he remained agape. The monster's voice, which he had not heard in quite some time, and never at such close range, came out not as a growl, but full and rich. The sound startled Nog, and he stared up at the JemHadar's face. For long seconds, the creature's powerful hands remained locked around his upper torso, and Nog thought that if the JemHadar squeezed, it would crush the life out of him. Nog closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

But the creature released him. His body now unsupported, Nogs leg started to give way beneath him. He staggered to the left a step, his knee buckling. He reached down and wrapped his hands around it, forcing it straight and keeping himself on his feet.

Did you hurt your leg? the JemHadar asked.

Nog stood back up and stared into the face of the enemy. Not much more than a year ago, the lower part of his leg had been destroyed by a blast from a JemHadar weapon. The memory still clear, still haunting surrounded Nog like a toxic fog, choking him as it closed in around him. In his mind, he hunted for something to give himself air, to protect him from the suffocating closeness of his memories and his terror. What he found was hatred.

You blew my leg off, Nog said, his voice hissing through his clenched teeth.

The creature's brow knotted. It cocked its head at an angle, obviously not understanding Nogs words.

A JemHadar shot my leg off, Nog said, his voice louder now. Why am I standing here? he asked himself. Why am I talking to this creature? He should leave, he knew, turn and escape as swiftly as he could. But he did not move. Instead, he watched as the JemHadar peered down at his leg. Its biosynthetic, Nog said.

The JemHadar nodded. You are fortunate to have reclaimed your life, it told him, its voice lacking any detectable inflection, as though simply reciting a cold fact.

It is a cold fact, Nog told himself, and then pushed the thought away. I don't feel fortunate, he spat, and an image rose in his mind, vivid and real he saw himself holding a phaser trained on this monster before him. In the fantasy, Nog did not hesitate; he depressed the trigger and fired a beam of white-hot energy into the JemHadar's chest, vaporizing it into nothingness. Would you feel fortunate to trade your leg for a hunk of rock in the Chintoka system. It was not a question. Nog knew he should leave while he could, but somehow the depth of his loathing kept him there; he wanted he needed this creature to express remorse for what the other JemHadar had done to him.

The Chintoka system, it said. I am aware of it. The Dominion housed a primary communications relay there during the war. For the first time, Nog thought he detected emotion in the creature's voice resentment, maybe even anger.

Good, Nog thought. Let it feel what I feel.

Seventy-two JemHadar were killed in that action, the creature continued, and now Nog was certain that he heard anger in its voice.

You were trying to kill us, Nog said, struck by the incongruity of offering up a defense for Starfleet's attempts to save the people of the Alpha Quadrant from the invading hordes of the Dominion.

It was the Founders will, the JemHadar said.

That doesn't make it right, Nog said, the volume of his voice climbing.

Of course it does, the JemHadar avowed. Everything done in the name of the Founders is right.

Shooting my leg off? Nogs voice had risen almost to the point of screaming.

The JemHadar soldiers you fought were trying to kill you, I'm sure, the creature said. Their mission was to

defend the communications station. They were carrying out their duty. You fought them. Shooting you was the appropriate thing to do.

Nog seethed, and he suddenly felt the urge to lunge forward at this monstrosity, regardless of the consequences.

Everything done in the name of the Founders is right, the JemHadar repeated. If that was not true, then I would not be standing here. It leaned forward, bringing its face to within centimeters of Nogs. Or you would not be standing here. The threat carried in the words only reinforced the menace on the JemHadar's face.

Nog staggered backward, unable to stand his ground. This creature, this Dominion soldier, would one day reclaim its birthright, Nog knew; it would kill again, and it would do so soon.

Nog turned and looked at the bulkhead beside the turbolift, then reached over and touched the control plate. The door opened, and Nog backed into the car. I'm not standing here, he said, mustering what little defiance he could. As he moved to the rear of the lift, he spotted his padd near the bulkhead on the far side of the corridor. His eyes were still on it as the door slid closed.

Port airlock, he said, and the lift started its horizontal journey to the bow of the ship. Nog would go back to the station and report to Colonel Kira what had happened, and make her understand how dangerous the JemHadar was except that he knew that she would not understand. She believed Odo they all did and she would ascribe Nogs warnings to fear, and to the terrible injury he had suffered in the Chintoka system.

Nog would still go back to the station, though. He would go to ops, work one of the sensor consoles, and return to Defiant only once the JemHadar had left it.

They were carrying out their duty, Nog thought. Which was true, he supposed, except that their duty was to kill and to conquer. These creatures, these things, had been created specifically for that purpose. They were no better than charged phaser banks, chambered quantum torpedoes, and with no more conscience or morality than those weapons. And worse than that they liked what they did, every one of them.

Nog's hands began to tremble.

I hate them, he said aloud, and knew that he was right to do so.

11

I'm ruined, Quark said. He threw an elbow up onto the bar, dropped his chin into it, and peered out at empty chairs, empty tables, and worst of all, an unmoving dabo wheel. Treir, his newest dabo girlan Orion, tall, gorgeous, and majestically green stood by the gaming table with her arms folded across her chest, looking painfully bored. Two of his waiters, Frool and Grimp, stood quietly in a corner, leaning against a wall and looking equally uninterested in being there. Business had been so slow tonight that Quark had sent the rest of his staff home.

The virtual night of Deep Space 9 encroached on Quark's as it rarely had recently, sending shadows and silences into the lightly populated establishment. The festive colors reflected by the dabo wheel, and usually sent spinning around the room, instead rested statically on the walls. A dreary dimness hung between the orange and yellow stained-glass artwork on one side of the room, and the many hues of the bottles sitting behind the bar on the other. The absence of the whoops and cries of dabo players and the overlapping conversations of a large crowd left the place bereft of meaty sound, with the occasional, reedy ring of glassware a lonely underscore to the relative quiet.

Ruined, Quark? Skepticism filled the voice of Ro Laren, who sat across the bar from him. Quark looked over to see her eyebrows raised on her forehead, and a closed-mouth smile that he thought just might be hinting at mischief. The two were by themselves at the bar, at the end farthest from the entrance.

Ruined, Quark maintained. Just look at this place. He brought his elbow up off the bar and motioned with both hands at his establishment. Ro swiveled on her stool and gazed around. It's not even twenty-six hundred and there are only Quark hurriedly scanned the room from side to side, then glanced up at the tables on the second level, aggregating the clientele with practiced precision, though tonight that did not take much of an effort. seven customers here. He raised an arm and pointed across at the dabo table,

where a Tellarite freighter captain sat bent over the gaming surface, her head resting on the wager board between her splayed arms. And one of them not even conscious.

Ro laughed at that, just a short chuckle, but it affected Quark as though it were music. And not that Klingon opera tripe, he thought; thanks to Jadzia and Worf, Quark had heard more than enough of that overdramatic bellowing during the last eight years. No, Ros laughter sounded light and lyrical, like a Betazoid dance suite.

Well, Im not saying youre not having a bad night, Ro amended, spinning back toward the bar. But ruined?

Im telling you, Quark said, this is the start of a downturn. I can feel it in my lobes.

Your lobes, huh? Still, the impish smile remained on her face.

Quark grasped the edge of the bar and bent forward, as though about to offer Ro something in confidence. Never, he began, his voice conspiratorially hushed, underestimate the lobes of a Ferengi.

Ro leaned on her forearms over the bar and dropped the volume of her own voice, obviously playing along. Ill remember that, she said.

Quark pushed back from the bar and smiled himself. You do have to admit, weve got some pretty nice, pretty large ears. He waved in the general direction of the side of his head.

Ro sat back on her stool and threw up her hands in what Quark took to be mock frustration. What is it with men and size? she said. Not everything worthwhile is big.

Or tall, Quark said without missing a beat. To his delight, Ro smiled widely.

Or tall, she agreed. They regarded each other across the bar for a moment, and Quark felt that they had made a connection beyond his flirting with her. Still, I dont think youre ruined, Ro finally said, turning her head and looking around. The moment passed.

Listen, Quark told her, closing time is hours away, nobodys gambling, nobodys using the holosuites, and Morns not even here. He peered toward the other end of the bar, where his best customer for more than a decade typically sat. The usually reliable Morn, Quark knew, had forgone the bar tonight in favor of his own quarters, where he was giving a poetry reading for anybody on DS9 who wanted to attend; Morn had sent invitations to every personal companel on the station. Plus, Ive got only six conscious customers, and one of those, he said, teasingly referring to Ro, is only drinking pooncheenee. He reached forward and picked up the short, translucent blue glass sitting on the bar in front of Ro. Another, Lieutenant? he asked. Quark had no taste himself for the sweet, fruity beverage he kept it in the bar primarily for use as a mixer but a lot of Bajorans liked it.

Ro made a show of considering the question, the ridges at the top of her nose wrinkling together. Then she asked, What else have you got?

Quark turned and set the empty glass down in an area he reserved for discards, of which there were pathetically few right now; later, one of his employees would recycle the used bottles and glasses, utilizing the replicator. Then he examined the shelves at the back of the bar, and the bottles that lined them in various shapes, sizes, and colors. What can I give Laren? he asked himself, searching for something with a bit of flavor and character. Not finding anything to his liking, he checked the stock below the bar, finally pulling out an amber bottle with a distinctively curved, tapered neck. Saurian brandy? he asked, offering the label for Ro to inspect.

Sure, she said. Why not?

Quark bent behind the bar again and retrieved a crystal snifter. He set it down in front of Ro and removed the leather hood from the top of the bottle, letting it dangle from the cord that was attached to a strip surrounding the base of the neck. Captain Sisko never used to come in here much, he said as he poured out two fingers of the brandy, but this was his favorite drink, so I used to keep it around for functions.

Functions? Ro asked. She slid her upturned palm beneath the bowl of the glass, her middle and fourth fingers on either side of the stem, and lifted the brandy to her lips.

Starfleet conferences, political meetings, the occasional party, Quark explained. Ill say this for the man for a Starfleet type, he sure knew the value of quality catering.

Hmmm, this is excellent, Ro said after she had taken a sip of the brandy.

Have you ever had it before? Quark asked.

I have, just not in a very long time, Ro told him before raising the snifter to her lips again. She took a second sip, then lowered the glass to the bar. So, you're not all that fond of Starfleet types, huh?

Well, you have to admit, they're not always all that much fun. He grabbed the hood and replaced it atop the brandy bottle.

No, Ro agreed. But they do keep the peace.

Sometimes, Quark said, the tone of his voice falling to convey his cynicism. He recalled the incident a few years ago when the Bajorans had barred all Ferengi from their system and from the wormhole, and how the Federation had refused to involve itself. He refused to dwell on the memory of what had happened back then remained too painful for him to think about, even now but his estimation of the Federation and Starfleet still lingered. When it's in their own interests to do so, he added.

You know, Quark, Ro said, her mischievous smile returning, I was a Starfleet type.

Oh, you may have been in Starfleet, Quark said, discounting the idea with a wave of his hand, but I'm sure you were never the Starfleet type. He bent and placed the Saurian brandy bottle back below the bar.

Ro took another sip of her drink. What makes you say that?

Well, for one thing, that's a Bajoran Militia uniform you're wearing, not a Starfleet one, which means you didn't stay in Starfleet. And for another, just look around. Quark gestured to include the rest of the bar. You're here, but I don't see any Starfleet types. And the Gryphon's been docked at the station off and on for three days now, in between trips to Europa Nova, so we've got another few hundred of them wandering about. Quark shook his head and rolled his eyes. They're probably all down in Morn's quarters listening to him spout poetry.

Ro laughed so hard that she nearly choked on her drink. A lilt Quark had not heard before emerged at the upper reaches of her chortles. The sound delighted him.

What's so amusing? somebody asked. Quark looked away from Ro to see that Commander Vaughn still clad in his uniform despite the lateness of the hour had entered the bar. Quark's attention had been so focused on Ro that he had not even heard the commander approach. Normally, Quark would have been concerned by the lapse. Ears open, eyes wide, went an old Ferengi saying to which he had always subscribed but the truth was that his ears had been open and his eyes had been wide; they had simply been filled with the intoxicating sound and sight of Ro Laren.

Good evening, Commander, Quark said. Just the old joke about a hew-mon, a Klingon, and a Romulan walking into a Vulcan embassy.

I know that one, Vaughn said, and Quark recognized the commander's graciousness in allowing him to avoid honestly answering the question. It's not that funny.

Ah, well, I guess humor is in the ear of the beholder, Quark said, intentionally paraphrasing an old hew-mon expression.

I guess it is, Vaughn said. Lieutenant, how are you this evening? he asked, addressing Ro.

Im fine, Commander, thank you, she said, and Quark noticed a sudden stiffness in her manner.

You know, we never did get a chance to talk about your experiences in Advanced Tactical training, Vaughn said. Id still like to do that. For a horrible moment, Quark thought that the commander would sit down. He actually liked the old man Vaughn had so far treated him with respect, even asking for his opinions about the Gamma Quadrant but Quark did not want any intrusions into this unexpected time with Ro. Fortunately, Vaughn did not take a seat, nor did he even burden Ro with having to answer his question. Of course, he told her, it'll probably have to wait a few months until I return from Defiant's mission.

Ill look forward to it, Ro said, and while her voice and the expression on her face seemed genuine, Quark thought he detected an aspect of discomfort in her response. She raised her glass and drank more of the brandy.

Very good, Vaughn said. So, Quark, did you procure that item I ordered?

Oh, yes, Quark said, suddenly remembering that he had received the item earlier today. He had been paying such close attention to Ro that it had not occurred to him when Vaughn had come in. Just a

second, he said, moving down the bar in search of the bottle. He found it quickly and hoisted it up by its neck onto the bar. Here you are, Commander.

Vaughn reached forward and slid his hand around the bulbous bottom of the dark-green bottle, then spun it around so that he could read the label. Apparently satisfied, he said, Thats the stuff.

Glad to be of service, Quark said. Now, how will you be paying for that?

Vaughn smiled, and Quark smiled back, knowing what the old man would say. Obviously its slipped your mind that you asked for payment in full when I ordered it.

Oh, thats right, Quark said, putting on his expression of sudden remembrance, though he knew it would not fool Vaughn. My mistake, Commander.

Thank you, Quark, Vaughn said, hefting the bottle into the crook of his arm. By the way, you wouldnt happen to have an old holosuite program set on Earth, would you?

Actually, I do, Commander, Quark said, pleased that this intrusion might at least lead to more business. He reached below the bar and pulled out a small metal box, flipping open its lid to reveal the orange tips of several dozen isolinear rods.

Im actually looking for something specific, Vaughn said. Do you have anything from North America in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries relating to space travel?

Earth space travel in the twentieth century? Quark said, mulling over the request. Had hew-mons even left their planet back then? Quark had not intended the question as an insult, but he realized as soon as he had said it that it might have sounded that way. Before he could rephrase it, though, Vaughn answered.

Just barely, the commander said with a smile, clearly not offended.

Quark considered the request, knowing he had nothing exactly like what Vaughn had asked for, but trying to think of any other holosuite programs that might satisfy the commanders needs. Im afraid I dont have that, Quark said hurriedly, but I do have several other twentieth-century Earth programs Paris, New York, Las Vegas thats an amazing program

Thank you, no, Vaughn said, interrupting Quarks list. I didnt think youd have what I was looking for, but I thought I would ask, just to be sure.

Im sorry, Commander, Quark said. I could look for something like that for you, though special-order it.

Perhaps when I get back from the Gamma Quadrant.

Believe me, Quark told him, I could use the business.

So I see, Vaughn said, turning and surveying the empty bar.

Quark took the moment to look over at Ro. Her eyes were cast downward, at the surface of the bar. She seemed uncomfortable.

When Vaughn turned around toward the bar again, Quark looked back up at him. The station has quieted down considerably since the Europani departed, Vaughn offered.

The Europani, Quark agreed, and the crews of the ships taking them back to their planet.

Of course, Vaughn said. Well, I hope business improves for you. Thank you for this. He indicated the bottle, then looked to Ro. Good night, Lieutenant.

Commander, Ro said, looking up and smiling, though it appeared to Quark like a professional smile and not a personal one.

Quark watched as Vaughn exited the bar. When the commander had gone, Quark turned his attention back to Ro. You were awfully quiet, he said, trying to achieve a tone of nonchalance. He flipped the lid closed on the box of isolinear rods.

Yeah, she said. Actually, I like Commander Vaughn. Its just that well, I guess you were right Im not really the Starfleet type.

Take it from me, Quark told her, thats not the worst thing in the universe. He bent and returned the box of holosuite programs to its place beneath the bar.

Maybe not, she said, seeming suddenly pensive. She was quiet for a few seconds, and then said, May I ask you a question, Quark?

The answer is yes, he told her immediately. In a heartbeat, another smile blossomed on her face.

You havent even heard the question yet, she said.

Quark leaned on the bar and looked into Ros eyes. I trust you, he said.

Ro chuckled warmly, and Quark felt a chill run through his lobes. No sound had affected him like that in a long time, not even the delicious chink of latinum. Ro held his gaze a moment longer, then asked, Are you really ruined? He could not tell whether that was the question she had initially intended to ask him. Well, ruined might be putting it a little strongly, he admitted, pushing away from the bar. But business has been mostly slow since the end of the war. Having the Europani and the convoy crews on the station helped, but profits dipped while I was away at Farius Prime.

Sorry about that, Ro said. She had been the one who had secured his cooperation in the whole Iconian gateways mess, through a mixture of cajolery and coercion, though he liked to think that he would have gone along anyway, simply as a favor to her. Well, maybe not that sorry, she said, her tone light. There was that nasty bit of business on Cardassia.

Yes, well, if you want to include my financial reversals there, he said, playing along with her teasing, then business is really in decline. All of which was both true and troubling, Quark knew, but somehow it did not seem like such a bad thing to joke about it right now. And that doesnt even take into account the generous contract I gave Treir.

Generous? Ro asked. She lifted the snifter and sipped once more at the brandy.

You wouldnt believe it if I told you.

Maybe not, she said. Actually, I thought she was working out. Ro looked over her shoulder at the dabo table, and Quark followed her gaze. The Tellarite captain had not moved, but Treir had sat down and was now leaning her head against her hand, her elbow propped up on the table.

Well, I have to admit that her presence in the bar has turned some heads and brought in some customers, Quark said. The freighter crews loved her. Of course, that was up until two days ago, when there were still people other than Starfleet types on the station.

Personally, I like the lull, Ro said. Its allowed me the first real free time Ive had since Ive been here.

Quark grunted his disagreement. When its quiet, business suffers. And when business suffers, Im not happy.

Oh, I dont know about that, Quark, Ro said. If not for the quiet, I might not have come in here.

Quark could not be certain he had never been terribly good at judging these things but he thought he might not be the only one flirting now. He started to respond, but then he heard something. He turned from Ro and looked off into the middle distance, concentrating and trying to identify the sound.

Whats wrong? Ro asked.

Nothing, Quark said. I hear a group of people a large group of people heading this way.

I dont hear anything, she said. Are you sure? By way of an answer, Quark looked back at her and tugged at one of his ears. They waited for a few seconds, and then Quark saw that Ro could hear it too.

The voices increased in volume as they drew closer, with laughter and yelling mixed in. A moment later, Morn wandered into the bar at the head of a boisterous throng. The bald Lurian strode directly over to his usual seat, plopped himself down, and looked around for somebody to serve him. Several of Morns companions joined him at the bar, while the bulk of the crowd scattered to various locations including, Quark was pleased to see, the dabo table. Treir had risen from her seat, he saw, and now stood in a sultry pose next to the dabo wheel. Remarkably, the Tellarite captain had been removed to a nearby table, where she sat groggily back in a chair, apparently trying to shake off her night of hard drinking. The noise level in the bar had, in a matter of a few seconds, escalated dramatically. Quark and Ro looked at each other in amazement.

That must have been some poetry reading, Quark finally said, raising his voice to be heard.

I guess so, Ro said, also raising her voice.

Quark scanned the room for Frool and Grimp, got their attention, and pointed where he wanted them to go. I should never have let Broik leave for the night, he said to himself. Then, to Ro, he said, Excuse me for a minute. He started toward the other end of the bar to serve Morn, but stopped when Ro called after him.

Good night, Quark, she said, standing from her barstool.

No, youre not leaving, he said, hoping that he could wait on his customers and then return to his conversation with her.

Like I said, she told him, I liked the lull.

Quark thought about what he could possibly say to convince her to stay, but he could see her discomfort with the raucous crowd, so he simply said, Good night, Laren.

Thanks for the brandy, she said, gesturing back at the nearly empty snifter as she began walking toward the door. She stopped, came back to the bar, and leaned across it, obviously wanting to say something to Quark without anybody else hearing it. He leaned over the bar, putting his ear up close to her lips. Put it on my tab, she whispered.

Quark turned and smiled at her. Beautiful and considerate, he thought; she must have realized that he extended lines of credit to very few of his customers, and that he wanted as few people as possible to know that he did so at all.

Thanks again, she said.

Anytime. He stood motionless behind the bar and watched her leave. When she had gone, he said it again Anytime. Then he turned and paced down to the other end of the bar.

Okay, Morn, he said, which one of your usuals will it be? But even amid the call of profits, he was still thinking about Ro Laren.

12

Akaar exited the turbolift ducking his head out of long-standing habit and stepped into the dimly lighted corridor. Capellans as a rule possessed keen eyesight, slightly sharper than that of humans, but he found it did him little good aboard this station. With such a low level of afternoon illumination, he wondered how much darker it became here at night. He imagined wandering around in complete blackness, tripping over raised doorsills, banging his head on low transoms, and ending up hopelessly lost in this dreadful Cardassian labyrinth.

Akaar peered both ways down the corridor. He had consulted a station directory and diagram prior to heading down here, but now he could not recall which way he needed to go. He spied what seemed to be a companel in the bulkhead opposite the turbolift, and he walked over and tapped its reflective surface. The panel came to life, a Cardassian shatterframe display appearing on it, accompanied by a short series of electronic tones. Akaar studied the unbalanced, asymmetric polygons arranged around the central, circular viewing area, and decided that the stations crew Starfleet and Bajoran personnel alike merited commendations simply for serving in this inhospitable setting.

Computer, he said, direct to me Commander Vaughn's quarters. His voice echoed faintly in the empty corridor. The panel hummed briefly, but did nothing more. Akaar waited for a moment, then reached up and tentatively touched the screen again. Another series of tones sounded, and then the computer addressed him.

State request. It surprised Akaar that the voice was not male, and even more so that it was not entirely unfriendly.

Computer, he repeated, his fingers still pressed against the panel, direct me to Commander Vaughn's quarters.

Restate request.

Akaar sighed. Attempting a different approach, he said, Computer, locate Commander Vaughn. Commander Vaughn is in his quarters.

Computer, where are Commander Vaughn's quarters? he asked, and the computer dutifully recited the level, section, and cabin numbers that Akaar had already ascertained from the station directory.

Computer, how do I get there from my present location?

Restate request.

Akaar dropped his head, then sighed a second time. Clearly, his assessment of the computer as not unfriendly had been premature. He dropped his hand from the companel, which blinked off after a couple of seconds. He looked both ways down the corridor again, then arbitrarily set off to the left. He passed two doors on one side of the corridor and two on the other, determining from the increasing numbers on the accompanying wall plates that he was headed in the right direction. At the next door, though, the

number unpredictably decreased. He stopped in his tracks, thinking that perhaps abandoning Deep Space 9, ne Terok Nor, to the Bajorans, and thus to the Federation, had actually been part of an insidious Cardassian plot to sow madness through the galaxy.

He decided to walk as far as the next turbolift. If he had not located Vaughns quarters by that point, then he would contact ops and ask for assistance, embarrassing as that would be. A fleet admiral, decades in space, with tens of thousands of light-years behind me, he thought, and I cant even locate a cabin on a space station. He laughed quietly to himself, and then thought that perhaps this had not been the Cardassians doing after all, but Vaughns; it would have been just like Elias to find some means of concealing the location of his quarters.

Akaar started down the corridor again, fully prepared to admit defeat. The next door he came to was Vaughns. He laughed again, although this time with less humor; he realized that he had been entertaining a hope that he would not find Vaughn, and that he would not have to tell his old friend what he had done. A fools daydream, Akaar told himself, and then he touched the access panel. A moment later, the door glided open. He lifted his feet over the sill and bowed his head beneath the upper doorframe, feeling as though he had to fold himself up in order to move around this station. Not that Gryphon or Defiant or any other Starfleet vessels are much better, he thought. He looked forward to the day when Capella would construct its own space stations and its own starships, with doorways and chairs and beds that would comfortably accommodate larger people.

Akaar glanced around as he entered the room. The layout and furnishings seemed standard a sitting area, a dining table and chairs, replicator, companel, a closed door on the far side of the room that doubtless led into a bedroom. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary or even noteworthy; anybody could have lived here. These could even be guest quarters, Akaar thought, except that even lodging for a guest typically contained some sort of adornments. Here, there was nothing, though he supposed the absence did not stand out unless you looked for it. The walls featured no paintings or other artwork, and no books or pictures or other personal items sat on any of the tables. Akaar knew that Vaughn had only been on the station for a couple of months so far, and that he always traveled with few belongings, meaning that he had probably arrived here with very little. And perhaps he had not even decided whether he would remain on Deep Space 9 for the long term. Or perhaps, Akaar thought, these quarters are just the way Elias wants them.

Vaughn himself stood on the opposite side of the room, in front of a wide, eye-shaped window. Dressed in his uniform, he looked no different from the way he had the last time Akaar had seen him. Of course, through all the years Akaar had known him, Vaughns appearance had never seemed to change much. Did you travel halfway across the quadrant to inspect my quarters, Admiral, Vaughn said from the window, or are you going to greet me with an open heart and hand?

Elias, Akaar said, striding farther into the room. Vaughn walked over from the window, and when they met, Akaar extended a hand to him. Vaughn did the same, and they wrapped their hands around each others forearms.

L.J., its good to see you, Vaughn said.

And you, Akaar responded. Although I am never certain where I will find you next. Throughout their careers in Starfleet, Akaar had unexpectedly encountered Vaughn on a number of occasions, in a number of locales. Before coming to Bajor, though, Akaar had been aware of Vaughns presence on DS9; all of the admiralty knew of his transfer here, though not all of them supported the move.

I do make my way around, Vaughn agreed. He released his grip on Akaars arm, and Akaar did the same. Vaughn then walked past him and over to the sofa. Please, have a seat.

I have been seated for days, Akaar told him. He followed Vaughn over to the sitting area, but the two remained standing.

The Bajorans? Vaughn asked.

During the weeks of meetings we had with them, yes, Akaar said, but during the past few days, it has been the Europani. When you have hundreds of crew and thousands of passengers aboard an Akira-class starship, there is not much you can do but stay in your quarters. Over the past four days, Akaar had made numerous trips between Bajor and Europa Nova aboard Gryphon, part of a sizable convoy

ferrying the Europani back to their newly decontaminated world.

Just be grateful Europani aren't the size of Capellans, Vaughn joked. You would've had to sleep on the outside of the hull. Akaar laughed as Vaughn walked over toward the dining area. If you won't sit, L.J., can I at least get you something to drink or eat?

Considering the friendly nature of this station, Akaar said with measured sarcasm, I am afraid to see what may emerge from a Cardassian replicator. Again he followed Vaughn across the room.

Vaughn circled around the dining table and stepped up to the replicator. Deep Space 9's not unfriendly, he said. It's got character.

As does a black hole, Akaar said, but I would not want to spend any time in one.

Vaughn gestured at the replicator. So what would you like? It's only seventeen-thirty, but are you in the mood for an early dinner?

I have not had a meal since early this morning, so I am hungry, Akaar said. I do not suppose any Capellan foods are programmed into the replicators here. I have been craving some koltari stew lately. Let's see, Vaughn said, and ordered the dish. Akaar was not surprised when the computer asked him to furnish parameters for it. Vaughn shrugged, then inquired about any Capellan foods at all; none were available. Sorry, Vaughn said. I've done a bit of tinkering since I've been here, though, and I've managed to introduce a few new meals, and improve some others. There's a better-than-fair approximation of that dinner we had on Earth, in Rome, back during the last Tholian visit. Akaar did not recall the meal to which Vaughn referred, though he certainly remembered the calamity with the Tholians, but he trusted his old friend's memory and intentions. Vaughn ordered a family-style serving of pasta fagioli, which did not sound familiar to Akaar, although he thought he recognized the preparation of extra garlic.

The food materialized on the replicator pad in a wide, deep bowl, quickly filling the room with a delicious redolence. All at once, the memory of the dinner Akaar had shared with Vaughn in Rome rushed vividly back to him. For this, Akaar said, I will sit down. His mouth already watering, he took a seat at the table, thinking that the full aroma of the food was reminiscent of the pungent meals traditionally prepared on Capella. Knowing Vaughn as he did, Akaar was sure that the selection had not been coincidental.

Vaughn set the bowl in the center of the dining table, and then from a compartment beside the replicator, he retrieved bowls, utensils, and linens, which he laid out for the two of them. Then he pulled out a squat, dark-green bottle from a second compartment. Something to drink? he asked, holding the bottle out for Akaar to see. He recognized it at once as grosz, a Capellan liquor.

Where did you manage to find this? Akaar asked, reaching out and taking the offered bottle. Thinking that he had not partaken of grosz in quite some time, he examined the label, then had to look at it a second time to be sure of what he had seen. This is from my home territory, he said, hearing a mixture of astonishment and delight in his own voice.

When I learned you'd be spending some time on the station, Vaughn explained, I asked the barkeeper on the Promenade to try to track some down for me. Turns out that he's got some interesting connections and is quite resourceful.

Evidently, Akaar said, mindful of the fact that Vaughn had just revealed the existence of his own interesting connections and his own resourcefulness. Vaughn had not been on the station three and a half weeks ago, when Akaar had visited briefly with Colonel Kira, but the colonel had surely informed Vaughn of it when he had come back. Few people outside Starfleet Command and the Federation Council were aware, though, that Akaar would be returning to Deep Space 9 and staying for an extended period. Akaar chose not to inquire about the source of Vaughn's information, both respecting his friend's privacy and understanding the futility of asking such questions of him.

Vaughn produced two glasses while Akaar removed the wire cage around the mouth of the bottle. He pulled the cork free and then poured out the clear liquid, tinged lightly purple. He waited until Vaughn sat, then held up his glass in a salute. Vaughn raised his own glass. To old friends, Akaar offered.

And getting older all the time, Vaughn added.

Akaar nodded, aware that Vaughn, eight years his junior, had passed the century mark himself more than a year ago. He pushed his glass forward, tapped it against Vaughn's, and drank. The grosz flowed down his throat with a heady warmth, and a sharp, challenging taste even better than he remembered. He let

out an appreciative sigh. Thank you, my friend, he said.

My pleasure, Vaughn told him. Welcome to Deep Space 9.

Akaar picked up a ladle and served himself from the bowl of hearty soup. You make me feel welcome, but the rest of the station As his voice trailed off, he recalled the difficulties he had encountered on the way here. Can you explain the numbering scheme of the quarters on this level?

Im not sure that I understand it myself, Vaughn said. But I think it may have had something to do with Gul Dukats twisted notion of security.

Make it impossible for his crew to find their own quarters? Akaar asked rhetorically. He finished serving himself and passed the ladle over to Vaughn. Very clever, he added derisively. The mention of Dukat reminded Akaar of another Cardassian Dukats cousin, Macet. He asked Vaughn his opinion of the gul. Vaughn did not answer immediately, but appeared to consider the question as he put food in his bowl. Finally, after setting the ladle down, he said, Macets intentions seem genuine to me, but regardless of his intentions, his assistance has been invaluable. Without the use of his vessel during the evacuation of Europa Nova, we would have lost a lot of people.

I am sure you are aware that he also helped return the Europani to their planet during the past few days, Akaar said, and Vaughn nodded his agreement. Without Trager, we would still be shuttling between Bajor and Europa Nova. Akaar took his first spoonful of the soup and found that it tasted as good as it smelled. This is excellent, Elias.

One of my favorites, Vaughn said, starting on his own meal.

I invited Macet to Deep Space 9 after we finished the resettlement, Akaar said, but he declined.

Weve performed repairs on his ship at DS9 twice now, Vaughn said, and on both occasions, I asked him to come aboard the station. Neither time did he or any of his crew leave Trager.

I suppose that is understandable, Akaar said, knowing that Gul Dukat had caused the people of the stationall of Bajor, in facta great deal of horror and suffering. I wonder what sort of a reception Macet would receive on Deep Space 9.

Mixed at best, Vaughn said between mouthfuls of food. Im sure not everybody shares my opinion of his aims.

What about Kira? Akaar possessed a great curiosity about the colonel, one not sated by his single conversation with her. Knowing what she might soon be faced with, he hoped to learn what he could expect from her.

I cant speak for Colonel Kira, of course, Vaughn said, but I believe she is cautious about Macet.

Cautious, Akaar asked, or suspicious?

Probably both, Vaughn allowed. But I think its worth noting that when the Europani required assistance, she put aside any negative feelings for the greater good.

Akaar said nothing for a moment, considering this information as he ate. Then he asked, What do you think of her, Elias?

I like her, Vaughn said simply.

That is not what I am asking, and you know it.

Shes strong, decisive, loyal, solid under pressure, Vaughn expounded, not hesitating to provide his opinions. Not always as diplomatic as a commanding officer might reasonably be expected to be, but I actually find that refreshing. Vaughn paused, apparently thinking about how else he could characterize the colonel. Passionate, he finally said. Quick to temper sometimes, but she also seems to be committed to enjoying her life. I havent known her long obviously, butyou read her report of the time she spentor thought she spentin Bajors past?

Yes, Akaar said.

I think that experience has had a profound affect on her, Vaughn said. Shes young to be in such a position of authority, particularly for somebody with no formal military or command training. Even so, I feel privileged to be serving under her. There are things Starfleet could stand to learn from Colonel Kira. Akaar found himself surprised at Vaughns strong assessment of Kira, considering how short a time he had served with her. What about her feelings about the Cardassians?

Passionate, Vaughn repeated.

What exactly does that mean? Akaar wanted to know.

Vaughn reached out, picked up his glass of grosz, and took a healthy swallow. I don't know her well enough to know what goes on inside of her. But I do know that she's led a complicated and difficult life. You know what the Cardassians did not only to her people and their way of life, but to Kira personally, and to her family. She lived the first twenty-six years of her life not knowing a day of freedom from oppression, and she's spent a good part of the past eight years fighting to prevent that from happening again. Vaughn drank again, then lowered his glass back onto the table. All of that, and yet she fought beside the Cardassian resistance during the war, and her first action when faced with Macet was to accept his help. And since the war, she's been generally supportive of the relief efforts to Cardassia. Akaar listened to Vaughn's comments attentively. He would still make his own judgments about Kira, but he appreciated the benefit of knowing Vaughn's mind about the colonel. Even when Vaughn was wrong, Akaar knew, his evaluations still often managed to provide valuable insights.

Over dinner, the conversation crossed many subjects. Vaughn asked about Councillor zhThane, a mutual acquaintance, who had accompanied Akaar first to Bajor, then to Europa Nova, and finally, today, back here to Deep Space 9. And Akaar wanted to hear Vaughn's account of what had gone wrong at Torona IV. Since Defiant's nearly disastrous encounter there, diplomatic relations between the Federation and the Jarada had completely broken down. Vaughn seemed pleased to learn from Akaar that the Federation Council was content, at least for now, to let the relationship between the two governments fester; the council considered it simply too difficult right now to deal with the xenophobic, isolationist Jarada, an opinion also shared by Starfleet Command. And although the admiralty continued to consider Torona IV strategically important, Akaar explained, they were also confident that no other Alpha Quadrant power would be able to cultivate an alliance with the troublesome Jarada.

As the afternoon blended into the evening, and as the dinner and their conversation progressed, a feeling of discomfort began to overtake Akaar. In any circumstances, his presence on Deep Space 9 would have seen him visit with his old friend, but knowing that he had come to Vaughn's quarters with an additional purpose made him uneasy. Although Akaar had been careful to maintain his usual phlegmatic manner, he thought that Vaughn might have picked up on his anxiety once or twice.

After the meal, Akaar and Vaughn repaired to the sitting area, where they sat across from each other and emptied the bottle of grosz. No phaser practice for us tonight, Vaughn said with a smile.

I believe you have already stunned me, Akaar said, holding up his glass. Then, knowing that he could put it off no longer, he asked, How is Prynne?

Vaughn's expression did not change, nor did he delay in responding, which Akaar interpreted as indications that he had indeed been expecting the subject of his daughter to arise. She's well, he said. I've followed her service record, Akaar said. Her evaluations aboard Mjolnir and Sentinel were quite good. She is considered an exceptional conn officer.

A bit intense, Vaughn quoted one of Prynne's previous captains, a judgment of which Akaar was aware. But she's young, Vaughn explained with a shrug.

She was not always that way, Akaar said as gently as he could. Vaughn leaned forward and placed his glass on the low table at the center of the sitting area. Only a few sips of grosz remained, Akaar saw. Vaughn rested his elbows on his knees and stared over at him, and Akaar suspected that his old friend knew where the conversation was headed.

Do you have something to say, L.J.? Vaughn asked.

Elias, do you think it wise to have Prynne on Defiant for your mission to the Gamma Quadrant? Akaar asked. He attempted to avoid being either overly nonchalant or too intense with the question. If any chance existed of leading Vaughn to the proper course of action here, it would require a careful effort. Vaughn continued peering at Akaar. You said it yourself she's an excellent conn officer.

And you said, a bit intense, Akaar countered.

She deserves an opportunity at alpha shift, Vaughn said, ignoring Akaar's comment. And right now, Defiant can use her.

Akaar finished his grosz and deposited his glass on the table beside Vaughn's. A purple-tinted drop slid down the inside of the glass. There are reasons that Starfleet discourages family members from serving

together, he said.

We send entire families out on starships these days, Vaughn argued.

Not the captains family, and certainly not when some of them are officers in the crew, Akaar said, his voice rising as he struggled to make Vaughn see the folly and the danger of having his daughter serving aboard his ship. You should know that better than most.

Vaughn flew up onto his feet as though he had been launched from the sofa. He strode away from the sitting area and across the room, over to the window. He stood there for a moment, then leaned on the sill and looked out into space. He said nothing.

Having Prynn on your bridge is irresponsible and dangerous, Akaar said, refusing to back down, although it pained him to have to deal with Vaughn about this. Especially if her intensity especially if she still blames you for what happened to her mother.

L.J., Vaughn said, still gazing out the window.

Im sorry, Elias, but Ive taken steps to have Prynn reassigned.

Vaughn whirled around. What?

Akaar rose and regarded Vaughn across the room. He hated having to do this, but he knew that it was the right thing. He only hoped that Vaughn would be able to see that too.

Dont do this, Vaughn said, seething, his words wrapped in a concentration of anger Akaar had rarely, if ever, seen in his old friend.

Captain Mello has agreed to take Prynn aboard Gryphon, Akaar said, and she will reassign her alpha-shift conn officer to Deep Space 9 so that you can have him for the mission to the Gamma Quadrant.

Dont do this, Vaughn said again. Please.

Akaar walked over to Vaughn, hoping to close more than just the physical distance between them. He looked into Vaughns eyes, expecting to see anger, but instead saw only anguish. No, Akaar thought. Not just anguish. There was also something he had never before seen in Vaughn fear. This is the right thing, Akaar went on. I think you know that.

I know what youre saying, Vaughn admitted. Do you believe I havent thought through all of this? I have. He turned away again and peered out the window. Ive fought with myself over and over, made the same arguments that youre making. Ive thought about reassigning her Ive thought about transferring myself.

But you transferred here to try to mend things with Prynn in the first place, Akaar said.

Vaughn turned from the window. No, thats not the case. I mean, I knew she was here, but something else motivated me to stop what I was doing, to change my direction

Something else?

Slowly, Vaughn divulged a strange and unsettling tale about an encounter he had experienced with one of the Bajorans Orbs of the Prophets. From anybody else, Akaar would have considered the story either a fabrication or a delusion. But not from Vaughn. Still

I have never known you to trust in mysticism, Akaar said.

No, youre right, Vaughn said. And I dont know if thats what this was. Maybe, maybe not. Ive been thinking of it as a personal epiphany. But not about Prynn; about me. I want to explore.

Then explore, Akaar told him. But do not bring Prynn with you.

Vaughn paused and looked down. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts gathering himself and Akaar could not recall ever having seen Vaughn in such a desperate state. When he looked back up and spoke, his voice grew low and beseeching. This may be my last opportunity to reconnect with my daughter.

Things have been improving; weve been working well together the last few weeks. L.J., you know what it was like to grow up without your father.

Imagine if you had also not had your mother.

The personal nature of Vaughns appeal startled Akaar. A spill of emotion washed over him suddenly, bringing with it his long-simmering melancholy about never having known his father, and the fear he always felt when he thought about how close his mother had come more than once to losing her life during his infancy and childhood.

Why would Prynn still be on DS9, and ready to pilot Defiant, Vaughn asked, if some part of her didnt

want to reconcile with me?

She loves her job, Akaar said, recognizing the weakness of his argument, and that the direction of the conversation had changed.

She loves her job more than she hates her father, Vaughn agreed. And that's a start.

Akaar gazed at Vaughn, and he felt his resolve slipping away. Finally, Akaar dropped his head. All right, he said, and hoped he would not regret the decision.

Thank you, Vaughn said, his voice thick with gratitude and relief.

I have to inform Captain Mello, Akaar said. He turned away from Vaughn and headed for the door.

Thank you for dinner, and for the grosz.

L.J., Vaughn called, and Akaar stopped and turned back to his friend. If you're concerned that I'll somehow jeopardize the crew because Prynne is on the ship, I can promise you, that won't happen.

I know that, Akaar said. But sometimes it becomes necessary for a commanding officer to make difficult decisions even to make sacrifices. And I know that you will do what is best for your crew.

Thank you for that, Vaughn said.

Do not thank me, Akaar told him. That is what concerns me that you will do the right thing for your crew, even if it is the wrong thing for you and Prynne. I am not worried about your crew, Elias; I am worried about you and your daughter.

Vaughn said nothing. Akaar held his gaze for a moment, then turned toward the door, which opened before him. He left Vaughn's quarters, not knowing whether he had just done his old friend a favor, or consigned him to a terrible fate.

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The sun shined down on the mountains and glinted off the distant ribbon of the river. The vibrant colors of the autumn—the green of the grass, the reds and oranges of the leaves falling from the trees—had deserted the landscape now, overtaken by the muted hues of winter—the yellow of the dead grass, the brown of the barren trees. Kasidy Yates gazed out from the porch at the vista before her and knew that another change was coming; snow had been forecast here for later in the month, and soon all would be dusted white. Already, in the past week, some of the higher peaks had been frosted.

Kasidy reached up and grabbed the edging of the deep-blue shawl draped across her shoulders, pulling it closed about her. The weather had grown warmer today than it had in weeks, in part because the winds had died down, but a chill continued to blanket the land. Kasidy breathed in deeply, enjoying the crisp freshness of the air, though she missed the rich, sweet scent of the moba fruit that grew on this land in summer.

Now, come on, she told herself. You've only been living here a couple of months. But she had visited here in the summer, when the moba fruit had ripened and hung down from the trees in succulent, violet globes. The aroma had captured her senses back then, and now she looked forward to next summer, when she would live in the midst of that splendid bouquet with

Kasidy stopped the thought before completing it, not ready to think again about who would be with her in the future, because that also meant thinking about who was not here now. Instead, she opened the shawl and peeked down at the swell of her belly beneath her sweater. A smile came instantly to her lips as she ran a hand over the bulge in her flesh, in her body, that still seemed so strange to her, but that by next summer would be her son or daughter.

Kasidy walked the length of the porch to its western end, where sunlight streaked past the overhang and illuminated a patch of the wooden planking. She reached out from beneath the shawl to grab the arm of one of the two rockers, and pulled it over into the sun. She sat down without too much effort, although such maneuvering became more troublesome for her each day; she could only imagine the level of difficulty her final trimester would bring.

A cloud scudded by overhead, sending a shadow sweeping across the land toward the house. Kasidy wrapped the shawl tightly around herself, and when the cloud had passed, she tilted her face up and let the comforting rays of the Bajoran sun warm her. She closed her eyes, and this time she could not keep

herself from thinking about Ben; she never could, not for long. He had loved this place, had looked forward to witnessing the change of seasons, and now she lived here, wishing every time she closed her eyes that, when she opened them, he would be here too. One day, she believed, that would be true. One day, she would open her eyes, or come around a corner of the house, or look out past one of the moba trees, and there he would be, smiling so wide, with the love he felt for her reflected in his eyes. And he would come to her, and then this house, this land, would truly be theirs.

She lowered her head and opened her eyes. Ben was not there. That was hard, but somehow, it was also all right, at least for now. There might come a time, she knew, when she would not be able to hold on to her hope, and on to that last, evanescent connection she had experienced or thought she had experienced with Ben almost half a year ago. For now, though, she remained content, even amid the despondency and the emptiness, to believe that she had communicated with him in whatever realm he had ascended to, and that what he had told her what he had promised her would eventually come to pass. In all the time she had been together with Ben, Kasidy had never really understood the Bajoran religion, not in any deep and emotional way. She supposed the conceit of her own beliefs the conceit of almost anybody with religious beliefs prevented such understanding. Well-defined theological convictions did not admit contrary viewpoints, for even the consideration of alternate possibilities ran contrary to the notion of faith. Lately, she had begun to wonder if she should or even could find her way out of such a self-limiting perspective.

As for Ben, she had never understood how he had done what he had done. He had never been an impractical man, and yet somehow, over time, he had allowed himself to be made an icon of an alien spirituality. She knew that he had come to have a deep and abiding love for the Bajoran people, and that he had actually conversed with their gods, but she could not imagine taking on such an enormous responsibility. It was one of her concerns about being here on Bajor, where her relationship with Ben threatened to make her something of a minor figure in their religion herself.

A low sound drew Kasidy's attention away from her thoughts. She looked around and listened for it again, but heard only the lyrical trickle of the creek that ran through the property. She peered into the distance, where the sun bathed the Kendra Mountains golden and sent shimmers along the winding form of the Yolja River. Farther north, though, she saw thunderheads moving down the valley, darkening the ground beneath as they sailed in this direction. A jagged streak of lightning flashed from the sky to the ground, out beyond the nearby town of Adarak, and the thick, cottony rumble of faraway thunder threatened again.

In a few minutes, the wind picked up, pushing its way through the skeletal moba trees, and carrying with it the electric smell of the oncoming storm. Kasidy huddled tighter beneath her shawl, knowing she would have to head inside soon. Its just as well, she thought. I have to finish that letter to Joseph Movement caught Kasidy's eye, past the trees, and she looked off to the right, down the unpaved road that led from Adarak. A lone figure was walking in this direction, she saw. Her heart seemed to jump in her chest, the thought of Ben still fresh in her mind. She tsked at her silliness; she could not yet tell the identity of the figure, but the light complexion eliminated Ben as even a remote possibility.

Or Jake, she thought, sadness buffeting her like the cold wind. It had been weeks months, she amended since anybody had seen Jake; she had not heard from him since she had moved to Bajor. She missed that bright young man for so many reasons. She had known and liked Jake longer even than she had known Ben, and the two had been friends from the day they had met. And after Ben had vanished, she had found solace in sharing her grief with Jake, and in being able to see so much of his father in him. When she had learned that Jake was missing, sorrow had overwhelmed her and taken her to the brink of despair; only the life forming within her had brought her back and allowed her to look forward again. Kasidy stood from the chair and walked to the other side of the porch, nearest the road. Who can this be? she wondered. When she had first relocated to Bajor, she had received scores of visitors, well-meaning locals and others too, from all over the planet wanting to do whatever they could to help the wife of the Emissary. Kasidy had not wanted to insult anybody, out of her own sense of politeness, but also because of Ben's love for these earnest people. As the days had passed, though, Kasidy had begun to speak privately with some of her visitors from Adarak, and she had let them know that while she

appreciated the assistance and the good wishes, she also sought a measure of solitude. To her surprise, the people of the town had understood, and now they not only left her to herself for the most part, anyway but also exercised a protectiveness of her, keeping uninvited guests away as best they could. They monitored the local transporter, and kept the roads and skies clear of unauthorized traffic. Kasidy still received messages on her companel, as well as an occasional visitor, but the person she saw most these days was Itamis Nath, the local postmaster; while mail almost always arrived in her delivery box via transporter, he sometimes would come out himself just to check on her, she was sure.

The figure coming down the road waved, and Kasidy pulled a hand from beneath her shawl and waved back, though she still could not identify the person. Not Nath, she could see that, and not anybody she knew from town. Maybe a stranger, she thought, absently biting her lower lip. She hoped she would not be faced with another of the Bajoran faithful; she suddenly found herself not in the mood for a guest, particularly not for one wanting to worship her missing husband or her unborn child. Whoever the caller, they wore a wide hat, she saw now, and did not seem to be that tall

Nog, Kasidy finally recognized. She smiled, realizing that what she had mistaken for a hat was actually his ears. She wondered why he had come all the way to Bajor unannounced, and why he had walked out to the house rather than using the transporter in Adarak. She had known Nog for as long as she had known Jake; the two young men still considered themselves best friends and she had actually gotten to know him well in the weeks and months after Ben's disappearance; Ben had helped Nog become the first Ferengi in Starfleet, and Nog had regarded Ben with appreciation and respect. After Jake had also gone missing, Nog had contacted her at least once a day, ostensibly to update her on the hunt for Jake, but the two had continued talking daily even after the search efforts had slowed. They had subsequently become good friends. Like the locals here, he had also become protective of her. He had even modified one of the escape pods from Xhosa for her, so that she could keep it behind the house in case of emergencies; with her being pregnant, he had not wanted her to have to walk half an hour into town if the local transporter went down for maintenance or for some other reason.

She watched Nog as he walked up the dirt road toward the house, and she revised her earlier feeling about not wanting guests; she was pleased to see him. She had intended to contact him on Deep Space 9 this afternoon, after she had finished her letter to Joseph. She wondered again why he had come all this way without letting her know first

And suddenly Kasidy understood the reason for Nogs visit. They found Jakes body, she thought, something Nog would have wanted to tell her, not by subspace, but in person. No, she thought. No, not again. She stepped off the porch, intending to run to meet Nog.

But what about Nerys? Kasidy had also become good friends with Kira Nerys in the last few months, and she could not imagine the colonel not shouldering the burden of delivering such terrible news. Maybe you should just wait till he gets here, she said, chiding herself for leaping to such an awful conclusion. Still, as she waited, she could not shake off the feeling of dread that had descended upon her. Even before Nog reached the house, though, she felt herself relax. The Ferengi wore a wide, toothy smile as he approached, an indication that he was not delivering bad news to her although he might be delivering something; she saw that a small box dangled from one of his hands, his fingers tucked beneath a string wrapped around it. When he got within earshot actually, with his ears, he had probably been within earshot for quite some time, she thought, amused at herself she called to him. Hi, Nog.

He waved again with his free hand, and when he finally turned off the road and up the path to the house, he said, Hi. He was not in uniform, but clad in comfortable-looking blue pants and a green sweatshirt, underneath a light jacket. He lifted the box as he walked up, offering it to her. Here, I brought you some Argelian teacakes. I know how much you like them.

Why, thank you, Nog, she said, touched by his thoughtfulness. As she reached out and took the box from him, she asked, Where did you get them? I usually couldn't get any on the station.

They're from Uncle Quark, he said.

Really? Kasidy asked, slightly embarrassed by the obvious skepticism in her voice. Quark had always treated her well enough, particularly after she had become involved with Ben, but such a considerate act was hardly characteristic of Quark's dealings with her or of his dealings with anybody else, as far as she

could tell.

He doesn't know, Nog admitted. He wasn't in the bar when I left the station. Treirs running the morning hours.

Treir? Kasidy asked. The name did not sound familiar to her.

Uncle's new dabo girl, Nog explained. Although I get the feeling she thinks she's his business partner. Anyway, she let me take them.

So you stole them? Kasidy teased. That's not very Starfleet of you.

Don't worry. When I tell Uncle they were for the Emissary's wife, Nog said, he'll thank me for cultivating good relations with the Bajorans.

And then post an account of his good deed to the Bajoran comnet, she said with a laugh. Come on in the house. She stepped back up onto the porch and started toward the door.

I forgot what time of year it was down here, Nog said. His shoes clogged along the porch behind her. My lobes are freezing.

Kasidy opened the door and went inside, Nog coming in after her. The front room, the largest in the house, spread away from the door in all directions. Kasidy spent most of her time these days here, either huddled around the fireplace or sitting at the picture windows that looked out on the scenic landscape. She liked the openness of the room, the great windows and the vaulted ceiling an inoculation against potential feelings of claustrophobia. She enjoyed reading books or recording letters in this space, often composing missives to Ben and lately, to Jakeso that, when they returned, she could easily share with them what they had missed, as well as how much she had missed them.

I'm sorry about your ears, Kasidy told Nog, but you should be all right in here. She had burned a fire earlier this morning, and the room still retained much of the warmth that had been generated. Why didn't you transport over? Kasidy asked, curious. For that matter, why didn't you let me know you were coming? She walked across the room, pulling the shawl from her shoulders and dropping it onto an easy chair. She stopped with the box of teacakes at the kitchen doorway, and turned back toward Nog.

I guess because I didn't even really know I was coming, he said. Not until I was on my way. He strolled over to his left, skirting around a sitting area and moving toward the stone hearth. I had the day off, and I realized that if I stayed around Deep Space 9, I'd end up working on the Defiant. I knew Commander Vaughn wouldn't like that, so I decided to get off the station. As he spoke, Nog looked at Ben's collection of African art from Earth that adorned the walls, and then along the mantel, at the framed photographs there Ben and Kasidy at their wedding, a portrait of Ben in his dress uniform, a montage of Jake at different ages, and others. His gaze did not linger on the photographs, Kasidy noticed she could not look at them herself without becoming wistful but quickly traveled upward. Above the mantelpiece hung a reproduction on parchment of a painting Ben had loved, and that Kasidy had come to appreciate herself, City of Bhala. Before I knew it, Nog went on, I was on a transport headed to Bajor. So then I thought I would come visit you. He turned and looked over at her from across the room. I hope it's all right.

Yes, of course, Kasidy said. But why didn't you transport out from Adarak?

I don't know, Nog said, looking nervously down at his feet. I guess I just felt like taking a walk. For the first time, Kasidy detected a note in Nog's voice that something might be wrong.

Well, I'm glad you came by, she said, opting not to question him about it, but to let him tell her in his own time, in his own way. She held up the box and said, I'm just going to put these on a plate. Can I get you something to drink? Maybe something warm?

That would be great, Nog said.

Kasidy thought about what she could serve Nog; her replicator had not been programmed with any Ferengi selections. You don't care for tea, do you? she asked him.

Not really, he said.

How about some hot chocolate? she tried.

If you have salt to go in it, Nog said. The notion of combining chocolate and salt did not appeal to Kasidy, but after leading a freighter crew comprising people from several different species, she had long ago ceased to be surprised by the various things people chose to eat.

I certainly do, she said. I'll be right back. She headed into the kitchen. While she removed the string from

around the box and set some of the teacakes out on a plate, Nog spoke to her from the front room. This place looks just like the model, he said.

The model, Kasidy noted, and not Captain Siskos model. She wondered if Nog had intentionally avoided using Bens name for her sake.

Thats right, you havent been here since we finished, she said, and felt momentarily awkward herself for having referred even indirectly to Jake, who had helped her during the early stages of the houses construction. Ill take you on a tour later. She pulled a tray out of the cupboard and placed the plate of teacakes on it. She got out two smaller plates and some linens, and then tracked down a saltshaker. Good thing I stocked the kitchen, she thought. She had done so because to do otherwise would have meant that this was not Bens house; he loved to cook.

I remember these windows from the model, Nog said. Theyre great.

Yes, thats one of the things about the place that I like best, she said. She activated the replicator Ben might have been a cook, but she was not and ordered a mug of hot chocolate for Nog and a cup of apple-cinnamon herbal tea for herself. She loaded the two drinks onto the tray and then carried the light repast out of the kitchen. Nog had crossed to the side of the room opposite the fireplace, she saw, and stood now at the windows, looking out at the view. He had taken his jacket off, which she saw hanging on the coatrack beside the front door. Here we go, she said. She set the tray down on a small table, between two chairs that faced the windows. Kasidy sat down, and Nog walked over and sat in the other chair.

So how are you feeling? he asked.

Good, she said. Its getting harder every day to move around normally, but overall, things are good. She took one of the small plates and put two of the teacakes on it.

Im glad to hear that, Nog said.

So whats this about Commander Vaughn not wanting you on the Defiant? she asked, recalling what Nog had said a few minutes ago.

No, its not that, he explained. He picked up the mug of hot chocolate in one hand and the saltshaker in the other. The crews been working so hard to get the ship ready to explore the Gamma Quadrant that he just wants to make sure were all well rested.

Sounds reasonable to me, she said.

Me too, Nog agreed, though none of the crew were too happy when we had to push the start of the mission back a day.

So when are you leaving? she asked, and suddenly felt an unexpected pang of loss, knowing that she would not see Nog again for another three months.

The day after tomorrow, he said.

She took a bite of a teacake, trying to distract herself from her emotions. Hmmm, these are terrific, Nog. Thank you for bringing them.

Youre welcome, he said, and sprinkled a liberal measure of salt into his mug. He drank deeply, licking his lips afterward. This is good too.

So are you looking forward to the mission? Kasidy asked.

Yeah, Nog said. Itll be nice to be on the Defiant without having to head into battle. He paused and looked down, his eyes focusing on the mug in his hands. He seemed distant all of a sudden, and Kasidy wondered if the thought of going into battle had been the cause. Nog had been traumatized by the loss of his leg during the war, she knew, and though he had been fitted with a perfectly functional biosynthetic replacement, it would not have surprised her to learn that he still sometimes suffered from the memory of the ordeal. She chose not to intrude into his silence, and finally, he looked up and said, Anything to get off the station right now.

Is there something wrong on DS9, Nog? she asked, concerned about the young man.

Its just the other day Again he looked away, clearly struggling to deal with something. No, not really, he said at last. I just want to get away.

Okay, she said, not wanting to add to his troubles by pressuring him to discuss them. If he wanted to talk with her about it, then she would let him find the way to do so.

I guess I wanted to say goodbye to you before I left, he said then, seeming to recover from whatever had occupied him. He shook more salt into his mug and took another hearty drink. Well be gone for three months.

I know, she said. You just make sure that you come back. She immediately regretted her words, knowing that it evoked the disappearances of Ben and Jake.

Ill be back, Nog promised, and Kasidy wondered how many such assurances she would hear in her life, and whether any of them would ever turn out to be justified. Nog set his mug back down on the tray rather deliberately, she thought and then locked his eyes with hers. I also wanted to tell you that Jakes coming back too.

What? The assertion shocked her, too much for her even to be happy about the claim. She put her own cup back down on the tray, a little too quickly, and tea spilled over the rim and onto her fingers. She ignored it. Nog, what do you mean?

I mean that I know Jake is all right, he said confidently. That hes alive and not hurt or anything.

How do you know that?

I dont know how I know, he admitted. I just do.

So you dont know, she said, trying to control the annoyance she felt and prevent it from growing into anger. She raised her hand to her lips and mechanically licked the drips of tea from them. You just believe hes okay.

Listen, Nog insisted, leaning toward her in his chair, people keep talking about Jake being missing or in trouble because he would never just leave the station and not tell anybody where he was going.

He did tell us, Kasidy pointed out. He said he was going to visit his grandfather on Earth.

Right, Nog said. But I dont think he was ever going there.

Why not? she asked. Did Jake say something to you?

No, no, he said. I would have told you I would have told everybody if he did. But before he left, I kind of got the feeling that maybe he wasnt going to Earth after all.

But why did you get that feeling? she wanted to know.

I dont remember, exactly, Nog said. But I do remember the feeling. It was the last time Jake and I talked before he left, and it seemed to me like he wasnt going to Earth, and that he was specifically trying not to tell me that.

But why wouldnt Jake tell you where he was going or what he was doing? she asked, of both Nog and herself. Why wouldnt he tell me?

I dont know, Nog said. But you know Jake. If he thought there was any chance he wasnt coming back, he wouldve said goodbye.

Yes, Kasidy agreed hesitantly. She looked away from Nog and toward the window, trying to make sense of what he was saying, wanting to make sense of it.

I dont know why Jake didnt want us to know where he was going, Nog said, but hes smart and strong Like his father, Kasidy said without thinking.

Exactly, Nog said. Im telling you, I know hes coming back. It was preposterous, of course. Nog had not presented any new facts, other than his recollection of having a feeling that Jake might not have been headed to Earth. But even if that turned out to have been an accurate feeling, it still remained that Jake had not been seen or heard from in two months.

And yet, Kasidy thought. Nogs assertion that Jake would return, unsupported though it might be, for some reason bolstered her. In the vigor of Nogs certainty, she found comfort, and even a renewed hope. You know, he said, Jake really likes you. Kasidy looked back over at Nog. I mean, he loves you, but he also likes you. He thinks youre great. The words touched Kasidy deeply. Im telling you, he wouldnt leave without saying goodbye. She nodded her agreement to him. Whether true or not, Nogs conviction filled her with a feeling of strength she had been lacking for some time. She committed to herself that she would consciously hold on to that feeling for as long as she could.

They sat for a while in a comfortable silence. When she heard light taps at the window, Kasidy looked up. Small, clear droplets had started to collect on the glass. Its raining, she said.

Yeah, Nog said. Choritzing.

What? The word meant nothing to her.

Choritzing, Nog repeated. The Ferengi have a hundred seventy-eight words for rain. This He pointed toward the window. is choritzing.

Oh, Kasidy said. Okay. They sat and watched as some of the drops grew heavy enough that gravity pulled them sliding down the window. I like the rain, she said.

Me too, Nog said. It reminds me of home. Back on Ferenginar. Kasidy looked over at him, and he suddenly smiled broadly at her. So what are you going to name the baby? he asked. Kasidy smiled back at him. This was a question Nog asked her with some regularity, the joke between them being that almost every time he asked, she gave him a different answer.

Well, she said, if its a girl, Octavia Lynn.

Okay. Maybe a little too hew-mon, but okay, he said, pleasantly teasing her. And what if its Jakes brother?

Half-brother, she corrected.

How can you have half a brother? Nog asked.

Ben is Jakes father, Kasidy explained, and hell be the babys father

Right, Nog interrupted. So theyll be brothers.

But Jake and the baby will have different mothers, she forged ahead, so theyll be half -brothers.

How can you have half a brother? Nog repeated, but she thought from the expression on his face that he was kidding her. Hew-mons, he said again, rolling his eyes, and they both laughed. When she finally told him her current choice for a boys name Marcus Daxhe playfully suggested that Marcus Nog might be a better option.

They talked for a long time after that, about her solitary life on Bajor, and about his work on Defiant, and about Colonel Kira and Dr. Bashir and Quark and other people. They even spoke more about Jake, and also about Ben, in a way that she thought neither one of them had in a long time without frustration or sadness, but with the simple joys of love and remembrance. They sipped at their tea and hot chocolateKasidy refilled their cups twiceand nibbled on the teacakes, which Nog also salted. When they finally rose from their chairs so that Kasidy could show Nog around the house, she thought that she felt stronger and more positive than she had in a very long time. And for his part, whatever had been troubling Nog when he had arrived seemed to have left him as well, at least for the time being.

As they were leaving the front room, Kasidy stopped and looked down at Nog. Thank you for coming, she said to him. He smiled up at her, and then she showed him the rest of the house that she and Ben and Jake had built.

14

Thirishar chThane snapped the panel back into place and stood up. He bent over the console, touched a sequence of controls, and watched as the level-five diagnostic ran through its automated functions. Words and numbers flew across the display too rapidly to be read, and the testing sequence signaled its completion with a beep a moment later. A readout appeared on the screen, and Shar tapped a touchpad with a long, slender finger, scrolling through the list of system checks and verifying their outcomes. As with the previous four diagnostics he had executed today on the stellar cartography labs secondary interfaces, the results all showed green. But the information he most sought, the time required to run the diagnostic, appeared at the bottom of the list two point three seconds.

Success, Shar thought. He quickly downloaded the testing data to a padd, packed the engineering tools away into their compartment, and left the lab, headed for Defiant s airlock. For whatever reasons, the installation of the new stellar cartography lab had given the refit crews more difficulties than any other system during the past few months. The primary systems had passed their final checks only a week ago, and the secondaries just within the last three days. Shar had not been satisfied with the data flow rate, though, and when all of the other refit and repair work had been finished, earlier today, he had decided to make one more attempt to improve performance. Now, at the end of his shift, he had finally achieved his goal.

As he walked through the main port corridor toward the airlocks at Defiant's bow, he found the ship not only eerily quiet, but unusually still. In dock, neither the impulse engines nor the warp drive were engaged, of course, but gone too were the sounds and disturbances produced by a ship filled with engineering and maintenance staffs. Most of the crew had left Defiant about midafternoon, he knew, encouraged by Commander Vaughn to spend their last night before the mission relaxing.

Nearly empty as the ship was, the lighting in the corridors had been dimmed, and although Shar knew it not to be true, the air felt colder and drier to him than it usually did. He experienced such reactions sometimes when he had been in the ship's or the station's environment for an extended period. It caused him no real trouble, but simply made him uncomfortable. The temperature and humidity maintained aboard the ship matched those on the station, which in turn matched those considered optimal on Bajor. He could always tolerate the conditions he had certainly become more accustomed to them during his years at Starfleet Academy and on the U.S.S. Tamberlaine but sometimes he looked forward anxiously to returning to his quarters, where he could regulate the environment according to his own preferences. For more reasons than that, though, he wished he could go to his quarters right now. Tonight, he would be having dinner with Zhavey, at her request. He did not want to, really, because he knew what she hoped to accomplish by such a meeting to convince him to return to Andor and take part in his shellthreth. Under other circumstances, he might have summoned the will to decline her invitation, but in just fifteen hours, he knew, he would be heading to the Gamma Quadrant for three months, where he would easily be able to avoid her attempts at coercion.

As he neared Defiant's airlocks, he recalled the relief he had felt weeks ago when he had learned that Zhavey had left the station, bound for Bajor aboard Mjolnir. And when he had found out that Kree-thai, the Andorian vessel assigned to her for diplomatic missions, had departed the station a few days after that, he had assumed that she would not be coming back to DS9. But two days ago, she had returned here aboard Gryphon, and earlier today, Kree-thai had returned as well. He assumed that meant that she would soon be leaving aboard her ship, either back to Andor or to the Federation Council chambers on Earth. He had not been surprised when she had asked him to dinner, realizing that, no matter her agenda, she would want to say goodbye to him. And as much as he disagreed with her on some issues, Shar loved Zhavey, and he hoped that they could part on pleasant terms.

As he started into the airlock, Lieutenant Candlewood strode in his direction from Defiant's main starboard corridor. Calling it a day, Ensign? the computer specialist asked. He wore his dark brown hair in tight ringlets about his head, his aquiline nose his most distinguishing feature.

Yes, sir, Shar said, stopping and waiting for the lieutenant to reach him. When he did, they walked side by side through Defiant's open airlock.

Do you think she's ready? Candlewood asked, patting the ship's bulkhead just before they stepped across the threshold separating the ship and the station. Even after all his years among humans, their proclivity for referring to space vessels with a feminine pronoun perplexed him.

Yes, sir, I do, Shar told him.

They reached the end of the station's airlock, and Candlewood worked the control panel to open the hatch. They stepped down into the docking ring, the hatch rolling back into place behind them. A Starfleet security guard, whom Shar recognized but whose name he did not know, nodded as they passed. Shar and Candlewood entered the nearest turbolift together, and Shar waited until the lieutenant had specified his destination in the habitat ring before stating his own.

So, are you going to relax tonight, Ensign, Candlewood asked, smiling, or have a last wild night before we ship out for a quarter of a year? Shar understood that the question must have been intended as a joke, although the point of the humor eluded him. He answered in the only way he knew how to seriously.

I'll be having abusynight, sir, he said, thinking of the possibly difficult hours with Zhavey that lay ahead.

The turbolift stopped and the door opened. The lieutenant looked over and smiled, apparently believing that Shar had meant something other than he actually had.

Well, just be ready tomorrow morning, Candlewood said as he exited the lift. It's going to be a long mission.

Yes, sir, Shar told him. Im looking forward to it.

Shar stood at the door to Zhavey s quarters and tried to think of a good reason not to enter. Several occurred to him, but none compelling enough to act upon. He knew what the next few hours would likely bring if he could last that long but considering that he would not be seeing Zhavey for a long time after tonight, he felt that he owed her the show of respect and love that he truly had for her. He promised himself to be attentive to her in their time together, to try not only to listen to her arguments but to avoid patronizing her with simple acknowledgments, as he had during their last couple of encounters. He had thought through the choices he had made in his life many times and still continued to do so but he would try tonight to listen to Zhavey with a new ear. He had committed to the course of his life right now, and he did not see himself returning to Andor any time soon, but he wanted to demonstrate for her the regard she deserved not only as his zhavey but as the wise, strong woman she was.

Shar took a deep breath, and then coughed, the cool, stale air catching in his throat. If nothing else, at least he would get to spend the evening in a physical atmosphere more to his liking. He lifted a hand to the signal panel beside the door and hesitated. He looked down and realized that he still carried the padd he had brought from Defiant. He thought briefly about taking it to his quarters, but recognized the thought as a poor excuse to delay the inevitable. One of his antennae tingled as he stood there, and he reached up and scratched at its base through his thick mop of hair. He suddenly thought of Thrissers willowy form, her lovely face, her long, straight hair and decided he had been thinking too much about this. He should go inside before he ended up doing Zhavey s work for her.

Shar stabbed at the signal panel. Almost immediately, the door glided open. Charivretha stood at the far end of the room, between the window and the doorway to the bedroom.

Come in, Thirishar, she said, a smile decorating her features as he had not seen in a long time. He stepped inside, at once aware of the satisfying increase in the temperature and moisture content of the air. Good evening, Zhavey, Shar said. He moved farther into the room, toward a nearby table, where he intended to put down his padd. Thank you for inviting

Somebodys behind me. Shar sensed the presence via his antennae, back and to his left. He whirled, and in that moment before he saw the person, he realized that the electromagnetic signature he had detected belonged not just to anybody, but to an Andorian and not to just any Andorian. Standing in the shadows in the front corner of the room stood a tall figure, with a rugged appearance, his hair in long, tight locks like Shars, but pulled back tightly against his head and tied together.

At first, Shar did not recognize his bondmate, encountering him in this context. And then he did. Stunned, he said, Anichent.

Hello, Shar, Anichent said, smiling. He walked out of the corner and embraced Shar. For a moment, Shar stood there, his arms at his sides, not knowing what to think, what to feel. And then his hands came up around Anichents back, and he hugged his bondmate close. He had not seen him in person in How long? Shar asked himself. He did not know. He had also not known until that instant how much he had missed Anichent. The surge of emotion surprised Shar, and he held on tightly to his bondmate for long moments. Finally, they pulled back and regarded each other. Shar put his hands on Anichents upper arms, looking at his handsome features. What are you doing here? he wanted to know. Anichent said nothing, instead shifting his gaze past Shar.

That was when Shar sensed the other presence behind him. As he had just done, he spun around, knowing the identity of the person even before he saw her. Dizheishorter, a bit stout, but in a pleasing way stood in the other corner at the front of the room.

And suddenly, Shar understood. As Dizhei moved toward him, he stepped back and turned again, this time toward Zhavey. The many thoughts intertwining in his mind drained away, leaving behind a dangerous emptiness. His muscles tensed, rage coursing through his body as though his blood were afire. The padd he still held shattered as his hands clenched into fists. He dropped the pieces where he stood, and before he could stop himself, he charged across the room. A sofa sat between the front of the room and Zhavey, and Shar took it in an easy bound. As he landed, his knees bent and his elbows pulled back, his body ready to leap and strike at

Zhavey.

In the last moment before his family would have been torn irrevocably apart, Shar regained enough control to stop. He pushed the anger back down, unfulfilled. He stood up fully from his crouch, trying to marry his body to his mind once more. He looked at Zhavey and saw an expression on her face, not of fear or resentment, but of sadness. Even with Charivretha in front of him, and two of his bondmates behind him, he felt utterly alone.

What are you going to do, my young chei? she asked quietly, and he knew that the question encompassed more than whatever actions he would take in the next few minutes. But Shar realized that he could not even have told her what those next few minutes would bring from him, let alone the coming days and months and years.

How could you do this? he hissed at her. The quality of his voice scared him, directed as it was at his zhavey, and when he spoke again, he did his best to moderate his tone. Why would you do this? Do you think

Thriss walked through the doorway from the bedroom and stopped next to Zhavey. We all did this, Shar, Thriss said gently. We miss you.

Thriss, he said, her name barely audible as it passed his lips. He loved all of his bondmates, but Thriss He raced to her and swept her up in his arms, spinning her around. He squeezed her tightly, thinking nothing but her name, feeling nothing but her warm body clutched against his. Thriss, he said. Thriss. We love you, Dizhei said behind him.

With difficulty, Shar released Thriss. Keeping a hand on her shoulder, he looked over at Dizhei and Anichent, who had both walked across the room to them. I know, he said. He gazed again at Thriss and said, I love you, and then looked at his other two bondmates, including them in his declaration.

Then come back with us, Anichent said. Come home.

Shar sighed and looked away, dropping his hand from Thriss's shoulder, his energy sapped. We've talked about this, he said.

No, Thriss implored him, we haven't; you have. You've made the decision for all of us.

Am I not responsible for your lives, he snapped, and he saw tears forming in Thriss's eyes. What am I supposed to do? he asked her, and then he walked through the little group, looking at each of them, asking the question of them all, even Zhavey. Am I supposed to let you or let our biology or our culture decide for me what my life will be? He walked past the window, away from all of them.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. He heard somebody sniffle, and he knew that Thriss was crying. He fought the urge to go to her, knowing such an action would only aggravate the problem. He tried to think what he could say to them that he had not said before, tried to think how he could make them see why he had to continue on the course that he had chosen, and why that course mattered not just for him, but for them as well, and maybe for all of Andor.

Nobody wishes to decide your life for you, Thirishar, Zhavey said into the silence. He could tell by the way she delivered her words that she had measured them carefully before speaking. He turned to her. Your life is your own, she continued. Once you have completed the shelthreth, you may return to Starfleet, or do anything else you wish. You would never have to set foot on Andor again. Thriss sobbed, and Dizhei went to her, putting her arm around her shoulder and gently wiping away her tears.

I he started, and he wanted to say will, and he wanted to say cant, and he did not know what to say. Maybe, he said at last, and somebody gasped, though he could not tell which of his bondmates it had been. After I return from the mission

No, Zhavey stopped him. What would happen if you did not return?

I have a commitment, he said, knowing the moment that the words had left his mouth that they had been the wrong ones to say.

Commitment, echoed Zhavey, and he could see that anger had also risen in her, anger that seemed barely contained. And what of your commitment to your bondmates? That has existed longer than your Starfleet career. And it is a personal commitment. More, it is an obligation to your kind.

I did not make that commitment, Shar said, regretting the difficult truth, but having no choice but to counter Zhavey's argument. It was made for me. He and his bondmates had been pledged to each other

as children, the result of circumstance and DNA matching. Still, he had not left Andor prior to their sheltreth because he did not love them; he had grown to love each of them, and he had no desire to see them hurt. But he also could not would not take part in the self-destructive patterns that Andorian culture imposed on its members in the name of saving the whole. As much as Zhavey and his bondmates and almost all other Andorians considered their social practices the salvation of their species, Shar viewed those same practices as their demise. And he had committed himself to finding a different solution to their biological dilemma.

Zhavey walked across the back of the room to him, until they stood face-to-face. You have an obligation to your family, to these people She pointed behind her toward the others. and to your society. She paused, and when she spoke again, she softened her tone. You have romantic responsibilities, she said. Go look into Thriss eyes and see if you can still tell her that you wont come home.

Shar saw the beseeching expression on Zhavey s face, and he would have done almost anything to prevent her from continuing to feel the way she must be feeling. He searched for the words to say, and more than that, he searched for some measure of coherence in all of the emotions churning within him. I love my bondmates, he thought. I love my zhavey and I love my people. And I hate what theyre all doing to themselves.

Before he could find what to say next, Zhavey spoke. You will do this, she said. It was enough to get him moving.

I cant, he said, and he strode quickly across the room. He had to stop to wait for the door to the corridor to open fully, and in that second he heard Thriss call his name Thirishar.

He left without looking back.

15

Not only had Kira never seen Commander Vaughn this way, she could never even have imagined him this way. As they ran down a list of station matters they had decided to review prior to Defiant s departure this morning, the normally reserved Vaughn moved haphazardly about, like an escape pod being tossed about in the Badlands.

Commander, she said, looking up from the computer interface on her desk, do you intend to walk to the Gamma Quadrant?

Excuse me? Vaughn said. He paced from one side of her office to the other, crossing in front of her desk. When she did not respond to him, he stopped and peered over at her. Im sorry. What did you say, Colonel?

I just wanted to know if you were going to need the Defiant on your mission, she told him, straight-faced. Because if not, then you can leave the ship here. He stared blankly at her, apparently oblivious of either her humor or the reason for it. What she had taken for mere distraction now began to concern her.

Commander, are you all right?

Oh, he said, almost as though coming out of a trance. He looked down at himself and seemed to realize the cause for her question. Forgive me, Colonel, he said, and he walked over to her desk and sat in one of the chairs in front of it. Im a little anxious.

So I noticed, she said. Its all right. Its just that Ive never seen you like this.

To tell you the truth, Vaughn said, I dont know if Ive ever been like this. He smiled, a slight, nervous expression that lent a youthful quality to his features.

Like what? she asked him. Have you got reservations about taking the Defiant into the Gamma Quadrant? Because Odo promised that the Dominion wouldnt interfere with peaceful exploration.

No, no, Ive got no reservations, Vaughn told her. And Im not concerned about the Dominion. He paused and looked off to the side, absently brushing his hand over his beard. He appeared pensive, as though making a decision about something. The expression on his face looked familiar to Kira, and she realized that she had seen it once before in the Bajoran temple on the Promenade, just before he had revealed the reasons he wanted to take the position as her first officer reasons that had included his Orb experience. She said nothing now while he remained silent, and then finally he turned back to her. Ive wanted to do

this for a very long time, he said. Since I was a boy.

A boy? Kira asked, surprised at the revelation. In the time Vaughn had served on Deep Space 9, she had come to think of him as a man who could get things done, and who could do anything he chose to do. But she inferred from his words now that he had essentially had a yearning to explore all his life, a yearning that had gone unfulfilled, and that registered to her as uncharacteristic of him.

Yes, Vaughn said, leaning his forearms on the front of her desk. When I was very young, my mother used to take me out into the wilderness occasionally. She'd make a fire and we'd sit around and talk and keep warm.

Images came to Kira's mind as Vaughn spoke sitting with her two brothers and her father around a fire, either at the Singha refugee camp, or out in the rough country, on the run from the Cardassians. Despite the horrors they had all suffered during the Occupation, she recalled those times with her family fondly. And I remember, Vaughn continued, that when the fire would start to sputter, I'd crawl into my sleeping bag. As the fire continued to diminish, and my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I would be able to see more and more stars. Although Vaughn still faced her across her desk, Kira had the impression that his eyes did not see her, but gazed back into the past. And I remember thinking that if the universe was truly infinite, then that must mean that everything you could possibly conceive of must be out there somewhere.

I remember thinking that same thing when I was a girl, Kira said, although she did not add that what she had most wished for back then had been a Bajor where her mother had not been killed, and where her brothers and her father were not always hungry and where there were no Cardassians.

Vaughn smiled at her, his eyes twinkling, obviously unaware of the cloud that had passed through her heart. As he went on, Kira let go the dark aspect of her recollection, focusing instead on the marvels of an infinite universe. As though putting voice to her thoughts, Vaughn said, I also thought that there must be wondrous things out there of which I couldn't possibly conceive. Anyway, that mystery, that promise of not only the unexpected, but the unimaginable that was what filled my childhood with the desire to explore.

What happened? Kira asked.

Vaughn did not answer right away, and Kira could not tell whether he was trying to pinpoint in his mind just what had happened to take him away from those dreams, or whether he was deciding if he could talk about it. A lot of things happened, Colonel, he finally said. As I'm sure you know, a lot of things happen to all of us. She could only nod her head slowly in agreement.

They sat quietly for a moment, and then Kira glanced down at the time on her desktop display. Well, Commander, she said, you've only got ninety more minutes before you officially become an explorer. Vaughn lifted his arms from her desk and sat back in his chair. If we can get through this list, he said, pointing at the display. Sorry for the digression. What was the next issue?

Kira reached forward and operated the console, paging to the next item. Personnel rotation while the Defiant is away, she said. She scanned the duty and shift changes Vaughn had proposed and that she had approved, and she made a decision. You know what, Commander? She swiveled the display around so that Vaughn could see it. Then she worked the controls again and the screen went dark. We've already been over these issues; there's really no need to go over them again.

Are you sure, Colonel? he asked. I'm happy to review the list with you.

I trust your work on all of this, she said. And even if there's a problem, she added with a smile, I think we can handle it.

Vaughn smiled back. I think so too.

