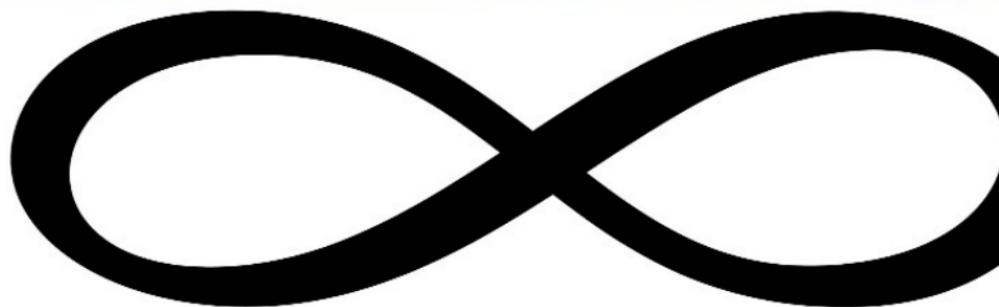


# Ikon: Sisko's Passion

The First and Last Episode of Deep Space Nine



# IKON-SISKO'S PASSION

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## RETURN TO SOUKARA:

For the crew of this ill-fated starship, the U.S.S. Saratoga, hope has given way to dread and dismay. During the battle that would become known as Wolf 359, the Borg, a single minded domineering collective of cybernetic beings, are devastating all of the ships systems. The ship's crew was on high alert well before the engagement with the Borg began because the Borg's record for destroying or enslaving those attracting their interest was well established. Despite the best efforts of the Captain to maneuver and strategize to defend his ship, and all the souls contained therein, he can only delay the evitable dire outcome. Suddenly, the ship shudders under the stress of the attack as the Borg ship emits an energy pulse and begins to drain the Saratoga's defensive shields.

Unnoticed in the turmoil, an intruder has boarded the ship - a bald, brown skinned human male in archaic Bajoran garb. Sequestered in an aloof cargo bay, he is seated in a small exotic looking starship prepared for a hasty exit. On the bridge, Commander Benjamin Sisko, the Saratoga's first officer, narrowly avoids death as the Borg fire a blast at the Saratoga – killing the Captain, hundreds of crew members, and most of the officers positioned at their battle stations. The remaining crewmembers scramble to the shuttlecraft and escape pods.

After exiting the Bridge, Commander Sisko frantically races to gather his family and get them to safety. The bedlam all around him is infectious, forcing him to call on all his mental strength to keep a stable mind and not lose focus.

Moments before the blast from the Borg, Jennifer Sisko, Commander Sisko's wife, heard her husband's voice on the communications system in her quarters, "Jake Sisko report to Escape pod three on deck six and Jennifer Sisko report to shuttle bay two immediately!"

In the atmosphere of distress and upheaval, Jennifer was uncomfortable with the idea of separating from her son, but she trusted her husband's judgment and respected his authority as a Starfleet officer. So, she kissed her son and they hurried on their way. Jennifer went to deck six, dropped off her son, and then headed to shuttle bay two. Just then, a shockwave surged through the ship and knocked Jennifer to the floor. She scrambled to her feet and sprinted for her life.

While Jennifer was escaping, her husband had given the order to abandon ship. The attack caused the ship's hull to lose its integrity. What was once the home of officers and their families was now a death-trap. The warp core, the source of the massive energy output that powered the ship, was compromised, and its breach, the precursor to a catastrophic explosion, was imminent. Commander Sisko got word his son had safely reached one of the escape pods, but his wife was unaccounted for. Desperately, Commander Sisko ran to his quarters only to find fire, the hull obliterated, the interior demolished and no sign of Jennifer. With furious urgency, Commander Sisko combed through the rubble. As he was frantically searching, a Bolian Starfleet officer, a blue-skinned extra-terrestrial

humanoid, dashed by. He saw Commander Sisko sifting through the debris.

“Sir!” he yelled to Commander Sisko. “You’ve got to leave now!”

“Help me!!” Commander Sisko screamed back to him with absolute desperation in his voice.

The Bolian pulled out his tricorder and scanned the room.

“Sir,” he said, “she’s gone. There’s nothing you can do. She must have been pulled into space when the hull was damaged. Sir, you’ve got to leave now!”

Commander Sisko, in complete denial, continued his futile search. Realizing words alone were useless; the Bolian grabbed Commander Sisko, wrestling him out of the door and toward an escape pod.

“Don’t worry,” the Bolian told Commander Sisko. “Maybe she was somewhere else when your living quarters were hit and you’ll find her when this is over, but if you don’t leave you’ll never see her again.” The Bolian didn’t believe this, but thought giving Commander Sisko this faint hope would help to convince him to leave.