So, she said, rising from her chair, why don't you go explore the universe? When Vaughn stood, she extended her hand to him across the desk. He took it with a strong, solid grip. Walk with the Prophets, Elias, she said.

He bowed his head to her. Thank you, Colonel.

As she released Vaughn's hand, the door chime sounded. Vaughn turned toward the door, and Kira peered around him to see who it was. Admiral Akaar. It had surprised Kira somewhat when the admiral had returned to DS9 a few days ago. It remained unclear to her how long he would be on the station or

what his exact purpose here was he had been vague when she had contacted him in his quarters aboard Gryphon and asked him about it though his presence here, and that of Councillor zhThane, supported her belief that the Federation might soon take action regarding Bajors admittance. Come in, she said, and the doors parted and slid open. The admiral entered, and Kira could not help but make note once more of his enormous size.

Colonel, he said.

Admiral, she acknowledged him.

I wanted a moment with Commander Vaughn before he left, Akaar said. Kira motioned toward Vaughn, an invitation to the admiral to proceed. I wish to bid you a safe and prosperous journey, Commander, he said.

Thank you, Admiral, Vaughn said, and he raised his right fist to the left side of his chest, making the same gesture to Akaar that the admiral had made to Kira when she had first met him. Akaar returned the gesture. I was just on my way to Defiant right now. Vaughn looked to Kira. Permission to disembark, Colonel, he said in a rather official manner, but Kira thought she saw a gleam in his eyes.

Permission granted, she said.

Colonel, the admiral said simply.

Admiral.

The two men turned and left her office. When the doors had closed, she walked out from behind her desk and over to the right, where she peered through a window into ops. She watched Vaughn and Akaar enter the turbolift and then descend out of sight. She continued to stand there for a moment, hoping that Vaughn would find the substance of his boyhood dreams where he was going. She also thought that he would be missed on the station while Defiant was away. And more than that, she realized that she considered him a friend, and that she would miss him too.

16

Shar hoped the first day in the Gamma Quadrant would be an easy one. He had not slept at all during the night, unable to prevent his thoughts from traveling again and again to Thrissand to Anichent and Dizhei, too, and even to Zhavey, but mostly to Thriss. He felt so physically and emotionally exhausted that he had even considered asking Commander Vaughn to replace him on duty today, but he thought that the commander would have been displeased that one of his crew had not heeded his instructions to get enough rest prior to their mission.

Shar specified Defiant's dock as his destination, and felt the lift begin its journey. He set down his duffel, but resisted the temptation to put a hand or a shoulder against the wall for support. He rubbed his face with his hands and tried to shake off his fatigue. Perhaps he would be able to sleep for a little while aboard the ship. It was still early, and Defiant would not depart the station for almost ninety minutes; he typically only slept three or four hours a night, anyway, so an hour's rest now would be helpful. He had decided to embark now partly because he had been unable to sleep anyway, but also because he had wanted to avoid the possibility of another confrontation with Zhavey and his bondmates. He had checked his companel this morning before leaving his quarters; he had enabled a security protocol to prevent anybody but station personnel from contacting him over the comm system and he had seen that Zhavey and Anichent had left several messages for him through the night. They might even have come to his quarters, for all he knew, but he had placed a security lockout on his door as well.

The lift slowed to a stop, and Shar reached down and retrieved his duffel. He exited the turbolift and approached the airlock that led to Defiant. Lieutenant Costello stood guard this morning, he saw. Good morning, Lieutenant.

Good morning, Costello said.

Shar walked up to the security scanner and operated its controls, activating it. Please identify for access to U.S.S. Defiant, a computer voice instructed him. Shar placed his hand in the center of the scanner, which lighted up at his touch.

Ensign Thirishar chThane, he said. Science officer.

Identity confirmed, the computer said.

Costello turned at her post and worked a control panel beside the airlock entrance. The hatch spun open and retracted into the bulkhead. Shar started to climb the steps.

Thirishar.

He stopped and turned toward the turbolift. Thriss stood there, her lovely face slightly swollen, her eyes bloodshot. She must have been crying this morning, he thought, and then realized that she had probably been crying most of the night. Of all of them, Thriss had always been the most emotional; that had bothered him at first, but over time he had come to appreciate her passions as an integral part of her great beauty. To see her like this broke his heart.

Shar stepped back onto the deck, and Thriss raced over and threw her arms around him. Embarrassed, he told Costello, Illlll be just a moment. He dropped his duffel on the deck and led Thriss down the corridor a dozen paces. He heard the airlock door close behind them.

What are you doing here? he asked, facing her and putting his hands on her hips, and then he realized the absurdity of the question. I mean He let his voice trail off; he did not know what he meant.

Thirishar, please, Thriss said, staring into his eyes and clutching at his arms, her sadness palpable. Tears pooled in her eyes and slipped down her cheeks, leaving silvery trails along her beautiful blue skin. Shar reached up and wiped them away, then put the palm of his hand gently against her face.

Oh, Thriss, he said, and there was no denying how much he loved her. If this had been only about his feelings for her, the decisions he had been forced to make would have been different, and they would have been easier, for all of them.

Dont go, she pleaded. We love you. I love you. I need you. He could not bear her sorrow, and to know that he had been the cause of it

Thriss, he said, pleading himself. He took his hand from her face. What am I supposed to do?

Come back to Andor with us, she said, but the inflection in her voice told him that she knew he would not go back to Andor. And thather terrible, desperate sense of resignationpierced him to the core, and he knew that he could not continue to disappoint her.

I will, he said, and her eyes opened as wide and bright as full moons. For a moment, his heart felt full, and nobody in the universe existed but the two of them.

You will? she asked hesitantly, as though even her question might make him rescind his words.

I will, he repeated. Ill visit Andor as soon as I return. Thriss face darkened, like somebody turning off a light.

No, she said. Please. Now.

Thriss, he told her, this is what I can do right now. But its a promise. I will go to Andor. He searched for something more to say to her, something that would convince her of the truth of what he was saying. He reached up and tapped his combadge. ChThane to Lieutenant Ro, he said. He kept his eyes on Thriss.

There was a delay, and then he heard Ros sleepy voice. This is Ro, she said.

Lieutenant, Im sorry to wake you, he said, but I need to ask you for a favor.

What is it, Shar? she asked, and he was surprised to hear the level of concern in her voice. What do you need?

My, uh, my bondmates are here on the station, he said, and theyre going to be here until I return from the Gamma Quadrant. The darkness had left Thriss face, he saw, but now he could not tell what she was feeling. Had his promise made her happy or at least happier or did she think that he would not live up to his word? Uh, at least, one of them will be staying, he told Ro. Perhaps all three. Id like for them to be able to stay together in my quarters. Will you arrange that? I know its an unusual request.

Ro did not respond immediately, and Shar feared that he might have irritated her by waking her for something that probably seemed trivial. But then she said, Id be happy to give them access to your quarters, Shar. Where are they now?

Theyre staying with my zhavey with Councillor zhThane. Their names are Shathrissa zhCheen, Thavanichent thDani, and Vindizhei shRraazh.

Again, Ro did not respond right away, and then she said, Im glad Im recording this conversation. Trying to spell those names would probably be a waste of time.

Thank you, Laren, Shar said.

You're welcome, she said. Safe journey, Shar. Ro out.

Shar deactivated his combadge. He looked into Thriss's eyes and still could not tell where her mind, where her heart, was. I love you, he said. He leaned in and kissed her. She did not respond right away, but then she reached her arms around his neck and opened her lips, and they kissed deeply. For a long, exquisite moment, they stood together as one, a joyous union of love. Yes, he thought. Ill go to Andor. Their lips parted and he stepped back from her. Wait for me, he said, looking into her eyes. She walked back with him to the airlock, which Lieutenant Costello opened after Shar had gone through the security check again. Shar squeezed Thriss's hand, then picked up his duffel and mounted the steps to the airlock. The hatch rolled back into place behind him.

This time, he did look back, turning and gazing through the window in the hatch, but Thriss had already gone.

17

Vaughn settled into the captain's chair on the bridge of Defiant. A hum, not a hum, a vibration, something felt and not heard, played beneath the sounds of the ship and crew at readiness. A sense of anticipation imbued the tableau, even beyond Vaughn's own excitement. He peered around at the alpha-shift command crew and watched as they prepared the ship for departure. Consoles emitted electronic tones all around the bridge.

Soon, Vaughn thought. Soon the ship would spring completely to life, and they would be on their way. And after all these years, he would finally be on his way.

Directly ahead of him, Prynn reviewed a display showing the first leg of Defiant's course. Vaughn experienced a pang of remorse and anguish for what had happened at that console a month ago, but he quickly dealt with it, replacing the useless emotions with the happiness in his heart that Prynn had survived her ordeal, and that she would now share with him this journey into uncharted territory.

Vaughn looked to his left, where Ensign chThane sat at the sciences console, which now possessed a great deal more functionality than it had when Defiant had been only a battleship. Now, though the vessel still had teeth, it had also been provided with enough scientific equipment and capabilities to carry them through their extended mission of exploration. Ensign chThane and the rest of the crew would engage in more investigative science in the next three months, Vaughn was sure, than all that had been done aboard Defiant since the original ship had been commissioned five years ago.

Next to chThane, stationed at the environmental-control console since he had no responsibilities right now in the empty medical bay, Dr. Bashir sat quietly, gazing around the bridge himself. Vaughn made eye contact with Bashir, and the doctor offered him a smile. Vaughn nodded.

On the starboard side of the bridge, Lieutenant Nog occupied the engineering station, and aft, Lieutenant Bowers stood at the tactical console. Lieutenant Dax, whom Vaughn had chosen to serve as his executive officer for the mission, stood at his right hand. A fine crew, Vaughn thought. All of them.

He tapped the controls in the console to his right and opened a shipwide comm channel. This is Commander Vaughn, he said. He had known for a few days now that he wanted to speak to the crew before they embarked on their voyage, but he had not planned on exactly what he would say. With the moment upon him, though, he found that ideas and words came easily. On Earth, he said, more than five centuries ago, a small band of people set out across the vast, unexplored continent of North America.

They traveled on foot, by raft, and with pack animals, for almost two and a half years and covering more than six thousand kilometers. A recollection occurred to Vaughn as he spoke, of sitting as a boy and reading about, and being enraptured by, the accomplishments of these and so many other explorers.

On inhabited worlds all over the galaxy, similar courageous expeditions have taken place, he continued, wanting to include all of the crew in his vision, and not just the humans. The great Jalia, who discovered the Outer Islands on Ferenginar. Vaughn peeked over at Nog, who returned his gaze with a smile, the lieutenant clearly pleased and probably surprised. Vaughn winked at him. The intrepid Andorians, Shetthius, Shintral, and Chorna, who first circumnavigated their globe. Vaughn glanced toward the

sciences console to see ChThane looking back over at him, a smile now on his face. Vaughn went on to list valiant explorers from each of the civilizations represented aboard Defiant, and as he did so, he was gratified to see the rest of the bridge crew turn toward him as they listened.

The two men who led the expedition across the North American continent on Earth, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, were set a mission to explore an expanse of unknown wilderness, to chart the lands they traveled, to seek out what new life there might be, to befriend the peoples they might encounter, to keep a record of their journey, and to bring that knowledge home. He paused, thrilled that this moment had come at last. They called themselves the Corps of Discovery. Let us therefore, on this stardate, rededicate ourselves to that ideal. To Vaughn's surprise and delight, the bridge crewed by Prynn, he saw applauded.

He closed the comm channel with a touch to the console, and then his gaze went to Dax.

She did not hesitate. In a voice that filled the bridge, she said, All stations, report status. The beeps and chirps of their equipment sang through the bridge, and in turn, each of the crew joined the chorus.

Tactical and communications, ready, Bowers said.

Navigation and flight operations, ready, Prynn said.

Science and sensors, ready. ChThane.

Impulse engines are online, warp power available on your command. Nog.

Life support at optimum. Medical bay standing by. Bashir.

The ship is ready, Captain, Dax said. Your orders?

Captain, Vaughn thought. A fellow could get used to that. Seal the airlock and signal DS9 that we are ready to depart.

The airlock is sealed, Nog reported a moment later.

Deep Space 9 signals that we are cleared for departure, Bowers said.

Release the docking clamps, Vaughn ordered. Aft thrusters at one-quarter, port and starboard thrusters at station-keeping.

Docking clamps have been released, Prynn said. Aft thrusters, one-quarter. Around them, the ship seemed to change, like a great beast waking from its slumber, though Vaughn suspected that the feeling might have been attributable more to his imagination than to reality.

Ensign ChThane, Vaughn said, let's see where we're going. Activate the main viewer.

Main viewer, aye. At the bow end of the bridge, the large, primary viewscreen blinked to life. Ahead of them loomed the great, exotic form of Deep Space 9, the station receding gradually before them.

We have cleared the station, Prynn said.

Ensign Tenmei, Vaughn told her, set course for the wormhole.

Course laid in, she responded immediately.

Ahead one-half impulse, Vaughn said. Take us in.

The thrum of the impulse engines pulsed through the ship. On the viewscreen, the stars slipped from port to starboard as Defiant yawed onto its new heading. Seconds passed, and then the wormhole blossomed before them, a spinning maelstrom of blue light and circular shape, glowing purplish white at its center.

The ship dove into the light, and then the light vanished, replaced by a bizarre kaleidoscope of luminous colors and alien contours. Vaughn watched in fascination until they emerged from the wormhole into the Gamma Quadrant, ninety thousand light-years away from where they had entered it.

Ensign Tenmei, Vaughn said, set us on our planned course. Prynn deftly operated her console. Course laid in, sir.

Ahead warp factor six, Vaughn said.

Vaughn felt Defiant leap forward beneath him, charging toward the unknown. Their mission to explore the Gamma Quadrant had begun.

Part Three

Gloom The Dark Seas

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil.
Death closes all; but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
A L F R E D , L O R D T E N N Y S O N ,
U L Y S S E S

18

Kasidy sat in a chair in front of the hearth. The warm breath of the crackling fire washed over her, chasing away the chill from the front room. Outside, the wind whistled through the eaves and lifted snow against the house, the frozen granules striking the window with a sound almost like rain. The excavation is advancing faster than any of us expected it to, Prylar Eivos Calan said, seated in a chair to Kasidys left. We may even be able to begin a new dig in the northwest section of the city by springtime.

Kasidy listened without much interest as the Bajoran monk spoke about the archeological efforts proceeding at Bhala. She understood the historical and religious significance of the ancient city, especially considering that it had been lost for twenty millennia. She supposed she could have been proud that Ben had been the one to discover the ruins, or maybe she could have even attempted to deal with his loss by involving herself in something that had been so special to him. Jake had done that, working at the site for three months after his father had vanished. But in truth, Bhala scared her.

There is some fragmentary anecdotal evidence to suggest that we may find the citys main shrine in the northwest section, Eivos continued.

When Kasidy thought of Bhala, she remembered how Ben had been hurt while researching its location, in an accident that had come dangerously close to killing him. And she also could not help recalling that, just a couple of months ago, a text had been unearthed there that some Bajorans believed identified the child she would give birth to as an important figure the Infant Avatar in their religion. Bhala held fascination and spiritual meaning for many, she knew, but for her it remained a source of anxiety.

Of course, the timetable and order in which we'll move into the other sections of the ruins haven't been completely determined yet, Eivos went on.

Of course, Kasidy said, interjecting in the hope that she might be able to move the conversation to another topic. Can I get you some more tea, Prylar? she asked.

Oh, he said, looking down at the empty cup he held perched on his thigh. Uh, no thank you, he said. He peered over at her cup, which she rested on the arm of her chair. She reminded herself that she needed to get a little table for this area. But may I get you some more?

No, no, she told the prylar, I can get it myself. She started to brace herself to stand, but before she could, Eivos stood up himself and plucked the empty cup from her hand.

Nonsense, he said. If my wife ever found out that I allowed a pregnant woman to wait on me, she would refuse to allow me back in the house. Kasidy returned his smile. Herbal tea, were you having? he asked. As Eivos walked between her and the fire, headed for the kitchen, she felt a momentary drop in temperature, like swimming through cold water in a warm pond.

Yes, apple-cinnamon, she said, actually grateful that she would not have to get up. She thought about when Nog had visited her almost two weeks ago, just before he had left for the Gamma Quadrant. She

found it difficult to believe that she had so much less energy and mobility now than she had then. She peeked back over her shoulder at the picture windows on the other side of the room, remembering when Nog had called on her. Thinking of him made her a little sad; she missed their daily conversations, and she hoped that, wherever he was right now, he was safe.

Kasidy heard Eivos say something in the kitchen, followed a moment later by the warble of the replicator. Back when Jake had been working at the dig, he had told her stories about Prylar Eivos, about how dry he was, and how his monotone could put an android to sleep. But she actually liked Eivos and really, so did Jake and she enjoyed his occasional visits. He had been one of the many who had contacted her when she had first moved to Bajor, but unlike with most of the others, she had perceived his offers of neighborly assistance to be completely unmotivated by her status as the wife of the Emissary.

Eivos emerged from the kitchen and delivered her cup of tea. She took it from him and sipped at the warm, sweet liquid. While I'm up, he said, may I make you something to eat?

Oh, no thank you, she said. You didn't come over here to spend the afternoon serving me.

Maybe, maybe not, he said as he stood beside her. My wife tells me that there are few acts more virtuous than serving an expectant mother.

Well, you tell Audj I like the way she thinks, Kasidy said. And make sure you bring her with you the next time you come out.

I will, he said. In the meantime, even if I didn't come out here to wait on you, I did come out for a reason.

Eivos crossed behind her to the front door, where he had hung his coat on the rack. Actually, I brought you something, he said. Kasidy watched as he dug first through one pocket, and then another, eventually pulling out a small package of some sort. He walked back over toward the fire and offered it to her.

Kasidy reached out with her free hand and took it. The package was slender, ten or twelve centimeters in length, she guessed, wrapped in plain, white paper, and tied in the middle with a red ribbon. Is this a gift?

It is, Eivos said. It is a gift for a very specific purpose.

Kasidy moved to put her teacup down so that she could open the package, and Eivos graciously took the cup from her. She pulled one end of the ribbon, and it came free. She dropped the ribbon in her lap and unfolded the paper. Inside lay an exquisite crystalline figurine made of an amber-colored stone. A Bajoran, she saw, just able to make out the ridges at the top of the miniature's nose. The neck, though, sloped out toward the shoulders, like a Cardassian. How odd. As she raised the artifact to her eyes to look at it more closely, it caught the reflection of the fire and burned with an inner, golden light. And the eyes, she saw, seemed almost to gleam with a light of their own. This is beautiful, she said.

I'm glad you think so, Eivos said, sitting back down.

What is it made of? Kasidy wanted to know.

A material called jevonite. The piece was discovered at Bhala, and we
Bhala? Kasidy asked.

Yes, Eivos said. She could see that he detected her uneasiness. Actually, that's one of the reasons I brought it. I originally was going to ask the Bajoran Archeological Authority and the Vedek Assembly if we might make a gift of the figurine to Jake, as a token of the work he did himself at Bhala, but primarily as a keepsake of his father. The generosity of spirit embodied by such a gift touched Kasidy, and she knew it would have touched Jake. But with Jake still missing, Eivos continued, and knowing how close the two of you are well, I just thought this might be a nice keepsake of Jake for you.

Kasidy gazed down at the figurine. I'm she stammered, unsure how to express her gratitude, unsure how to convey how much Eivos's kind gesture stirred her. She wished that it had not been found at Bhala, but this piece was one of the last things I discussed with Jake when he was working at the site, Eivos said.

Kasidy looked over at the Prylar. Thank you, she said. This means a great deal to me.

I'm so glad, Eivos said, and she could hear the joy in his voice at having given her something like this.

Prylar, I have to tell you, you're the only member of the Bajoran religious order who doesn't make me feel uncomfortable.

How kind of you to say, Eivos told her. I certainly understand, though. With the unrest these days in the Vedek Assembly, I sometimes find it difficult myself not to feel ill at ease among my peers.

Unrest? Kasidy asked. She picked up the paper the figurine had come wrapped in, along with the ribbon, and dropped them on the floor beside her chair. She held the figurine in one hand in her lap. Yes, Im afraid so, Eivos said. He leaned over from his chair and offered Kasidy her cup of tea back. She took it from him with a smile. When the translation of the ancient and some believe apocryphal Ohalu text was posted to the Bajoran communications net, it initiated a major division within the Assembly. Kasidy knew that Kira had been the one who had posted the translation to the comnet, an act for which she had been Attainted by the vedeks.

How bad is it? Kasidy asked, concerned that the greater the impact of Kiras act, the less likely it would be for her Attainder to be withdrawn.

Eivos sighed heavily. Its not good, Im afraid. The divide seems to grow wider each day. It is very disturbing. Im worried that the very unity of the Bajoran religion may be at risk. He sounded troubled, and Kasidy understood why. While political differences had always existed within the Bajorans government particularly in the first days of the provisional government that had been established after the end of the Occupation their religion had stood as very nearly a monolithic source of harmony for them for a long time, even through the Occupation. There had always been issues regarding who would be the next kai, or what actions the Vedek Assembly should take in various situations, but overall the Bajoran religion had remained united. There was the Pah-wraith cult, of course, but that had never threatened overall religious accord. A true schism within the faith could, Kasidy suspected, bring tremendous turmoil to Bajor.

Im very sorry to hear that, she said. Is there anything you can do to address the situation?

I do what I can, Eivos said. He sat quietly for a moment, his expression one of pained contemplation. Then he shrugged and seemed to throw off his worries; Kasidy suspected that he simply did not wish to burden her with his troubles. Who knows? he said. Maybe well find another text at Bhala that will repair the damage caused by the first one.

Maybe, Kasidy said, but although the Bajoran religion had certainly been full of surprises in the last few years, she somehow doubted that Eivos or anybody else would find anything in the ruins to offset what had happened what was continuing to happen in the Vedek Assembly. That would have to be accomplished by the vedeks themselves, and after what that august body had done to Kira, Kasidy had no confidence that they would be able to find a solution. Following Eivoss lead to change the subject, though, Kasidy said, You were telling me about possible plans to excavate in the northwest area of Bhala.

Yes, he said, and he immediately launched back into a discussion of the archeological site. Kasidy listened, smiling and nodding as appropriate, but her mind drifted to Deep Space 9. Later, once Prylar Eivos had left, she would contact Kira on the station to make sure that she knew what was happening on Bajor.

19

Beneath a clear daylight sky and a high moon, Vaughn stood at the top of the low mortar-and-stone tower and looked out over the city. Modern buildings flowed in circles away from his location, the metal and glass of their construction tinted in delicate shades that coalesced into a magnificent tapestry of color. Numerous greenswards sat interspersed throughout, perfectly placed as natural counterpoints to the artificial hues all around. Busy pedestrian thoroughfares roamed between the buildings, both the spokes and the rims of the concentric wheels in which the stunning metropolis had been laid out.

Even as Vaughn appreciated the breathtaking beauty of the city, though, he found the dull, formless quality of the sounds that rose from it disturbing. The brown noise of movement and machinery reached him, an almost random agglomeration of acoustic elements that seemed as empty as the bountiful colors here seemed full. Conspicuously absent were the sounds of voices, music, and anything utilized as an aural communication or signal.

And still, the city was a masterwork. Walking through it during the past few days had been like walking through a painting. The colors and contours of the buildings impressed the eye in the same way that art

did, as though the perfect shade or shape had been chosen at every point. The buildings, though no taller than one or two stories, gave the suggestion of slender height. Flowers and foliage accented both structures and streets, and public meeting places stood set off from the flow of pedestrian traffic by statuary and sculpture. Belowground, a complex transportation grid, using capsules about the size of a Starfleet shuttle, allowed individuals easy, fast access to both local and distant points.

Vaughn turned and offered his admiration of the vista. Your world is truly beautiful, then he lowered his chin and peered down at the optic net spread across the chest of his uniform. A wave of hues and forms splashed across the fine mesh, a translation of his words into the visual language of the Vahni Vahltupali. The being with Vaughn whose name the translator approximated as Ventu, but whom Vaughn had come to think of as Red-Blue One, shimmered slightly in response, sending a complicated series of orange-yellow ripples across his flesh. Vaughn's own modified translator decoded the communication as Life is a beautiful thing.

And that, Vaughn thought, sums up the Vahni. Four billion beings with a benevolent, global government, at peace among themselves, with their world, and with what they knew of the rest of the universe. And they had a technological sophistication that matched their social achievement. Accomplished astronomers and physicists, they had traveled throughout their solar system, discovered subspace, and now stood on the brink of developing both warp drive and transporter technologies. All in all, Vaughn was pleased that the Vahni had found Defiant.

The crew had been on the sixth day of their journey in the Gamma Quadrant, charting and studying the Vahni system via long-range sensors, when they had received a subspace transmission. The message had lacked an audio component, but its visual portion had shown two strange beings, essentially humanoid in shape and size, but wildly different in most other respects. The beings, two of the Vahni Vahltupali, had two legs below a long, narrow torso, two tentacles that approximated arms, and a bulbous, headlike projection atop their frame. Tall and slender, their bodies possessed a firm but malleable and many-jointed skeleton, allowing them to contort their bodies dramatically. They had neither vocal nor auditory organs, but a complex ocular organ ringed their heads. Most intriguing of all had been their flesh, over which they could exercise remarkable control, changing its color and texture in whole or in part. The two beings sending the message had been different colors, one a reddish blue and the other a greenish yellow, but the shapes and hues flickering across their skins had been identical and had repeated. The crew had concluded that the Vahni communicated via the epidermal patterns, and they had set out to decode the transmission. Ensign ChThane had succeeded fairly quickly in determining the rudimentary meaning of the message, which had been an invitation to the Vahni world. Vaughn had considered the matter carefully, since the Prime Directive generally barred Starfleet contact with pre-warp civilizations, but a gray area existed in the regulation when the civilization itself initiated first contact.

For a day and a half, Lieutenant Nog and his engineering staff, along with Lieutenant Candlewood and Ensign ChThane, had worked with Vahni technicians to develop a translation system. The Vahni had previously made contact with two other spacefaring and verbal species, and so they had already created equipment for the task; it had therefore only been a matter of adapting it to the Defiant crew's universal translators. The completed device included an optic patch of fine mesh spread across the chest of each Starfleet uniform, with the interface between the patch and the universal translator mounted in a small casing worn on the hip. The system worked amazingly well, given the diverse natures of the two methods of communication, though occasional lapses did occur.

We've enjoyed our stay here, Vaughn told Ventu, who had been one of those who had first contacted Defiant. Ventu served within the government here, on one of the many councils given over to affairs of state; the jurisdiction of his council included establishing relations with off-worlders, and he had acted as Vaughn's guide during the crew's time here. We thank you for your hospitality, Vaughn continued, and then he waited while the translator interpreted his words and sent them shimmering across his chest. Ventu shifted, and a burst of colors bloomed on his flesh, twisting and spinning into complex forms and then vanishing.

Our people like you being here, came the interpretation of Ventu's response. The neutral tone of the voice

produced by the translator seemed to Vaughn a poor analogue for the vibrancy of the original communication. We are [untranslatable]. A low tone signaled the words that could not adequately be deciphered. Your people are friendly and we welcome you to our world always.

Commander, someone called out, the sound of a raised voice in this environment oddly intrusive. Vaughn looked out over the wall surrounding the top of the tower and saw Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign Roness approaching along with a bright-blue Vahni. Bowers and Roness both waved, and the bounces in their gaits and the smiles on their faces told Vaughn that they had been enjoying their time in the city as had all the crew. Over the last couple of days, the entire complement of Defiant had cycled down to the planet at one time or another, all of them enchanted by the unique inhabitants of this world. Were coming up, Bowers called, pointing to the tower while colors flickered across the front of his uniform. Vaughn held his hand up, not waving, but indicating that he had seen and heard the lieutenant.

Vaughn turned back to Ventu. When we return to our own people, he said, they will send others here to establish formal relations with you. Vaughn's translator drew his words.

We will look forward to that time, Ventu flashed. The Vahni then bent at his midsection, just above the tops of his legs, his head coming down to within centimeters of the floor. He reached out a tentacle, and the four smaller, opposable tentacles at its end wrapped themselves around the handle of a cloth bag he had carried here. Ventu opened the bag, then reached in with his other tentacle and withdrew what appeared to be a fist-sized ball composed of an iridescent, silvery material. He stood back up and held it out toward Vaughn.

What is this? Vaughn asked, taking the object.

It is a remembrance for you of the Vahni Vahl Tupali. Vaughn turned the ball around in his hands and examined it. The structure of the object was not solid, he saw, but resembled a crumpled piece of paper. As he manipulated it, the surfaces seemed to move, as though covered with a thin layer of liquid. Apparently sensing Vaughn's confusion, Ventu extended a tentacle and slipped one of his digits beneath a thin strip of the silvery material, which Vaughn had not seen. Ventu pulled the strip loose with a quick snap, and the ball began to unfurl. In seconds, the object had straightened into a flat sheet, about the size of a computer display. On its surface was a hologram of the city from its tallest point the tower in which they stood. Vaughn understood now why the Vahni had wanted to bring him to this location before he transported back up to Defiant.

This is wonderful, Vaughn said. He peeked at the other side of the object and saw the shimmering, silvery material. Thank you.

To have a new friend is wonderful, Ventu flashed. You are welcome.

Vaughn heard footsteps echoing to his left, through the archway at the top of the stairs. He compressed the picture Ventu had given him back into a ball it collapsed with almost no effort found the strip, and fastened it back in place. A moment later, Bowers and Roness emerged from the archway, followed by their Vahni guide. Commander, Bowers said, his breathing slightly labored after having climbed the four flights to the roof of the tower. Brestol just took us on a tour of their natural-history museum. Have you seen it? Vaughn watched the patch on the lieutenant's chest as he spoke, fruitlessly trying to correlate his words with the forms and colors into which they were coded.

No, I'm afraid I haven't, Vaughn said. He bowed his head toward Brestol, a greeting he was sure required no translation, and indeed, Brestol made a similar motion in response.

It's truly amazing, sir, Bowers enthused. The evolutionary chain on this planet I'm no biologist, but I've never seen anything like it.

I think we're going to have to perform an emergency transport to get Ensign Trb out of there, Roness said with a chuckle, referring to one of the ship's science officers. Then, evidently realizing that she was speaking to her commanding officer, she straightened, dropped her smile, and added a hasty, Sir.

At ease, Ensign, Vaughn said.

Yes, sir, she said. Thank you, sir.

Vaughn suppressed his own smile. So young, he thought. Roness had shown herself to be an able crewperson, with a good attitude and solid piloting skills, but she could stand to lose some of her earnestness. In time, he thought, although he suspected that continued exposure to Lieutenant Bowers

might speed that process for her. I assume you two are headed back to the ship? Vaughn asked.

While Roness issued a sober and immediate Yes, sir, Bowers had something else in mind. Actually, sir, we were hoping we might stay on the surface a bit longer. Smart, Vaughn thought, for Bowers to ask in person rather than over a comm channel; let the commanding officer know that you are prepared to perform your duties as needed, show him the respect of a face-to-face request, but also let him see how much you want something.

Vaughn looked to Ventu and asked whether he had any objections to some of the crew spending more time on the planet. We welcome your people at any time, came his interpreted response. Vaughn turned back to Bowers and Roness.

Check the duty roster with Lieutenant Dax. If she can spare you, then you can stay, Vaughn told them, and then added lightly, whichever of you two actually want to stay, that is. Clearly, both Bowers and Roness had come seeking permission to remain on the planet longer, but the young ensign had lost her nerve. No matter what, though, I want everybody back aboard ship in two hours. He had scheduled Defiant to depart the Vahni world and resume their exploration of the Gamma Quadrant four hours from now.

According to Dax, quite a few of the crew had expressed a desire to stay with the Vahni, not just a few more hours, but a few more days. Vaughn could certainly understand that; the Vahni Vahltpali were a lovely people, inquisitive and friendly, with an impressive civilization. And Defiant's itinerary did allow for some flexibility in the amount of time the crew spent at whatever stops they made along the way. For Vaughn, though, the encounter with the Vahni had merely whetted his appetite for exploration, and he was anxious to resume their mission. More time spent here, he thought, might not leave them enough time to make some other discovery farther along their course.

Thank you, sir, Bowers said, his translated words careering brightly across the front of his uniform. Well contact Lieutenant Dax right away.

Thank you, sir, Roness echoed. Vaughn nodded, and the two officers headed back through the archway and down the stairs, accompanied by their Vahni companion.

Vaughn regarded Ventu once more. He held up the compressed picture. Thank you again for this, he said. I hope to see you again someday.

Again, you are welcome, came the slightly stilted response. Vaughn wondered about the degree of accuracy to which the translators functioned. They were obviously sufficient to their task, but he also suspected that the awkward sentences they produced might imply room for improvement. Perhaps when the Federation established formal contact with the Vahni, even better translators could be developed.

Farewell, Vaughn said, and he tapped his combadge. Vaughn to

Suddenly, the floor heaved to the right, throwing Vaughn and Ventu off their feet in the other direction.

The compressed picture flew from Vaughn's grasp as he thrust his hands out to break his fall. He caught himself in time to cushion his impact, but his head struck the stone floor just above his left eye. A tremendous boom split the air, as though thunder had rumbled from a cloud directly above them. Vaughn had enough time to recall that the sky had been clear, before his instincts told him that the city was being rocked by seismic activity. The violent shaking of the tower went on and on, as did the almost deafening roar and now Vaughn thought he could hear those roars not just here at the tower, but in the distance as well. Yes, he thought again, a quake.

Vaughn lifted his head and pushed his upper body up off the floor. He searched for Ventu, and saw him lying on his back a couple of meters away. Empty, white whorls erupted on his flesh, the Vahni equivalent, Vaughn guessed, of screaming in terror.

Vaughn struggled to his knees and then to his feet, the tower still shuddering dramatically beneath him. He staggered his way across to Ventu and reached down to try to help him up, but the Vahni would not move, his tentacles wrapped tightly about his body. Vaughn reached up and slapped at his combadge, but found that it was no longer there. He looked back toward where he had fallen, but the shaking made it impossible to focus his eyes on one spot.

The floor thrust to the side again, sending Vaughn off balance. As his feet shifted, he spread his legs and lowered his center of gravity, preventing himself from going down. He moved back to Ventu and stood

over him, making sure the translator patch on his chest faced the Vahni. You have to get up, Vaughn shouted, barely able to hear his own voice above the cacophony. Ventu did not move, though his flesh continued to flash brilliant white eddies. Vaughn felt at his hip to make sure the translator hardware was still there; it was. We have to get out of here, he yelled, and he moved around to Ventus head, crouched, and shoved his hands beneath his tentacles. He hoisted the Vahni onto his feet, surprised to find the alien heavier than he had expected. Ventu looked at Vaughn at least Vaughn thought he did, because the pale swirls diminished and Vaughn pointed to the archway. Come on, he yelled. We have to get down. Ventu wrapped his tentacle around Vaughn's arm. The two leaned on each other in order to keep their balance in the still-moving tower, and they took two steps toward the archway. That was when the tower collapsed.

Vaughn had no idea whether or not he had lost consciousness, but in his next moment of awareness, the shaking and booming had ceased. He opened his eyes and found his vision blocked by something just centimeters from his head, a brownish gray object he could not identify. The stale smell of dust clogged his nose, and small sounds pops and cracks, almost like wood burning reached his ears. Slowly, he began flexing his arms and legs, testing his spine, attempting to take stock of his body. He lay facedown atop a hard, irregular surface, and every part of him ached, though everything at least seemed intact. Cautiously he began to push himself up. Something moved beneath him and he stopped, waiting to see what would happen. When nothing did, he raised up all the way and looked around. Below him sat only rubble, he saw, the obvious remnants of the tower. Vaughn had landed on top of the pile of crushed mortar and stones; one of the stones had been in front of his face when he had opened his eyes. The four-story edifice had disintegrated into a mound maybe four meters high. He got to his knees, perching precariously on the loose stones, and looked around for Ventu, but he did not see him. Bowers, he called. Roness. He waited a few seconds, then called the names again. Neither officer responded. He hoped that they and their Vahni companion had made it out of the tower before it had crumbled.

Vaughn looked beyond the rubble beneath him and out at the city. Vahni packed the pedestrian thoroughfares now, some running, but most just milling about. He saw a lot of bone-white flesh among the crowds, the residue, he assumed, of fear. Smoke rose from the city in three or four places, though the ebon plumes were narrow, suggesting that they had not spread and might be brought under control quickly. He also saw several laserlike beacons, their light dazzlingly purple, shooting up into the sky from separate locations, a Vahni method, Vaughn surmised, of signaling an emergency.

Vaughn scanned the buildings nearest him. While some had suffered damage broken glass lay everywhere, and some external structuring had bent and twisted he saw that none of the buildings had collapsed. Whatever had occurred a quake, Vaughn still speculated had clearly taken a toll on the city, but it appeared that only the old tower had been destroyed.

The pops and cracks of debris settling continued beneath Vaughn, and the jumbled hum of many footsteps blew innocuously through the air. Past the small sounds, though, a heavy, unnatural silence draped the scene in a way he found haunting. Because I've heard silence like that before, he thought; it had been the sound of death among the living.

Vaughn examined the heap of rubble and began easing himself down from it. He moved along carefully, taking his time not to dislodge any of the loose masonry. A few times, stones fell from the pile as he began to put his weight on them, but he moved slowly and avoided tumbling down after them.

When he reached the ground, Vaughn examined himself. Dirt coated his uniform, which had been slashed open in several places; the right thigh of his trousers hung down from the top of his knee, and his exposed skin had been badly abraded. His hands were cut and bleeding. Half the translator patch had been torn away, and the interface no longer hung at his hip.

Vaughn walked the perimeter of the wreckage, searching for his crewpeople and the two Vahni. A thick dust hung suspended in the still air; Vaughn felt it in his eyes and throat, and he waved a hand before his face as he walked, trying to ward it off. A third of the way around, he spotted the bright-blue Vahni Brestol, he remembered leaning over two bodies in Starfleet uniforms. Ashen patches infested

Brestols body, as though the pigment had been drained from sections of his flesh. He extended his tentacles out to the fallen officers, apparently trying to help them.

Vaughn raced over and crouched on the other side of Ronesss body from Brestol. Are you all right? he asked, peering over at the Vahni, then recalled that the translator patch on his chest had been damaged. Brestol looked at him for a moment and did nothing, and then a yellow ring swirled around his midsection. Vaughn gestured, attempting to indicate all of the Vahnis body. In response, Brestol reached out a tentacle to Vaughns head, touching him gingerly above his left eye. A rainbow of colors streamed back along his tentacle. Vaughn lifted his hand and felt his head where Brestol had touched it; his skin was tacky, and his fingers came away reddened by blood. Vaughn shrugged, not expecting the Vahni to understand, and turned his attention to Roness.

The ensign lay on her right side, her arms in tight against her body, her blond hair falling across her face, a purplish bruise on her forehead. Vaughn placed two fingers against her neck. He felt a strong pulse, and he exhaled loudly, unaware until that moment that he had been holding his breath. He moved on his hands and knees a meter or so past Roness to where Bowers lay on his back. Again, Vaughn felt for a pulse and found one, though not as strong as Ronesss. He inspected Bowerss body for injuries, and found a gash on his left arm bleeding badly.

Seeing that Bowers had lost his combadge, Vaughn turned back to the ensign. He gently moved her arm from across her chest. She stirred as he did so. A spark of sunlight glinted off her chest, and Vaughn reached in and picked her combadge from her uniform. He squeezed the device, and its familiar electronic tones were like music in the horrible quiet.

Vaughn to Defiant. He waited a moment, and then tried again. Nothing. He started to consider what alternatives he had if could not contact the ship. If there had been an attack on the planet Commander, this is Dax. The lieutenants voice seemed rushed and serious. Are you all right? Is the ship? he asked.

We were hit by something, Dax said. Hard. We dont know what. Systems are just coming back online. What about the transporter? Vaughn asked. He heard Dax say something to somebody on the ship before she responded.

The transporter is up, she said.

All right, Vaughn told her. I have two injured, one possibly badly. Only I have a combadge, so youll have to lock on to the three human lifesigns at these coordinates.

Aye, sir.

Vaughn looked to Brestol and described a circle with his finger to include the three Defiant crew, then pointed to the sky, trying to indicate that they would be returning to the ship. The Vahni tilted his head back and looked at where Vaughn was pointing. Suddenly, a stark, white whorl spun across Brestols torso, and then the terrible pallor seemed to crawl across his flesh. Vaughn lifted his head and followed Brestols gaze. He could not believe what he saw.

Commander, were locked on to you, Dax said through the combadge.

Energize, Vaughn said. And as the transporter effect surrounded him, sending bright motes of light across his vision, the last thing he saw was the sky falling.

20

Kira saw the concern on Kasidys face the creases at the top of her nose, the slight downward tilt of her eyebrows, her forceful gaze.

Is there anything you can do? Kasidy wanted to know.

Like what? Kira asked, more sharply than she had intended. She looked away from the companel to compose herself. Through the glass doors of her office, she saw the crew working in ops. She shifted in her chair and addressed Kasidy again. Im sorry, I didnt mean to snap. Its just She hesitated, seeing the difficult truth of the situation. Ive tried pretty hard these past few months to live with the Attainder, and most of the time, I do pretty well. But sometimes And here lived the truth she hated. sometimes its still difficult.

You dont have to apologize, Nerys. Kira saw that Kasidys face had become a little rounder since the last time they had spoken. It sickens me what Yevir and the rest of them did to you. Thats why I wanted to tell you about this. If theres a problem in the Vedek Assembly, like Prylar Eivos said, they may try to blame you for that too.

And they might be right, Kira said. Kasidy looked shocked at the notion. Im not saying that Im responsible for their actions, but I did post the Ohalu text on the Bajoran comnet, and I defied a vedek to do it. I did it because I believed it was the right thing to do, and despite being Attainted because of it, Id do it again. For the first time, though, Kira wondered if she would; after what Kasidy had told her, the repercussions of her actions might end up being far larger and far worse than she had ever anticipated. But if they hold you responsible for the division in the Vedek Assembly Kasidys voice trailed off, and she looked down, obviously troubled. Behind her, Kira could see a window, and beyond it, snow blowing past.

Its snowing there, she said.

Kasidy looked up again. Yeah, for a couple days now. Weve gotten a dozen centimeters.

A dozen? Kira said, cheerfully surprised. Have you been outside?

Yes, a few times, Kasidy said, her mood seeming to lighten a bit. When the wind dies down, I like to go out for walks. Its very peaceful and quiet when theres so much snow on the ground.

And very cold, Kira added with a smile.

I wear layers, Kasidy said, and then, pointing to her growing belly, she added, whether I want to or not. They both chuckled at that. You ought to come for a visit.

I know, I know, Kira said. Kasidy had asked her several times in the past few months to go see the new house. Kira had always said that she would, but so far that had not happened, and she really did not know why. The station and all the duties required of her certainly filled much of her time, particularly with Commander Vaughn now off in the Gamma Quadrant, but she realized that it also must be something other than that. To Kasidy, she said, Its been a long time since I played in the snow.

You really should visit, Nerys, Kasidy said again. She seemed tired to Kira. Id love to see you.

I know, I will, Kira said. When I can. In the meantime, though, dont worry about me; Im fine.

I know youre not fine, Kasidy said.

I am, Kira insisted. I wont tell you Im happy or even indifferent about the Attainder, she explained, but Im dealing with it. And theres really nothing more they can do to me, no matter what happens in the Vedek Assembly. I still have faith, Kas. Dont underestimate the power of that. She found it awkward to have this conversation with Kasidy; after all, Kiras gods had apparently taken Kass husband from her, at least for now. And maybe, it occurred to her, that was one of the other reasons Kira had not visited Bajor.

All right, Kasidy said. But this still worries me.

It worries me too, Kira thought, though not for the same reasons it worried Kas. Kira could handle the personal consequences of having uploaded the Ohalu text, but the possibility that there might be a division within the Vedek Assembly troubled her. Kira remembered the infighting that had occurred in the provisional government after the Occupation, and how it had weakened her people and stymied their progress. A spiritual rift, though, would be worse than that. The Bajoran faith had seen the people through the worst period in their history, had made them strong and seen them come through the fire united. A religious schism could fracture that unity.

Kas, please, dont worry about me, Kira implored. I really am fine. The only thing I want you concentrating on is that little baby youre going to have in a couple of months.

Well, theres not much chance of me forgetting that, Kasidy said in a funny, exaggerated way. Ill talk to you again soon, Nerys.

Okay, Kira said. Bye, Kas. The companel screen went blank for an instant, and then the symbol of Bajor appeared on it. Kira reached forward and deactivated the panel with a touch; it chirped and winked off. She sat and thought for a moment, then stood up and walked to the doors of her office, but stopped before they opened. She had been headed to speak with Admiral Akaar, but just what would she say to him? That she had concerns that some of her people might take actions that threatened Bajors admittance

to the Federation? Kira did not even know for sure that the presence of Akaar and Councillor zhThane on the station had anything to do with that except that Kira had been around Starfleet long enough to know that they did not leave their admirals sitting around somewhere for no reason, and she was sure the same was true of the Federation Council and their members. What she needed to do was what she would do would be to meet with the admiral and finally determine what he was doing here.

And what if he is here to address Bajoran membership in the Federation? she thought as she returned to her desk. Not for the first time, she wondered what the near future would bring for her people. Three years ago, when Bajor had been on the brink of entering the Federation, Kira had not only come to accept the inevitability of the event, but to embrace it as the positive step forward it would be for Bajorans. Now, she found herself worried that it would not happen.

As Kira understood it, no restrictions existed with regard to the spiritual beliefs of Federation worlds. Certainly, member planets were not required to practice only a single religion. But if a schism had developed in the Vedek Assembly, and if it widened enough to threaten the peace and unity of the Bajoran people, what then? Would a population splintered by religious strife be permitted to join the Federation? And even apart from that, what would it mean for her people?

Kira did not know, and she hoped she never would.

21

Ezri Dax sat in the command chair on Defiant's bridge and stared in amazement at the main viewscreen. She had never witnessed anything like this. The lone moon circling the planet of the Vahni Vahl Tupali had suddenly and inexplicably shattered.

Silence gripped the crew. Just moments before, the bridge had been full of sound and motion, the ship struck by something and propelled from its orbit. The crew had been thrown about, systems had fallen offline, and Defiant had careened toward the planet below. Only Nogs ability to bring flight control back up quickly, and Prynns superior piloting skills, had saved the ship. Now, though, they all sat numb, transfixed by the sight of tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of fragments hurtling through space, the remnants of what had just been a dense, inert lunar body.

Ezri gaped at the scene, her mind working to make sense of what she saw, trying to find a context that would make it seem real. Instead, it felt as though she were trapped in some horrible holosuite program. And then a memory an echo of a memory reverberated in her thoughts. Praxis, it came to her, and she knew the recollection spilled from another lifetime. Curzon, she thought, though which host it had been mattered less than the content of the old thought the Klingon moon, half of it blown out into space by an industrial accident. The massive Klingon energy-production facility on the moon had failed disastrously, the result of a tragic miscalculation. But the Vahni moon had been desolate, an empty, lifeless body.

On the viewscreen, masses of debris tore through space, and a voice, another echo Audrid, maybe, or Jadzia resonated in her mind Do something. She stood up and went over to the sciences station, pulling her eyes from the viewer. Shar looked up at her as she approached, an expression of appalled disbelief on his face. His antennae appeared to recede a bit, as though retreating from the image before him. Shar, she said, I need you to chart the courses of the biggest pieces. Pieces, she thought. Of a moon. The words did not fit together. Anything that could cause damage on the planet. On the main viewer, it appeared as though most of the moon had been pulverized, leaving only dust and small fragments that would burn up in the planets atmosphere, but there also looked to be a number of sizable pieces left. Yes, sir, Shar said, and he turned to his console.

Ezri moved across the bridge to the tactical station. Ensign Merimark worked her controls, a silver earpiece protruding from her left ear. Ezri put her hand on the young ensigns shoulder. After a moment, she removed the earpiece and said, Weve heard from eighteen of our people on the surface, counting Commander Vaughn.

Is anybody hurt? Ezri asked.

Some of them are reporting injuries, but nothing serious, Merimark said. They all want to stay on the planet to assist the Vahni. The ensign consulted her panel again, then said, Three of the crew are still

unaccounted for Bowers, Trb, and Roness but two of them may have been the ones with Commander Vaughn.

Try to keep reaching them, Kaitlin, Ezri told her. Inform the others that they can stay on the planet for now.

Aye, sir, Merimark said, and worked her console.

Ezri moved over to where Nog sat at the engineering station. What's the ship's status? she asked.

Whatever hit us carried a massive amount of energy, Nog said, glancing up. It overloaded the shields and created a feedback surge that knocked just about everything else offline. The backups and secondary backups tried to engage, but they also overloaded.

Then how do we have any systems at all? Ezri asked.

Most of them shut down automatically before they suffered any damage, Nog said. The majority of the damage was done to the EPS power couplings and some of the ODN manifolds.

So you were able to bypass the downed junctions, Ezri concluded.

Yes, Nog said. Were actually not in bad shape. Nog looked back up. It shouldn't take more than a day or so to replace the failed junctions.

Good, Ezri told him. Start putting together a repair plan.

Yes, sir, Nog said.

The starboard door opened with a whisper, and Commander Vaughn entered the bridge. He looked hurt. Blood had caked in an irregular patch above his left eye, two dried, red trails snaking from it down the side of his face. His uniform, covered in a brown-gray layer of dirt, had been torn open in a dozen places, his bruised and bloodied flesh showing through them. Report, Lieutenant, he said, stepping up to Ezri. She told him what they knew and gave him the ship's status. Vaughn confirmed that Bowers and Roness had been with him and were now in the medical bay, neither one of them hurt badly, though Bowers might be out of commission for a couple of hours.

Lieutenant, Shar said from his station, addressing Ezri, then adding, Captain, when he saw Vaughn. I've charted the debris field. I've identified any fragments of the moon that will strike the planet, and that are large enough and traveling at such an angle that they'll produce an impact yield greater than ten megatons. Ten megatons, Ezri thought, and wondered exactly what that meant, and then knew almost immediately probably from Jadzias experiences, she guessed that such a strike would be capable of wiping out a small city. Any fragments significantly larger than that would threaten the entire planet.

How many, Ensign? Vaughn asked.

Shar hesitated for just an instant, as though not wanting to deliver bad news, Ezri thought, and then he did just that. Two hundred thirty-one. And they'll begin hitting the planet in less than six hours.

Ezri raced into the two-tiered shuttlebay where Chaffee and Sagan were berthed. Both of the shuttles had already been powered up, and a low whine buzzed through the bay, like the sound of bees in a hive. The small compartment, barely larger than the craft it housed, felt cold to Ezri, though she suspected that the sight of open space below the shuttles, just beyond the force field, spurred her imagination. Lieutenant Candlewood stood beside Chaffee on the lower tier, she saw.

Lieutenant, he said, Tenmei and Roness are already on board the shuttles and ready to go.

All right, Ezri said, pleased that Gerda had been in and out of the medical bay as quickly as she had. Let's go then. I'll take the Sagan.

Aye, sir, Candlewood responded, and he immediately boarded Chaffee.

Ezri sprinted to the bulkhead and began climbing the yellow rungs built into it. With so many lives at risk, she was eager to board Sagan. The Vahni interplanetary ships carried no weapons, leaving Defiant and its two shuttles as the only line of defense.

Ezri reached the second tier and hurried aboard Sagan. She quickly closed the hatch and took a seat in the cockpit beside Gerda. The plan was simple. Defiant, Chaffee, and Sagan would attempt to destroy the lunar fragments threatening the planet. Defiant, with its superior weaponry, would focus on the half-dozen largest bodies, which measured hundreds and, in two cases, thousands of meters across. If any of those bodies struck the planet, Ezri knew, it would have not just consequences local to the point of

impact, but global implications, maybe even to the point of generating a nuclear winter. The exacting process of destroying the massive fragments would take some time, so that they would not end up just broken apart; fracturing the biggest lunar pieces would only increase the amount of work that had to be done, without significantly decreasing the danger to the Vahni. In the meantime, Chaffee and Sagan would demolish the smaller, but still potentially lethal, fragments.

Lets go, Ezri said, working her controls, configuring them for the weapons and sensors they would need. Within moments, Chaffee and then Sagan had dropped from Defiant and into space. The debris field spread before them. The number of objects seemed vast, the task ahead impossible. Lunar fragments stretched from one side of their visibility to the other, from the top to the bottom, and reached away from them for kilometers.

Ezri sensed movement beside her, and she turned to find Gerda looking at her, the realization of the enormosity and difficulty of their job clearly showing on her face. We can do this, Ezri told her with a certainty she did not feel. But she had learned from Commander Vaughn that confidence served as an important tool of command of leadership. Were lucky there aren't even more large fragments than there are. Whatever destructive force had torn apart the moon, at least it had reduced it mostly to rubble that would not threaten the planet.

Aye, sir, Gerda said, and Ezri could see the young woman collect herself, a sense of resolve settling on her features. It was a noteworthy moment for such a junior officer. Gerda operated her console, and Sagan sprang toward the debris field. The shuttles would begin in the middle of the pack, destroying the most dangerous fragments first, those with the steepest angle of entry, then work their way outward along spiral courses.

Ahead of Sagan, a cluster of nine fragments rolled end over end toward the planet below. Ezri checked her instruments and saw that only two of them were large enough to threaten the Vahni; the others would either burn up as they encountered the planet's atmosphere, or be deflected back out into space. And there, Ezri knew, lay the primary danger of this mission. They did not have enough time or power to destroy every fragment headed toward the planet, only those that posed a threat; that meant that they would need to maneuver through the debris field to specific targets, and while the smaller fragments might not have been a danger to the planet, they absolutely would be to the shuttles.

Ezri watched the readouts for optimal weapons proximity, even as she keyed in a phaser lock on one of the tumbling rocks. When Sagan flew into range, she hit a touchpad, unleashing the shuttles fire. Sagan jarrred slightly as the phasers sprang into action, the drone of their activation seeping into the cabin. Streams of phased energy raced into the eternal night of space. The phaser lock was true the largest fragment in the cluster vanished in a burst of light and energy. In her mind, Dax supplied the explosive sound that would never be borne in space.

Only two hundred twenty-four to go, she said to Roness, subtracting one from the number of fragments the shuttles had been charged with handling. Then she worked to retarget the phaser lock.

Ezri slumped back in her chair, exhausted. Her arms, extended over her console as she had worked the targeting locks and the phasers, felt leaden. For nearly six hours, the crews aboard Defiant, Chaffee, and Sagan had battled the debris field, winnowing the number of potentially deadly lunar fragments down one by one. Now, finally, only one remained, and it had already been reduced by Defiant's phasers from seven hundred meters across to two hundred meters.

You did a terrific job, Ezri told Gerda. The ensign had also fallen back in her chair, looking as tired as Ezri felt. They had parked the shuttle above the planet, a comfortable distance off Defiant's port bow as the ship completed the destruction of the last fragment. Chaffee had similarly settled into station-keeping on the starboard side of the ship.

Thank you, Gerda said, smiling. You too.

Ezri smiled back, and then exhaled a long, loud breath. Though successful, the mission had not gone flawlessly. Twice, Chaffee and Sagan had been called in to assist Defiant when larger fragments had broken up under the ship's assault. Chaffee had also been clipped by one of the smaller rock masses, which had caused a plasma leak in one of its subscale warp engines. Since they had not been using the

warp drive, it had not been a problem; Candlewood and Prynne had isolated the leak and thereby stopped it, but it would have to be patched later.

Ezri felt not only pleasure and relief that the threat to the planet had been neutralized, but also a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment for the role she had played in making that happen. She had directed the coordinated operations of the shuttles with a surety and skill she had not been fully aware that she possessed. Some of her thoughts and actions had been driven by the ingrained experiences of Dax's former hosts, she knew, but she also felt that she had brought some of her own qualities to bear.

Commander Vaughn had so far been an excellent mentor to her, schooling her not so much in the details of command as in the attitude and mindset required to lead effectively. She felt fortunate to have so adept and willing an instructor.

Ezri glanced over at Gerda and noticed the bruise on her forehead. By the way, she said, I'm so glad that you weren't hurt down on the planet.

Gerda peered over at her with a devilish grin. Oh, you're just saying that since I successfully navigated us through all those space rocks.

Well, Ezri said playfully, that didn't hurt. The two chuckled, a welcome moment of relief after the last, tense hours. Really, though, how are you feeling?

Actually, I've got a bit of a headache, Gerda said. Dr. Bashir told me I had a mild concussion, and that I shouldn't go to sleep for a few hours. She laughed again. I guess that wasn't much of a problem, was it?

I guess not, Ezri agreed, laughing herself. Gerda's sense of humor was one of the things she really enjoyed about the young woman.

You know what I'm going to do when we get back to the ship? Gerda asked.

Sleep for two days? Ezri suggested. The constant, low-level hum of the shuttle seemed restful now, uninterrupted by the sounds of the engines and the phasers. Ezri thought that if she closed her eyes, she would not wake up again until somebody pulled her bodily out of the shuttle back aboard Defiant.

That too, Gerda said. But right now, I've got a taste for a big, fat jumja stick.

Really? Ezri said. How can you eat those things? They're so sweet.

They're good, Gerda protested. It's a natural sweetness.

Ezri wrinkled her nose and shook her head, lightheartedly exaggerating her dislike of the Bajoran confection. Before Gerda could respond, a flash of light caught Ezri's attention. She sat back up and gazed out the forward windows.

What is it? Gerda asked, also sitting back up in her chair.

I think that the Another spark flickered above the planet. The light shows just beginning for the Vahni. The leading edge of the debris field had reached the planet, the remaining, smaller fragments burning up as they plunged through the middle atmosphere. Ezri felt tremendously gratified that the Vahni would be able to look up to the sky right now in wonder rather than in fear. Even in the daylight, they would be able to see the meteors as they blazed out of existence, the rock masses done in by friction with the atmosphere as they fell from space.

They watched for long, silent minutes as the lunar fragments disintegrated in magnificent, fiery bursts scores of kilometers above the planet's surface. Then something flared off to starboard. Ezri looked in that direction and saw only Defiant off in the distance. She reached up to her console and started to work the sensors. Did you see that? she asked Gerda.

I thought I saw something, she answered. I'm not sure.

Defiant to Sagan, came Commander Vaughn's voice over a com channel.

Ezri touched a control on her panel. Dax here. Go ahead, Captain, she said. She continued operating the sensors.

Lieutenant, the fragment we were trying to destroy just broke into three pieces, Vaughn said. The phasers may have ignited some volatile material inside it. Ezri found two of the pieces with the sensors, then finally located the third, farther away from Defiant than she had expected. She scanned the masses of rock, and saw that the readings did indicate the residue of an explosion. Defiant can still handle the two pieces nearest us, Vaughn continued, but we're not going to have time to destroy the third. Ezri saw the problem detailed on her readouts: the third fragment had been accelerated by the explosion ahead of

the other two and, she noted, into a dense area of the debris field. Even though the remaining fragments were small, it would be a tricky journey for the shuttle to maneuver through them.

We've got it, Captain, Ezri said. Considering the damage Chaffee had sustained from its collision with one of the fragments, Sagan was obviously the better choice for this task. Dax out.

Gerda worked at her controls, and Sagan began to pulse with energy as the engines came back up to full readiness from standby mode. What about a tractor beam? she asked.

It's traveling too fast, Ezri said. She quickly plotted a course through the debris field and laid it into the navigational computer. Do you have the course? she asked.

Laid in, Gerda said. Bringing us about.

The shuttle surged forward and then to port, toward the planet. Ezri looked up, through the forward viewport, and saw sparks of light below, the lunar fragments dying in flames as they rushed down.

Suddenly, a rock mass soared past the shuttle off to starboard. Ezri consulted the sensors and saw that they had entered the debris field, hundreds of fragments ahead of them, and thousands approaching rapidly from behind. She picked out the one they were after.

Targeting, Ezri said, waiting for the computer to acquire a lock. The indicator on her panel flashed green. Phasers locked. She reached to fire, but Sagan lurched to starboard as Gerda screamed a warning, but too late. Ezri flew from her chair and slammed into the bulkhead. Pain seared through her right shoulder as she felt it give way. She cried out, the sounds of her pain swallowed by the increased thrum of the engines.

Are you all right? Gerda yelled, not taking her eyes from her console.

Yes, Ezri yelled back, not caring about the truth of her response. She tasted blood, and thought that she must have bitten her tongue or the inside of her cheek. She struggled back up and into her chair as Gerda righted the shuttle, the pulse of the engines quieting.

We were about to get hit by one of the fragments, Gerda explained. Knowing what had been coming, she had obviously been able to brace herself as she had maneuvered the shuttle out of danger.

Ezri found that she could not raise her right arm up to her console, so she grabbed her arm with her left hand and lifted it there. Still able to move all her fingers, she worked the sensors, searching again for their target. She found it as it entered the planet's upper atmosphere, but their evasive maneuvering had taken them away from it. We need to get back on course, she said.

I know, Gerda said. We also have to avoid being knocked out of the sky. She paused, then said, Brace yourself.

Sagan rolled to port, dipped, then rolled to starboard before righting itself again. Ezri held on to her console with her left hand and kept herself seated. She studied the sensor display, her eyes on the readings of the fragment as they neared it once more. Targeting, she said as she worked the phaser controls. She waited. Finally, the indicator blinked green, but almost immediately it reverted to red. The shuttle began to shake as it shot through the upper atmosphere. The targeting indicator changed from red to green and back, two more times.

I can't get a lock, she said, which meant that she would have to target the fragment manually. She could do that, but she could not risk missing and sending a volley of deadly phaser fire into the planet below. We're going to have to come up from underneath.

We can't do that, Gerda said. We'd be flying head-on into the debris field.

Ezri understood Gerda's warning—it was one thing to fly amid the lunar fragments traveling in their direction, and another to fly into them going in the opposite direction—but she had no time to explain why they had to do this. Do it, Ezri said. To her credit, Gerda hesitated for only a fraction of a second, but in that instant, Ezri knew that the ensign wanted her to take the shot now and get the shuttle out of there. But she could not take that chance. They had not worked this long, this hard, to save the Vahni, just to end up killing some of them themselves with errant phaser fire.

Around them, the shuttle grew louder as it raced downward. The huge mass of the planet filled the forward windows, green and brown land visible through white clouds. The flashes of the burning lunar fragments continued to wink on and off in front of them like guttering candles. The vibrations in the cabin increased as Sagan broached the middle atmosphere.

And then they were turning, pulling up and around in an arc. The planet slipped out of sight too slow, Ezri thought, but she knew that such a maneuver at greater speeds would have torn the shuttle apart. At last, the stars filled the windows, Sagan heading back away from the planet. Ezri reacquired the fragment on the scanners and tried another phaser lock, which again failed. She enabled manual firing and concentrated as the shuttle and the fragment rushed headlong at each other. She fired, the phaser blast barely audible in the noisy cabin.

The fragment did not disappear from the sensors. The distance between Sagan and the rock mass diminished rapidly. One more shot, she thought, maybe two, but her hands were already working her panel. Another phaser strike surged from the shuttle.

Ahead of them, the fragment exploded in an intense blaze of yellow-red light.

Yes, Ezri hissed through clenched teeth, knowing that, while they might have saved the people below, she and Gerda were still in danger. On her sensor readout, she saw two more fragments approaching the shuttle fast. Come about, she ordered, looking up in time to see a mass of burning rock charge past Sagan. There's another one, she shouted, following it with the sensors. With no time to establish a phaser lock, she fired a spread directly in front of the shuttle. Ahead, another fragment flashed as it disintegrated. She checked the sensors again, and saw a huge swarm ahead, too dense to travel through, too wide to escape, too many to destroy. Land, she yelled. We've got to land. If they could even get low enough, below an altitude of about fifty kilometers, the fragments would never reach them, burning up in the atmosphere above them. She thought about transporting to safety, but she could not allow the shuttle to crash and possibly kill any of the Vahni.

Gerda brought Sagan around in a tight arc, the starfield slewing away. Ezri waited to see the horizon of the planet, wanting to know that they were no longer headed upward. Sensors showed that another fragment had just missed them, and she knew this was going to be close. Maybe if she could rig the warp drive to overload and vaporize the shuttle, then they could transport

A mass of rock slammed into the rear of the shuttle. Power destabilized for a second as the shields went down. The interior went dark, and then emergency lighting flashed on, bathing the cabin in a dull red glow. The noise inside the shuttle increased dramatically, deafeningly, and Ezri realized that the noise-suppression plating must have been breached.

We've lost attitude control, Roness yelled.

Another fragment crashed into Sagan. The sickening sound of rending metal filled the cabin. The shuttle moaned like a wounded animal, and then it began to tumble. Ezri flew out of her chair, just able to bring her left arm up as she struck the ceiling. Now, she thought with maddening clarity, the shuttle will head back down to the planet. She was thrown into the side bulkhead, and then backward. She had just enough time to be amazed that she did not feel any pain.

And then darkness took her.

Ezri awoke slowly. At first, she became aware of sounds around her, soft, syrupy rhythms she could neither place nor understand. Her first coherent thoughts were of Trill, and of the Caves of Makala. For a time, she drifted in her mind through the interconnecting pools, communicating with the other symbionts, and waiting an almost painfully long time to move out into the world, and then from there to the rest of the universe. And then, finally, she was Lela Dax, and more than the sum of the two of them. Lela, and then Tobin, and then all the rest, through to Ezri. Ezri Dax, aboard Destiny, Deep Space 9, and Defiant. Aboard Sagan.

Ezri opened her eyes and did not know where she was. She peered at the ceiling and recognized Defiant. She tried to lift her head, but found herself too weak.

Doctor, a woman's voice said, she's awake.

Ezri heard footsteps, and then a face entered her field of vision, a woman with blue-green eyes, and reddish blond hair braided and pulled back against her head. Ezri knew this woman, she was sure. She remembered having a drink with her in Quarks the night before the mission, when the woman and Sergeant Etana had been saying goodbyethe woman's first extended mission, her first extended time away from Etana. Krissten, she said.

Yes, the nurse said.

Ezri, came another voice, and it took Ezri only a second to recognize Julians mellifluous tones. His dark, handsome face appeared above her, beside the nurses. How are you feeling?

She opened her mouth to speak, but only an unintelligible sound emerged.

Thats all right, Julian told her, reaching up and running a hand tenderly across her forehead. Youve been thrown around quite a bit. The good news is that youre going to be all right. He smiled at her, a smile that she had already taken into her heart.

The shuttle, she finally managed to say. We were on board the shuttle.

Yes, Julian said, and his face changed slightly, she saw, the smile maybe no longer as wide.

What she started, and again she tried to raise her head. Julian put a hand on her shoulder and restrained her, gently pushing her back down. What happened? The Vahni?

You saved the Vahni, Julian said.

The fog seemed to begin lifting from around Ezri, and she became more aware of her surroundings. She turned her head to the right and saw a biobed and medical displays. How did I get here? she asked.

Later, Ezri, Julian told her, and he looked up at the nurse. She nodded and moved away.

What happened? Ezri asked, raising her voice.

Your shuttle lost power, Julian told her. As it started to fall back toward the planet, we were able to grab it with a tractor beam and transport you off.

The nurse reappeared, and it looked as though she handed something to Julian.

What about Gerda? Ezri wanted to know. How is she?

You need to rest, Julian said, and he reached up toward her neck.

No, now, she said, her voice loud and insistent. How is Gerda? Instead of an answer, she heard the sibilant puff of a hypospray, like somebody whispering into her neck.

Rest, now, Ezri, Julian said, not responding to her question. But as she closed her eyes and let sleep pull her back into its velvety folds, she could not help but think that Julian had already given her an answer.

22

Taranatar stood alone inside the turbolift, watching the walls of the shaft rush horizontally past the open front end of the car. He reviewed the details of his current operation, as few and as simple as they were, and thought about delaying his plan. He could even abandon it completely.

You taste fear, he told himself, disgusted with his vacillation. He had been charged with a campaign by the Founder, and he would see it through, however long it required, however many operations he had to prepare and execute. No matter the vagueness of the Founders directive, or its apparent pointlessness. A god had spoken, sent him a mission, and he would see it through.

Or die.

The turbolift slowed, then stopped in front of a set of doors. They parted and slid into the bulkhead, revealing a corridor within the habitat ring. Taranatar waited. When nobody entered the lift or passed by, he shrouded and moved out. The muted sounds of voices drifted to him, some coming from farther down the corridor, others from behind the closed doors of the quarters on this deck. The smells of food and of the beings who lived here permeated the air. He detected no threats to him, and so he set out purposefully toward his objective.

As he walked, Taranatar thought about the Founder, who had instructed him to immerse himself in the various cultures he would encounter on Deep Space 9, and in the various aspects of life in those cultures. After spending as much time as Taranatar had on the space station, doing little besides standing in the operations center and going into battle when he could even if that meant utilizing the holosuiteshe knew that he must do something more. He had observed Colonel Kira in combat, both in the Delta Quadrant and once in the holosuite, and he had spent a few days in the week prior to Defiant s departure roaming the ship, but still, he knew that had not been enough. Even the colonel had suggested to him that there was more to see here than just the operations center and the holosuites. And so he had begun to travel to various locales throughout the station.

Two people came walking down the corridor together toward Taranatar. One was a human male in a Starfleet uniform, he saw, the other a Bajoran female in a Militia uniform. He wondered if they might be coming from the place to which he was headed. As they drew nearer, talking with each other, Taranatar gauged their movements, waited as long as he could to commit, and then flattened himself against the bulkhead. They passed him, never even having suspected his presence. Contempt welled up within him for these Alpha Quadrant beings and their pathetic observational abilities, but then more of the Founders words echoed in his mind Dont judge them. Experience and try to understand, only. Judgment will come later. He put the beings out of his mind and continued on down the corridor.

The first place Taranatar had gone to experience Alpha Quadrant life, other than the operations center, had been Defiant. After Commander Vaughn had asked him to come aboard the ship to answer questions about the Gamma Quadrant, Taranatar had decided to remain aboard, and he had returned daily, roaming through the ship and watching the crew as they prepared for their mission. But then the little being, the Ferengi, had run into him. And the Ferengi had feared him.

Correctly so, Taranatar thought now. JemHadar soldiers had maimed the little being, destroyed one of his legs. The Ferengi had experienced the superiority of the JemHadar, and his subsequent fear was justified. Taranatar understood, though, that his encounter with the Ferengi had not served the goals the Founder had laid out for him. He had inspired fear, and had himself felt disdain for the pitiful little being, and neither of those things furthered his mission. He had failed, and that was unacceptable.

After that, Taranatar had selected other locations and activities with which he was not familiar. He had already visited several of these shrouded, to avoid incidents like the one with the Ferengi and now he was about to visit another. He arrived at a set of closed doors, beyond which lay his destination. He stood across the corridor and waited for somebody to enter or exit.

Thirteen minutes and thirty-five seconds later, the doors opened, and a human woman in a Starfleet uniform walked out. Okay, bye, she said, looking back into the room. Out of habit, Taranatar measured her at a glance medium height and weight for her species and gender, blond hair, green eyes, the blue collar that designated her as working in the sciences. When she had cleared the way, he moved quickly, turning sidelong to steal through the closing doors. Once inside, Taranatar peered to his right, then took two silent steps to an empty space along the bulkhead.

The room was fairly large. Three oval windows in the back wall looked out into space, the trio flanked on either side by a pair of wide, tall cabinets. The cabinet on the right stood closed, but the one on the left was open; inside were several empty shelves, but others were filled with colorful artifacts that Taranatar could not identify. A table sat in front of the leftmost window, with two long, but much lower, tables lining the left and right bulkheads. In the center of the room, mats and pillows and blankets were strewn about, and amid these meandered nineteen small beings.

Children, Taranatar thought, grasping the concept, if not the reality, of what he saw. Two other beings fully formed males stood near the windows. All of the beings appeared to be either Bajoran or human, though two of the children may have been descended from both species.

The children were even smaller than Taranatar had anticipated. He found himself unable even to speculate about their ages. Had they been JemHadar, he would have put them at just a few days old, but he knew that most humanoids developed far more slowly than that. It was a sign of weakness.

Taranatar stopped himself. Withhold judgment, the Founder had told him. Taranatar stood against the wall, watched, and listened.

In an unsystematic, even a chaotic, manner, the children gathered up the mats, blankets, and pillows, and carried them over to the open cabinet. There, they dumped their cargo into a pile. One of the adults the human; the other was Bajoran thanked them, picking up the material and placing it onto the empty shelves in the cabinet. Despite the lack of ceremony, the actions seemed ritualistic to Taranatar, though he could not fathom their meaning.

After the children had completed their task, they returned to the center of the room, where they sat down on the floor. Near the middle of the three windows, the adult Bajoran thanked the children for cleaning up, then asked them if they wanted to look at some animals. The children sent up a clamor, some of their words indecipherable, but they identified the Bajoran man as Gavi. From the table by the window, Gavi

picked up a group of placards, each a third of a meter by half a meter in dimension. Then he crouched down, setting the placards on his thighs.

Okay, he said, what animal is this? He raised the top placard and displayed it for the children. This? Taranatar at once recognized the pictured beast, a brown-haired, four-legged pack animal native to Bajor called a pylchyk. The children all yelled their own responses, most of which were correct. Gavi said, That's right. This is a pylchyk, apparently ignoring the children who had called out the wrong answer, or given no answer at all. This animal lives on Bajor, and the people there use it to carry supplies and to tend their fields. Gavi's tone of voice, and the manner in which he pronounced his words, seemed very strange, almost as though he believed the children incapable of hearing or understanding him. Taranatar wondered if these might be defective children. He knew that defective Jem'Hadar were occasionally bred; when that happened, they were simply destroyed.

Gavi looked over at one of the children, a small human girl, and said, Can you tell me the name of this animal, Claudia? The girl, who had not properly identified the animal the first time, stared back at him without saying anything. This is a He waited for the girl to say the name of the animal, but she said nothing. Come on, Claudia, I know you can do it. This is a pyl a pyl Pylchyk, the girl erupted, and all of the children cheered.

Taranatar watched as Gavi went through all of the placards, showing them to the children and then asking questions and talking about the animals on them. Taranatar found himself fascinated by the process, despite or perhaps because of his lack of understanding about the purpose of the exercise. And Gavi even presented pictures of a few animals including treni cats and cotton-tailed jebrets, both supposedly native to Ferenginar of which Taranatar had absolutely no knowledge.

After Gavi had shown all of the placards, he asked the children who among them wanted to draw. The group made loud noises in response, several of the children putting their arms up in the air as though attempting to call attention to themselves. Gavi then asked what they should draw today, and again the children responded, although Taranatar could not tell if all of the responses actually answered the question. Gavi held up his hands, palms out, and quieted the children by saying, Wait, wait, one at a time. Then he pointed to the child closest to him, a young girl who looked essentially human, but with some vague Bajoran characteristics. What would you like to draw today, Mireh? he asked her.

I want to draw the wormhose, she said.

Gavi smiled at the girl, leaned in, and poked her in her midsection. Okay, Mireh. We can do that. But it's not called a wormhose.

The girl laughed at least, Taranatar thought it was laughter, though it could have been some other sort of spasm. It's not? she said.

No, Gavi told her, and then he addressed all the children. Who knows what it's called? he asked. A number of the children pushed their arms straight up into the air again, and two of them yelled, The wormhole!

That's right, Gavi said. The wormhole. He leaned back in to the girl. Can you say that, Mireh? Can you say wormhole?

The girl looked at him, crossed her arms in front of her, and said, very definitively, Yes.

Well, okay, Gavi said, laughing. He stood up and said, So let's draw. The children stood up and headed for the little chairs around the tables at the sides of the room. Gavi joined the human man, and the two moved across the room to the other cabinet, from which they extracted large pieces of white paper and what appeared to be colorful drawing implements.

Something bumped into Taranatar's leg. He looked down, just in time to see himself finish shimmering back into visibility. A human boy stood beside him, apparently having wandered while making his way to one of the tables. A sense of shock filled Taranatar at even having been approached without realizing it. And for this boy, this little human, to have penetrated his concentration and concealment he felt humiliated. Look at the alligator, the boy said, staring up into Taranatar's face. Unlike the Ferengi aboard Defiant, this being displayed no fear of him. He gazed up at Taranatar with a smile, then raised his arms. Up, the boy said.

The human man yelled Hey, get away from him! and then Gavi gasped. Taranatar looked up to see the

two men glaring at him. Gavi walked slowly forward, his arms outstretched, palms out, as though trying somehow to ward off Taranatar. Don't do anything, he said, and Taranatar wondered what he thought Taranatar might do. They're only children, he added.

As Gavi neared, Taranatar looked past him at the other man, and saw an expression of fear and anger on his face. It occurred to him that perhaps these men had also encountered JemHadar in the past, as the Ferengi had, and perhaps they had been wounded by them as well. The children, though Taranatar saw that most of the children were peering at him and smiling; some looked surprised, and some looked curious, but none of them appeared scared. Interesting, Taranatar thought, though he was unsure of the import of what he had noticed.

Gavi stopped two paces from Taranatar. Still moving slowly, he bent down and reached out for the boy. His fingers closed around a sleeve of the boy's shirt, but the boy pulled his arm away, his eyes never leaving Taranatar. Gavi, with an obvious sense of desperation, lunged forward, snatched the boy by the shoulder, and reeled him into his arms. The boy said, No, loudly, but Gavi told him to be quiet in a very stern tone of voice, and the boy quieted.

Take him, Joshua, Gavi said, staring at Taranatar's face, but clearly not speaking to him. The other man stepped forward and gathered the boy up, then moved back toward the windows again. Gavi asked, What do you want?

Taranatar held Gavi's gaze for several seconds before he said anything. The Bajoran stood slightly crouched, his muscles tensed, his attention focused, and Taranatar perceived that he would stand his ground if Taranatar charged. After three months on the space station, this was perhaps the most interesting thing Taranatar had learned.

Only to observe, he said at last.

Gavi's expression did not change, although Taranatar sensed an alteration in his stance. A moment ago, he had been poised to fight, but now he had relaxed somewhat, evidently trusting Taranatar's words.

A fool, Taranatar thought. He could be on the man before he had a chance to scream, snapping his neck where he stood. This time, Taranatar did not correct himself about judging the beings here; this was simple truth.

I think, Gavi said, I think you should leave.

Taranatar nodded. Yes. He took two quick paces to the doors, which opened before him. He stopped for a moment, still curious about all that had gone on here, not so much with respect to the two men, but with the children. Taranatar turned and looked back into the room, at the boy who had bumped into him. The boy looked back at him for a moment, then held out his arms in Taranatar's direction, and said, Alligator.

Taranatar whirled and left, more confused now than ever about life in the Alpha Quadrant.

23

Vaughn was angry.

Clad in full dress uniform, he stood in an area that the Vahni called the Remembrance Garden. The word remembrance induced just that for Vaughn right now, bringing to mind the lovely picture of the city that Ventu had thoughtfully presented to him. Both the gift and the giver had been lost in the collapse of the tower, and as Vaughn stood amid the enormous congregation of Vahni assembled in the garden, he craved vengeance for Ventu, for the more than three thousand Vahni who had died in the quakes and aboard their interplanetary ships, and for Ensign Roness. But vengeance, Vaughn knew, always carried with it a steep price, and in the end it paid for nothing. Short of that, the need for justice beckoned, though like so many things beauty, truth, duty the notion of what constituted just actions varied with perspective.

At one end of the garden an area in the city's largest park that could easily have accommodated Defiant for landing a group of Vahni marched solemnly up onto a proscenium. The lack of ordered sounds, disturbing to Vaughn even before the tragedy, he now found almost unbearable. The shifting mass of bodies in the garden made a noise like a collective death rattle. For comfort, he clung to the sounds of the

crew, sad though they were; more than half of the ship's complement had accompanied him to the ceremony, and all had wanted to attend. The memorial had lasted nearly two hours now, and as the crew had listened via their translators to the sentiments of the several Vahni officiating, tears had flowed. Sam Bowers had been particularly hard hit by the loss of Gerda Roness, though Nog, Trb, Kaitlin Merimark, and Jeanette Chao had also been close friends of the young ensign. Dr. Bashir had also seemed very moved during the Vahni tributes, though Vaughn suspected that the doctor's emotions were further beset by his concern for Dax; besides her own harrowing experience in the shuttle, she now faced dealing for the first time with losing a person under her command.

The Vahni on the stage had arranged themselves in rows atop a tiered platform, and one of them stepped forward from the center of the lowest row. Two large displays, one on either side of the stage, ensured that all in the crowd could view the proceedings. My [untranslatable] Vahni Vahltupali, and our honored friends from the United Group of Planets, the woman conveyed, as we conclude our observance, we would like to share our grief through a rite of [untranslatable]. Low tones stood in for the missing words. Around the garden, the Vahni all bowed, and Vaughn saw the ocular organs ringing the heads of those nearest him squint closed. Then a change passed through the many-hued assemblage, the flesh of all the Vahni drifting from their natural colors to an indigo so dark that it was almost black. No sounds came through the translators. Vaughn bowed his head and closed his eyes, wondering what human analogue there might be for this communal experience. Were the Vahni crying? Chanting? Was this a moment of silence, a moment of darkness?