Jennifer reached shuttle bay two and was taken aback by the sight of the strange spacecraft she encountered. It reminded her of an insect, a cicada or maybe a locust. The ship was shaped like an aquatic vessel, with large shimmering metallic wings that fanned out from either side. The ship was adorned with a figurehead, a life-sized statue of a Bajoran woman dressed in what looked like religious regalia.

Jennifer’s first reaction was confusion, and her first thought was to leave and search for another escape route, but as Jennifer turned to

flee, the voice of her husband, Commander Benjamin Sisko, called to her from inside the strange ship.

“Jennifer! Don’t leave! There’s no time! Get inside now or we’ll be separated!” he said.

With new determination, Jennifer charged toward the strange little ship. A rear hatch opened to receive her as she approached. Just as she entered, the strange little ship began moving out of the shuttle bay. Jennifer found the motion unsettling. It was not like the muffled acceleration ships with inertial damping systems produced. It was more of a floating sensation, like a bubble drifting in the wind. As the strange little ship exited the Saratoga, her husband spoke to her again.

“No matter what, I want us to be together,” he said.

The shuttle bay doors opened and closed behind them more quickly than Jennifer had ever seen. At the moment they cleared the Saratoga, the strange little ship’s wings elongated and spread increasing in area by at least ten fold. Jennifer felt the strange little ship speed up and swerve away from the cube shaped Borg vessel that had attacked them.

“Welcome aboard the Opaka,” Jennifer heard her husband say.

Catching her breath, Jennifer considered the situation. Her husband’s demeanor was inappropriately cheery. Had he lost his mind? Where had this ship come from and why were they the only ones in it? The Opaka’s amenities were Spartan. The ship had hammocks for bedding and a simple table fastened to the floor. The only visible chair was the elaborate one her husband was seated in. Jennifer wondered how this ship was powered. The Opaka lacked the bulk to accommodate even

small impulse engines, so she knew engines capable of warp drive for interstellar travel were out of the question on this vessel. There were none of the normal sounds associated with the high energy mechanisms and systems that operated on even the most basic starships, only the creaking of the middle section as it oscillated with the motion of the expansive metallic wings. It dawned on her, without powerful engines, this ship lacked the speed for escape or the capacity for effective cloaks, shields, or weapons. Filled with shock and panic, Jennifer slowly approached the front of the ship to confront her husband to get the answer to this strange mystery. At her first glimpse of him, she was shocked by his appearance. Moments before on the Saratoga, he had a full head of hair and was clean-shaven. Now his head was shaven and he was bearded. She wondered how and why her husband would take the time to alter his appearance in the middle of an emergency evacuation. Insanity seemed to be the obvious answer.

“Ben, why have you done this?” Jennifer asked.

“For us” he said, still looking straight ahead. Jennifer noticed there were no visible instruments to navigate or control the ship. Now another possibility crossed her mind.

“Could I be dreaming?” she wondered.

Jennifer suspected she was hallucinating after falling unconscious during the attack, from an injury or lack of oxygen. She reasoned if she touched him she could sense whether this was real or imaginary. As she reached to place her hand on his shoulder, her husband reached out to take her hand. Jennifer was startled and confused.

“I’m sorry Jen; I didn’t mean to frighten you. As soon as we’re clear of danger, I’ll explain everything, but it won’t be at all easy for you to

accept or understand. Just remember, I did this because I love you too much to be without you and this was the only way for us to be together," he said.

Mystified and unhinged, Jennifer was still as unsure as ever about what was happening to her, but she found a measure of comfort in his words. She noticed her husband's hand resting on an ornate box that glowed with iridescent light from within. She wondered if this was somehow the power source of the ship. Slowly, the strange vessel turned so the Saratoga and the Borg Cube were directly in front of them completely visible through the large window in the bow of the ship. The small winged ship drifted toward the battlefront.

Just as a paralyzing sense of terror began to surge through her, Jennifer saw the strangest sight she had ever seen. Everything, all she could view through the strange little ship's window, became still. Debris, shrapnel, shuttlecraft and escape pods halted in mid-flight. Explosions and shockwaves ceased to expand. An eerie calm suddenly fell upon the entire scene. Only the Opaka, the strange little winged ship, with Jennifer and her husband inside, remained animate. It continued on its path passing between the Borg cube and the Saratoga. Jennifer felt no change in speed as their course quickly took them through and out of the battle zone. In what seemed like an instant, they were many light years away from Wolf 359. Looking out of the window, Jennifer saw a planet she recognized as Cardassia Prime.