Right now, darkness suited Vaughn. The irony of what had happened here, with respect to his own life, had not eluded him. He had recently climbed from a life of secrecy, struggle, and death, into one of openness, cooperation, and exploration. And here, less than two weeks into his first mission of discovery, the darkness had risen up behind and overtaken him. But Vaughn would not lament his own fate at a time when the futures of so many had been ripped away, and the futures of those left behind had been irrevocably damaged. What he would do was what he had done for decades he would fight. Already, the easiest battle had been won. In the three days since the destruction of the Vahni moon and the quakes on their world, the crew of Defiant had obliterated the potentially deadly fragments of a planet in the Vahni system that had also been destroyed. While Sagan's extensive damages would require a week to ten days more to repair, Chaffee's plasma leak had quickly been patched. The mended shuttle and Defiant had tracked down those planetary fragments that had might have, in time, headed toward the Vahni world and caused great devastation.

The tougher battle, though, still needed to be fought.

This time, the enemy would likely not be as easy to detect or vanquish as rocks floating through space. Since the Vahni moon had shattered, Ensign ChThane and his team of scientists had been able to determine that a strange, unidentifiable energy pulse had passed through the system at warp speed. The velocity implied an artificial cause, but although the crew had been unable to ascertain the exact nature of the pulse, all observable indications actually indicated a natural source.

Vaughn heard a rustling sound, and he raised his head and opened his eyes to find that all of the Vahni had reverted back to their regular colors. The Vahni at the front of the stage stood up fully and again addressed the crowd. Now, please join us as we [untranslatable]. Without turning what need did they have to turn, Vaughn realized, when their eyes encircled their heads? she raised her tentacles high, paused, and then brought them down dramatically. The flesh of the group on the stage erupted in a panoply of colors and forms, the individuals synchronized for the first few seconds, and then diverging in an amazing visual display. The translators captured the initial seconds. We look to the sky and see and then delivered only the low tone that signaled uninterpretable communication. All around the crew, Vaughn saw, the Vahni in the crowd began changing the colors and shapes on their flesh in time with the changes occurring on the Vahni onstage.

They're singing, Vaughn thought in wonder. His sense of appreciation for this extraordinary species only served to redouble his resolve to prevent the destructive force of the pulse from ever being visited upon them again. According to the Vahni, such events had been taking place on their world for more than two centuries. They had always occurred without warning and in no discernible pattern, except that the length

of the intervals between them had decreased each time, while the level of destructive power had increased. Two hundred years ago, the quakes had happened decades apart, causing little damage; the latest event had followed the previous one by less than a year, and obviously had been the most powerful they had ever experienced. Worse than that, Ensign ChThanes simulations revealed that, had the Vahni moon not been in the path of the pulse, effectively eclipsing it and preventing most of it from ever reaching the planet and Defiant the surface of the Vahni world would have been devastated, and many of its inhabitants lost. Vaughn knew that if another pulse passed through the system, with no moon to provide even the possibility of escaping its full force, the Vahni civilization would likely be wiped out. And Vaughn would not allow that to happen.

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The door chime signaled, and Kira looked up from a padd to see Admiral Akaar outside her office. Come in, she said flatly. Although pleased that the meeting she had requested three days ago would at last take place, she did not feel particularly happy about having to deal again with the laconic and disobedient admiral. This time, though, she vowed that she would wrest some answers from him. The doors parted, momentarily allowing the bustle of ops to enter along with Akaar, then shut behind him with a click, isolating her office once more. She put the padd down and opened a hand in the direction of the chairs in front of her desk. Please, Admiral, she said. Have a seat. She walked out from behind her desk and over to the replicator. Can I get you something to eat or drink?

As he sat, Kira noticed a padd in his left hand, its display dark. No, thank you, he said, and she thought she detected a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

Of course, Kira thought. This is my office, my territory, and I'm in control. Even something as simple as offering food demonstrated that, she knew. It had not escaped her notice that for her first meeting with Akaar, he had insisted that they use a conference room aboard Mjolnir. Since then, he had been to her office one other time, to bid farewell to Commander Vaughn. Her only other contact with him had been via companel, when she had attempted to learn more about his and Councillor ChThanes continued presence on the station, which was when she had requested this meeting.

Kira had not intended to get anything for herself from the replicator, but now she decided otherwise, wanting to maintain every small measure of control over this meeting that she could. She turned away from the admiral and ordered a raktajino. The replicator brightened and hummed, a mug materializing on the shelf in a haze of illumination. The hearty scent of the steaming liquid immediately floated through the room. Kira wrapped an index finger through the handle of the mug and lifted it to her lips. She imagined Akaar seething behind her at her deliberate movements, but when she turned and walked back to her desk, his face remained impassive. He had put his padd on the edge of her desk, she saw.

So Kira said as she set the mug down and sat in her chair, but the admiral interrupted almost before the word had even left her mouth.

Colonel, he said, it has come to my attention that, in the past two years, the Federation has provided Bajor with a number of large and mid-scale industrial replicators. Would you please detail for me the uses to which they have been put? As had happened during their first meeting, Kira found the admiral's inquiry more like an order.

Well, she finally said, I'm aware that two of the large replicators are in use at the Bajoran shipyards. And as quickly as that, she realized, Akaar had seized control of the meeting. She peered down at the cool, reflective surface of her desk, at the inverted image of the admiral between her padd and the mug of raktajino, and she thought it fortunate that no weapon happened to be lying within arms reach at the moment, or she might not have been able to resist the temptation to use it.

Two? he asked. Do you believe that is a sufficient number to support military readiness for Bajor?

Kira felt as though a warning shot had been fired across her bow. These questions followed in the same vein as those Akaar had asked when he had first arrived at the station, implicitly impugning the Bajoran government, and perhaps even the Bajoran people. Forgive me, Admiral, she said, striving to retain some measure of diplomacy, but isn't this information available to you from other sources than me? She resisted

her inclination to further suggest that Akaar had already acquired the data he now purported to seek from her.

Regardless, Colonel, Akaar said, does that mean that you cannot or will not answer my questions?

A surge of energy coursed through Kira's body along with the anger rising in her. She felt the need to get up and move about her office as a means of dispersing her frustration. Such an action, though, would likely cede even more control over the meeting to Akaar. Instead, she reached up and rested her arms atop her desk.

I can answer your question, Admiral, and I will, she told him. But I'm the one who asked you here. Three days ago, she added to herself, and then it occurred to her that his meeting had nothing at all to do with her request to see Akaar; it was taking place now only because he wanted to see her.

Of course, if you are not comfortable discussing your people the admiral said, as though Kira had not spoken at all. He allowed his thought to remain unfinished.

Not at all, Kira responded, with what she took to be just a little too much detachment to be completely convincing. She worked the console on her desk, accessing the latest reports she had regarding Bajoran shipbuilding. There is a third large-scale IR in use at the shipyards, as well as two mid-scale units, she said.

The admiral nodded almost imperceptibly. Do you think Bajor is committed to its own defense right now?

Of course it is, Kira said, her voice rising. The common defense is one of the central foundations of our government. But I don't care how many replicators the Federation has provided, they're still spread pretty thinly across Bajor. If you're implying that there is some other

I am implying nothing, Akaar said calmly. I only wish to know if you believe that Bajor is prepared to stand on its own.

I believe that's what I said, Admiral, she told him, and she could hear her anger slipping into her voice. And what are your reasons for believing that? he asked.

Kira brought her hands down flat on the surface of her desk, spread wide, fighting the urge to push herself up out of her chair and stalk through the office. You know what, Admiral? she said. I think maybe this is a conversation you'd be better off having with First Minister Shakaar or Minister of Defense Reydau.

I am having this conversation with you, Akaar said, and for an instant, his eyes smoldered. Kira thought she saw anger there, but not just anger something else that she somehow perceived had nothing at all to do with either her or Bajor. Your people are widely regarded as spiritual, Colonel, he went on, the look on his face gone so quickly that Kira wondered if she had imagined it. Is it possible that your collective spirituality defines your society so much that it precludes developing a strong military infrastructure?

Admiral, Kira said, taking her hands from atop the desk and dropping them onto the arms of her chair. The number of replicators we choose to use in the shipyards can't be used to characterize our dedication to defending Bajor. There are other needs housing, roads, dams, power plants Kira did not appreciate having to defend her people. But she also believed in her people, and she took strength from that belief. As a society, we must defend ourselves, but we're also accountable for other responsibilities. And yes, our spirituality guides us along our collective path.

What about those not on the path? Akaar asked.

Kira erupted, the oblique reference to the Attainder the final disrespect she was willing to take from this man. She slapped her hands onto the desktop and shot up out of her chair. That's it, she said. This meeting is over.

Akaar looked at her, his eyes almost on a level with hers even though he remained seated. He wore his face like an empty mask. He did not move. Colonel, he said. I am simply asking about your people, trying to learn about their ways of life, about who they are.

There's been nothing simple about any of your questions, Admiral, she said. In the few times you've talked to me since your arrival, you've managed to question Bajor's commitment to providing aid to Cardassia, our willingness to defend ourselves, our spirituality, the way I run this station, and now the Attainder.

Akaar gradually stood up to his full and imposing height. Kira, at half a meter shorter, never took her

gaze from his. She refused to be intimidated not by his size, not by his rank, not by anything. I was not making reference to your Attainder, Akaar said, and Kira thought that maybe maybe his demeanor had melted a bit; had he perhaps perceived that he had crossed the line? I am not here to pry into your personal life.

Why are you here? she demanded. Kira did not expect an answer, since none had been provided by the admiral during his time on the station, but this time, she actually received several.

I am in the Bajoran system to meet with Councillor zhThane and Minister Shakaar, Akaar said. I am on Deep Space 9 to help preside over a summit. And I am in your office to inform you that, three days from now, a delegation from Bajor, and two from the United Federation of Planets, will be arriving on this station.

A summit? Kira echoed. Delegations. Her mind spun back to her first meeting with Akaar, when she had guessed at the reason for his visit. Does this have to do with Bajor being admitted to the Federation? she asked. Again she did not expect the admiral to be forthcoming with information, and again he surprised her.

It does, he told her.

Although Kira had suspected that this event sat poised on the horizon, the confirmation still knocked the wind out of her. She thought she had been prepared for this, but was she? And were her people? She slowly sat back down, feeling a bit dazed. Across from her, Akaar took his seat again as well. Questions formed in rapid-fire fashion in Kira's mind, each leading directly to the next. Before she could decide which to ask first, though, the admiral answered the most important of them all.

Several months ago, he said, Minister Shakaar officially requested the renewal of Bajor's petition for membership. Kira knew that had been the purpose of Shakaar's visit to the Federation not long ago. Pending this summit, Akaar continued, the renewed petition will either be approved or denied.

What happens if it's denied? Kira wanted to know.

Bajor will be ineligible to reapply for membership for a period of no less than five years, Akaar said. He picked up the padd he had brought with him and activated it. The device, almost hidden by his massive hands, blinked to life with a quiet sequence of quick, electronic tones. In addition to Councillor zhThane and me, First Minister Shakaar will be attending, as well as the Trill and Alonis ambassadors to the Federation. He worked the controls on the padd, then handed it across the desk to Kira. This is a list of the staff members accompanying the two ambassadors and the minister, he said. Kira took the padd and scanned its contents, reading through the list of names, orange letters displayed on a black background. The summit will begin the day after the delegations arrive.

Kira looked up from the padd. As the practical considerations of hosting such an event on the station occurred to her, the shock of learning what lay ahead in the next few days began to fade. Obviously you'll want to step up security while the ambassadors are on the station, she said.

Yes, Akaar agreed. Given the nature of the negotiations, though, I would like it to be handled in as low-profile a manner as possible.

Of course, Kira said, finding it odd to suddenly be working with the admiral, rather than feeling as though they were operating at cross-purposes. Diplomats want to be safe, but they also don't like to be smothered.

That is my experience as well, the admiral said. I do have a concern about the security arrangements, though. So did Kira; she always did. Deep Space 9 was a big place that saw a lot of visitors, sitting as it did at the most important junction in the quadrant. Still, they had managed to keep the station secure for more than eight years, through far more difficult circumstances than they would be facing now. Colonel, Akaar went on, do you think your chief of security will be capable of performing the tasks that will be required of her?

Of course, Kira said at once. Her own reservations about Ro had been allayed both by the fine job she had been doing and by a general improvement in her attitude since being assigned here. If I didn't think Lieutenant Ro capable of doing the job, then she wouldn't still have the job.

Of course, Akaar said. But do you have any doubts at all about her willingness to follow orders?

Because I am inclined to replace her for this duty with Lieutenant Spillane, the security chief aboard

Gryphon.

Are you asking me if I trust Lieutenant Ro? Kira asked, bewildered. She knew that Ro had experienced some troubles when she had served in Starfleet, and that she had eventually walked away from it completely, but Kira nevertheless found it stunning that a Starfleet admiral would question the woman's integrity. I don't doubt Ro, she said. She's been a valuable addition to my staff. Kira considered whether or not to say more, to say the thought that had come to mind, and then decided that she would. I'm sure she would even make a fine Starfleet officer.

Akaar rose from his chair, apparently ready to end the meeting. If Bajor is admitted to the Federation, Colonel, he said, then which members of the Bajoran Militia are offered positions in Starfleet will be decided on an individual basis. For once, the admiral's antagonistic implication did not seem directed toward Kira. But you run this station, and so the personnel decisions are yours to make. He started for the doors. Good day, Colonel.

Something occurred to Kira, though, and she stopped him with a word. Admiral? He turned back to her as the doors opened. The sounds of consoles and voices drifted into the office from ops. Are matters of Bajoran faith, and our relief efforts to Cardassia, and our military capabilities those things relevant to Bajor's admission to the Federation?

Everything Bajor does, everything Bajor is, he proclaimed, is relevant. They regarded each other across the room, and then Kira stood, choosing to end the meeting by once again assuming a small measure of control.

Thank you, Admiral, she said, clearly dismissing him. Akaar turned and exited. She watched him go, thinking about her dealings with him, which she now viewed in a somewhat different light than she had for the past six weeks. His many questions now seemed understandable though not necessarily reasonable given the circumstances. To Kira, it now appeared that the admiral had been attempting to take Bajor's pulse through her, a prospect she did not especially like, considering the Attainder and the recent tension in her professional relationship with the first minister. Still, as Kira reviewed all of Akaar's pointed questions, she did not feel threatened, either for herself or for her people. Bajorans could stand up to any scrutiny. In the end, she felt certain that their renewed petition to join the Federation would be approved.

Kira sat back down. And as she thought about Bajor joining the Federation, she wondered, if he were here, what Captain Sisko would think.

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Bashir approached the cabin he shared with Ezri, anxious to see her before she returned to duty later today. He always looked forward to the two of them spending time together, of course, but he was motivated now more by his concern for her. After the incident aboard Sagan, Ezri had stayed overnight in the medical bay, and then at Vaughn's orders, had remained off-duty for the next two days owing not to her physical injuries, but to allow her some time to cope with the death of Ensign Roness. Bashir had privately concurred with that decision, but Ezri had asked to take a shift today, and the commander had agreed prematurely, Bashir feared. Ezri had been understandably despondent since the incident, and he worried about her adding to her own burden by resuming her duties too soon.

The door to the cabin opened with a low breath of air. As Bashir stepped across the threshold, he felt the tension in his body, the rigidity of his arms, the stiffness of his back, his hands clutched into fists. He willed himself to relax, not wanting to anticipate and thus contribute to any negative emotions that Ezri might be experiencing. When he had left for the medical bay this morning, she had still been asleep, and so he did not yet know how she was feeling today.

Inside their small quarters, Bashir was immediately pleased to see Ezri in her uniform, working at the command panel, as though she had begun to move past the terrible sorrows of the past few days. Perhaps it would not be too early for her to return to duty, after all, he thought. Hi, he said, any remaining anxiety quickly draining from his body. Are you ready for lunch? But when Ezri turned toward him, he saw her eyes rimmed in red. Tension flooded through him once more, though he strived not to show it.

Hi, Ezri said, attempting to inject a lightness into her tone and manner that she very obviously did not feel. Actually, Im not really very hungry.

Neither Ezris appearance nor her admission surprised Bashir; this was what he had expected. The loss of Roness had been difficult for Ezri, he knew, not least of all because her orders had led directly to the ensigns death. Thats all right, he said, trying to deflect attention from her lack of appetite. Im not all that hungry myself. As he looked at Ezri, he noted her pale complexion, as well as a slight puffiness below her eyes, both indications of her recent sleeplessness. She had awoken abruptly several times during the past two nights, and although she had not spoken of nightmares, Bashir felt certain that she had been visited by them. Whatre you doing? he asked, pointing to a series of numbers and several blocks of text on the companel. He hoped to ease Ezris grief, at least for the moment, simply by behaving as though nothing were amiss.

Im just looking at the readings of the pulse, she said, glancing around at the display. Bashir did not quite know what to make of that. Ezri was no scientist, and although several of Daxs previous hosts had been, he doubted that she would be able to add anything to the crews research. Im not having much luck, she added, confirming his thoughts. To this point, Bashir knew, EnsignchThane and his staff had been unable to identify the precise nature of the pulse, although the direction from which it had traveled had been evident. Defiant now journeyed back along that path, Commander Vaughn hoping that the crew could find a means of ending the threat to the Vahni. Bashir felt the vibrations of the engines through the decking as the ship flew at warp.

He moved farther into the room, walking over to the lower of the rooms two beds and sitting down on the edge of the mattress. How are you feeling? he asked, tapping at his shoulder. When Sagan had been struck by the lunar fragments, Ezri had suffered a hairline fracture of her left radius, and an anterior dislocation of her right sternoclavicular joint. Bashir had repaired and treated both injuries, and by now, any discomfort should have faded completely. But Ezri answered his question in a different way than he had asked it.

Actually, she said, Im feeling pretty down. She switched off the companel, but continued sitting before it. Bashir nodded, his heart heavy. Thats completely understandable after what youve been through, he said. He wanted to go to her and take her in his arms, but by remaining seated, Ezri seemed to indicate that she wanted something else from him right now besides comforting. Maybe it would be a good idea to take another few days before you go back on duty, he suggested to her.

No, Ezri said at once. I have to go back to the bridge.

I know you feel that way, Bashir said, but youve been affected so deeply by what happened that Im supposed to be affected, she interrupted. Were all affected. Im sure even Commander Vaughn has been having difficult moments since She hesitated only an instant before saying the words. since Gerda died.

Yes, of course, Bashir said, supposing that she must be right their small crew of fortythirty-nine now had all been hurt by the loss of one of their own. Vaughn had held a memorial yesterday, and there had been few dry eyes. Oddly enough, Ezri had managed not to cry at the service, even though she had wept back in their cabin both before and afterward. Were all affected, Bashir went on, but its obviously different for you; you were there.

Im the first officer, Ezri declared. I have to return to duty.

Ezri, he said, and now he did stand up. The crew can get along without you for a few more days.

Without me, yes, she agreed. But not without their first officer. The position is my responsibility. I cant let my personal situation, my emotions, paralyze me. I have professional obligations. The ship needs a first officer, and not somebody substituting in the position, but the person chosen for that duty.

I understand, Bashir said. He took the few steps over to her and put a hand tenderly on her shoulder.

You need to take your mind off of what happened, and maybe even to prove to yourself that you can do the job.

No, thats not it, Ezri said, her voice rising. She stood, and Bashir let his hand fall from her shoulder. She paced past him, then turned to face him from the corner of the room. This isnt about my needs. Its about my responsibilities. She paused, looking down at the floor, and when she spoke again, her voice had

quieted. I feel horrible about Gerda. I wish she hadn't died, and I suppose that if I could, I'd give up my life for hers. But I know that I did the right thing. The actions Gerda and I took, the orders I gave, saved so many lives down on the planet. I feel survivors' guilt, but I don't feel guilty for the command decisions I made.

Bashir heard the words of a counselor in what Ezri was saying, and he wondered if she was helping herself with the truth, or hiding behind it. He worried that she might be overcompensating for her part in the loss of Roness. In fact, ever since Tiris Jast had been killed, Ezri had taken on more and more responsibilities, and Bashir could not help thinking now that so many of her actions in the last few months had been reactions to tragedy as though, by assuming a position of leadership, she would be able to avert such disasters in the future.

Even if you don't feel responsible for Roness's death, he told her, you still have emotions. You said yourself that you feel down, that you feel horrible.

Yes, I do feel that way, Ezri said. But I told you how I was feeling because I need to talk about it, not so that you can protect me.

It's my job to protect you, he said, taking a step toward her.

As my lover, Ezri asked, or as the ship's chief medical officer?

Both, I suppose. As Defiant's CMO, he had the authority to relieve Ezri of anybody else of their position, even over the objections of the captain. He had not considered invoking his power to keep Ezri from returning to duty, but if that became necessary

You don't have to worry about me professionally, Ezri said. I have resources available to me to deal with the responsibilities of my position, resources that nobody else aboard has.

Bashir understood the reality of that eight other lifetimes of experiences, collected within the Dax symbiont. But Ezri was not any of the other of Dax's hosts, and he believed that she had not even fully integrated all of their memories. Because of Jadzia's presence and experiences while aboard DS9, Bashir had studied a great deal about Trill physiology, and he realized how difficult joining must have been. It must still be for Ezri, who had never trained for it. During the last eighteen months, he had witnessed firsthand the problems that she had experienced as she learned to exist as a joined being.

So yes, Ezri had resources, but Bashir was not convinced that she would be able to avail herself of them in a way that would help her right now. Dax's previous hosts had memories of coping with loss, but they also had memories of feeling loss, and those might be recalled to Ezri now, perhaps even deepening her sorrow. Joining, Bashir knew, required a delicate balance even under the best circumstances, and he was not convinced that Ezri had yet achieved the equilibrium she would need to live out a healthy, joined life. He said none of this to her, though, wanting neither to add to her troubles, nor to deny her the support she sought from him right now. Instead, he said, All right, agreeing not to address his concerns about her resuming her position as the ship's first officer. He opened his arms, and she went to him. As he held her, she told him how she felt, about the tremendous emptiness and sadness she carried inside her, and about her guilt at having survived when Roness had not. Bashir listened, trying to provide her the support she needed.

But he also knew that he could not surrender his other concerns about Ezri. He would continue to be there for her, to give her guidance when she asked for it, and to help and love her through it all. But when she returned to duty, he would also watch her.

Watch, and worry.

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Quark listened to the sounds of the bar a fair number of voices, but neither enough rings of glassware nor enough groans of loss at the dabo wheel and he realized that he actually missed Dr. Bashir and Chief O'Brien. Of course, the 57th Rule of Acquisition: Good customers are as rare as latinum; treasure them never proved more true than when good customers abandoned you. Even though they were Starfleet types, Bashir and O'Brien had at least known how to drink and spend money. They might not have gambled enough to satisfy Quark's appetites, but darts had been a thirsty game for them.

Quark glanced from behind the bar over to the corner where the dartboard still hung. Dr. Bashir still played occasionally, but things had certainly not been the same since the chief had gone back to Earth. Earth, Quark muttered. Hew-mons. He shook his head in disgust.

Grabbing a rag, he began to wipe down the bar, lamenting his middling fortunes as he did so. Since the Europani and the convoy crews had departed the station, business had sunk to a steady but unspectacular level. As he had expected, the presence of the Gryphon crew on the station had done little to improve profits, and the absence of Defiant had actually hurt them. Quark still hoped that commercial traffic through the wormhole would eventually resume, but he did not, as a rule, put much stock in hope. The 109th Rule of Acquisition said about dignity what might just as well have been said about hope that an empty sack is worth the sack. At this rate, Quark would wither and die in the bar decades from now, having earned just enough profit to pay for his Certificate of Dismemberment and maybe, just maybe, a little memorial plaque for the corner. It can replace the frinx ing dartboard, he mumbled to himself.

Dabo, came the cry of several voices from across the room, and Quark peered over to see only a handful of gamblers around the wheel. Treir, long, slender, and deliciously green, stood over the dabo table, her scant outfit clinging alluringly to her body, its iridescent fabric titillating the eye by allowing just enough jade skin to show through without causing a riot. But only just. She had been one of the few bright spots in the bar recently though he paid her dearly for that brightness usually generating a good turnout around the dabo wheel.

As Quark continued to swab the bar, he saw Grimp approach carrying a tray with several glasses of varying shape, size, and color. One of them, an orange-tinted flute, stood almost completely full. Grimp came around the bar and started to unload the empties onto the recycle shelf. Quark wiped his hands with the rag and tossed it beneath the bar, then walked over to Grimp and pointed at the full glass. What's this? he wanted to know.

Argelian sparkling wine, Grimp said. Lieutenant McEntee wanted to try it.

She wanted to try it? Quark asked, already jumping ahead and knowing what he would hear.

Ah, she, ah, she didn't like it, Grimp stammered. He had loaded all of the empty glasses onto the shelf, and now he lifted the flute and reached to put it there as well. Quark seized his wrist and stopped him, the sparkling wine splashing over the rim of the glass and onto both their hands.

She did pay for it, though, Quark demanded. Right?

Well, ah, since she didn't drink it

Grimp, you fool, Quark said, raising his voice. I'm running a bar here, not a charitable taste-testing facility. The waiter flinched at the loud words, his eyes squinting and his shoulders hunching. Grimps cowering reminded Quark of his own brother, back in the good old days when Rom had worked in the bar, before he had become station engineer, before he had become

But that was a subject Quark did not need to think about right now; his mood was sour enough without having to think about how Rom was currently working to destroy Ferengi culture. He released Grimps wrist, and said, Go back and charge her for the drink. The waiter hesitated, obviously not wanting to confront the Gryphon officer. Charge her, Quark insisted, or it's coming out of your salary. Maybe he would dock Grimps pay anyway, he thought, for either impertinence or incompetence or maybe for both. Grimp put the flute down on the recycle shelf, the glass clinking against another, then slunk with his tray back out onto the floor.

A movement drew Quark's attention, and he looked down to the end of the bar near the entrance. Seated there, Morn held up a tall, blue, and empty glass, wiggling it in Quark's direction. Thank the Blessed Exchequer that there are some constants in the universe, he thought. He quickly retrieved the rag and wiped the sparkling wine from his hand, then ducked beneath the bar and pulled out a short, bulbous bottle. An emblem of the First Federation adorned the import hologram around its squat neck. Quark removed the stopper from the clear bottle as he strode over to Morn, who had deposited his glass in front of him. Quark poured out a healthy serving of the bright orange tranya. Well, my friend, Quark said as he sealed the bottle back up, I hope you're having a better evening than I am.

Morn offered a sideways glance every nearly a leer at a lithe Mathenite woman sitting beside him. He

winked at Quark, then raised his replenished glass, obviously about to make a toast. Before he could, though, a loud crash and the clatter of breaking glass filled the bar.

The bottle of tranya still in hand, Quark raced out to find Frool sprawled on the floor. The waiter still held a tray in his outstretched hands, pieces of broken glass scattered out in front of him in many colors.

Quark lowered himself to his knees beside Frool to be sure he was all right. The waiter had somehow hurt his leg last week, and he had been limping around ever since. Quark had warned him to be careful, but he clearly had not listened.

Frool rose to his feet. Quark rose with him, a hand steadying the waiter's back and brushed himself off. "I'm all right," he said. He pointed to the shattered glass on the floor. "Sorry about that."

"Frool, you gimp," Quark said, and his words filled the bar, which had quieted at the sound of the crash.

Quark turned and raised his arms out in front of him, gesturing with his fingers to his customers.

"Everything's all right, folks. Nothing to see here. Just go back to your drinking and gambling. He looked over at Treir and saw again the empty seats around her. Plenty of room at the dabo wheel, he added.

Slowly, the noise level began to increase as people returned to what they had been doing—mostly talking, Quark assumed, since none of them were drinking, gambling, or spending enough.

"I'll clean that up," Frool said, indicating the bits of glass on the floor.

"You do that," Quark said. "And it's coming out of your wages." Frool nodded resignedly and moved off.

Quark looked to the customer nearest him—Ensign Ling from ops, seated at the bar—shugged, and said,

"You just can't get good help these days. He started to head back behind the bar, but then another eruption of sound accosted him.

"Dabo," came the yell of mingled voices. Quark reached past Ensign Ling and put the bottle of tranya down on the bar, then hurried toward the dabo table. As he walked, the heavy clink of latinum drifted to him. Normally a beautiful sound, in this context Treir counting out somebody's winnings—it made him sick.

At the table, Quark took hold of Treir's elbow and leaned in beside her. "What's going on?" he asked.

Treir shifted and bent, reducing her height of nearly two meters, and then draped a long, perfectly toned arm across his shoulders, the side of her body rubbing up temptingly alongside his. "Were paying off another lucky winner here at Quark's," she said with an appealing lilt in her tone. "Just like we always do."

Quark knew she had said this as an enticement to the people at the table, and to anybody else within earshot, but there were not nearly enough customers around the dabo wheel to suit Quark. More than that, her words carried a little too much truth for him right now; he shuddered to count how many times she had paid out on a spin of dabo this evening.

"Well, stop doing it," he grouched. "And get some more people gambling," he added, louder.

In an instant, Treir had extricated herself from around him. She faced Quark, peering down from her full height. "Get 'em yourself," she said, the singsong quality of her voice now gone. "I can't force people to come into this." She hesitated, and Quark dreaded whatever descriptive noun she would choose to finish her sentence. "In place," she finally said, apparently realizing—and wisely so—that it would not benefit her to insult the establishment that paid her salary.

Quark stared up at her. "It's your job to get customers to come in here and gamble," he told her. "At the table, two people stood up and moved away. Quark pointed after them. "Look," he said. "See what you're doing. Now you're chasing customers out of here."

"You're about two milliseconds away from chasing me out of here," Quark, she said. Then, lowering her voice to an ominous pitch, she said through gritted teeth, "You'd better watch it."

Quark had just about had enough. He thought that perhaps he should chase Treir and her steep salary out of here. This did not mark the first time since he had hired her that she had argued with him. Worse than that, she often behaved as though she were his business associate, rather than merely his employee.

"Listen," Quark told her, "if you want to leave." He stopped. He had just heard something unexpected to his left, but when he looked in that direction, he saw nobody there. "Odo," he thought immediately. The constable always used to attempt to insinuate himself into the bar to spy on him, but Quark had learned to distinguish the nearly subaudible sound of shifting fluid that Odo made, no matter his form. But Quark dismissed the notion as quickly as it had come to him. Not only was Odo off on some planet in the Gamma Quadrant oozing around with the Founders, but the only similarity between the sound Quark had

just heard and the sound Odo made was that there appeared to be no source for it.

And then something occurred to Quark. He reached out to the dabo table and swiped an empty glass from atop it. He lowered it to his side, then whipped his arm upward, tossing the glass in the direction of the sound. The glass tumbled in a swift, flat arc, reflecting the orange and yellow light produced by the artwork on the wall.

And then the glass froze in midair.

The air beyond the unmoving glass shimmered, and a JemHadar soldier flickered into existence. Quark heard several people gasp around the bar. He could not really tell from the face they all looked alike to him but from the black coveralls the JemHadar wore, he assumed this was the one Odo had sent here. The idea that the former constable might try to reach through the wormhole to disrupt Quark's business seemed a natural one.

The JemHadar did not move, but stood staring directly at Quark. Other sounds rose in the bar now glasses being put down on tables, chairs being pushed back, footsteps. Quark looked quickly around and saw that many of his customers had gotten up, and still others had already started toward the exit. Quark to security, he yelled, and the sounds of people rushing toward the door grew in number and volume. Still, the JemHadar did not move, and Quark supposed that was a good thing. The last time a JemHadar had appeared in the bar, he had later killed numerous people and attempted to destroy the station. This one often used the holosuites, causing Quark only the trouble of frequent repairs, but that was a much different thing than suddenly appearing in the middle of the bar out of nowhere. When he received no response to his call for help, he said again, Quark to sec

This is Ro, came the lovely voice of the lovely lieutenant. What can I do for you, Quark?

Lieutenant, Quark said, purposely not using Larens given name, wanting to impress upon her the need for her professional assistance. We've got a serious disturbance in the bar. We need help.

I'll be right there, Ro said, and Quark was pleased to hear a sense of urgency in her voice. He heard the comlink close.

Quark stood motionless, continuing to stare at the JemHadar. He wanted to turn and run, or at least back slowly away, but he feared that might incite the soldier to violence. He remembered vividly how a JemHadar had maimed his nephew, destroying one of Nogs legs. So he remained still. Directly behind him, he heard Treir's careful, measured breathing, and he could tell that she was scared too. That troubled Quark even more; Treir was a tough female.

Well? What do you want? Quark finally blurted, unable to control his fear. The JemHadar said nothing and continued to stare at him. The eyes reminded Quark of somebody else, he realized Garak, with that cold, intense glare that could seemingly penetrate neutronium. Quark had heard a rumor a while ago that Garak, when he had served with the Obsidian Order, had once stared at a man for ten hours straight, ultimately forcing the man into submission, and though Quark had never been able to substantiate the claim, he had never for a moment doubted its veracity.

The sound of footsteps rapidly approaching out on the Promenade reached Quark. When he heard them enter the bar, he took a chance and turned. Ro stood just inside the entrance now, phaser drawn and held out ahead of her. Sergeant Etana and Sergeant Shul flanked her, their weapons also in their hands. People streamed past them, headed out onto the Promenade.

Quark watched as Ro scanned the room, her eyes quickly finding him. Quark, she said, what is it? What's the trouble? Before he could answer her, though, he saw that her gaze had moved past him and had evidently taken in the JemHadar. Taranatar, she said. Is there a problem?

Not with me, the JemHadar said.

Ro approached the dabo table, her phaser now held at her side and pointing down toward the floor. As she reached Quark and Treir, she nodded to Treir and made a quick motion with her head, obviously indicating that she should leave. Treir apparently did not need any more invitation than that; she backed away toward the door.

Ro stepped directly up to Quark. What did he do? she asked him, clearly referring to the JemHadar. Do? Quark said. He chased away what few customers I had.

Ro nodded, then looked over Quark's shoulder for a second. How did he do that? she asked. The

broken glass by the bar?

What? Quark asked, and then remembered the tray his waiter had dropped. No, no, that was Frool. But this JemHadar was slinking around here, invisible. His voice rose and his words began coming faster. And then he appeared out of nowhere and terrified everybody included. You saw them pouring out of here. He pointed past Ro toward the door.

A sympathetic expression played across Ros face, and Quark thought that she could see how angry and frightened he felt. Then she looked back over toward the JemHadar. He looks like hes been drinking, she said, any sense of exigency suddenly leaving her voice.

What? Quark said, perplexed. He moved to Ros side so that he could see both her and the JemHadar, and then he saw the glass in the JemHadars hand. No, no, Quark protested. I threw that in his direction when I heard a strange noise. Thats how I got him to uncloak.

I see, she said, nodding her head. To Quarks dismay, she holstered her weapon.

Wait, what are you doing? he said, his words emerging in a rush.

Taranatar, Ro said, stepping toward the JemHadar, what are you doing in here?

I am observing, he said. Nothing more.

I see, she said. She turned back toward Quark, and she still looked as though she felt sorry for him. So youre not here to hurt anybody? she asked, obviously of the JemHadar.

No.

All right, she said. She motioned to her deputies, and said, Etana, Shul, you can go. Then she walked back over to Quark.

Youre not letting him go? Quark said.

He hasnt done anything criminal, Ro explained.

Cant you at least get him out of my bar? Quark wanted to know.

Ro sat down at the dabo table. Quark, she said, lowering her voice, apparently so that only he could hear her. You cant deny admittance to somebody just because of his species. You know that. Im sure youve been the victim of that sort of attitude.

But

I know how you feel, she said. Believe me, thereve been plenty of people Id have liked to have kept out of plenty of places. A lightness dressed her words, and Quark thought that she was trying to ease his tension. He was gratefulmore than grateful; happyfor her concern, but it did not change the situation in the bar.

Hes wrecking my business, he said. When you arrived, you saw those peoplethose customers leaving.

Im sorry, Quark, she said, and he believed her. I really am. But simply being a JemHadar isnt a crime.

But disturbing the peace is, he said. And incitement to riot.

All I see right now is incitement not to play dabo, she said. And thats not a crime, she repeated.

It ought to be, Quark persisted. Im not joking.

I know youre not, Ro said. She leaned forward on her chair so that her face drew very close to his. He could smell a delicate scent on her, and it surprised him; he had never noticed her wearing perfume before. The bouquet was somewhat mild, but still very pleasantand the idea of it, of her dabbing it onto her body, was much more than merely pleasant. When I get off duty, she said, maybe Ill come back here and play a little dabo myself.

Quark felt a tingle in his lobes. You will? he asked, his voice now a whisper.

It might be fun, she said. Ive been thinking these past few days about taking a few risks.

Well, if youre up for some risks, Quark started, but then he heard a footstep. He jerked his head up to see Taranatar moving toward the bar. Quark backed away from Ro a step. You have to do something about him, he said, pointing.

Ro sat back up and watched the JemHadar as he crossed the room. Quark saw the few customers who remained allow him a wide berth as he passed. Fortunately, the JemHadar did not stop at the bar, but continued walking and headed out the door. Hes scaring my customers, Lieutenant, Quark said, again employing Ros title in an attempt to impress upon her the seriousness of the situation.

She looked back at him. All right, she said. Ill speak with Colonel Kira about it.

Make sure you tell her what you saw, Quark insisted. This isn't just about me; it's about the people on the station being able to enjoy the vital services I provide.

Ro smiled at him. Of course, she said. She stood up, then walked around the dabo table and out the door.

Quark sighed heavily. He tried to think of what he could say to the few customers still there to encourage them to spend their money, but nothing came to mind. What a night, he thought. He straightened his jacket with a tug at the waist, then went back to the bar. Frool had come back, he saw, and was preparing to clean up the broken glass. Grimp had also returned to the bar, and Quark considered asking him whether or not he had succeeded in getting Lieutenant McEntee to pay for the drink she had sent back, but he found that he did not have the energy. Ill just dock his pay, anyway, he thought. Just in case. Then he wondered if Laren would actually come back to the bar later. She had probably been joking, but he thought he would put on some cologne himself. Just in case.

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The planetary system had been obliterated.

Vaughn leaned forward in the command chair and peered at the main viewscreen as Defiant approached the devastation. A vast field of debris most fragments no larger than a human fist stretched across billions of billions of cubic kilometers. These were not planetesimals; this was not a solar system in the early stages of being born, but one that had lived and died. Every planet, every moon, every comet and asteroid, had been pulverized here everything but the star, which they assumed had endured by virtue of its considerable mass, density, and energy. Vaughn had many times witnessed the cruelty of an indifferent universe, and he could only hope now that the system had not been inhabited and that this would not be the fate that would ultimately befall the Vahni Vahl Tupali.

Im seeing the same strange energy readings we recorded in the Vahni system, Lieutenant Bowers reported from tactical. As he and the rest of the bridge crew worked, the sounds of programmed tones, the audio cues of the various panels, played through the air like an electronic concert.

Vaughn lifted his chin from his hands. This didn't just happen though? he asked. The debris seemed too widely dispersed for this to have occurred recently.

No, sir, Ensign chThane confirmed at the sciences console. Nog and Prynn worked the other primary bridge stations. The pulse did pass through the system, but the residual energy readings, and the granularity and distribution of the rubble, indicate that this happened over time, probably the result of multiple events.

All of which supports what the Vahni told us, Vaughn said, nodding slowly. That this has been afflicting their planet for centuries. And if all of the Vahni information proved accurate and Vaughn had no reason to believe otherwise then they could expect another, more powerful pulse to sweep through their system in less than a year possibly even in just a few months. Vaughn leaned back in his chair and sighed heavily. Is there anything to suggest how much farther away the source of the pulse might be?

No, sir, Bowers said. He paused, operating his controls, and then said, Captain, Im reading a concentration of energy about a hundred fifty million kilometers from the star and theres a mass there. Its a planet, chThane announced.

Intact? Vaughn asked, and thought, How can that be? He stood up and walked over to the sciences station.

Yes, sir, chThane answered. He consulted his display, and then quoted readings for the planets mass, diameter, and distance from its star, all of which fell within the normal range for class-M worlds.

Vaughn leaned toward the console, bringing a hand up on the back of chThanes chair. Are there life signs? he asked, searching the panel himself for an answer. Or any indications of a habitable ecosphere? The ensign worked his controls before responding. I cant tell, he finally said. The energy readings are interfering with sensors.

Vaughn straightened and turned toward the main viewscreen, as though he would be able to see the unexpected planet across the cold kilometers. He looked at the rock fragments tumbling silently through

space, barely visible in the darkness as they caught the negligible light of the distant sun, and he thought he suddenly understood something. Ensign, he told chThane, transfer the coordinates of the planet to the conn. Vaughn paced back over to the command chair. Shields, he said.

Shields up, Bowers confirmed a moment later.

Ensign Tenmei, Vaughn said, take us in over the ecliptic. The debris of the system had spread out more or less along the plane of the solar equator. Best speed.

Aye, sir, Prynn said. Her hands moved deftly across the flight-control console, summoning Defiant's wings. The bass hum of the engines sent deep vibrations through the ship's structure.

Vaughn sat down and gazed toward the viewscreen again. The stars shifted and the wreckage of the system fell away as Defiant changed its heading. Vaughn imagined the energy pulse repeating across decades, across centuries, growing ever stronger, battering planets and moons into nothing but shards, and he wondered how a lone world could have survived when nothing else had. And as Defiant brought the crew closer to the mystery, he could only conjure up one explanation: the planet had to be the source of the pulse.

The atmosphere roiled, a cauldron of churning shadows. Currents and eddies seethed through the dark, gray sea of clouds, imparting to it an inhospitable, even violent, appearance. The cover encompassed the planet, an inexplicable mixture of aeriform elements and energy surges—energy reminiscent of the pulse itself, though on a much smaller scale.

Vaughn sat in the command chair and watched the turbulent scene on the viewscreen. Ensign chThane had calculated the orbits of the Vahni world and the one below, as well as the sidereal motions of their respective stars, and verified that the pulse had come from here. Further, the science officer had utilized stable cloud masses at the poles to determine the rotational period of the planet, allowing him to pinpoint the area on the surface where the pulse had originated. Defiant circled above that location now in a geosynchronous orbit.

Anything? Vaughn asked, his eyes still on the viewer, still on the heaving, twisting mass of clouds obscuring the planet. The sight put him in mind of another world, from across the galaxy and long ago, beset by the throes of a nuclear winter. In this case, he thought, the comparison might turn out to be apt. Negative, chThane responded, checking his readouts. I'm still not receiving any telemetry from the probe. It should emerge from the atmosphere in just under four minutes, Lieutenant Bowers offered.

Thank you, Vaughn said. When sensors, communications, and transporters had failed to penetrate the sea of clouds, Vaughn had ordered a probe launched, in the hope that it could reach the surface and gather useful data about whatever was down there. Contact with the probe had been lost as soon as it had descended into the atmospheric cover, but it had been programmed to return to the ship at a specified time.

The bridge grew quiet as the crew waited, only the gentle rumble of the thrusters intruding into the stillness. Vaughn glanced around and saw Nog and Prynn staring at the viewscreen, while Bowers and chThane studied their panels. The crew seemed bound by a sense of tension, Vaughn thought, which he recognized as an amalgam of anticipation and anxiety; they wanted very much to help the Vahni, and at the same time, had doubts about whether they would be able to do so. Whatever data the probe provided would likely determine the nature and extent of the action they could take.

Vaughn recalled the terrible threat to Europa Nova not long ago, and he understood that if the Defiant crew could not put an end to the pulses, then the Vahni would have to be evacuated from their world, just as the Europani had. Considering that first contact had only just been made, and that the Vahni did not possess warp drive, suggesting a rescue effort to Starfleet would be a delicate matter. The notion of sending a squadron of evacuation vessels into the Gamma Quadrant, and the massive logistics involved in transporting more than a thousand times as many individuals as had been moved from Europa Nova, would also not be welcomed easily. Vaughn felt certain, though, that he could convince the right admirals and the right Federation councillors to see the Vahni civilization saved. But unlike the Europani, the Vahni would never be able to return to their home, which would doubtless be destroyed by the next pulse.

One minute, Bowers announced into the silence. And then, Thirty seconds, and after that, Ten. Vaughn watched the viewscreen, though he knew the ships sensors would pick up the probe well before his eyes did. Zero, Bowers said at last.

Vaughn waited. Ten seconds. Twenty. Half a minute. The low buzzes of failure indications of unsuccessful attempts to communicate with the probe, and to scan for it reached Vaughn from the tactical and sciences stations. Ensign chThane?

Theres no contact from the probe, he answered, a hint of disappointment rising in the science officers usually even voice.

I cant read it on sensors either, Bowers added.

All right, Vaughn said, running a hand through the silver hair of his beard. Lets give it a little longer. He reached over to the console to the left of the command chair. He tapped at the controls, walking his way through a couple of menus until he accessed a chronometer. He noted the ships time, and then allowed fifteen minutes to pass. The bridge crew said nothing, alternately checking their instruments and gazing up at the viewscreen at the convulsing atmosphere displayed there. Report, Vaughn finally said.

Still no contact with the probe, chThane responded at once. Bowers simply looked up from his console and shook his head when Vaughn looked his way.

All right, Vaughn said. Either the probe failed on its own, or something caused it to fail. Opinions?

The energy surges within the atmosphere might have affected it, Nog suggested. They could have shorted out or overloaded some of its systems. If guidance or propulsion were damaged, then the probe might have crashed.

Sir, Prynn said, turning her chair around to face Vaughn, even if the probe withstood the energy surges, it may not have survived its flight through the clouds. She peered over her shoulder toward the viewscreen, at the writhing atmosphere, then looked back at him. It looks like a rough ride.

Vaughn nodded and stood up from the command chair. Is it possible, he asked the bridge crew, that the clouds themselves are the source of the pulse?

I dont think so, sir, chThane said. There doesnt appear to be any means within the atmosphere to generate that amount of energy. I think it more likely that the clouds have retained the energy within them as a result of the pulse passing through them from below.

I concur, sir, Nog said. The elemental composition of the clouds wouldnt support the production of energy. Bowers also added his concurrence.

So we clearly need to find out whats down there, Vaughn said. Prynn turned back to her console as he walked toward the sciences station. He stopped to the left of the conn. Ensign chThane, he said, is it possible that some sections of the atmosphere are less dense than others? Or contain fewer or weaker surges?

The science officer looked up from his panel. The soft lights of his display lent a slight, orange cast to one side of his blue face and white hair. Yes, sir, he said. It may even be likely; the atmosphere is clearly in flux, which would probably leave some areas not as deep as others. But Im not sure if the sensors will be able to penetrate the clouds at any depth.

Lets find out, Vaughn said. He looked down at Prynn. Ensign Tenmei, break geosynchronous orbit and take us down. Keep us He turned to chThane. Five kilometers, Ensign? he asked. With the possibility that the probe had been damaged by its passage through the clouds, Vaughn would not want to risk a similar fate for Defiant.

That should be a safe distance, chThane said.

Keep us five kilometers above the clouds, Vaughn told Prynn.

Aye, sir, she said. Vaughn watched as her hands danced expertly across her console. Viewer ahead, he ordered, and one of the crew probably Bowers made the adjustment. Vaughn saw the image change to a flickering starfield, the flickering the result of the rubble in the system moving between the ship and the backdrop of distant stars. On the left stretched the gray arc of the planet. As Vaughn watched, the planet began to fill more of the screen, Prynn guiding Defiant downward. The image imparted a sense of movement, though the inertial dampers prevented an accompanying sensation. The dark horizon loomed as the ship grew closer to the planet.

Prynn counted out the distance to the top of the cloud cover. The beeps and tones of the conn were joined by those of the tactical and sciences consoles as Lieutenant Bowers and Ensign chThane operated the ships sensors. Prynn reached five kilometers, and the ship leveled off, the arc of the planet stabilizing on the viewscreen.

Im not reading past the clouds, chThane reported, but scans indicate that they do vary in density and depth.

Very good, Vaughn said. Lets find the

The ship was rocked. Vaughn felt himself pitch forward, and he instinctively reached for the flight-control console. His hand found it as his body twisted around, leaving him facing aft. He managed to keep from losing his footing. The ship shuddered, a roar filling the bridge, as though Defiant had been pounded by weapons fire. Prynn, he yelled over the noise. He saw her hands moving across her panel even before he issued the command. Take us up. He wondered how she could even see her controls, let alone work them, with the ship shaking as much as it was. But then Defiant s flight smoothed out, the sound returning to its earlier level. No, Vaughn realized. The sounds not the same.

Something hit us from below, Bowers reported without having to be asked. Shields are down to seventy-one percent.

Thrusters are offline, Nog said. The impulse engines A note of confusion laced the engineers voice.

I brought them online when the thrusters went down, Prynn explained. That accounted for the change in the sound of the ship, Vaughn knew. He dropped his hand from the side of the conn and made his way back to the command chair, where he sat down heavily.

Any other damage to the ship? Vaughn asked. Casualties?

Reports are coming in, Bowers said. Nothing more major than the thrusters. And only a few bumps and bruises for the crew.

We were hit by a discharge of energy from the clouds, chThane said.

Were we attacked? Vaughn wanted to know.

I dont think so, chThane said, working his console. It was more like lightning striking a lightning rod.

That, at least, was reassuring.

Sir, Nog said, I need to get below to help Ensign Permenter with the thrusters.

Go, Vaughn said. Ensign Tenmei, will you be able to maintain a standard orbit using the impulse engines?

Yes, sir.

Ensign chThane, Vaughn said, hearing the starboard door open and close behind him as Nog left the bridge, determine the safest minimum distance for the ship above the clouds. We still need to find out whats down there.

Yes, sir, the science officer said.

As the crew set about their tasks, Vaughn thought back to when he had stood on the Vahni world, looked up to the sky, and seen the awful sight of their splintered moon. He peered at the viewscreen, at the forbidding environment below, and thought, And somewhere down there is the cause.

Vaughn looked at the desktop computer interface in his ready room and studied the records provided by the Vahni Vahltpali. A translation in Federation Standard marched across the bottom half of the display below the ideogrammic Vahni text. The written language of the unique alien species reflected their physical characteristics; their complex symbols echoed the shapes and colors Vaughn had seen dashing across their flesh.

Vaughn squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed a thumb and forefinger over his closed lids. He was tired and frustrated, having found nothing in the Vahni data to assist the crew in penetrating the sea of clouds surrounding the planet below. For the last fifteen minutes, Vaughn realized, his attention had wandered from his research to the content of the message he would soon have to transmit to Starfleet Command.

He would need to detail the plight of the Vahni, and impart a sense of urgency to

Bridge to Captain, came Lieutenant Daxs voice over the comm system. She had taken some shifts off after the accident aboard Sagan and the loss of Ensign Roness, but she had then insisted on returning to duty. So far, she seemed to be recovering well from her ordeal.

Vaughn, he responded, still rubbing his eyes. Go ahead.

Sir, Dax said, we've found something.

Vaughn dropped his hand from his face and opened his eyes. The twisting, multihued Vahni text greeted him, but in his mind, he saw the crew on the bridge. Im on my way, he said. He pushed a control and blanked the display, then rose and left the ready room. He crossed the main port corridor into one of the side halls behind the bridge, and a moment later he entered Defiant's command center.

Report, he said.

Dax looked over her shoulder at the sound of his voice, then stood from the command chair. We've been scanning the cloud cover for places the sensors can see through, she said, and we found a complete break.

Vaughn stopped beside Dax and peered at the viewscreen. In several places, the atmosphere had shifted, allowing a small but unobstructed view through the clouds. Vaughn spied a nondescript patch of brown that he took to be land. What do you make of it, Ensign ChThane?

I believe it's simply a result of the constant movement of the clouds, he said. We're on the side of the planet almost diametrically opposite the source of the pulse, so if that's what's causing the atmospheric effects, they may be less pronounced here.

There's no guarantee how long the break will remain open, Dax told him. Sensors and transporters and communications still can't scan past the clouds because of the energy surges, but we may be able to get a probe through.

Vaughn looked at Dax and nodded. Do it, he said.

Five minutes later, another probe was launched. As it flew toward the break in the clouds and then started down, Vaughn ordered it to be tracked on the viewscreen. He and the rest of the crew watched the probe descend, the magnification on the viewer increasing as it did. Several times, the shifting clouds obscured the view, but they were able to follow the probe until, finally, it leveled off and began its trip around the planet. With luck, it would be back on the ship by morning, providing data about whatever was down there.

As Vaughn peered at the viewscreen, though, he had a sudden intuition that he would not like what the probe would find.

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The heavy doors to the security office opened with a whirl. Kira strode inside and up to the desk, a padd clutched at her side. Even half a year after his departure, she felt a moment of loss whenever she entered here and did not see Odo at the post he had held for so long. Behind her, the doors closed with a solid click.

Colonel, Ro said, sounding startled as she looked up from the display on her desk.

You sound surprised to see me, Kira said.

Oh, well, yes, Ro admitted, but only because I was just sending you a message to see if I could meet with you tomorrow. She glanced back down at her desk and touched a control. But I guess I don't need to do that now.

What did you want to see me about? Kira asked. She noticed the security monitors behind Ro, and was pleased to see that all of the holding cells stood empty.

Well, Ro started, sitting back in her chair, about Quark. Kira smiled, although she felt no humor. The answer hardly came as a shock to her. With Odo gone, it had only been a matter of time before the unscrupulous Ferengi had begun to extend the limits of his attempts to bend, if not break, the law. Kira had certainly expected him to grow bolder with the changes in station security personnel over the past months.

What's he done now? Kira asked. He and Morn aren't staging vole fights again, are they? Before the Europani refugees had left the station, two of them had complained of seeing the oversized Cardassian rodents, though at the time, Kira had ascribed the reports to overactive imaginations.

No, no, Ro said. Actually, it's not Quark that's the problem; it's Taranatar.

Kira blinked. Taranatar? she said, a sudden sense of dread washing over her about what Ro might say. Part of the feeling, she knew, was personal she had begun to like the JemHadar but part of it stemmed from persistent concerns about the Dominion. Kira had noticed Taranatar spending less time in ops during the last few days, and she had intended to ask him about it. She had assumed that he had been using the holosuites, engaging in his combat programs. Now, she hoped that had been the case, and that the trouble that had arisen was no more serious than a complaint from Quark about the holosuites being damaged. She stepped forward and took one of the chairs in front of the desk. What happened? she asked Ro.

The security chief related a story about Taranatar unshrouding in the bar a short time ago and frightening Quark's customers. That might not have been so bad by itself, Kira thought, but then Ro talked about a report she had only just received. Yesterday, apparently, Taranatar had unexpectedly appeared in one of the child-care facilities on the station, scaring everybody there so much so that they had even been fearful of informing security about it. It was one sort of misdeed to bother patrons in a bar, Kira thought, and something else entirely to terrorize children.

Kira stood up and paced the security office, her arms folded, still holding the padd. She turned back toward the desk and started to ask questions about what had occurred in the child-care facility, but Ro told her that she had not yet begun to investigate the episode. She had witnessed the aftermath of Taranatar's appearance in Quark's, though. I don't think he meant to unshroud, Ro said, and I really don't think he meant to scare anybody, but he certainly did.

Not just Quark? Kira asked, walking back toward the desk.

No, Ro said. I saw a lot of people racing out of the bar, and it seemed pretty clear who they were racing away from.

All right, Kira said. I'll speak to Taranatar about it tomorrow. Today had been a long enough day without adding any additional responsibilities to it. After she left here, she intended to head straight for her quarters.

Thank you, Colonel, Ro said.

Kira sighed and sat back down. This was not a problem she wanted to have right now, just days ahead of the summit between Bajor and the Federation which was the subject she had actually come here to discuss. She informed Ro about the impending arrivals of the Bajoran, Trill, and Alonis delegations on Deep Space 9, and about the need for heightened, but discreet, security.

Ro moved forward in her chair, leaning her elbows on her desk. Arent the Alonis water-breathers? she asked.

They are, Kira said. But they won't be expecting us to modify any of our accommodations for them.

They'll be using aquatic rebreathing devices while they're on the station, and they'll return to their ship every night. She looked down and activated the padd she had brought with her. It came to life with a chirp, and she handed it across the desk to Ro. This is a list of the members of all the delegations, Kira said.

Councillor zhThane and Admiral Akaar will be attending the talks as well.

Ro took the padd and glanced at its contents, then looked back up at Kira. What's this about? she asked.

Kira hesitated briefly, recalling how secretive Akaar had been about the summit, but then she decided that the security chief would need as much information as possible in order to properly discharge her duty. Kira told Ro about Bajor's renewed petition for membership in the Federation, and that the coming talks would produce an outcome, one way or the other.

Ros mouth opened as Kira spoke, and the color drained from her face. Kira saw but did not understand the reaction. Ro looked off to the side, as though in thought. I knew there was a reason he was at the station, she said, almost too quietly to hear.

You mean Admiral Akaar? Kira asked.

Ro turned back to Kira as though waking from a daydream. Oh, uh, yes, she said. Ros expression went blank. I'd just been wondering why he's been here at DS9, she said, but Kira could see that there was more to Ros reaction than simply casual curiosity. She remembered Akaar's concerns about Ros abilities and her dedication to duty.

Do you know the admiral? Kira asked. I mean, did you know him prior to his coming to the station?

Yes, Ro said. When I was in Starfleet. We had a professional disagreement. The admission was clearly uncomfortable for her to make.

What sort of professional disagreement? Kira asked.

I'd prefer not to discuss it, Colonel, Ro said.

Kira quickly grew angry at the uncommunicative responses she had about had enough of those lately but she just as quickly squelched the feeling. As commander of the station, she continued trying to prevent herself from reacting too hastily in any circumstances. Now, instead, she attempted to put herself in Ros place, imagining a disagreement between herself and a superior and the Prophets only knew how many times that had happened during her life. She only had to think of the Attainder for evidence of that. I understand, Lieutenant, Kira said. But I have to ask you if this disagreement with the admiral will have any effect on the performance of your duties.

No, sir, Ro said definitively. Not from my end.

Are you sure there's nothing I need to know about this, Kira asked. Because if there is, I want to know about it now.

Ro did not answer right away, but paused and seemed to consider the question, which Kira appreciated. Still, Kira did not expect Ro to divulge what she had already chosen to keep to herself.

Colonel, Ro said at last, the admiral doesn't like me, and I don't like him either. He probably doesn't think I'm capable of doing this job, or any other job, for that matter. Frankly, I don't care. I'm going to do my job the way I'm supposed to, the way you expect me to, no matter what the admiral thinks.

That's good enough for me, Kira said, satisfied with both Ros honesty and her attitude. She stood up.

Develop a security plan for the period that the delegations will be on the station, and let's meet in my office tomorrow morning to discuss it. Ten hundred hours.

Yes, sir, Ro said. Thank you.

Kira nodded, then turned and left, the doors opening at her approach. She felt positive about the meeting she had just had with Ro, but as she walked along the Promenade, she realized that she also felt uneasy not about Ro, but once more about Admiral Akaar.

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The complex of buildings slumped across the landscape in disrepair, but still remained standing everywhere but at its center. There, in a circle roughly a hundred meters in diameter, no hint of a structure existed. Instead, only a gray darkness endured darkness, and energy.

Nog looked away from the aerial view of the complex on one monitor and over to the accompanying sensor data on another. He reviewed the limited information for the I don't know how many times, he thought, and realized that he was not going to reach a conclusion different from the one he had already drawn. He peered over at Shar, who stood beside him in the aft section of the bridge, and saw a somber expression on his friend's face. Although Nog would certainly characterize Shar as a serious individual, the Andorian often wore a smile as a means of both blending in and warding off unwanted attention, Nog suspected. But serious or not, smiling or not, Shar usually maintained a steady manner, neither upbeat nor down. Since they had departed Deep Space 9, though, Nog had noticed his friend keeping almost completely to himself not an easy feat, considering that the two shared their cramped quarters. Shar had brightened during the contact with the Vahni Vahl Tupali, but right now, though Nog doubted anybody else on board would be able to tell, Shar seemed terribly low. And with what the sensor readings from the probe had revealed, Nog could not really blame him.

Shar did not look up at Nog, but continued to study the contents of a padd in his hands. Nog looked to his right, at the rest of the bridge. The sounds of voices and consoles filled the air, an aural mixture not unlike that in Uncle Quark's bar, he thought except that the voices in the bar did not often talk about sensor readings, and the beeps and tones of consoles substituted here for the clatter of the dabo wheel. Around the bridge, Nog saw several pairs of crewpeople in conversation Merimark and Rahim at the tactical console, Cassini and Trb at sciences, and Vaughn and Dax near the main viewscreen. Nog was sure that, like himself and Shar, they were all discussing or analyzing the data they had finally collected

from the planet.

The second probe had successfully negotiated the break in the clouds, and then circled the planet at relatively low altitude, flying as far below the atmospheric cover as reasonable. While the probe had been scanning the surface, the breaks in the clouds had been swept closed, but others had appeared this morning, allowing it to find its way back into space. During its ascent, it had been impacted by an energy surge, but it had survived the incident and returned to Defiant.

Nog turned back to the monitors set into the aft bulkhead. The sensor scans of the planet showed an industrial civilization, but in ruins. There were no life signs beyond those of flora; enough sunlight apparently penetrated the gray sea of clouds to allow plants to survive on the surface. The most important information the probe had gathered, though, concerned the site that Shar had identified as the source of the pulse. Scans had failed to discern anything about the building complex there due to the energy readings at its center, but the energy readings themselves had proven critical in Nogs analysis. In the hour that the probe had spent circling above the complex and harvesting data, the energy level had increased at a consistent rate and that had brought Nog to his conclusion.

He peered over at Shar again. What do you think? he asked. Shar looked up from the padd. His antennae had a particular crook to them, a certain attitude. Over time, Nog had learned to read Shars mood, at least sometimes, by the position of his antennae. And what he saw now told him that Shar had reached the same troubling conclusion that he had. A moment later, Shar answered Nogs question and confirmed that suspicion.

Ill go get the captain, Nog said. He walked along the starboard side of the bridge past Merimark and Rahim at tactical, and Senkowski at the engineering station and up to Commander Vaughn and Lieutenant Dax standing near the starboard side of the viewscreen. Beyond them, the dead planet hung in space, shrouded in its gray pall. Vaughn and Dax both looked over at him as he walked up.

Yes, Lieutenant? Vaughn said.

Captain, Nog said, Ensign ChThane and I would like to speak with you; weve completed our analyses. Vaughn gave a short, quick nod, and gestured toward the aft section of the bridge. Nog turned and led the way back, with Vaughn and Dax following. Shar looked up from the padd again as the group approached.

Nog pointed to the monitor displaying the building complex. As you know, he said, addressing Vaughn and Dax, this is where we believe the pulse originated. Specifically, here. He tapped the center of the screen, indicating the great, shadowy circle at the heart of the buildings. Because of the energy readings in this area Nog worked the controls below the second monitor, searching for the data that would illustrate his words. He found it and pointed it out to Commander Vaughn. You can see from these scans, Nog said, that interference from the energy prevented the sensors from picking up anything for kilometers around the complex. Vaughn and Dax both nodded.

Can you tell if the energy is a natural phenomenon, Vaughn asked, or artificial?

Nog looked over to Shar, who said, No, we cant. The science officer reached up to the monitor and traced a circle along the boundary between the complex and the gray patch. Sections of the buildings here appear to have collapsed, which could indicate a natural phenomenon that the builders of the complex were not expecting. But it may be that this is some sort of energy-production facility, and the builders somehow lost control of it.

Either way, Dax said, whether the energy occurs naturally or artificially, this must be what destroyed the civilization on the planet.

Actually, were not certain about that, Nog said. Scans around the rest of the planet show it to be perfectly habitable. Shar passed his padd to him, and he passed it to Vaughn. and the pulse appears to have emanated outward and upward from the complex, not along the surface.

But the planet is devoid of life, Dax noted.

Thats true, Nog agreed, but were just not sure why.

Any idea how we might be able to stop the pulses? Vaughn asked.

Not yet, Nog said. But from the level of the interference with the sensors, we were able to determine the current magnitude of the energy at the site. And the rate at which its changing.

Changing? Dax said.

Yes, Nog said. The amount of energy there is increasing considerably.

Why? Vaughn asked.

We dont know, Nog said. But we can tell that it is increasing at a combinatorial rate.

Combinatorial? Dax said. She sounded shocked, and Nog thought that she clearly understood that such a rate of change was far greater than either a geometric or exponential progression.

Yes, Nog said. And if it continues increasing like that, then the amount of energy there will soon match the amount in the pulse we encountered in the Vahni system.

Meaning that another pulse will launch into space, Vaughn concluded solemnly.

We think so, Nog said.

How long? Vaughn wanted to know.

Nog glanced over at Shar again, not for scientific support this time, but for moral support. Nog did not want to answer Vaughns question, because he did not want the information he had to be true. But he knew that it was.

Nog turned back to face Vaughn and Dax. Three and a half days, he said.

Before Vaughn issued his final order, he glanced down at the padd on his desk. In the upper right corner of the display, a flashing icon denoted the active link to the ships library computer, and in the middle of the screen, a blue progress indicator had almost reached the three-quarters mark. The download of the Vahni data, together with the translation algorithms for their written language, was taking some time.

Vaughn looked back up at the figure of Lieutenant Dax standing across from him. Her soft, round features had drawn into a tense expression, but she wore it well, he thought; the situation warranted concern, and she seemed neither panicked nor unsure, despite the tremendous responsibility being thrust upon her. If something should happen on the planet, Vaughn told her, continuing their conversation, if we were not back in eighty hours, I want you to take Defiant out of here.

Yes, sir, she said. To her credit, she spoke without hesitation, although Vaughn knew that even the idea of abandoning three of the crew must have troubled her, particularly after the loss of Ensign Roness. It would have bothered any officer. Vaughn had certainly left enough people behind in his career to know that it never got any easier. And sometimes, he thought, you end up leaving yourself behind or pieces of yourself.

Vaughn stood up and walked around the desk. Lieutenant, he said, locking eyes with his first officer, I want to be very clear about this. As much as he could, he would ease this burden for her by making this decision now, and not requiring her to make it later. I dont want Defiant here even a minute past the deadline Ive given you. Even if we cant save the Vahni, were at least going to save the crew.

Dax straightened, her bearing changing subtly. She nodded slowly and seriously, her hands slipping out of sight behind her back. The expression on her face appeared to belong momentarily to somebody else. I understand, she said in a voice that also seemed only partially her own. I wont wait.

Good, Vaughn said, and he circled back behind his desk again. Believe me, though, he went on, if we cant stop the next pulse from launching into space, I dont intend to be on the planet for it. There are buildings still standing down on the surface, but there certainly arent any people.

He leaned to his right and checked the padd again, his fingertips brushing the smooth, glassine desktop. The progress indicator had edged up toward the eighty percent mark, he saw.

Sir? Dax said, and now her voice sounded exclusively like her own again. What about the Vahni Vahltupali? If you cant stop the pulse on the planet, and we cant stop it in space, then should we contact them? Should we contact them now and tell them about the situation?

Vaughn sighed. He had thought about this himself during the past few hours. My decision would be not to, he said, sitting back down. If the next pulse is even as powerful as the last one and the Vahni records tell us that it will be more powerful than they have virtually no chance of surviving. At the very least, the quakes that will wrack their planet will decimate their civilization. They dont have starships, and none could arrive from the Alpha Quadrant in time to evacuate them.

So what good would it do to tell them that their society was facing annihilation? Dax asked rhetorically,

answering her original question. She brought her hands out from behind her back and clasped them together in front of her waist. There would be panic.

Panic, Vaughn agreed, and fear and sorrow and pain. I see no reason to visit that upon them. What he did see, though, was an opportunity to further demonstrate his confidence in Dax's leadership. She had learned a great deal and performed well in the few months since she had chosen to pursue the command path, and his belief in her was tacit in his having assigned her as Defiant's first officer for this mission to the Gamma Quadrant. At the same time, the Starfleet crew on DS9 were not exactly overburdened with command personnel, a circumstance that had obviously contributed to Dax's rapid rise to a position of such authority. Vaughn certainly felt her capable, but because of the fast and dramatic increase in her responsibilities, he endeavored to demonstrate his faith in her whenever the chance arose. If I'm not on Defiant when it departs, though, he told her, then whether or not to contact the Vahni will be your decision. If we don't make it back to the ship, the only order I'm binding you to at that time is to get the crew to safety.

Yes, sir, she said.

In the meantime, keep Lieutenant Nog and Ensign Trb focused on finding a means of defeating the pulse in space, he said. Maybe if we can't shut it down at the source, they'll be able to find some way of dealing with it up here.

Both the engineering and science staffs are already working on the problem, Dax said.

I know, Vaughn said. Defiant has a fine crew.

Dax nodded her agreement. One last thing, Captain, she said. What about the Sagan? Should I keep a team working on it? The necessary repairs to the shuttle would still take another five to eight days to complete.

Yes, he said after a moment's thought. Unless those personnel are specifically needed for the effort to stop the pulse. We're not that sure of our facts; maybe the energy buildup will start to diminish, or the rate of increase will, and we'll end up here for more than three days. In that case, the second shuttle might be of some use to us. Vaughn did not need to dwell on the fact that, once he took Chaffee down to the planet's surface, he and the shuttle crew would be isolated from Defiant and from any assistance, should they require it. Neither communications, sensors, nor the transporter could penetrate the energy in the cloud cover. Lieutenant Dax and Dr. Bashir had already raised concerns about that issue, but Vaughn had quickly decided that whatever potential risk there would be to the shuttle crew was easily offset by the almost certain danger to the Vahni.

Understood, Dax acknowledged.

Is there anything else, Lieutenant? Vaughn asked.

No, sir, she said. Except good luck, Captain.

And to you, Lieutenant, Vaughn said. I know I'm leaving the ship in good hands.

Thank you, sir.

Dismissed.

Dax started for the door, but she stopped when a voice sounded over the comm system. Ensign ChThane to Captain Vaughn.

Vaughn tapped his combadge. Go ahead, Ensign, Vaughn said.

The shuttle is ready to go, he reported.

Very good, Vaughn said. He glanced down once more at the padd. The progress bar had now passed the eighty-five-percent point. I'll be there in about twenty minutes, he said. Vaughn out.

Dax nodded and continued out of the ready room. Vaughn watched her go, the deck's main port corridor briefly visible beyond her as the door opened and closed. He turned in his chair to the computer interface on his desk. With practiced movements, he quickly accessed the file of sensor readings the probe had recorded at the source of the pulse. Vaughn really had no idea what they would be able to do once they got down there, even if they were able to learn more from a closer examination. The best hope, of course, lay in the notion that the pulse might be the product of a mechanism that could be shut down, or that they could destroy with the shuttle's phasers. Somehow, Vaughn doubted any solution would turn out to be that simple.

Not for the first time, the prospect of unleashing the phaser cannons and firing a salvo of quantum torpedoes occurred to him. In his mind, he saw the powerful weaponry pounding the planet, the surface collapsing and eventually liquefying amid a hail of light and explosions. But for all they knew, the energy of the phasers and torpedoes if they could even penetrate the cloud cover and be delivered accurately to their target might hasten or even strengthen the next pulse.

Vaughn again reviewed both the raw numbers of the sensor data and the analyses the crew had so far done. To this point, they had learned very little. He could only hope that going down to the planet would provide them with more information.

A few minutes later, a tiny chime signaled the completion of the download. Vaughn switched off the computer interface, then reached over and picked up the padd. He sequenced through a quick diagnostic to verify the success of the data transfer. He then opened one of the Vahni files to ensure that the translation algorithms functioned properly. As the colorful and complex shapes of the written Vahni language marched across the display, the plain letters of Federation Standard crawling along beneath them, Vaughn vividly recalled the scene of the crowd singing at the memorial service, their voices a prismatic flow of forms and contours.

Vaughn switched the padd off and stood up. He reached over past the computer interface, to where he had earlier tossed his old Starfleet field coat. Surface temperatures around the source of the pulse had read mild during the day, but would likely drop during the night. Vaughn put on the coat which he had managed to hold on to since his days as a cadet and tucked the padd into an inside pocket. Then he headed for the shuttlebay.

The door to the shuttlebay opened to a jet of fire. Along the starboard side of the battered Sagan, Ensign Permenter guided a laser torch across a section of twisted hull plating; where the ruby beam contacted the metal, sparks flew in a bright fountain. The starboard warp nacelle, which had nearly been torn from the shuttle during its ascent through the Vahni atmosphere, lay on the deck behind Sagan, still in obvious need of repair. Beside Permenter, Ensign Gordimer used a tricorder to monitor the work being done. Both officers wore protective eyewear. Gordimer, Vaughn knew, was a security officer, but on a ship with a crew of only forty during an extended mission, people often had to labor outside their specialty. As Vaughn started into the shuttlebay, he heard somebody call to him from behind, barely audible above the hissing drone of the metalworking. Captain. Vaughn turned in the doorway to see Dr. Bashir rushing to catch up to him.

Yes, Doctor? Vaughn said, raising his voice to be heard.

I need to talk with you, sir, Bashir said as he reached the doorway. Vaughn looked at the doctor, saw the serious expression on his face, and stepped back out into the corridor. The door glided shut, cutting off the noise of the laser torch.

What is it, Doctor? Vaughn asked. I assume this can't wait.

Im sorry, Bashir said. Ive been struggling with whether or not to approach you about this, and, well, Ive decided I really don't have much choice.

Make it quick, Vaughn said, his voice registering the annoyance he felt at being delayed. Time is a factor here. I need to get on the shuttle.

Thats just it, sir, Bashir said. Im wondering whether youre the right person to be going on this mission.

Excuse me? Vaughn said, nonplussed that the ships chief medical officer seemed to be taking exception to personnel assignments.

Youre the senior officer on the ship, Captain, Bashir explained, and for you to take part in a potentially dangerous away mission

Just a minute, Vaughn said, interrupting. Who would you have replace me on the shuttle?

Bashir had a ready answer. Lieutenant Bowers, I think, would be a good selection.

Lieutenant Bowers, Vaughn echoed, and he suddenly thought he understood the doctors motivation. He took a couple of steps past Bashir, then turned back to face him. Not Lieutenant Dax?

Bowers, I believe, has more experience on away missions, Bashir said, although he did not sound entirely convinced of his own words.

I see, Vaughn said. He considered several ways of dealing with the doctor on this issue, but quickly opted for expediency. Are you worried about me going down to the planet, he asked, or about Lieutenant Dax being left in command of Defiant?

Im concerned about Lieutenant Dax, Bashir admitted. I wont deny that. After what shes been through, Id also say thats a legitimate concern.

Youre right, it is, Vaughn said. Which is why I took it into account when I made my decision. I believe Lieutenant Dax is up to the task I set her.

With all due respect, sir, Bashir said, that may not be the case. She may seem to be all right when shes on duty, but off duty, shes

Dont tell me, Vaughn said.

But, sir Bashir began to protest.

I dont want to know, Vaughn reiterated. He looked down a crosscorridor and away from the doctor for a moment, attempting to rein in his displeasure at having to deal with this now. At the same time, he realized that Bashirs apprehensions about Dax were not without reason. I like Lieutenant Dax, Vaughn said, looking back over at the doctor. I suppose that weve even become friends in a way that Curzon and I never managed to. But Im also her commanding officer, and in the middle of a mission. And what I see from her professionally right now is that she has worked out the loss of Ensign Roness.

Bashir nodded. What Im suggesting, he said, is that perhaps she hasnt actually worked it out as well you think she has.

But thats my point, Vaughn said. In her job as a Starfleet lieutenant, as first officer of this ship, shes behaved perfectly well. Whatever her private feelings are, shes not allowed them to interfere with the performance of her duties. Vaughn paused, then said, I have confidence in her abilities.

As do I, Bashir returned at once.

But what is this about, Vaughn asked, if not her ability to command under stress? When Bashir did not respond right away, Vaughn stepped back over to him. Is it maybe about the difficulty of command, about the substantial burden of its responsibilities, especially under stress, and you wanting to shield her from that?

I suppose it might be, Bashir said, looking down briefly.

Dont be so troubled by that, Julian, Vaughn said. Its not a wrong or bad point of view. I understand it, and even appreciate it. But I cant permit it to influence my command decisions.

Of course, sir, Bashir said in a tone that seemed to indicate his understanding.

Vaughn moved away from Bashir and said, Carry on, Doctor, dismissing him.

Yes, sir, Bashir said.

Vaughn walked forward and the door to the shuttlebay opened. He expected to be greeted with the screech of the laser torch slicing through metal, but instead, only the voices of Permenter and Gordimer reached him. As Vaughn started through the doorway, Bashir called after him again.

Good luck, Captain, he said.

Vaughn glanced back over his shoulder. And to you, Doctor, he said. Then he continued into the shuttlebay, and the figure of Bashir disappeared behind the closing door.

The shuttlecraft Chaffee hied to port and down. The great, veiled mass of the planet swung into view in the forward windows, implying the movement that the inertial dampers denied. Vaughn scanned the clouds for breaks and saw none. Already, the shuttle had descended toward the planet twice, only to have to pull back when the transitory routes through the cover had been swept closed.

The depression is increasing, Ensign chThane reported. He sat at the front starboard console, working the shuttles sensors; Vaughn sat directly behind him. Their scans could not penetrate the clouds and the energy surges contained within, but they could visually detect where the cover had parted in an area; chThane tracked such an area right now. It seems to be stretching far down.

If it opens all the way through, Im ready for it, Prynne said at the flight-control console. Ive put us into a tight spiral course around the central point of the hollow. Vaughn watched as her hands moved fluidly across the panel, operating her controls like a conductor leading an orchestra.

Minutes passed, and Vaughn sat quietly, allowing the two ensigns to do their jobs. The deep, solid hum of the engines pervaded the hull of the small vessel, enclosing the cabin in a cushion of steady vibration and sound. The stars swam sideways past the windows as Chaffee circled above the potential breach in the clouds. Monitors to either side of the two main consoles displayed the images of the constantly stirring atmosphere directly beneath the shuttle.

Vaughn gazed at the monitors, but he could see nothing but the agitated expanse of gray. Still, a quarter of an hour later, Ensign chThane announced that a route completely through the cover had opened. Its the same point weve been focused on, he said.

Acknowledged, Prynn said. Bringing us in. She worked her controls, and the nose of the shuttle dipped toward the planet. Ahead, the horizon rose in the windows until it was lost from sight, the planet filling the view.

Twenty seconds until we reach the top of the cover, chThane said. Vaughn peered through the windows and still could not discern the passage through the clouds. As they descended, though, details of the atmosphere became visible, evanescent structures of air, billows and wisps and swirls. Ten seconds. A helical formation curled away to port. With nothing to provide perspective, Vaughn found it impossible to gauge scale. What seemed like a small coalescence of vapor could easily have been kilometers long. And then the grayness swallowed the shuttle. Chaffee bucked and began to shake as the colorless walls of air shot upward past the windows. Vaughn recalled the mythical tale of Jonah, as well as his own past experiences when he had felt, either figuratively or literally, as though he had been in the belly of the beast.

Im getting intermittent energy readings, chThane said. No discernible source. The shuttle began to rattle more strongly, as though the vibrations had reached a point of resonance. Vaughn clasped the arms of his chair, trying to steady himself. The cockpit became a shuddering blur, and the hum of the engines fluctuated, rising and falling as the shuttle made its way downward.

Vaughn looked at the monitor to Prynns left, but had difficulty focusing on the image. Energy readings are climbing around us, chThane said, raising his voice to be heard above the increasing sound in the cabin. The clouds are movingthe break is shifting below us.

I see it, Prynn said calmly. Her gaze had left her panel, Vaughn saw, and had shifted to the monitor displaying the path below Chaffee. She held her arms tensely over the conn, her fingers moving sporadically as she adjusted the shuttles course. Chaffee veered to port, and Vaughn felt his momentum shift as the gravity of the planet asserted itself over the inertial dampers.

The shuttle trembled as though something had struck it, and a loud boom filled the cabin. Vaughn imagined the fragments of the Vahni moon as they had battered Sagan, incapacitating Dax and robbing Ensign Roness of her life. That was an energy surge, chThane called over the rising noise. I cant tell where it came from.

Vaughn looked to his right, to the system status monitor set into the bulkhead there. Powers down three percent, he read, struggling to keep his eyes steady. The shields are holding.

As long as the shields stay intact, Prynn said, we can get through anything. Vaughn looked over at her and saw tremendous concentration reflected in her features. He would not have been surprised if he learned that she had no idea that she had even spoken. Hold on, she said a moment later, and Vaughn did so, clutching tightly at the arms of his chair. The shuttle rolled to port, the clouds spinning in the opposite direction in front of the windows. Prynn righted Chaffee for a moment, then maneuvered back the other way.

Then something slammed broadside into the shuttle and sent it plowing through the air. It could have been a current of air shearing into Chaffee, Vaughn supposed, but he suspected that they had been rammed again by a surge of the mysterious energy. He tried to read the status monitor, but found it impossible with the shuttle shaking so violently now. Vaughn saw the clouds now up against the windows; Chaffee had been pushed from the break in the atmospheric cover and into the cover itself.

Prynn rolled the shuttle to starboard, and then did it a second and third time in rapid succession, the circular acceleration keeping everybody in their seats. Vaughn felt a momentary sense of vertigo, and then the shuttle straightened. At the windows, the gray air had moved away again; Prynn had pulled the

shuttle back into the breach. The shaking lessened, and Vaughn read from the status monitor. Power is surging in the port engine, he said.