## COMMUNION:

After a moment of silence, Benjamin Sisko stood up and turned to face his wife. He approached her and gently took her face in his

hands. He kissed her on both of her cheeks and, as his eyes began to fill with tears, he tightly embraced her.

“I know you’ve been through more today than anyone should ever have to endure, but I want you to take a deep breath and be strong for me, for us,” he said.

Jennifer’s mind was a tempest of shock, fear, and confusion.

“Look,” Benjamin said, “I’ve prepared a little something for us.”

Benjamin gestured to the small table. It was low and anchored in place off to the side. Benjamin unbolted it and moved it to the center of the ship where he refastened it to supports he had built into the floor. Benjamin lifted a golden trimmed, purple Tholian silk cover from the table to reveal Bajoran spring wine, pastries and a shining copper pot with a cast iron lid. The table was set for two. Large silver cargo nets ran the length of both sides of the ship storing provisions and equipment. Benjamin reached into the netting and pulled out two large red velvet pillows. Benjamin placed the pillows on the floor on opposite sides of the ebony table. He took Jennifer’s hand and led her to the table. They sat down at the table and Benjamin opened the wine. As he poured it, the sweet smell of jumja berries filled the ship. Jennifer was able to mildly distance herself from the horrors that had gripped her just minutes ago by shifting her thoughts to the quiet space her husband had prepared for them. Dazed and confused, Jennifer stared vacantly into the sparkling wine.

“Aren’t you going to taste it? I considered serving lemonade, but I wanted to share something new with you,” Benjamin said, smiling as he sipped the wine from the golden goblet. Jennifer forced a smile and sipped the wine. It was wonderful, exotic and sweet.

"I know you're wondering what's in the pot, so I'll tell you. It's aubergine stew, I made it myself. Tell me if it's as good as my fathers," Benjamin said.

Benjamin sensed Jennifer's mind was elsewhere. He realized he had been preparing for this rendezvous for a long while, but it had come suddenly for her. He was eager to start a new phase of their life together, but he knew he couldn't rush Jennifer.

"I have to ask. How did you do this?" Jennifer asked.

"What do you mean?" Benjamin said.

"I mean, how did you extract me and this ship from a disastrous Borg encounter without as much as a scratch? I mean how did you freeze time and space. I mean, how do you navigate a starship that seems to have no engines?" Jennifer said.

"Those are all very good questions, obviously, and they all have very good explanations, but let's enjoy the wine and the food together while I explain," Benjamin said.

Benjamin decided to explore what Jennifer's reservations were and try to remedy them one by one.

He said, "I want you to know Jake is fine. There's no need to worry about him." Instantly, Jennifer's mind slid back to the Borg attack and all those lost in the massacre. After a pause, Jennifer was able to calm herself as she sipped the wine and began to trust her fate to her husband's instincts and love for her, but she still felt a surreal bewilderment like Alice having passed through the looking glass. Then Benjamin sipped more of the wine and said, "We are going to sit here and eat and drink and talk together until all your questions are answered. There's no easy way to explain this, so I'm just going to tell

you as best I can. In fact I'm not even sure I've totally accepted it yet. I'll start by saying time, and the change I've experienced, is the explanation to what has happened to you today. The explanation for all that has happened centers around the nature and the perception of time. You see, as mortal human beings, we see time as linear, but I've had an awakening, a discovery, and a realization. All that happened today I had already lived through. In fact, from a linear point of view, this happened to me many years ago."

"You've used time travel to change the past?! Benjamin you know you can't do this. It's too dangerous and as a Starfleet officer you pledged never to do anything like this! It was you on the com system telling me to drop off Jake and head to the shuttle bay, not the Benjamin Sisko that belonged there!" Jennifer said.

"Yes," Benjamin said, "it was one of the keys to preserving the timeline and making sure you would both be safe. I know what you're thinking, but there's more to this. Yes, from your point of view I have travelled through time from a future I faced without you, but this isn't as straight forward as that," Benjamin said.

Now Jennifer was beginning to understand. She had likely died in today's Borg attack and her husband had come back to rescue her. What should she do now that she had this information? She decided to listen to everything Benjamin had to say before trying to make any judgment about what to do next.

"There's no simple way to explain this, so I'm going to tell you without a buffer and then you'll gather the rest as we continue to work through this together," Benjamin said. "Time, the explanation for all that has happened to you, centers around the nature and perception of time," Benjamin said. "You see, as mortal humans, we see time as

linear, but I've had an amazing awakening, a discovery, a realization. I met my true mother, and she, along with the rest of my newfound relatives, taught me to see time from a non-linear frame of reference."