Vaughn saw Prynn glance down at her console, then back up at the monitor. Cut power to it for ten seconds, Prynn said. Ensign ChThane looked in her direction and did nothing. Do it, Prynn said again, yelling now, or the engine will shut down automatically. ChThane moved then, calling out his actions as he followed Prynn's directions. Vaughn watched the power level of the port engine drop to zero on the status monitor. After ten seconds, ChThane reengaged power, and the readouts returned to normal.

One more time, Prynn called. Hold on. She pulled the shuttle over to port, and then plunged the nose down. Vaughn lost all sense of orientation, but felt an increasing acceleration, as though he were falling from a great height. He looked through the windows again and saw tendrils of gray air buffeting them. Chaffee began to quiver again.

And then stopped. The flight of the shuttle stabilized and quieted, and the view before the windows cleared. Prynn pulled Chaffee up, leveling it out, and only then did Vaughn realize that they had been shooting nose-first toward the ground. He consulted the status panel. Engine power is down nine percent, he read.

That's not bad for the pounding we took, Prynn said. Verifying that, ChThane calculated the enormous amount of energy that had struck the shuttle. I don't think all of those were surges, Prynn said. I think anytime the clouds came into contact with the shuttle, there was a discharge of energy. ChThane concurred with that conclusion.

Vaughn stood up and stepped between Prynn and ChThane. He raised his hands up and rested them on the backs of their chairs. Well done, he told them.

Vaughn leaned forward and peered out the windows. Above, an unbroken sea of clouds stretched to the horizon in every direction, diffuse sunlight penetrating them from above. Below, a nearly lifeless terrain spread out before them, dark patches dotting the rugged topography, the colors washed out in the gloom.

Look there, Ensign ChThane said, bringing his hand up and pointing just to the right of their flight path. Vaughn gazed in that direction and saw a series of shapes rising up in the distance from the otherwise barren landscape. As the shuttle drew closer, the shapes resolved into buildings.

It's a city, Vaughn said.

Captain, Prynn said, I've calculated our course, based on the coordinates collected by the probe. She looked up at him. We're traveling in the wrong direction.

Vaughn took a last look at the city, then said, Bring us around.

Aye, sir. She operated her console, and the shuttle tilted to port. Within a few seconds, the city had slipped from view.

How are sensors functioning? Vaughn asked.

There's some interference from the energy in the clouds, ChThane said, but we're getting solid readings.

Good, Vaughn said. Scan astern for the city, and get what you can. I want to learn as much as possible while we're down here.

Yes, sir, ChThane said, and he worked his controls.

The shuttle began to straighten, pulling out of its wide turn to port. Coming onto our new course, Prynn reported. Vaughn watched as she headed the shuttle toward the source of the pulse, half a world away.

30

Kira walked down the dimly lighted hall, tired after a long shift. She had accomplished a great deal today, but the one item that had eluded her had been a conversation with Taranatar. Now, on her way to her quarters for a light dinner and a period of meditation, she had decided to track him down and deal with the matter before another incident occurred. She had contacted him via the comm system and found him in a holosuite; he had offered no objections to her stopping by to speak with him.

Kira stepped up to the door of the holosuite, wondering what spectacle she would witness this evening, what sort of hideous, unimaginable beast she would find Taranatar fighting. Or will it be something simple,

she thought, like a Borg? She had observed him taking part in his combat training programs several times now, and it had been both horrible and fascinating to watch him in battle. She found the precision and callousness with which he killed troubling, even in a simulated environment, but at the same time, his tactics and physical abilities impressed her. Certainly, for a humanoid his size, his strength, dexterity, and stamina were unparalleled. So far, she had watched him defeat a huge, insectile beast with claws that could have snapped him in two; an incredibly fast, flying creature with twenty-centimeter fangs and razorsharp wings; a horde of mugato; and a small army of Breen soldiers.

Now, as she touched the control pad beside the door, she found herself more than a little curious about what she was about to see. The door opened with a mechanical hum, and for a moment Kira could not make sense of the scene that lay before her. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the holosuite appeared black, but matched the actual surfaces of the room in dimension. Taranatar stood near the center of the space, peering straight ahead. A series of blue filaments hung in the air before him, some straight, some curved, some vertically oriented, some horizontally. Much smaller than the lines and figures, a series of red markings marched through the air all about them.

Kira moved inside and around to her left, along the line of the wall, attempting to get a better view of the scene. She circled around toward Taranatar, to see from his angle the images suspended in the air before him. Only when she had drawn close to him did she get an idea of what she was looking at: mathematical equations and their graphical representations.

The symbols in red were unrecognizable to her, but the manner in which they had been laid out suggested mathematics, as did the lines and figures. There seemed to be x-, y-, and z-axes hanging in the air, as well as several other forms, including curves, cones, parabolas, and several irregular polyhedrons. This looked essentially like a trigonometry lesson.

What is this? Kira asked.

Taranatar must have heard her enter and approach him, of course; few things escaped a Jem'Hadar's notice, and so he did not start when she spoke. When he answered her, he continued to stare at the mathematical tableau. You know it as calculus, he told her, or differential equations.

Well, some people know it as that, Kira said.

Now, Taranatar turned and looked at her. I do not understand.

Mathematics and I never got along very well with each other, she said.

Taranatar stared at her and said nothing. She was about to explain her remark when he finally said, Let me render the statements in your own language. He ordered the computer to translate the symbols into Bajoran. The red characters vanished, replaced a second later by others.

Kira shrugged. I recognize the numbers and letters now, she said, and even some of the symbols, but it's all still Romulan to me.

Taranatar studied the statements for a moment. This is not Romulan, he said.

It's just an expression, Kira explained. It means that I don't understand it.

Taranatar regarded her silently, his eyes staring into hers. How can that be? he asked. You operate spacecraft, you utilize weaponry.

Yes, I do, Kira agreed. But that doesn't mean I understand the numbers behind them.

But Taranatar seemed at a loss for words, and despite his continued and evident discomfort with being on Deep Space 9, as well as his curt nature, Kira had never before seen him speechless.

I learned by doing, she told him. And the more experience I gained, the easier it became to acquire new skills and sharpen the old ones. But as for the theory behind piloting a runabout or aiming a phaser, I guess a lot of the technology helps with that.

What if you lacked the technology? Taranatar asked her. What if your survival depended upon this? He gestured toward the red figures and blue shapes, his hand passing through one of the equations, and Kira assumed the curve it defined.

If I had to rely on mathematics to live, Kira said, a smile on her lips, then I suppose I'd die. Taranatar said nothing. Well, maybe I wouldn't die, she amended, but I'd have to act intuitively, not by calculation. Like I did in your simulation with the Rintanna.

Do you understand none of this? Taranatar wanted to know, looking again at the mathematical layout.

For all of the unfamiliar experiences Kira had seen him endure since arriving aboard the station, he seemed more puzzled now than she had ever seen him.

Kira turned her full attention to the graph and the statements. A memory of her father and her brother, Pohl, attempting to tutor her rose vividly in her mind. The scent of the parchments on which she had tried to do her exercises filled her nostrils, and she could almost hear her brothers frustrated voice endlessly repeating the intricate concepts to her. She peered at the mathematics hanging before her and looked for anything more than just familiar. She walked around Taranatar and indicated a pair of equations. This is a derivative of that, she said, pointing first to the lower equation, and then to the upper. She then found the two-dimensional curve that went along with it, a tangent connecting to it at one point. It was probably the simplest set of equations and figures in the room. Its the instantaneous rate of change at the intersection of the curve and the slope. To her surprise, Taranatar nodded.

Yes, he said.

She tried to find something else she understood, but could not. These are more derivative symbols, she said, waving her hand through several other statements, the red light flashing over her skin like momentary tattoos, but I dont understand them.

They are partial differential equations, he said.

Kira suddenly realized that Taranatar obviously read Bajoran. The JemHadar really were amazing creatures beings, she corrected herself; people and she wondered what they might evolve into once unshackled from the Foundersdemands that they live only as soldiers. She remembered when a JemHadar infant had been found and brought to the station more than five years ago. Odo had believed that the JemHadar, which had developed into an adult inonly a few days, could be freed by the proper care from his genetically engineered predisposition to violence. Kira had disagreed with him, and she had ultimately been proven right in that instance, but now, here was Odo making the argument to her all over again, and this time, she was beginning to see that he might be right after all.

Partial differential equations, Kira said, echoing Taranatar. I guess Ill have to take your word for it.

For the limitations you possess, Taranatar said, your combat skills are truly amazing.

The comment surprised Kira. Im not sure whether thats a compliment or an insult, she said.

It is simply a fact.

All right, Kira said. So what is it youre doing here? she asked, suspecting that she already knew the answer.

I am training, Taranatar said.

Of course, she said. Which is what I expected, except that I thought youd be in here fighting some powerful, deadly creature.

The mind must be trained as well as the body, he said, otherwise neither will survive long.

Thats true, Kira agreed, thinking about the mental and emotional discipline it took to struggle against the Cardassians during the Occupation. She also recalled that Taranatar had told her that he had programs to train his mind; she just had not expected any of them to be a mathematics lesson. Anyway, she went on, getting to the purpose of her visit here, Id like to talk with you about what happened in Quarks last night, and in the child-care facility the other day.

Very well, Taranatar said.

What were you doing in those places? Kira asked.

I was doing as the Founder instructed me to do, Taranatar said.

Ive noticed that you havent been spending as much time in ops recently, Kira said.

As the JemHadar have seen in battle, humanoids are given to developing patterns, Taranatar said. When a high percentage of what I saw and heard in the operations center began to repeat my earlier observations, I decided I should go elsewhere.

You got bored? Kira said, feeling herself start to smile. Taranatar looked at her and said nothing. Kira put her head down and walked forward into the center of the room, thinking about how best to proceed here. When a blue line and several red symbols crawled up her arm, she stopped, turned, and stepped back out of the mathematical display. So you decided to observe other aspects of life on the station, she said. Where did you go?

The first place I went was Defiant, Taranatar said.

Given the long conflict between the Dominion and the civilizations in the Alpha Quadrant, Kira felt herself grow concerned at this revelation. A moments reflection, though, convinced her of the futility of such a concern. Taranatar already had essentially unlimited access on the station, something even more obvious from a practical standpoint when considering his ability to shroud; he could go just about anywhere on the station without anybody knowing about it. More than that, though, Dominion personnel had already spent time on both DS9 and Defiant, and whatever military secrets Starfleet held had doubtless been fleeting. And besides, Kira actually trusted Taranatar, at least to a point, both because of his behavior since he had come aboard, and because of his ties to Odo.

Why the Defiant? Kira asked.

As I walked through the ship after my meeting there with Commander Vaughn, Taranatar explained, I decided it would be a good place to continue my observations. So I spent several days there.

All right, Kira said, satisfied with his answer. She could see the blue lines of the display reflected in his eyes. Where else did you go?

The gem merchants establishment, he said, and Kira wondered how the proprietors would greet that news. Of course, even had Taranatar been an enemy, she doubted he would have posed a threat to their merchandise; she could not picture a JemHadar wearing an earring or a necklace. The security office, he continued. The child-care facility, the flower merchants establishment, the bar and gaming establishment. I see, Kira said, thinking she might have to mention something to Ro, in light of the increased security that would be needed for the upcoming summit. Even though she trusted Taranatar, she did not believe the delegates or Admiral Akaar would enjoy learning that a JemHadar soldier had access to secured areas. But why did you shroud yourself?

At first, I did not, Taranatar said. But on board Defiant, I encountered a Starfleet officer who reacted to me with great fear. Kira resisted the temptation to ask who it had been, not wanting to change the focus of the conversation. She supposed it might have been Permenter or Richter, or maybe Nog, Kira thought, and realized that he had better reason than most to fear the JemHadar.

Because such a reaction to my presence interfered with my mission, Taranatar continued, it seemed a reasonable course to shroud myself, particularly when I chose to enter areas beyond direct control of Starfleet and the Bajoran Militia.

But why did you unshroud last night then? Kira asked.

Because the Ferengi heard me, he said.

Kira was stunned. Quark heard you?

Yes, Taranatar said, and he seemed abashed by the admission. I underestimated the sensitivity of Ferengi hearing.

Me too, Kira thought but did not say. She had always known that the ears of the Ferengi were not just for show, but she had never known they were that good. What about in the child-care center?

I was paying attention to many things, Taranatar said in a rush, his tone almost defensive. Somehow, I allowed a child to run into me.

I see, Kira said, having to stifle a laugh. She tried to imagine a little girl or boy unmasking the imposing JemHadar, and could not. Well, there have been complaints from the child-care center and from Quark. Now, I'm not inclined to agree with just about anything Quark has to say, but Lieutenant Ro told me she witnessed a number of customers fleeing the bar when you appeared.

That is correct.

I think a lot of people still aren't used to a JemHadar soldier being on the station, Kira said, especially since we were attacked by some not that long ago. On top of that, though, I think maybe when you unshroud in front of them, it makes them feel as though you're spying on them.

I am, Taranatar pointed out.

Yes, but I mean they think that you're going to hurt them, Kira explained, that you shrouded in order to sneak up on them and attack them.

I would not do that now, Taranatar said. Kira chose not to think about the implications of the word now in his statement.

I believe you, Kira said. But until the people of the station get used to you, I think maybe it'd be a good idea not to shroud when you're observing them.

But it's clear my presence can be disruptive, Taranatar said.

At first, sure, Kira agreed. But that's the point. You need to give these people the chance to grow accustomed to you, so your presence won't be disruptive.

Taranatar seemed to think about Kira's words for a moment, and then he said, Very well.

Thank you, Kira said. I'll let you get back to your training, she finished. She glanced again at the mathematics filling the center of the room. She headed for the door, the mathematical symbols dancing confusingly through her mind. Maybe before she went to her quarters, she thought, she would stop in the bar and get a drink.

31

Ezri watched the pulse leave the planet. The energy radiated outward from a point on the surface in a golden wave, an ephemeral trail fading behind it. As the planet rotated, the pulse swept across surrounding space in all directions. Eventually, it reached the world of the Vahni.

Ezri felt her heart pounding in her temples, louder in her head than the throbbing of the warp core behind her. After experiencing the effects of the pulse firsthand, she found it difficult to view the simulation and not revisit all that had happened both on the Vahni world and on the shuttle. But I have to push those thoughts away, she told herself. It was one thing to indulge her feelings off duty, but right now she had work to do.

So here's what we've come up with, Nog said. He stood next to Ezri at the primary console. His demeanor, typically rushed and animated when he discussed a potential solution for a problem, now seemed flat. Ezri had come down to engineering after Nog had informed her that he and his staff might have developed a defense against the pulse, but now she understood that, whatever they had developed, it did not satisfy the chief engineer. She reached up and rubbed the side of her forehead, tired after a long day; she had not been sleeping all that well recently.

Nog tapped at the controls on the console, and the display above it reset. At the center of the screen, near the blue circle that represented the planet below and which should have been gray, Ezri thought two green segments appeared, wedged together in a shallow V pointing toward the planet. Nog pressed another touchpad, and the simulation reran. Again, the energy wave spread from a point on the surface of the planet, but this time the segments deflected a portion of it in other directions. Beyond the segments, a region devoid of the destructive energy extended all the way to the other blue circle, the one representing the world of the Vahni.

Ezri took her hand from the side of her head and pointed to the segments. All right, she said. What is that?

It's a pair of amplified, finely focused deflector fields, Nog said. The concept did not seem to excite him. Amplified by what? Ezri asked. And focused by what?

Nog worked the console again, and two schematics of Defiant, one lateral and one overhead, replaced the simulation on the screen. We think we can tie warp power into the deflector grid, Nog explained, still lacking the enthusiasm he usually demonstrated when discussing engineering matters. He indicated several points along what Ezri recognized as the warp-power backbone, presumably at points of intersection with the deflector grid, although her knowledge of the ship's systems did not extend that far. Then, if we defeat the surge protection, we can use the navigational deflector to project the strengthened fields. Nog, Ezri said, looking away from the display and over at the engineer, you don't sound particularly happy about this plan.

It's not, he admitted. The light from the display shined on his face, lending it a pale tint. If we can even make these modifications work, then in the best case, the navigational deflector will be completely destroyed, and the warp drive might overload.

And if the warp drive overloads, Ezri said, leaving the sentence dangling for Nog to finish.

Then we'll either be adrift, he said, or a fireball.

Ezri looked again at the skeletal cutaways of the ship, trying to put Nogs words into perspective. Let me get this straight, she said. What you just told me is the best -case scenario?

Yes, Nog said. He operated the controls once more, bringing the simulation back up on the display. The modified deflector fields, he said, resting the tip of his index finger on the green segments, have to be generated from somewhere. Obviously, the safest place for Defiant to do that would be behind the fields. He slid his finger off the segments, over to the area the pulse failed to penetrate.

And if the fields dont work, if they dont redirect that portion of the pulse, then the pulse will strike Defiant, she said, not needing to add that the ship could not survive such an event.

Right, Nog said.

So what are the chances of this working? she wanted to know.

He shrugged. Three percent, he said. Maybe five. The problem is the enormous amount of energy in the pulse. And the fact that we dont understand how its being generated.

Ezri bit anxiously at her lower lip. Movement caught her attention, and she peered to her right to see another engineer, Tariq Rahim, working at a console. Looking back at Nog, she asked, How long would you need to set this up?

Ten hours, he said.

So if we decided to try this, Ezri said, thinking aloud, youd have to begin the modifications about two days from now. And if Commander Vaughn had not returned to the ship by that time, then Ezri would have to measure a three-percent chance of saving four billion Vahni against a ninety-seven-percent chance of losing the Defiant crew. All right, she said. See if you can get us something with better odds.

Aye, sir, Nog said, and she could hear weariness in his voice. He had been working to find a means of stopping the pulse almost since the moment it had destroyed the Vahni moon.

And make sure you get to bed before too long, Ezri told him. Youre not going to solve anything if youre falling asleep on the job.

Aye, sir, Nog said again, offering her a weak, but seemingly genuine, smile. I just want to try one more thing with this simulation, he said, pointing to the display. Ezri looked in that direction just in time to see the entire console go dark.

What she started, looking back up, but she stopped when she saw two other stations wink out across the room. Nog stabbed at the controls, but nothing happened. Ezri saw Rahim making the same attempts at the other dead consoles.

Nog dropped to his knees and pulled an access panel free. Ezri squatted down beside him. Nog set the panel aside, leaning it against the bulkhead, then peered in and examined a complex clutch of optic fibers, isolinear chips, and other equipment. Ezri wanted to ask questions, but she knew that Nog would tell her what had happened once he had figured it out himself. He reached inside and checked several connections. When he withdrew his hand, he said, Weve lost an engineering circuit.

Shouldnt the backup take over? Ezri asked.

It should, Nog said. He looked over at Rahim, who was still trying the controls on one of the other dead consoles. Tariq, Nog said, I need a spanner.

Yes, sir, Rahim said. The crewman reached over to an open case on an adjoining console, pulled out a tool, then brought it over to Nog. Here you go, he said, handing the spanner to Nog.

Thanks, Nog said. He switched the tool on, then inserted it carefully into the access port. In almost no time at all, the console sparked back to life. Ezri peered across the room and saw the other consoles still dark. The main circuit shut down, Nog said, but for some reason, the power didnt shunt to the secondary.

Why not? Ezri asked. And why did the main circuit shut down?

I dont know, Nog said. He grabbed the access plate and set it back in place, the magnetic locks sealing with a clank. All I did, he said as he stood up, was to manually switch over to the backup circuit. He handed the spanner back to Rahim, and said, See if you can do the same for the other consoles.

Yes, sir, Rahim said. He took the tool and started back across the room.

Its probably just a bad monitor or a bad switch, Nog said. Ill get somebody to track the main circuit and see what happened.

All right. Let me know what they find, Ezri said. She headed for the door, which slid open before her. Before she left engineering, though, she turned back toward Nog. Just make sure its not you crawling around the Jefferies tubes all night, she said. Get some sleep.

I will, Nog said, and this time his smile was wider.

Ezri stepped out into the corridor and made her way to the nearest turbolift. As the car rose on its short journey from deck two to deck one, she rubbed at her eyes, exhaustion setting in. Still, tired as she felt, she hoped to find Julian awake. She needed to sleep, but she needed and wanted his company first.

She turned out of the lift into the main starboard corridor, walking toward the bow of the ship and the cabin she shared with Julian. The dim, night lighting here, a vivid contrast to the bright lights of engineering, reinforced her fatigue. As she passed the short corridor on her left that led to the bridge, she briefly considered and then quickly rejected the idea of stopping in to get a status from Lieutenant Bowers; the ships second officer knew his job.

Then, as though her thought had summoned him, the voice of Bowers came over the comm system. Bowers to Dax.

She tapped her combadge. Go ahead. She stopped walking, waiting to hear what the lieutenant wanted before continuing to her cabin.

I thought you should know that we just detected a hull breach, he said.

How bad is it? she asked, feeling immediately and fully awake, as though a glass of cold water had been thrown in her face. She turned back toward the hall leading to the bridge.

Its just a few square centimeters, Bowers said, and the force fields are having no problem containing it. He seemed serious, but not hurried or upset, which she took as a positive sign.

Do you know what caused it? Ezri asked.

Not for sure, Bowers said, but its on the bottom of the ship, aft, so we think it might have started when Defiant was struck by the discharge from the atmosphere. There is an energy reading at that spot on the hull.

That made sense, Ezri thought. Have you scanned the exterior of the ship for any other energy readings? she asked.

A cursory scan showed nothing, Bowers said. Were now conducting a more rigorous search. Ive also sent a team down to repair the breach.

Good, Ezri said. Check with engineering too. They just had a main circuit shut down. The backups online now, but see if that problems related to the breach.

Ill do that, Bowers said.

Ezri took a beat, thinking about the writhing cloud cover below them, suffused with energy, and the possibility that it had somehow reached out and punched a hole through the hull of Defiant. And take the ship to a higher orbit, she told Bowers. Lets not stay any closer to the planet than we need to.

Yes, sir.

Is there anything else, Lieutenant? she asked.

No, sir.

All right. Thanks for the update, she said. Dax out. She pressed her combadge, deactivating it. She again contemplated going to the bridge, but the ship was in good hands. More than that, part of being an effective command officer meant knowing her own limitations, and though she no longer felt tired, she knew she nevertheless needed to rest. She only hoped that she would not dream again of her time on the shuttle.

32

Ro Laren ambled up to the security office doors. Surrounded by the quiet shadows of the early morning, she stopped and peered into the dark, empty office. After a few moments, she stepped back and eyed the access panel, but despite the sizable number of security measures remaining to be implemented between now and tomorrow when the Bajoran and Federation delegations would arrive on the station she realized that she had not come down to the Promenade for that purpose. With the morning shift change

and the start of her day still more than an hour away, work was the furthest thing from her mind. Except that's not true, she thought. Almost all she had been able to think about during the last day and a half had been her position as Deep Space 9's chief of security.

Ro turned away from the office and began strolling along the Promenade. She considered bringing the lights up after all, she knew the security codes that would allow her to do so but she decided against it. She found right now that she liked the dim illumination and the silence; they allowed her to feel a sense of tranquillity.

Except that's not true either, she scolded herself. The thoughts that had troubled her for much of last night and for yesterday and the night before that had not brought her anything even resembling peace. When Kira had informed her the night before last of the upcoming summit, and of the realistic possibility that Bajor might soon join the Federation, Ro had essentially tried not to think about it. She had instead attempted to concentrate on her duties, even during her off-hours, busily preparing the station, her staff, and herself for the enhanced security requirements. Still, her own personal concerns had continued to intrude into her thoughts.

Ro yawned as she passed the Replimat and the florist to her left, and the assay office and an empty storefront formerly Garak's tailor shop, she had been told to her right. She had gotten little sleep last night, probably no more than a couple of hours, and it had been her restlessness that had sent her out of her quarters so early this morning. Even as she had tried to push it away, the prospect of Bajor entering the Federation had unsettled her. If it happened, she knew, then the Bajoran Militia would no doubt be rolled up into Starfleet. She had absolutely no idea whether or not she would be offered a position although if Akaars' presence on the station indicated anything, then she supposed she would be fortunate not to end up reinstated and then tossed in the brig. Even if she was invited to rejoin Starfleet, though, she did not know if signing up for another tour would be such a good idea either for her or for Starfleet. If nothing else, her stints aboard *Wellington* and *Enterprise* had demonstrated her difficulties fitting in to a command hierarchy and following orders.

Which is why you're in the Bajoran Militia now, right? Ro thought, chuckling aloud. She rolled her eyes and shook her head at the inanity of it all. She had moved around a great deal during her adult life even within Starfleet and yet she had never managed to find a place where she felt that she belonged.

Except maybe here, she allowed. Unexpectedly, she had grown to like this place. And she did not want to have to leave it.

As Ro walked by the hair salon, she reminded herself that she needed to make an appointment soon; her straight black hair had grown uncomfortably long, reaching past the tops of her shoulders. The ordinary nature of the thought provided an odd counterpoint to her anxieties about Bajor joining the Federation, and about the uncertainty of her near future. If she had been asked several months ago, back when the Bajoran Militia had assigned her to DS9, if she thought that she would ever feel comfortable on the station's facility with a significant Starfleet presence let alone want to stay here, she probably would have laughed. At that time, her expectations had been that, before long, she would end up either resigning from the Militia or being expelled from it.

And yet, despite her negative outlook back then, the situation had begun to work out here. After a tentative beginning, Ro had settled into her job, and what had started as a rocky relationship with the station's commander had mellowed into something far less problematic. She had also made friends here, spending time with Nog and Shartan young and distinctly unusual Starfleet officers as well as with Hatram Nabir, a seamstress who had opened up a shop on the Promenade not long after Ro had arrived here. For that matter, she had even developed some sort of a positive rapport with Taranatar. She still shied away from socializing in large groups, but she found that the geography of the station, as well as its immense size, allowed her the opportunity to be as social or as private as she wished far more so than did living aboard a starship. She even seemed to feel a sense of home here, although her lack of familiarity with the sentiment made such a characterization suspect.

In reality, Ro thought, she had lived an almost hermitic existence, at least in terms of relationships. She had not isolated herself from people, but she had completely contained her positive emotions for a very long time. As a result, people had come and gone from her adult life with dizzying rapidity a pattern that

echoed the events of her childhood, she knew, although she never liked to explore such thoughts or memories for too long. She had tried a few times to come to terms with what she had experienced in her youth, even once seeking out a counselor when she had been in Starfleet, but she had found herself not yet ready to deal with such matters.

Im probably still not ready, she thought, though without bitterness.

Ro passed Hatrams shop, and up ahead, the security office slipped back into view along the circumference of the Promenade. She supposed she would begin her workday now after all. As much thinking as she had done during the past day and a half, she really did not like to analyze things too closely or for too long. All she needed to know right now was that, given a choicesomething she believed unlikelyshe would opt not to leave this place or these people just yet. It seemed somehow cruel to her that she would finally find a place where she felt like she fit in, and then be forced from that place; it also seemed perfectly in keeping with her tumultuous life.

During Ros trip around the Promenade, the level of light had risen, on its way toward full illumination for the simulated daytime hours on the station. As she neared her office, she tried to blank her mind, and when that failed, she started running down the list of security measures she and her staff would need to address today. Before she reached her office, though, she stopped. To her left sat the entrance to Quarks.

Feeling a pang of disappointment that the bar was closedeven though all of the establishments on the Promenade were closed at this time of dayshe realized that she had come down here so early for the opportunity to see and talk with Quark. Of course, she could not reasonably have expected him to be here at this time of the morning; the bar would not open for a few hours, and he would likely not even be there at that time. Recently, she had noticed that he had assigned Treir to manage the morning and afternoon shifts, and Quark, as far as she knew, was not an early riser. Still, even given all that, she had felt the desire to talk with himnot specifically about what she might face in the coming days, since neither the upcoming summit nor the reason for it were public knowledge yet, but just to share his company. She had certainly enjoyed their many conversations over the past few months. He had hinted at wanting a romance with her, but she suspected that those hints amounted to little more than Quarks roguishness. And yet he had been kind, even sweet, to her. Yes, he had some strange valuesRo had never really understood the desire to acquire material objectsbut he had so far been a good friend to her. And he certainly knew how to listen.

With those ears, she joked to herself, how could he not be a good listener? She laughed aloud, the sound a lonely one on the empty Promenade. She would have to remember to mention her observation to Quark; she thought he would enjoy the humor.

Ro walked up to the doors of the bar and peeked inside, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the lighting overhead. The bar was empty. She shrugged, then stepped back and continued on down the Promenade to her office. Inside, she sat down at her desk and accessed her itinerary for the day. For the most part, her schedule consisted of various tasks related to the increased security for the summit. She also had another meeting with the colonel later this morning so that they could discuss all of the preparations. The day would be full, and by the time Ro finished working, she knew, Quark would be busy running the bar. She could visit him there, of course, but even though business had been slow lately, the bar was hardly conducive to having private conversations; Quarks were not the only ears on the station.

Maybe Ill try to see him after he shuts down the bar tonight, she thought. Or maybe not.

33

Sunrise did not exist here. The constant ceiling of clouds blinded the planet to its star. Night fell as black as eternity, and the days existed in a perpetual dusk. Vaughn looked up through the forward windows and saw that the dark had been replaced, not by the reds and oranges and yellows normally associated with dawn, but by the diurnal gray of this shrouded world. Shortly after penetrating the clouds, Chaffee had passed the terminator and flown into the night, and the shuttle had now emerged once more into the

dim daylight of the planet.

Whats our status? Vaughn asked in the quiet cabin. Nobody had spoken for a while. ChThane looked up, but Prynn did not, instead keeping her gaze on the flight-control console.

We estimate that were less than an hour from the site, Prynn said, answering first, even though she had not looked up from her panel.

Estimate? Vaughn asked.

As we get nearer the source of the pulse, chThane explained, the energy readings are increasing. Its inhibiting full sensor contact, making our scans erratic.

I see, Vaughn said. He peered through the windows at the relentlessly monochromatic sky above.

Below, a mountainous region spread before the shuttle. Their path around the planet had so far taken them only over land.

Were getting pretty good reads within about a hundred kilometers of the shuttle, Prynn added, but little beyond that range.

Vaughn felt his weight shift as Chaffee veered to port. Ahead, one of the taller mountains in the range slipped away to starboard. Vaughn waited until Prynn had leveled the shuttle, and then he dropped a hand heavily on the back of chThanes chair. Ensign, since were so close, Id like you to prepare our equipment. They had brought scientific equipment with them with which to better examine the source of pulse, some of which would require Shars expertise to set up.

Yes, sir, chThane said, rising from his chair.

Vaughn stepped aside, allowing the ensign to pass on his way to the rear compartment. Then Vaughn moved forward and settled into the seat at the starboard console. This was, he realized, the first time that he and Prynn had been essentially alone since he had visited her quarters back on the station. He glanced over at Prynn, who remained intent on her own console. Vaughn felt a strong urge to say something to her, to attempt to draw her out. He wanted to engage her in a dialogue that would, even for a short time, pull them out of their positions as commander and ensign, and push them into their roles as father and daughter. With so much at stake right now, Vaughn understood the comparative insignificance of his failed relationship with Prynn, but he also knew that they would have little to do until they reached the source of the pulse.

The shuttle angled again, this time to starboard. Vaughn looked out the windows and saw another large, rocky peak sliding away from their path. Beyond it, another chain of mountains reached upward, some seeming almost to touch the dark sky above. It reminded him of a murky landscape painting he had once seen a long time ago, though he could not immediately recall when or where that had been.

Sir, Prynn said, momentarily startling Vaughn out of his thoughts. Those two mountains ahead of us?

Yes? Vaughn said, looking first at Prynn, and then back out the windows.

I can keep us low and take the shuttle between them at our current altitude, Prynn said, or I can ascend and split them higher up.

Why would we fly higher if we didnt have to? Vaughn wanted to know.

Because if we go in low, Prynn explained, well have to pass through a divide between the mountains thats about two hundred meters wide.

Vaughn slowly nodded his head. Traveling at speed through such a narrow channel, he knew, would leave very little margin for error. Can you do it? he asked, peering over at Prynn to judge her response. For the first time, she returned his gaze, a confident expression on her face.

Yes, she said seriously. Then, as though remembering that she wished to conduct all contact with him in an exclusively official manner, she added, Sir. No animosity or anger entered her mien, only a sense of simple professionalism.

Then do it, Ensign, he told her, careful to keep the pain he felt from sounding in his voice, instead treating her as she obviously wanted to be treated. I cant fault her for that, Vaughn realized; Prynn was giving him precisely what he had demanded from her. The rest, he could only hope, would come in time.

Yes, sir, she said, and she turned her attention back to her panel. She tapped at various touchpads on her console, her movements fluid and unrushed, as though she were playing a delicate instrument. The beeps and chirps from her console sounded almost like a melody. Vaughn could feel no changes in the

shuttles flight, but when he consulted his panel, he could see them on the sensor displays.

As Chaffee neared the two mountains, Vaughn looked up through the windows. The two peaks seemed to rise above the shuttle like twin giants. The sharp, severe appearances of crags and tors loomed above the shuttle like unspoken threats, promising an unforgiving reception in the event of a piloting mistake.

Chaffee raced toward the area where the two mountains came together, and for just a moment, Vaughn reconsidered his decision and thought about ordering Prynn to take the shuttle higher.

But then it was too late. Chaffee roared into the chasm between the two huge masses. The sheer rock walls on either side of the shuttle rocketed past, their surfaces a blur. Vaughn heard more electronic tones as Prynn continued to adjust their course. He waited for Chaffee to emerge from its difficult route, and as the seconds passed, the flight between the mountains seemed to take too long. The image of the chasm dead-ending flew through Vaughns mind, the shuttle slamming into the cold rock face at such speed that there would not even be time to realize that death was at hand.

But Prynn would have consulted the scans of the chasm, and if the sensors had not provided a clear picture, if their erratic functioning had not allowed her to see all that she had needed to see, then she would not even have proposed their current course. Vaughn knew that, having great respect for Prynns piloting abilities, including whatever judgments those skills required of her. By all accounts, including his own limited observations, she numbered among the best in Starfleet.

Gradually, the shuttle began to shimmy. As the trembling increased, Vaughn examined the sensor displays for the reason. Had an energy discharge from the clouds struck them, as one had struck Defiant, or had Chaffee suffered some system problem? Vaughn grabbed the edge of his console with both hands, steadying his gaze and allowing him to see the readouts. A strong wind funneled through the chasm, he saw, no doubt buffeting the shuttle and causing its shaking.

And then, in an instant, the shuttle steadied. On either side of Chaffee, the chasm walls fell away, and the shuttle flew out into open air. Below, several smaller peaks rose up, but they were set widely apart, allowing the shuttle to skim through them with ease.

Vaughn peered over at Prynn. Not for the first time, he saw her mother in herin her delicate but intense features, but also in her temperament. Like Ruriko, Prynn would do what needed to be done, regardless of the personal consequences.

Youre an excellent pilot, he told her quietly.

She looked over at him, and for one brief moment, Vaughn felt a sense of connection personal connectionwith her. Her eyes seemed to clear, and her expression to soften, and he had the sense that she had let go of all that had come between them. He so regretted what he had done, and now might finally be the time to beg for her forgiveness.

But in the next instant, Prynns walls had gone back up. Thank you, sir, she said, and she looked back down at her console. Vaughn watched her a moment longer, thinking of what he could possibly say to reach her, but then he turned back to his own panel. With an effort, he let it all fade from his mind, concentrating on the sensor readings laid out before him. He and Prynn sat that way for long minutes, the silence keeping them apart.

As Chaffee eventually neared the end of the mountain range, scans indicated a city ahead. The shuttle had passed several already along its route, all of them devoid of life. Most of the cities had revealed the manner in which they and their inhabitants had fallen, if not the reasons for their demise. One city had consisted of nothing but the blackened husks of buildings, burned and left standing like some charred monument to death. Another had been filled from one end to the other, and beyond the metropolitan limits, with ground vehicles, all pointing away from the city as though the entire population had attempted to flee at once, and then been trapped together in their panic. Another had evidently been under siege, battlements raised along its outskirts in defense against a fleet of military-looking vehicles surrounding it; both the attackers and the attacked had been battered in apparent mutual annihilation. Strangely enough, there seemed to be no indication that the pulse had been the cause of any death or destruction.

The shuttle cleared the last of the mountains and flew in over foothills. The city spread out on the plain beyond, a large, modern collection of buildings that stretched for kilometers. Vaughn consulted the sensors and read no life signs. Can you bring us in lower? he asked Prynn.

Yes, sir, she said. She nosed Chaffee downward, leveling off as the shuttle cleared the edge of the city. Vaughn peered through the windows and saw only stillness. As with the other cities they had passed, scans put the age of this one at hundreds of years, but unlike the others, there were no indications of what had happened to the people who had dwelled there. The buildings looked worn by time and wind, but stood relatively intact. The city appeared untouched by any sort of destruction, and unaffected by any mass exodus. Vaughn could easily visualize entering any of the buildings below to find it looking as though somebody still lived there. Would there be any indications that the inhabitants had abandoned their homes, or that they had been driven out? Or would they appear to have been there one moment, and then unaccountably gone the next? Or would we find the remnants of bodies? Vaughn asked himself, his thoughts running, as they seldom did, to the morbid. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind, but instead, another thought bloomed all the inhabitants who had lived in the city below were still there, dead by their own hand.

Vaughn gripped the side of his console and took a deep breath. He had to get hold of himself; such thoughts did not serve him or the mission. He looked over at Prynn as she calmly piloted the shuttle. Take us back up, he said.

Yes, sir, Prynn acknowledged, and she quickly pulled Chaffee back up to the altitude at which they had flown around the planet. Vaughn watched as the ground retreated below, and he felt unexpectedly pleased as the shuttle rose. Concentrating on his odd feelings, he was surprised when Prynn spoke again. What happened on this planet? she asked.

I dont know, Vaughn said, continuing to look at the city as it passed beneath them. Discarding his peculiar thoughts, he tried to speculate about what could have caused such widespread but disparate destruction of the civilization here. The pulse, he told himself, although he did not understand how that could be. He could only hope that the answers lay ahead of them. And to Prynn, once more, he said, I dont know.

The energy readings had increased dramatically as Chaffee neared the source of the pulse. Vaughn peered over chThanes shoulder at the sensor displays; the ensign had returned to the cockpit after preparing the scientific equipment. Scans seemed to indicate at least one more city between Chaffee s current position and the source of the pulse, although readings in that direction were more erratic now than ever. Directly below the shuttle, surface conditions read calm and cool, with temperatures hovering around ten degrees. Gravity pulled marginally weaker than on Earth, and the atmosphere held a slightly higher oxygen content, though it was certainly breathable. Good, Vaughn thought. Unless conditions at the site differed significantly, they would be able to disembark Chaffee without having to use environmental suits; as streamlined and sophisticated as the Starfleet issues had become over the years, Vaughn found that they still hindered natural movement.

Ill get our gear, he told Prynn and chThane. He turned from the forward console and headed for the rear of the shuttle. He stepped into the aft compartment, which doubled as a transporter pad. Moving past the scientific equipment, he reached for a section of the starboard bulkhead. He opened a small storage closet, in which hung outerwear for the crew. He gathered this up in one arm, then pulled out a small locker, about half a meter long and not quite as deep or as tall; the box contained phasers, tricorders, and beacons.

Vaughn carried the gear back out into the main cabin. He dumped the jackets and his old field coat onto a chair, and then set the locker down on the floor. He squatted before the box, unlatched it, and then flipped open its lid, revealing four phasers packed in the upper tray. He pulled one free and attached it to his hip.

A sudden movement in Vaughns peripheral vision caught his attention. He turned and looked toward the bow of the shuttle in time to see a dark form move out of sight off to starboard. He stood up and started forward. What he started to ask, concerned that he already knew the answer, and then the shuttle shuddered violently. Vaughn flew across the compartment into the port bulkhead.

Weve been struck by an energy surge from the clouds, chThane called, confirming Vaughns suspicions. Engine power is down thirteen percent.

Im taking us down, Prynn said, not waiting for authorization. Vaughn felt Chaffee tilt down toward the ground. He looked through the forward windows and saw an empty plain below. Once they landed, they could assess the damage, make needed repairs as quickly as possible, and continue on their way. Another blast thundered into Chaffee. Vaughn felt the shuttle drop precipitously, a wavering sensation filling his stomach. He thought they would fall from the sky, but then Prynn somehow reined Chaffee back under her control.

Theres another chThane yelled, but too late. Another bolt of energy struck the shuttle. Vaughn hurtled toward the rear of the cabin. He slammed into the bulkhead and collapsed onto the deck. When he looked up, he was amazed to see Prynn still at her station. ChThane, obviously knocked from his seat, now wrestled his way back to it.

Suddenly, a tremendous report shot through the cabin, followed by the horrible moan of tearing metal. Vaughn looked up at the ceiling and saw the dark, writhing sea of clouds above. For a moment, his mind could not process the image, and then he realized that a meter-square section of Chaffee s roof had been torn open. He saw the blue tinge of an emergency force field and hoped it would hold. ChThane called out, but Vaughn could not make out his words.

Vaughn felt the shuttle veer to port, then dip, and he wondered if Prynn was running evasive maneuvers. Just get us to the ground in one piece, he thought.

Holding on to a chair, Vaughn pulled himself back to his feet. He steadied himself with a hand to the bulkhead, then shuffled back into the aft compartment. He reached the transporter controls and punched at the touchpads, intending to establish a lock on Chaffee s crew of three. If Prynn could not keep control of the shuttle, then he could beam them

The transporter panel was dead.

Vaughn peered back through the doorway and out through the forward windows. The ground approached quickly, and he saw Prynn still working hard at the conn. Then another surge hammered into Chaffee, and air screamed through the breach as the shuttle decompressed, the force field obviously gone. The hull screeched as the compromised structure struggled against the forces of its flight. An acrid scent, like that of molten rock, filled the cabin.

Vaughn watched as a shadowy form pushed into the cabin through the hole in the ceiling. An amorphous, shifting mass of gray whirled through the compartment. ChThane turned and saw it just as it reached him. A dark wisp seemed to graze the blue flesh of the ensigns face, and he screamed. The terrible, ugly wail rose loud enough to be heard over the wind, and over the sounds of Chaffee breaking up around them. Vaughn had rarely heard such a cry of agony, but something else about it struck him it seemed less like a cry of pain than of anguish.

Chaffee swerved to port then. The gray tendril withdrew from the cabin as though the shuttle had jerked itself away from its clutches. Their forward momentum slowed, and the wind dropped significantly. For an instant, Vaughn thought that Prynnamazingly still at her post might actually be able to land them safely. And then Chaffee crashed.

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Bashir crawled through the Jefferies tube, a medical tricorder clutched in one hand. The metal grating that formed the base of the conduit rattled as his knees came down on the rigid surface. Voices echoed back to him from around a corner up ahead, the identities of those speaking impossible to distinguish above the din he made as he moved forward.

Bashir reached the intersection of three tubes and turned down the one to his right. Not too far in front of him, Ezri, Lieutenant Nog, and Ensign Gordimer sat one after the other in the enclosed space. Beside them, Bashir saw, several access panels had been removed from one of the bulkheads, revealing some of the ships circuitry within. As he neared the trio of officers, he slowed, quieting his approach so that he would not interrupt their conversation.

completed the scans, said a womans voice that did not belong to Ezri, obviously being transmitted through a combadge. The readings only occur at your location. Theres nothing on the exterior of the hull

or anywhere inside the ship. Bashir recognized the voice as that of Ensign Merimark.

What about transporter signatures? Ezri asked, glancing up at Bashir, but clearly still speaking with the ensign. Her words rang in the tube, echoing down the long metal conduit.

We found none, Merimark said.

All right. Thank you, Ezri said. Dax out. She raised a hand to her combadge and closed the channel, then addressed Bashir. Doctor, she said. He understood the need for such formality, but he also found it somewhat amusing, considering that she had come here directly from their cabin. For that matter, he had also just come from there, not long after she had left.

Lieutenant, he responded, acknowledging Ezri. He nodded at Nog and Gordimer, who both responded in kind. Nog, he noticed, also held a tricorder, one doubtless configured for engineering use. Bashir lowered himself to a half-sitting, half-lying position in the cramped space. He peered across the conduit at the exposed circuitry—the middle of the three open sections was dark and saw what appeared to be a bypass of some sort. A bundle of optical fibers emerged from one section, snaked along the floor of the Jefferies tube past the middle section, and connected back into the third. What's going on? he asked, the reason Ezri had called him here not immediately evident to him.

Last night, she explained, we experienced a minor power disruption in engineering. He recalled her mentioning that when she had returned to their quarters last night. Ensign Leishman has circumvented the problem. She swept her hand through the air above the obviously improvised bypass, but this appears to have been the source of the disruption. Ezri indicated the middle section.

Bashir looked, but beyond the circuitry being dark and therefore without power, he assumed he observed nothing out of the ordinary. He searched for something he could recognize as foreign, but saw only the expected assemblage of isolar optical chips, fiber-optic cables, and routing and junction nodes—except this what you're referring to? he asked, pointing to a gray substance pooled along the length of the middle section.

Careful, Doctor; don't get too close, Ensign Gordimer said. We're not sure what we're dealing with here. Bashir had not intended to touch the amorphous mass without scanning it first, but he understood that Gordimer's position in security required him to practice caution. Don't worry, Bashir said, withdrawing his hand, but continuing to try to get a good look at the substance in the poorly illuminated tube. The mass appeared inert and viscous, almost like a thick pool of grease, but dark gray rather than black. I don't think it's going to leap out at me.

I wouldn't be too sure about that, Doctor, Nog said.

What? Bashir asked, turning his head to look over at the engineer.

We haven't seen it moving, Ezri clarified, but the ship had an unexplained hull breach at about the same time as the power disruption in engineering. Bashir remembered her mentioning that last night as well.

You think this entered the ship through the breach and traveled here? Bashir asked, peering back down at the patch of gray. He opened his medical tricorder, and started scanning.

Possibly, Ezri said. Nothing has transported onto or off the ship, so we don't know how else this might have gotten here.

Bashir studied the display on the tricorder. I am getting energy readings, he said.

Which makes sense, Nog said. Somehow, this thing interrupted the flow of power, causing the outage in engineering, but it also carried enough energy to prevent the secondary system from engaging.

You say that as though it were planned, Bashir told him. But stars have energy, and they're not alive. This substance may simply be holding an electrical charge. He continued examining the tricorder scan. These energy readings, though

They're nothing you're familiar with, Ezri finished for him.

No, Bashir agreed.

They match the readings we took of the pulse, Nog said. And of the clouds surrounding the planet.

Really? Bashir said, looking up again. He reached up and wiped a hand across his forehead, his hand coming away wet with perspiration; the air in the Jefferies tube was still and close.

We think that when *Defiant* was struck by the energy surge from the cloud cover, this may have been deposited on the ship, Nog said.

And eaten through the shields and the hull, and then crawled here? Bashir asked, his tone conveying his skepticism.

We've seen stranger things, Ezri said.

Yes, of course, but this He peered back down at the substance, and then consulted the tricorder once more. Im reading no organic compounds, nothing beyond a very rudimentary physical structure, no musculature nothing to suggest a morphogenic matrix I think its very unlikely that this object is alive. Is that conclusive? Ezri wanted to know.

Bashir touched a control on the tricorder and ended the scan. As he folded the device back into its compact carrying form, he looked over at her. No, he said. Ill need to run a series of more complex tests.

All right, Ezri said. Id like you to do that. She turned to Gordimer. Ensign, I want you to go up to the transporter and beam the object directly to the medical bay.

Yes, sir.

Doctor, she went on, establish a containment field about the object while you study it.

Bashir noted the seeming confidence with which Ezri practiced command; the set of her body, the certainty in her tone and words, the quick decisions, all painted her as a person completely in charge of both herself and the situation. And yet, knowing as he did the personal price she was still paying for the loss of Ensign Roness, he wondered just how well her professional calm and resolve, forced as they must be, actually served her. He hoped that the mask she wore while on duty would not blind her to well, to anything. Commander Vaughn seemed to find such behavior constructive, but Bashir felt far less sanguine about it. He believed that Ezri should not be making decisions, either for the ship or for herself, either concentrating too much on the death of Roness, or completely ignoring it.

He mentioned none of this now. Nor did he know when he would be able to speak with her again about such matters; he hoped he would not have to. All he said now was Aye, sir. Then he turned and crawled back down the Jefferies tube the way he had come, headed for the medical bay as he had been ordered, with Ensign Gordimer thumping along behind him.

Bashir wheeled the portable stand to the center of the empty medical bay and set its brake. The white apparatus stood as tall as a diagnostic bed, with upper and lower shelves about half that size. He felt along the side of the upper shelf until he located the small control pad there, and then he activated the units locator; the signal, like that of a combadge, would facilitate transport. He also set the parameters for a containment field, which he would establish about the substance once it had been beamed to the medical bay. He tapped his combadge. Bashir to Gordimer.

This is Gordimer, came the ensigns immediate response. Im at the transporter, sir.

Im ready here, Bashir told him. Ive initiated a transport locator.

After a momentary pause, Gordimer said, Ive got it. Im all set.

Bashir told the security officer to stand by, then tapped his combadge again. Bashir to Dax.

Dax here, she said.

Were ready to transport, he informed her.

All right, she said. Dax to Gordimer. Energize.

Bashir took a step back from the stand and waited for the bright white streaks and the high-pitched drone of the transporter. He waited, but nothing happened.

This is Gordimer, the security officer said. I cant get a transporter lock on the object. The transport sensors can read its energy, but they cant establish a lock for some reason.

Try using a positional transport, Nog suggested, his voice coming over the channels opened to Dax. Beam everything up to five centimeters above the bulkhead that the substance is sitting on.

Yes, sir, Gordimer said. Resetting the transporter energizing.

This time, the light of the transporter shimmered above the stand in the medical bay, accompanied by a familiar hum. But when the light faded and the hum quieted, nothing had materialized there.

Nothing but air, Bashir thought, knowing that the positional transport would have attempted to beam everything within its target location. This is Bashir, he said. Ive still got nothing here.

The substance is still here, Dax said. Ensign Gordimer, would y She stopped speaking in mid-sentence, in mid- word, with a suddenness that told Bashir that something had happened. He heard a sound like one somebody would make when punched in the stomach, the air rushing from their lungs.

Lieutenant Dax? he said. He waited just long enough for a response, and when none came, he said, louder, Ezri? He took a step toward the door, but stopped when Nog spoke.

Doctor, the object moved, and Lieutenant Dax accidentally came into contact with it, he said, urgency sounding in his hurried words and raised voice. Shes lost consciousness.

Ensign Gordimer, Bashir said at once. Lock on to Lieutenant Daxs combadge and transport her directly to biobed one in the medical bay. For emergency situations, Bashir knew, the coordinates of various locations in the medical bay had been preprogrammed into the ships transporter.

Yes, sir, Gordimer said.

Bashir turned and sped over to the bed. Bashir to Richter, he said, contacting his primary medical assistant.

There was a pause, and then the sleepy voice of the nurse sounded over the comm system. This is Richter, she said. It was still early in the day, and Bashir had apparently just woken her.

Krissten, we have an emergency, he told her. I need you in the medical bay.

Im on my way, she said without hesitation, any drowsiness she felt now gone from her voice. Richter out. An instant later, the effervescent white light of the transporter filled the space above the bed, accompanied by the telltale whine. Even before Ezri had fully materialized, Bashir reached up and switched on the medical sensors. When the transport had completed, he peered down at her only long enough to see that she lay facedown, with her eyes closed and her complexion grown terribly pallid. Then he looked back up at the diagnostic display above the head of the bed. Her respiration was shallow, her heart rate down and fluttering, her neural activity nearly nonexistentalmost all of her vital signs had plummeted.

Bashir raced across the medical bay, heading for a storage cabinet. As he passed the portable stand at the center of the room, he reached out and tried to push it away. He had set the brake on it, though, and instead of rolling away, it toppled over. The stand crashed onto the deck with a clang, the sound uncomfortably loud in the quiet medical bay.

Bashir opened the cabinet and quickly pulled out a hypospray and a vial of cordrazine. As he dashed back over to Ezri, he affixed the powerful stimulant to the hypo. At the bed, he reached his empty hand to Ezris neck, pulling down the collar of her uniform with two fingers, her pale flesh clammy beneath his touch. He administered the hypo just below her ear, the small device hissing briefly as it worked.

On the medical display above the bed, the heart-rate monitor slowly changed, the number of beats per minute increasing, the rhythm of her heart smoothing out. Bashir waited, but few other readings improved. In particular, her neural activity remained dramatically low, a consequence almost unheard of with the use of cordrazine. Strangely, though, the neural energy of the Dax symbiont, though skewed, measured at a level not much different from normal.

Behind him, one of the doors to the medical bay opened. Footsteps approached, and he looked up from the tricorder to see Ensign Richter appear on the other side of the bed. She wore her reddish blond hair loosely about her head, he saw, with a curl to it that was not evident when she pulled it back in braids. Bashir felt a moment of surreal displacement, and of confused curiosity about himself, wondering why he even noticed such insignificant details right now.

Oh no, Richter said as she peered down at Ezri. How is she? she asked, even as her gaze rose to check the readouts for herself.

Shes in a coma, Bashir said flatly. Shes dying.

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Treir reached across the dabo table for the gaming rondure. As she did, the bare flesh of her shoulder brushed against Hetiks brawny tricepsequally bareand she felt an instant of heat. In the morning quiet at Quarksonly a handful of customers sat scattered about, having their breakfaststhe fleeting touch seemed

intense enough to be heard. The strength of her reaction surprised her. In the past few years, she had only pretended at such feelings for which she had been kept warm in other ways. But not like this. She found the unexpected jolt more than a little liberating.

Treir had hesitated in that sultry moment, and now she began moving again. She swiped the rondure from its cup in the dabo wheel and held it up before Hetik. So, she said, peering past the transparent orb with the starburst pattern at its center, that would pay off on?

Pass five and half under, Hetik finished, and then he explained the structure of the payouts.

Beauty and brains, Treir thought, and then laughed at herself for such schoolgirlish notions. Still, a woman could look. And with Hetik, there was plenty at which to look. Right now, she satisfied herself with a gaze just a fraction too long into eyes she thought of as the color of night. Right again, my cheltol, she said, the appellative slipping out before she could stop it.

Cheltol? he asked.

Uh, its an Orion term for a capable male student, she stammered, choosing discretion over description. It occurred to her that this must be how some of her own admirers felt. And she also considered what else she might be able to teach this sweet young man beside dabo.

Treir reached out and took Hetik's hand in hers, placed the rondure in his palm, and closed his fingers around it. His dark, delicious flesh complemented her green coloring, she noticed. Now you give it a whirl, she said, nodding her head toward the wheel, and then scolding herself for the unintended double entendre. As interesting and even delightful as she found her unanticipated responses to Hetik this morning, that was not why she had brought him here. This was business.

Hetik grasped the side of the dabo wheel and spun it around. The twitter of the wheel filled the room, easily overtaking the intermittent ring of flatware on dishes. He dexterously rolled the rondure from his palm to the tips of his thumb and forefinger, then reached down and sent it swirling around the upper, outer rim of the wheel.

Treir. The voice cut through the ambient sounds of the bar like a diamond through glass, sharply and without much effort. Both Treir and Hetik looked up from the dabo table to the entrance of the bar, where Quark had just arrived.

Treir muttered an Orion oath. What's he doing here? she thought in frustration. For the past few weeks, Quark had delegated the management of the bar during the morning hours to her. At first, he had still come to the bar himself at that time, keeping obviously watchful eyes and attentive ears, she added on her. Lately, though, he had stopped showing up in the morning. And despite her certainty that he still somehow managed to monitor her activities, through the use of surveillance devices or confederates or some other devious means, she had begun to feel some sense of autonomy during the times she was at least nominally in charge of the bar. Perhaps, she thought now, that had been naive. As she decided what she should do, she absently clutched at her necklace, a collection of emerald green jewels set in a pattern of interlacing triangles.

As the chirrup of the dabo wheel slowed, Quark started for the table. Stay here, Treir told Hetik, squeezing his upper arm to emphasize her words. She strode in Quark's direction, her long legs quickly eating up the short distance. She intercepted him about halfway to the table. Quark, she said, modulating her tone so that she sounded very pleased to see him. What are you doing here? She let herself almost sing the words, an attempt to focus Quark's attention on her. Behind her, she heard the wheel come to a stop, and the staccato sound of the rondure bouncing into a cup.

What are you doing? he demanded, even gruffer than usual. She saw that he looked upset, and she wondered if his mood had anything to do with his increasing flirtations with the station's security chief. Two nights ago, after that JemHadar had appeared as though from nowhere, she had watched Quark and Ro coquet with each other; she had also heard Ro suggest that she might return to the bar later that night, but Treir had not seen her in here since. Nor, she suspected, had Quark.

Now Quark leaned to his left and peered past Treir toward Hetik. We don't allow gamblers to touch the dabo wheel, he complained to her in a lowered voice. Let alone allow them to make the spins. He looked angrily up at her. Wasn't that the first thing I taught you?

Treir bent at her knees and slung herself around to Quark's side. As she slithered a bare arm across his

shoulders, she said in a breathy voice, But not the last thing youre going to teach me, I hope. Obvious, and Quark would see the words as a ploy, but he often responded to such advances regardless. She draped herself around him, her tall, lithe form folding up in such a way that she actually seemed to become the same size as the much smaller Ferengi.

Really? Quark asked, looking at her lasciviously. And what else would you like to learn? Treir liked predictable behavior; it had kept her in luxurious accommodations, elegant clothing, and a relative life of leisure for some time.

Oh, I dont know, she said, gently kneading his shoulders. Im sure youll think of something interesting for me. She started to ease him around toward the bar and away from Hetik.

Wait a minute, Quark said, setting his shoulders and not allowing Treir to turn him. The dabo wheel. He pointed in that direction.

Bad instincts, Treir railed at herself. She had moved too quickly to get Quark away. She knew better, but she had acted rashly. Probably because I was flustered by Hetik, she thought, but that was a poor reason. Dont worry about it, Quark, she said, trying to segue now from a personal mode to a business mode. Theres no latinum on the table.

Then whats he doing? Quark wanted to know. He extricated himself from Treirs hold. She pulled away from him, and in the blink of an eye, she towered over him once more. Quark looked up at her accusingly. Is he rigging the dabo wheel so you two can steal me deaf later?

Be careful what you say, Quark, she told him. I know you were just in a bad mood the other night when you intimated you were going to fire me, and maybe youre in a bad mood now, but you dont want to drive away just about the only thing drawing customers in here.

Quark made a show of peering slowly around the bar at the few patrons present. Yeah, he said. Im turning them away at the door.

Its breakfast time, she said. Dont be sarcastic. She added a smile to her admonishment, attempting to find the right attitude that would work with Quark today. Treir had initially believed that his supposed pursuit of Ro had been for the sole purpose of gaining some business advantage relating to her position aboard Deep Space 9. His continued sour mood, though, was beginning to convince her otherwise.

She held her hand out toward the dabo table. That young mans name is Hetik, she said. He made a pilgrimage here to see the Celestial Temple for the first time, and he

I dont care what his name is or why hes here, Quark said. I want him to stop touching my dabo wheel. He glared over at Hetik. And tell him to put some clothes on.

Treir glanced over at Hetik. The meaty young man was paying no attention to them, instead studying the dabo table. He wore a pair of tight black shorts and a small matching top that barely covered the upper portion of his torso. He looked very goodvery sexyand he seemed remarkably at ease. Treir knew well how uncomfortable it could feel to wear so little in public. In fact

Hes wearing more than I am, she said. Her outfitprovided to her by Quark, of courseconsisted of little more than a pair of narrow bands of shimmering silk, one at her chest and one just below her waist.

You have more parts people want to see, Quark said with a leer.

Some people, Treir agreed. But some would rather see Hetiks parts. She realized then how far this conversation had sunk, and that it would not likely improve, and although Quarks mood might, there was an immediacy to her need to discuss Hetik with him. She had intended to speak with him later, convinced that by the time he arrived at the bar this afternoon or this evening, she would have been able to prove to him the worth of what she had done.

Anybody who wouldnt prefer your parts is a fool, Quark said.

Perhaps, Treir said. But fools spend their latinum as much as the wise domaybe more so.

Thats true, Quark said, but then he looked up at her with a quizzical expression. But whats your point?

My point is, maybe Hetik could bring in a new set of customers, and thereby improve profits.

A smirk played across Quarks face, his skepticism evident. I dont think so, he said.

Well, thats too bad, Treir told him, because hes your new dabo boy.

Quarks eyes widened, and then his mouth dropped open, completely revealing his pointed, unaligned teeth. He closed and opened his mouth several more times. Like a fish, Treir thought, gasping when

removed from water. Finally, Quark managed to form words. Hes my new what?

Your new dabo boy, she repeated. I hired him.

Again, Quarks mouth oscillated between closed and open. You what? He brought a hand up to his chest, as though he were suffering a heart spasm.

She moved toe-to-toe with him and stared down directly into his eyes. I hired Hetik, she said, enunciating each word slowly, to be your new dabo boy.

Quark returned her gaze, still agape. Heshesyoyou he sputtered. It seemed to Treir as though he did not know what to be upset about first a dabo boy in his establishment, or heran employeehiring a new worker.

Listen to me, Quark, she said, dropping any pretense from her voice and manner. If some people come in here to ogle me while theyre drinking and gambling, then other people will come in to ogle him. She pointed a thumb back over her shoulder toward Hetik.

Quark shook his head, then closed his mouth and seemed to regain his composure. Nobodys going to come into the bar to see either one of you, he snarled, once I have the two of you thrown out an airlock. Treir felt her features harden, and she leaned down until her face was only centimeters from Quarks. Be careful with your threats, Quark, she said in a fierce whisper. Hetik might hear you.

What hes going to hear, Quark said, apparently unfazed by Treirs words, is me firing him. He backed up a half-step, then started around her. Just before he would have passed her, she reached out and took hold of his upper arm. Quark stopped, and they regarded each other.

Dont do it, Treir said. She knew that this would work, that Hetiks presence in the bar would bring in more customers, which would necessarily increase her own tips. And she liked Hetik and wanted to help him. She leaned in toward Quark. Perhaps we can come to some sort of accord about this, she said, breathing warmly in his ear.

Quark pulled back and stared at her for a few moments, his eyes squinting into slits. He appeared to consider Treirs request. Then he said, Im a romantic, but I also know the 229th Rule of Acquisition Latinum lasts longer than lust. He pulled his arm from her grasp, but before he could take another step, she grabbed him again. This time, she pulled him in close to her.

Then at least let me do it, she said. I hired him; let me fire him.

Quark jerked his arm free. Fine, he said. I just came in to get a bottle of grosz for Admiral Akaar. He looked over at Hetik, and then back at Treir. Make sure hes gone when I come back in tonight, he told her.

Fine, she said.

Quark started to head for the bar, presumably to retrieve the grosz, but then he stopped, came back, and leaned in to her. Just be happy Im not firing you too, he said. Then he made his way to the bar. She watched as he pulled out a stubby, dark green bottle and carried it out.

Once Quark had gone, Treir finally turned to Hetik. She saw that he was now looking at her. She started toward him, wondering what she would say.

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The smell of smoke reached him first.

Vaughn regained consciousness as though a switch had been thrown. One moment, his mind did not exist, and the next, awareness deluged him. With his eyes closed, his other senses painted the canvas of his circumstances. As he breathed in the acrid smoke, it irritated the dry membranes of his nose. A bitter taste coated his mouth, and his throat burned as though he had swallowed broken glass. His body ached within and without, his muscles strained, his flesh battered, and the air felt unpleasantly cool about him. The crackle of live flames reached him from several directions, but not so close that he could feel their heat. And beneath it all, something else made itself knowna noise that held more substance as a feeling than as a soundlike a far-off wind whispering at the very limits of hearing, moving air with a force diminished by distance.

Vaughn opened his eyes. He lay on his back, propped up against a section of bulkhead in what had been

the rear of Chaffee's forward compartment. The front of the shuttle was gone. No, not gone. It sat on the open ground thirty or forty meters away, engulfed by fire. A pillar of thick black smoke rose up from it, reaching for the gray clouds above as though for a kindred spirit.

Between the two sections of the destroyed shuttle, wreckage littered the ground. Two smaller fires burned off to the right, and hills sat far off in the distance to the left, but otherwise, the landscape extended away desolate and unvariegated, a flat, brown plain. Vaughn glanced over his shoulder and saw the bulkhead separating the fore and aft compartments. Through the misshapen doorway, the aft portion of the shuttle appeared relatively intact, although the roof had been almost completely ripped away.

Something moved directly to Vaughn's right, just a meter or two away. The broken remnants of a chair tumbled from atop a heap of debris, and he saw a hand reach upward. Prynn, he said, his voice rasping, the word barely understandable. He gulped, trying to clear his throat, then coughed forcefully. Mucus filled his mouth, and he spat to his left, not surprised to see streaks of red mixed in with the yellowish fluid. Prynn, he called again, pronouncing her name clearly this time.

Im here, she said, and she waved her hand. Im stuck. She sounded remarkably calm in light of what they had just endured.

Hold on, Vaughn said. He set one hand against what remained of the bulkhead to his left, and the other down on the decking beneath him. He pushed himself forward and upward, and managed to get to his feet. His body ached everywhere in his joints, in his muscles, on his flesh, and he felt a throbbing pain on the inside of his cheek but he seemed to have escaped any significant external injuries. Im coming, he told Prynn. He stepped carefully over and around masses of ruined machinery, leaning toward the aft compartment in order to compensate for the forward tilt of the decking.

When he got to the chair Prynn had pushed from atop herself, he reached down and lifted it out of his way. He swung the bent object back in the direction he had come, setting it down with a thud. Then he stepped forward and pulled away a snarl of mangled circuitry, revealing Prynn. She looked shaken and bruised. Her face and neck showed multiple cuts, and a long gash arced from her temple all the way down to her chin. A blood vessel must have ruptured in one of her eyes, because the sclera had turned a dark red. Can you see out of both eyes? he asked her.

Prynn glanced around, then back up at him. Yes, she said. But my arm. She pointed up toward her right shoulder, beyond which her arm disappeared beneath a fractured section of hull plating. She tried to push the plate away with her free hand, but it did not move at all beneath her efforts.

Vaughn studied the situation for a moment, then glanced around in the unlikely hope that he might spy a tricorder lurking somewhere nearby. Ideally, he would scan behind the metal slab before attempting to extricate Prynn. If some portion of her arm had been severed, the plating might actually be preventing her from bleeding to death; on the other hand, she might be losing blood right now.

Seeing no tricorder, Vaughn moved to his left and wrapped his fingers around the top of the hull plate. He had expected to find the metal warm to the touch, perhaps even hot, but it was actually cold. He pulled gingerly on the heavy slab, testing its weight; he did not want to manhandle it away from Prynn only to have it crash back down on her an instant later. Satisfied that he could move it, Vaughn repositioned himself so that he could brace his legs against an unbroken section of the starboard bulkhead. Setting his hands beneath the top of the slab, he pushed, using the combined strength of his arms and legs. The plate shifted forward a few centimeters and stopped, the loud screech of metal scraping against metal erupting from its lower edge.

From somewhere below him came the sound of movement. Vaughn felt sweat forming on his forehead as he struggled to prevent the plate from falling backward. He grunted as he tensed his arms and legs, pushing with as much force as he could manage, and still the plate began to slip back.

Im free, Prynn yelled suddenly. Vaughn looked over to see his daughter moving away from the metal slab. As quickly as he could, he jumped back out of the way, onto the dirt beyond the fallen shuttle. The broken section of the hull slammed back down. Vaughn turned and spat again, and again he saw blood. He wondered just how bad his internal injuries were.

Prynn tottered to her feet, and relief flooded over Vaughn when he saw her raise her right arm and flex her shoulder, elbow, and fingers. Her uniform had been torn open in a dozen places, he saw, and her

combadge no longer hung on her tunic. Considering what they had just been through, though, she appeared more or less unscathed. Are you all right? he asked.

Im okay, she told him as she found her way out of the wreckage and onto open ground. She faced him across a few meters and raised a hand to the side of her face, feeling cautiously at the wound there. She pulled her hand away and examined her fingertips, which were now red with blood.

He walked up to her. Youve got a deep cut here, he said, drawing a finger through the air along the side of her face. He looked closely at the gash, then said, It looks like the bloods clotted, so you should be all right.

Youve got quite a few cuts yourself, she said, pointing up at his face.

And I can feel every one of them, he said with a halfhearted smile.

Prynn turned and peered back at the smashed aft section of the shuttle. We need to find a medkit, she said.

We need to find Ensign chThane.

Oh no, Prynn said, distress filling her voice. Shar.

Vaughn glanced down and saw that, somehow, his combadge still hung on his uniform. He reached up and pressed it, and it warbled to life. Vaughn to Ensign chThane, he said. He waited a few seconds, then repeated the call a second time, and then a third.

There was no response.

Prynn turned and surveyed the area, and Vaughn did the same. They began searching the nearby ground around the wreckage of the aft section. As they looked, Vaughns gaze alit on the distant pyre of the shuttles bow.

The front of the shuttle, he said, and he rushed by Prynn and back into the mass of debris from which they had just come. He heard her say something as he moved as quickly as he could through the twisted doorway and into the aft compartment. Everything lay in a shambleshe stepped on a phaser as he enteredbut by simple fortuity, he saw what he needed immediately, lying in a corner and propped up against a dented metal locker. Vaughn took two long strides, bent, and picked up the fire-suppression canister.

He made his way back out of the wreckage. Prynn, he saw, had already started toward the fiery bow section. He ran to catch up with her. A million small aches nagged at him, but he counted himself fortunate that he could even stand up at this point.

Prynn stopped several meters from the burning cockpit, her arms thrown up in front of her face. As Vaughn reached her, he felt the heat of the fire coming at him in waves. The flames roared, the sound sending him back six weeks to the explosion on Defiant s bridge, to when he thought he had lost his daughter. But he had no time for that now. Stay here, he yelled to Prynn. He walked forward a few steps, wanting to get close enough to be able to use the canister effectively, but the heat grew unbearable. He stumbled to the right, starting around the wreckage in search of a break in the fire that would allow him to move closer.

As Vaughn circled, he saw something through the blistering air, glimpsed as though through rippling water. He backed away from the fire to get a better view, and saw only a pile of metal and circuitry lying another twenty meters away. He continued around, though, looking not at the fire, but out at the surrounding land. Another heap came into view, and Vaughn recognized the gray of a Starfleet uniform and a trace of blue that could only be Andorian skin.

Prynn, Vaughn called. Shar. He dropped the canister and ran. As he drew closer to the fallen ensign, he saw that his body had landed in an awkward position, like a rag doll tossed carelessly aside. ChThane lay facedown, his left arm bent back in a way that seemed impossible for a human or an Andorian; at best, the shoulder had been dislocated, and at worst, it had been torn apart.

Vaughn dropped to one knee beside chThanes head and felt for a pulse at the side of his neck. Vaughn knew little about Andorian physiology, but he knew enough to ascertain that the young man was still alive. He got up and began working his way around chThanes body, searching for any visible injuries. He heard Prynns footsteps race up and stop.

How is he? she wanted to know.

Hes alive, Vaughn said, not looking up. He moved down along chThanes body. As he reached the knee, he noticed a dark patch below chThanes shin. Vaughn examined that area of the leg and found a tear in the uniform pants. He reached two fingers from each hand inside the hole and pulled in opposite directions, the sound of tearing cloth strangely out of place in this alien environment. Vaughn examined chThanes leg, and what he saw made him want to turn away.

What is it? Prynn asked, her concern obvious. Is he all right? Vaughn heard her take a step closer, and he looked over at her and locked his eyes on her face.

Stop, he commanded, and she did, looking up and meeting his gaze. The dried blood from the gash, coupled with the injury to her eye, made her appear as though she was wearing a mask on one side of her face. Stay right there and listen to me. Ensign chThane is all right, but Im going to need your help to keep him that way. She nodded mutely, and Vaughn thought that shock might be setting in. I want you to go back to the aft section and find a tricorder and a medkit. Prynn turned immediately and started back the way they had come. Wait, he called, and she stopped and turned back toward him. I think I saw the emergency survival cache in the aft compartment, he said. See if you can open it. If you cant, or if you cant find it, then youll have to search through the wreckage for loose equipment. I also need something I can use as a splint.

A splint, Prynn echoed.

Yes, he told her. Now go. She headed away at a run.

Vaughn looked back down at chThanes leg. Halfway between the ankle and the knee, the jagged end of a bone protruded through the young mans skin. The white of the bone sharply contrasted with the blue of Andorian flesh. Indigo blood spilled from the wound and darkened the dirt beneath.

Vaughn stood up and hastily pulled off his uniform tunic. He kneeled back down again and lifted chThanes leg just enough to allow him to slide one sleeve under the thigh. Vaughn pulled the sleeve out the other side, then tied it together with the other one as tightly as he could. The blood flowing out of the leg wound ebbed at once.

Were getting you help, Shar, Vaughn said quietly. He reached up and again felt for a pulse at chThanes neck. Dont die on me now, he said. Dont die on me.

The day had moved on.

Vaughn pulled his coat closed against a breath of cold wind, grateful that the outerwear had survived the crash. He moved out of the wrecked aft section of the shuttle, carrying three handheld beacons, the last items that he thought they would need. As he and Prynn had ministered to Ensign chThanes injuries and to their own and then as they had raided the emergency survival cache and set up a camp around the fallen officer, Vaughn had begun to decide how they would proceed. Now, as he made one last inspection of the downed shuttle, he settled on a plan. Not necessarily a good plan, he thought, but of the few options available to them right now, it had been a simple matter to identify the best course of action.

As Vaughn stepped from Chaffee s splintered decking onto the hardpan, he peered around. The two smaller fires burning closest to here had sputtered out, leaving behind smoldering mounds of seared machinery. The larger fire enveloping the shuttle cockpit still blazed, though it had abated. Overhead, the incessant cloud cover continued to hold the planets daytime hours in a continuous dusk. The gray conditions gave Vaughn the sense of an impending rainstorm.

Or of an impending attack, he thought.

He eyed the never-still sea of shadows above, remembering vividly the murky form that had penetrated the roof of the shuttle, and which had looked very much like an extension of the cloud cover. Vaughn had considered the idea that the clouds might actually be life-forms, but nothing the crew had learned so far, either aboard Chaffee or back on Defiant, supported such a possibility. The attack on the shuttle had likely been akin to a lightning strike, he thought, with the clouds discharging energy, and the shuttle acting as a ground and conducting it; back aboard Defiant, when the ship had been similarly struck by an energy surge, Ensign chThane had offered the same analogy.

Before returning to the makeshift camp he and Prynn had set up, Vaughn decided to loop around the wreckage of the aft section, just to make certain that nothing else they might be able to use had been

thrown clear. They had already been fortunate that the emergency survival cache had come through the crash dented, but intact. Starfleet should make their shuttles out of the same material as their survival lockers, Vaughn thought, a flippant notion that had occurred to him on several other occasions; this was not the first shuttle accident he had lived through.

As Vaughn reached the back of the smashed shuttle, he looked back along the line of Chaffee's descent, expecting to see long gouges where it had skidded along the ground, perhaps even a small impact crater where it had first hit. Instead, he saw only a level, unbroken plain. Vaughn squatted and set the beacons down, then pulled a tricorder from an outside coat pocket. He opened the device and scanned the area; although interference from the energy in the clouds and at the source of the pulse hindered long-range scans, it remained possible to gather short-range readings. In this case, Vaughn's scans only confirmed what his eyes had already told him Chaffee had come down hard, but at neither the vertical nor the horizontal speed he would have expected. However that had happened, it had probably saved their lives. At least for now.

Vaughn closed up the tricorder and placed it back in a coat pocket, then bent and collected up the beacons. He wiped at the corner of his mouth with a knuckle, his saliva no longer streaked with red. What he had thought might be a symptom of an internal injury had turned out to be nothing more than the result of a chunk of flesh he had bitten from the inside of his cheek. He had mended the wound and stemmed the bleeding, although his cheek still ached.

Vaughn went back around the wreckage and headed toward the fire that was still consuming the shuttle's cockpit. As he walked, he noticed again the remote hum that he had first heard when he had regained consciousness after the accident. So far as he could tell, it had never stopped; it felt like Defiant traveling at warp, that constant background drone and throb of the engines that permeated the ship. It's the voice of the clouds, he thought, the audible effect of all the energy surrounding the planet.

Vaughn passed the flickering orange flames burning the forward section of the shuttle. Beyond, the small encampment came into view although calling it an encampment seemed an overstatement to Vaughn. The area he and Prynn had staked out around Ensign ChThane consisted of little more than bedrolls, blankets, and the locker that had contained the survival cache. A second locker, which had held a small, portable shelter a thin but insulative and weatherproof material and a collapsible framework over which it fit had broken open during the crash, its contents ripped apart.

As Vaughn approached, he saw Prynn standing over ChThane, a tricorder in her hand, no doubt checking his condition. The ensign lay on his back now atop one of the bedrolls, wrapped in a thin metallic blanket that confined his body heat and kept him warm. Vaughn had treated ChThane's fractured legs as well as his dislocated shoulder, three bruised ribs, and numerous cuts and contusions as best he could, but damage to one of the young Andorians' less identifiable organs demanded more medical knowledge and ability than either he or Prynn had. They had stabilized the ensign enough to move him onto the bedding, though, and his vital signs had improved somewhat. He had even shown indications of reviving, but Vaughn had decided to administer an anesthetic, to keep him both unconscious and out of pain. ChThane appeared to be out of immediate danger, but Vaughn knew that he would require a doctor's attention soon.

How is he? he asked Prynn. She looked much better now, after Vaughn had tended to her bumps and bruises, and after she had cleaned herself up. He had been able to heal almost all of her thankfully superficial injuries, with the exception of the one to her eye. The deep red surrounding her dark iris and black pupil made the eye appear opaque and therefore blind, but her vision actually remained unaffected. He's the same, she said, answering him across ChThane's body. A gust of wind blew past, and she pulled the collar of her jacket up higher.

Vaughn peered down at the young man, whose usually bright blue skin had grown dull. He's lucky to be alive, he said. Were all lucky to Vaughn stopped as he looked up at Prynn and saw tears in her eyes. She turned away from him and moved a few paces away.

I'm sorry, she said. She raised her arm, and Vaughn assumed she was wiping away her tears. He heard her breathe in slowly and deeply, then she dropped her arm and turned back around. It's just that we were friends, she said. Becoming friends, anyway.

Vaughn thought that there was probably even more to it than that; just before he had arrived at Deep

Space 9, the station had been attacked, and Prynne had lost coworkers and friends, one of whom she had been very close to. Now he wanted to go to his daughter and wrap his arms around her, hold her and tell her that everything would be all right. But apart from all that had come between them over the years, he understood that she needed something other than that right now. Ensign Tenmei, he said gently, we weren't lucky, were we? He emphasized the word by isolating it.

We were lucky, Prynne said, pushing the tricorder closed and slipping it into a jacket pocket. But not just lucky.

Vaughn nodded. He told her what he had seen what he had failed to see in the downed shuttles wake.

How did you do it? he asked, genuinely curious, but also wanting her to focus on her involvement in their survival.

It's an old shuttle pilots trick, she said, and for the first time since the crash, she seemed to perk up. There are certain maneuvers you can make with a crippled shuttle at the end, the antigravs saved us.

Antigravs don't work at speed, Vaughn noted.

We decelerated as we broke apart, and I used the emergency thrusters to brake us even more at the right moment, she explained. Then I overcharged the antigravs. It's a split-second timing thing. They call it the Sulu Shuttle Stunt. Vaughn nodded, impressed. He recognized what Prynne had described so matter-of-factly as a maneuver that even the best shuttle pilots would fail to perform successfully nine times out of ten. She really is exceptional, he thought, and he told her so, making sure to speak as her commanding officer, and not as a proud father.

Thank you, she said, accepting the compliment graciously. Vaughn opted not to ask her for whom the old shuttle pilots trick had been named, Hikaru or Demora. He had known them both, and neither answer would have surprised him. Instead, he handed her one of the beacons.

Here, he said. I thought these might be useful. Prynne took the beacon, found its activation switch, and turned it on. A powerful beam of white light emerged. She shined it at the ground around her feet, and then off into the distance; even in the dim daylight, it had a considerable range.

Vaughn walked around Ensign ChThane. He set the other two beacons down, then grabbed a bedroll and lowered himself into a sitting position on it. We need to discuss what we're going to do, he told Prynne.

She switched the beacon off and set it down with the others.

I've actually had some thoughts about that, she said, pulling the tricorder back out of her jacket. She opened the device and worked its controls. I scanned the rear section of the shuttle, and it just might be possible to scrounge enough salvageable components from different systems to repair the transporter. Transporter technology, Vaughn knew from Prynne's record, had been a secondary area of concentration for her during her Starfleet service. We obviously wouldn't be able to beam back to the ship through the clouds, and with the levels of the energy at the source of the pulse, I'm not sure how close we could get to there, but we might be able to get closer.