"Your 'true mother'?" Jennifer asked.

"This is a complicated subject, too. My father hid from me the fact my biological mother died while I was a baby; however that still isn't the whole story. The mother I'm speaking of, who is linked to the events you are now living through, is a non-corporeal alien, one of the beings the Bajorans refer to as the Prophets," Benjamin said.

Thinking out loud Jennifer said, "How is that possible? How could a non-corporeal alien have a flesh and blood human child?"

"What would seem to be a temporal paradox is the heart of the explanation. After I first encountered the Prophets in the wormhole in the Bajoran sector, I found out one of them had shared my earthly mother's existence and caused me to be born so I could become their Emissary and save Bajor and the Alpha Quadrant from their adversaries, the Pah-wraiths, who were threatening to destroy them and wipe out the overwhelming majority of life in the Alpha Quadrant and beyond. My deeper metaphysical connection to her is not something I can explain to someone outside of our family. There's a realm of perception of time and space only we have, and without that insight, I can't express it to you. Words alone can't communicate the answer," Benjamin said.

"Does this mean you're not fully human?" Jennifer asked.

"Not at all, I'm just as fully human as you are. It just means I'm also fully something more. I have something I want to show you,"

Benjamin said. He got up and walked over to the silver cargo netting and pulled out a rectangular object. It was a small picture frame. He stepped back over to the table and handed it to Jennifer. "The woman in the picture with my father is my biological mother," he said.

As Jennifer looked at the picture, she relaxed her posture and her mind as well. If her husband could view time from a non-linear frame of reference, and had knowledge of future events, she could trust what he told her about their son, Jake, and everything else for that matter. She felt guilt over violating what the United Federation of Planets would call the Temporal Prime Directive, not altering the natural course of events through the use of time travel, but she was beginning to see this as a special case indeed. If Benjamin had saved her as a son of one of the Prophets and not as a Federation citizen, then Federation laws would not apply to him. She also could not help but wonder if she was just rationalizing so she could embrace a situation that obviously favored her.

"This ship and the escape: how did you do it?" Jennifer asked.

"Again, it's all about the manipulation of time. In a limited way, I have the power to alter time," Benjamin said.

Benjamin walked over and picked up the ornate box he held his hand on as he piloted the ship and said, "I can speed things up or down. In reality, the events at Wolf 359 never deviated from what they would have been had I not been involved. This box contains what is called an 'an Orb of the Prophets'. It's a small pocket of the space where my Prophet family resides. It has special properties that enhance my abilities to alter time/space and allows me to pilot this ship. I call it the Orb of Sanctuary. I created a localized time distortion field around this ship causing time to proceed at an accelerated rate to us which

made everything else seem to be static. We actually passed through the melee so fast no one could detect where or what we were. If anyone did detect us, we would just seem to be one of the many sensor distortions caused by the fighting,” Benjamin said.

“And how do you navigate this ship? What is the means of propulsion?” Jennifer asked.

“At any given moment, cosmic particles are bombarding us from all directions. I use the same kind of time distortion to halt the particles which have velocities unsuited for our desired course and accelerate the volume and speed of the particles that are desirable. The wings act like sails carrying us along on a wind of particle collisions. By distorting time locally around the ship, even a small velocity can get us to where we’re going in a hurry,” Benjamin said.

## FUTURE SHOCK:

As Jennifer began to meditate on her situation, feelings of angst and disconnectedness welled up inside her. All the strange revelations, about her husband’s true nature, and the knowledge she had been snatched from the grave, were overloading her mind. She pondered whether or not some divine law of destiny had been violated. If so, would she soon be punished for this transgression? She had been saved from certain death, but as far she knew, was still going to miss out on seeing her son grow up and many other irretrievable events. If she reentered the world that came to be after her death, she would be a kind of temporal outlaw doing damage to the timeline with every contact she made.

“What kind of life would it be?” she thought to herself.

Jennifer began to doubt her husband's judgment. After all, he could most certainly be so blinded by his desire for them to be together he would take irrational risks and have a distorted view of the magnitude of the consequences. Jennifer also felt guilt over surviving the Borg attack. It seemed unfair for her to be spared when so many others had been lost because they had no deus ex machina hero to rescue them. Jennifer felt her heart racing. She began to hyperventilate. She put her hands over her face and cried loudly and uncontrollably.