As a commander, Vaughn listened to Prynne's proposal with satisfaction, pleased simply in terms of her professionalism. Here was an officer actively seeking a solution to their dilemma, and though her thoughts had turned to preservation of the away team, they had also included an attempt to find a means of completing their mission. How long would that take, and how likely is it to work? he asked.

I don't know, she said, studying the tricorder. Based on the readings of the wreckage, I'd guess about a day. She looked up. But I can't really tell how close it would be able to get us to the pulse, she admitted.

Vaughn turned his head away from her and peered off into the distance, integrating her comments into the framework he had already developed for the continuation of their mission. His eyes found the still-burning husk of Chaffee's cockpit, and he watched the bounding flames as they persisted in birthing the rising black smoke. Not far from there, he saw the fire-suppression canister still lying where he had dropped it earlier.

Finally, Vaughn looked back up at Prynne. Yes, try to get the transporter working, he told her. If the pulse can't be stopped, we have no idea what effect it will have on the surface of the planet, but it'd probably be a good idea to get as far away from it as possible.

Prynne's brow knitted in obvious puzzlement. You don't want to use the transporter to try to get closer to the pulse? she asked.

If you can make it work in time to make a difference, Vaughn said, then yes, you should try it.

I should try it? she asked.

Yes, he said. In the meantime, Im going to try to get there on foot.

Youre going to walk there? she asked, her voice rising in surprise. Alone?

Somebody needs to tend to Ensign chThane, he said, glancing over at the unconscious Andorian. And youll also be working on the transporter.

Prynn seemed to consider this, and then she asked, How far is it?

Based on the levels of the interference, he said, I think somewhere between fifty and two hundred fifty kilometers. But its impossible to know for sure.

Prynn let out a long, heavy breath. Two hundred fifty kilometers in two and a half days? she said doubtfully. Youll never make that, even under the best conditions.

Which is why Im hoping that the distance is closer to fifty kilometers, he said. He chose not to address the fact that, even if he made it to the location in time, he still had no idea howor even ifhe would be able to prevent the next occurrence of the pulse; all along, they had known that they would have to learn what they could when they got there, and hope that they could improvise a solution.

Vaughn stood up and faced Prynn. If you succeed with the transporter, and if you can beam yourself close to the pulse, then do so, he said. Otherwise, get yourself and Ensign chThane as far away as possible. Whether or not we stop the pulse, the crew will finish repairing Sagan in a few more days, and theyll send it down to look for us. He did not bother to add that if they could not stop the pulse they would have to survive its effects in order to be rescued, something far from sure, considering that the planet was completely devoid of animal life.

All right, Prynn said, accepting his orders. Her features fell still, her expression unreadable.

If I can stop the pulse, or if I cant but I somehow survive it, he said, then Ill come back here.

All right, she said again, still stone-faced. Vaughn wished he knew what she was thinking. He understood the familiar and troubling echo she must be hearing from seven years ago. It doesnt matter, he told himself. Not now. They each would do what was required of them in order to try to save the Vahni Vahltpali. When will you go? she asked.

Now, he said. I just need to gather some provisions.

Ill get the rations, she said. She went over to the survival cache, opened the lid of the locker, and reached inside. Vaughn watched her for a moment, then gathered the few items he had decided to take with him on his trek a bedroll, a beacon, one of the metallic blankets; he already carried a tricorder and a phaser. He wrapped the beacon and the blanket inside the bedroll, then affixed the lightweight bundle to his back, fastening with bands across his shoulders. Prynn returned with a dozen thin, metallic envelopes, along with two containers of water. Vaughn deposited the rations envelopes in various pockets of his coat, and slipped the carry straps of the water containers over his shoulders.

Ill report approximately every hour, he said. Although Vaughns combadge had been the only one not lost in the crash, they had found several others in the survival cache, and Prynn now wore one on her jacket.

With the interference from the energy, Im not sure how long well be able to communicate.

I understand, she said simply. A silence fell that Vaughn found awkward, and he found himself at a loss for something to say. Finally, Prynn said, Good luck.

You too, Prynn, he said. He looked in her eyes, her injured sclera changing her appearance dramatically.

He pulled out his tricorder and began scanning. He studied the readout, then turned with the tricorder held out in front of him, searching for the highest level of interference. When he found it, he started walking in that direction, leaving Prynn behind him.

For the first time in a very long time, he did not look back.

37

Dax drifted through the pools in the Caves of Makala.

No, not drifted. Floated. Swam. Pushed.

Dax pushed through the murky waters, the usually gentle, welcoming pools now impeding progress. The

cool, damp air above stagnated as well, resisting any movement through it. A difficult tranquillity reigned. Dax sent out a message, but the blue-white veins of energy died quickly, reaching nowhere, and nobody. The pools sat strangely still, absent not only of other symbionts, Dax realized, but seemingly of existence itself. Somehow, the life-carrying waters, and perhaps even the caves, had slipped beyond the universe. A shadow fell, gray and mysterious. Dax felt it as it stole light and heat, an unexpected eclipse. The darkness descended on the pools, and Dax dove down pushed down suddenly desperate to escape the clutches of the unsettling pall. But the dim mantle pushed down too, roiling the waters. A distant siren sang, a lonely echo in the churning flow of this other existence. Dax tumbled, end over end, side over side, tossed about by the pulsing movements. The memory of the motion sickness that once afflicted Ezri rose and
Ezri.

Ezri was here, Dax knew. Ezri Tigan. The next host. Or the previous one. Dax could not remember. The current host the current host

There was no current host. Dax was Dax, and only Dax.

But how could that be? There had been hosts, and if they had gone, then there could only be death. Pain, and then death.

Dax reeled, mentally, emotionally, physically. The beclouded pools spun, eddies and gyres pulling Dax down deep into the gray waters. Pulling Ezri down

Ezri was drowning.

And Dax knew. Death enveloped Ezri, surrounded her, and yet Dax would go on. But that was not the compact Dax had made. Ezri would protect the symbiont, and Dax would protect the host.

The waters grew heavy with their motion, oppressing even as they promised release. A new life, a new existence called a cherished existence but none of that mattered. Only Ezri mattered.

Dax drifted upward. Floated. Swam. Pushed.

Dax struggled, understanding that the struggle would be the life or death of both of them. Accepted that. Cherished that.

Ezri, Dax cried, and fought to find her in the growing shadows.

Ezri Dax regained consciousness in the medical bay for the second time in a week. She recognized her surroundings immediately. The quality of the light shined differently here than in the rest of the ship, both a bit brighter and a bit harsher. The diagnostic scanner mounted in the bulkhead above her beat in time with her heart. And of the voices she heard, one belonged to Julian.

This time in the medical bay, his was the first face she saw. Can you hear me? he asked gently, his dark, handsome features drifting into sight above her.

Yes, she tried to say, but her tongue felt thick and slow in her mouth, and the sound she produced only approximated the word. She tried to concentrate on speaking, on coordinating the muscles of her mouth, and realized that her mind seemed thick and slow as well.

Slowly, Julian said, and a warm feeling filled Ezri as a smile bloomed on her face.

Slow, she thought ponderously, is all I can do. She sensed herself floating back down into the folds of unconsciousness, and she fought to remain awake. Her eyes closed, and she forced them open again.

Yes, she pronounced deliberately. I can hear you.

Good, Julian said. His eyes sparkled above a thin, tight-lipped smile she had seen many times before. He was pleased, she could tell, but also worried and unsure.

Whatwhat happened? she wanted to know, still struggling to swim up to full consciousness.

Later, Julian told her. He reached up and laid his strong hand atop hers, the warmth of his touch almost overwhelming her. Her vision blurred, and a tear spilled from each eye, down the sides of her face.

Julian, she said. She pushed her body to move. She turned her hand over so that she could take hold of his. He glanced down for a moment, and then she felt him squeeze. He smiled again, but fully this time, with no reservations or concernsonly with love. What happened? she repeated.

You need to rest now, he told her. We can discuss it later.

No, Ezri said with as much vigor as she could marshal. Tell me now, Doctor.

Im afraid youre off duty, Lieutenant, he said, a sternness and seriousness underscoring his words. She was in the medical bay, it occurred to her, with no memory of how she had gotten here, and so of course Julian must be upset about whatever had happened. But that only strengthened her resolve to learn what had taken place.

Julian, I need to know what happened, she said, imploring him to talk to her.

He breathed in and out deeply through his nose, his nostrils flaring. Youve been in a coma for several hours, he finally told her. I was barely able to keep you alive. He glanced up and over her head, probably at the diagnostic panel. When he looked back down, he said, Frankly, Im not even sure how I was able to bring you out of the coma.

You didnt, she said without thinking. She lifted herself up off the bed, sliding her elbows back underneath her and propping herself up. Her head spun.

Easy, easy, Julian entreated. He put a hand to her shoulder and tried to restrain her, and then to ease her back down. She resisted. Lieutenant Dax, Julian said in his strong physicians voice, you need to rest.

Your body has been through an enormous trauma.

Ezri relented, allowing herself to be lowered back down onto the bed. What happened? she asked again, driven to talk about what she had been through. I remember heading to a Jefferies tube one of the engineers found something

Later, Julian told her. I want you to rest right now.

Ezri struggled up again onto her elbows. Dr. Bashir, she said, injecting a tone of command into her voice, there are four billion Vahni lives at risk right now. I dont have time to rest.

Look, Julian said. Youre not going to be able to help anybody if you attempt to do too much too soon and simply end up collapsing. He stared directly into her eyes as he spoke, his expression hardened. She lowered herself back down onto the bed.

Ill lie back down, she said, and Ill rest. But first you have to tell me what happened. Its important that I know.

At last, Julian relented. Ensign Leishman found an amorphous gray substance in one of the Jefferies tubes. Yes, Ezri said, the recollection springing forth from somewhere in her clouded mind. The substance. We were trying to transport it. She remembered that Nog had been with her in the tube.

Thats right, Julian said. According to Nog, it somehow moved when we attempted transport. He said he didnt actually see it move, but that suddenly, it was elsewhere on the deck, and your hand was touching it. You collapsed immediately.

Julian, she said, reaching up and grasping the sides of his shoulders. The substance is alive.

All right, he said, taking her hands in his own and lowering them back to her sides. But you have to rest now. He looked back over his shoulder. Nurse Juarez, he said, would you prepare a hypo?

You have to listen to me, she said when he peered back down at her. She saw how tired he looked, saw the tension in his features, and she understood how hard this must have been on him. Ill rest, she told him, but first you have to listen to me. And tell Lieutenant Bowers. She heard footsteps, and then saw Juarez above her as he stepped up to the bed. He held a hypospray in his hands, she saw; Julian reached across Ezris body, and Juarez handed it to him.

All right, Julian said. Tell me.

The substance is alive, she said again. I sensed it while I seemed to be unconscious.

Seemed to be? Julian asked with evident skepticism.

I didnt fall into a coma, she forged ahead. Or maybe part of me did, but I wasI wasits an enormously powerful mind. And very alien. And I think it knows about the pulse.

Julian looked over at Juarez. The two men seemed to share a moment of nonverbal communication, and then they looked back down at her. All right, Julian said. Ill inform Lieutenant Bowers. He held the hypospray up in both hands and checked the setting. Ezri could see that he did not believe what she had told him. She had been in a coma, and whatever she told him she had experienced, he would ascribe to dreaming, or whatever you called the state your mind entered in such circumstances.

And maybe hes right, she admitted to herself. But she did not think so. And despite Julians arroganceborn of his superior knowledge and abilities she knew that he would pass on what she told him

to Lieutenant Bowers.

Julian lowered his hands, preparing to administer the hypospray. Wait, Ezri said. I have to tell you one more thing. Julian withdrew the hypo. The being I think it took me to another universe. This time, the expression on Julians face reflected not skepticism, but curiosity. It was almost as though she had furnished him an important piece of a puzzle.

Ill inform Lieutenant Bowers of everything youve said, he told her. But now its time for you to rest. He reached forward again, and Ezri felt the slight pressure of the hypo against the side of her neck, its tip slightly cool.

She was very tired. She had used so much energy coming back here, she thought, and the sense of that suddenly became clear in her mind. She recalled a struggle against gray clouds, and the recollection came to her not like a memory, but like a dream of a memory, the way the lives of Daxs past hosts often came to her.

Ezri heard the brief whisper of the hypospray close by her ear. It occurred to her that Dax had heard or felt similar sounds quiet, short, sibilant so often back in the Caves of Makala. And thinking of the symbionts time in the pools back on Trill, she slid beneath the waves of sleep.

The next time Ezri opened her eyes, she woke naturally from sleep, rather than regaining consciousness. She still felt tired, but she also felt much better. Her mind had cleared, and her thoughts came easily now. She reached her arms out to each side and stretched, yawning heavily and, at the end, loudly.

Well, hello, she heard Julian say from across the medical bay. She lifted her head and peered across the room. Julian handed something to Nurse Richter Juarez appeared to have left and then started toward her. His demeanor the sound of his voice, the expression on his face, the ease of his gait seemed light-years away from where it had been earlier. From his manner, she supposed that her condition had improved markedly. How are you feeling? Julian asked as he arrived beside her bed.

I must be feeling much better for you to be smiling like that, Ezri joked. She offered a smile of her own, then shifted on the bed and sat up, swinging her legs over the side.

Well, as a matter of fact, yes, you are, he agreed. He peeked up at the diagnostic panel. All of your vital signs have returned more or less to normal, and He reached up and tapped at a control, which beeped twice in response. your isoboramine levels have increased significantly.

Ezri looked up at Julian, her smile vanishing instantly. My isoboramine levels were low? she asked.

Isoboramine, she knew, was a neurotransmitter chemical essential for a joined Trill; it functioned as a medium for the transfer of synaptic processes between host and symbiont. If the amount of the chemical dropped below a certain level, the symbiont would have to be removed in order to keep it alive; in such a case, the host would die.

Yes, they were, Julian said apologetically. Im sorry. I didnt mean to spring the information on you like that.

I know, she said, reaching over and squeezing his hand as a sign of reassurance. But tell me what happened.

Actually, Im not entirely certain, he said. But I used the standard benzocytazine treatment. It didnt work initially, but once your vital signs stabilized, it took hold.

And all of this, Ezri asked, attempting to make sense of what had happened to her, because I touched the creature we found in the Jefferies tube?

Well, Id still hesitate to say that the substance is alive, Julian said, but your contact with whatever it is seems to have been what injured you.

If its not alive, then what is it? she asked. And whether its alive or not, how did it do what it did to me?

She brought her hands down on the bed on either side of her body and pushed herself off, hopping onto her feet. She held on to the bed for a moment, making sure that she could stand after what she had been through, and after having been on her back for hours. Julian took hold of her upper arm, steadying her.

Are you all right? he asked.

Yes, she said, lightly brushing away his hand. Im okay. She walked unhurriedly across the medical bay.

Ensign Richter turned from a console on the other side of the room, saw Ezris slow progress, and started

to rise out of her chair. Ezri waved her away, and the ensign hesitated, then returned to her seat. What is it? Ezri asked, turning to Julian and repeating her question about the substance.

We don't know yet, Julian said, following her across the room. He passed her and went to the console where Ensign Richter sat, picking up a tricorder there. But we did learn some things about it, thanks to you. He walked back over to her.

Thanks to me? she asked.

Yes. Let me show you. Julian motioned to a companel in one wall, and the two of them strode over to it. He opened and worked the tricorder, then keyed a sequence of touchpads on the companel. On the larger display, an image appeared of the section of the Jefferies tube in which they had found the substance. The gray pool sat draped from the location Ezri had last seen it and out across the floor of the tube. Oddly, the seemingly liquid material did not drop through the metal grating.

This is the substance as it appears right now, Julian said. He touched a control and a white line traced the edges of the free-form shape. After you mentioned being in another universe, I thought about the incomplete sensor readings we've been getting, and it occurred to me that perhaps the substance exists in more than what we consider normal space. He touched another control, and a second, red line appeared, drawing an amorphous shape that abutted the first.

This is a part of the substance in another universe? Ezri asked, pointing at the area on the display bounded by the red.

Not in another universe, no, Julian said. But in another stratum of our own. This portion of the object He indicated the same area Ezri had. exists in subspace. We've found other parts of the substance in other areas of space, which explains why we've had such trouble taking meaningful scans of it. It might also tell us similar things about the energy pulse.

You think they're related? Ezri asked.

Well, we had the same sorts of difficulties taking sensor readings of the energy pulse and the energy in the planets cloud cover, Julian said, so it may be that the energy also extends into other domains within our universe. The engineering and sciences teams are now taking that into account as they try to find a means of stopping the next pulse.

Ezri nodded slowly, and thought, What does this all mean? I have another question, she said, attempting to piece together all of the strange facts. If my isoboramine levels were affected, then that means that the link between Ezri and Dax was compromised. Is it possible that happened because another connection was established, one between the symbiont and the substance?

Julian wrinkled his brow. That would presuppose that the substance is alive, he said, and we really have no significant evidence of that.

We have my experiences, she said. That is, Dax sensed a consciousness in another universe.

Or maybe you or the symbiont dreamed that, Julian suggested.

Maybe, Ezri said, and she had to allow for that possibility. But I didn't dream the reduction in my isoboramine levels. Maybe that allowed Dax to communicate with, or at least sense, this other mind.

It's possible, I suppose, Julian said. But I'm not sure how we could ever prove that, or make use of it.

Ezri paced away from the companel and across the room, back over to the bed in which she had awoken. Something she felt she needed to know dwelled just beyond the horizon of her memory. Maybe because it's not your memory, she thought. She raised a fist and tapped her forehead, as though she could physically dislodge the missing recollection from its hiding place. Ezri wondered if Trill initiate training would have helped her integrate not just the memories of Dax's former hosts, but also those exclusively of Dax because that seemed to be what she required here access to the recall of the symbiont. Something important had happened when she had been in that coma, something Dax knew. Since being joined, she had experienced many confusing thoughts and emotions, but she had never felt like this, isolated from what had become the other half of her mind and heart.

Ezri touched her fist to her forehead and held it there. She closed her eyes, and at once, a gray wave seemed to wash over her. The soothing waters of the Caves of Makala, she thought at first, but then another interpretation came to her the dim, energy-filled clouds surrounding the planet below, and the substance spilling across the surfaces in the Jefferies tube. And finally, she had what she was looking for.

She turned around and faced Julian across the room. I have an idea, she told him.

38

Quark strode out of the turbolift and onto the Promenade, his mood as dark as a JemHadar's heart. He listened and could tell immediately, even before he reached the bar, that his fortunes had not improved much. If the proverbial wise man could hear profit in the wind, Quark wondered what sort of a man that made him. Besides poor, he thought. As he walked toward the bar, his ears told him the approximate number of customers theretoo few and the number of those playing at the dabo table several more than at any time during the past couple of weeks, but still not enough.

I should have stayed in my quarters, he thought. Except that even an afternoon spent foraging through the quadrants financial and commodities exchanges had not held any fascination for him. It vexed Quark to see his idiot brothers so-called reforms being implemented on Ferenginar, crippling so many of the markets. But even Quark's anger at Rom could not keep his mind occupied for very long.

Quark only glanced at the floor as he slipped behind the bar; the last thing he needed to see right now was just how close his employees came to outnumbering his customers. He looked at the mess Froot and Grimp had managed to leave remarkable, really, considering the dearth of business and grabbed a rag. He began to swab the surface of the bar, wanting to occupy himself. But as he concentrated on the simple task, with his eyes cast down, his ears still remained open. And he did not hear her.

Again.

Quark had neither heard nor seen Ro Laren since she had chased the JemHadar soldier from the bar two nights ago. She had talked about coming back later that night, but not only had she not returned since then, she had also been conspicuously absent from the Promenade. Quark had not even seen her in her office.

Females and finances don't mix, he reminded himself. He never seemed to remember that when he needed to. And he had been fool enough to believe that she had actually begun returning his flirtations. Quark grumbled, lifting a V-shaped glass half-filled with a lightgreen liquid. He wiped the condensation from its base and from the place it had rested, then set it back down. The Boslic woman sitting on the other side of the bar, whose drink this seemed to be, was not even paying attention. She sat turned away, peering in the direction of the dabo table. Quark thought about suggesting to her that she go play, but then a voice reached his ears.

Pass five, pass five, the voice said. Sorry, no winners this time. Quark had no problem with the outcome it was about time that the dabo wheel began spinning again according to the advantages of the house but the voice should have belonged to Treir. It did not; it belonged to a man.

Quark shifted to his left and looked past the Boslic woman. Around the dabo table sat a couple of men and a half-dozen women. Treir, who should have been operating the game, was nowhere in sight. Instead, the young, scantily dressed Bajoran man she had brought in earlier today stood in her place. As Quark watched, the man Hetik, was it? held the rondure up before the gamblers, his hand dancing dramatically through the air, and then, with a flourish, he placed it in the wheel and sent it spinning around. The edges of Quark's lobes warmed as anger rose within him. Not only had Treir an employee had the audacity to hire somebody, and not only had she concocted the position of dabo boy, but he had ordered her to get rid of Hetik by the time he returned to the bar. And yet there the man stood, with Quark's latinum spread out on the table before him.

Quark flung the rag down behind the bar, furious. He would fire Hetik, and then, when he found Treir, he would dispatch her as well. Sensuous or not, green or not, Treir had overstepped her bounds more than once, and by more than just a bit. Quark had had enough. He turned and almost ran into Treir. Quark pulled up quickly, surprised not only to see her there, but that she had approached without him hearing her. Am I that distracted, he asked himself, or is she that good? He thought his ears had been open, but now he realized that he had only been listening for the sound of Laren's voice. As he looked up at Treir, though, he knew that none of that mattered at the moment; what mattered was him regaining control of his bar.

I told you to get rid of him, Quark said without preamble, pointing over at Hetik. He spoke loudly, not caring who heard him. This was his business, and he would

I have a proposition for you, Treir said, interrupting his thoughts. She spoke in soft tones, but her eyes stared down hard at him. Her manner seemed to imply that there would be no subterfuge here, no use of wilesfeminine or otherwiseonly business dealings.

Why would you want to get rid of him? somebody asked to Quarks right. He looked in that direction and saw that the Boslic woman had turned in her seat toward the bar. The triangular slope of her forehead, and her dark hair and eyes, reminded him of Rionoj, a freighter captain with whom he occasionally dealt. This woman was shorter and heavier than Rionoj, though, and clearly did not have the sense to tend to her own business; she had evidently heard Quark and seen him gesture toward Hetik. Hes beautiful, she said. In fact, I may go play a little dabo myself.

Quark resisted the impulse to tell the woman to go. Instead, he simply smiled and nodded. Then he turned back to Treir, who had not moved a millimeter. A proposition? Quark said, sidling away from the bar and over toward the shelves behind it, putting a little distance between himself and the Boslic woman. Treir glided over with him.

Yes, a proposition, she said. Let Hetik work here for a week before you make a decision about whether to keep him on or not. If you decide to let him go at that point, then Ill pay his wages.

Quark felt the ridge of his brow rise, surprised at Treirs promise of actual latinum. She obviously wanted very much for Hetik to work here. Quark did not know whyalthough considering the amount of clothing these two wore in public, he thought he could guess easily enoughbut he did see an opportunity for a small profit. What sort of wages did you agree to pay him? he asked. Treir told him, and actually, the amount was fairly low, only a fraction of what Quark currently paid her. Ill tell you what, Quark said. Ill keep him on for a week, and then Ill pay him. But if I decide to fire him, I wont pay you for the week.

Treir said, No, thats not fair, but her shoulders slumped, and Quark knew that he would get what he had demanded. He took a step past Treir, heading toward Hetik, but she stopped him. All right, she said.

Quark gazed up at her curiously. Why are you doing this? he asked.

If I tell you, Treir said, shaking her head, you wont believe me.

Tell me anyway.

Because I think its good business, she said. I mean, look. She nodded her head in the direction of the dabo table, and Quark looked over there. I know its only eight people, she went on, but hes only been here a few hours, and thats the most people weve had playing dabo in weeks.

Quark shrugged and looked back at her. Coincidence, he said. And even if its not, him drawing one or two more dabo players a night is not going to justify keeping him on the payroll.

Treir suddenly smiled broadly, which unnerved Quark. Oh, hell do better than that, she said. And the two of us together will do much better than that. Quark wondered if Treir and Hetik might be planning something other than simply trying to draw more dabo players into the bar. He doubted it, but he also resolved to keep his ears open.

Well, why dont you two drum up some business right now, he offered sarcastically. We could use it. Sure, Treir said, nodding.

Oh, and Ill draw up a contract for our little agreement, he told her.

Im sure you will, Treir said, and she headed for the dabo table.

Quark watched her go, confident that he had just made himself some easy latinum. Still, it brought him little joy. He peered down at the floor, then bent and retrieved the rag he had thrown down. He tossed it on the recycle shelf, beside a couple of short glasses and a tall, slender blue bottle. Then he found an unused rag beneath the bar and resumed his cleaning.

Hey, Mr. Quark, long time no see. Vic Fontaine had finished singing for the night, and as the lights came up in the nightclub, he descended the steps at the right-hand side of the stage. Quark sat alone at a table in the space between there and the bar, one elbow up, the side of his face resting on his closed hand. So whats doin? Vic asked as he passed by, no doubt headed to get a drink. Quark might not have visited this holosuite program in a while, but he had spent enough time in it to know that the singer liked to

imbibe after his last set.

You dont want to know, Quark intoned, answering and not answering Vics question. He watched as the musicians on the stage packed up their instruments. One of the men seemed to be having some difficulties getting his curved, gold-colored horn into its black case.

Oh no? Vic said. Quark glanced over and saw him perched on the edge of a stool, a quick nod of his head getting the attention of an older, gray-haired man tending bar. Vodka and tonic, rocks, Vic ordered. Then, looking over at Quark, he asked, Somethin to drink?

Quark shrugged. He was about to say no, but then decided otherwise. Ill just have a snail juice, he said. Snail juice, right, Vic said, shaking his head as he motioned again to the bartender. Quark peered back at the stage and saw that the horn player had managed to wrestle his instrument into its case. All packed up, the musicians started to leave, most going backstage, but a couple descending onto the floor and heading out the front entrance. A moment later, Vic stepped up to the table and set a short, frosted glass down in front of Quark. So, you mind? he asked, gesturing to the chair on the other side of the table.

Sure, why not? Quark said. Vic put his own drink down with a thud softened by the white tablecloth. Then he sat himself down.

So, I dont wanna know whats doin with you? he asked. Or you dont wanna tell me?

Believe me, Quark said, its not very interesting, and it doesnt have a happy ending. He lifted his face from atop his hand, then dropped his arm onto the table and wrapped his fingers around his drink. The glass felt cooler than he usually liked his snail juice, but then, why should he ever expect to get what he wanted?

Hey, you dont wanna sing, thats fine with me, Vic said. I been doin it all night.

I heard. Well, at least the last few songs, Quark said. He had come up to the holosuite after he had closed the bar. He had been surprised to see so few holographic patrons in the club. My business is so bad, Quark had mused, it extends all the way to Las Vegas in 1962. Now, to Vic, he said, You sounded good. Quark actually enjoyed the hew-mon music that Vic sang, though it really did not sound very hew-mon; the music seemed too sophisticated to be of Earth origin. In fact, Quark would not have been surprised if he found out that hew-mons had appropriated the style from some other people on some other world that they had assimilated into the Federation. They were worse than the Borg.

Thanks for sayin so, Vic said. With ears like those He pointed his chin in the direction of Quarks lobes that means a lot.

Dont mention it. Quark picked up his drink and absently moved it around in a tight circle, swirling the snail juice around. He heard the shells ticking along the sides of the glass.

Vic lifted his own glass and took a healthy swallow. So, he said, lowering the drink back to the table, hows business?

In an annoyed monotone, Quark said, Dont mention that either. He plunked his glass down and slumped in his chair.

Uh-oh. Trouble at the till?

Trouble everywhere, Quark lamented, and he complained about Treir.

Treir, Vic mused. Shes the green one?

Yes, Quark said. How did you know? He was certain the Orion woman had never used this holoprogram.

Its amazin what you can learn cooped up in a memory buffer, Vic explained. Ill tell you what, though.

You twenty-fourth-century types are more colorful than the strip at night. Its fabulous.

Yeah, well, I dont care what color she is, Quark moaned, shes been causing me grief. He told Vic about what she had done today, and about how she continued to behave like his business partner rather than his employee.

Hmmm. Seems to me that if a farmer puts a fox in charge of guardin the henhouse, Vic said, and then the fox eats the hens, well, it aint the foxs fault.

It took a moment for Quark to decipher Vics words. Youre saying its my fault? he asked.

Hey, pallie, I dont know, Im not there, Vic said. Im just sayin.

Well, stop saying, Quark told him. Besides, Ive got a lot more problems than just Treir. Things havent

been the same since the war, I've got monsters chasing away the few customers I do have, and romance is dead.

Hey, I know somethin about the effects of war, and all you can do is ride it out, Vic said. Now, I don't know from monsters, but I can tell you that not only isn't romance dead, it ain't even sick.

Maybe not in Las Vegas, Quark muttered. He lifted his glass again.

Not in Vegas, and not on that floatin bicycle wheel of yours. Not anywhere, at any time, Vic maintained.

Look, if a lonely, little-lobed lightbulb like me can get the girls, what does that say about a big-eared, smartly dressed guy like you?

These lobes aren't what they used to be, Quark said. He raised his glass and took a swig and gagged, and then spit the mouthful of whatever it was out in a spray, just missing Vic. Quark managed to get the glass back onto the table, half its contents spilling out. Around his coughs, he managed to say, That's not snail juice.

Mr. Quark, Vic said, leaning one arm onto the table, this is 1962. If there's somebody somewhere on Earth drinkin liquefied snails, I don't know about it, and I don't wanna know about it.

What is that? Quark asked, wiping his mouth. The vile drink had combined an unbearable iciness with some harsh and unidentifiable taste.

Vic held up his glass. Same as I'm drinkin, he said. Vodka and tonic.

It's awful, Quark said, wiping his mouth with the flat of his hand. The next time

The comm signal sounded, two short, low tones. Incoming message for Quark, the computer announced. Quark had set up the holosuite comm system tonight so that nobody could get directly through to him. He had thought that Treir might want to talk, might want to try to get him to change his mind about their agreement. But he had decided that he did not wish to be disturbed.

Whoever it is, tell them I'm busy, Quark said. But then it occurred to him that maybe Ro was trying to contact him, and as unlikely as that seemed, he could not help finding out. Wait, he told the computer. Who is it?

The message is from Lieutenant Ro, the computer responded.

Quark felt his heart begin thudding wildly in his chest. His lobes tingled. Computer, put the message through, he said, sitting up in his chair.

Laren's voice rang through the comm system. Lieutenant Ro to Quark, she said simply.

This is Quark. He looked over at Vic, but the hologram was gazing off toward the bar.

Quark, I'm sorry to bother you while you're in the holosuite, she said. I stopped by the bar, but you'd already closed up. She paused, and then said, I hope I'm not interrupting anything.

Not at all, Quark said. What can I do for you?

Well, I just got off duty. That surprised Quark; it was late, and I don't really feel like going to sleep, so I guess I was just looking for some company.

Quark could not believe it. He felt his mouth drop open, and he quickly closed it, folding his lips around his teeth. Uh, all right, he said. Where are you?

In my office.

All right, he told her. I'll be there in five minutes. That would give him enough time to stop in the bar and put on some cologne.

Great, she said. Ro out. The com channel closed.

Quark peered over at Vic again, who still pretended that his attention was elsewhere. Well, Quark said, standing up, nice talking to you.

Vic looked over at him. Always a pleasure, he said. Quark headed for the door. Behind him, he heard Vic say, I guess romance isn't dead on the ol' wheel after all. Quark did not bother to stop or look back. But he did smile.

Quark strolled with Ro in the dim, nighttime illumination of Deep Space 9. They walked through one of the crossover bridges and headed from the docking ring toward the habitat ring. It had been more than two hours since he had met Ro in her office, and they had been meandering about the station and talking ever since. They had both admitted to being tired and to having had a difficult couple of days. Quark had

actually claimed more than merely a couple but their time together had been comfortable and filled with laughter. Quark realized that their senses of humor rooted in their similarly sarcastic sensibilities meshed well.

So then what happened? Ro asked, carrying on their conversation.

Well, then I signed aboard a freighter he began.

Wait a minute, Ro said. What about the apprenticeship with the district subnagus?

I decided to leave that, Quark said.

All right, Ro said, stopping in the corridor and turning toward him. Quark stopped as well. As he faced her, he saw the arc of the docking ring through the windows, the stars shining brightly beyond the station. Ro playfully jabbed a finger in his direction, and said, You're not telling me everything.

With a raffish tilt of his head and a lowering of his voice, Quark said, What are you going to do, Security Chief? Interrogate me?

Ro opened her mouth in a smile. You'd like that, wouldn't you?

Quark smiled back at her. I believe I would, he said.

Ro shook her head and rolled her eyes, then started walking again. Quark followed along, catching up to her in a couple of steps. Just up ahead, he saw, stood the closed set of doors that separated the crossover bridge from the habitat ring. So, Ro said, are you going to tell me why you left the apprenticeship?

Ah the subnagus requested that I leave, Quark told her.

Requested? she asked skeptically.

Well, he suggested he told me to leave, Quark offered. Ordered me, really.

Ordered, huh? Ro asked, pronouncing her words slowly and melodramatically. Quark got the sense that she suspected what he was going to say, or at least the type of thing that he was going to say, and that she now played up her end of the dialogue for effect. And why would the subnagus order you out of your apprenticeship if he regarded you so highly?

I was well, I was also highly regarded by his sister, Quark admitted, pretending to be abashed.

They arrived at the doors to the habitat ring, which opened before them. They stepped through, and Ro stopped again. Quark, you rake, she said, a wide smile on her face. She reached out and pushed at the front of his shoulder with the tips of her fingers.

Now, can I help it if females find me attractive? he said.

No, I guess you can't.

They stood there for a moment, and then Quark held his hands out, one in each direction. Which way do we go now? he asked.

Ro looked both ways down the corridor, then moved up to a control panel set into the bulkhead opposite the doors. She touched the panel, and said, Computer, what time is it?

The time is zero-three-fifty-three hours.

Ro's eyes widened. Is that right? she asked Quark.

I think so, he told her. We've been walking for quite a while.

I really need to get some sleep, she said. It's been a long couple of days, and the next few aren't going to be any shorter or easier.

Aren't you down this way? Quark asked, pointing his thumb back over his shoulder.

Yes, she said, and I won't even ask how or why you know that.

Are you kidding? Quark said as they headed in that direction. A new chief of security is appointed to the station, and I'm not going to know where they live? Please.

Ro chuckled. What was I thinking? she said.

When they reached her quarters a few minutes later, Ro opened the door and stepped inside. Quark discreetly remained in the corridor. Thank you for the company, Ro said.

Thank you, Quark said. I enjoyed it.

I did too.

There was a brief pause as they stood there, and the notion of moving forward and kissing Ro shot through Quark's mind at warp speed. Instead, he simply said, Good night, Laren.

Good night, she said, and then, before he could turn away, May I ask you a question, Quark?
The answer is yes, he said at once. Her lips formed into a smile again, as lovely a sight as Quark thought he had ever seen.
You havent even heard the question yet, she said.
I trust you, he told her.
Well, dont, she said. You may not like this question.
Quark did not like the sound of that statement. Go ahead, he said anyway.
Do you thinkdo you think that women like the cologne youre wearing?
Quark felt immediately embarrassed. Not anymore, he said.
Ro must have sensed his humiliation, because she said, Im sorry. I didnt mean to hurt your feelings. I mean, you obviously like it, and Im sure that Ferengi women must like it too.
Its very popular on Ferenginar, Quark confirmed.
Im sorry, Ro went on. Its justI thought youd want to know.
Quark was astounded. Why would he want to know that he smelled bad to a female he liked? Except that, if she had not told him, he realized, then he would have continued to smell bad to her. This way
Its all right, he told her, and meant it. By telling him that she did not like his cologne, she had actually shown him both respect and trust. I appreciate you saying something to me. The last thing I want to do is repel you.
Oh, well, even without the cologne, she said, her voice thick with sarcasm, you still repel me.
Quark nodded. You repel me too.
Good night, Quark.
Good night, Laren.
On the way back to his own quarters, Quark twice jumped up and clicked his heels.

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Vaughn had walked for hours. Night had fallen now, and it had fallen hard. With no moons to reflect sunlight through the clouds, and the remote light of the stars unable to penetrate the atmospheric cover, darkness reigned. Vaughn hiked now toward his destination holding the beacon out before him, illuminating the ground a few meters ahead. He imagined peering down on himself from a height, a solitary mote in the empty ebon setting. So completely had the day vanished around him that Vaughn felt utterly alone, adrift on a virtually invisible sea, with the shore nothing more than a distant, impossible memory. I am alone, he thought. As far as he knew, there were only two other people on this entire planet, and he had walked away from them. A modern-day Michael Collins, he romanticized. Four centuries ago, as humanity had first set foot on another world, Michael Collins had become the loneliest human being in history. He and two other astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, had journeyed from the Earth to the moon in a two-vehicle tandem spacecraft, one of which had then descended to the lunar surface. Collins had remained in the orbiter, and when it had circled around the far side of the moon, he had been cut off from all communication. By himself aboard Columbia, he had been farther from Earth than any single human had ever been, and totally unable to contact anybody, anywhere. The sense of isolation, Vaughn had always thought, must have been profound.
Here men from the planet Earth, he quoted aloud, first set foot upon the moon. His words fled into the night, the sound of his voice small and insignificant in the vast, unseen emptiness about him. Vaughn recalled his first trip to the Sea of Tranquillity, and to the preserved remnants of mans first steps out into the cosmos the base of Eagle, the landing craft; the camera that had transmitted images of the event back to the people of Earth; the flag of the old nation-state that had sent the astronauts. Vaughns life had already changed by that time he had been pulled away from his childhood dreams of exploration and into the world of special ops but he had still been overcome by a sense of awe during that visit to the landing site.
Now he remembered the last sentence on the plaque that those early space travelers had left behind We came in peace for all mankind. For Vaughn, those words epitomized the spirit of discovery. They

reflected his aspirations to explore the universe with amity for all, to gather and share whatever wondrous new knowledge he could. This mission to travel the Gamma Quadrant had been intended to serve those purposes, but it had instead transformed into a rescue mission, at least for now. We came in desperation to save mankind, he thought. To save the Vahni.

As Vaughn strode through the darkness, he felt the ground begin to ascend beneath him. For the last couple of hours, the gentle swells of grass-covered hills had risen and fallen in his path, reducing his pace, and worse, causing him to exert himself more. His legs and feet still felt good the grass actually cushioned his footsteps somewhat but a dull ache had developed at the top of his right leg, near his hip. The pain was mild, but what had at first been an occasional twinge now occurred with every step.

Vaughn stopped, tucked the beacon beneath his left arm, and pulled out his tricorder. He scanned along his right side and saw that he had strained his hip flexor. Nothing could be done about it, though, since he had left the medical supplies back with Prynn and ChThane. He would simply have to live with the pain.

Vaughn swung around and performed a sensor sweep back along his path. He searched for the downed shuttle and the life signs of Prynn and ChThane. He found nothing and tried again. As he had drawn closer to the source of the pulse, interference from the energy there had increasingly affected both sensors and communications. On his third attempt, he picked up the shuttle, and shortly after that, human and Andorian biological signatures. Vaughn had traveled more than fifty kilometers from there, he saw.

That seems right, Vaughn thought, considering how long he had been walking, and that he had been able to maintain a steady pace, at least until encountering the hills. He had rested for ten minutes every two hours, unfurling the bedroll and lying atop it in order to rest his body as completely as possible in that short interval. He had also eaten the contents of two of the rations packets, and sipped periodically at the containers of water. As the day had departed, the temperature had fallen, down into single digits, which at least had the benefit of lessening his need for water. Fortunately, cool as it had become, his old coat and his almost constant movement had kept him warm.

Fifty kilometers, Vaughn thought. That meant that the facility surrounding the place from which the pulse emanated could be anywhere from just beyond the next hill to two hundred more kilometers away. He turned back in the direction of his destination and scanned ahead. Energy again interfered with his readings, but then they cleared and revealed something just a few kilometers away. Sensors revealed buildings, machinery, thoroughfares and no energy readings. What lay ahead was not the source of the pulse, but a city. A dead city; as with all those they had flown over in the shuttle, this one showed no indications of extant life.

Vaughn took the beacon in his hand again and began forward. As he climbed the hill in his path, he checked the time on the tricorder and saw that it had been fifty-seven minutes since he had last spoken with Prynn. During his march across the planet, he had contacted her once an hour, allowing them to update each other on their progress; while Vaughn had tried to reach the source of the pulse, Prynn had begun her attempts to configure a working transporter from the wreckage of Chaffee.

Vaughn thumbed off the signal that would sound on the hour, then closed the tricorder and returned it to a coat pocket. He reached up and slapped at his combadge, the electronic tones of its activation sounding hollow and slight in the open air. Vaughn to Tenmei, he said. Seconds passed with no response. Vaughn to Tenmei, he said again. He waited longer this time, and was about to speak again when he finally heard Prynns voice.

This Tenmei can me? Bursts of static split her words apart. Repeat Tenmei hear me?

Vaughn stopped in his tracks and turned back in the direction of the crashed shuttle. I can hear you, but just barely, he said, raising his voice. Im obviously too far from you now, too close to the pulse site. Are you all right?

fine Shars vitals are improv came Prynns response, again punctuated by the white noise of the energys interference. some success porter ther day Vaughn waited to hear more, not wanting to miss anything she said by talking while she might still be transmitting. When he heard nothing more, he went on himself.

Ive covered more than fifty kilometers so far, he said. I dont know how far I am from the pulse, but theres a city a short distance up ahead. Ill probably walk for another hour or so now, then stop and sleep for about six hours before continuing. In truth, Vaughn would have preferred to keep going until he

collapsed, but he knew he would be more likely to reach the site of the pulse in time if he did not completely exhaust himself. He waited once more for a response, but none came. He tapped his combadge again. Vaughn to Tenmei, he said. Vaughn to Tenmei.

Nothing.

Vaughn turned and continued on his way. When he reached the top of the hill, he tried one final time to reach Prynn. But past the chirp of his combadge and the sound of his voice, he heard nothing but the insubstantial background whine of the clouds.

Somehow, it felt as though he had lost his daughter again.

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Kira stood in her bedroom and slipped into the jacket of her dress uniform. She fastened it closed, then tugged at its hem, straightening it and trying to get it to sit comfortably on her body. She glanced briefly in the mirror, but she did not see her reflection; all she could see, all she could think about, were the locusts. They had come in her dreams, billions of insects sweeping en masse across Bajor. They darkened the skies and eclipsed the sun, sending her world into an eerie darkness. Kira remembered running through a city Ashalla, she thought dashing down the pedestrian thoroughfares and yelling to people, warning them of the descending swarm.

She had woken up hours ago, sweating, the bedclothes torn from the mattress. She had been unable to fall back to sleep, instead replaying the fragmentary dream the nightmare over and over in her mind. Even now, as she prepared for the day, prepared to meet the officials as they arrived at the station, she could not let it go. The sinister images still haunted her.

Kira left her bedroom and walked into the living area of her quarters. She headed for the door, intending to go to her office for a few hours before the delegates began arriving. A feeling stopped her in the middle of the room, though, and she turned, her gaze coming to rest on a photograph she kept on a side table. Captain Sisko Benjamin Sisko, the Emissary peered out from within the frame, his sleek, handsome aspect a source of strength for her even today, more than half a year after she had last seen him.

Except that today, the likeness of Benjamin Sisko also reminded Kira of when Bajor had been on the verge of entering the Federation three years ago. After the Emissary had experienced a paghtemfar a sacred vision he had urged the Bajorans not to join at that time, and they had heeded the advice of their religious icon. And the Emissary's paghtemfar, Kira knew, had been one of locusts.

Kira breathed in and out quickly, her mind racing. She had no illusions that she had experienced any sort of a vision during the night, but she wanted to understand what her subconscious had been attempting to communicate to her. She need not be touched directly by the Prophets in order to trust her instincts. Her dream might not presage Bajor's future, but it surely indicated what Kira thought might happen, and how she felt about those possibilities.

Feeling a bit light-headed, Kira raised her arms to her waist and locked her hands together. She closed her eyes, then slowed and deepened her breathing, concentrating on one of her many meditation rituals. By degrees, a sensation of calmness spilled over her.

Kira opened her eyes and looked over again at the photograph of the Emissary, drawing hope from her memory of him. She started for the door, leaving thoughts of locusts behind. That was the past, she told herself, choosing to interpret her dream now not as an omen of things to come, but as a recollection only of things that had come before. Within months, or even weeks, Bajor might be a member of the Federation. Kira left her quarters, headed for her office and marching foursquare into the future.

As the airlock hatch rotated open, Kira tugged one last time at the front flap of her uniform, trying again to make it sit properly on her body. She actually liked the formal dress of the Militia the soft, brushed fabric, the lavender coloring, the Bajoran style but she just could never quite wear hers comfortably. She had fussed with the long wraparound jacket for half the morning, but nothing she did seemed to make any difference for more than a few seconds.

Get used to it, she told herself. After all, she would be in the uniform for the rest of the day. She would greet

the Alonis delegation when they arrived at the station in a few hours, and then Shakaar and his staff later in the day. This evening, she would host a reception for all of the guests.

Opposite Kira in the corridor, Lieutenant Alfonzo, who had opened the hatch, continued to work at a panel set into the bulkhead. The ring of heels on the metal decking of the airlock drowned out the beeps of the panel. Two figures emerged through the hatchway and stepped down into the corridor. The first stood a head taller than Kira, slender, and he moved with a natural grace. A second man accompanied him just behind and to his left, shorter, but solid and muscular. A narrow river of irregularly shaped spots flowed from each mans forehead and down the sides of their face and neck.

Welcome to Deep Space 9, Kira said. Im Colonel Kira Nerys, commander of the station. She stepped forward, holding out her hand in salutation. For a moment, she flashed back to the first time she had met Akaar, and she wondered if she had once again made a diplomatic blunder. She thought back to her seven years as DS9s first officer, and she could not recall Captain Sisko ever having such problems receiving visitors to the station. But then the first man raised his own hand and clasped Kiras. His hand felt cold, and Kira remembered that the same had been true of Jadzia, and that it was true now of Ezri. I am Seljin Gandres, the man said, Trill ambassador to the Federation. He had long brown hair, down past his shoulder blades, far longer than she had ever seen on a male Trill. His eyes were a rich brown, but Kira also thought that they lacked a depth that she had always perceived in Jadzias eyes, and that she even saw now to some extent in Ezris. Even had Kira not read the biographical synopsis Starfleet had provided on the ambassador, she thought she would have been able to tell that he had not been joined to a symbiont. This is one of my aides, Gandres continued. Hiziki Gard.

Gard eased his way past the ambassador with a poise Kira found unexpected, given the mans short stature and his muscled physique. He offered his hand, and Kira took it. Welcome to the station, she said.

Thank you, Colonel, he said. A pleasure to meet you. As with Gandres, Gard possessed an icy grasp. Unlike the ambassador, though, his eyes gave the impression of great knowledge and experience, belied by the outward appearance of his age. Kira released his hand, and with an effortless bearing, he slid back into his subservient position behind and beside Gandres.

Ambassador, Kira said, the local time here is ten hundred hours, and weve planned a reception for all the delegations at twenty hundred, so youve got ten hours until then. In the meantime, Id be happy to conduct you on a tour of the station, if youre interested, or I could have you escorted to the quarters weve arranged for you and your staff.

Pardon me, Colonel, Gard said, but would it be possible to inspect the quarters before occupying them? Gandres turned his head and peered down at his aide. Forgive my aides impertinence, Colonel, the ambassador said, but he is in charge of security for our contingent, and he is thorough.

I intended no disrespect, Gard said, bowing his head. Kira recognized the truth of his wordshe had intended no disrespectbut she also understood that he made no apology for wanting to see to the security needs of the ambassador.

Not at all, Kira said. Lieutenant Alfonzo can take Mr. Gard there now. She gestured with an open hand toward Alfonzo, who had completed his task at the panel, she saw. Just so you know, though, we have tightened security on the station in anticipation of the summit. She spoke directly to Gandres, but she intended her words for Gard as well. The arc of the habitat ring in which the delegations will be housed has been swept and closed to all but authorized personnel. Weve also closed this section of the docking ring, as well as the crossover bridge connecting this location with your quarters.

Kira wondered if she should have asked Ro to join her in welcoming the delegation to the station. She had considered doing so, but had decided that such an action would have been antithetical to the low profile Akaar had requested. Kira had also opted not to burden her security chief with having to wear a dress uniform for the day; Ro struck her as someone not particularly comfortable in formal settings.

Over the past two and a half days, Kira had met with Ro several times in order to discuss security for the summit. In Kiras opinion, Ro had done an exceptional job of both planning and implementing the new procedures and mechanisms. Even simply coming out to the docking port just now, Kira had been impressed not only by the execution of the new protocols, but by their unobtrusiveness. Ro had posted

security officers throughout the station at critical locations, of course, but she had also devised a means of keeping them at a distance from the delegations. Lieutenant Alfonzo, Kira knew, had just now collected the individual sensor signatures of the ambassador and his aide. As the two men moved throughout this section of the docking ring, their assigned section of the habitat ring, and the crossover bridge between, force fields would raise and lower along their paths, both before and after them, far enough away to occur without being noticed, but close enough to provide a genuine measure of protection. The same would be done for every member of the two Federation delegations and the Bajoran delegation. It was, Kira thought, an ingenious solution.

We also haven't announced the summit to anybody on the station beyond the necessary personnel, Kira concluded, and First Minister Shakaar has not made a public announcement of it yet on Bajor, so few people are even aware that it will be taking place.

I appreciate your diligent efforts to ensure our safety, Gandres said. Actually, before taking a tour of the station or settling into our quarters, there is somebody aboard I would like to meet. Kira had been expecting this. What is, the Federation Council understand that a Jem'Hadar soldier is now living aboard Deep Space 9.

That's true, Kira said, although we don't think of Taranatar as a soldier. She took care to respond in a manner that would signal her intent not to contradict the ambassador, but simply to provide him with information.

Is he a diplomat then? Gard asked.

More a student studying abroad, Kira found herself saying. He was sent here by Odo to observe and try to understand life in the Alpha Quadrant, she went on, and he's been doing that. She was pleased now that she had asked him not to shroud on the station.

I understand, Gandres said.

Kira moved to her left and touched a control panel set into the bulkhead there. The panel sprang to life with an electronic tone, a Cardassian shatterframe display appearing on it. Computer, she said, locate Taranatar.

Taranatar is in ops, the computer replied. Kira lowered her hand, and the panel winked off.

Ambassador, I'd like to accompany you to ops, Gard said. I can verify the security arrangements for our quarters later.

Gandres listened to his aide, then said to Kira, If you have no objection, Colonel.

Right this way, Kira said, motioning toward the doors of the nearest turbolift, across from the airlock and a few paces down the corridor. Gandres and Gard turned in that direction, but before they reached the lift, the doors opened. Admiral Akaar appeared, his huge form expanding out of the car as though he had been stuffed within its confines.

Colonel, the admiral said, looking at her before turning his attention to Gandres. Ambassador, he said, bringing a closed fist up to his chest, and then opening it before him. I welcome you with an open heart and hand. To Kira's surprise, Gandres returned the gesture.

L.J., the ambassador said, how are you?

I'm well, Akaar said. Colonel Kira has been most hospitable. Although she kept her expression neutral, Kira was shocked by the statement; as far as she was concerned, her relationship with the admiral had been nothing but adversarial. He need not have told the ambassador that, of course, but then, he need not have said anything at all. And how are you?

I'm doing well, Gandres said. Then, turning, he introduced Gard. One of my aides, Hiziki Gard. This is Fleet Admiral Akaar.

A pleasure to meet you, Gard said, and he held out an open hand to the admiral. Kira felt both paralyzed and fascinated, unable to move or say anything as she watched the aide make the same mistake she had. Akaar seemed to appraise Gard for a moment, then reached out and took his hand. A phaser blast could not have stunned Kira more. She looked at the hands of the two men as they came together, Gard's engulfed within Akaar's, but the two held their stance solidly for a few seconds before letting go. Kira realized that she did not understand the admiral at all.

Seljin, Akaar said, looking back at the ambassador, I'd like some of your time today. There are some

issues I wish to discuss before tomorrow.

Of course, Gandres said. We can talk right now. Is there somewhere we can go?

How about back aboard your vessel? the admiral asked. At first, Kira thought that Akaar was again trying to gain control of a meeting, but then she realized that, while he had taken her aboard Mjolnir, a setting with which he had been familiar, in this case, he was consenting to a setting with which he was not familiar.

I would recommend meeting aboard our ship as well, Gard offered. At least until I can verify the security precautions on the station.

Gandres acknowledged Gard with a nod, then turned to Kira. Thank you for welcoming us to Deep Space 9, Colonel, he said. Ill be in touch with you later.

Youre welcome, Ambassador, she said. Gandres and Akaar disappeared into the airlock, and Kira pointed to Alfonzo. The lieutenant operated the airlock controls. The hatch rolled closed along its geared runway. Have somebody relieve you here, she told Alfonzo, and then escort Mr. Gard to the quarters for the Trill delegation.

Aye, sir, Alfonzo said.

Thank you, Colonel, Gard said.

Kira nodded, then turned and strode down the corridor, headed for her office. She started to attempt to decipher Akaars behavior, but found herself at a loss to do so. She thought she understood him now less than she had before.

Forget it, she told herself. There were more important things that she needed to focus on right now. She did not know how long the summit would last, but she suspected that the next few weeks aboard the station would prove very interesting.

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Prynn heard her father cry out in pain. She watched him writhe on the ground, the gray sky reaching down and wrapping its wisps about his body, torturing him in some incomprehensible way. He thrashed about, his agony plain. Dull brown dirt kicked up and coated his uniform as he struggled to free himself from the violent and mysterious shadows.

She tried to move toward him and could not, tried to scream and found herself mute. Dad, she thought, an appellation she had not used for him in years. Desperation knotted her stomach. He could not leave again. She had to go to him, had to help him, even after all that had come between them. She fought to get to her knees, pushing herself up, pushing against the bedroll.

Prynn opened her eyes on a desolate world, beneath a sky just beginning to pale from black to the distressed color of cinders. Dawn had come to this empty place, as much as it could. Or maybe this is dusk, she thought. Maybe that was all this world knew anymore.

Prynn had risen to her hands and knees on the bedroll, she saw, and she remembered battling to move in her dreams. She sat back on her haunches, the soft, metallic blanket sliding from her shoulders with a sound like sand slipping through her fingers. Whatever images and sounds, whatever thoughts and emotions, had populated her dreams seemed to drain away now as she sought to recall them. Her fatherher father

A moan rose to her left. Prynn looked that way, still feeling bound by the fetters of sleep. But then she saw Shar. His blanket had fallen from him, and his upper body had come partially off his bedroll and onto the ground. His arms moved in small, irregular spasms. He seemed to be asleep, but also in pain.

Another moan escaped Shars lips. The familiarity of it brought Prynn to the recognition that this sound had invaded her dreams, had masqueraded as the voice of her fathers agony. Why not Moms? she thought suddenly, not knowing why the question had come, but deciding at once that she did not want an answer to it.

As Prynn made her way over to Shar, the charred, skeletal remains of Chaffee s bow caught her eye. The flames had stopped burning late yesterday, but even now, narrow strands of smoke escaped the

wreckage and drifted upward. The calm of the scene contradicted the awful chaos of the crash.

Prynn reached down beside Shar and picked up the tricorder she had set to monitor his condition during the night; she had wanted to be alerted if he required medical attention while she slept. She had also left a second tricorder near the head of her own bedroll, configured to patrol a perimeter around their small camp. Nothing had triggered an alarm on either device.

Standing over Shar, Prynn reset the tricorder to an interactive scanning mode. Shar cried out again as she held the device over him near his head. She slowly moved it down the length of his body, and saw that he had mended some overnight. His vital signs had not improved much, but they had at least remained level. His dislocated shoulder and bruised ribs appeared better, obviously owing to Vaughns treatment, but his horribly splintered leg would demand more than the splint and the simple first aid he had been given. Worst of all, the injury to one of his internal organs would continue to threaten his life if he did not see a doctor before long.

Prynn put down the tricorder, then retrieved the medkit from the survival cache and prepared to administer a painkiller. The hiss of the hypospray against Shars neck seemed unusually loud against the backdrop of silence. She stood back up and stayed there for a few minutes, the spent hypo in her hand, watching and listening as Shars movements calmed and his moaning ceased. Then, very gently, she eased his upper body back onto the bedroll, pulling the blanket over him and up to his chin.

As she returned the hypospray and the medkit to their places, a chill ran through Prynns body. The temperature had dipped during the night, though not too much, and her blanket had kept her warm. Already this morning, the temperature had begun to rise back toward yesterdays level of low double digits not exactly comfortable, but not terrible either.

Prynn retrieved a ration pack and a water container from the cache, then returned to her bedroll. She slipped on her jacket, then sat down and consumed what would have to pass for her breakfast. As she ate, she thought about the day ahead. She would continue to work on reconstructing the transporter from the salvageable components of the shuttle wreckage, and she would have to consider reviving Shar at some point. He had neither eaten nor drunk since before the crash, and she had no means of providing him sustenance intravenously.

When she finished eating, Prynn put the water container and the spent ration pack back in the cache, then took a combadge out of a jacket pocket. She set the combadge to maintain an open channel with her own, and placed it near Shars head. She had done the same thing yesterday, wanting to keep a comlink open to him while she was away from the camp. She also set the tricorder back to an automated scanning mode to monitor his condition.

Then, gathering the few tools she had, she headed out to Chaffee s aft section, where she would work on the transporter and an escape from this dead planet.

The bent metal panel seemed to pull free, but then it snapped back into place. A sharp edge caught the index finger of Prynns left hand, slicing it open. Pain flared, and she sat back amid the debris of the downed shuttle and kicked out in frustration. Her boot impacted the panel, drawing a loud clang, and then one side of the panel slipped down a few centimeters. A second later, the entire metal piece fell away from the bulkhead.

Prynn looked at the newly revealed circuitry that she had been trying to access, then laughed. The sound was a lonely one in the empty wastes, made more so because she knew that it contained no humor. She peered up through where the roof of the shuttle should have been and regarded the forbidding sky. The clouds, despite their constant movement, stared back like the unchanging and impenetrable walls of a prison.

Her finger throbbed, and she lifted her hand and examined it. Blood flowed from a cut running lengthwise up the tip. She raised her finger to her lips and sucked at the wound, clearing it, then looked at it again. The cut reached deep into her flesh, she saw, and it filled quickly again with blood.

Prynn put her fingertip back in her mouth, applying pressure to the cut. She got to her feet and walked from the rear compartment of the shuttle, out through the path she had cleared through the wreckage. The soles of her boots scraped along the ground as she strode back toward the burned-out shell of

Chaffee's forward section and, beyond it, the camp.

As she walked, she thought of Vaughn, walking himself, trying to reach the source of the pulse. He was out there somewhere, alone, and she wondered what he was feeling right now. And she wondered what she herself was feeling. After he had departed yesterday, she had gone to work on the transporter and, even given the circumstances and the surroundings, that had somehow provided her a sense of normality. Prynn had been able to focus on the work, narrowing her vision and thoughts to the task at hand.

Today, though

Today had been different. While she had continued to make progress with the transporter, her mind had begun to wander. She had found herself recalling the days after her mother had died, and the terrible sense of loss that, though experienced less often as the years had passed, had never really left her and never would, she knew. Prynn supposed that such morose remembrances stemmed from facing her own mortality. With rescue from Defiant realistically impossible during the next day and a half, and Vaughn's ability to stop the pulse uncertain at best, she understood that the remainder of her life might now be measured in hours. She did not want to die, and she would do everything she could to prevent that from happening, but for all of that, her thoughts dwelled not on her own death, but on that of her mother. The days of despair Prynn had experienced after her mother's death continued to recur to her, no matter how much she attempted to concentrate on recovering the transporter.

The days after Mom's death, she thought, are still going on. Seven years later or seventy, each day Prynn lived would be a day lived after that dreadful event. And no matter what happened in the next day and a half, that would always be the case.

Prynn passed the blackened bow of the shuttle, the camp coming into view beyond it. Shar, she saw, had not moved from atop his bedroll. She headed directly for the survival cache, where she took a dermal regenerator out of the medkit. She cleared her wound once more, then raised the device and switched it on. A narrow blue beam emerged from the tip, accompanied by a high-pitched whine. As she ran the healing light across her fingertip, her flesh began to knit together, a pinpoint of heat sparking her nerve endings. Within a minute or so, she finished, and deactivated the regenerator.

Something moved at the periphery of her sight. Prynn turned quickly, and saw nothing. She gazed out at the open land beyond the camp and saw only a barren vista. She peered at the metallic blanket pooled on her bedroll, and then over at Shar.

Shar's eyes were open and looking at her. He resembled a corpse, with empty eyes staring without seeing from a face that had lost any trace of vibrancy, his blue skin ashen. Prynn's breath caught for an instant, but then Shar lifted a hand that had come out from beneath the blanket slowly, tentatively, as though motioning to her with a great effort.

Prynn sprinted the few steps over to Shar. She kneeled down beside him, dropping the dermal regenerator and scooping up the tricorder beside his bedroll. She reset the device, then took Shar's hand as she scanned him. His condition, she saw, had not changed much from earlier, although she did detect a shift toward dehydration.

Shar squeezed her hand, and she set the tricorder aside. He tried to speak with her, but his mouth made only small, smacking sounds. Prynn got him some water, then helped him lift his head so that he could drink it. He coughed with the first sip, but then managed to get the water down. When he finished drinking, Prynn eased his head back down onto the bedroll.

Your eye, Shar said, and she remembered the injury to her sclera.

Im fine, she said. It looks worse than it is.

What happened to you? Shar wanted to know. And to me? Prynn told him about the crash, pointing out the demolished bow section twenty meters away. Shar looked in that direction, and then back at her.

What about Commander Vaughn? he asked, his voice rising with concern.

He's fine, she said flatly, anger welling within her. The emotion surprised her not her negative feeling for Vaughn, but the suddenness and the unexpectedness with which it had come upon her at this moment.

Why? she asked herself. Why did that happen? Because somebody had been worried about her father? Why should that make her angry?

Because he doesn't deserve anybody's concern, she concluded. Except that even she hoped for his

continued well-being right now, since he was attempting to save four billion people. And even though she despised him, she did not wish him dead.

To Shar, Prynn conveyed Vaughn's intention to travel on foot to the source of the pulse. She also mentioned how communication with him had failed once he had traveled too far from the camp.

Will he have time? Shar wanted to know.

I don't know, Prynn said. And if he makes it there, will he be able to do anything? I don't know that either. But Vaughn She hesitated, wanting to reassure Shar, but hating the words she was about to use. Vaughn is good at his job. So good, she could not prevent herself from thinking, that he sent my mother to her death. Prynn knew that the bitterness she felt would show on her face, and so she picked up the dermal regenerator and paced back over to the survival cache. She made a bit of a show of replacing the device in the locker, hoping she had successfully covered her emotions.

If Commander Vaughn can't stop the pulse, Shar said behind her, then we're going to die. His voice, it seemed to Prynn, carried fear and pain, but not the fear of death, and not the pain of his physical injuries. Something else occupied him, she thought.

Shar, she said, turning back to face him, I'm working on repairing the shuttle's transporter. Some of the primary circuits were destroyed in the crash, but both backups are relatively intact. She explained Vaughn's orders, that she should first try to fulfill the mission of stopping the pulse, and then one way or the other get Shar and herself as far away from the pulse as possible. In a few days, Sagan will be repaired and Lieutenant Dax will send it down to rescue us.

If we live through the pulse, Shar said.

We'll make it, Prynn said with a sense of surety she did not feel. She noticed Shar's face tensing. His jaw set, his eyes narrowed, and his antennae moved in a manner she could not interpret. Shar? she asked, taking a step toward him. He said nothing, but his gaze had left her, and now he stared up at the sky. Are you all right? Are you in pain? Can I get

Shar rolled his upper body onto his left elbow, and looked over at her in a way that stopped her in mid-sentence. Color rushed into his face, patches of deep blue blooming on his cheeks and forehead, a dramatic contrast to the stark whiteness of his hair. Prynn could not tell whether he was hurt or angry. He stared at her for a long moment. Finally, he said, Zhavey.

What? She did not understand.

My mother, he said, and she realized that he had interpreted the word for her. Prynn had heard about the complications of Andorian biology, that they wed in groups of four, and that they even reared their children in such family units. She knew that Councillor ZhThane was one of Shar's parents, and she wondered if that was to whom he was now referring.

Your mother? Prynn asked.

Some part of her he said, and trailed off. She made this worse.

I don't know what you mean, Prynn said. Shar, I'm sorry, I don't understand.

Just before we left Deep Space 9, he said, she brought my bondmates to the station.

Oh, Prynn said, startled by the revelation. She did not know what else to say.

She was trying to manipulate me into returning to Andor. His right hand balled into a fist. And she succeeded. I agreed to visit my bondmates on Andor when we get back from the Gamma Quadrant.

Shar lifted his fist a few centimeters and then brought the meaty part of it down onto the ground.

Shar, you don't have to think about that now, she told him. Listen, you don't have to do anything you don't want to. Your mother

I promised to go back, he said, yelling the word. And when I don't He looked away from her, his gaze drifting toward the ground in front of him, but the vacant look in his eyes told Prynn that he was seeing something else, some image in his mind. It will kill Thriss to lose me. Shar raised his right fist again, higher this time, and then he thrust it against the ground, knuckles first. Rage hardened his normally soft features. Shar, Prynn called, but already, he had brought his fist back up. He pounded the ground again, and then a third time, and he did not stop. His knuckles hammered the ground, faster and harder, and Prynn heard the awful sound of his bones breaking. Shar, she called again, then turned and moved back to the survival cache. She quickly dug inside for what she needed, then raced around Shar, to his back. She dropped

down behind him and pushed the hypospray against the side of his neck. Her fingers brushed his flesh, and she felt the tautness of the muscles beneath.

Shar punched once more, then stopped, his arm pausing as he raised it. Prynn put a hand against his back and lowered him down onto the bedroll. She reached across his unconscious form and grabbed the tricorder there, then scanned him. When she had determined that his condition remained stable, she examined his hand. Several layers of skin had been torn away from his knuckles, and blood seeped from the wound. Bones in all of his fingers had fractured.

So this is what they mean by Andorian fury, she said, glad that the soporific she had given Shar would keep him asleep for at least several hours. She stood up and went once more to the medkit, to retrieve what she would need to treat Shar's new injury. It seemed almost impossible to credit the transformation she had just witnessed. Shar, normally quiet and reserved even in social situations, had changed in an instant into somebody she barely recognized. She had not felt threatened herself in any way, but the incident had still affected her.

This is Vaughn's fault, she thought. He had left them here. Had left her here. Again.

Again? she asked herself. Now I don't even know what I'm thinking. She attempted to clear her thoughts as she returned to Shar's side.

For twenty minutes, Prynn tried to concentrate on administering first aid, tried to focus on Shar's hand and on nothing more. When she finished doing what she could, she headed out to resume her work on the transporter. But even as she started for the aft section of Chaffee, she peered back over her shoulder not at Shar, not at the camp, but off toward the horizon. She did not know why, but she could not shake the image of her father walking away from her.

42

Treir slid the plate onto the bar. Here you go, she said, referring to the small, lightly browned cakes, covered in a thick, fruit-filled glaze. Skorrian fritters in a Kaferian apple compote. Morn looked at his breakfast approvingly. Treir reached below the bar and pulled out a set of dining utensils wrapped in a linen napkin. She set the package beside Morn's plate, then reached down and patted his hand. Now, don't eat too fast, she teased him. I know one of your stomachs must still be filled with all that Maraltian seev-ale you had last night. Morn rolled his eyes, nodding his head in agreement.

Treir smiled and moved down the bar, away from Morn. She poured herself a glass of water, then peered over toward the dabo table. The late morning tended to be the slowest time of day in the bar, between breakfast and lunch for most of DS9's denizens, but that had changed today. Word of Hetik's presence in the bar must have spread through the station like the Symbalene blood burn. A dozen people, mostly women, but a few men, too, surrounded the dabo table now, a situation remarkable not only because of the time of day, but because in recent weeks, Quarks had not seen so many gamblers at one time even at night. And she felt certain that business would only continue to increase in the days ahead. Thirteen through, thirteen through, she heard Hetik say, announcing the outcome of the latest spin and play.

Bastion? somebody called raucously. When it was busy, the dabo table was by far the loudest spot in the bar and maybe anywhere on the station.

Sorry, Hetik said. No bastion. A collective groan went up among the gamblers, but a groan that nevertheless held a note of enjoyment. Win or lose, these dabo players were having fun, another detail that boded well for future business. The thick clink of gold-pressed latinum rang through the room as Hetik collected the winnings of the house.

A distinctive-looking woman at the far end of the bar signaled to Treir with a wave. Treir walked over to the woman, tall, with a rough, grayish skin, a long, narrow neck, and strikingly luminous eyes and took her order for a refill of her drink. She picked up the Melkotian woman's empty glass and moved back down the bar to find the bottle she needed. To her surprise, she saw Quark standing in the doorway, and to her delight, she saw him looking over at the dabo table with an expression of satisfaction on his face. Then he looked around, saw her, and smiled.

Treir quickly replenished the Melkotian womans drink, went back to the end of the bar, and set it down before her. When Treir turned back around, Quark had come around the bar. Is this all Hetik? he said as he approached, inclining his head in the direction of the dabo table.

Treir smiled and shrugged. What do you think? she said. Quark glanced back over at the pack of gamblers, his astonishment seemingly surpassed only by his conspicuous glee. So, she said, reaching out and playfully brushing a fingertip across the top of his bald head, do you have the contract for our agreement about Hetik?

Contract? Quark said, turning back to her. Forget it. He waved a hand between them, as though physically dismissing the notion.

Are you sure? Treir asked, deciding that, at this point, she wanted more than simply Quarks easy acceptance of her new hire. I mean, I already told Hetik that he would only be here for another six days. She had not really done that, but she wanted Quark to acknowledge her worth.

You what? Quark said, the sharp, toothy smile disappearing from his face.

Treir slid a hand languorously along the edge of the bar, dipping her body down until the entire length of her arm rested flatly on the smooth surface. She leaned her head against her biceps and peered innocently up at Quark. Is that a problem? she asked. I realized after you left last night that you really didnt want Hetik here, so I told him this morning that we would be letting him go.

Quark stared at her for a moment, his mouth dropping open. He was obviously aghast. Lets not be He paused, and then smiled. Treir, he said, his voice dripping with as much charm as he could muster.

Quark, she said in a low, throaty tone, flirting along with him. She lifted her head from her arm, and eased off the bar toward Quark. She glided a hand around his back, and brought her lips near his ear. Is there something you want to tell me? she asked in a whisper.

Yes, of course, he said, his arm coming up around her waist. Hetik can stay.

Treir purred in Quarks ear, and then said, And what else?

Your idea to hire him was a good one, he admitted, with only the slightest hint of reluctance. Then he turned his head and looked up into her eyes. Youre an asset to the bar, he said seriously.

Well, thats almost a declaration of love, somebody said. Treir looked over and saw the stations chief of security standing a short distance down the bar. Treir got the impression that she had been there for a few moments.

Laren, Quark said anxiously, dropping his hand from around Treirs waist, though Treir left her arm around his back. I mean, Lieutenant Ro.

Good morning, Quark, Ro said, the corners of her mouth threatening a smile. She seemed entertained by the scene Treir and Quark had been playing out.

Good morning, Lieutenant, Treir said. What can I get for you?

Oh, dont let me interrupt, Ro said. Finish your business first.

Uh, we were done, Quark said.

Actually, I wasnt done, Treir told him, running a finger slowly along the top of his ear.

Oh no? Quark said, gazing back up at her, his hand returning to her waist. His attention seemed far away, his euphoric moment an obvious by-product of her touch.

If Im such an asset to the bar, Treir suggested, then perhaps Im underpaid.

Quark grinned, and Treir suspected that he actually appreciated her audacity. I dont think so.

She raised her free hand to the base of Quarks neck and straightened the silver bauble strung between his lapels. Well, then, she said, perhaps a position change.

Quark reached up and toyed with her necklaces bold move, Treir thought at first, considering that Ro was still here. But then she realized that her initial assumption about Quarks interest in the lieutenant that it had only to do with Ro being DS9s chief of security must have been correct after all. What sort of a position did you have in mind? he asked, continuing his flirtation.

Oh, I dont know, she told him. Junior partner sounds interesting to me. She skimmed a finger down the edge of one of his lobes.

I dont know about junior partner, Quark said, but maybe we can discuss a merger. Treir winked, but before she could say anything more, Ro interjected.

Quark, she said, her voice harder now, evidently no longer amused at the byplay. Treir looked over at the lieutenant and saw only seriousness on her face. Colonel Kira wants to see you in her office as soon as possible.

Colonel Kira? Quark said, and all at once, his focus changed. He took his hand from Treirs waist and moved away from her. He took a few steps down the bar until he stood directly across from Ro. What does she want?

Youll have to ask her, Ro said sternly.

But I didnt do anything, Quark protested.

No, Ro said. Of course you didnt. She looked and sounded angry, but as she turned and marched out of the bar, something in the way Ro carried herself made Treir think that she was also hurt.

Treir peered down at Quark, who now looked worried after the news that the colonel wanted to see him. She smiled, realizing that she had not quite understood the situation between Quark and Ro after all.

Quarks interest in the lieutenant might or might not have been genuine, might or might not have been motivated only by expediency, but Rowonder of wonders, Ro actually liked Quark.

Treir shook her head, thinking that the universe really was an amazing place.

43

Vaughn walked through the dead city. The heels of his boots pounded along the empty street, reverberating in the metal canyons formed by the tall buildings on either side of him. He moved quickly, steadily, the hard surface putting more strain on his back, legs, and feet than had the softer, undeveloped ground, but it also allowed him a faster pace. His hip still ached, but he ignored it.

Sleep had come easily to him last night, the result of a lifetime of battlefield service. Through the years, Vaughn had come to understand the value of rest in the fulfillment of missions, and he had trained himself to sleep under difficult circumstances. Last night had been different only in the dreams that had come. The nightmares.

Vaughn could not recall the images that had haunted his slumber, but he had woken with a start before dawn. Disoriented in the pitch blackness of this worlds night, it had taken him a moment to recall his circumstances. He had consulted his tricorder and seen that he had slept for little more than four hours. He had considered attempting to get more rest, but quickly abandoned that idea, finding himself wide awake and anxious to continue on his way.

It had taken him only a couple of hours to reach flat land and, shortly after that, the city. The collection of structures had risen before him like a small range of hills, low in the foreground, climbing higher in the distance. He had entered the city and made his way through it for three hours, choosing not to rest until he had left it behind him. Other than the sizes of the buildings, he had found little variation marking one area from another.

Now, Vaughn walked on through the city, surrounded by neglect. The buildings, whether one story tall or ten, showed that they had long been deserted. Dirt adorned their sides like spatters and streaks of brown paintbut not just their sides. Every building in the city stood open to the outside, every window shattered, masses of glass shards lying alongside walls like crystalline moats. Land vehicles likewise sat exposed, their own windows reduced to fragments. A patina of dust lay over everything like an immovable veil. Nobody had lived here for a very long time.

But the former inhabitants of the city had not abandoned their homes for some other place; they had left it for death. Bones littered the urban landscape, some scattered about as though strewn by some inimical force, others together in intact or nearly intact skeletons. The remains appeared to be those of humanoids, with two arms and two legs. The skulls were larger than that of a human, and the thoracic cavities were bound by ribs oriented not horizontally, but vertically.

Curiosity drove Vaughn to stop and explore the macabre scene, but he could not take the time away from his journey. Still, as he passed the skeletal remnants of the people who had obviously once lived here, the tricorder and his own eyes told him many things. Beside one fractured set of bones after another sat a handheld weapon. He saw affixed to buildings and lampposts numerous nooses, below which the

skeletons of the hanged had fallen in heaps. Other collections of bones lay smashed in the street, the clear result of people plummeting from tall buildings to their deaths.

Vaughn wondered what had driven these people to kill each other, but even as he did so, he understood that no civil war had occurred here. For whatever reason, the hundreds of thousands who had lived in this city had chosen to abandon their homes in the fastest way possible. The fatal wounds caused by the handheld weapons had all been self-inflicted, the nooses had been strung up by those intending to sling them around their own necks, and nobody had been thrown from atop a building they had all jumped. The population here, Vaughn was suddenly convinced, had committed mass suicide.

As he walked past the dead, he used his tricorder to study the city they had left behind. Readings put its age on the order of centuries, with indications that it had last been inhabited two hundred years ago.

Machinery, also long dead, permeated the buildings. Computers and communications equipment spread throughout the city, through every structure and down into subterranean conduits. Circuitry junctions sat on street corners every few blocks, encased in large cubes that stood twice as tall as Vaughn, and that had been dusted brown through the decades.

Vaughn speculated that perhaps technology, or its misuse, had somehow brought these people to their demise, although he could not see how. The other lifeless cities that Chaffee had flown over had been brought to their ends in different ways by fire, by panic, by abandonment, by siege and Vaughn could find no common element among them beyond the deaths of their citizenry. What little information he possessed failed to add up to any obvious conclusion.

At the next intersection sat one of the large circuitry junctions. Vaughn raised his tricorder and took sensor readings of the cube. Like the others he had scanned, this one housed a union of several citywide technologies. He recognized computer and communications relays, set in a sophisticated configuration, but he detected nothing that might send the entire population of the planet to its death, particularly in so many disparate ways.

Vaughn lowered the tricorder and glanced down the street. He was nearing the far border of the city, he knew, beyond which lay more open, undeveloped land. And somewhere close, he hoped, the site of the pulse. If he could put

Something moved up ahead. Vaughn stopped immediately. He turned his head slowly, peering from one side of the street to the other. He saw nothing. His first inclination was to attribute it to the wind, but the air had been calm, not even disturbing the layer of dust coating everything here. Perhaps just a shadow then, Vaughn thought as he lifted his tricorder, intending to scan the street ahead of him. The result of a random swirl of the unceasing cloud cover

Movement came again, and this time Vaughn saw its source. A half-block down, on the right-hand side, a figure peered out from around the side of a building. The face looked human. Vaughn watched the figure for a few seconds, and then it moved again, reaching a hand out and gesturing toward him.

No, Vaughn realized. Gesturing him forward.

Vaughn took a step toward the figure toward the man and stopped, waiting to see his reaction. The man continued motioning Vaughn forward, and something about the way he did so seemed oddly familiar. Vaughn started ahead again, and as he did, he moved his thumb up onto the tricorder controls and activated a scan.

When Vaughn had closed to within twenty meters, the man held up his hand, palm out. Vaughn stopped. The man peered around, then gestured again, this time pointing across the corridor.

Corridor? Vaughn thought. The man pointed across the street. Vaughn looked there and saw nothing, but a sense of déjà vu overwhelmed him. It seemed ludicrous to even consider that he had lived a sequence of events like this before, but the feeling remained strong. Suddenly, without thinking, Vaughn lifted his empty hand and pointed past the man. The man nodded, as though acknowledging Vaughn, and then he came out from behind the building and into the corridor.

Street, Vaughn told himself, but already his thoughts had moved past that. The man was wearing a Starfleet uniform. An old Starfleet uniform.

And Vaughn recognized him.

The man turned and started running away, the clap of his boots on the pavement echoing in the empty

street. Wait, Vaughn called, and sprinted after him. Still running, the man waved back toward Vaughn, as though to quiet him down. John, wait. The man reached the next intersection and rounded the corner, disappearing from sight.

Vaughn raced toward the cross street, already knowing what he would find when he got there. He would look where the man had run and see nothing. The man would have vanished, leaving no trace beyond Vaughn's doubting of his own mental state.

Vaughn reached the intersection, stopped, and peered down the cross street. Almost a block down, the man continued to run, his footsteps still resounding. Vaughn took a step, preparing to follow, but then stopped again. He did not have time for this. Unless and until he could demonstrate that chasing the man would provide a means of stopping the pulse, he had to go on. For all Vaughn knew, he was imagining this entire encounter. And maybe that, some form of mass delirium, had been what had carried the people of this world to their ends.

Vaughn raised his tricorder and scanned the receding figure. The readings indicated a human male, in good health, approximately fifty years of age. Vaughn looked up again and saw now that the man had gone perhaps around a corner, perhaps back to wherever he had come from. Perhaps back into the recesses of Vaughn's mind.

In the dust coating the streets, Vaughn saw a set of footprints leading away from him, in the direction the man had taken. Vaughn followed them back down the street, tracing them to where the man had emerged from the beside the building. The footprints ended there.

Transporter? Vaughn thought. But that would hardly explain everything. Time travel? Holograms? Illusions or de lusions? A sensor sweep revealed no residual energy readings, other than those present everywhere on the planet. No transporter signatures, no chroniton particles, no photonic emissions. He replayed the scans that he had initiated when he had first started toward the man. He saw the same readings a healthy, fifty-year-old human male. Then he played back the visual record the tricorder had captured. He worked the controls in order to display a magnified image of the man's face. Vaughn recognized it at once the long, narrow countenance, the angular features, the graying hair above the ears. He remembered the day What? Sixty, sixty-five years ago? when he and the man had run down the corridor of a starship together, making the same gestures they had just made in the street of this dead city. And Vaughn remembered all that had been lost back then, so many years ago.