"I can't do this, I can't do this," she repeated over and over. Jennifer got up and began to pace in circles in the ship. Benjamin got up and attempted to reach out to her, but Jennifer folded her arms across her chest and with a sullen expression on her face, continued to pace in circles with Benjamin at the center. This continued for some time, until Benjamin broke the silence.

"As odd as it may seem, I know exactly how you feel, because it's the same way I felt when I lost you," he said.

When Jennifer heard this, she stopped in her tracks.

"I couldn't conceive of a future for me that didn't include you. In many ways, I died with you. Yes, with the help of my new family, I moved on. I found new purpose in being in command of Deep Space Nine and in being the Emissary of the Prophets to the Bajorans. Of course, I had to be there for Jake and he was there for me. I even found love again," Benjamin said.

Upon hearing those words, Jennifer quickly glanced over at Benjamin, but hoped he didn't notice.

"Then, later, after I grew in my knowledge and ability to traverse the workings of time, I realized losing you didn't have to be a permanent

thing - I could reconnect with you. Yes, I moved on, but only because I was forced to. I once had a Commander who served under me. He was a fine officer. A man I trusted to do his duty no matter what the challenge. I sent him and his wife on an extremely important, dangerous covert mission. The fate of the entire Alpha Quadrant could well have depended on their success, but when this Commander was faced with the choice of completing his mission or leaving his injured wife behind and sacrificing her life, he chose his wife. I remember how furious Starfleet intelligence was when they found out what had happen. I had to harshly reprimand and discipline him for his actions, but in the end, I confided to him that if I had to choose between leaving you behind and the mission, I would have done the exact same thing. So, here you and I are. Once I realized the power to not leave you behind was mine, I had no choice but to use it," Benjamin said.

Jennifer stood up straight, turned, faced Benjamin and said, "But you never gave me a choice."

Benjamin was astonished and ambushed by her words. He had come back through time and space to rescue a wife who embraced death more than their love? "Surely, this couldn't be," he thought, "she's just in shock. This will pass, and we will be able to pick up where we left off just like the Borg never attacked at Wolf 359."

However, other thoughts began to pierce his mind. The ugly truth was they could not just start over where they left off. The Borg had robbed them of that. If they came together again, it would have to be in a new way, one Jennifer may never be able to fully embrace. He wondered if the alien side of his being, which had been awakened by his mother and the rest of the Prophets, had dulled some facets of his humanity. He shuddered at the thought that this rescue, intended to

bring about a blissful reunion, was in reality only a fool's errand, threatening to rip open and rub salt into deep old wounds that had at least stopped bleeding.

"Ethnocentrism?" he muttered softly under his breath.

For the first time, he questioned his own identity. By nature, he considered, humans are creatures of linear time, and he no longer was. So, could he still think and view the world as other men did? Was he still human? Bringing about this chance for them to be united again seemed so obvious and fundamental to him. How could it not be the same for her? Was it because he had lost the ability to see the world through truly human eyes, so he could not see her point of view? Cautiously, he approached Jennifer and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Are you saying you would rather have died today?" he asked.

He was frightened by what he had asked, and by what her answer might be, but he had to know. There was no use in not confronting the issue. Their eyes met and tears began to run down both of their faces.

"No, Ben, no. It's just so much to accept all at once. Thank you, thank you for saving me," she said. After she said this, they embraced for what seem like hours.

After the anxiety of their exchange passed, they walked back to the table arm in arm, and began to dine together. Jennifer laughed in an attempt to defuse any remaining tension, and inquired about the copper pot with the mismatched lid. "The pot and the lid seem to be a pretty odd couple. Who was their matchmaker?" she asked.

Benjamin leaned back a little, getting comfortable and said, "The cast iron lid and the copper pot both belonged to my biological mother. Like I was telling you, my mothers, the one who is one of the Prophets and my biological mother, coexisted for a time. When my Prophet mother withdrew from my biological mother, my biological mother became aware she had been living a life that had been imposed on her and not of her own freewill. She packed up all of her things and left my father while I was just a baby and never returned. In her rush to leave, she left these things behind. My father gave them to me. Necklaces, and these, are the only possessions of hers I have."

"Did you ever try to contact her?" Jennifer asked.

"No, she died in a tragic accident soon after she left my father," Benjamin answered. After touching the pot and lid, Jennifer said, "It's so nice how the pot and the lid she left behind fit together and there's something so beautiful about the contrast of the two different metals. Oh, and did I mention? This stew is awesome. It's obvious you have become an even better cook over time - and you were already great," she said.

"You know I had to bring out the best for you," He said.

At the edge of his range of vision, Benjamin saw a small glimmer of light reflect off of a small spherical shaped container in the cargo net. It was platinum accented and made of transparent aluminum.

"Oh my, I almost forgot something important. I guess I'm still more human than I thought," he said.

Benjamin got up and quickly snatched the small container from the netting. He rearranged the items on their dining table and made a special prominent place for the container in the center.

“What is this, some exotic spice from New Orleans?” Jennifer asked.

“No,” Benjamin said laughing heartily for the first time since Jennifer and he had reunited, “don’t sprinkle this on your stew. Guess again.” Jennifer picked up the little sphere and examined it closely.

“This is a strong yet intricately attractive vessel. So, whatever is inside must be significant and somehow connected to something from your life or mine or maybe both,” Jennifer said.

“Right on all counts” Benjamin said.

“Ok, I’m stumped. What is it?” Jennifer asked.

“It’s sand,” Benjamin said.

“Sand from Gilgo Beach where we first met” Jennifer said, realizing at once what it was. As Jennifer stared at the little sphere, all the pleasant memories of the day they met, of their romance, and of their life together, began flooding her mind. She thought of how a chance meeting was the seed that grew into a beautiful relationship. She recalled all of the good times they had together and the day their son was born.

“I hoped looking at it would make you feel the same way it makes me feel when I look at it. It makes me realize what started on that day at the beach was wonderful and I don’t want it to end. Today is like the day at Gilgo Beach. We’re meeting again and we’re starting again and there is no reason why it can’t be just as fantastic as it was before even if it will be different,” Benjamin said.

In that moment, Jennifer felt her resistance to entering into this new life, which was being intrusively forced upon her, fade away. In that

moment, she began to embrace that this was indeed a precious gift her husband had given them - like Gilgo Beach all over again.

As Benjamin watched Jennifer holding the sphere, he noticed a change in her demeanor. The smile on her face didn't look strained any longer and her posture was no longer rigid. Even the way she held her fork as she ate the stew was more relaxed.

"More wine?" he asked, hoping to expedite this trend toward peacefulness he noticed in her.

"Yes, please," she answered, all the while gazing at the sphere.

"Benjamin, all the things you're doing to try to put me at ease, I must say they're working. You say you can manipulate time, so I can't help but wonder, have we done this all before? Is this a cycle we've repeated over and over again until you found the right buttons to push to help me accept all this?" Jennifer asked.

"Well", Benjamin said, but before he could finish his sentence, Jennifer interrupted him. "Don't answer that. If I get too deep into considering all the temporal distortions and time paradoxes, and causality loops you're stirring up, it's just going to give me a headache" Jennifer said.

## CATCHING UP:

After a while, as the stew pot began to empty and the wine bottle was running low, Jennifer's curiosity about what had happened in the post Borg attack world that didn't include her grew as her anxiety about this new beginning waned. "As much as it frightens me, I have to ask. What happened after we were attacked at Wolf 359?" Jennifer asked.

As he took a long sip of the Bajoran wine, Benjamin's expression became mournful with a hint of a smile. "Where we're going, we'll have time to discuss all those things in detail. That's one of the things I've been looking forward to the most. So much has happen and so many things have changed and all the time I wished you were there to share it. I wanted you there to cry and laugh with me through it all," Benjamin said.

Jennifer reached out and took Benjamin's hand. She realized she had been so focused on her feelings of shock and confusion that she had not considered the sorrow, trauma and grief her death had brought into her husband's life. For the first time, windows of empathy opened inside her heart and mind. Jennifer began to realize Benjamin had suffered and endured so much more in the years he had lived in the aftermath of her death than she had in the hours of her rescue. Jennifer felt embarrassed that she could have been so self-centered. "I'm here now Ben," Jennifer said.

Then Benjamin said, "Let me tell you, the Borg didn't assimilate the Alpha Quadrant, although it was a very shaky situation for quite some time. Do you remember Commander Data from the Enterprise?"

"The artificial life form?" Jennifer asked.

"That's the one. He was able to tap directly into the Borg command systems. He made them go into a kind of sleep mode. Somehow, when the Borg realized they had been compromised, they self-destructed before we could use the opportunity to gather information and intelligence. We all breathed a huge sigh of relief on that day. Unfortunately, it was short lived. Not long after that, a galactic empire called the Dominion dragged the entire Quadrant into the most devastating war in Federation history," Benjamin said.

Jennifer was completely intrigued by what she had just heard, but she didn't like the direction the conversation was going in. She wanted to make the mood light and ease Benjamin's concerns about her, so she changed the subject. "You told me Jake was going to be fine. Tell me more about what his life was like. Did he ever get married? Did I ever have any grandchildren?" Jennifer asked

Benjamin answered. "Jake had a full life. He became a great writer and father. He was a tremendous help to me while I was commanding Deep Space Nine. I never could have gone on without him. Jake saved my life more than once and in more ways than one."