He doubted his perceptions, and even his sanity. But he also suspected the technology running through the city, despite that his tricorder registered nothing functioning within its confines. Regardless of the explanation for whatever had just happened, though, it was time for him to move on.

Vaughn turned back in the direction he had been traveling before he had seen the man, and started walking again. He would be out of the streets in another hour, back into open land. He had to focus on his journey now, on reaching his intended destination and stopping the pulse from launching into space. And still, as his footfalls bounced between the wasted buildings of this wasted city, he could not banish from his mind the image of the man he had just seen Captain John Harriman of the U.S.S. Enterprise.

44

Kira reviewed the list of food and drink for the reception. She sat at the desk in her office, tapping at the padd, which emitted tiny electronic tones as she paged through the entries. The Bajoran selections pleased her, and included alva, shrimp, hasperat souffl, and mapa bread with moba jam, along with several bottles of spring wine and a variety of teas. One other item at the end of the list caught her attention. How did you get foraiga? she asked. The delicacy was very difficult to obtain, even on Bajor itself.

Colonel, I've been doing business in this system for more than a decade, Quark said. And I'm a Ferengi. I know how to get things. He stood across from her, waiting for her to authorize his catering menu.

You know how to get things, Kira told him, and you also know how to overcharge for them. His greed never slackened, she thought as she looked at his charge for the foraiga.

Fine, take it off the list, Quark said, with what Kira took to be feigned nonchalance. I thought Minister

Shakaar would enjoy it, but if you think its too expensive He left his statement dangling, obviously probing for information.

I never said Shakaar would be at the gathering, Kira reminded him, offering a cold smile.

Quark patted his chest with one hand. My mistake, he said. I guess I just assumed that all of this fine Bajoran food wouldnt be for just you and Lieutenant Ro. His voice seemed to catch when he mentioned Ro, but the sound was so slight that Kira might have imagined it. Perhaps the security chief had been giving Quark a particularly difficult time lately something she would have to laud Ro for, if true. Besides, you dont usually wear your dress uniform.

All right. The foraiga is fine, Kira said, choosing to ignore Quarks observation, and moving on to the rest of the menu. She could have and probably should have delegated this responsibility, but she liked Quark to know that she personally kept her eye on him. And with the importance of the summit, she wanted to ensure that the reception this evening would be a success. Of course, Kira knew virtually nothing about Alonis or Andorian or Capellan food, and Jadzias tastes had ranged well beyond her homeworld of Trill. Whats this? Kira asked, spying another item with a sizable price. Kagannerra? She highlighted the item on the padd, then leaned forward and held the device out to Quark so that he could see it.

Thats a type of kelp, he said, only glancing at the padd. Very large fronds. Quite flavorful, I understand. Kelp? Kira said. She pulled the padd back and looked again at the price beside the item. This is what you want to charge for kelp?

Excuse me, Quark said, affronted or pretending to be affronted, Kira assumed. Theres not a lot of call for food for water-breathers on this air-filled station. He held his arms out wide, as though to take in the whole of DS9. I couldnt find any food native to Alonis anywhere in the sector. I did manage to locate a shipment out of Pacifica that contained the kagannerra and some other items known to be enjoyed by the Alonis.

All right, Kira relented.

And I was lucky to find that, Quark continued, as though Kira had not spoken. The ship wont even arrive at the station until two hours before the gathering. The fees I had to pay just to have the ship diverted to Deep Space

All right, Quark, Kira said, louder. She applied her thumb to the authorization control surface, then handed the padd back to Quark. He took it, and in the same motion, held out a Ferengi banking device, which had appeared in his hand as though from nowhere. She applied her thumb to the control surface on that device, sighing with exasperation. She found her dislike for Quark only exacerbated by having to do business with him.

Im sorry, Colonel, he said, unapologetically checking Kiras thumbprint on both the padd and the banking device, as though she might have attempted to cheat him in some manner. Perhaps if Id had more time Yes, youre right, she said, cutting him off again, but this time, she actually regretted doing it. She had to admit that she had asked a great deal of him, calling him to her office late this morning, and then requesting his catering services for this evening. Remarkably, it had taken him only an hour to prepare a menu that included food and drink for people of five different races. He might be overcharging for his services, but he really did know how to cater a function. Thank you, Quark, she said. Next time, Ill try to give you more notice.

Quark nodded. Their business at an end, Kira reached forward and activated the computer interface on her desk, intending to return to her work. When Quark did not move, though, she looked back up at him. Something else? she asked.

Actually, I was just curious what the occasion was for a gathering of such an eclectic group of people, he said. This time, Quarks attempt at nonchalance was completely transparent. Given his avarice, it seemed clear that he thought there might be some sort of business prospect for him here a supposition that actually worked to Kiras benefit in this case. She had waited as long as she had to approach Quark about catering the reception as part of her general intention to keep news of the summit quiet for as long as possible. After the war with the Dominion, numerous powers had expressed concerns about Starfleet maintaining an exclusive military presence at the wormhole. Both the Klingon and Romulan Empires had been particularly vehement in their opposition to such an arrangement, although nothing had yet come of

that opposition. The Tholians and the Gorn had also voiced apprehension about perpetuation of the status quo at Bajor, as had several other governments. The longer Kira could keep word of the summit from spreading, she thought, the better.

To Quark's question about the reason for the gathering, Kira responded, "We're celebrating my naming day."

Quark tilted his head to one side, clearly annoyed. "If you don't want to tell me, Colonel, that's fine."

"I don't want to tell you."

"That's fine."

"Good," she said, standing up behind her desk. "Then I won't keep you from getting ready for the gathering. Of course," Quark said, and he finally turned and left. As soon as the doors closed behind him, the voice of Ensign Ling emerged from the comm system.

"Ops to Colonel Kira," she said.

"This is Kira. Go ahead."

"The Alonis ship, Arieto, is on approach to the station, Ling reported. They should be docking within the hour."

"Acknowledged," Kira said. "Let me know when the ship arrives."

"Aye, sir." The channel closed with a short tone.

Kira, still standing, idly tapped her desktop with her fingertips. She wondered what Quark's reaction would be when he found out about the summit. She knew that he had long professed an aversion to the Federation, and if Bajor actually joined

Kira realized something she had not previously considered. If Bajor did join the Federation, with its essentially moneyless economy, then Quark's business would be well, no longer a business, as far as he would be concerned. Deep Space 9 would officially become a part of the Federation, and there simply would no longer be an environment here in which to earn profit. Quark would doubtless have to leave the station.

A smile decorated Kira's face at the thought of that greedy troll being forced to relocate. At the same time, though, she remembered vividly what it had been like to be displaced from her own home, something that had occurred with regularity throughout her life. And Deep Space 9 was Quark's home; she was fairly certain that he had been a resident of the station for longer than anybody else. And right now, he had no idea that his life might soon be thrown into turmoil.

The smile faded from Kira's face. She sat slowly down in her chair, surprised at the genuine sympathy she suddenly felt for Quark.

45

"It's too dangerous," Julian said. He had paced around the ready room and now stood near a far corner, as though seeking refuge from what Ezri had been suggesting. His features had grown tense, and she could see him shifting from disagreement and resistance toward anger. She needed to defuse the situation, not only for Julian's sake, but for her own; in order to implement her proposal, she would require his support.

"Well," she said, shrugging, "we can't let Sam do it." She motioned toward Lieutenant Bowers, who sat across the desk from her. He looked at her with surprise, and she smiled. "Unless you want to, that is." Bowers held up his hand and shook his head. "No, thanks," he said lightly, matching her tone.

"Look, this isn't a joke," Julian said, walking back over to the desk. He did not laugh or smile, but despite that, and despite his words, she could see that the anger welling within him had eased for the moment, replaced by frustration. "There just isn't enough evidence to justify what you're proposing," he told her, holding her gaze, as though he could convince her of the fact of his position through sheer force of will. "You keep saying that," Ezri said, "but it's not really the case. Whatever that object in the Jefferies tube is, I sensed a mind when I came into contact with it."

"That can hardly be considered evidence," Julian said dismissively.

"You're wrong," Ezri challenged him. "It is evidence. Whether you find it convincing or not is another matter."

Then let me state it plainly I don't find it convincing, he said.

You've made that clear, Doctor, she told him, her own anger rising. She took a beat to rein in her emotions. She would not persuade Julian to support her plan by fighting him. There's also the simple fact of the object's appearance on the ship. It penetrated the hull and traveled to the Jefferies tube. She glanced over at the computer interface on the desk. A view of the Jefferies tube showed on the display, the mysterious dark gray mass still lying along the bulkhead and down on the grating. The object had not moved since yesterday, since they had attempted to transport it. Ensign Gordimer had established a containment field about the location, although because of the object's multidimensional nature, they could not be certain that such a measure would restrict its movement.

We don't know for a fact that it entered the ship through the breach, Julian argued. It might have emerged from subspace exactly where it is.

Even so, that would seem to imply some sort of movement, Bowers observed, obviously seeing Ezri point. And we also know that it moved within the Jefferies tube.

Movement isn't proof of life, Julian said, turning and walking across the room again. Stars move, planets move, oceans move, but they're not alive.

That's not quite the same thing, Ezri said after Julian had turned back toward her. And no, the object's movement isn't proof that it's alive, but it does suggest the possibility.

A possibility isn't enough to justify the risk you want to take, Julian maintained.

I think it's more than a possibility that this thing is alive; I think it's a probability, she said. More than that. I believe it is alive. I sensed a mental contact with it.

You were in a coma, Julian implored her. You might have dreamed that.

Yes, Ezri said immediately, which seemed to surprise him. You're right. I might have dreamed it. But I didn't dream the drop in my isoboramine levels. Ezri had already voiced her opinion that the change in her body chemistry indicated that a connection had been made between Dax and the object.

Your body and the body of the symbiont have a physical link, facilitated by the isoboramine, Julian said, walking back toward the desk. Even though you touched the object, no physical link was made between it and the symbiont.

Maybe a connection was made through subspace, Bowers suggested.

Maybe, Dax agreed, looking over at the lieutenant. But back in the pools on Trill, Dax communicated with other symbionts not by physical contact, but by energy surges. And there's certainly plenty of energy around here these days. She peered up at Julian. You even said yourself that the object and the energy in the clouds and in the pulse might be related.

I did, Julian admitted, but that was only speculation. All of this is only speculation.

I think it's more than that, Ezri said. And if I'm right about the object being alive, and about Dax being in mental contact with it, then I might also be right about it having knowledge of the pulse. She took a breath and raised her hands up onto the desk, putting them there palms down. Julian, Sam, she said. I'm not sure that what I want to do will work. Maybe the object isn't alive, or maybe Dax won't be able to communicate with it, or maybe we won't learn anything that will help us stop the pulse. But I am sure that if another pulse launches into space, the Vahni civilization will be destroyed.

I know what's at stake, Julian said quietly. But you can't quantify life. You can't say that risking one to save another, or even another four billion, is justified.

You also can't quantify life, Julian, she told him. You can't say that it's better to save Ezri Dax than it is to save even one Vahni Vahltpali.

Julian leaned forward, putting his hands on the desk, his fingers splayed. I can say that. It's better for me. Ezri saw the love and the pain in his eyes. She understood what she was asking him to face, but she also knew that it was the right thing to do. It would be better for me too not to try this, she said. I don't want to die. That's why I need you, to make sure that I don't.

Julian grunted and pushed himself away from the desk, again retreating across the room. You don't want to die? he asked, and Ezri was surprised to hear skepticism in his voice.

No, she said, not knowing why Julian would even ask such a question. Of course not.

He looked at her anxiously, then looked away. She could see him holding something back from her.

What is it? she asked. Julian looked over at Sam, and Ezri gathered that he did not want to reveal what was on his mind in front of the lieutenant. Its all right, Doctor, she said, emphasizing to him that this conversation, this disagreement, was wholly professional, and that it would not divide them personally. You can speak your mind.

I am concerned, Lieutenant, Julian said haltingly, that your fervor to put yourself in harms way may be an overcompensation for the loss of Ensign Roness.

Ezri felt momentarily stunned at the statement at what sounded very much to her like a betrayal. Since returning to duty after Gerda had died, Ezri had performed her duties skillfully and without agonizing over the loss of a crewperson under her command. Off duty, though, in her quarters in the quarters she shared with Julian she had suffered. Continued to suffer. And Julian knew that.

She opened her mouth to respond, but Bowers spoke first. Pardon me, Doctor, he said, but I dont see any fervor here. I just think the lieutenant has an understandable desire to do what she can to try to save the Vahni.

Thank you, Lieutenant, she said to Bowers. She studied Julian for a moment and saw the pain still in his eyes pain at the trauma she had undergone yesterday. Im not eager to do this because of the risk involved, she said. But youre right to question me about that, Doctor, because you know how much the death of Ensign Roness has affected me on a personal level. Ezri suffered the loss because Gerda had been a young officer with a long life and career ahead of her. And because Gerda had been her friend. And yes, because it had been Ezris orders that had sent the young woman to her death. Ezri had cried in Julians arms about it more than once, and he too had been emotionally affected by what had happened, perhaps even more so than she had. But even with all of that, Ezri had managed to find solace, and the strength to perform her duty, from her belief that she had made the right choices, given the right orders. Ezri would bring Gerda back to life in an instant if she could, but the two of them had saved tens of thousands of Vahni lives. Now Ezri wanted to save billions.

Im sorry, Julian said. Im not questioning your ability to command I just

You dont have to explain, Ezri told him. I understand. She stood up. But youre wrong about my motivations. I was a counselor, and I know whats going on inside of me. This has nothing to do with Gerda. This has to do with saving a lot of people, and me believing I may be able to help accomplish that.

But the risk he said.

Theres risk in everything we do. But I believe that a direct, planned contact with the object She pointed to the display, to the image of the gray mass, without looking away from Julian. might allow Dax to communicate with whatever intelligence is behind it, and possibly find some means of stopping the pulse. And I believe that youll be able to keep me alive while I try. In my judgment, its a risk worth taking. Julian gazed at her and said nothing.

Sam, Ezri said, what do you think?

Bowers stood from his chair. He looked from Ezri to Julian. I dont like it, he said. Its dangerous, and I have no idea how to measure the chances of success. He turned back to Ezri. But under the circumstances, I also think its a risk we should take.

Ezri nodded to Bowers, then regarded Julian. He looked at her for a long time. Finally, he lifted his hands up at his sides, then let them clap back down against his body. All right, he said.

46

Somethings going on, Quark thought as he marched along the Promenade toward the bar. Kira in a dress uniform, Alonis and Trill coming to the station and attending an event with an Andorian and a Capellan one of the only Andorians on DS9 being a Federation ambassador, and the only Capellan, a Starfleet admiral. This would be more than a gathering, as Kira had called it. Something was definitely happening, and Quark wanted to know about it.

He strode along, darting left and right through the midday crowd, anxiously rapping the padd in his hand against the side of his leg. He dashed past the bar without even glancing inside, heading instead for the

security office. Laren would know about whatever was going on, and she would tell him.

If she'll even talk to me now, he thought.

The doors to the office parted before Quark. He began speaking as soon as he stepped inside. Laren, I just came from He stopped at the sight of the person standing behind the desk. She turned from peering at one of the security displays just as the office doors clicked closed.

Can I help you, Quark? Sergeant Etana asked.

No, he said, drumming his fingers against the padd. No, I where's Lieutenant Ro?

Etana looked left and right, then back at Quark. Not here, she said. The expression on her face suggested that she thought Quark had asked an improper question.

I can see that, he said, not bothering to hide his annoyance. Can you tell me where she is?

She's working on a security issue, Etana said evasively.

I'm sure she is, Quark thought. He realized that this gathering tonight must be why Laren had been working such long hours the past few days. He spun on his heel and, without saying anything more to Etana, bolted out of the office.

Quark sped across the busy Promenade toward the bar. He had to find Laren as soon as possible. And not just about the gathering, he thought, recognizing the other cause for his sense of urgency he had flirted with Treir in front of Laren. What had he been thinking? After he and Laren had spent such a wonderful few hours together last night, walking through the dark, quiet station, talking and laughing. Idiocy must run in my family, he muttered as he entered Quark's.

He quickly slipped behind the bar, headed for the companel at the far end. He skirted by Treir, who was busy serving a customer. Hey, she said, how did it go with Colonel Kira?

Quark ignored her, dropping his padd on a shelf with a clatter. He ducked down below the companel and worked to unlock a compartment there. As he did, Treir came over and bent down beside him. Is everything all right? she asked. Didn't she approve the menu?

Yes, yes she did, Quark said hurriedly, not wanting to be distracted. He reached up to the shelf and pulled the padd from it. Here, he said, handing it to Treir. Can you take care of this?

Treir took the padd and examined it. Um, sure, she said, but if I'm working on the catering, then who's going to run the bar?

Quark looked at her, but he had to replay in his head what she had just said. You stay in charge of the bar, he told her. Find Broik and have him work on the catering. He turned back to the compartment.

All right, she said. She stayed beside him for a moment more without saying anything. Finally, she stood up and moved away.

Quark finished unlocking the compartment, then slid its door open. He reached inside and withdrew a small, unexceptional box. Holding it on his knee, he flipped open the lid, revealing a cache of isolinear optical rods. Quark pulled out a particular rod, then closed the box and set it back inside the compartment. He rose, then instinctively glanced around to make sure that nobody was watching him too closely. Satisfied, he opened a hinged access plate in the companel, pushed the security-breaching rod into a receptacle, then flipped the plate closed. Not wanting anybody to hear what he was doing, Quark chose to key in his query LOCATE LIEUTENANT RO .

The response came back at once, spelled out on the display LIEUTENANT RO IS IN THE WARDROOM .

Of course, Quark thought. The gathering tonight would be held in the wardroom. Laren was no doubt securing the area. He entered another command IDENTIFY PERSONNEL IN WARDROOM . A list of three names appeared, Laren's and those of two other security officers. Quark wanted to talk to Laren, but he would wait until she was alone.

He deactivated the companel, then removed the orange isolinear rod and slipped it inside a jacket pocket. He would return to his quarters and monitor Laren from there, then go see her when the opportunity arose. First, though, he dropped down to the compartment again, sliding the door closed and locking it.

As Quark stood up, the companel emitted a quaver that signaled an incoming audio message. He touched a control to receive the communication, foolishly hoping it might be from Laren. Quark's, he said.

I want to use a holosuite, a rich voice announced. Quark recognized both the words and the tone at once. It was the same message as always, delivered in the same manner which, despite its lack of courtesy, still worked better than having the JemHadar stalk into the bar before going to one of the holosuites. Program Taranatar Seven.

He quickly checked the availability of the holosuites on the companel. This is Quark. Ill send somebody with your holoprogram up to holosuite one. The channel closed without even an acknowledgment from the JemHadar. Not only are they ugly and nasty, Quark mumbled to himself, but theyre also rude. He turned toward the bar, located the right box of programs on a shelf beneath, and picked out Taranatar Seven.

Quark peered around, searching for Treir. His gaze found her at the dabo table, delivering drinks to a group even larger than this morning. He looked for Frool and Grimp, and saw them also busy with customers. Actually, now that Quark noticed, the bar had quite a few patrons, at least for this time of day. For any time of day, lately, he thought. And yet the increase in business failed to cheer him.

Deciding just to deliver the holoprogram himself, Quark hurried out from behind the bar and over to the nearer of the spiral staircases. He bounded up, one hand sliding up the outside railing, his footfalls ringing on the metal stairs. At the top, he headed for the holosuites. He found the JemHadar waiting, rigid as a statue. As a gargoyle, Quark thought. He remembered when the soldier had unshrouded in the bar three nights ago, and how unnerving and frightening that had been. Now, though, seeing the JemHadar in this context, wanting to enter a holosuite, Quark felt less threatened not unthreatened, but less threatened.

Here, he said, holding up the isolar rod. The JemHadar reached forward, delicately plucked it from Quarks hand, and turned without a word toward the holosuite door. Quark started to go, but then an abrupt chill coursed through the outer ridges of his ears. Anxiety gripped him. He did not know the purpose of Kiras gathering this evening, but an image came to him of the JemHadar tearing through the wardroom, leaving a slew of mangled bodies in his wake one of them Larens. He turned back to the JemHadar, who was operating the panel in the bulkhead beside the holosuite door. Why are you here? Quark asked, startled to hear a note of challenge in his voice.

The JemHadar took his hand off the panel, looked over, and regarded Quark for a moment. I am here to train, he finally said. This program simulates

No, Quark interrupted, waving off the explanation. Why are you here, on Deep Space 9?

Again, the JemHadar looked at him for a few seconds without saying anything, and Quark got the uncomfortable feeling that the soldier was deciding whether to answer his question or break his neck.

Very quickly, the fear Quark had felt the other night in the bar returned. It suddenly seemed like a bad idea not only to have asked the question, but to have come up here in the first place. Quark

contemplated running, but then the JemHadar spoke. I am on this station, he said, in order to observe life in the Alpha Quadrant. Quark declined to point out that the JemHadar could not do much observing in a holosuite well, unless it was a certain type of program, but he chose not to mention that either. And I am also here to keep an eye on you.

Quarks lobes went cold. But then he realized that what the JemHadar had said made no sense. What possible interest could the Founders have in a Ferengi bartender? And then the answer occurred to him. Odo sent you here, he said.

The Founder sent me, yes, the JemHadar said.

Two things immediately became clear to Quark. First, his concerns about the JemHadar were baseless; Odo would not have allowed the soldier to come to the station if any real chance existed of something bad happening. And two, even ninety thousand lightyears away, the constable still wanted to be a thorn in his side. Odo told you to keep an eye on me, he said.

Yes.

And you believe the Founders are gods, Quark said.

The Founders are gods, the JemHadar insisted. He resumed operating the panel, and the door to the holosuite glided open. Quark could see the holographic emitter system in the walls beyond. The JemHadar walked through the doorway.

If the Founders are gods, Quark blurted, then how could they have lost the war?

The JemHadar stopped just inside the holosuite and turned back toward Quark. The Founders did not lose the war. The JemHadar failed them. The Vorta, the Cardassians, and the Breen failed them. Of course, its never the leaders fault, only their minions, Quark said, and he actually took a step forward. You know, I knew Odo longer than anybody on the station. I knew him better than anybody. And I never once thought of him as a god. It rankled him, he realized, that anybody did. That demonstrates nothing about the Founder, the JemHadar said. It only demonstrates something about you.

It demonstrates that Im observant, Quark said.

It demonstrates that you court death.

Quark stepped back now, unsure whether to accept the statement as a joke or a threat. Somehow, he did not believe that a genetically engineered soldier would have much of a sense of humor.

You neednt worry. I wont hurt you, the JemHadar said. He turned toward the panel just inside the door, raised his hand, and slipped the isolinear rod into a slot. Because the Founder instructed me not to.

How nice of him, Quark said. What else did Odo say about me?

He said you were a lawbreaker, scurrilous, loutish, avaricious, deceitful, devious, and short. The JemHadar touched a control, and the holosuite transformed from a dim, empty room on a space station into a bright, sprawling beach on the edge of an amethyst lake.

There, you see? Quark said. He was wrong, so how can he be a god?

I am sure the Founder was not wrong, the JemHadar avowed, still peering at the panel.

Well, I am short, Quark allowed, but a lawbreaker? Scurrilous and loutish? And those other things? Please.

Ive observed nothing to suggest the Founders description of you is inaccurate.

All right, Quark said, warming to the opportunity to prove Odo something less than a god. Lets say that he was right, that I am all those things. You know that Odo was chief of security on the station when he was here, right?

The JemHadar looked over at Quark now, apparently curious. Yes, he said.

Well, if Im a lawbreaker, then doesnt that mean that Odo should have arrested me and put me in prison?

Quark argued. But here I am, free. Which means either Odo was wrong and Im not a lawbreaker, or he was right, but he wasnt a good enough chief of security to catch me. Either way, Id say that doesnt make him much of a god. I shouldve been a Vulcan, Quark thought, dazzled by his own display of logic.

The JemHadar said nothing.

Well, Quark said. All right then. He started to leave.

Wait. To Quarks surprise, the word sounded more like a request than a command. The Founders created the JemHadar. Created them. We exist by their providence. Is that not a characteristic of divinity?

I wouldnt exist if not for my mother, Quark said. I dont lose sleep over it.

But your mother did not create the entire Ferengi species, the JemHadar said.

Listen, with enough latinum and the right scientists, you can create just about anybody or anything, Quark said. So what?

The JemHadar said nothing again. Then he turned and paced deeper into the holosuite, his boots kicking up puffs of white sand as he neared the edge of the bluish purple water. Quark, enjoying being able to confound this genetically engineered soldier, walked forward and through the doorway.

The JemHadar stopped and turned back toward him. What do you most want? he asked.

What? Quark had not expected such a question.

The JemHadar strode back across the beach until he reached Quark. What is it that you most desire? Wealth?

Quark laughed, a response combined of amusement and anxiety as he peered up into the JemHadars intense eyes. Wealth, he confirmed. Of course.

If a Founder chose to, he could become a brick of gold-pressed latinum, the JemHadar said. Or ten bricks. Or a thousand.

Thats not exactly the same thing as having wealth, Quark contended. They couldnt spend himself.

The JemHadar stepped around Quark and moved back to the panel inside the doorway. He touched a control, and the scene around them gained substance. The lake began to undulate, the gentle waves nipping at the shore. The crisp smells of vegetation floated through the air, carried along by a caress of breeze. The pacific nature of the holoprogram seemed at odds with the character of the JemHadar. And why do you spend? he asked.

Quark shrugged. To acquire things, of course.

But the Founders do not need to acquire anything, the JemHadar said, moving past Quark again and heading back across the beach toward the water. The Founders can be anything they wish to be. They are free from the need for wealth, because they already have everything they already are everything in the universe.

Yes, but But what? Quark wondered, his gaze drifting downward. He had never considered Odo's nature in quite the way the JemHadar had just described it. Odo had never quite been like that, reveling in all that he could become, although Quark supposed that he could if he chose to. In a sense, the JemHadar was right; Odo could have just about anything he wanted, because he could be just about anything he wanted. Of course, in all the time Quark had known him, the constable had only wanted three things to serve the cause of justice, to have Kira love him, and to return to his people, all things that he could not have simply by shifting his form. But then, Odo had nevertheless managed to acquire all of those things. He had meted out justice for years, Kira had come to love him, and he had finally gone back to live with the Founders.

Odo has everything he ever wanted, he thought. The truth of that astounded Quark. Odo was no longer with Kira, of course, but that had been his choice.

Computer, the JemHadar said, begin program. Quark looked up. He thought that the holoprogram had already been running, but obviously the JemHadar had only activated the setting parameters up until now. At first, Quark detected no change in the holosuite, but then a deep vibration reached his ears. The sound increased in volume, originating somewhere behind the JemHadar. Quark peered out at the surface of the lake and saw a mass of water being displaced, churning upward. As the rumble grew louder, the movement of the water grew more violent. Quark looked at the JemHadar's face. The soldier was smiling.

The lake bubbled upward in a frenzy. With a crashing sound, the surface broke, and a huge shape burst out of the water. Quark saw a creature out of a nightmare, with a rugged, black hide, two golden, vertical slits for eyes, and a gaping maw that held enormous triangular teeth. The beast bellowed, an ugly, angry cry. The JemHadar turned to face it. Quark turned and raced from the holosuite. Even though this was only a simulation, he had no desire to witness this sort of thing.

Quark headed out across the upper level of the Promenade toward the nearest turbolift. The image of the horrible creature in the holosuite stayed with him only an instant. Odo's face replaced it in his mind, along with the notion that the constable essentially had acquired everything he had ever wanted. And I can't get almost anything I want, Quark thought bitterly. Not the moon for which he had always longed, not great monetary wealth, not even much of a business. And he also might have thrown away whatever small chance he might have had with Ro Laren.

But now Quark decided he would do what he had to do to change that.

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Vaughn took a last sip of water, then sealed the container and set it aside. He stood up, packed his bedroll, the blanket and beacon inside it, and strapped it to his back. He slung both water containers over his shoulder, then started up the side of the hollow in which he had chosen to rest.

At the top of the incline, a roadway stretched away to the left and right. Vaughn had found the road a few hours ago, on the way out of the city. It measured a dozen or so meters across, traveling through the rise and fall of the landscape in a predominantly straight line, directly toward the complex surrounding the source of the pulse. Walking on the even terrain beside the road allowed him to maintain a steady gait, while at the same time putting less strain on him than if he were to move along the harder surface of the

road itself.

Vaughn turned left and resumed his journey. A long upgrade lay ahead, the summit about a kilometer away. He slipped his tricorder out of a coat pocket and performed a scan. As he had drawn nearer the site of the pulse, the range of the sensors had decreased dramatically, though the amount of interference from the energy still confirmed that the road continued in the right direction. He closed the tricorder and slid it back into his coat.

Above, the dark sea of clouds gloomed, matching Vaughn's mindset. Since his encounter in the city with Captain Harrimanor whoever or whatever it had been he had spent considerable effort conceiving of possible explanations. Time and again, though, his mind would drift from asking questions and searching for answers, to recalling his days with Harriman. Over and over, he had to force his thoughts back to the situation at hand, a problem of focus that did not usually afflict him.

In the end, he figured that the problem broke down simply enough either that had been Harriman back in the city, or it had not. If it had been Harriman, then how had he come to be here, and why? And why from so long ago? Had there been a reason he had not responded when Vaughn had called to him? Most important, how would this affect the mission to disable the pulse?

On the other hand, if it had not been Harriman which seemed far more likely then who or what had it been? Had it occurred only in Vaughn's mind, or had it been real? And if real, then how had it been accomplished, and why? Again, most important, what effect would it have on his mission?

What most troubled Vaughn was the agreement between what he had perceived and what his tricorder scans had shown. If it had not been Harriman, or at least a human male, then either both Vaughn and the tricorder had been fooled, or Vaughn's perception of the tricorder had been fooled. Either way, it left the accuracy of the two most valuable tools he had right now the tricorder and his mind in doubt.

As Vaughn hiked up the gradient, leaning into the slope, his thoughts wandered again from Harriman's apparent presence here to those dangerous days spent with him. What? Sixty-five years ago? He remembered with horror the catastrophe of Ad Astra, in which lives and hopes had been lost. He recalled the mission to remedy the damage done, to avert the unwinnable war the success, but at a cost. Vaughn had still been a young man then, in his thirties, and naive.

No, not naive, he thought, a word that carried negative connotations with it. Innocent. Back then, he had believed in the virtue of fighting evil, without really understanding the toll that such fighting could take. Now, alone on this planet, he shook his head and laughed, with not humor but curiosity. He had not thought about Tomed really thought about it in years, perhaps decades. And yet for the last few hours, he had come back to it again and again. All this time later, he found that those ancient emotions could still take hold of him, as though he were experiencing them for the first time. He knew now that he would always carry within him the simple hollowness of the tragedy, along with the complicated sorrows that came from fighting in the shadows.

Underneath the gray skies, Vaughn marched alongside the road, up the incline. Pebbles crunched in the dirt beneath his boots, a sharp contrast to the spectral hum still pervading the air like the aural equivalent of mist. As he approached the summit of the upgrade, a shape became visible in the distance, slowly climbing into view. Vaughn's hands balled into fists, a symptom of the adrenaline that began to course through his body. If he had reached the complex around the pulse already, then he would have an entire day to determine a course of action to save the Vahni.

But as Vaughn topped the rise, he saw only a single structure. A dark tower of some sort, it sat perhaps another kilometer away, reaching up from the center of the roadway itself. It appeared to be about as tall as the road was wide, its base measuring about half that size. Vaughn pulled out his tricorder and attempted a sensor scan, but the interference from the energy made it impossible.

Vaughn kept his gaze on the structure as he continued walking, looking in particular for movement. He saw none. He wondered about the purpose of the structure. Considering its placement, he speculated that it might have functioned as a checkpoint of some sort. He looked for openings in the side facing him, and saw a rectangular doorway at ground level, and several narrow slits in a vertical line above it. With its dark coloring and slightly irregular edges, it appeared to be constructed of stone and

Vaughn stopped. He checked the tricorder again, but still could not take a reading. It didn't matter. He

had drawn close enough now to recognize the structure. It was identical to the tower at the center of the Vahni city.

In less than a quarter of an hour, Vaughn had reached the tower. When he had come within half a kilometer, he had been able to scan the structure stone and mortar, four stories tall, a single doorway, and a stairway that ascended up the inside walls to the roof. He did not have the readings of the actual Vahni tower why would he? so he could not compare the two structures, but his memory found them indistinguishable.

What's going on? Vaughn wanted to know. Was he in a holosuite somewhere, or was this all occurring in his mind? Maybe he still lay back in the wreckage of Chaffee, unconscious or even comatose, imagining all of this.

Except this did not seem like a holosuite or an illusion or a dream. Of course, he understood that he might not be able to prove such a belief one way or another. It had been more than a day since the shuttle had gone down, though, and all of the events since then finding Prynn alive, treating the badly wounded ChThane, walking for kilometers across the empty land, passing through the city had all seemed real. But then, so too had Harriman.

Standing beside the doorway, Vaughn patted a hand against an outer wall of the tower. The stone felt cool to the touch, hard, rough. He closed his eyes for a moment, and the sensations remained.

Vaughn pushed one side of his coat back, allowing him to draw his phaser. He tapped at the control surface on the top of the weapon, configuring it to a powerful but nonlethal setting. He turned around to face back the way he had come, leveled the phaser, and fired. A shaft of yellow-red light streaked into the surface of the roadway, at a point about ten meters away, its high-pitched whine loud in the almost-quiet of the empty landscape. Vaughn shot the beam for ten seconds, then released the trigger. The point on the road at which he had fired glowed red. He checked the tricorder and read liquefaction of stone composites and binding materials. It proved little, he knew, though it at least seemed to lend credence to the reality of his surroundings.

Turning back toward the tower, Vaughn stepped away, raised the phaser, and fired again. He held the beam for longer this time. When he stopped, a section of the wall glowed red. He worked the tricorder once more, scanning the tower. Again, he read liquefied stone in the affected

A life-form showed on the display. Vaughn adjusted the scan and located it on the roof of the tower. It read as Vahni Vahltpali.

Vaughn slipped the straps of the water containers from his shoulders, lowering the containers onto the roadway. Then he unburdened himself of the bedroll, also setting it down on the road. He reset his phaser to heavy stun, then strode back to the tower. Cautiously, he moved through the open doorway, his weapon poised at the level of his waist. Inside, the air felt slightly cooler than the air outside, and slightly damp. He waited a few seconds for his eyes to adjust fully to the dimmer lighting, then turned to his left and started up the stone stairs that ran along the wall. The setting matched his recollection of the tower on the Vahni world.

Climbing the stairs as quietly as he could, he took three minutes to reach the top. He stood with his back to the inside wall, beside the open doorway that led out onto the roof. He consulted the tricorder again, verifying the presence of the Vahni. Then he closed and pocketed the tricorder, raised his phaser higher, and stepped through the doorway.

Ventur or somebody or something that looked just like him stood on the far side of the roof, a cloth bag at his feet. Vaughn slowly moved forward, observing and saying nothing. As he did, a flash of color and form flowed across the Vahn's body. Again, you are welcome, came the slightly mechanical voice of the translator. Vaughn peered down at his chest and saw only his tattered uniform under his open coat, but not the optical mesh that had comprised part of the Vahni translation devices. Nor did the interface between the mesh and the universal translator hang in a small casing at his side.

Vaughn looked up. Who are you? he demanded.

All at once, the tower thrust sideways, surging to Vaughn's right. He and Ventu were thrown from their feet in the opposite direction. Even as he fell, a sense of dj vu overwhelmed him, just as it had back in the

city with Harriman. He dropped the phaser as he brought his hands up in time to break his fall, but the left side of his forehead impacted the stone floor of the roof. Explosive sounds pounded the air around him, sounds he knew to be the products of a quake. He had lived through all of this before.

The tower continued to shake violently. Vaughn pushed himself up, fighting to rise onto his knees, and to his feet. He looked over at Ventu and saw vacant, white swirls blooming on his flesh, and Vaughn vividly remembered the horrible, silent screams of the Vahni.

He eyed the doorway, and briefly considered bolting through it and attempting to escape the tower before it collapsed. But he had little time, he knew, and if he got caught within the tower when it went down, he might be killed. He looked back at Ventu, but instead of trying to help him, as he had back on the Vahni world, Vaughn raced to the wall that rimmed the roof. Beyond the tower, he saw no Vahni city, nothing but the empty, rolling geography of this gray world. He gazed upward, and saw the sky filled not with the awful sight of a shattering moon, but only the constant cloud cover that haunted this place.

The tower shifted dramatically, nearly knocking Vaughn from his feet once more, but he grabbed the top of the wall and held himself up. He peered over at Ventu or the masquerade of Ventu and saw what he had seen a week ago fear, embodied in the empty whorls cycling across the Vahnis flesh, and the tentacles wrapped tightly around his upper body. Knowing what the next few moments would bring, and not wanting to chance the reality of the situation, Vaughn decided to protect Ventu. If they could make it through the destruction of the tower, then maybe Vaughn could get some of his questions answered.

With the roof moving back and forth beneath his feet, he staggered over to Ventu. We have to protect ourselves, Vaughn yelled. To demonstrate, he lifted his arms up around his head. Ventu, he screamed through the din, protect your head! Back on the Vahni world, Ventu had died from a massive brain injury. Maybe this time, Vaughn could

That was when the tower collapsed.

Vaughn could not tell whether or not he had lost consciousness, but the next perception he had was that the quake had ceased, as had the thunderous noise accompanying it. He opened his eyes and raised his head, finding himself atop a pile of rubble that had once been the tower. A veil of dust hung in the air, and the debris beneath him ticked and popped as bits of rubble fell toward the ground. He had been here before.

Slowly, Vaughn moved, taking inventory of his body. He felt familiar aches, particularly in his limbs. What isn't familiar here? he thought.

As he began a cautious descent, the urge to call the names of Bowers and Roness rose in his mind; that was what he had done back on the world of the Vahni. But now, when he peered out past the remains of the destroyed tower, he did not see a Vahni city, its pedestrian ways clogged with frantic crowds, smoke flowing skyward from several points, violet lasers shooting up and warning of the emergency. Instead, he spied only a barren landscape, with a narrow belt of roadway receding into the distance.

Moving carefully, Vaughn maneuvered down the mound of debris. Several stones tumbled from the pile, but he managed to avoid a similar fate. Minutes passed, until finally he reached the ground.

Vaughn looked down at himself. His coat was filthy. His uniform, torn open in a few places and covered with dirt, resembled, but did not match exactly, his uniform after the tower collapse back on the Vahni world. Cuts laced his hands, blood seeping from the wounds. He reached up and felt at his temple, his fingers coming away tacky with blood.

Vaughn circled the heap of rubble, looking this time not for Bowers and Roness, but for Ventu. He waved his way through the thick cloak of dust enclosing the scene. A third of the way around, where before he had come across Bowers and Roness and the other Vahni, this time he found nothing.

He continued walking. Farther along, he discovered the body of Ventu. The Vahni lay along the side of the tower wreckage, about three meters up. His tentacles draped lifelessly across the broken stone. Cuts and abrasions covered his body in numerous places, marring his beautiful red-and-blue flesh. And something had clearly fallen onto the headlike projection atop his frame; ichor oozed from a gaping wound that split the ring of his eye.

Vaughn pulled his tricorder from his coat, grateful that it had not been lost. He scanned the inert form of

Ventu. The sensor readings confirmed the body as Vahni; there were no signs of life.

A tremendous sense of loss flooded over Vaughn, threatening to pull him down into its dark depths. Despite being convinced that whoever or whatever sprawled dead before him was not truly Ventu, the fact remained that Ventu had perished not now, not here, but a week ago, on the Vahni world. Ventu, and three thousand other Vahni, and then Ensign Roness, all gone.

Vaughn stepped back away from the wrecked tower, then turned and made his way back to his supplies. He sat down on the roadway beside them, facing toward the wreckage, but averting his gaze, looking down instead. He pulled off his coat, opened one of the water containers, and wet a corner of the fabric. Gently, he wiped the blood from his forehead, then applied pressure to the wound there. He held his hand like that for several minutes, hoping to stanch the flow of blood.

Unable to stop himself, Vaughn thought about the Vahni Vahltupali. Such a lovely species of beings, they embodied what Vaughn had hoped to discover out in the universe. The Vahni stood as the antithesis of what the circumstances of Vaughn's life had left him exposed to. They were bright and joyful, peaceful and calm. Truly, he could not have hoped for a better experience on his first exploratory mission.

And yet I was so anxious to leave, he recalled. While the rest of Defiant's crew had expressed their desire to spend more time with the Vahni, Vaughn had looked ahead, to the next discovery, the next wonder, that they might come across. Charging through the mission as though it were an intelligence operation, he realized checking off one objective and immediately moving to fulfill the next, without reflection or satisfaction, but only the intensity for completion. The crew had met the Vahni and embraced them, enjoyed their time with them, as Vaughn had simply categorized the encounter as a success and sought to move on to the next goal, the next discovery. Where had his own joy been, he wanted to know, his own sense of wonder? Somehow, he had missed the whole point of his own desire to explore, and now the cruel truth of that left him feeling empty.

Vaughn withdrew the section of coat he had kept pressed to his forehead. He dabbed at his wound with his fingertips to see if the bleeding had stopped; it had. He looked up and regarded the fallen tower. He felt very much like the ruined structure, shaken until it had torn itself apart.

Stop it, he said aloud. As he so well knew, he could do nothing about the mistakes of the past. He could only look forward. For now, the chance to explore had gone, leaving a mission in its place. He had to reach the source of the pulse and find some way to save the Vahni Vahltupali. Those were his next goals, and he had to concentrate on accomplishing them.

Vaughn stood up and packed up his few provisions once more. He circled the wreckage twice, searching for his phaser, which he had dropped on the roof before the tower had come down. He didn't find it. Not wanting to use up any more time, Vaughn put the mass of broken stone behind him, headed once more toward the mysterious pulse.

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Kira worked the control pad set into the bulkhead. These will be your quarters while you're on the station, Minister, she said as the door coasted open.

Thank you, Shakaar said. Kira had met the first minister at the docking bay and escorted him here. Their conversation along the way had been limited to official matters, and had been somewhat strained. It only underscored Kira's feeling that Shakaar had put some distance between them.

Until today, they had not spoken in more than six weeks, since she had returned to the station via the Iconian gateway. And their last significant communication, not too long after she had been Attainted a few months ago, had been contentious. At that time, he had let her know that her excommunication could easily threaten her position aboard Deep Space 9. Although he had never suggested that he wanted to remove her from command, he had tacitly warned that, whatever struggles arose for her, she would have to weather them without him. Since then, she had done just that.

I'll see you tonight at the reception, Kira said, ready to return to her office.

Of course, Shakaar said. Would you like to come in for a few minutes?

The invitation caught Kira off-guard. Shakaar must have seen her hesitation, because he added, Unless

you really need to get back to ops.

No, she said, curiosity replacing her surprise. Not at all. He stepped aside to allow her to pass, then followed her into the cabin. The door hummed closed behind them.

Its good to see you, Shakaar said, moving past her and farther into the room. Nerys, he added, with a smile. You can still call me Edon, he told her, or have things degenerated that badly between us?

No, of course not, Kira said immediately, although she really had perceived an iciness in their relationship. She had initially believed that the distance growing between them had only been natural they had stopped seeing each other romantically a couple of years ago but she had lately come to believe it a result of Shakaars political life. Now, apropos of that, she said, Unless there are some Bajorans listening to us. Maybe then wed better argue with each other.

Shakaar laughed, a sound Kira had not heard in a while. That might actually work best for me, he said. I think youve got more political enemies than I do.

Kira smiled, but Shakaars jest bothered her. So far as she knew, the only real political opposition she had came from Vedek Yevir and his followers, who had been the ones to Attaint her. Well, and maybe from Admiral Akaar, Kira amended.

May I get you something to drink? Shakaar asked, crossing over to the replicator in the small dining area.

No, thank you, she said.

Oh, he said. All right. He looked at the replicator for a moment longer, as though deciding whether or not to get something for himself. Then he walked around the dining table and over to the sitting area. Please, he said, indicating an easy chair, have a seat.

Kira walked over and sat down in the chair, and Shakaar sat on the sofa across from her. Youve been well, I hope, she said.

I have, Shakaar told her. Busy, but well. I trust the same is true of you.

It is, Kira said, and realized that she meant it. Despite all of the difficult times she had undergone in the last few months, and notwithstanding the potentially tumultuous days approaching for Bajor, she felt strong in her own life. She recalled the swarm of locusts that had infiltrated her sleep last night, but the concerns fueling her dreams she held not for herself, but for her people. Feeling somehow unburdened by the insight, she returned to her thoughts of a moment ago. Can I ask you about Admiral Akaar? she said. She saw what she perceived as hesitation in Shakaars features, and she quickly added, Off the record. Shakaar nodded his head slowly as he seemed to consider this. He leaned back on the sofa, spreading his arms wide. Off the record, certainly, he said. What can I tell you?

What do you think of him? Kira asked.

Shakaar shrugged. Hes a Starfleet admiral, like all the rest. Perhaps a bit more serious than some, a little more As he searched for a word to complete his thought, Kira offered her own observation.

Secretive? she said.

I wouldve said guarded but yes, Shakaar agreed. Has that been a problem?

Kira shook her head. I dont know, she said. I have a vague uneasiness about the admiral. The apparition of the locusts flew across her mind again, and she wondered if their presence in her dream represented a shadow she felt Akaar might somehow cast over her people.

Are you sure your feelings are about the admiral, Shakaar asked, and not about the prospect of Bajor joining the Federation?

Kira thought about the question before answering. The Prophets only knew that she had been asking herself similar questions for days. But she arrived at the same answer now as before. I think Ive come to terms with Bajors membership in the Federation, she said seriously. I even believe that it will benefit our people. But I also think that for those in our generation, so many of whom have been horribly wounded by the Occupation, this step might be exceedingly difficult.

I understand, Shakaar told her. He pulled his arms in and stood up. Ive had similar thoughts. But Im confident that we can do this, and that it can be a great boon to all of Bajor.

I think so too, Kira said. Its just that, with all the rapid changes Bajorans have experienced in the last century even in the last decade weve had to struggle to retain our character. I just wonder what will become of our unique identity once we become just one small part of something so much bigger.

Is that what you're worried about? Shakaar asked, walking back over to the dining area as he spoke. That Bajor will join the Federation and become somehow homogenized? Because my experience is that their member worlds are very different, one from another.

I don't know, Kira admitted. Yes, that does worry me. But I also think I'm even more concerned about Bajor not joining the Federation. If the locusts had represented Akaar to her, Kira realized, then perhaps the shadow that had so frightened her in her dream had not been the Federation descending on Bajor, but Akaar separating Bajor and preventing its membership.

I've been dealing with this issue for months, Shakaar said. Believe me when I tell you that there's nothing to worry about. Everything is proceeding exactly as I'd hoped. They were mere words, Kira knew, and perhaps even hollow promises, but despite the prickliness of her recent dealings with Shakaar, she still trusted him. We're going to need you in the next few days and weeks, and past that.

I'll be here, Kira said.

Are you sure I can't get you anything? he asked, pointing at the replicator.

No, I'm fine, she said.

Moba juice, Shakaar ordered. Kira could not see the device past him, but she heard its hum. Shakaar turned back toward her after a moment, a tall glass of the purple beverage in one hand. He sipped from the glass, and then said, There'll be a great deal of work beyond Federation membership. We'll want to diversify, to enhance the usefulness of Deep Space 9, especially once the wormhole is reopened to commercial and exploratory traffic. I imagine the Klingons and the Romulans may push for a bigger role in those affairs this time. He started back across the room.

Kira could only imagine how troublesome it would be to have to deal with both Klingon and Romulan officials as permanent residents of the station, but she also understood why those powers would want a hand in occupying such an important area of space. Even discounting any possible threat from the Gamma Quadrant, Bajor and the wormhole had become a virtual crossroads of the galaxy, a place where everybody's interests could be impacted.

Shakaar sat back down on the sofa. He talked about other governments who had expressed a desire to be represented on DS9, rushing through a list that included the Ferengi, the Tholians, and the Gorn. At one point, she thought he even mentioned the Breen allies of the Dominion during the war, and a people who had shown nothing but animosity toward Bajor and the Federation, even since hostilities had ended but realized that she must have misunderstood him. Eventually, Shakaar said, I did ask you in here for a reason, though. Actually, I wanted to ask for your opinion.

About what? Kira asked.

Shakaar put his drink down on an end table beside the sofa, then leaned forward. I wanted to know who you favor as the next kai.

Oh, she said, not prepared for the question. Well, I guess it's a foregone conclusion at this point that Vedek Yevir will be elected.

I'm not asking for a prediction, Shakaar told her. I'm interested to find out who you believe would best serve as Bajor's spiritual leader. Or did I misinterpret you, and you think that Yevir is the best person for the job?

No, Kira said, too quickly, she thought. Her discomfort with Yevir as kai had less to do with his call for the Attainder and more to do with why he had done it. No, she went on, I don't think Yevir would be a good kai.

Shakaar regarded her for a few seconds, his eyes peering into hers. Finally, he sat back on the sofa. Its more than that, isn't it? he said. Its not that you don't think Yevir would be a good kai; its that you think he'd be a bad one.

Kira sighed. Yes, I do think he'd be a bad kai, she confirmed. More than that, I think that he might actually be dangerous.

Dangerous? Shakaar said. How? Like Winn?

No, not like Winn, Kira said at once. She could still grow agitated and angry when she thought of the former kai, a woman who had been motivated by ego and ambition, a political animal far removed from what Kira considered to be a server of the faith. I don't think Yevir is driven by ambition, she explained.

He truly has a strong faith and a real commitment to our people. But I also think his faith is voracious. Shakaar looked at her with a quizzical expression. Surely you don't object to somebody having a passion for their devotion.

No, of course not, Kira said. But Yevir's passion is unbridled unthinking. He believes so fully that the Prophets guide his every decision that he doesn't really consider the consequences of his actions.

Shakaar nodded slowly, offering a nonverbal sound of understanding, although Kira could not tell whether he agreed with her assessment. All right, so not Yevir, he said. Then who? Ungtae?

Kira could feel herself making a face, no doubt an expression that conveyed both her affection for the old vedek and her reservations about him being elected kai. I like Ungtae, she said. He's a good man, with a long record of good service.

But? Shakaar asked.

I don't know, she said. He's a man of great faith, humble, maybe even wise, but he's just plain.

What's wrong with plain? Shakaar asked.

Nothing, really, Kira said. And I'd probably be perfectly happy with Ungtae. It's just that I would rather see a kai who didn't just satisfy the Bajoran people, but inspired them.

Shakaar smiled at her. Somebody like Opaka, he said.

Yes, Kira said, returning his smile.

You really held her in high regard. It was not a question.

All of Bajor did, she said. But yes, I think she was an amazing woman. Gentle but strong, self-possessed but humble. She was a genuine leader, somebody we could all look to for spiritual guidance.

I liked her too, Shakaar said.

I know you did.

But you still haven't answered my question, he said. If not Yevir or Ungtae, then who?

If I had to choose right now? Kira asked rhetorically. The irony of the notion vexed her, since the Attainder would prevent her from voting for the next kai. Vedek Pralon.

Pralon? Shakaar repeated, reaching for his glass of moba juice. Really?

You don't think Pralon would make a good kai?

Shakaar sipped from the glass, and then said, Oh, I think Pralon would be a fine choice, but I just wonder how she would be in dealing with other governments.

Other governments? Kira thought, and realized that he must mean the Federation. The reason he was seeking her opinion became clear; Kira probably had more experience with the Federation, at least in the guise of Starfleet, than any other Bajoran. He must also believe that membership was imminent. I don't know if Vedek Pralon has had much contact with the Federation, she said. But I think she could handle it.

I'm not talking about the Federation government, Shakaar said. I'm talking about

A message over the comm system interrupted him. Ops to Colonel Kira, came the voice of Ensign Ling. Go ahead, Kira replied.

Colonel, the Alonis ambassador is asking to speak with you, Ling reported. Kira had greeted Tel Ammanis Lent, the Alonis ambassador, over a com channel when her ship had arrived at the station earlier. Because of the environmental suits that the aquatic aliens required in an atmosphere, Lent had chosen to remain aboard her vessel until the reception.

Tell her I'm on my way, Kira said, standing from her chair.

Aye, sir, Ling responded.

Kira out. To Shakaar, she said, I'm afraid I have to go.

Of course, he said, standing up as well. Maybe we can continue this later.

All right, she said. I'll see you this evening. Shakaar nodded his acknowledgment, and Kira headed for the door. She thought that the impromptu meeting had gone well, but as she strode out into the corridor, she found herself surprised that Shakaar still valued her opinion.

Bashir reexamined his preparations. Every tool aboard ship that he could conceive of needing, whether it be a device, a drug, or a member of his limited staff, now populated the medical bay. This time, he would be ready for whatever happened to Ezri. This time, he would not permit her life to be endangered. Are you all set? Bashir asked as he checked her condition on the medical display. In addition to all of the other measures he had taken, he had also primed Ezri for her second contact with the object. He had insisted on being allowed a couple of hours to design a treatment that would fortify those areas and processes within her body that had previously been threatened. Now, as he stood beside the diagnostic bed on which she lay, he felt confident that he had provided Ezri the medical reinforcement to safely withstand the coming trauma.

Im ready, Ezri said. She peered up at him, an expression of determination set into her features. Bashir thought that he also saw a speck of fear in her eyes, an observation that actually pleased him. No matter how strongly Ezri believed that she had to take this course of action, her fear indicated that she had not made the choice without the proper consideration. Indeed, her decision to proceed despite her fear seemed heroic. As he looked down at her adorable round face and into her beautiful deep eyes, an intense feeling of pride surged within him. The emotion filled him up, and all he could think was how much he loved this woman.

All right, then, Bashir said. He reached up and tapped his combadge. Bashir to Bowers.

Bowers here.

Were ready to begin, Bashir told him. As long as Ezri remained in the medical bay, and Commander Vaughn on the planets surface, Bowers would be in command of Defiant.

Acknowledged, Doctor. Keep me informed, he said. Bowers out.

Bashir looked across the room to where Nurses Richter and Juarez sat at neighboring consoles. During Ezris contact with the object, Richter would monitor the condition of the Dax symbiont, and Juarez Ezris condition, both backing up Bashirs own observations.

Well, then, Bashir said. Lets get started. He reached to a shelf beside the bed and retrieved a tricorder. Im lowering the containment field. On the other side of the bed stood the portable stand, and atop it sat the mysterious object. After the attempt to transport the object had failed, Nog had devised a means of physically moving it via a magnetic containment field. The operation had been delicate work, but an engineering team had managed to remove the object from the Jefferies tube and load it onto the stand. Bashir worked the tricorder, which Nog had configured as a control interface for the containment field. Around the object, a curtain of blue pinpoint flashes into view, accompanied by a low buzz. In a second, the pinpoints and the hum had gone, as had the containment field.

He looked back down at Ezri. He felt a sudden urge to stop her from doing this, but he fought the impulse. Last time, Ezris contact with the object had been accidental and unexpected. This time, he would be with her from the very beginning, and that and his careful preparations would see to it that she made it through the experience.

Ill see you soon, she said, and smiled.

You bet you will, he responded, forcing his lips into a thin smile of his own. He thought to say something more, but phrases such as Pleasant journey and Bon voyage seemed insufficient. Instead, he simply said, Good luck.

Ezri reached up, found his hand, and squeezed. He squeezed back, and then she let go. She took a deep breath, lifted her other hand, and reached out above the portable stand and the object. She glanced up once more at Bashir, then lowered her hand. Although the dark substance appeared liquid, no movement rippled across its surface as Ezris hand came to rest within it.

Immediately, a rush of air escaped Ezri in a grunt, her eyes fell shut, and her head lolled to the side.

Bashir looked up at the diagnostic panel. As he watched, Ezris heart rate decreased and her respiration slowed, and her neural activity started to ebb. Juarez called out the changes from his console.

I see, Bashir said, more to himself than to Juarez. I see, and Im ready. He set the tricorder back down on the shelf, exchanging it for a hypospray he had previously prepared. Out of habit, he checked the drug in the ampule delactovine, a systemic stimulant, since cordrazine had not been completely effective last time as well as the dosage setting. Then he turned his gaze back to the diagnostic panel, set to act once

Ezris readings had fallen beneath a certain threshold. But that did not happen. Both her heart rate and her respiration reached a plateau, leveling off well above where they had during Ezris first contact with the object. Again, Juarez reported the changes.

Bashir watched the readings remain stable for a few more minutes, then set down the hypo. He checked Dax's readings, and saw that they remained within a normal range. Bashir's preventive measures appeared to be working. He would have to keep an eye on Ezris neural activity, but at the moment, neither host nor symbiont seemed to be in any danger.

Bashir inhaled deeply, then let the breath out slowly, releasing some of the tension in his body. He peered down at Ezris inert form, at the shallow rise and fall of her chest, and wished that he could do something more for her. But for now, all he could do was wait.

Bashir paced. He moved back and forth past the foot of Ezris bed, his gaze shuttling between her face and the diagnostic panel. During the past hour, her vital signs had begun to slip again, though not yet in a way that threatened her health. The most significant changes had been in her neural activity and isoboramine levels. Bashir had worked to keep both from diminishing too much, employing a cortical stimulator and a round of benzocytazine injections. The measures had succeeded in slowing, but not stopping, Ezris decline. Soon, if the decreases continued, he would put an end to this.

He stopped, then walked forward until he stood beside the head of the bed. He picked up the tricorder from the shelf, then peered down at Ezris soft face. Her skin had paled, he saw, leaving the ribbon of spots down the sides of her face and neck contrasting starkly with her pallor. The cortical stimulator sat affixed to her forehead, the blinking green and red lights of the small device indicating its functional status. Neural activity down another tenth of a percent, Juarez reported from across the medical bay.

Bashir glanced up at the diagnostic panel and confirmed the reading. Acknowledged, he said, and looked back down at Ezri.

He hated seeing her like this. Even though it had been her choice to take this action, it troubled him. He understood that if her interpretation of events had been correct regarding her first contact with the object, then Ezris declining neural processes and isoboramine levels coincided with Dax's mental contact with it. With what? Bashir asked himself in a burst of anger. With a pool of unimpressive slime that somehow extended into other dimensions? He felt his jaw clench and his hands tense. How could she have done this? he thought. How could she have so obviously risked her life and her life with him for this speculation? Bashir squeezed his eyes closed, suddenly furious with Ezri. And with himself, he realized. Why had he agreed to this? For Ezri? For the Vahni? The Vahni would not be served by the unnecessary and avoidable death of Ezri Dax.

Pain coursed through his palm. He looked down and saw his hand gripped so tightly about the tricorder that his flesh had gone white. He opened his hand and dropped the device back onto the shelf, where it rattled among other equipment. A hypospray skittered off and fell to the floor.

He stared at his hand. Indentations decorated the fleshy part of his palm, tinged red now as blood flowed back to the areas. He tried to bring his anger under control, but instead, his ire rose, and he imagined sweeping his arm across the shelf in front of him, knocking everything to the floor. No, not the shelf, he thought, and looked over at the stand, and at the bizarre object resting upon it. He saw himself pulling Ezris hand from the substance, and then upending the stand aiming a phaser.

Bashir raised a hand to his face, wiping it across his eyes. He felt pressure in his temples, and a wave of exhaustion washed over him. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to sleep. If he could just

Doctor, Juarez called, and Bashir recognized the note of concern in the lieutenant's voice even before the alarm sounded. Bashir dropped his hand and opened his eyes. He looked up at the diagnostic panel, the source of the warning tones, and saw that Ezris neural activity had dropped precipitously, her other vital signs following it down. He acted at once, almost without thought, a product of his training and abilities. He reached for the hypospray of delactovine, but could not locate it on the shelf. He quickly crouched and looked on the floor, recalling the hypo that had fallen, but he did not see it.

Edgardo, he called, standing back up, prepare a delactovine injection. As Juarez acknowledged the order, Bashir pulled the tricorder from the shelf. He did not even realize the decision he had made until he

reached across the bed and pulled Ezris hand from the object. He lowered her arm down beside her body, then worked the tricorder. The haze of blue dots that indicated the activation of the containment field buzzed on around the object.

Juarez raced over, a hypo held up in his hand. Bashir took it, verified the drug, and set the dosage. Quickly, he applied the nozzle end of the hypo to Ezris neck. The short hiss of air was a welcome sound. He peered up at the diagnostic panel, waiting for the changes that would come. And they did come heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, and numerous other readings. And still her neural activity remained dangerously low, so low that her autonomic functions could be endangered. If her brain ceased to function above a certain minimal level, Ezris body would no longer sustain itself her heart would cease to beat on its own, her blood would cease to flow through her veins, her lungs would no longer expand and contract.

Bashir reached up to the cortical stimulator and touched a control. At once, the blinking of the green and red lights sped up. He looked to the diagnostic panel again, but after a few seconds, only a marginal increase marked Ezris neural activity. Bashir shook his head, a calmness settling over him as he considered the next steps he would have to take. He reached for the hypos and other medical equipment on the shelf by the bed. He had prepared for this contingency. Now he could only take the actions he had planned, and hope that they would be enough to save Ezri.

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Charivretha sat at the dining table with Thirishars bondmates, a tall glass of Andorian ale in her hand. She had arrived just as Thriss, Anichent, and Dizhei had been starting dinner. At Dizheis invitation, Charivretha sat down at the table with them, although she would not join them in their meal; in just a few minutes, she would be leaving for the ambassadorial reception.

It had been an arduous, tiring day, spent in meticulous preparation for the summit tomorrow. Charivretha did well with details, able to master massive amounts of facts, allowing herself to recall them effortlessly as needed; she could sometimes even cull unexpected and valuable conclusions from previously unvisited juxtapositions of information. But for all of that, she cared less for the preliminaries and more for the actual job. She enjoyed politics, not paperwork.

Throughout the long day today, Charivretha had looked forward to a glass of ale. She could not abide replicated versions of the drink, but Anichent had discovered that the barkeeper on the station possessed a couple of bottles in his stock. She had asked Anichent to purchase them, as good an excuse as any to visit Thirishars bondmates this evening. Thirishar had offered the three of them the use of his quarters just before departing on his mission, and they had all moved in here that same day. Charivretha tried to spend as much time as possible here with them, but her responsibilities sometimes interfered, as had been the case during the past few days.

Now, she smoothed the white, thickly textured fabric of the formal dress she wore, and then raised her glass in salute. Anichent sat across from her at the table, the tall, hardy figure putting her in mind of Zherathrizar, one of her own bondmates. Dizhei, already old for her years, but very sweet, sat to her right, and Thriss, usually so lively, but quiet right now, sat to her left.

To family, Charivretha said as she lifted her glass. Only Anichent and Dizhei followed her lead. Anichent had ale; Dizheis glass contained water and matched her toast. Thriss continued eating her meal, not looking up. Charivretha chose to let the discourtesy pass. She sipped at her drink, the fiery liquid tumbling down her gullet like warm gravel, heating and rasping her throat, and leaving behind a delicious warmth and fullness.

Anichent smacked his lips and delivered a husky sigh after taking a healthy gulp of the ale. He really did resemble Zherathrizar in many ways, Charivretha thought, from some of his mannerisms to his mode of dress; the brown leather vest he wore over a pale green tunic and brown pants gave him the air of an outdoorsman, though she knew his aspirations actually leaned toward politics. I thought I was overcharged for the ale, he said in a voice made deeper by the Andorian drink, but now I'd have to say it was worth it.

And I'd have to agree, Charivretha said in a bass whisper. She cleared her throat, and then looked over to Dizhei. Are you sure you wouldn't like some? she asked the prim schoolteacher.

Thank you, Dizhei said, but I don't want to change the sound of my voice. She smiled, a clear signal that she understood and accepted the good-natured teasing.

So, what have you been doing during the past few days? Charivretha asked. She looked from Dizhei to Anichent to Thriss, including all of them in her question, although again, Thriss did not look up from her dinner.

Actually, we've begun touring the station, Anichent said around bites of his meal. This is a very interesting place.

Really? Charivretha said. She did not care much for Deep Space 9 herself, finding it a sterile and unwelcoming environment. The unfriendly Cardassian architecture certainly contributed to that feeling, and the Bajoran climate bothered her even more. Here, in Thirishars quarters, the temperature and humidity had been elevated to sufficiently high levels, but in the public areas of the station the coldness and aridity made her constantly uncomfortable.

We wanted to acquaint ourselves with Shars new life, Dizhei explained.

That's a lovely sentiment, Charivretha said. She admired the forgiveness Thirishars bondmates managed for him, despite his continually selfish behavior. She loved her chei, but he embarrassed her at times, even shamed her, by the self-centered way in which he had chosen to live his life.

With her thoughts, a seed of anger began to form deep within her. As she felt it grow, she very deliberately put her glass of ale down on the table. As an ambassador, she always searched for ways in which she could effectively hide and then restrain her emotions, and she found that concentrating on specific movements could serve that purpose.

Today, we went to the operations center, Anichent said. We contacted Lieutenant Ro, and she got authorization for us from the station commander.

A young Bajoran man escorted us around while we were there, Dizhei said. He was kind enough to show us where Shar works. It was very exciting.

I'm glad that you're enjoying your time here, Charivretha said. Then, as casually as she could, she asked, Did all three of you visit the operations center?

Dizhei cast her eyes downward, immediately conveying an answer to Charivretha.

No, Anichent said, keeping his tone light. It was just Dizhei and me.

I see, Charivretha said. She reached forward and picked up her glass, again allowing the small physical action to cover and redirect her rising emotion. It concerned her that Thriss had not accompanied her bondmates on their tour, particularly considering the young woman's dour mood this evening. Of course, Thriss's emotions had always run at speed, and sometimes out of control it remained a wonder to Charivretha that Thriss had managed to complete her studies and become a physician and so perhaps today represented an isolated incident. So where else have you been on the station? she asked.

Well, we've certainly spent plenty of time on the Promenade, Anichent said, and then added, rather melodramatically, shopping. He raised his eyebrows and sent a sidelong glance at Dizhei.

Oh, I haven't been that bad, Dizhei protested. The two began to bicker playfully, obviously a comfortable scene the pair had acted out on many other occasions. Charivretha liked these people, and she felt gratified that Thirishar had been so fortunate with the bondmates who had been selected for him. During the confrontation she had engineered before he had departed on his mission, Charivretha had wondered whether she had made a wise choice in bringing all three of them to the space station. She had initially considered sending only for Anichent, with whom Thirishar had formed his first romantic bond; Ch'Thane knew that her chei found stability and peace in that relationship, but she had also realized that any chance of convincing Thirishar to return to Andor would require something other than a promise of constancy. And in the end, it had been the emotionalism and volatility of Thriss that had finally compelled his agreement to come back home.

Anichent and Dizhei had moved past their lighthearted raillery about shopping and returned to the subject of where they had been on the station during the last few days. Anichent mentioned the mid-core science, engineering, and administrative facilities, the runabout bays, and the docking pylons. Charivretha took

another drink of her ale gulp this time, and not just a sip and set her glass back down. Thriss, she said, attempting to remain conversational, although her voice had been roughened by the ale. How have you enjoyed these places?

At last, Thriss looked up from her meal. I've stayed here, she said. I wanted to stay close to Shar. I can understand that, Charivretha said carefully, but really, you should occupy yourself until he returns. I miss him, Thriss said simply.

I do too, Dizhei said. I just want Shar to come back from his mission and then come home with us. I want our shelthreth. If there was more to her thought, she did not give voice to it.

You know me, Anichent said, shrugging. I encouraged him to join Starfleet, because I knew that's what he wanted. He paused, and Charivretha thought he was deciding just how much he wanted to say about how he felt. I just never thought he'd leave Andor so soon. Or stay away so long. I miss him too.

I know, Charivretha said. She thought of her own bondmates, and how unthinkable how unlivable it would have been for any one of them to do to their group what Thirishar was now doing to his. But at least he finally promised to come home, she said, trying to focus on the positive. Both Anichent and Dizhei nodded and smiled, and Thriss returned her attention to her plate. Charivretha could see that none of Thirishar's bondmates felt all that sure of his pledge. Either they doubted his word, or they doubted Thriss's account of his giving it. Whichever the case was, Anichent and Dizhei at least seemed to be dealing well enough with their misgivings; Thriss evidently was not.

I know Shar promised to come back to Andor with us, Anichent admitted, but I'm just not so sure that he actually will.

Of course he will, Charivretha pronounced. I won't allow his Starfleet career to stand in the way. She regretted the strength of her words at once; she thought that a lighter touch was required here.

Anichent put his fork down on his plate and folded his hands together, resting his elbows on the table. Shar didn't leave Andor to join Starfleet. He didn't leave us for Starfleet. A strange quality in his tone made it seem as though he had discovered an unpleasant truth. I know we talk that way, but Shar's told us many times why he left.

What Thirishar may say and what may be true, Charivretha said, peering across the table at Anichent, are not necessarily the same. No words and no reasons, she knew, could explain away the irresponsibility of what Shar had done.

I know that, Anichent said, meeting Charivretha's gaze, almost challenging her. But I've been wondering if he might be right about our people. Maybe the way of life we've chosen as a race won't save us after all. That's absurd, Charivretha said, no longer concerned about the force of her tone. Since the reforms, the death rate has decreased significantly.

We're not dying as fast as a people, Anichent allowed, but maybe I don't know maybe some of us are dying a lot faster as individuals.

What do you mean? Dizhei wanted to know.

What he means doesn't make any sense, Charivretha said. It's simply doubletalk to allow Thirishar to obviate his responsibilities. She felt angry not only at the negativity of the conversation, particularly in front of Thriss, but that anybody at all could try to justify her chei's actions. She fought to keep her emotions in check.

No, it's not doubletalk, Anichent said. Shar wasn't happy on Andor. He didn't like not having choices about some important things in his life. To stay there would only have continued to hurt him.

He did and does have a choice about loving you, Thavanichent, Charivretha said. And about loving Vindizhei and Shathrissa. And he does love all of you.

I know he does, Anichent said. I know.

And with love comes certain obligations, Charivretha told him. And that's true whether you're an Andorian or a Klingon or a Tholian.

Obligations, yes, Anichent said. But I'm not sure love really makes demands. An obligation is something Shar should want to fulfill, but our demands—the demands of our society—I think maybe we've been asking too much of Shar.

That's ridiculous, Charivretha said. She pushed her chair back and stood up, unable to remain still.

Nothing has been asked of Shar that hasn't been asked of generations before him. Then maybe we've been asking too much of all of us, Anichent suggested. It doesn't matter, Thriss said suddenly. All eyes turned toward her. She still sat with her head down. Nothing will matter if Shar doesn't come back from his mission. Thriss, don't, Dizhei said, obviously saddened by her bondmate's despondency. Anichent reached over and tenderly put his hand on Thriss's forearm. He will be back, he insisted. Thriss slowly withdrew her arm from Anichent's touch. She stood from her chair. Excuse me, she said, and Charivretha thought she saw tears in the young woman's eyes. Thriss walked from the dining area and across the room, disappearing into the bedroom. Dizhei looked over at Anichent. I'm going to go to her, she told him. He nodded, and she followed Thriss through the bedroom door. Charivretha and Anichent regarded each other across the table. I'm not sure what any of us are going to do if Shar doesn't come back to Andor this time, he said quietly. He'll come back, Charivretha said, as though stating a fact. I've got to get to the reception. Thank you for the ale. Anichent nodded, and Charivretha rose and headed for the door. She expected that he might say something more to her, but then she had entered the corridor and the door had closed behind her. As she strode toward the turbolift, she realized that, if Thirishar did not come back to Andor this time, then she had no idea what she would do either.

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Vaughn watched his daughter die, and in that terrible instant, he relived the moment of their separation, felt the weight of the years since, and regretted everything.

Prynn's body landed in a heap beside the captain's chair. The air grew heavy with the awful smell of her burned flesh. Vaughn stood in front of the chair and looked down at her, his heart aching. He studied Prynn's inert face, her slack features a harsh contradiction to the horrific injuries she had suffered.

Vaughn felt the need to move away from his daughter, and to reach the console she had just been operating. He wanted to suppress his emotions and focus on keeping Defiant intact and headed away from its attackers. Prynn was dead, but the rest of the crew were not.

Except that there was no flight control console, no Defiant. There were no crew, and no attackers. And so Vaughn crouched down next to Prynn. He reached out to touch her, but stopped as a memory drifted through his mind. He turned his hand up, and was actually relieved when he saw that his palm had not been scorched.

There's no con for me to burn my hand on, he thought, but the notion floated through his consciousness like vapor, there one moment, dissipated the next. He stretched his arm out toward Prynn again. His fingers alit on her shoulder, pressing lightly. The texture of her uniform, the resistance of the unmoving body beneath, all seemed real though he knew none of it could be.

Vaughn reached down and dipped two fingers into the pooled fluid atop Prynn's mangled midsection. He brought his fingers up to his face, and saw that they were red with blood. His daughter's blood. The realization slammed into him with incredible emotional force. Anger, heartbreak, and guilt filled him.

Why are you doing this? he asked himself. Why are you reliving this? He believed that this could not be real. He had not traveled back six weeks to this moment, nor had the moment traveled forward to him. But no matter the explanation, he had no time for this; he had a mission to accomplish.

Vaughn stood up and peered down at his daughter. Peered past her. Beneath Prynn's body, the decking appeared as it should, covered with a light gray carpet. But just beyond her, the carpet faded away, blending along an irregular border into the surface of the road. Vaughn looked up and saw this dead and deadly planet stretching away from him in all directions. And yet he also stood on one small section of Defiant's bridge, around the captain's chair. And though he knew that Prynn would not die, he had not died, and though he knew that this could not be real, his heart still grieved for the loss of his daughter. Grieved as it had when this had actually happened. He felt the familiar rage and anguish, the enormous guilt, and he wondered how this could have happened again.

It's not happening again, he forced himself to think. Prynne was not dying, not almost dying again. Ruriko was not dying again.

Vaughn pushed himself back into the moment, back onto the empty planet from which waves of destruction had been launched at the Vahni. He looked out at the vacant landscape, and with an effort, walked from the fragment of Defiant's bridge and back onto the road. He examined his fingertips again, and saw them still wet and red with blood. He turned, expecting, not expecting; hoping that the scene had vanished. But the incomplete center section of Defiant's bridge sat incongruously in the middle of the road.

His mind reeled, vainly attempting to make sense of what he saw. Of what he knew. Of what he felt. For real or not, explicable or not, his emotions were genuine, more than mere echoes of what had come before. Profound sadness held him in its grip. Prynne had not died, and yet he felt as he had in that moment when he had believed that she had been killed.

Vaughn seemed trapped, engaged by his own sorrow. He had lost any sense of time, he realized, and conscious thoughts not born of his feelings had become difficult to manage. Everything had slowed down around him, as though this instant when he had thought Prynne dead would never end.

Is that what this is? he forced himself to think. An effort to slow him down, to prevent him from reaching the pulse and trying to shut it down? And if so, would not a phaser blast, or even a well-thrown stone, have sufficed?

Vaughn wanted to turn from the scene of Prynne's near-death, but found that he could not tear his gaze away. He stood there for long moments, struggling. Finally, he allowed the kilometers that had passed beneath his boots to take over. Tired from the physical efforts of the last day and a half, Vaughn let his eyelids close. The heartache remained, but with Prynne's still figure no longer visible, he found enough will to employ an old mantra and try to rein in his emotions. You have a mission.

Vaughn turned, then opened his eyes. The empty road extended away from him, and he started walking again.

The sky reached down. Vaughn watched as, maybe two kilometers ahead, the clouds swirled above and funneled down to the road like a tornado. He pulled out his tricorder, although he was no more certain of the device than he was of his own senses anymore. He attempted a scan, but the interference from the energy made it impossible.

As Vaughn walked on, he saw a piece of his past come alive. The whirlpool of gray clouds withdrew from the road by degrees, eddies of energy spinning the matter beneath it into a different form. The effect reminded him of a transporter or a replicator, but not working all at once, instead rebuilding from the bottom up.

Even when it was only partially completed, Vaughn recognized the structure the clouds were creating. Tall and he knew it would grow taller still, it spanned the roadway and well beyond. A complex steel framework sat perched atop a concrete base.

So this is what's happening, he thought. And this is how it's going to be. Harriman, Ventu, Prynne, and now this, not time travel, not holograms, not illusions or delusions. Not real, exactly, not authentic, but real enough, the energy clouds somehow reorganizing matter into people and places and events from his past and probably re-creating the corresponding sensor readings on his tricorder. Someone or something was peering into his mind, into his memories.

But why?

Vaughn walked on, determined to reach the site of the pulse. By the time he reached the steel-and-concrete structure, its construction had been completed, the funnel of gray energy withdrawing back up into the cloud cover. The gantry towered above him. The tangled mass of metal gave the impression of architectural confusion, but Vaughn knew that every beam, every conduit, every joint, had been meticulously planned and constructed. The launchpad looked no different now from when he had visited here as a teen.

Vaughn strode through the flame trench, the channel between the two huge concrete slabs on which the tower complex sat. When humankind's early spacecraft had lifted off from here, taken into orbit by

massive, controlled explosions of fuel, the initial fires had been diverted here. Up ahead, the huge steel wall that had directed the flames reached from slab to slab. At the bottom of one side of the wall, daylight peered through an open doorway. Vaughn headed there at a steady gait, determined to put this slice of his past behind him as quickly as possible.

Vaughn had read about this place as a boy, captured as he had been by the promise and wonder of exploration. But he recalled now that the joy he had expected to feel when he had first visited this place had never materialized, supplanted by his knowledge of the tragedy that had begun here. As it had then, melancholy now swept over him.

The heels of his boots clicked along the concrete that had replaced the roadway, the sound reverberating hollowly between the walls of the slabs. Vaughn tried to concentrate on humanity's first steps out into the cosmos, many of which had been taken from this very place. But he could not remain focused on such thoughts, his mind being pulled back again and again to his first trip to Cape Canaveral. And back to Prynny lying nearly dead on the bridge of Defiant. And to Ventu, killed in the collapse of the tower. And to Captain Harriman, back on that fateful day.

Vaughn kept his eyes on the open doorway in the steel wall at the end of the flame trench. The rectangle of light sat dwarfed by the black wall. Vaughn felt insignificant amid his massive surroundings, and a sense of the helplessness and fear that must have enveloped the people whose deaths had begun here closed in around him.

As he neared the doorway, Vaughn told himself that he should not stop beyond it. That he would not stop beyond it. He knew what was there, had seen it all those years ago, and he did not need to see it right now. You have a mission, he thought again, and began repeating the phrase over and over in his mind.

It did not matter. He passed through the doorway, saw the roadway reappear beyond the launchpad, and then peered to his right, as though he had no control over his own body. The plaque hung there on the concrete slab, brass letters raised on a darker background. Vaughn stopped and read it.

LAUNCH COMPLEX 39, PAD B

TUESDAY , 28 JANUARY 1986

1139 HOURS

DEDICATED TO THE LIVING MEMORY OF THE CREW OF
SHUTTLE ORBITER CHALLENGER , OV - 99

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COMMANDER MICHAEL J . SMITH , PILOT
RONALD E . MCNAIR , MISSION SPECIALIST
ELLISON ONIZUKA , MISSION SPECIALIST
JUDITH A . RESNIK , MISSION SPECIALIST
GREGORY B . JARVIS , PAYLOAD SPECIALIST
S . CHRISTA MCAULIFFE , PAYLOAD SPECIALIST

THIS DAY

SEVEN EXPLORERS

SAILED ON A FLAME OVER

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

The words struck Vaughn like a punch to the face. He felt dazed and sad and alone. His knees wavered beneath him, and he thought for a second that he would go down. He looked skyward, the gray launch tower pushing up toward the gray clouds above.

Stop it, Vaughn yelled, elongating the vowels. Stop it. Somehow, he kept his feet. He dropped his head back down, and said, You have a mission. Stop feeling what you're feeling. He peered to his left, at the road as it headed away. You have a mission, Vaughn said. You have a mission.

He repeated it another fifty times before he was finally able to get himself moving again.

Vaughn walked on.

He walked through a section of battlefield on Beta VI, where he and his team had been unable to do anything but watch as more than eleven thousand men had beaten each other to death with rocks and sticks. Today, he saw only one member of his team, and perhaps only a dozen men attacking each other, their boots sloppy with the blood of the corpses lying at their feet.

He walked past the dark, stale cell not much more than a box in which the Breen had once kept him for seven weeks. He had survived only by licking at the damp stones of the walls, and by killing and eating the aurowaqqā furry, ten-legged creatures, larger than his hand that had occasionally found their way into his prison. He killed an aurowaqqā today, beneath the heel of his boot, unable to stop himself, and then felt diminished for having done so.

He walked down the streets of Pentabo, on Verillia, amid throngs of emaciated children, orphaned by war and living in the wreckage of their world. The desperate, hungry faces he saw today reflected more sorrow and pain than should have been possible for young people to feel. The scene broke his heart anew.

He walked along the corridors of Kamal, the old Cardassian freighter lost in the Badlands. Bajorans, whose gaunt bodies betrayed their horrific lives under the Occupation, sprawled dead throughout the ship, their Cardassian oppressors dead beside them. He looked for the Orb, speculating about a connection to this haunted planet, but his experience did not extend to that portion of the freighter. And finally, as the already pale sky faded toward the onset of night, Vaughn stood on the bridge of TPlana-Hath, staring at the viewscreen, living again that terrible moment when he had first known for sure that Ruriko was gone. Part of him died with her. Again.

Vaughn walked on.

The light would be gone soon. Because of the amount of the energy interference, the tricorder could not tell Vaughn how far he had traveled today, but it did not matter. Either he would reach the pulse, or he would not. Less than a day remained now before the next destructive wave would launch into space. Vaughn's legs, very tired now but still strong, had held up remarkably well to this point, and he felt confident that he would not falter physically. On an emotional level, though, his strength had waned greatly. That the people and places he had seen on his journey had been re-creations and not precisely genuine was irrelevant, because his reactions to those people and places had been genuine both whenever they had first occurred and again today.

As Vaughn marched up another rise, he dreaded what he would find on the other side. The experiences of his past had been appearing closer together, and he expected another incident shortly. You have a mission, he said, despite the uncertainty of his emotions and of his ability to control them.

As he reached the top of the rise, Vaughn tried to brace himself for whatever lay beyond it. It did not work. He stopped, his eyes narrowing as he regarded what he saw before him.

In the distance, a complex of neglected structures spread across the landscape. From this height, Vaughn could see into their midst. No buildings stood in the center of the complex. There was only a circle of darkness.

The site of the pulse.

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The wardroom hummed with the sounds of many voices. Kira stood near the doors and surveyed the reception. The Bajoran, Alonissian, Trill, and Andorian delegations, all clad in formal wear, continued socializing warmly with each other. Kira had earlier decided to stop speculating about what the future would hold, but if the smiles among the guests were any indication, then Bajor would be a member of the Federation within the next couple of minutes. The mood here had been so positive throughout the evening that even the normally austere Akaar seemed to be enjoying himself. That had seemed like a breakthrough for the unapproachable admiral, and Kira elected to take it as a promising sign. Overall,

she thought, the event had been a rousing success.

Not typically enthusiastic herself about mingling with government figures, Kira had actually spent time tonight doing just that. She had moved about the room with relative abandon, drawing both the ambassadors and their staffs into conversation. She supposed that she had wanted to put on Bajors best face, though she of course knew that her behavior here would have no bearing on the talks. Still, she liked being positive.

A few meters in front of Kira, Shakaar, and the Trill ambassador, Gandres, were speaking with one of the two officers Kira had introduced as her aides. The two Sergeants Etana and Shul were actually Lieutenant Ros deputies, and the only signs visible to Kira of what she knew was incredibly tight security. As she watched, Shakaar, Gandres, and Etana moved to one side, allowing Tel Ammanis Lent, the Alonis ambassador, to float past them in her antigrav chair. Lent thanked the trio for their courtesy as she went by, and then glided over to Kira.

Ambassador, Kira greeted her, smiling. I hope that youre having a pleasant evening.

I am, thank you, Colonel, Lent said, her words passing through a level of conversion even before reaching Kiras universal translator. The water-breathing Alonis, when not in an aquatic environment, wore formfitting suits that held a layer of water suspended against their scales. The helmets they wore contained a device that transmitted the sounds of their underwater voices out into the air. And the food, Lent went on, is the best Ive had at a foreign facility. Kira did not know exactly how the Alonis ate while wearing their environmental suits, but obviously they somehow managed the feat.

Im glad you like it, Kira said. Its just Bajoran hospitality.

And you are certainly very welcoming, Lent said. By the way, the kelp is truly delicious.

Good, Kira said. Id heard it was flavorful. While it surprised her that Quark had actually been telling the truth about the exorbitantly priced kelp, what intrigued her more were the Alonis themselves. They physically resembled the creatures of myth that possessed the head and upper body of a Bajoran and the tail of a fish. The silvery bodies of the Alonis were not precisely like that, but similar; their head and torso were more or less humanoid in shape and function, but they had a long tail structure instead of legs, and short fins in place of arms. They had no opposable digits, but had developed an advanced civilization via their short-range psychokinetic ability, which they used to manipulate water into essentially solid tools. They had joined the Federation forty years ago, and were widely regarded as a kind and peaceful people.

So Id like to know, Colonel, Lent asked, have you ever been to Alonis?

I havent, Kira admitted. But I have been reading about your people and your world. It sounds like you have a beautiful civilization. The ambassador flipped up the bottom of her tail. Kira had learned just a few minutes ago from one of Lents aides that such a gesture indicated grateful acknowledgment. Have you ever been to Bajor?

I have not, the ambassador said. But the rich green of your oceans seems like quite an exotic setting. The waters on Alonis, Kira had read, were colored a deep purple, like those on Trill. I look forward to visiting them one day.

Well, there are no underwater cities. The doors to the wardroom whispered open behind Kira, and she glanced over her shoulder to see who had entered. Quark stood there, carrying a tray of what appeared to be Bajoran fruits in a jumja glaze. He quickly scanned the room, as though searching for somebody. When he spotted Kira nearby, he immediately stepped over to her.

Colonel, have you seen Lieutenant Ro? he asked. He seemed agitated to Kira, and she could only imagine what sort of trouble he had caused this time.

No, I havent, she told him, but Quarks attention had already left her. He moved his head from side to side, apparently trying to see past some of the guests.

Is that her? he said suddenly, and he thrust the tray of desserts at Kira. She instinctively put her hands up and took the tray, and Quark hurried away.

Quark, she called after him, but he was already halfway across the room, weaving a path through the guests. Both exasperated and a bit embarrassed, Kira looked back at Lent. Ambassador, if youll pardon me, she said.

Of course, Colonel.

Kira strode in the opposite direction Quark had taken. She went to the end of the room, where tables had been set up for the food. She found an empty space and set the tray down, then turned to look for Quark. Before she located him, though, the doors to the wardroom slid open once more. This time, Ro Laren entered. Lieutenant, Kira called as she made her way over to the security chief.

Colonel, Ro said. Is there something wrong?

No, not at all, Kira said. In fact, I'd like to compliment you on security. You've really done a fine job.

Thank you, Ro said. The lieutenant seemed distracted, her gaze constantly moving about the room part of her security training, Kira assumed.

Quark just came in here looking for you, Kira warned her.

Quark? Ro said. Did he say

A blur of movement occurred at Kira's side. Laren, Quark burst in. I need to speak with you.

Laren? Kira thought, and she wondered when Quark had developed the nerve to address the security chief by her given name.

Not now, Quark, Ro said, her eyes still moving about, studying the room. I'm on duty.

Laren, listen, he said, dropping the volume of his voice down to what Kira thought of as a conspiratorial level. The Ferengi drifted sideways, insinuating himself between Kira and Ro, his back to Kira. I need to know what's going on here.

Did you ever think that if we didn't tell you about it, Kira said over his shoulder, that it might not be any of your business?

Quark ignored Kira and continued talking to Ro. Please, he implored her. I need to know

I said not now, Ro told him, her tone firm. She stopped scanning the room and peered down at Quark.

The colonel is right this isn't your business.

Quark staggered back as though Ro had struck him. Kira jumped back, only narrowly avoiding him stepping on her feet. Ro looked up at Kira. Colonel, if everything's under control here, there are other security matters I need to tend to.

We're fine here, Kira said. Ro nodded, then quickly turned and left. Quark stared after her for a moment, then started for the doors. Kira stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. I believe you were about to serve more desserts, she said. Quark looked back at her, out of the corner of his eye, and then back at the closed doors. Kira wondered what had happened what Quark had probably done to cause him such anxiety with Ro. She would have to remember to ask the security chief about it later.

When Quark still did not move, Kira leaned in toward his ear. If you don't start serving again, she said, then I'm going to have to penalize your breach of contract by closing the bar down for a few days. She noticed that she did not smell the rancid cologne that he often wore.

Quark turned and looked her in the eyes. He muttered something under his breath and moved past her, headed for the food tables.

As Kira watched him go, she saw Akaar standing by himself. He had a drink in his hand, and he seemed to be observing the rest of the guests. Kira decided that the time and place were right for her to try to establish a rapprochement with the admiral. She strode over to him. Good evening, she said. I hope you're having a pleasant time.

Akaar regarded her in a manner to which she had become accustomed by now, with an aloofness that suggested judgment and suspicion. She chose not to react to it, instead simply continuing to smile and wait for his response. I am having a pleasant time, he said at last. Thank you for inquiring.

You're welcome, Kira said. I'm glad that you're enjoying the reception. She paused and debated what to say next, then plunged ahead. I hope that your time on the station continues to be productive, she said.

Akaar sighed, then leaned down toward Kira. I'll tell you something, Colonel, he said. I do not care at all for He glanced around the room. Cardassian architecture. However, I have so far been impressed with Bajoran hospitality.

As Akaar stood back up, Kira felt her mouth drop open in surprise at the echo of her own words to Ambassador Lent. She began to say something in an attempt to cover her surprise, but somebody called to Akaar from somewhere behind her. Akaar raised a hand and gestured, then looked back at Kira.

Excuse me, Colonel, he said, and walked away.

Kira turned and watched Akaar move across the room, over to Councillor zhThane. She thought about her comment just a little while ago to Ambassador Lent about Bajoran hospitality, and she wondered if Akaar had just tried to tell her something.

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In the full darkness of night, the soft flurry of white light stood out like a lone star in the void. The materialization sequence finished, and Prynn walked from Chaffee's aft section and over to the site. She shined her beacon down at the small section of decking she had transported away and then back. It had been reduced to a mass of disfigured metal.

Well, that's it then, she said. Throughout the day, she had managed to cobble together a working transporter, utilizing the parts of the primary system that had survived the crash, along with elements of the two backups. She had been running tests for the last hour, beaming objects in increments both toward the source of the pulse and in the opposite direction. She had ascertained now the effective ranges of the transporter in this environment one hundred seventy-five kilometers away from the pulse, but only seven kilometers toward it. Beaming in either direction would not help them much, if at all. Prynn returned to Chaffee's aft section and powered down the transporter, frustrated. She had struggled with the patchwork machinery all day, not just to get it functioning, but to increase its range. But the problem stemmed from the local effects of the energy produced at the source of the pulse, not from the equipment. Even if Prynn had access to a perfectly maintained transporter, nothing short of extremely powerful pattern enhancers would

Pattern enhancers, she thought. She raced into the shuttles rear compartment and pulled open the compartment doors in the port bulkhead. Several environmental suits sat within, all intact. Prynn took out two of the full-body suits, along with a pair of helmets. She could use an old test pilot's trick, she had realized, and reconfigure the suits to function as pattern enhancers. That might increase the transporter range significantly.

Prynn spent an hour working on the suits, another idea occurring to her as she did so. She had not quite completed the task she had set herself, though, before exhaustion took firm hold of her. Reluctant to stop, but knowing that she would accomplish nothing by pushing herself too far beyond her limits, she headed back to the encampment. She considered using a stimulant from the medkit, but decided that the best thing would be to get a few hours sleep and then resume her work.

As she walked, Prynn swung the beacon out along her path in wide arcs. There really was little need to light her way, she reflected, considering that the ground here lay so completely flat and featureless. She wondered about the land that Vaughn's journey had taken him across, and about how far he had gotten. Vaughn. To Prynn's aggravation, her thoughts had come back again and again to her father today, and not just with respect to the mission here. Her mind had continued conjuring up the image of him walking away from the camp yesterday, which in turn had inexplicably engendered feelings of abandonment in her. It made no sense. Vaughn's attempt to reach the source of the pulse on foot had been the proper command decision, and leaving her behind to work on the transporter and to tend to Shar had also been right. And still, she could not seem to reel in her thoughts and emotions. In her mind's eye, she repeatedly saw him deserting the camp.

Not deserting, she chastised herself. Departing. She found it strange and disconcerting that she should be fixated on something that she did not even believe to be true. But then, the pulse, this planet, the crew's experiences here—all of it had been nothing if not strange and disconcerting.

A memory from earlier today occurred to Prynn. While she had been working on the transporter, she had vividly recalled lying wounded on Defiant's bridge, back during the attack by the Jarada. Except that she could not have recalled such a thing; the explosion and the extent of her injuries had knocked her unconscious, and Dr. Bashir had explained to her how it would have been impossible for her brain to imprint and retain memories of the event. And yet today, she had remembered lying on her back beside the captain's chair, and remembered somebody touching her shoulder and midsection. That person would

have been Dr. Bashir, of course, who had treated her on the bridge except that she kept feeling somehow that it had been Vaughn there, and not the doctor. And the sense she had gotten from Vaughn had been one of intense guilt and sadness, and the memory or daydream, whichever it had been had left her temporarily feeling sorry for her father.

Prynn passed the shuttles forward section and headed for the camp. She slowed her pace, trying to be quiet so that she would not wake Shar. He had come to this afternoon, and had been sheepish and apologetic for his outburst this morning. She had waved the incident away, then checked his injuries and provided him what little care she could. He had at least been able to eat and drink, which she hoped would allow him to retain whatever strength he had right now.

Prynn put down the beacon, stripped off her jacket, and flopped down onto her bedroll. Fatigue affected her both physically she had spent a lot of effort digging through the shuttle wreckage and mentally the reconstitution of a working transporter had been far from a trivial matter. And she also supposed that she had been taxed emotionally, with the

Prynn? Shar's voice sounded very small in the night.

Im sorry, she said. Did I wake you?

Nowell, yes, actually, he said. Ive been lying here falling in and out of sleep, thinking and dreaming. Shar's voice, though low, sounded fairly strong. Prynn squinted through the darkness in his direction. She had not yet extinguished her beacon, and he was just visible in the fringes of its illumination. He lay on his back, his head turned toward her, and though she could not tell anything about his complexion in the dimness, his eyes appeared more alive than she had seen them in the last day and a half.

She reached over to where she had set the beacon down. Im going to turn the light out, she warned Shar. Would you leave it on? he asked. For a few minutes?

Oh, she said, surprised at the request. Sure. She pulled a blanket over her body.

Did you have any success with the transporter? Shar asked.

Yes, she said. I actually got it working, but because of the interference from the energy, the range is limited. She told him the distances to which she had successfully been able to beam objects. Ive started to reconfigure the environmental suits as pattern enhancers in order to address that, she continued. It should help, but Im not sure how much.

Youre trying to use the environmental suits as pattern enhancers? Shar asked. I didnt know you could do that.

Its not a common practice outside of flight testing, she explained. I also have another idea. Ill need your help with it, though.

What do you want me to do? Shar said.

The primary power cell for the shuttles internal systems was destroyed, she said. The backups intact, but its not working, either. Fortunately, the secondary backup is working, and thats what Im currently using to power the transporter.

All right, Shar said.

If we can get the primary backup cell to function, she went on, then I think I might be able to construct another working transporter out of whats left of the primary, its backups, and the environmental suits.

If one transporter wont help us, Shar asked, then what good will a second one be?

We can beam ourselves and the second transporter and power cell, she explained, and then use the second system to beam the first one to our new location. Then we can keep doing that, sort of skipping across the planet until we reach the far side, where there are breaks in the cloud cover.

Shar seemed to think about that for a moment Prynn wondered whether he might have drifted back to sleep and then he said, That could work. Even though his voice remained quiet, Prynn thought she heard some excitement in it.

I think so too, she said. But the problem is that primary backup cell. I can fix it, but its going to take me a while to finish modifying the suits and piecing together a second transporter. I wont have time.

I can do that, Shar said. If you tell me how to reconfigure the environmental suits, I can help with that too.

Good, she said. Well start on it first thing in the morning.

Shar said nothing more, and the silence of this empty world pushed in on them. After a few minutes, Prynn reached out from beneath her blanket and switched off the beacon. The darkness descended at once, nearly suffocating in its completeness. Prynn closed her eyes, anxious for sleep to welcome her into its fold. To her surprise, though, she was still awake fifteen minutes later when Shar spoke.

I wonder how Commander Vaughn is doing, he said.

I dont know, Prynn responded, and she heard a coldness in her voice she had not intended. I dont know, she said again, holding her tone level.

Whatever happened between you and your father, Shar said, Im sorry. I know what its like to be at odds with a parent.

Prynn laughed, a loud, ugly sound that she regretted at once. It seemed as though the tension of their circumstances had caused her to lose the full control of her emotions. Im sorry, Shar, she said. I didnt really mean to laugh.

Its all right. Im sorry that I said anything.

No, Prynn told him, not wanting him to feel bad. Its just you dont know what my father did to me. Did to me? Prynn asked herself. She must have been tired to have misspoken like that. I mean, what he did to my mother, she amended.

Youre right, Shar said. I dont know. He said nothing else, neither inviting her to say more, nor stopping her from doing so. Prynn did not like talking about this, but then after tomorrow, she might never have a chance to talk about it again.

My mother was a Starfleet officer, she said. She and my father worked together a lot before I was born, but then Mom decided that shed had enough of a soldiers life. Prynn felt pressure behind her eyes, and the gentle sensation of tears forming. Still, she found herself wanting to go on. She wanted children, but Vaughn Vaughn could never let go of the job, even after I was born. We could never really be the family Mom wanted, but she and Vaughn never fell out of love. She could see her mother in her memory her mother and Vaughn. Tears spilled from her eyes now, sliding coolly down the sides of her face. I loved them both. I missed Vaughn so much when he was away, and loved it when he came home. I always wanted to be closer to him. Thats why She stopped, stunned at the words she had been about to say. The revelation had come to her simply and powerfully. Thats why I joined Starfleet, she finished. I just wanted to share more of his life.

When Prynn paused, Shar said, Thats nice, that you wanted be with your father that much. But I guess something happened.

My mother ended up on a mission with my father again, she said. He ordered her away team to Prynn wiped a hand across her eyes, trying to dry her tears, but smearing them across her face instead. She had not spoken about this had not thought about it like this in such a long time. It was still hard. The away team never returned. Vaughn knew the danger, but he made the decision to send them anyway.

Was it the wrong decision? Shar asked.

The question astounded Prynn. Was it the wrong decision? It had resulted in the death of her mother; how could it be anything but wrong?

I mean are you angry with your father because you were almost killed when the Jarada attacked us at Torona IV? Shar asked.

No, of course not, Prynn answered immediately. That wasnt his fault.

On his order, Shar said, we didnt defend ourselves.

Because if we had, it would have put a hundred thousand Europani in danger. The Jarada would have attacked the convoy.

Thats right, Shar said. So maybe there was also a good reason for the order he gave your mothers away team.

No, Prynn thought. No reason could justify the death of her mother. But what she heard herself tell Shar was, I dont know. And she realized that she had never known. Vaughn had never talked about his decision to dispatch the away team. He had always simply taken the responsibility for her mothers death and she had always let him take it. I dont know, she said again, wondering for the first time whether Vaughns guilt had been because he had given the wrong order, or because he had given the right one.

Good night, Shar, she said, unable to talk about any of this anymore right now.

Good night, he said, and she was grateful that he did not choose to pursue the conversation further.

She had been seventeen when her mother had died, and she had been devastated. They had been not just mother and daughter, but the best of friends. Prynn remembered so vividly when Vaughn had told her the horrible words, the look of pain and guilt on his face, and her tears, flowing as though they would never stop

How could it have been the right decision? she asked herself. If her father had to give the order again, would he? Prynn had never asked him that, had never thought to ask him. And seven years ago, there had not been an opportunity to ask such a question anyway. Mom had died, and her father her father had been there with her for a while, but she had never been able to approach him; the enormity of his guilt and the depth of her anger had been obstacles too great to overcome. After he had told her, they had never really spoken of it again, other than her blaming him, and him saying how sorry he was. He had abandoned her

Abandoned?

Once more, Prynn saw in her mind the figure of Vaughn walking away from the camp. For a day and a half now, the image had refused to leave her. Do I hate him because he was responsible for Mom's death, she asked herself, or because he wasn't really there to help me through that terrible time? Although it was not a question that she had ever asked before, she had been sure of the answer to it for the past seven years. Until today. Until right now.

Prynn wondered if her father knew the answer, and she resolved to ask him to talk to him about it.

If I ever see him again.

A tremendous sense of sadness and loss engulfed her. And as she fell asleep, all Prynn could think about was how much she missed her father.

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Kasidy strolled down one of the cobbled lanes that led from the local transporter facility. The night had remained as balmy as the afternoon, an agreeable change from the first few days of the winter. Only a week ago, she had been peering out the front windows on a landscape frosted white by snow. And according to the Bajoran comnet, the weather forecasters were predicting another winter storm just a couple of days from now. All of which had helped her choose to take this opportunity to get out of the house, enjoy a change of scenery, and take in some fresh air.

Yellowish flickers of light danced along the cobblestones, thrown by the traditional oil lamps hanging from poles along the lane. Kasidy ambled along, not rushing despite the lateness of the hour. She knew that the shops would be closing shortly, but hurrying would have defeated her desire for a relaxing walk. She would stop in whichever of the shops she could, and then come back some other time to see the rest.

Except that's not really the whole story, is it, Kas? she asked herself. She had been thinking about coming into town for a week now, ever since Prylar Eivos had called on her. The warmth of the man, his amiable demeanor and genuine thoughtfulness, the ease and humility of his faith, all had reminded her of how Ben had always spoken of the Bajorans. Working with the Commerce Ministry here, before she had become the wife of the Emissary, she had certainly met some nice people, but few who had inspired her to view Bajorans in quite the way Ben had. But, already determined to see out her pregnancy here because that had been what she and Ben had planned, she had now resolved to try to see in these people all that he had seen. Even so, she understood that she had not chosen to visit Adarak at this time of night by accident. Despite her optimism after seeing Eivos, she still had difficulty dealing with her prominence among the Bajoran people.

As Kasidy neared the main avenue of shops, she felt herself tensing. She had already been recognized during the few minutes she had been in town, and she worried that, even this late in the day, she would be faced with the misplaced veneration of strangers. Back at the transporter facility, the young man operating the pad had stared wide-eyed at her as she had stepped down from the platform. The attention and awe had made her uncomfortable, although she had to admit that the young man had recovered

quickly. He had welcomed her to Adarak, and then offered to direct her to her destination or answer any questions she might have. She had thanked him, but declined his assistance. She had been to the town before though not since she had first moved to Bajorand she knew where she wanted to go.

Kasidy reached the avenue, which intersected the lane at a right angle. She stopped and peered both ways down the wide pedestrian thoroughfare. The old-fashioned oil lamps lined both sides of the way here too, and large trees marched down the center. The yellow lamplight wavered across the leaves, making them appear to move, as though blown by a breeze. At random, Kasidy opted to turn to her left. The first couple of shops she passed had already closed for the night, though their storefronts remained lighted. Kasidy only glanced at the wares displayed as she walked by, thinking that she would window-shop on her way back. The next shop was open, though, and she stopped to look inside. A pair of paintings stood on easels at either end of the front window, with several interesting bronzes and other sculptures on pedestals between them.

As she gazed at the artwork, the door of the shop opened. A tall Bajoran man emerged carrying a bag in his arms, probably containing something he had just purchased. While the man held the door open for a woman following him out, he looked over and saw Kasidy. Pleasant evening, he said with a smile. To her surprise, she saw no hint that he knew her identity.

Not quite as renowned as you thought, she joked to herself. A pleasant evening to you, she said to the man. His companion, also a Bajoran, stepped past him and out of the shop. The woman nodded and smiled at Kasidy, then did a rapid double take, obviously recognizing her.

Excuse me, the woman murmured, quickly looking away, apparently abashed by her own reaction. The woman linked her arm with the mans and guided him down the avenue.

Now, thats more like it, Kasidy thought, chuckling. She entered the shop, still amazed that she could cause such a response in people, but not feeling quite as tense now as she had just a few minutes ago. After all, the woman had been embarrassed at her blatantly visible recognition of the wife of the Emissary. After Kasidys experiences with so many well-meaning Bajorans appearing on her doorstep when she had first moved to Kendra Province, perhaps the locals had decided not only to protect her from such attention, but to make sure that they did nothing themselves to discomfit her.

Inside the well-lighted shop, paintings lined the walls, and sculptures sat displayed atop narrow tables in the middle of the room. Now, youre out late, dearie, arentcha? came a loud, friendly voice. Kasidy looked around and saw a Bajoran woman, older and a bit stocky, waving to her from the rear of the shop.

Its a nice night for it, isnt it? Kasidy said. She walked over to the first table, on which stood two bronzes. Both were tall, each about half a meter high.

That it is, dearie, that it is, the woman agreed. Its gonna be a cold winter, so Ill enjoy as many of these days as we can get.

Me too, Kasidy said, tickled by the womans gregarious nature. Is this your gallery?

That it is, the woman said again.

Kasidy moved around the table, studying the sculptures. One depicted a robed Bajoran woman in mid-stride, her hands oddly crossed in front of her waist; the other showed a bare-chested Bajoran man leaning forward, struggling to haul something unseen, by ropes he held over his shoulders. Kasidy appreciated the technique of the two pieces, which seemed rough and kinetic, and yet also somehow graceful.

The robed woman, Kasidy decided, did not really appeal to her, although it took her a moment to determine why despite being completely different in composition and material, the work reminded her too much of the jevonite figurine that Eivos had given her. While she remained grateful for the pry-lars thoughtfulness, the statuettes tie to Bhala had come to bother her. She had not yet taken it down from the mantel in the front room, but she had begun to consider doing so. If City of Bhala had not been Bens favorite print, she would have thought about taking it down as well.

Those are by Flanner Posh, the shopkeeper called. Only twenty-six years old. Lost his father in one of the camps.

Kasidy glanced over at the woman and nodded, not really sure of the significance of the comments. Im

sorry to hear that, she offered.

Were all sorry, the woman said, though without any animosity. I just mention it cause what happens to a person informs their art. Kasidy nodded again, not really paying much attention, but when she looked back at the sculptures, a story unfolded in her mind. The man the artists father worked to death by the Cardassians during the Occupation, made to plow fields in the high heat of summer; the woman, a cleric of some sort, also imprisoned in the camp, and somehow a source of strength for the boy the future artist allowing him to make it through. She had no idea whether any of that was even close to the truth, but the artwork had that quickly taken on new weight, new meaning, for her.

Kasidy roamed deeper into the gallery, peering at the paintings and the other sculptures, and occasionally exchanging remarks with the shopkeeper. Quite a few different artists were represented here, and Kasidy found that she really liked the work of several of them. As she reached the rear of the gallery, she asked the woman, Did you do any of these?

Oh, my good word, no, the woman said. My contribution to the world of art isnt as a sculptor or a painter; its as a critic.

Kasidy laughed. Me too, she said. I cant draw a blade of grass.

But you know a good picture of one when you see it, dontcha?

That I do, dearie, Kasidy said, good-naturedly mimicking the womans way of speaking.

To Kasidys delight, the woman threw her head back and laughed heartily. Ah, youre a kidder, darlin, she said. I like that.

Good, Kasidy said, unable to keep from smiling. Maybe youll give me a good deal on this painting then. She gestured to her left, at a pointillist landscape.

Everybody gets the same deal, dearie, the woman told her, but theyre all good ones.

Im sure they are, Kasidy said. Actually, this piece its not quite right for me, but I love the style.

Thats Galoren Sens work, the woman said. Really maturin these days. I like that one myself. Course, I like em all, otherwise they wouldnt be hangin in my gallery.

Will you be getting in any more of his work? Kasidy wanted to know.

Well, lemme see Senll probably bring me more of his workoh, in about two months, maybe three.

All right, Kasidy said. Ill be sure to come back then.

I hope Ill see you sooner than that, the woman said. I do have a pretty good turnover.

All right, Kasidy said. Ill be back sooner. And she meant it. This woman had put her at such ease. Even though people had recognized Kasidy tonight, the man leaving the gallery had not, and now neither had this shopkeeper. Plus, now that she thought about it, the two who had recognized her had treated her with common courtesy, but not with reverence; they had even seemed to try to avoid being reverential. Maybe the people of Adarak would allow Kasidy maybe she would allow herself to look beyond the place the Bajorans claimed for her in their culture. Somehow, in just a few minutes, this loud, genuine woman had brought Kasidy a lovely sense of calmness and acceptance. You have a very pleasant evening, she told the woman. Then she thought to ask, By the way, whats your name?

Im Rozahn Kather, she said. But everybody calls me Kit.

Well its very nice to meet you, Kit. Im Kasidy.

Of course you are, dearie, Kit said, and she winked. Kasidy felt her own eyes widen as she realized that this woman had known who she was all along. She also felt sure that Kit had treated her no differently than she treated anybody else.

Kasidy left the gallery feeling more comfortable here on Bajor than she had since moving here. When two women passed her on the avenue, she offered them a big smile. Pleasant evening, she said. The women returned both the smile and the greeting.

Bajor still did not feel like home to Kasidy, but she suddenly thought she could see a time when it would.

55

Vaughn awoke to the sound of fire.

Earlier, after he had sighted the complex surrounding the source of the pulse, he had descended the hill

and walked the final kilometers to the outer walls of the buildings. The veil of night had dropped by then, and considering his exhaustion, he had decided to make camp and get some sleep. He would make his push into the buildings once he had rested and regained some of his strength.

Before laying out his bedroll, Vaughn had paced along the outside of the complex, searching for a way in. He had not needed to search long. The first door he had come to had been not only unlocked, but wide open. Beneath the light of his beacon, the yawning entrywaylike so many things on this planet had projected an air of abandonment.

Now, where he was camped, a hundred or so meters away from the complex, the crackle of flames reached his ears, not from the buildings, but from nearby. He floated slowly up out of sleep at first, until the incongruity of the sound brought him fully awake. In the instant before he opened his eyes, he perceived the fluttering light on his closed lids, and felt inconsistent waves of heat breathing across his face.

Recalling that his phaser had been lost, Vaughn did not move as he opened his eyes, wanting to assay the situation before betraying that he was no longer asleep. The small fire grew from within a circular bed of stones, he saw, a couple of meters in front of him. Vaughn waited a moment, looking and listening for anything that might help orient him to whatever new circumstances he now faced. He remembered clearly his mission to stop the pulse, his location on this planet, what he had been through today

Through the flames, movement caught his eye, just on the other side of the stone circle. Unable to tell what had caused it, he listened for any other sounds beside those of the fire. The movement came again. And that's Rigel, a voice said, the seemingly ordinary nature of the words and tone striking in the current context. Vaughn sat up on his bedroll and peered over the flames. A woman sat there, her knees pulled up against her chest, her head back as she gazed at the stars. She had dark hair that fell to the middle of her back, a bit wild despite being tied just below her neck. She looked to be in her thirties and even younger when the wavering firelight sent an orange-yellow glow across her features although Vaughn knew that she was older than that. He stared at her, and she looked away from the heavens and over at him. Do you remember what you learned about Rigel, Elias? she asked.

Vaughn recited the stars mass, absolute magnitude, and spectral type before he even realized that he had spoken.

That's right, the woman said, offering him an encouraging half-smile. It's also one of the most populated systems in the quadrant. Do you know how many planets orbit Rigel?

This time, Vaughn did not answer. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the ersatz nature of the woman, of the fire, of the moment. He envisioned the clouds whirling down and reconstructing this scene, manufacturing everything before him out of the dust of this lonely world. This isn't Berengaria VII, he told himself, any more than this woman is my mother.

But somehow it did not matter. Vaughn had lived much of his life in control, but today he had been unable to elude the sentiments of his past. More must be happening here, he believed, than just the re-creation of incidents from his life; he had become too sympathetic to feelings of loss and abandonment. Even now, as he attempted to reason his way through this, the moment that had been remade around him pulled at his heart.

Vaughn opened his eyes and said, Twelve, identifying the number of planets in the Rigel system. He peered around, trying to see more of his surroundings, but the illumination of the fire did not penetrate very far into the darkness. It doesn't matter, Vaughn thought again. This isn't the planet where I was raised. This isn't my mother.

Except that she looked and sounded so much like her. That's right, twelve, she said, and there was that half-smile of hers again. Vaughn smiled back. He loved these times. His mother spent so much time out in the wilderness with her work, but only occasionally did they do this, heading out to sit by a fire and stare up at the stars.

Vaughn raised his eyes and peered up at the brilliant pinpoints of light that dotted the night. He wondered only briefly how the sea of clouds could have reproduced such an effect, when in reality it perpetually separated the surface of this abandoned world from the rest of the universe. He found Rigel, and shrugged off the fact that the star should not have even been visible from the Gamma Quadrant. He

looked back over at his mother, and his heart filled with his love for her. They'd been so close. Genuine or not, he felt grateful for this time, an unexpected gift.

Elias, I need to talk with you about something.

Oh no, he thought, feeling a terrible jolt, as though he had fallen in frigid water. No. Not this night. Of all nights, not this one. And he told her that No, Ma. I don't want to talk. I just want to look at the stars with you.

Elias

No. Vaughn threw off his blanket and stood up. Tell me tomorrow, he said, knowing that, in so many ways, there would be no tomorrow.

The flames, beginning to sputter now, lighted her eyes. She sat with her hands clasped in front of her shins, hugging her knees. She regarded him with an expression of love and compassion, and he thought that she would allow him the reprieve for which he had asked. Then she said, I have Burkhardt's disease. Vaughn said nothing. He had a sudden urge to throw himself on the fire, and thought, That's new. He did not remember wanting to immolate himself as a boy. The past had come alive for him, but with the burden of the subsequent years also alive in his mind and heart, this moment had actually worsened. Ma, please don't, he pleaded.

I was diagnosed this week, she said softly, the expression on her face one of empathy. She seemed concerned less with the content of her words than with their effect on Vaughn. It's a progressive

No, Vaughn yelled, feeling like a boy trying to make something true by wishing it so. No, he said again, unwilling not only to accept the reality of this moment now, but to have accepted it all those years ago. He turned and walked into the darkness, beyond the reach of the firelight.

Elias, he heard his mother call after him. He did not answer. He kept walking, allowing the empty blackness of this place to close around him. Elias, she called again, but he did not hear her follow. He could not remember he had never been able to remember exactly what had happened when she had first told him this. Had he bolted like this? Had she come after him?

Now he walked on, the sensation of moving in the consuming darkness strange and unsettling. His mother did not call again, and no footsteps approached behind him. She had obviously decided to leave him alone.

Just as she left me all those years ago, he thought. Alone.

Vaughn stumbled and fell forward. His hands scraped against the ground as he went down. He lay like that for a long time, prone, palms flat against the ground, elbows up at his sides. Finally, he rolled over onto his back and stared up at the sky.

There were no stars. He could not even see the clouds for the lack of light. What he did see in his mind was his mother's face, called up from memories not just minutes old, but decades.

She left me alone, he thought again, ancient anger and frustration and sadness accompanying the memories. And then came this thought No wonder Prynne hates me.

Vaughn laughed in the night, more a bark than anything having to do with humor. Somehow, he had never made the connection, although it must have implicitly buttressed the guilt he had felt for the last seven years. Just as his mother had been taken from him, he had taken Ruriko from Prynne. In his daughter's life, he had been no better than a disease.

All those successful missions, he thought, and yet, when she needed me most, I failed my own daughter. I left her alone.

He remembered looking into Prynne's eyes a day and a half ago the white of one made crimson by injury and then turning and walking away from her. He had not looked back, and now he wished that he had. It seemed impossible, but he had somehow left her alone again. ChThane had been at the camp, of course, but Vaughn had left Prynne with no mother, no father

No father? he asked himself. He was her father. Her mother had been gone for seven years now, but he had not left her.

Or had he? Vaughn had been honest with Prynne about what had happened, about his role in Ruriko's death. He had never even considered not telling her. Prynne had been furious with him, and reasonably so, and from then on their relationship had been defined by the depth of her anger and the enormity of his

guilt. They had never really spoken of it again, other than him saying how sorry he was, and her blaming him. He had sought to

To leave her alone. This time, the thought hit him like a club to the back of the head. He had taken her mother from her, that much had always been clear, but now he realized that he had also taken her father from her. Because of his guilt and Prynns anger, he had essentially removed himself from her life, because that was what she had wanted although not, he saw now, what she had needed. And perhaps that had also been the path of least resistance for him, and an opportunity to practice penance. He had always thought that Prynns had a justifiable reason to hate him, but now he also saw that she had another, because he had not really been there to help her through that terrible time.

Vaughn clamped his hands over his face, then let his arms flop onto the ground on either side of him. He had failed Prynns as a father when she had most needed him, and the thought of abandoning her again permanently, and leaving her truly alone crushed him. He could not let that happen. He could not. So thinking, he fell into a restless sleep, filled with dreams of his past, and dreams that were somehow not his own.

56

Kira shrugged out of her dress jacket, pleased to finally be free of the ill-fitting garment. During her years on Deep Space 9, she had often thought to have the jacket altered so that it would sit comfortably on her body, but the idea of Garak touching her clothing had prevented her from ever doing so. Now that the erstwhile tailor had returned to Cardassia, though, a Bajoran seamstress Hatram something, she thought had opened a shop on the Promenade. Hatram had even had the good sense to move into a different space than Garaks old shop, which nobody seemed to want to rent. Anyway, Ill have to bring it in, she told herself, knowing that she never would. That Garak had owned the tailors shop had only been an excuse; Kira tended to avoid minutiae such as this, and her life experience had certainly provided her the ability to withstand a little discomfort.

Besides, she thought, tossing the jacket on her bed, I may never have to wear this again. If Bajor joined the Federation, then she would be wearing formal Starfleet attire for occasions such as today. Of course, there was no guarantee that Starfleets dress uniforms would be any more comfortable than those of the Militia.

Kira sat down on the bed and slipped out of her pants. As she dropped them on top of the jacket, she smiled, realizing that she had made a significant decision without even thinking about it. Bajoran membership in the Federation, she knew, would mean that the Militia would roll up into Starfleet. But even with the summit beginning tomorrow, Kira had not really thought about that in terms of her own career although she had considered the implications for Ro, after Akaar had revealed his disapproval of her. Kira supposed that if she had thought about it, she would have made her choice quickly anyway. As much as she had come to like her position as DS9s first officer, her half-year as the stations commander had proven even more fulfilling. No matter what Vedek Yevir might maintain, Kira believed that she had served Bajor well. She wanted to keep doing so, and it really did not matter to her whether she did so as a member of the militia or as a member of Starfleet; in the last weeks of the war, Admiral Ross and Captain Sisko had commissioned her as a Starfleet commander, and her uniform had fit perfectly well. Kira stripped off her remaining clothes and pulled on a thigh-length, gold lam robe, the fabric cool and silky against her skin. She headed out into the living area. It had been a long and tiring day when were her days anything but? and she sought a measure of tranquillity.

At the small shrine she kept, Kira lighted a candle and then sat down on the floor, folding her legs together and resting her wrists on her knees, palms facing upward. For a few minutes, she concentrated on the candles flame, letting its gentle, wavering movement mesmerize her. Then she closed her eyes and tried to empty her mind of thoughts. In place of the flame, she visualized the blue-white pinwheel of light that decorated space when the Celestial Temple opened, attempting to lose herself within its depths. By degrees, the tension in her body and mind melted away, like a morning frost succumbing to the rising sun. Thank the Prophets they didnt take this away from me, she thought. In truth, they Vedek Yevir and the

others who had chosen to Attain her could not have taken this away. Even had Kira tried to accommodate such a penalty, it would likely have been impossible for her. She spoke to the Prophets too often virtually every day and not even in such a structured way as this. Simply walking through the normal course of her life, she maintained a dialogue with the Bajoran gods. It had been her way for as long as she could remember, and it had seen her through many dark times. It was one thing for the Vedek Assembly to forbid her to pray with other Bajorans or to read the sacred texts, and something else entirely for them to try to control her heart.

Of course, Kira still missed temple services, as well as studying the hallowed works. She had read the ancient texts so many times that she could almost recite them. Maybe more than almost, she thought but there was something special about holding the books in her hands and actually seeing the words. Again she felt that critical times lay immediately ahead for her people. It troubled her that Akaar might have a say in that, and what he had said earlier in the evening recurred to her. He had spoken of Bajoran hospitality, in a way that she had found difficult to decipher. He had repeated what she had said to Ambassador Lent, but that could easily have been a coincidence. But coincidence or not, he could have intended the words as a compliment or as sarcasm; his inscrutable demeanor allowed for either possibility.

Kira recalled all of the questions the admiral had asked her with respect to Bajor's relationship with Cardassia, and about Bajor in general; she also remembered the discomfort she had felt in answering those questions, and her resistance to his apparent desire to measure the Bajoran people through her. Nobody but Shakaar could speak for Bajor unless the First Minister himself authorized it; according to Kasidy and her friend Prylar Eivos, even the Vedek Assembly seemed on the verge of schism, though Kira had heard nothing more about that in the last week. With Federation membership at stake, though, she knew that Bajoran unity would be more important than ever.

Kira opened her eyes. Her focus drifting, she stared once more at the flame of the candle. She let the minutes pass as she strived to abandon her thoughts, seeking the calmness of her faith. The Prophets would watch over Bajor, she knew. She closed her eyes and saw the face of Gul Macet. Despite the DNA records provided by Cardassia, Macet still made Kira uneasy. Dukat had played that game too many times, claiming to be something he was not. That face Dukat had haunted her dreams for so many years, and to see those same features now on Macet Kira's eyes opened again. So much for meditation, she thought. She slapped her hands on her thighs, frustrated, then leaned forward on her knees and blew out the candle.

I have to let all of this go, she told herself. All of these things that I can't change. She could only command Deep Space 9, she could only be true to her faith, and she could only deal with Macet as circumstances warranted.

Kira sighed, then stood up. All she wanted right this moment was to follow the path on which the Prophets had set her. She had weathered the last few months—the months since she had been Attained—relatively well, she thought, but every now and then she lost her way a bit. Although she maintained her faith, and practiced her solitary rituals and prayers, she felt sometimes as though she had been not separated, but distanced, from the Prophets.

And now right now she could not even seem to meditate.

She wandered over to the window and gazed out at the location in space she knew the Celestial Temple to be. She wished it would reveal itself. As many times as Kira had seen the sight, it never failed to thrill her in a profound way.

Now, though, only the distant stars and the emptiness of space between them stared back at her. And suddenly an idea occurred to Kira, an idea born of her faith, and of her need to feel close to the Prophets.

Kira to ops, she said, raising her voice a touch.

Ops, Selzner here, Colonel, came the reply.

Ensign, at what time is the Rio Grande scheduled to finish maintenance on the subspace relay tonight?

Kira wanted to know. She walked over to the console and checked the current time on the chronometer.

Let me check, Selzner said. A moment later, Selzner read off the schedule. The runabout would be returning through the wormhole in less than thirty minutes.

Kira smiled.

As she headed back into her bedroom to don her uniform her duty uniforms she told the ensign what she intended to do, although not why.

Kira notified ops, checked her equipment a second time, then bent and pulled open the access plate. One end of the plate swung upward, revealing the control panel beneath. Kira keyed in the activation sequence, then grabbed the handle there and twisted it ninety degrees left. Her weight quickly vanished as the local gravitational mat detuned, causing a momentary flutter in her stomach. At once, the pad she stood on began to rise. She flipped the access plate closed, stood back up, and waited.

Slowly but steadily, the launch bay slipped away. Kira peered over at the bow of Euphrates, watching it until disappeared from sight. The pad stopped, and she felt a jolt as it locked into place, level with the stations outer hull. She looked forward and saw the arc of the habitat ring sweeping away before her. The Promenade and ops rose to her left, and above, Gryphon sat moored to the station at the top of a docking pylon.

Kira turned to her right and gazed out past the docking ring. Her magnetic boots made heavy, metallic thuds against the runabout pad as she moved, the sounds traveling through her environmental suit. Unlike a few weeks ago, the space around DS9 contained no free-floating vessels; the two small ships that had delivered the Alonis and Trill delegations sat along the docking ring, as did Ambassador zhThanes ship, and the shuttle that had brought Shakaar and his staff had already departed for the return trip to Bajor. From her vantage outside the station, Kira noticed that the stars appeared brighter and sharper than when viewed from within DS9. She studied the stars, picking out constellations and orienting herself so that she faced the location of the wormhole directly. After that, she did not have to wait long. Within minutes, the Celestial Temple spiraled into existence, vibrant blue light topping a brilliant white background, with traces of purple moving inside. A sensation of warmth flooded over Kira, and a connection seemed to form, reaching from her small, insignificant body out to the majestic whirlpool of light swirling before her and reaching back in the opposite direction as well. Kira felt unconditional love and acceptance, for the Prophets and from Them. Her vision blurred, tears pooling in her eyes, as the threshold of heaven began its normal collapse. In a second, the magnificent, churning light had compressed to a point; a flash, and then it had gone completely.

That quickly, Kira had gotten what she had come for. Still, she stood like that, motionless and looking out into space, for a long time. Finally, she went back inside the station.

57

Dax drifted floated, swam, pushed knowing that Ezri remained in danger. But they had chosen as one this course of action, and Dax would do everything possible to see that they survived this experience as one. They had a mission, though, and that truth came first right now.

Dax pushed through

Not the pools this time. Not the Caves of Makala.

Dax pushed through a sea of clouds. A vast sea, reaching not just from pole to pole, but from world to world, and from star to star. Except that there were no worlds, and there were no stars. And yet the sea filled the universe

And beyond.

The sense of that came to Dax somehow, and Dax knew. Knew that communication had come, from somewhere, from something. Dax sent out tendrils of thought, seeking to find the link, to enhance it. But only silence returned.

No, not only silence.

Something like a vibration hummed through the universe, electrified the setting. It pealed like a sound almost beyond hearing, glowed like a color almost beyond seeing. Something was there. Something was

every where.

Dax attempted to communicate, calling to whatever lived out there. Called and waited, but received no response. Tried again and again, in all the ways Dax knew. Still nothing came back.

Time passed without meaning. Seconds might have been seconds, but they might also have been lifetimes, or any interval in between. Or perhaps time did not pass at all.

Dax struggled to exchange thoughts with the inhabitants of what? Of another universe, Dax understood. But the tenuous connection seemed as though it might not have been an actual connection, seemed as though it might have been nothing more than a figment. Dax rested, and waited, listening to the near-silence, but haunted by the voices that faintly disrupted the quiet.

Voices?

Yes, Dax realized. Voices. Dax listened. Strained to listen, and found not only voices, but the beings behind them. The sounds became ideas, and Dax tried to discern perceptions and thoughts. At last, they came, and when they did, they surprised.

Elias Vaughn lay on the ground, arms at his sides, eyes closed. He could have been asleep or unconscious or dead. Dax understood that the beings had perceived the commander like this, doubtless down on the planet's surface, obviously sometime within the last couple of days.

Dax strived to delve past the image of Vaughn, to contact the beings that had seen him. But communication continued to prove impossible. For Dax, access came for ideas and echoes, but not for a direct link to the minds behind them. Dax could vaguely perceive the beings, but could not apparently be perceived by them.

And so Dax searched the ideas, seeking to understand the intentions of the beings. None were revealed.

Dax stumbled mentally, weakening, finding it difficult to maintain the drive to penetrate this alien society.

But Dax battled on, turning to the echoes

Memories, Dax suddenly realized. The echoes are memories.

Dax dove down, pushing into the echoes, watching, listening, perceiving. A wall rose up, infinite and impenetrable, but on this side of the wall, Dax saw this had all begun with the invaders with the saviors with the Prentara.

The Prentara had once populated the world around which the sea of clouds now circled. They had discovered the other realm, and had been astonished by it. Sights and sounds, scents and tastes, sensations and emotions, all had followed with the Prentara, carried along by technology, and all had been magnified. An avalanche of emotive and perceptual experience spread across a universe in which none of this had previously been known. A battle to push outward from the strange realm ensued, and the Prentara fought for their lives.

Just as Ezri fought for hers right now, Dax realized.

The symbiont swooped down into the echoes, hunting for memories and collecting them up. Somewhere, images of Pryn and Shar down on the planet appeared. Representations of Vaughn also arose, although they seemed confused. Vaughn at an ancient launch facility, on a battlefield, on a ship with dead Bajorans and Cardassians. There were the Prentara too, wired in to their machines, wired in to the other universe. And then Dax pulled back. Drifted upward, floating, swimming, pushing. Again, it was time to find Ezri.

Lieutenant Bowers waited patiently for her to begin, as did Julian. Ezri lay propped up on the diagnostic bed, a glass of water raised to her lips. She sipped, finding the act of drinking both refreshing and strangely foreign, as though she had never done it before. Now a consequence, she knew, of Dax's exposure to the other universe.

Ezri handed the glass to Nurse Juarez, who stood beside her. Julian and Lieutenant Bowers waited just past the foot of her bed, and somewhere, Nurse Richter also worked in the medical bay. Ezri took a long, deep breath, gathering herself for the coming conversation. She had reintegrated enough with Dax to have assimilated the symbiont's experiences, but interpreting the images the echoes had taken some time. Even now, not everything Dax had perceived had bowed to reasonable analysis. Still, she thought that she understood enough that Bowers and the crew had to be told.

As had been the case after her first contact with the object, Julian had wanted her to rest immediately

after she had regained consciousness. Again she had insisted on remaining awake, and this time, on speaking herself with Lieutenant Bowers. Julian had relented at once, accepting her claim that she had vital information to impart.

I saw I experienced another universe, she began. She looked to her left, to where she had brought her hand down into the dark gray substance, but both it and the stand on which it had sat had been removed. Could you explain that? Bowers asked. Ezri looked at him, then raised her hand to her forehead and rubbed at her temple.

Are you all right? Julian asked. He moved toward her along the side of the bed, glancing up at the diagnostic panel.

Im okay, Ezri said, dropping her hand back onto the bed. Its just that theres so much in my head right now I need to find a coherent way to tell this.

Take your time, Bowers said. But of course they all knew that time weighed heavily on them right now. As far as they could tell, they were less than a day away from the next pulse.

Some time ago, Ezri started again, sorting out her narrative, a humanoid race lived on this planet. That was not new information; the crew had been able to draw the same conclusion from the readings of cities that the probe had returned to Defiant. They called themselves the Prentara, and they developed a sophisticated virtual-reality technology.

Virtual reality? Juarez said. Like holosuites?

No, not like that, Ezri said. They tied powerful computers directly into peoples minds.

Julian raised his eyebrows. That can be very addictive, he stated. Very addictive, and very dangerous.

I dont know about that, Ezri said. But I do know that, sometime later, Prentara scientists discovered this other existence, a pocket universe outside our own that that it was. She grew agitated as she struggled to express the concepts in her mind.

Easy, Julian said, resting a hand on her upper arm. Easy. She looked up at him, and he offered her an effortless smile. His obvious support meant a lot to her.

Im all right, she told him, and she put her hand atop his. This other existence that the Prentara found, it was a universe of the mind the very fabric of it supported and nurtured and augmented mental activity.

The scientists who discovered it reported amazingly profound experiences.

Like a mind-altering drug, Julian suggested.

Yes, like that, I think, Ezri agreed, but far more powerful. They called the other universe the thoughtscape.

Let me guess. They used it to enhance their VR technology, Bowers said.

Ezri nodded. They wired their virtual-reality equipment into the interface they had opened between this universe and the thoughtscape. It enhanced their experiences beyond their imaginations, and it worked for them for years. But then something happened. She paused, still coming to understand the horror in what she had learned. They found out, she went on, that the thoughtscape was alive.

They all looked at her without saying anything. Even Nurse Richter, across the room, stopped whatever she had been doing and peered in Ezris direction. The sudden silencing of their voices left the medical bay throbbing with the beat of Ezris diagnostic scanner. Finally, Julian spoke.

Did the Prentara know? he asked. The expression of revulsion on his face reflected Ezris emotions. The notion of somebody forcibly tapping into another mind, using that mind it was rape of the lowest order.

Did they stop?

They did stop, Ezri said, actually relieved about that part of the story. But I dont know if they ever knew that the thoughtscape was composed of living beings.

Then why did they stop using it using them? Juarez asked.

They stopped when the first pulse emerged from the interface, Ezri explained. The force of it thrust outward, leaving the planet intact, but weve seen what the pulses have done to the rest of this solar system.

And to the Vahnis system, Bowers added.

The Prentara tried to close the interface, but the pulse had widened it considerably and they couldnt do it,

Ezri went on. A substance also came out of the interface with the pulse, and it began forming the cloud cover around the planet. Except that those aren't clouds.

Is that a manifestation of the thoughtscape? Bowers asked.

The Inamuri, Ezri said. The Prentara called the beings of the thoughtscape the Inamuri. And the clouds aren't the thoughtscape; the clouds are an extension of the interface. That's how Dax could commune with the Inamuri when I touched the substance.

Commune? Julian asked. Not communicate?

No, there was no communication, Ezri said. Dax could sense the minds of the Inamuri, and their memories, and maybe even Prentara memories imprinted on or swallowed up by the Inamuri. And this story I'm telling Dax didn't learn all of this in this form; we've deduced it from what Dax did learn.

What happened to the Prentara? Juarez asked.

I don't know, Ezri said. I don't think even the Inamuri know. But we saw the probe readings. There's nobody alive down there except for our people.

Maybe the subsequent pulses killed them, Bowers suggested.

But what are the pulses?

I think they're the result of the Inamuri trying to push their way into our universe, Ezri said.

They may still be trying to fight the invasion into their domain, Julian said.

Yes, Ezri said, the word invasion prompting Dax's memory. The Inamuri considered the Prentara to be invaders but she searched for the remainder of the recollection. They also thought of them as saviors.

I don't understand that, Bowers said.

Neither do I, Ezri admitted. But I know what we have to do to prevent any more pulses. Again, all eyes in the room focused on her. We have to close the interface, she said.

Per Julian's orders, Ezri would remain in the medical bay for at least another day—a recommendation perfectly acceptable to her. She felt fatigued beyond any measure she had ever known, even back during the war. Before she could sleep, though, she needed to complete the information load. Julian had provided her with a mild stimulant so that she could do so, but the effects had now begun to abate. Ezri operated the pad in her hands and played back the last few sentences she had recorded. The clarity of one piece of data seemed suspect to her, and so she erased that part and rerecorded it. Then she listened to it again. Satisfied, she moved on to the final part of her tale.

While she worked at this task, she knew that Nog and his engineering team worked at another. Within an hour of Ezri's contention that they had to close the thoughtscape interface, Nog had devised a means of doing just that. As she understood it, his plan involved triggering a series of explosive devices to detonate simultaneously in various dimensions of space, including subspace. The idea reminded Ezri of the Houdini mines that the Jem'Hadar had used against them at the siege of AR-558.

Nog had explained that each device would destroy a portion of the walls of the interface. If enough of the interface was destroyed at the same time, then the surrounding space in this universe would essentially cave in and permanently seal off the realm of the Inamuri. Nog had been specific about the number of devices—thirty-two—because if too few were detonated, then the energy of the Inamuri would be able to overcome the force of the collapsing space, and would instead widen the interface.

Once the devices had been completed, they would be loaded onto a probe, along with Ezri's account of the Inamuri and the Prentara, and then the probe would be sent down to the planet's surface. Keyed to lock on to human and Andorian life signs, or to land beside the interface if bioscans could not locate the crew, it would reach the site about half a day before the next pulse. That left more than enough time for the away team to set the devices in place, and retreat from the site to safety, before the multidimensional explosions closed the interface.

Ezri finished her recording, then worked the pad to transfer it onto an isolinear optical chip. Julian, she called. With Ezri out of danger, both Richter and Juarez had left the medical bay. Now, across the room, Julian turned from a console.

Have you finished? he asked, walking over to her. She held up the isolinear chip, which he took from the tips of her fingers. He slapped at his combadge. Bashir to Nog.

Go ahead, Doctor, came the lieutenants response.

Lieutenant Dax has finished recording her data, Julian reported.

All right, Nog said. Ill send somebody up for it. Nog out.

Ezri felt herself outlasting the stimulant Julian had given her, but amid all the difficulties of the last week or so, a moment of playfulness suddenly asserted itself in her. So, she said.

So? Julian asked, looking down at her, his blue eyes peering into hers.

I told you so, Ezri said, referring to her belief that her contact with the object might help the crew stop the pulse.

You did indeed, Julian said, obviously picking up her meaning. I guess that nine lifetimes of experience trump mere genetic engineering.

I guess so, she said, and chuckled.

You know, Im proud of you, he told her. His intense gaze held hers. Not for being right about this, but for fighting to do what you thought needed to be done. For being strong enough to lead this crew even in the face of your own personal troubles.

His words touched her deeply, because they meant that he had been able to see in her what she had striven to be. Thank you, she said, and she could not keep from smiling. Her eyes slipped closed for a second, and she forced them back open.

Its all right, Julian said. Get some restCaptain.

Captain, Ezri thought, the word like a medal pinned to her chestor a couple of extra pips on her collar. It echoed in her mind as her eyes closed once more, and she imagined Julians voice saying it again as she fell asleep Captain.

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Im an idiot, Quark pronounced. The words filled the almost empty room. Quark looked around and saw the few other people here glancing in his direction. He ignored them, and turned back to the person across the table from him.

Hey, youd know about that bettern I would, Vic said, shrugging. The holographic singer returned his attention to his holographic breakfast. Quark peered over at his plate, then quickly looked away; the notion of eating flaky, dried-up grain fragments immersed in cows milk, even when the concoction was made out of photons and force fields, turned his stomach.

Hew-mons, Quark thought, but even as he did so, he knew that his revulsion was misplaced. Nothing and nobody disgusted him right now more than himself. Yeah, well, trust me, he told Vic. Im even more of an idiot right now than my simpleton brother.

Vic lifted a flute of a bright orange liquid that looked quite a bit like pooncheenee, though without the reddish tint. Quark knew that the drink could not have been the Bajoran beverage, since this holoprogram ran period-specific. You mean your brother whos now in charge of the whole shebang back home? Vic sipped at his drink, then set it back down.

Not to mention ruining the entire Ferengi economy, Quark moaned. Thanks for reminding me.

Vic shook his head slowly as he chewed noisily on his breakfast. So thats why youre upset? Vic asked. Cause your brothers wreckin the out-of-town books?

Im upset, Quark said, because theres something going on here on the station, and I dont know anything about it.

Hey, you cant know everything, right? Vic said.

Quark leaned forward across the table. If it happens on this station, he intoned, I make it my business to know about it. He sat back in his chair. And if theres profit to be had, then I make it my business.

Vic threw one hand in the air. So you dont know about this one, he said. You find out about the next one. No big thing. Its just business.

Just business? Quark repeated, appalled at the combination of the two words. You dont understand. Im not just a businessman; Im a Ferengi businessman. Business is my life.

Yeah, I know thats what you say, Vic offered.

Im not just saying it, Quark told him. Business is my life.

Vic nodded and smiled in a way that made Quark uncomfortable. Hey, pallie, whatever you wanna believe is fine with me.

I dont just believe it, Quark maintained. Its true.

Okay, okay, whos arguin? Vic scooped up the last bit of his breakfast and shoveled it into his mouth.

You are, Quark said.

Look, Vic said. He set his spoon down in his empty bowl with a clink. You say business is your life. I just see somethin different, is all. Since Ive been back in business here at the hotel, how many times have you and Julian been in here cryin in your beer about one dame or another? First it was Jadzia, then it was Ezri, and then the green one. Im tellin you, you cant figure the players without a scorecard. I know the doc and Ezri have a thing now, but youyoure still in here mopin.

Quark shrugged and offered a sly smile. I like females, he said, feeling somewhat sheepish. I cant help that.

Course not, Vic said. I have a fondness for em myself. But didnt somebody once say that dames and dough dont mix? Vics words sounded remarkably similar to the 94th Rule of Acquisition.

All right, so I have a weakness, Quark allowed. That doesnt mean business isnt my life.

Vic raised his glass and downed the last of his drink. Thats right, he said. Except, what about this? He put his glass down on the table, then spread his hands out, gesturing at their surroundings.

Quark looked around. What about what?

I dont wanna bite the hand that feeds me, Vic said, but youre lettinthis light show run twenty-six hours a day. I know we get our fair share of traffic in here from that floatin bicycle wheel of yours, but not that much.

I like this place, Quark said meekly, recognizing the truth of what Vic had said.

Hey, and thats great, Vic told him. He picked up his empty glass and held it up, gesturing toward the bar.

Believe me, Im happy about that. It just doesnt make the best business sense for a guy who claims business is the most important thing in his life. Plus He set his glass back down.

Plus what? Quark asked.

Didnt you risk your life to rescue your mother from a bunch of bad guys who snatched her? Vic said. I mean, thats great. Shes your mom and you gotta do what you gotta do. But you said business is your life, and that aint exactly business.

Quark nodded, wondering exactly how Vic had learned about Ishkas kidnapping by the Dominion. My mothershe had the Grand Naguss ear

Yeah, yeah, Vic interrupted, obviously not putting much stock in Quarks purported justification for his actions. Didnt you also risk your life helping the Feds take this place back from the bad guys?

Better customers, Quark said at once. The Federation and the Bajorans make better customers than the Dominion and the Cardassians. But even Quark did not believe that excuse for what he had done.

A young woman with long red hair and a short skirt appeared at the table, carrying a tray with two bottles on it. Here ya are, boss, she said, setting the tray down. She poured first from the champagne bottle, and then from the clear, squarish bottle of orange liquid. Vic sipped at the drink while she loaded his empty bowl onto the tray.

Thanks, doll, Vic said. After she had gone, he looked back over at Quark. What about all those stories about you runnin food and medicine to the Bajorans back when the bad guys ran the show?

Quark felt an unpleasant chill buzz through the ridges along the tops of his ears. That was at cost, he protested, perhaps a bit too loudly. Trying to settle himself back down, he said in a quieter tone, That was also a business decision. He repeated his contention that Bajorans made better customers than Cardassians.

Vic seemed to consider him for a moment, and then he leaned forward across the table. In a low voice, the singer said, I know thats what you say, pallie, but you probably dont realize that there are still some facts and figures from way back when rootin around inside these walls.

What? Quark said. The idea that the stations computer system still retained records of his

Occupation-era transactions made his lobes go completely cold. Thats all speculation, Quark insisted,

understanding that Vic knew otherwise. I dont want to hear that outside of this room.

Vic raised his hands up in front of him, palms toward Quark. Hey, nobodyll hear it from me.

Quark looked away, uncomfortable with where this conversation had gone, but at the same time wanting to hear the rest of what this hologram had to say. Whats your point, anyway? he asked.

My point is, youre always in here claimin to have this ideal of the Ferengi businessman that you wanna live up to, and yet youre always doin somethin to mess that up.

Exactly, Quark said. So Im an idiot.

Yeah, maybe, Vic said. Or maybe this image they gave you as a kid and that youre always tryin to fulfill, maybe thats not really what you want out of life.

Quark reached up with both hands and rubbed at the bottoms of his lobes. His ears had gone numb. Me, not wanting to be a businessman? he thought, incredulous at the suggestion. Not wanting to be a Ferengi businessman? The idea seemed preposterous on its face.

Or maybe you just dont know how to deal with gettin what you want, Vic went on. I knew a guy once who wanted more than anything to be a Major League baseball player.

Baseball, Quark thought. Siskos game.

This guy didnt have all that much natural ability, Vic continued, but he worked his tail off to get through the farm system and make it to the bigs. Quark had no idea what farms had to do with baseball, but then he had always been mystified by the sport. So what does he do when he gets there? Drinks like a fish, carouses till dawn, stuff hed never done before in his life.

Why? Quark asked.

Who knows why, Vic said. But he makes it to the Majors, and hes only there for a cup of coffee before they ship him back down. Never makes it back up. So he got what he said he really wanted, and he threw it away as soon as he got it. So maybe he didnt really want it, or maybe he didnt know what to do with it once he did get it.

Quark sat quietly for a moment, taking in what Vic had said. The words bothered him, and not because they were untrue. But he also did not know if he had the strength to face them. Finally, he said, So whats all that got to do with me?

Vic tilted his head to the side and smiled. Mr. Quark, he said, youre not an idiot. He paused, and then said, You want to know what I think? I think business isnt the only thing youre worried about messin up these days.

What do you mean? Quark asked, although he supposed he already knew the answer.

What do I mean, Vic said. Black hair, nice figure, wrinkled nose

Laren, Quark said, his heart changing its beat at just the thought of her.

Laren, Vic agreed.

I messed that up.

Doesnt surprise me. Vic grabbed his drink and drained it in one quick pull.

Quark grunted. She probably wasnt interested anyway.

I got news for you, pallie, Vic said. He put his empty glass back on the table, then stood up. The dame digs you.

You spoke to her? Quark asked.

Didnt need to, Vic said. He dug into his pocket and came out with a handful of green bills. He selected several and dropped them onto the table. I heard her voice when she called you in here a couple nights ago. Shes got it for you.

Quarks heart pounded wildly in his chest. He stared up at Vic, unable to say anything.

Look, Mr. Quark, Vic said. I hate to eat n run, but I gotta interview some comics this morning. I still havent found that opening act Ive been lookin for.

Thats all right, Quark said.

Vic smiled again. Catch you on the flip side, pallie. He walked across the room and climbed the stairs to the stage, then disappeared behind the curtain.

Catch you on the flip side, Quark muttered, having no idea what the words meant. But he understood the rest of what Vic had tried to tell him.

Vaughn's footsteps echoed loudly in the dark corridor. The air here tasted stale, as though it had lain dormant in these buildings for centuries. He did not smell death here, though, only abandonment. He marched along, his boots kicking up the thick layer of dust that coated the floor. Little galaxies of particles spun through the beam of his beacon. He consulted his tricorder as he walked. This near the site of the pulse and its massive energy, the reach of the tricorder had dwindled to less than two hundred meters, but as Vaughn had hoped, the sensors did function well within that limited range. Now all he had to do was get close enough to the center of the complex to scan the area, then somehow use that information to determine a means of stopping the pulse.

Yeah, Vaughn thought, that's all. He laughed, the sound briefly joining his footfalls as they reverberated through the corridor. A doorway stood open in the left wall, and he shined his beacon through it as he passed, interested only in confirming that it was a room, not another corridor.

Vaughn had moved through the complex for almost an hour now, steadily making his way toward its center. Doors had lined most of the corridors through which he had walked, some of them closed, some of them like the last one wide open. He had earlier searched some of the rooms, looking for information or tools or anything else that might ultimately aid him in completing his mission here. But all he had found had been more of what he had seen yesterday back in the city: computers, communications equipment, and circuitry junctions. Scans had revealed that the machinery populated many of the rooms here, but also traveled through the walls and beneath the floors. None of it remained active.

Vaughn reached an intersection. A corridor extended to both his left and right, and the one he was in continued ahead. He shined his beacon in all three directions and saw nothing. He performed another scan, making sure that the center of the complex still lay ahead, then strode forward.

Back in the city, Vaughn had speculated that technology had somehow played a part in the extinction of the civilization here. Whether that was true or not, though, he thought that he had begun to see the mechanism by which the inhabitants of this world might have come to their ends. Vaughn had spent yesterday being visited by specters of his past that had evoked brutal feelings of loss and abandonment in him, and his emotions had reeled. If that same sort of thing had happened to the people here, but continuously, if they had been faced each day of their lives with such horrible feelings, then perhaps that had driven them to their destruction. Vaughn did not doubt that living day after day with a fresh sense of loss would have been unbearable.

A shape appeared up ahead in the light of his beacon: an empty chair. As Vaughn approached it, he found the sight of it eerie, an apt symbol for this empty world. This place is haunted, he thought in a melodramatic and uncharacteristic manner, and he realized just how fragile his emotional state had become. He passed the chair and walked on.

The suggestion of ghosts, though, brought him quickly back to the middle of last night to seeing his mother, hearing again those terrible words, and feeling once more the desperate grief and loss he had first felt as a boy. He had awoken this morning at the first gray light of day, only marginally rested from the interrupted and uneasy sleep he had gotten. Recollections of his dreams lurked vaguely beyond the outskirts of his consciousness, and he had the strange impression that he had dreamed the dreams of others including those of Prynne and Ch'Thane. He also had the sense that he had dreamed of the people who had once lived on this planet, and also, oddly enough, of Ezri Dax. But his first thoughts upon waking had not been of his dreams, or of his encounter with his mother, but of his daughter, and his hope that he would not fail her would not leave her again.

Vaughn had padded back to where he had first lain down to sleep last night, and had found almost everything where he had left it. His bedroll and blanket had been there, his food and water, his coat, tricorder, and beacon; he had taken only the latter three objects with him for his foray into the complex. Even the circle of stones had been there, the ashes of a dead fire blackening the ground around which they sat. Only his mother had been missing, a fact for which he had been grateful. He had examined the dirt around the circle of stones, and seen footprints leading away from the camp and back along the

direction he had taken to get here.

Maybe she went to join Captain Harriman, Vaughn thought now, bitterly. He had not been on this world long, but he had come to despise it. The intensity of his feelings shocked him, and he tried to push them aside.

Up ahead, the corridor dead-ended against another. Vaughn saw a patch of light on the wall facing him, light not thrown there by his beacon. He stopped the echoes of his boots diminishing quickly and switched the beacon off. The darkness within the complex had faded to a dull illumination he recognized too well the outside light of this shrouded planet. And he perceived something else besides the light the high-pitched wail at the bounds of his hearing. It sounded louder here, stronger, which did not surprise him.

Leaving his beacon off, Vaughn continued down the corridor. At the intersection, he consulted his tricorder, then proceeded to the left. The light grew brighter, and he walked on until he reached another intersection. He turned again, right this time, following the light. Twenty meters ahead of him, the corridor ended in a tangle of building materials. Past a heap of metal and stone, he could see patches of the dark gray mass that stood at the center of the complex the source of the pulse.

As Vaughn walked forward, he noticed a heavy curtain of dust hanging in the air, dust that he had not stirred up from the floor. He scanned the air. The dust was primarily composed of traces of stone, sand, and lime, along with some metallic particulates; he concluded that it was the residue of the building collapse up ahead, which must not have happened too long ago. He guessed that this part of the complex had come down during or after the last pulse.

Vaughn stopped at the pile of debris and studied it. It stood close to two meters tall at most points, though lower on the left side and higher on the right. On the left, though, a metal beam hung from the fallen ceiling all the way down to the floor. If he could squeeze past it, he would probably be able to get over the rubble there.

Vaughn set the beacon down, then closed his tricorder and secured it in a coat pocket, fastening a flap across it. Reaching up, he tested the stability of the metal beam; it seemed wedged in place. He ducked down and slowly pushed his body through the space between the wall and the beam, actually making it through without much effort. Just as carefully, he stepped over the debris. He dislodged a few pieces of broken building materials, but quickly got past the heap.

The place where the pulse had been generated stretched before him, a great, dark circle that could have been a reflection of the sky above it. The surface of the circle, perhaps a hundred meters across, roiled and spun, a gray vortex that descended from its edges to a low point at its center. All around the perimeter, the complex had caved in either blasted by the pulse, Vaughn supposed, or falling in as the zone of energy had expanded over time, loosing the foundations of the buildings. A fine, gray mist hung in the air here, like a thin fog over a lake at dawn.

Vaughn pulled out his tricorder and scanned the vortex. The readings of its surface corresponded to those of the cloud cover, although the vortex was much more powerful. At the center point, sensor readings broke down. Vaughn ran a diagnostic, verifying the accuracy of the aberrant scan. The readings resembled those of a singularity, he noted, with significant distortions in the space-time continuum there, although he saw no compression of matter and no extreme gravitational force. Vaughn adjusted the tricorder several times, attempting to circumvent the conditions, but he could take no better scans.

Finally, he checked the amount of energy that had built up in the vortex, and the rate at which it was now changing. Both measures reached slightly higher than had been predicted by the crews extrapolations of the probes data. If Vaughn had harbored any scant hopes that he would reach this place and find the threat to the Vahni Vahlupali gone, or even delayed, those hopes now vanished.

Based on the tricorder readings, another pulse would surge from the vortex in less than four hours.

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Prynns emotions seemed heightened today, as though whatever dreams had visited her during the night had somehow made her miss her father more. As she and Shar had worked throughout the morning, she

had continually had to force herself to concentrate on what she had been doing. Even now, as they set to complete their final test, her mind drifted to her father, and to the image of him walking away from the camp.

Prynn shook her head, as though the movement could shake the picture in her mind loose. She refocused her attention on the tricorder in her hand, reached forward, and pressed a control. In an instant, white motes appeared before her eyes, and her surroundings faded from view.

She materialized one hundred meters from Chaffee's aft section. She peered back at that portion of the wreckage, and just to the left of it, where Shar lay. She reached to the outside of her forearm, where the controls of her environmental suits comm system were set. She switched it on, and said, Tenmei to chThane.

I read you. Shar's voice sounded tinny in her helmet, with a slight reverb.

All right, she said. I'm going to check the equipment.

Prynn turned to her left. On the ground there sat the mass of machinery she had patched together. Two circuitry modules, each about the size of her torso, sat beside each other. Bundles of fiberoptic lines emerged from each in several places, some routing back into the same module, some into the other one. Isolinear optical chips jutted out all across the upper surfaces, sitting amid numerous other components. The tangled collection of technology looked to Prynn like the wreckage of the shuttle itself, twisted, broken, beyond repair, but the modules actually composed the second rudimentary transporter that she had pieced together.

That, along with the environmental suits, she thought. When she and Shar had awoken this morning, she had used the first makeshift transporter to beam him to Chaffee's aft section; with Shar's leg so badly broken, neither one of them had wanted to risk moving him any other way. The two had then worked on the plan they had devised last night, with Shar attempting to repair another power cell and to finish rigging the environmental suits, and Prynn trying to improvise a second transporter. Both had been successful. Now Prynn set her tricorder to sensor mode. She scanned the extemporized transporter machinery, then executed a diagnostic of it. When she had finished, she told Shar, The equipment looks good. I'm going to beam you over now.

Acknowledged, Shar said.

Prynn reset the tricorder to function as a control interface for the transporter, then energized the unit. She lifted her gaze from the display just in time to see the fading sparkle of dematerialization where Shar had been. Several meters in front of her, the white streaks of light reappeared, depositing both Shar and the other heap of transporter machinery on the ground. Shar lay on his back, also clad in an environmental suit.

You did it, he told her, the thin sound of his voice still echoing slightly inside her helmet.

We did it, she said, knowing that Shar's part in their accomplishment could not be understated. Despite the painkillers and medication she had given him, his injuries still left him uncomfortable and weak. She found it remarkable that he had been able to concentrate long enough to do the detailed work he had done this morning. How's your leg? she asked him now. The process of getting him into an environmental suit had been an arduous one, and even with the anesthetics, she knew, it had been painful for him.

I'm all right, Shar said.

Prynn nodded, a movement that felt awkward in the confines of her helmet. Okay, she said. Shar was far from all right, she knew, but she respected his desire to forge ahead in their mission. I guess we should get started then. They had decided to skip-transport as they had begun referring to it toward the site of the pulse. Failing that, they would do what Vaughn had ordered they would use the transporters to get as far away as possible. Although the use of the environmental suits as pattern enhancers had doubled the ranges of the transporters in both directions, they suspected that the amount of interference from the energy at the site would prevent them from getting all that close to it. They could not really know that, though, until they attempted it. They also had no way of knowing whether her father had been able to reach the site by now, and so she and Shar might actually be the last hope for the Vahni. Of course, if they could even get to the location, there remained the matter of just what they could do to

An electronic thrum interrupted Prynn's thoughts, and she thought at first that it might be feedback in her

suits comm system. She raised her forearm up so that she could see and work the controls there, but as she did, she saw Shar point upward. Look, he said. Prynn tilted her head back, the movement clumsy because of her helmet. She reached up and unlocked the seals, then twisted the helmet to release it. As she pulled it off, the foreign sound increased in volume. She peered skyward. Above, an object descended toward them. With only the churning clouds as a backdrop, Prynn could not immediately tell its size. But as it drew closer, she recognized the shape. It looked like a quantum torpedo.

Prynn stood over the object, a sense of optimism growing within her for the first time since the crash. She had set to the tasks she had taken on with determination, but she understood now that, even with the successes she and Shar had managed with the transporters, she had never really believed that they or her father would be able to stop the pulseor that they would be able to escape this place. Normally confident that she could accomplish anything, solve any problem, she was surprised to realize that she had lacked that confidence for the past few days.

The object had soft-landed five meters from where she and Shar had been with their improvised transporter equipment. It sat lengthwise on the ground, about a half-meter tall, a meter wide, and three meters long. White letters and numbers in Federation Standard marked the black casing in several locations, identifying it as one of Defiant's probes. A gouge penetrated one end of the outer shell, the edges of the gash seared, as though made by an energy weapon.

Prynn bent and released the locks in the probe's casing, then lifted the upper section of it open. Shar had removed his helmet, and she narrated for him what she saw. She could identify the guidance and propulsion systems which seemed to have taken some damage from whatever had sliced through the outer casing but where she would have expected sensor equipment, she saw only two small modules, surrounded by a pair of bags that held caches of unfamiliar objects twice as large as her fist. In the center of the probe sat a rectangular container with three words printed on it VAUGHN CH THANE TENMEI.

Prynn pulled out the container and opened it. Inside, she found a padd. She carried it back to where Shar still lay on the ground, and sat down beside him. Together, they listened to Lieutenant Dax and Lieutenant Nog describe what the crew of Defiant had learned about the pulse, and the solution they had devised to stop it. Prynn could not interpret the movements of Shar's antennae, but if they expressed emotion, then she guessed that they displayed excitement right now; that was how she felt.

We have to get the explosives to the site, she said when the messages had finished. She wondered whether they should attempt to skip-transport them to the source of the pulse, but Shar answered the question before she even asked it.

With these type of devices, designed to shift into subspace and other dimensions, I wouldn't recommend transporting them, he said. The phase change could detonate them.

All right. Then we'll have to get the probe back in the air, she said. We'll just have to hope that Commander Vaughn has reached the site, or that we can beam there ourselves.

Prynn walked back to the probe and found the control interface for the guidance system. Reviewing the settings, she saw that the Defiant crew had programmed the remaining sensors to scan for human and Andorian life signs, and if unable to find any, then to scan for the energy interference at the source of the pulse. She added a command now to ignore the present location, then set the probe to lift off in one minute. She quickly loaded the container with the padd back inside, then closed and locked the upper casing.

She rejoined Shar, and the two of them waited for the probe to launch. A minute passed, but nothing happened. Prynn used her tricorder to scan the probe, and found that all of its systems had gone dead. Immediately, her optimism faded.

What happened? Shar asked.

I don't know, Prynn said. It's completely lost power. She returned to the probe and reopened the upper casing. She examined the guidance and propulsion systems. Whatever had penetrated the outer casing had damaged the probe's power cell. She imagined a lance of energy spiking down from the clouds, like

the one that had doomed the shuttle. The cell had obviously functioned until the probe had reached them, but the greater power requirements for a liftoff had apparently overloaded it. Prynn knew at once what they would have to do, and when she told Shar, he agreed.

Twenty minutes later, she had replaced the failed power cell in the probe with one of their own. She ran some quick diagnostics, then set the probe to launch. This time, it lifted off and headed away.

Sitting beside Shar on the ground, Prynn watched the probe fade out of sight. She searched within her for her optimism but found it difficult to find now. She knew that she and Shar were essentially back where they had been last night, although the environmental suits now doubled the distances they could transport. With only one power cell, though, they would be able to beam away from here just once, either fourteen kilometers toward the site of the pulse, or three hundred fifty kilometers in the opposite direction.

Either way, she thought, it won't make much difference. Either her father would be able to stop the pulse, or he would not. All she and Shar could really do right now was wait and hope.

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Ro stepped out of the turbolift and started down the Promenade. She weaved through the people, paying them little attention other than to be sure she did not run into anybody. She had just come from Kiras office, where she had briefed the colonel on the station's security status. Now Ro headed back to her own office, where she would continue to coordinate her teams. To this point, all of the procedures and precautions they had put in place for the summit had worked well and without incident.

As she passed the bar, she withstood her inclination to peer inside. She was still angry with Quark for the way he had acted yesterday. They had been having such nice times together recently, and their late-night stroll through the station two nights ago had been tremendously enjoyable and even, maybe, just a little bit romantic. She and Quark had really taken a liking to each other or at least, so she had thought.

Ro had not minded Quark's flirtation with Treir when she had first entered the bar. Ro could be something of a flirt herself sometimes. What had made her angry, though, was that he had continued flirting with Treir at the same time that he had ignored her.

Except that you weren't really angry, were you? she asked herself as she approached her office. She had actually been hurt by what had happened. Of course, what difference does it make anyway? she thought. The summit had started this morning, and if Bajor ended up entering the Federation, she likely would not be here much longer.

The doors to her office separated and slid open, and as soon as she walked inside, she saw Quark. He stood between the two chairs in front of her desk, apparently waiting for her. He turned, and began speaking as soon as he saw her. Laren, he said quickly, I want to apologize for my behavior yesterday in the bar. I don't really know what

Quark, she interrupted, striding across the room and moving behind her desk. She heard the office doors click closed. I really don't have time for this right now. She sat down in her chair and studied a display. The harshness in her tone and manner carried with it not just her disappointment in Quark, she realized, but also her concerns about her future.

Quark did not move. Laren, he said quietly. I'd just like to speak with you for a minute, and then I promise I'll go. You don't even have to say anything. He sounded desperate for her attention, but she also thought that she perceived a seriousness and sincerity in his words.