"Tell me more. How did Jake save you?" Jennifer said.

"Most of all, being Jake's father gave me purpose and forced me to keep my grief and self-pity in check. Even if I felt like giving up, I couldn't because there was no way I was going to pull Jake down with me. I always thought of how I would be letting you down if I wasn't the father to Jake I should be," Benjamin said.

"I don't doubt even a little that you did an awesome job with our son, because that's the kind of man you are-the kind of man who won my heart and never once made me regret it," Jennifer said.

Benjamin felt his eyes tearing up and his throat tightening up, but he had already shed enough tears in too short a time in his estimation, so he held back his emotions and instead lifted his goblet and said, "To the greatest wife in the universe!"

Jennifer and Benjamin touched their drinking vessels together and smiled and laughed. Soon after, Benjamin's mind began to drift to thoughts of his second wife, Kasidy Yates, a freighter captain Jake had introduced him to on Deep Space Nine. His love life after losing her

was one subject he hoped Jennifer would avoid. He also wondered how Jennifer would feel upon finding out their son had played matchmaker for him after she was gone. Would she feel they had betrayed or abandoned her? Benjamin suddenly found himself squirming on his cushion, desperately trying to think of something else to say to keep the conversation flowing away from a direction he didn't want. Then, a horrifying uncertainty entered his mind - was he wearing the ring from his marriage to Jennifer or to Kasidy? If he was wearing the ring from his marriage to Kasidy, and Jennifer noticed it, he knew the jig was up. He knew if he sneaked a peak at it, no matter which ring it was, and Jennifer noticed it, her curiosity could start a domino effect that would open a very messy can of worms indeed. Benjamin had masterfully juggled all of the temporal alterations necessary to rescue Jennifer from the attack of the Borg at Wolf 359, but in his zeal, he glossed over some of the convoluted issues her reemergence would create. Only an instant had passed, but to Benjamin, a long awkward silence had occurred. Then to make things worse, Benjamin remembered he had alluded to finding love again earlier.

Jennifer, who had been lost in a daydream about an October Fest she had attended with Benjamin at New Berlin, noticed the expression on Benjamin's face was now a pained wide eyed grin. "I'm sorry Ben, did you say something? My mind wandered. I was thinking of some of the good times we had."

"No, everything's fine. More wine?" Benjamin blurted back.

"Actually, I think I've had enough, but it was so tasty. I hope that wasn't the last bottle," Jennifer said.

For the first time Benjamin was tempted to use his time altering abilities in a trifling manner. He knew it would be a slippery slope to give into the impulse to freeze Jennifer in time while he got the wedding ring situation in order and then unfreeze her as if nothing had happened. After all, she would never be aware anything unusual had happened, and the possible conflict would be avoided, but if using his abilities in this way became a habit, it would undermine their relationship. Once he did this, could he stop, or could it lead to the compulsion to use his abilities to avoid routine problems and conflicts that crop up in any intimate relationship? Benjamin decided it was a line too dangerous to cross. If the issue of Kasidy, and other women he had been involved with in Jennifer's absence, was going to become an issue he would just have to work through it with her without using his abilities to cheat his way around it.

"Well, it was a very rare very old Bajoran vintage. It was the only one I had, but I can get more later. I'm glad you enjoyed it. It really was good wasn't it? You know, Bajor is a botanical treasure trove. The flowers are so beautiful the sight of them is stunning and their scent is like a drug. The trees produce fruit with a host of vibrant colors and exotic tastes. It rivals Eden itself," Benjamin said.

"All I can say is set course for Bajor!" Jennifer said laughing. Then Jennifer did something that had always befuddled Benjamin. She read his mind. "Ben, I know when you lost me there was a void, and I understand you needed to fill it, but I'm back now and I want that part of your life to be gone and forgotten. Is that ok with you? Jennifer asked.

"That's quite ok with me," Benjamin said, drinking the last from his goblet. Then Benjamin eased his grip on the misgivings he was feeling and put his anxiety about the ring behind him. "There's something I

wanted to talk to you about. I want us to renew our vows in an extravagant wedding on Bajor.”

“But I don’t understand. How could we do that? Wouldn’t you be recognized?” Jennifer asked.