All right, she relented, her own voice still severe. One minute. She sat back in her chair, folded her arms across her chest, and stared up at him.

All right, Quark said, looking suddenly flustered. She thought that he had probably not expected to be allowed to plead his case to her. He dropped his gaze from hers. I just wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday in the bar.

You already said that, she told him, thinking that he had probably rehearsed that line before coming in here, but perhaps nothing more than that.

I guess I did say that. He tapped nervously on her desk with his fingertips, then seemed to realize what he was doing and stopped. He stepped away from the desk and started moving nervously about the room.

Its just that I didnt mean to do what I didI mean, I didntI was

Quark, Ro said, exasperated at his hesitation.

He stopped pacing and looked over at her. Im sorry, Im sorry, he said quickly. I just wanted to apologize to you.

Well, youve done that, she said, let down that Quark could not muster more than the few simple words that he had. So go on your way. She made a shooing gesture with one hand, then looked down at the display on her desk, although she did not actually read any of the words there. The office doors hummed opened again, and then closed. She sighed heavily and slumped back in her chair, peering after Quark.

Except that Quark had not left. He stood on this side of the doors, looking back at her. Laren, he said, Im sorry. The desperation had left his voice now, replaced, she thought, with forthrightness. He walked back over to her desk, navigating between the two chairs. The way I behaved with Treirwhether you had been there or notwas wrong, he told her. But it was especially wrong because I hurt your feelings.

A swirl of emotions surged through Ro, not least among them, confusion. Why, Quark? she wanted to know. Why did you act that way?

Im not sure, he said. But I think it was out of fear.

Fear? That answer did nothing to allay her confusion.

Ive been enjoying the time weve spent together lately, Quark repeated. And obviously you have, too He paused, and she realized that he was giving her the opportunity to agree with him.

Maybe, she said, and then, unable to stop herself, she smiled. Quark smiled back.

So I think I got scared, he said. Scared that you might get to know me better and then not enjoy spending time with me. Or scared thatI dont knowthat I might actually get something I want.

To Ro, that answer sounded suspiciously absurd. She leaned forward in her chair and rested her forearms on the top of the desk. Yeah, she said, I can see how getting what you want could be pretty frightening.

Laren, Im a Ferengi, Quark said. That means that my entire life has been about trying to get what I want. He stopped and took a deep breath, as though bracing himself for something. And for most of my life, I havent gotten it. So finally getting something I want, particularly something as valuable aswell, as youit really is frightening.

Ro looked into his eyes and saw only frankness there. She was moved by that openness and honesty, and by his appraisal of her which she chose to take in the romantic sense she thought he had intended. Im not sure that I completely understand, she said, but thank you, Quark.

Youre welcome, he said. He waited, and they simply looked at each other for a moment more without saying anything. She realized she was glad hed come in here, and even more so that hed said the things he had, in the way that he had.

If only

Ro stopped her thought, not wanting to think about her unsure future right now, and not wanting her apprehensions to show on her face. Finally, Quark headed for the doors, but again, he did not make it far. He turned back to her. Are you all right? he asked, concern evident in his voice. His ability to read her mood so well surprised her, and also impressed her. They had just spent the last few minutes with him basically begging for her forgiveness and her giving it to him, and then him baring his soul, and yet he somehow perceived that something else entirely was bothering her. Still, she did not feel prepared to talk about it right now.

Im fine, she said. Seeing doubt in Quarks eyes, she added, Im just tired, thats all.

I see, Quark said, but instead of leaving, he walked back over to her desk. So, hows theuh, conferencegoing? he asked.

The conference, huh? Ro said, aware that Quark knew nothing about the summit, other than the confluence of officials here at the station. But since Kira had just told her that the first minister would be announcing the meeting and the reason for it to the people of Bajor later today, Ro thought that it would do no harm to tell Quark about it now. Actually, she said, theyre calling it a summit.

A summit? Quark asked.

Yes, Ro said. Theyre meeting about the issue of Bajoran membership in the Federation. Theyre

supposedly going to decide one way or the other. She stopped talking when she noticed an expression on Quark's face of shock and even pain. For a moment, she thought that there might even be something wrong with him physically. Quark, are you all right?

No, he said, looking off to the side, as though in a daze. He moved in front of one of the chairs at her desk and dropped heavily into it. No, I'm not.

What's the matter? she asked. He continued to stare off to one side. Quark, she said, beginning to grow concerned. At last, he looked over at her.

Is it going to happen? he wanted to know. Is Bajor going to join the Federation?

I don't know, she said. Why? What difference does it make to you? She thought that maybe he had surmised her own situation, that since the Bajoran Militia would be rolled up into Starfleet she would be facing the end of her career, and therefore the end of her time on Deep Space 9.

If Bajor joins the Federation, he said, then I really am ruined.

What? she said, thinking that Quark was once again exaggerating. Why would you? But then she saw it. The Federation has essentially a moneyless economy.

A moneyless economy, Quark echoed, saying the words as though they had been laced with poison. I won't be able to make a living running the bar, because this will be completely a Federation facility, and so nobody will be paying.

I never thought of that! I'm sorry, she said, her concern for her own situation now coupled with a concern for Quark. What will you do? she asked, a question she had been posing to herself for the last couple of days. What were you going to do three years ago when Bajor was on the verge of joining?

Three years ago, I was a younger man, he said.

What does that mean?

It means that three years ago, I actually celebrated the prospect of Bajor's admittance into the Federation, Quark said. I was going to stay in the bar and work the angles. Because the one thing that will happen when this becomes a Federation space station is that more ships will come here, and that'll translate to more customers in the bar. More customers means more information, and more information means more opportunity. And as the 9th Rule of Acquisition states, opportunity plus instinct equals profit.

Ro was not quite following Quark. And you don't have the instinct anymore? she asked.

I don't know if I ever had it, he said disgustedly. But then he seemed to rethink that, and said, I've still got the instinct. But what I don't have anymore is the drive. Not to run the bar without being able to make a sure living at it, not to wait for a piece of information here and there that would allow me to possibly make some small profit somewhere. Ro did not say anything; she was not sure what to say. I don't know, Quark went on. I guess maybe the war had an effect on me.

It had an effect on all of us, Ro offered.

Yeah, Quark agreed. Again, he looked off to the side, his gaze seeming to see something beyond the office. When my nephew's leg got shot off, I think maybe I've just realized that I value stability. Chasing profit based on gathering speculative information—you can make a killing, but there's just so much uncertainty in it. Quark looked back over at Ro. I'll tell you something, Laren, he said in a voice so quiet that it was almost a whisper. The bar's not the most profitable it's ever been right now, but I don't ever tell anybody I said this—that's all right.

Because you have stability, Ro said.

Yes, Quark said. I'm not making much of a profit, but I am making a living. He stood up from his chair, apparently preparing to leave. I think I've known for a while now that, whenever Bajor did join the Federation, it would finally be time for me to move on.

She looked up at him, and said, I know the feeling.

What do you mean? Quark asked.

Starfleet, Ro said. Quark's eyes widened in understanding. He sat back down in the chair, and Ro started to talk to him about her own uncertain future.

Vaughn leaned against a broken wall, the gloom of the gray mist about him, and listened three times to Lieutenant Dax's account of her contact with the thoughtscape. Each time, he felt a greater sense of the nature of it, and of this world as well, although precise understanding still eluded him. It seemed as though a lot of disparate facts almost fit together to form a greater knowledge, but he could not quite move the facts around to their proper places.

The probe had arrived here as Vaughn had been searching the perimeter of the vortex—the interface with the thoughtscape—attempting to find anything that would help him understand or defeat the pulse. The probe had hovered overhead for a short time, before finally alighting on one of the few patches of ground between wrecked sections of the complex. It had landed about a third of the way around the vortex, and it had taken Vaughn twenty minutes to reach it, crawling through and around the debris of the fallen buildings.

Vaughn had hoped that the probe was more than simply a probe, that the Defiant crew had developed information vital to his mission, possibly even a means of stopping the pulse. His heart had raced at the sight of the devices, which he had immediately assumed to be some sort of a solution. Each was metallic, with an ovoid body, and two panels set parallel to its surface, attached by rigid filaments. The devices had been completely unfamiliar to him.

He had listened first to Dax's account, and then to Nog's explanation and instructions about deploying the devices. Vaughn had paid particular attention to the engineer's caution to use all of them. If too few of the interdimensional explosives were detonated, Nog had warned, the interface would not be closed, but only widened. Then Vaughn had listened to Dax's account two more times.

Now, just two hours before the next pulse, he worked his way around the outside of the vortex, positioning the thirty-two devices at intervals of roughly ten meters. He set each one to detonate at the same time, one hour from now. The crew had included two satchels in which to carry the explosives, and he had slung them over his shoulders. He had already emptied and discarded one bag, and had now almost gone through the second one.

As Vaughn circled the vortex, waving away the gray mist suffusing the air, he felt strongly that he stood at the brink of understanding all that was happening and all that had happened here. He reviewed everything that he now knew about the thoughtscape and this world. According to Dax, the pulse resulted from the thoughtscape—the Inamuri, she called them—attempting to enter this universe. That did not necessarily imply hostility, he knew. The question he had to answer was, Why? Why did the Inamuri want to cross into this universe? The Prentara had violated their space; they had violated them via their virtual-reality technology, so perhaps they wanted to counterattack. But Dax had said that the Inamuri considered the Prentara both invaders and saviors. How could that be? And whether invaders or saviors, or somehow both, the Prentara had died out long ago, something the Inamuri must know.

Vaughn stepped over a girder that had fallen in such a way that it now hung out over the vortex. He looked back and saw that he had come about ten meters, and so he pulled out another device. He armed it, bent down, and set it in place. Then he moved on.

His own experiences here must tie into all of this, Vaughn thought. As he recalled the various scenes he had encountered, he reflected on the fact that they shared a common thread beyond simply being past events from his life. All of the incidents—from Captain Harriman to Prynne to his mother—had engendered a profound sense of loss or abandonment in him. And the Inamuri, through the energy clouds, had caused that. They must obviously have sensed his mind, his memory, in some way.

Vaughn remembered thinking this morning that he had dreamed dreams not his own, and he wondered now if that might have been an indication of some mental or emotional connection—a communing with the Inamuri. But he had also felt as though he had dreamed Prynne's and Ch'Thanes' dreams, so perhaps this entire planet was connected to the Inamuri, united by the energy that circled it. He recalled the high-pitched sound he had thought of as the voice of the clouds, and he realized now that he might have been more right than he had known.

Ten meters to the next location. Device, arm, set.

Vaughn continued around the vortex. He waved idly at the gray mist, and thought about the mechanism by which bits of his past had been re-created. The energy from the clouds had reorganized local matter

into different forms, but again, the question was, Why? Had Vaughn's experiences been intended as an attack on him? As communication? And if the

Awareness surged in Vaughn's mind. He dropped to his knees, his hands coming up to the sides of his head. His consciousness felt as though it had been split open.

The mist, he understood at once, and knew that the understanding was not entirely his own. The mist, like the cloud cover, was an extension of the interface with the thoughtscape. And he stood within it, and sensed a tenuous connection with

The Inamuri.

And suddenly Vaughn grasped it all. The Inamuri had not been attempting to navigate through the interface into this universe, although they eventually would. They had been sending the energy clouds through the interface, and all of that energy squeezing through the relatively small interface had caused the pulse. And the sea of clouds, the energy within, had been sent here to reorganize the matter of this world into a form that the Inamuri could inhabit.

Why? Vaughn asked aloud. Why?

Still waiting for answers, he staggered to his feet. He knew that he had to keep going. You have a mission, he told himself. He moved on.

Tell me, Vaughn thought, exhorting the Inamuri to give him more. Why did you re-create events from my past? And why events of loss and abandonment?

Because the Inamuri knew loss, Vaughn realized, because it knew abandonment. The re-created events of his life had been either its attempts to communicate or manifestations of its thoughts and emotions.

It, Vaughn thought. Not they. The thoughtscape, the Inamuri, was not a race of beings; it was a singular entity. One being that had known only one reality, that of its own pocket universe, as Dax had called it. It had known only its own existence, and nothing beyond that.

Until the day that the Prentara had connected their technology to it. Connected their minds to it through their virtual-reality systems. They had invaded the living mind of the Inamuri.

Vaughn saw the first device he had set up sitting just ahead, and he turned to see the previous one.

Standing an equal distance from each, he pulled out the last device. Armed it, bent, and set it down.

Still crouching, Vaughn gazed through the mist around the perimeter of the vortex, at the interdimensional explosive devices that now surrounded it. Then he looked out into the vortex itself, at the sweeping, twisting surface that so closely resembled the sea of clouds above. The private domain of the Inamuri had been invaded by the Prentara, but then the Inamuri had come to understand that they were other beings, that there were other beings, and therefore that there was more to existence than only itself. In some sense, Vaughn saw, the Prentara had saved the Inamuri, adding unexpected knowledge and sensation to its solitary existence. It had tried to establish contact with the Prentara, had tried to enter this universe, not understanding the destruction it caused by doing so. After the first pulse, though, the Prentara had withdrawn from the vortex, from their connection with the Inamuri, leaving it alone again.

No, Vaughn thought. Not again. The thoughtscape had been left alone for the first time in its life. Before then, it could not have understood the concept of being alone, because such a thing had been outside of its experience. But then the thoughtscape had learned what it meant to be alone, in the most profound way. And so it continued trying to enter this continuum, and to find other beings.

And now Vaughn was going to seal it back in its own universe. Alone. Forever.

Vaughn had agonized, but he had made his decision, and now he had committed to it. He stood at the edge of the vortex, peering down into its center. Nogs interdimensional explosives would detonate in fifteen minutes. Even if Vaughn changed his mind now, he could not possibly make his way around the vortex again and undo what he had done.

Predictably, he thought about Pryn. She had always thought of herself as being so much like her mother, and he had always thought that too. Certainly she carried a great deal of Ruriko in her, but he saw now that there was also a lot of him within her as well. That might or might not have been a good thing, but it provided him a small sense of peace right now. He was very proud of his daughter, and he loved her.

Just moments from his own death, he hoped that his last desperate act would somehow manage to save

her. He should have thought of it as a long shot, but he found that he actually believed that he would be able to communicate directly with the Inamuri, and convince it to save Prynn and Shar if it could. What bothered him most right now was that, if she lived, he would be leaving Prynn alone again. He felt more than foolish for not having seen how much she had needed him since Ruriko had died. He had selfishly allowed his guilt to override his paternal responsibilities and that his guilt had been justifiable provided him no solace, and no pardon. He had failed his daughter, and his only regret about his attempt to save her now was that he would definitely fail her again; either she would die with him, or she would live, and be without him.

Vaughn checked the chronometer on his tricorder. Thirteen minutes left now. He turned toward the complex and headed for the corridor from which he had first seen the vortex. He climbed over the rubble, then squeezed past the beam, holding his burden out in front of him. Once past the beam, he found the beacon where he had left it. He picked it up with his free hand and switched it on, then strode the twenty meters down the corridor to the intersection there. He bent down and deposited the bag on the floor. Then, one by one, he examined the eight interdimensional explosives he had removed from around the vortex, and he verified that all of them had been disarmed. When the others detonated, he supposed that the force might set these off as well, but without being armed, they could not slip into other dimensions and have the effect Nog had intended. The vortex would not be closed.

Vaughn stood back up, leaving the explosives and the beacon there. Then he strode back toward the vortex, thinking once more about Michael Collins, the astronaut who had circled the moon alone. He also thought about the tendril from the clouds that had struck down Chaffee. Vaughn wondered if the Inamuri had been trying to communicate with them all along. He did not know for sure, but he understood that all of this was true, that in some rudimentary way, he and Dax, and maybe even Prynn and chThane, had been in contact with the Inamuri through the energy that now covered this planet and permeated its atmosphere. Dax had touched the fragment on Defiant, and Vaughn had experienced the matter that been reorganized for him here, and he had also walked through the mist around the vortex.

After disarming the devices, he made his way back outside, past the beam and over the pile of debris. Outside once more, he strode directly over to the edge of the vortex. Vaughn checked the tricorder again, and saw that the interdimensional devices would detonate in two minutes. He looked up and watched as many of the devices faded out of sight, slipping into subspace or some other dimension. If Vaughn had started away from here as soon as he had finished deploying all of the devices, he might have been able to escape the effects of the explosions. But after having come to understand the monstrous loneliness of the Inamuri, he had found himself unwilling to consign the creature to a lifetime of such an existence. As he had been reminded so vividly in the last day, Vaughn had known his own moments of loss and abandonment; he could not imagine a life in which such moments occurred unendingly, with not the slightest reprieve.

From his contact with the Inamuri, however tenuous, Vaughn had gained an understanding of what would happen once the interface was thrown wide the planet would be transformed, and then the Inamuri would emerge into this universe. Once here, it could contact other beings, putting an end to its isolated reality. Prynn and chThane would be put at risk, he knew, but with the interface expanded, there would be no pulse, and Defiant and the Vahni would be safe. And with the Inamuri in this universe, there would never be another pulse. Vaughn's own life, he thought, was a small cost for all of that.

He checked the chronometer again. Thirty seconds. He tossed the tricorder aside, then peered down into the churning gray depths of the vortex.

Vaughn spread his arms wide, breathed in deeply, and then dived into the twilight maelstrom.

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Kira looked up when the door signal sounded. Admiral Akaar waited outside. Come in, she said, and the office doors parted to allow him entry.

Kira remained seated and looked up at the admiral, his enormous size still noteworthy even after all the weeks that he had been on the station. Good evening, Colonel, he said.

Good evening, Admiral, she said. I imagine the summit has been adjourned for the day.

No, he said. We are taking a break at the moment, but we will meet for a few more hours later tonight.

He paused, and then added, And of course, we will be here for at least several more weeks.

Kira could not tell, but she thought Akaar might be attempting to bait her with this information. He clearly must have perceived the coolness between them he had been the source of it and he would have known that his continued presence on the station did not particularly please her. He can't even use the word hospitality without me suspecting his motives. Right now, though, she decided not to allow him to bother her.

Well, you've got important work to do, she said. What can I do for you this evening, Admiral?

Nothing, Akaar said. I came here to inform you of the break in our session. At first, Kira thought that he must have been joking why would she need to know about that? but then he went on. During the interim, First Minister Shakaar will be addressing the people of Bajor.

Yes, that's right, Kira said. Shakaar had mentioned the address to her at the reception last night, and she had ensured that he had been provided access to a dedicated comm channel today. He wanted to announce the summit and its purpose to all of Bajor.

The first minister will be on the Bajoran communications network five minutes from now, Akaar told her. I suggest that you watch him. As had been the case since the admiral had first arrived on the station, what he claimed to be a suggestion seemed to carry the weight of an order. In this case, it also sounded rather ominous.

All right, I will, Kira said. She considered asking Akaar why he wanted her to watch Shakaar's address, measuring her curiosity against the difficulty of extracting even basic information from him. Before she had even decided, though, the admiral bowed his head and started to leave.

Kira watched him go. She waited a moment after the doors had closed behind him, and then said, Kira to ops.

Ops, Selzner here.

Ensign, First Minister Shakaar will be addressing the Bajoran people on the comnet in a couple of minutes, Kira said. I'd like you to patch it into the station's comm system.

Yes, Colonel, Selzner said. I'll tie us in right now.

Thank you. Kira out. She stood up and walked over to the replicator. Tarkalean tea, she ordered.

One-half measure of kava. She preferred her tea not nearly as sweet as she liked her raktajino. The replicator hummed, and a cup of the hot beverage materialized on the pad. She picked it up and walked over to a companel set into the bulkhead. She activated it with a touch, and saw the elliptical symbol of Bajor hovering in the center of the screen. She backed up and sat down on a padded seat along the wall, then sipped at her tea and waited. Shortly, the companel blinked, and the image of Shakaar appeared on the display. He wore a formal, dark brown Bajoran jacket over a white shirt. He was seated, with his forearms at right angles to his body and resting on the table in front of him. A padd sat between his arms. Kira recognized the wardroom behind him.

Good day to all of Bajor, he began. For years now, since the first days after the end of the Occupation, many of us have discussed the possibility of our people joining the United Federation of Planets. Opinion has long been divided on the matter, and likely always will be, but in recent years, a large majority of Bajorans have come to favor aligning with the member worlds of the Federation, and becoming a part of a larger community. As we embark

How far he's come, Kira thought, her attention wandering from the speech. Shakaar had never lacked for confidence or charm, but he had never cared much for politics, even after being elected first minister.

Only his love for their people, and his sense of responsibility to them, had caused him to seek his office, and then to sustain it. For a long time, though, Shakaar had practiced his public service in a homespun sort of way, and although he had not entirely lost that simplicity and lack of pretension, Kira had seen a sophistication grow in him particularly in the last few months, as he had been dealing with the Federation. Three years ago, the Federation approved Bajor's petition for membership, but at the counsel of the Emissary of the Prophets

Kira sipped at her tea again, thinking back to her days in the resistance. Shakaar had always been such a

strong and effective leader, never wavering from his purpose to free their people. As a girl, Kira had been awestruck by the man, and as a young woman, absolutely dedicated to his command. Only later, as an adult, when she and Shakaar had become romantically involved, had she truly learned how sensitive and solitary he actually was, and how much of a price he had paid and continued to pay by choosing to lead their people.

spent time touring Federation worlds. I have spoken with their representatives, as well as Kira's romantic relationship with Shakaar had ended abruptly, but amicably. It had been later that they had drifted apart, the gulf seeming to widen especially in the last few months. Although Kira still loved Odo since he had left, she had not seen anybody, and she did not know when, or even if, she ever would. She also missed her closeness with Shakaar. Not their romance, but the closeness that had come from having a shared history and shared values. When they had talked alone in his guest quarters yesterday, the distance between them had been apparent to her, though the conversation had gone perfectly well. And since it had not been Kira's inclination to diminish their friendship, it must have been Shakaar's choice. And sometimes that saddened her.

and on behalf of the Bajoran people, I officially requested the renewal of our petition for membership in the Federation. Today, here aboard Deep Space 9, a summit commenced to consider that petition.

Attending are ambassadors from

Kira turned her full attention to Shakaar, now that he had come to the official announcement of the summit. She wondered what the reaction on Bajor would be, and just how long it would take the Federation representatives on the station to come to a decision.

There have been many struggles for our people in the past, Shakaar continued, but now we look to a bright, positive, and peaceful future. He paused, seemingly to underscore the words he was about to say. Today, he went on, I am happy to report to you that Bajor's petition for membership in the Federation has been approved.

Kira was startled. She had believed that there was a good chance that this would happen within the next few months, but for it to happen so soon

The summit will continue, as there are many issues still to be resolved, but the official signing ceremony will take place six weeks from today. At that time, Bajor will become a member of the United Federation of Planets.

Shakaar continued speaking, but Kira heard nothing more. She felt dazed by the rapidity with which this had happened.

The quaver of the companel drew her eyes back to the display, and she saw that Shakaar had finished his speech, and that his image had been replaced by a Bajoran icon. She put her teacup down on the arm of the seat, then stood up and paced over to the companel. She switched it off. Still feeling stunned, she peered aimlessly around her office. Her gaze came to rest on the bookshelf, and then to the large, red tome there. She walked to the shelf and pulled *When the Prophets Cried* down.

Anew will shine the twilight of their destiny, Kira quoted the ancient prophecy. Not the end of the day, she whispered. The beginning. Holding the sacred text flat in one hand, she ran her fingers across the faded gilt letters of the title inlaid into the cover.

Alone in her office, Kira smiled, knowing that a new dawn had come to the people of Bajor.

Part Four

A Newer World

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends.
Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
A LFRED , L ORD T ENNYSON ,

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Do you have regrets?

Prynn raised her head and peered over the open top of the survival locker at Shar, not surprised by his question. Her own thoughts had turned to many subjects over the last hour or two, and regret had certainly been among them. Still, even considering the uncertainty of their situation, she did not wish to discuss such matters right now. Whats the point? she thought. Instead, shrugging and attempting to change the subject, she said, Well, Ive never been surfing on the Canopus Planet.

Shar smiled, but in a way Prynn had noticed before, like a mask with no emotion behind it; she had always taken the empty expression to be his form of a polite response. She had wanted him to ask her what surfing was, but he would not let go of his question to her. I think you know what I mean, he said. Yeah, she said, nodding, I do. She ducked back down and pulled a ration pack from the survival cache. Holding it up so that Shar could see it, she asked, Would you like something to eat?

No, thank you, he said.

Prynn walked around the locker and back over to where Shar lay on his back atop his bedroll. On the way, she decided that she was glad they had opted to transport. Unable to get much closer to the source of the pulse, they had done as her father had ordered and beamed in the opposite direction. She did not believe that it would do them any good, but she was pleased that she no longer had to see the shuttle wreckage. The rest of their new surroundings appeared the same as the old flat and featureless just without the embellishment of the crash site. Now theres a regret for you, she thought. If Id only been able to land the shuttle .

Shaking off the thought, she sat down on her own bedroll, awkwardly lowering herself onto it. Though they had taken off their helmets, neither she nor Shar had removed their environmental suits since they had transported. In Shars case, with his mangled leg, the process would have been unnecessarily painful. And since he had not been able to take off his suit, Prynn had simply not bothered to take off hers.

She began to unwrap the ration pack. Beside her, Shar said, I should have gone home sooner. Prynn looked over and saw him staring up at the sky. She did not say anything. If he needed to talk about this now, then she would let him. I could have taken a leave of absence from Starfleet, he went on. I could have even gotten posted to some planetside assignment on Andor. He paused, and when the seconds began to stretch out, Prynn felt that she should say something.

Im not so sure how easy it is to get Starfleet to transfer you wherever you want to go, she offered.

Shar turned his head to the side and looked over at her. I was selfish, he said flatly.

Prynn looked at him for a moment, and then said, I dont know you very well, Shar, but you dont strike me as a selfish person. I suspect that if you were, then you wouldnt be feeling such remorse right now. She glanced down at the partially unwrapped ration pack in her lap, and found that she really was not hungry after all.

Shar turned his head back and stared up at the sky again. I just wish I had done things in a different way, he said.

We all make choices, Prynn told him. And theyre not always the right ones. She thought she had come to understand that in the past few days better than she ever had. Look, you cant change the past, she said, and the picture of her mothers face rose immediately in her mind. Not wanting to risk any painful emotions following after it, she quickly pushed the image away. At least, you cant change it, she said, seeking to lighten the moment, without getting paid a visit by the Department of Temporal Investigations. Shar smiled again, but in a way that seemed genuine this time. Have you ever had to speak to one of their investigators? he asked, his tone a strange mix of curiosity and disdain.

Not personally, she said, but one time, when I was on the Sentinel Something moved quickly to Prynns right, and she looked in that direction. In the distance, a huge plume shot into the air, a thick, agitated column of smoke

Not smoke, Prynn saw as the rising mass joined seamlessly to the gray sky above, both obviously of the

same composition. She quickly stood up, the ration pack falling to the ground from her lap. As she watched, the column expanded outward, like the result of a massive explosion. The pulse, she speculated, but then wondered if her father had managed to detonate the devices. Dad, she thought, and then realized that she had opened her mouth and screamed the word. She stared in horror at the scene. The gray mass continued to spread outward.

Prynn, Shar called. Prynn! She tore her gaze away and looked down at him. The helmets, he said, and pointed past her. She turned like an automaton, stiffly, not really conscious of her movements. Prynn! Shar called again, and she looked out and saw the middle third of the horizon filled now, and the column advancing in all directions. She shook her head, as though waking herself from a dream.

The helmets, she thought, and she finally moved, picking them up off the ground. She raced over to Shar and gave him one. He pulled it on over his head, and she bent and helped him twist it into position and then lock it into place. Then she stood back up and did the same for herself.

The instant before the shock wave struck her, she saw the lid of the survival locker crash closed. Then a wall of increased pressure slammed into her, knocking the wind out of her and carrying her backward off of her feet. She flew through the air like a leaf before a hurricane.

At least five seconds passed before she hurtled back onto the ground, hard. Her head snapped back, hitting the back of her helmet. She gasped for air, trying to catch her breath. The gale rushed past, clawing at the contours of her environmental suit, and roaring loudly in her ears. Below her, the ground began to shake violently.

Prynn inhaled great, desperate gulps of air, involuntary attempts to return oxygen to her lungs. She struggled up onto her elbows, and saw blue electrical charges arcing across the metallic portions of her suit. Ahead, she saw nothing but Shar, not the bedrolls, not the survival locker, nothing but a great, writhing wall of gray bearing down on her. Her gaze followed it upward, and she saw the cloud cover above descending rapidly toward the planet's surface. Instinctively, she threw her arms up in front of her face.

Suddenly, she was surrounded by the thrashing, penumbral mass. The pressure around her increased, and she felt her environmental suit pushing in on her on all sides.

Her last conscious thought was of her father.

65

Quark stood behind the bar, motionless and staring at the display on the companel. He knew what was coming.

During the past half-year, Shakaar said, I have spent time touring Federation worlds

This evening, the bar was busier than it had been in a long time, with a virtual mob surrounding Hetik at the dabo table. Earlier, the hum of voices, the ring of glassware, and the delicious clink of gold-pressed latinum had combined in a way Quark had come to think of over the years as the sound of success. But after Shakaar had begun his speech, the mangle of noises had dulled as the attentions of his customers had been drawn first to Shakaar's voice, and then to his image on the companels around the bar and out on the Promenade. Bajorans had mostly been the ones initially distracted from their drinking and gambling by the first minister, but before long, almost all of the bar's patrons had stopped to watch and listen to Shakaar.

Today, here aboard Deep Space 9, the first minister continued, a summit commenced to consider that petition. Attending along with me are ambassadors from Alonis, from Trill

Yeah, yeah, Quark said, waving his hand in front of the display. We know who the players are.

Shhh, Treir said beside him, slapping him lightly on the arm.

Quark's mood plummeted by the second as he watched Shakaar delivering his address from the station's wardroom. I can't believe I served that man drinks there, he thought.

There have been many struggles for our people in the past, Shakaar went on, but now we look to a bright, positive, and peaceful future. He paused rather melodramatically, Quark thought, and Quark knew that the moment was at hand. The summit had only begun today, he had only found out about its purpose

a few hours ago, and yet here the first minister was, already making the announcement. After all these years in the bar, and after all that he had been through on the station, Quark's time here was finally at an end. Today, Shakaar droned on, I am happy to report to you that Bajors petition for membership in the Federation has been approved.

The bar erupted, cheers and applause going up from the Bajorans present. And probably the Starfleet types too, Quark thought bitterly. He did not bother to look around or listen closely enough to find out. He remained frozen behind the bar, glaring at the image of Shakaar on the display. Amazingly, the oaf kept talking, obviously not understanding either the value of a good exit line, or the dreariness of an anticlimax.

At last, Shakaar finished speaking, and the companel blinked into standby mode. Quark continued to stare at the screen. I guess that's really something, Treir said next to him, reaching up and touching him on the arm. Quark shrugged her hand away, then reached forward and jabbed at the companel's controls, deactivating it.

Im sorry, a voice said softly behind him, perfectly audible through the buzz that now filled the room. He turned to see Laren sitting at the bar, her hands folded together in front of her. He had been so preoccupied with the announcement that he had not even heard her come in. An expression of concern dressed her features, which touched Quark. Even with the difficult decisions that lay ahead in her own life, she still managed to feel badly for him.

Laren looked at Treir, who still stood next to Quark. There seemed to Quark to be no animosity in the look, but it also seemed clear that Laren wanted Treir to leave the immediate area. Uh, I need to go see if Hetik needs any help, the dabo girl said at once, and she quickly moved away.

So, Laren said once Treir had left, what are you going to do? They had each asked the same question earlier, when they had spoken in her office, but neither of their answers had been terribly specific.

Quark regarded Laren for a long moment, appreciating her strong features, the girlish cut of her hair, and the closeness that he had begun to feel with her. He suddenly felt the urge to make a bold gesture, not to impress her not for her at all, really but to symbolize for himself the new and indeterminate path down which his life had just begun to travel. He smiled broadly, then reached back and touched a control on the companel. Two loud chimes rang through the bar, and the lively hum of conversation faded. The next round of drinks, he called loudly, locking his gaze with Laren's, is on the house. Another cheer went up in the bar, actually even louder than the one following Shakaar's announcement.

Laren smiled back at Quark, apparently delighted by his gesture. The moment seemed to stretch out as they stared into each other's eyes. Everything around Quark seemed to wilt out of existence, and he and Laren together seemed to make up the entire universe. Then a tall, ribbed metal mug came streaking down between them, slamming onto the bar and ending the moment.

Yridian brandy, said a loud, slurred voice belonging to the Yridian whose hand gripped the mug. Laren turned her head slowly toward the bleary-eyed drunk. Quark watched as she reached up and, just as slowly, slid the mug out from between them.

Sorry, she said. Quark isn't working right now. Find one of the waiters to help you.

But but the Yridian stammered.

Laren reached out quickly as Grimp raced past, headed for the bar, a tray of empty glasses in his hands. She stopped him with a touch to his arm, and said, Grimp, would you please find this She paused and glanced over at Quark, offering him a comic expression. gentleman a table to sit at.

Uh, okay, Grimp said. I just need to

Do it now, Quark ordered the waiter.

Here, Laren said, and she took the tray from Grimp, then passed it over the bar to Quark. Quark turned and put it down beside the recycle shelf, then turned back to see Grimp leading the staggering Yridian away.

Thanks, Quark said to Laren, and he knew that his gratitude carried well beyond her relocation of the drunk.

Believe me, she said in a soft tone, it was my pleasure. Then she asked, Are you all right?

Quark considered the question briefly, and then shrugged. Not everything always turns out the way you

expect it to, he said. And you know what? That's not always a bad thing. To his great surprise, he realized that he actually believed that.

I think you're right about that, Laren told him. Then she leaned in over the bar, and Quark moved forward and leaned in himself. Now then, she said, can I buy you a drink?

Quark smiled again, already feeling intoxicated.

66

Vaughn was drowning.

He had struck the surface of the vortex and felt an immediate series of sensations. His body seemed buoyant within the gray eddies, as though floating in muddy light. Electrical currents streamed across his flesh, and blue jags of radiance filled the null vision of his closed eyes. Unexpected warmth surrounded him, and acceleration gathered him in its grip. The force, smooth and circular, carried him down and around somehow pushed him down until, at last, he fell from the universe.

And had continued falling. The warmth vanished, leaving him not cold, but empty. Gravity, too, disappeared, and still he fell. His lungs hungered for air, but feeling the void about him, he resisted the impossible attempt to breathe.

Vaughn had forced open his eyes. In the dusky absence of reality, he saw himself plunging down. The other-Vaughn tumbled away, unseeing, and then his eyes opened.

Does he see me? Vaughn had thought, and knew that the other-Vaughn could not. The other-Vaughn was from the past, from moments ago, had only just now opened his eyes. But what does he see?

Vaughn asked. Another-Vaughn, from farther back in the past? Vaughn did not know, but he saw fear in the other-Vaughn's eyes, and knew that it must also surely be in his own. He closed his eyes, unwilling to see.

Vaughn's lungs had formed their own version of the void by then, and he exhaled in an explosive burst. His body went through the motions of breathing in, but there was no air here. His muscles moved anyway, trying to inhale, trying to help sustain him.

The gray existence had surged into Vaughn, through his mouth and throat, down into his lungs. Filling his lungs with the pseudomatter of the thoughtscape. A spasm closed his larynx.

Vaughn was drowning.

Vaughn was dying, but he did not wait to die. For almost as long as he could remember, he had gazed up at the stars and yearned to explore. And for nearly as long, he had been forced, had been requested, had been constrained, to fight. He could not say that the fighting had come to nothing, because it had not; it had been necessary, always necessary, sometimes for the greater good, sometimes for the smaller, and still other times, merely for survival. But now, in the end, he chose not to battle, for he saw no enemy.

Instead, he would do what he had always wanted to do; he would explore.

Vaughn opened his mind. He threw off the walls, he threw off the secrecy, the denials and rationalizations. As his long day waned, he searched for the truth, for the essence of himself.

He opened his eyes again, and saw himself

setting the interdimensional devices around the vortex, ready to die alone, unable to have made peace to have made a bond with his daughter

on a battered starship, engaged with a mystical object that showed him how much death he had been privy to, and that death had been no companion to him

standing in a transporter room and watching the love of his life leave, pretending that she would return, knowing that she would not

leaning over the corpse of a person he had killed, in the name of saving others, and realizing in that moment that he had sealed himself off from the rest of humanity

listening to the words of the officer who had set him on his path, allowing himself to be extracted from the fellowship of the innocent

sitting in a sickroom, holding on to the hand of his mother, who had filled his world and left him too soon

being born into an existence that promised true connection of the mind, of the body, of the heart but in the best of circumstances, delivered isolation in almost every instant and from all those moments, all those Vaughns peered back, peered forward at him right now, as he fell within the thoughtscape, gone from one universe and into another, alone as always, and yet alone as never before. Vaughn's consciousness stretched across all those moments, existed at the same time in all those moments, and in all those in between. And he witnessed all at once, as he thought no one should, the extent to which he had existed, did exist, and would always exist, separated from every other being in the universe.

The loneliness extended from the instant of his birth, across uncounted billions, trillions of instants, to now. Not every instant, but almost all of them. The understanding crippled him. Vaughn was dying, and now he would wait to die.

Waiting, Vaughn understood that the loneliness was a lesson, and he learned from it. He could not have done otherwise, not as he searched for the truth of a life that stretched away behind him. And not as the life that surrounded him, and occupied him, cried out in the pain of an isolation it had never known until inadvertent invaders had brought it the unintended gift of companionship and then taken it away. The thoughtscape had considered the Prentara both invaders and saviors, Dax had said, and Vaughn now grasped precisely why. Even a tormentor could provide company.

Waiting, Vaughn considered the prison that the home of the Inamuri had become. Still existing in every moment of his life, he closed his eyes on the thoughtscape, and opened them on the morning he left home after his mother had already gone, and really, had she not taken home with her when she had? Vaughn had always wanted to explore, and now he saw that he had left home a long time ago, and that he had been looking for it ever since.

Waiting, Vaughn realized that these lessons and the learning were connections. The teacher and the student. The thoughtscape had tied itself to him.

Hear me, Vaughn screamed without words. I am here.

Vaughn searched for the right moments of his life. He peered across the thoughtscape and saw everything he had ever been, everything he had ever done, all laid out before him, each instant distinct from the next. He closed his eyes, and opened them on the bridge of Defiant, returning again to the moment when he knew Prynn had gone.

Not this, he said as his heart ached. Not this.

He closed his eyes, and opened them on the distressed figure of Ensign ChThane, thrown onto the desolate plain of a dead planet.

Not this, he repeated.

Vaughn stopped waiting to die, accepting that he had decided to fight again, to struggle for even the smallest connection, for as many moments out of a lifetime that he could. No longer waiting to die, he saw that those moments, no matter how few, no matter how fleeting, were all worth fighting for. They were worth dying for.

His last conscious thought was of his daughter.

67

Kira strode purposefully down the corridor, the bright illumination and openness aboard Gryphon a noticeable contrast to the dark, cramped corridors in Deep Space 9's habitat ring. She read the room-identification plaques as she passed sets of doors, until at last she found the one Commander Montenegro had provided her. She reached up and touched the door chime set into the bulkhead there, and a moment later the doors parted and slid open.

Kira stepped inside, and although she saw Akaar immediately across the room, seated in a chair she could not resist looking around. The cabin was spacious, easily twice the size of most of the crew accommodations aboard the ship, she was sure. Unlike standard guest quarters, it had been decorated with more than a few adornments, and not just in a generic manner. Why wouldn't he make these quarters

his own? Kira thought. Akaar had been living here for several weeks now, and who knew how long would be here after today?

Some of the items she saw including what appeared to be primitive ceremonial masks and totems reminded her of similar items that Captain Sisko had kept in his quarters. In addition, though, numerous textiles hung on the walls sashes, headdresses, capes, many of them in brocaded fabric, and in a mixture of both muted and vibrant colors. She also saw an object that appeared to be a weapon three curved blades arranged in an essentially triangular shape, with a circular hole in the middle that she guessed functioned as a grip.

Colonel, the admiral said. This is unexpected. He did not stand.

Kira stepped farther into the room. She had come here after the summit had finally adjourned for the day. Now, in a moment of spontaneity, she raised her right fist to the left side of her chest, then opened her hand and held it out in front of her. I come with an open heart and an open hand.

Akaars eyebrows slowly rose. Indeed, he said, and now he did stand. Then I certainly must welcome you with an open heart and hand. He returned her gesture.

Kira smiled, skeptical. Admiral, she started. She brought her hands together in front of her and paced to her left. I have to tell you, she said, Im not really sure what to make of you.

Akaars shoulders moved slightly, his equivalent, she supposed, of a shrug. I am a Starfleet admiral, he said. I am here simply executing my duties.

Kira stopped and faced him across the room, folding her arms across her chest. And your duties included interrogating me?

Interrogating you? Akaar said. Yes, they did.

Why? Kira demanded, throwing her hands up and out, and then letting them fall to her sides. To understand Bajor through me? Thats not really fair. Im not an elected representative. I dont speak for my people. I cant speak for my people.

Akaar nodded. Is this the open heart you come with? he asked her.

Its the open hand, she said.

I see. He moved across the room, away from her and over toward a replicator set into the far bulkhead. May I get you something to drink, Colonel? he asked. Looking back at her over his shoulder, he added, To celebrate.

Kira did not know what to say. She did not particularly want to share a drink with this man, but she also did not wish to give the impression that she was not pleased about Bajors acceptance into the Federation. Before she could formulate a response, Akaar spoke again.

Colonel Kira, he said, turning to face her directly, did you think that my questions to you, and your answers, would prevent me from fostering Federation membership for Bajor?

Fostering? Kira echoed. She found the claim that Akaar had been a proponent for Bajor difficult to believe. But then, she had come here looking for answers from the admiral, wanting to identify and understand his motives. She said, I will toast Bajor joining the Federation.

Akaar nodded once, then turned toward the replicator. Instead of ordering something there, though, he picked up a short, bulbous bottle from a shelf. Kira watched as he pulled the stopper from the dark green bottle and poured a clear liquid into two glasses. He carried the glasses back across the room and offered her one. This is grosz, he told her. From my native Capella. Kira accepted the glass. Akaar held his up and said, To Bajor joining the Federation.

Kira lifted her glass, and saw that the drink was not perfectly clear, but had a purple tint. To Bajor joining the Federation, she echoed. Akaar moved his glass forward, touching it to Kiras with a soft ring. He drank deeply, and she took a gulp herself. The drink fired her throat as it went down, leaving behind an acerbic taste as the burn faded. She breathed out loudly through her mouth. Thats a powerful flavor, she said.

Perhaps I should have forewarned you, Akaar said. I understood that, as a rule, Bajorans liked powerful flavors.

I wasnt complaining, Kira said, and to support her declaration, she took another swallow. Again, she exhaled loudly. Just offering an observation.

Observation noted, Akaar said. Motioning toward the sitting area, he said, Would you care to sit, Colonel? Kira walked around a low table and sat on the sofa below the windows. The admirals cabin looked out, not on the station, but on open space. Akaar sat back down in the chair he had been in when Kira had arrived. He drank even more of his groz, and then said, Am I correct in saying that you believe I have been attempting to judge Bajoran society through you?

Havent you been? Kira asked, trying to keep any antagonism out of her tone, if not out of her words.

Akaar reached forward and put his almost empty glass down on the table. No, Colonel, I have not been, he said. What I have been doing is attempting to judge you through your feelings about your people and through your relationship with them.

Youve been judging me? Kira asked, not sure that the revelation actually made her feel any more comfortable with the admiral.

I believe that how a person sees their society, how they fit in and do not fit in, how they deal with internal strife, can say a great deal about them. Kira supposed that there must be some truth to that, but

The Attainder the Vedek Assembly imposed upon me She let her words trail off.

The Attainder is the result of how some Bajorans view you, Akaar said. Or perhaps it is not even that, but a form of political expediency. But with respect to you, Colonel, it is not the Attainder that interests me, but how you have dealt with it. You have carried on, and not just for yourself, but in continued service to your people. The words surprised Kira, not because they were not true they were but because they revealed an opinion she would never have guessed Akaar to possess.

Perhaps I owe you an apology, then, she said. But then, recalling that the admiral had certainly not made his stay at Deep Space 9 an easy one for her, she added, Or perhaps you owe me one.

Perhaps neither, Akaar countered. He reached forward and picked up his glass of groz, finishing it. Would you like another? he asked.

Kira held up her glass and saw that it was still half full. Quickly, she raised the glass to her lips, threw her head back, and downed the rest of her drink. Then she held the glass out to the admiral, and said, Yes, thank you.

For the first time that she had seen, Akaar smiled. He took her glass and walked back across the room, returning a moment later with two new drinks. He handed one to Kira across the table, and remained standing. Colonel, I believe that you and I have similar feelings about our peoples, he said. He paused, and then added, Although I may have more frustrations with mine.

Oh, Ive had plenty of frustrations myself, Kira said. Back in the days of the provisional government She did not need to finish the sentence.

I understand, he said. He seemed to consider something very seriously for a moment, and then he said, On my world, the Ten Tribes have warred sporadically for most of my life. Kira wondered how long that was, and suddenly had the sense that Akaar was a great deal older than she had assumed from his appearance. Numerous leaders have stepped forward through the years, he went on, and attempted to unify all the people. Some succeeded, but only for short times. Many of Capellas greatest leaders were deposed, others were others were killed. Genuine emotion appeared on Akaars features, an expression of terrible sadness, Kira thought. The admiral absently sipped at his drink, and then said, I was the victim of a coup myself.

You? Kira asked.

He moved back to the chair and sat down. I was a boy, he said. Born into leadership, a teer at birth. Kira gathered that teer was the title given to Capellan leaders. My mother served as my regent, and it was she who took me from our world and got me to safety when our government was overthrown. Have you ever gone back? Kira asked.

Many times, Akaar said. I have had a long life, and my people are a good, strong people perhaps too strong in some ways. The unity we need eludes us.

Im sorry, Kira said. I think I understand.

I believe that you do, Colonel, Akaar agreed. For more than a century, the Federation has provided my people with food and medicine they have dramatically improved the quality of health care. Before my birth, Starfleet officers even saved my mothers life. For a long time, I have wished for the opportunities

for my people that Federation membership would bring.

Will it ever happen? Kira wanted to know.

I hope so, Akaar said, melancholy tainting his voice. But certainly not in my lifetime. I've had to admit to myself that we Capellans have not matured enough as a society to become part of a greater community.

It seemed a difficult admission for him. I'm envious of your people, he said, holding his glass up again, Bajor has come far since the Occupation, and you should be proud of that, Colonel.

I am proud of that, Kira said, but she heard a hesitancy in her tone. I am, she repeated, stronger.

Akaar must have sensed her momentary uncertainty, because he asked, Do you have concerns?

Yes, she confessed, but not exactly about my people. I favor Federation membership, but tonight, after the first ministers announcement, I found myself worrying about Bajorans being able to retain their identity now.

The Federation has chosen to invite and accept Bajor into our community because Bajorans offer their own uniqueness, Akaar told her. There will be no need and no desire to change that. This union is not about how Bajor can be made to fit into the Federation, but rather how the Federation can be made into a part of Bajor.

Kira smiled, those ideas precisely what she had hoped for, and the words precisely what she had needed to hear tonight. Thank you, Admiral, she said.

You should be proud not only of your people, Akaar said, but of yourself, and your part in leading them. I feel privileged to serve.

And you will continue to do so, Akaar said. I am not supposed to tell you this, but when the Bajoran Militia is absorbed into Starfleet, not only will you be offered a captaincy, but you will be asked to remain in command of Deep Space 9.

Kira smiled again, realizing that she had never really considered the possibility that she could be reassigned elsewhere once Bajor joined the Federation. Thank you, she said again.

It was not completely my decision, Colonel, Akaar said, but those were my recommendations.

Kira regarded the admiral, amazed at how completely she had misread his motives and judgments. At the same time, she remembered how easy he had made it for her to do so. Something else occurred to her, and she immediately asked the question that rose in her mind. What about Lieutenant Ro?

In an instant, Akaar's demeanor changed. His face seemed to harden, his body to tense. A determination about Lieutenant Ro has not yet been made, he said.

Kira persisted, convinced, after serving with Ro for months, that the station's security chief was being unfairly judged. And what were your recommendations about Ro? she asked.

They differed considerably from my recommendations about you, Colonel, Akaar said. My opinions about Ro Laren have been on record for a long time.

Kira nodded, understanding, but also realizing that people changed. Captain Sisko had shunned the title and responsibilities of the Emissary at first, and then had come to embrace them. Damar had been an ugly, hateful man, who had come to acknowledge and regret the terrible things he had done, and had become a strong and worthy leader. And even Kira herself after the Occupation, she had for a long time resisted the prospect of Bajor joining the Federation, but now

Opinions about Capellans have existed for a long time too, I imagine, Kira finally said. But maybe in the future, how they learn to comport themselves going forward will matter more than how they did in the past. Her message to the admiral was clear Ro deserved another chance, or at the very least, another evaluation.

Maybe, Akaar said, the analogy obviously not lost on him. But he appeared unconvinced about either Lieutenant Ro or his own people.

Kira held up her glass of grosz once more. To Capella, she said.

Akaar did not smile, but he regarded Kira with what seemed to be an expression of appreciation. He lifted his glass. To Bajor, he said.

Kira leaned forward in her chair, holding her glass out to the admiral. He leaned forward himself, and touched his glass to hers. To newer worlds, she said.

The door opened, and Ezri stepped onto the bridge. Julian stood at her side, wanting to assist her, she suspected, but respecting her need to walk onto the bridge unaided. She was still recuperating from her latest experience with the thoughtscape, but when she had received word from Bowers that something was happening on the planet, she had wanted to be here. Julian had understood, and had put up no argument.

As they made their way toward the center of the bridge, passing Nog at the engineering console, Ezri saw the eyes of all the crew directed forward. She peered up at the main viewscreen. The clouds surrounding the planet had erupted in one area, as though forced up from below. The movement of the cloud cover had become far more violent, she saw, even causing numerous breaks through which the planets surface was now visible. The effects could not have been the result of the pulse, Ezri realized at once, because if they had been, then Bowers would already have ordered Defiant away. Whats happening down there? she asked as she and Julian came abreast of the command chair.

Were not sure, Bowers said, vacating the chair and allowing Ezri to take it. But were seeing some breaks in the clouds, big enough to allow us to scan through them. The energy buildup at the source of the pulse appears to be dissipating there and spreading out into the atmosphere.

Is the pulse still a danger? she asked.

Not as far as we can tell, Bowers reported. At least, not right now.

Ezri turned and looked past Julian, over toward the engineering station. Nog, she said, you did it. The away team must have succeeded in deploying the devices Nog and his engineers had developed and sent down to the surface. For the moment, it appeared that four billion Vahni Vahl Tupali would be safe.

Not me, Nog said, turning in his chair toward her. The explosion should have sealed the interface. The energy should have been trapped on the other side.

She looked to Bowers. Has the thoughtscape emerged onto the planet?

He shook his head. We cant tell what happened.

Quietly, so that only Bowers could hear, she asked, Has there been any sign of the shuttle?

Weve been scanning outward from the site of the pulse wherever we can, Bowers said, lowering the volume of his voice to match hers. So far, nothing.

Ezri considered their options. She eased herself up out of the command chair and walked over to the engineering station. Nog, she asked, how long until the Sagan will be repaired?

At least two more days, he said.

She turned and looked back at the viewscreen. Even if Sagan were available right now, she did not know if she would order it down to the surface. As much as the cloud cover had been in motion when Defiant had first arrived here, there had been enough stability in it that, when openings through the clouds had formed, the crew had been able to safely send both a probe and the shuttle through and down to the planet. But now the scene on the main viewer showed an atmosphere in complete turmoil. The idea of putting more lives at risk

Ive got the shuttle, Ensign Merimark called from the tactical station.

Ezri heard reaction from the bridge crew, but she ignored it, instead pacing over to stand beside Merimark. What are you reading? she asked.

Im picking up Chaffees transponder signal, Merimark said. Im trying to scan the location its difficult, theres still energy in the clouds, and theyre moving so wait there its on the surface Im reading hull plating. When the ensign suddenly stopped speaking, a sense of dread filled Ezri.

What is it? she asked.

Merimark looked up with a weary, pained expression on her face. The shuttle crashed, she reported.

There are no life signs.

Ezri felt whatever strength she had left in her drain away. She looked over at Julian. He stared back, the anguish he felt apparent on his face, as it must have been on her own.

Lieutenant Nog, she said firmly, finding strength in her responsibility to the crew. I want the Sagan ready as soon as possible, crews working on it around the clock.

Aye, sir, Nog said.

Lieutenant Bowers, I want options, she told him. I want to find the away team. She did not need to add alive or dead.

Yes, sir, Bowers said.

Ezri had already lost Gerda, and now maybe she had lost Vaughn and Shar and Prynn, but she would not leave this planet until she knew that for sure.

Ezri sat in the command chair, watching along with the rest of the crew as the planet below was transformed. Above the area from which the pulse had once originated, a huge mass of unidentifiable gray matter burst up into the atmosphere. Like the darkened image of a nuclear detonation, the mass emerged kilometers wide through the cloud cover. The clouds themselves fled from the explosion of matter, pushed aside by the enormous displacement of air.

The gray mass spread as it surged upward, and at its edges, began to turn back toward the planet, as though gravity had only just prevented it from surging out into space. Its surface whirled at uncounted points, a collection of spinning vortices impossibly bound together. The mass seemed to hover as it unfolded, as if now defying gravity.

And then it plunged down, not falling back to the planet, but diving toward the surface. The mass hurtled earthward, streaking down faster than it had climbed up. It struck the ground with phenomenal force, instantly liquefying rock at the points of impact, and sending expanses of ground blasting outward. The mass pushed along the surface, dislodging the crust to a depth of ten kilometers.

The clouds, tossed away earlier, now returned and joined the maelstrom, swirling into the mix of gray matter and rocky debris. Energy surges forked like lightning across the exterior of the enormous amalgamation. The mass grew across the surface.

And then the planet became shrouded once more, buried beneath a churning gray shell that hovered between solid and liquid states. The mass undulated like a living thing. It reached unbroken from pole to pole.

Ezri watched all of this, something she had not witnessed in nine lifetimes of experience, and thought, Vaughn and Shar and Prynn are down there.

Or at least, they had been.

Over the course of hours, the great, gray shell smoothed and calmed, but sensors could not pierce even its outer layers. Through breaks in the cover that had occurred during the transformation, though, scans had indicated that the energy level at the site of the pulse had dropped to zero. Whatever had happened down on the planet and whatever price had been paid to make it happen the pulse had been neutralized. The science and engineering teams continued searching for a means of penetrating the shell, either with sensors or with Sagan, once it had been repaired. While the crew held out little hope of finding the away team alive, Ezri refused to accept that felt that it was her duty to refuse to accept that. She had briefly thought about the eulogies she might have to deliver for her crewmates, not much more than a week after the service for Gerda Roness, but she had quickly scuttled such morbid and inappropriate notions. As the acting captain of the ship, Ezri remained dedicated to doing all that she could to save the away team, and she would presume them alive until it had been proven that they

Something's happening on the planet, Ensign Merimark announced. I'm reading a break in the shell two breaks both sizable.

Put it on the viewer, Ezri said. The main screen blinked, and one view of the planet was replaced by another, targeted view. On the surface of the gray shell, two small, circular holes had appeared.

The openings are both fifty-three-point-three kilometers in diameter, Merimark reported. Depth they reach all the way down to the planet. I've got full sensor contact down to the surface.

Foreboding suddenly washed over Ezri, the narrow cylinders in the shell uncomfortably reminiscent of the barrels of weapons. She recalled the simulation of the pulse that Nog had shown her down in engineering, and she now envisioned the destructive energy hurtling through the cylinders and out into space. Are there any energy readings? she asked.

Negative, Merimark said. Energy readings are minimal. There doesn't seem to be The ensign stopped speaking abruptly, and Ezri spun quickly around in her seat to face her. I'm reading two life signs at the bottom of one well, one life sign at the bottom of the other.

Ezri vaulted out of the command chair and raced to Merimark's station. Are they human? Ezri asked, looking for the answer on the console. Andorian? She felt her heart pounding in her chest, a desperate hope forming in her mind.

Merimark's fingers flew across the panel, causing words and numbers to march across her display. One Andorian, she said. And two humans. Two of them are in environmental suits.

Transfer the coordinates to the transporter, Ezri said at once.

Aye, sir, Merimark said.

Dax to medical bay.

Go ahead, Bashir replied.

Julian, she said with barely restrained excitement, we've located an Andorian and two humans down on the planet. We'll have them beamed directly to you. She felt absolutely astonished at the unexpected turn of events, both disbelief and joy coursing through her.

Acknowledged, Julian said, and she could hear his excitement even in the single word. I'll keep you posted. Bashir out.

Dax to transporter.

This is Chao, came the voice of the transporter chief.

Chief, we need an emergency site-to-site transport from the planet's surface directly to the medical bay, Ezri said, the words spilling from her. One Andorian, two humans. Ensign Merimark is transferring the coordinates.

I see them, the chief said. Transporter locks established.

Acknowledged, Ezri said. Bring them home.

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Ro Laren stepped out of her office and set the lock. It had been quite a day, and she looked forward to crawling into bed, pushing away all thoughts of Bajor and the Federation, and getting some sleep. Of course, she had not been able to do that for the past couple of nights, which certainly contributed to her exhaustion right now.

What a coincidence, a voice said from just down the Promenade.

Ro turned and looked in that direction, the figure of Quark difficult to see clearly in the shadows of DS9's simulated night. He stood at the entrance to the bar, evidently just closing up himself. I don't know if I believe in coincidences, she said, and began walking toward him.

Oh no? Quark said. He waited until she reached him before continuing. Are you suggesting that I planned this? he asked in obvious mock offense. Are you suggesting that I stood right here, staring over at the security office and waiting for you to come out, when I could have closed up half an hour ago?

Well, didn't you? she asked, playing along. Ro realized that one of the things she particularly liked about Quark was simply that he was fun.

Actually, he said, reaching down and setting the lock on the bar entrance, it was more like forty-five minutes.

Ro laughed, which felt especially good after the stress of this week. That was another thing she liked about Quark he was funny.

May I walk you to your quarters, Laren? he asked.

Well, she said, drawing the word out as though having to seriously consider her answer, I suppose since you've been waiting here so long She started for the turbolift, and he fell in step beside her.

Now that's what I like, Quark said. A female who knows her own value.

What do you mean? she asked him.

I mean, if I'd only been waiting for you for fifteen minutes, he said, you probably would've left me standing there.

Probably, she agreed with a smile. They reached the turbolift, and Quark pressed the control panel in the bulkhead beside it. The door retracted, and she and Quark entered the car. So, Quark, she said after the door had closed and she had specified her destination, were you really waiting for me? The lift began its descent.

Not really, Quark said, and Ro felt a twinge of disappointment. I could have closed up an hour ago, but Morn kept going on and on about the political situation on Beta Antares IV. Turns out one of his sisters is a top boss there.

Boss? Ro said. Isn't that sort of an odd title for a politician? She had heard of government officials being called many things, but boss had never been one of them.

With Morn, Quark said, I don't ask questions.

Why not?

Because he might answer them, Quark moaned, and then another hour of my life would be gone. Ro chuckled, well aware of Morn's penchant for seemingly endless conversation.

As the lift changed direction, Ro noticed something. She looked over at Quark, and said, You're not wearing that cologne anymore.

Quark offered a little shrug. You didn't like it, he said.

That's very considerate.

That's the 305th Rule of Acquisition, he told her. Always be considerate.

No. Really? she said, and felt immediately foolish for having asked. She may not have known all the Rules of Acquisition or any of them, for that matter, but she could have guessed that being considerate was not a business principle widely held by the Ferengi. She really must be tired. Quark apparently saw her embarrassment, because he did not bother to say anything, but only raised the ridge above his eyes. Don't laugh, she warned.

Whose laughing?

Well, how was business tonight anyway? she asked, clumsily changing the subject.

Good, Quark said. Except for me buying a round for everybody.

At least you got one back, Ro said, referring to the drink she had bought him earlier, after Shakaar's announcement. She had enjoyed that, although she had been called away on a security matter soon after. Best drink I ever had, he said, his appreciation clearly genuine.

The turbolift decelerated to a stop, and the door slid open before them. Ro stepped out into the habitat ring, but when she looked around, she saw that Quark had remained in the car. Aren't you coming? she asked. I thought you were going to walk me to my quarters.

He did not move, but looked at her with a serious expression on his face. May I ask you a question, Laren?

Ro suspected she knew what the question would be, and she made a decision she could not entirely believe she was making. The answer is yes, she said.

Quark's lips parted in a big smile, his eyes wide with surprise. You haven't even heard the question yet, he said.

Ro reached out to the side of the doorway, then leaned back into the turbolift, holding Quark's gaze. I trust you, she said.

Quark looked into her eyes for a few seconds, but then he said, You might want to wait for me to ask this question before answering.

Okay, she said. Go ahead.

I, uh, I wanted to, uh, know, he said, stumbling along. I wanted to know if you would like to go out with me?

You mean on a date? she asked solemnly. Quark nodded. Then the answer is yes. She pushed away from the side of the doorway and swung back into the corridor. Now, walk me to my quarters, she said. I'm exhausted and I need to sleep.

Quark exited the car, and the two began walking toward her quarters, side by side. They were both quiet for a few moments, a silence Ro found very comfortable, something she had not experienced in quite some time. Even with Bajor joining the Federation, and her future filled with nothing but uncertainty, she

felt content right now. And before she realized she was doing it, she reached over and took Quarks hand in her own.

They walked like that all the way to her quarters.

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Prynn opened her eyes as though from a long and restful sleep. She had no conscious thoughts as she lay on her back, staring up in the dimly lighted room. After a few seconds, for no good reason, she turned her head to the right. When she saw Shar lying on the diagnostic bed next to her, she bolted up, leaning on her hands. In an instant, she recalled everything that had taken place on the planet, up until the moment Shar had yelled at her to get the helmets. It seemed impossible that they had not been killed, but Dad, she thought, remembering the great gray column, expanding outward, obviously from an explosion an explosion where he had been. Prynn spun quickly around to look at the diagnostic bed to her left. It was empty. Dad, she thought again, calling to him in her mind, but she knew that he was gone. She dropped down onto her side on the bed. Tears blurred her vision and rolled down her face. She felt hollow. She had lost her father, and to make it worse, she had also lost the last seven years with him. At the periphery of her perception, Prynn heard the whisper of a door. She ignored it, unable to focus on anything but her sorrow. She squeezed her eyes shut as she began to sob.

Ensign Tenmei? Through the sounds of her grief, she heard the voice of Dr. Bashir. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and she opened her eyes. Before her, she saw the shape of his face, though she could not make out his features in the shadowy lighting. Are you in pain? Bashir asked.

Pain, Prynn thought, and could not begin to describe the agony that consumed her. She tried to answer, but she could not stop crying. Finally, she managed to say, My father.

Oh, Bashir said. Ensign, your fathers going to be fine.

Her tears seemed to stop immediately. What? she asked, raising her head. What?

Your fathers here in the medical bay, Bashir told her. Prynn stared at him, unmoving. She felt him exert pressure on her shoulder, trying gently to push her. She allowed him to guide her, and she peered into the gloom where he pointed. Computer, Bashir said, lights up one-quarter.

As the illumination in the medical bay increased, Prynn looked up at Dr. Bashirs face for a moment. Then she peered back to where he was pointing, at a diagnostic bed halfway across the room. She saw the figure of a man lying atop it and recognized her fathers profile at once. The sheet covering him up to his shoulders rose and fell at his chest, confirmation of his breathing.

Prynn laughed, a sharp, involuntary noise as uncontrollable as her crying had been. Hes alive, she sputtered. She laughed again, even as tears began streaming down her face once more.

Yes, he is, Bashir said. Prynn leaned backward, ready to fall onto the bed, but the doctor put a hand behind her and lowered her down. Computer, night lighting, he said. The shadows returned, the doctors face fading from sight once more. Im going to get you something to help you sleep, he told her.

Wait, she said, grabbing his arm as he started to go. How did we get here?

I wasnt on the bridge when it happened, he said, but I believe that the clouds cleared above you, and we just beamed you up. You and Ensign chThane were wearing environmental suits, so you were able to survive down on the planet during itstransformation. He tapped at her hand, then softly pulled it from his arm and set it beside her on the bed. Im going to get something to help you through the night, he said again, and he walked away.

Before he returned, Prynn had already fallen back to sleep.

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As Kira prepared to leave her quarters for her office, she thought again about contacting Kasidy. She had tried to reach her last night, right after Shakaars announcement, but Kass comm system had not been accepting incoming transmissions. She knew that Kas sometimes shut down her comm when writing letters, not wanting to be distracted. Kira had not bothered to leave a message.

Now, even though it was still early more than an hour before the start of the day shift she decided to try again. She sat down at her command panel, opened a channel, and sent a greeting. After only a few seconds, the display blinked and Kasidy appeared. Nerys, she said with a bright smile. She looked as though she had been awake for a while.

Good morning, Kira said. It looks like I'm not contacting you too early.

Not at all, Kas said. I always love hearing from you. Of course, if I could only get you to come for a visit I know, I know, Kira said. As soon as I can get away

Nerys, if I have to wait for a day you're not working, then this child Kasidy reached down below the view on the display, obviously running her hand across the swell in her midsection. will probably have a command of their own by then. Kira chuckled, and resolved again to find some time to visit Bajor. So how are you?

I guess I'm pretty excited, Kira said, putting her anticipation into words for the first time.

Excited? Now that sounds good, Kas said. About what?

About Bajor. Kira realized that Kas did not know what had happened yesterday. You haven't heard, have you?

Apparently not, Kasidy said. Why don't you tell me?

Kas, Bajor's been accepted into the Federation. The words actually sounded like something out of a dream to Kira. This time had been in Bajor's future for so long now that it seemed strange for it to finally be in the present. The official signing will take place in six weeks.

Surprise showed on Kasidy's face. When did this happen? she wanted to know. Kira told her about Akaar and the ambassadors and the summit, and then about the first minister's speech. When she had finished, Kasidy said, I didn't realize this was so close to happening.

I don't think any of us did, Kira agreed, other than Shakaar. She noticed that Kas's expression had slipped from surprise to what looked like discomfort. Are you all right? Kira asked. Does this bother you?

I'm fine, Kasidy said. It's just I'm not exactly sure how I'm supposed to feel about this. She paused, and then said, I mean, I'll be living in Federation territory, so that's a good thing.

It will all be good.

I know, you're right, Kasidy said. It's just that

Just that Captain Sisko should be here, Kira thought. It's all right, Kas. You had a sacred vision, so you know that Benjamin is with the Prophets. And that means he must know about this.

Of course, Kasidy replied, a forced smile appearing on her face. You're right. I'm sure Ben's very happy about this.

I'm sure he is, Kira said. He worked hard for this, against a lot of opposition and through some difficult times. But this is all happening because of him.

Kasidy smiled again, and this time, it seemed genuine. He really was he really is something.

Yes, he is.

For the next hour, they talked about Benjamin Sisko.

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I'll see you on the bridge, Captain, Nog said.

Before Vaughn could respond, Dr. Bashir offered his own opinion on the matter. Not for at least a day or two, you won't, he said, walking over to Vaughn's biobed. The doctor held a padd in one hand, which he referred to as he checked the diagnostic panel.

I'll be there soon enough, Vaughn told Nog. The engineer smiled and nodded, then left. This had been Nogs second visit today earlier the lieutenant had also gotten the opportunity to speak with Ensign Ch'Thanee and he had not been the only crew member to stop by the medical bay. In fact, the only person among Defiant's small crew who had not come by, not surprisingly, had been Prynn.

Vaughn might have had a profound experience down on the planet, and come to a deeper understanding of his relationship with his daughter and of the troubles between them, but he had no reason to expect

that she had done the same. According to Dr. Bashir, who had clearly noticed Prynns conspicuous absence, he had released her to her quarters this morning, with orders to remain off her feet until tomorrow. Of the three members of the away team, Pryn had been in the best condition after their ordeal, but even she would need time to recuperate. Vaughn had tried to accept what the doctor had told him, but it seemed less like a real explanation for Pryn not visiting him, and more like wishful thinking. And the truth was, no matter the troubles between them, it hurt him that she had not come in to see him. So how are you feeling? Bashir asked.

Tired, Vaughn said, and though that was certainly true for him physically, it was in an emotional sense that he felt most drained. Since he had regained consciousness, he had attempted to shake off the effects of his experiences down on the planet, but he had not been completely successful. All those memories of loss that he had carried with him through his life, most dulled by the passage of time, had been made current again for him, and all at once. He suspected that only time would help him mend the reopened wounds. He would be able to get through it, he believed, but he did not expect the process to be particularly pleasant.

Not wanting to dwell on all of that right now, though, he asked the doctor, Hows Ensign chThane? Bashir glanced across the medical bay to where the young man lay sleeping.

Hes doing well, the doctor said. Hes got a strong constitution. Ill probably release him tomorrow morning. Vaughn had already learned that chThane would not lose his leg, although Bashir had noted that if the ensign had gone without major medical treatment for another few hours, not only might he have lost his leg, but his internal injuries might have killed him. You, on the other hand, the doctor continued, I may want to keep here for two more days.

I understand. What had physically happened to Vaughn during his time within the thoughtscape, up until his eventual rescue, remained something of a mystery. Vaughn had hypothesized that, although he had dived into the vortex, he might never have actually passed into the universe of the Inamuri, or if he had, that he might have been carried quickly back into this one when the Inamuri had made the transition itself. Either way, he had guessed that the thoughtscape, sensing his plight via their strange mental and emotional connection, had formed an atmospheric pocket around him.

Dr. Bashir, on the other hand, had developed a different theory. He had detected residual energy readings within Vaughns body, leading him to conjecture that the Inamuri had actually reorganized matter within Vaughns lungs into respirable air. And because the residual energy spread throughout Vaughns body, the doctor also thought that the Inamuri might have essentially pressurized him from within.

Whatever the explanation, Vaughn felt confident that his survival had been the result of action taken by the thoughtscape, and Bashir concurred. Because of the uniqueness of that situation, Vaughn understood why the doctor wanted to keep him in the medical bay for a couple of days. While there appeared to be no deleterious effects on Vaughn other than to his emotionshe agreed that remaining under direct medical observation for the time being seemed like a good idea.

To Bashir, he said, I trust your medical judgment, Doctor.

Well, I guess somebody has to. Vaughn and Bashir both looked toward the door on the other side of the medical bay, where Lieutenant Dax had just entered.

You keep talking like that, Bashir said as the lieutenant walked over, and Ill have grounds to declare you mentally unfit for duty.

And you can write those orders from the brig, Dax retorted. Vaughn enjoyed the lively banter, a welcome change in tone for him from the last few days.

I like the brig, Bashir joked, checking the diagnostic panel again and making a note on his padd. Less work to do. He held up the padd, obviously to demonstrate how overworked he was. He finished what he was doing, then discreetly withdrew across the room to a console, leaving Vaughn and Dax by themselves.

How are you feeling, sir? Dax asked.

Like an old man.

Hmmm, Dax said. That doesnt really fit with the crews view of you as being indestructible.

Indestructible? Vaughn said.

Prynn and Shar were at least wearing environmental suits when we recovered them, Dax explained with a smile. You made it through two universes in a torn Starfleet uniform and a field coat older than most of the crew.

Take my word for it, Lieutenant, there are better ways to travel, he said. Then, curious, he asked, Whats the status of the thoughtscape?

Its difficult to know for sure without direct communication, Dax said, but it appears to have transformed a great deal of matter into a form that it can inhabit in our universe. So far as we can tell, the entire thoughtscape emerged through the interface and now surrounds the planet, in normal space and in several other dimensions.

Its been trying to do that for centuries, Vaughn said. The energy clouds were the mechanism for that. The thoughtscape Vaughn searched for the right word. pushed them through the vortexthe interface.

And the energy released with each push was the pulse, Dax said.

Vaughn nodded. And each time, the interface widened, he went on, allowing the thoughtscape to push more through the next time, and faster, which increased the size of the pulse. But it hadnt yet been able to get enough energy through to transform enough matternot until Nogs devices widened the interface.

You know all of this from communicating with the Inamuri, Dax said. Though she had phrased it as a statement, it was clearly a question.

I wouldnt say communicating, Vaughn told her. I liked your word, Lieutenant communing. Except that where you only seemed to have a one-way communing, I seemed to have had it in both directions.

Obviously, I was able to make the Inamuri understand the danger to Ensign Tenmei and Ensign chThane.

And to yourself, Dax noted. It was quite a sight to see the holes in the shell around the planet, especially when we found the three of you at the bottom.

Im sure it was, Vaughn said. I also sensed that, when Defiant and Chaffee were hit by energy from the clouds, the Inamuri wasnt attacking.

It was trying to communicate, Dax surmised.

Yes, Vaughn confirmed. As we both found out, the substance of the clouds also functioned as a conduit for thought.

When Iwhen Dax communed with the thoughtscape, the lieutenant said, it wanted to keep that connectionit cherished that connection. Vaughn nodded, understanding the terrible loneliness of the Inamuri, and how desperately it craved companionship.

What about the fragment of the clouds aboard the ship? Vaughn wanted to know.

Its gone, Dax said. As best we can tell, it withdrew into another dimension andrejoinedthe rest of the clouds. She paused, then asked, What about the Prentara? How did they die?

Im not sure, Vaughn said. But my experiences on the planetI still dont know if the Inamuri was trying to communicate its sense of loss to me, or if somehow the feelings of loss in my own life caused the experiences. Either way, I think that same sort of thing must have happened for every Prentara, every day. And living with that sense of loss, being faced with it all the timeI can understand how that could have driven them to their own destruction.

Dax stood quietly for a moment, no doubt contemplating the enormity of it all. Finally, she said, I sent your message to Starfleet Command. Vaughn had earlier asked the lieutenant to contact Starfleet, detail what had transpired here, and request that they immediately send a scientific team in order to find a means of communicating directly with the Inamuri.

Did you tell them the promise I made? Vaughn asked.

I did, Dax said. I also contacted the Vahni Vahltpali and explained to them as best I could what happened here. Theyre going to try to make contact with the thoughtscape.

Good, Vaughn said. Thank you, Lieutenant. You did a good job up here. You took risks, but they paid off. Your actions in attempting to contact the Inamuri not only saved it, but saved the away team and the Vahni.

Thank you, sir, she said. It was a challenge, butI like command.

I knew you would, Vaughn said. When we return from the Gamma Quadrant, I intend to recommend you for the Pike Medal of Valor.

Dax smiled. Thank you, Captain.

Now, unless there's anything else, Lieutenant, I think I'd like to get some sleep.

Certainly, sir, Dax said. She crossed the room to speak with the doctor for a moment, then left the medical bay, presumably headed back to the bridge.

Vaughn adjusted his position on the bed, trying to make himself more comfortable. His body still ached from everything he had been through. That ache is nothing, he thought, compared with what the Inamuri has been feeling for centuries. He did not regret the promise he had made to the strange being, despite that he had taken it upon himself to speak for the Federation. And he vowed to himself to make sure that Starfleet kept his word.

We'll be back, Vaughn had promised. And we won't let you be alone.

Vaughn sat in a chair in his cramped quarters, a padd in his hands. He read the last sentence that he had written: The joy of life is connection and then erased it. It was not quite right. And he wanted to get it right.

A hundred years old, Vaughn thought, and I'm still learning.

And what he had learned now had come from those hundred years, from the immeasurable number of moments he had lived within them. What had happened to him within the thoughtscape had been both a curse and a gift. He remembered that he had somehow been conscious, all at once, in every moment of his life, and though he could no longer feel precisely what that had been like and was thankful for that he understood that he still carried the loneliness of that experience within himself, and that he probably always would. The curse had been sensing the extent to which he had been alone without connection in so many moments of his life. The gift had been in the understanding that had come with that, the realization that the moments when he had made a connection to Ruriko, to his daughter, to his friends and coworkers, to the human race itself had redeemed the aloneness. Each moment, he now saw, came with a choice, and too often he had not chosen to connect.

Vaughn looked at the padd again, then dropped it into his lap. Dr. Bashir had released him this morning from the medical bay, but had suggested that he not work a full shift today. Vaughn still felt tired, but the fatigue was an emotional fatigue, not a physical one, and he knew that he would simply have to bully his way through it. He would follow the doctor's advice and work a half-shift today, but he would resume his full schedule tomorrow.

Defiant, Vaughn knew, had departed from the world of the thoughtscape, and now continued on its journey through the Gamma Quadrant. He had felt uncomfortable leaving the Inamuri, and a couple of the crew had actually volunteered to stay behind. Sagan had now been repaired, and the volunteers had suggested remaining in orbit about the thoughtscape until the science team arrived from Starfleet. Vaughn had been impressed by the offers, but there would have been little point in being here until a direct and safe method of communication could be devised, and Defiant simply did not have the resources to be able to do that.

Vaughn picked up the padd again and started to reread what he had written, but his mind quickly wandered. He was anxious to see Prynn. He had not had any contact with his daughter since he had walked away from her on the planet's surface, headed for the pulse. Actually, Vaughn thought, that might not be true. He remembered his feeling that the energy surrounding the planet had somehow connected everything on it. He had never sensed a direct connection with her, although he had felt some sort of a link with her through her dreams. If she was willing, he would talk with her about that, and about whatever experiences she might have had during their ordeal.

Ultimately, though, Vaughn wanted to express to Prynn his newfound understanding of how he had failed her. He hoped, now more than ever, that they could work toward a reconciliation. They would need to delve into what had happened in their lives and in their relationship, and into how and why they had become separated. It would probably not be easy, he knew, but they would have to search for answers together. For him, their circumstances had changed, and he hoped that they could be changed for her too. But in the two days he had spent in the medical bay after regaining consciousness, Prynn had not visited or contacted him once, and so he had decided not to force matters with her. Perhaps after they

returned to Deep Space 9, he could

The door chime sounded. Come, he said. Across the room, the door slid open to reveal his daughter. Pryn timer, Vaughn said, stunned to see her. He stood from the chair, dropping the padd onto it. She stepped into the room, and Vaughn felt suddenly awkward, and even lost. He thought, Connect, but he could not find the right words to begin.

Dad, Pryn timer said, and he realized that she had not called him that in years. He saw tears in her eyes, and he started toward her. She raced forward too, and they threw their arms about each other, hugging tightly. Im so glad youre all right, she said.

Tears pooled in Vaughns own eyes. Oh, Pryn timer, Pryn timer, he said. Im so sorry. He meant it in a way he never had before, although he knew that she would not know that. He felt his daughters body shaking as she wept. He cried with her, and they held each other like that for a long time.

When they parted, he looked into her eyes in a way he had not been able to for so long. He reached up to the side of her face and brushed away a tear. Your eye, he said, remembering that the last time he had seen her, the white had been injured and discolored.

Dr. Bashir, she began, but did not finish the thought. I couldnt see you in the medical bay because this She made a motion that seemed to include the two of them, their tears, the intensity and importance of this moment, and he understood that she had wanted this reunion to be private.

I know, Vaughn said. Its all right. Im just glad that youre here now.

I am too.

Im sorry, he said again, knowing that she would mistakenly think that he was apologizing for Rurikos death. After your mother died I should have been there for you. He did not expect her to understand immediately. When we were

I know, she interrupted. Dad, I know. I dont blame you for what happened to Mom. But I see now that I needed you back then, and when you werent there She let her words trail off. But I understand what happened you lost Mom too.

Yes, Vaughn agreed, but Im your father. I failed you, and Im sorry.

I know, she said. But youre here now. And I still need you.

I need you too, Pryn timer, Vaughn said, and he pulled her close once more. When they parted this time, she smiled, and all at once, Vaughn felt connected to his daughter again. There were so many things that they needed to search through together, to understand together.

They sat down and talked for hours, as they had not done in a very long time.

Finally, Vaughn had begun to explore.

CONTINUES IN

MISSION GAMMA BOOK TWO

THIS GRAY SPIRIT

About the Author

David R. George III was born and raised in the unparalleled city of New York, New York. Davids previous contributions to the world of Star Trek include a Voyager episode, Prime Factors, and a Deep Space Nine novel, The 34th Rule. He will also be writing one of the entries in the upcoming The Lost Era series of Trek novels. Additionally, he is hard at work on both a mainstream novel and a film screenplay. David received a Bachelor of Science degree from the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, with majors in Applied Mathematics and Scientific Computing, and minors in philosophy and writing. From Clemson University, he earned a Master of Science degree in Mathematical Sciences, with concentrations in Operations Research and Scientific Computing. The original research he carried out for his masters thesis was in the area of Artificial Intelligence.

David has lived all over the United States. In addition to his time in New York City, upstate New York, and South Carolina, he has called Kansas, Washington, and both northern and southern California home. David plays baseball and racquetball regularly, and he and his beautiful wife, Karen, love to travel, dance, and play softball together. They are ardent film watchers, avid readers, and enthusiastic New

York Mets fans. They currently reside in southern California, in a house with no children and no pets, although they do manage to keep several thriving houseplants.

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