“You’re thinking of it in a linear one dimensional way. One way we could do it would be to get married in ancient Bajor, long before the occupation by the Cardassians. With a little cosmetic alteration, we would just appear to be two well-heeled Bajorans flaunting our wealth. Within a certain context, I’m able to control temporal contamination, but it has limits. We would have to restrict the wedding to a few hours, and after it was over, I could make it so, relative to the Bajorans, it never happened. Only we would remember it. I want us to start a wonderful new chapter of our life together in grand fashion, with hordes of musicians and flower bearers, and with a huge feast afterwards,” Benjamin said.

As she envisioned the wedding Benjamin was planning, Jennifer’s fixation on the lost years, which she could never reclaim, became less pressing. Jennifer came to the realization that much of the time would have been filled with death and hardship from the Borg threat or the war that followed. She realized Benjamin had given her a unique gift, a chance to create beautiful memories while avoiding many sorrowful ones. Jennifer determined in her heart this gift was not an opportunity she was going to waste.

## MEET MOM:

Instantly, and without warning, Jennifer was in a different place. She was in an area that reached beyond what her eyes could see. The entire expanse was bathed in white light. Benjamin was there with her. The little table where they were eating was there too, along with

the pillows they were sitting on, but the table was now bare and nothing else, not single thing, occupied the entire space.

“Benjamin, did you bring us here? Is this the new home you made for us?” Jennifer asked.

“No, I didn’t bring us here, but don’t be afraid. I knew she would want to meet you and talk to us sooner or later” Benjamin said.

“Who is ‘she’?” Jennifer asked.

“My mother, this is how we talk. We’re really still on the Opaka. This white hued dimension we’re in is a metaphysical construct that allows our minds to communicate with my family’s minds through images of memories. Because my mother, and the rest of the Prophets, are non-corporeal they require this interface to talk with corporeal beings” Benjamin said.

“How does it work?” Jennifer asked.

“Often, they would access memories that include people you interacted with having a high degree of emotional intensity, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Then, instead of the interaction that actually occurred, the Prophets would speak and interact as the people in your memories,” Benjamin explained.

“That would be strange” Jennifer said.

“It’s about as strange as it gets. The first time they spoke to me, among others, they spoke to me as you in one my favorite memories of you. My mother is setting this meeting up and I can see she’s doing her best to make it comfortable for you. She’s using my memories and yours to create a situation that isn’t out of sync and confusing. I’m going to appear and speak as myself from your recent memories of

me. You're going to appear and speak as yourself from my recent memories of you, and my mother, I'm assuming, is going to appear and speak as she was when she was married to my father, which is how I now know her," Benjamin said.

"You said you assume. Didn't she tell you she was going to do this?" Jennifer asked.

"No, she's springing this on me just like she is on you. She has a habit of doing that, but I can sense when it's my mother who's engaging me," Benjamin said, laughing a little.

"Does your mother have a name?" Jennifer asked.

"Yes, it's Sarah," Benjamin said.

Then she appeared, Benjamin's mother. She was a tall, attractive, brown skinned woman dressed in a long, flowing white dress. She held in her hands the small sphere containing sand from the beach where Benjamin and Jennifer had first met.

"Hello, Benjamin. Hello, Jennifer," she said in a tone Jennifer found rather matter of fact.

She approached them at the table, placed the sphere at the center, and reached out to take hold of their hands. She made eye contact with each one of them, first Jennifer and then Benjamin, while smiling agreeably. Benjamin's mother then placed Jennifer and Benjamin's hands on top of the sphere in unison. This invasive and unexpected encounter caused Jennifer to feel disconcerted. Meeting your husband's mother for the first time can be a tense situation, but the strange, otherworldly nature of this meeting amplified the awkwardness to a level Jennifer never could have anticipated. Indeed, his mother was greeting her in a form familiar and accessible to

Jennifer, but she could not even slightly get past the obvious fact of it all being an illusion. In reality, Benjamin's mother had no body, no physical form at all. From Jennifer's point of view, the two of them must be light years apart in their perspectives on what a mother was. Jennifer wondered how she could ever learn to relate to such a 'mother' and how such a mother could ever learn to relate to her. Out of an acknowledgement of the absurdity of all the strange things she had endured in a short period of time, Jennifer smiled back at Benjamin's mother.

"Like it or not, I've gone down this rabbit hole and there's no turning back. Besides, she seems nice enough," Jennifer thought.

"The time for the Emissary to walk his path alone has ended. What had ceased now continues," his mother said.

Benjamin pondered all the warnings his mother and the rest of the Prophets had given him in the past about walking his path alone, and for the first time, he wondered whether it was because of Jennifer. Did they realize he would eventually reach through time and reconnect with her?

"Mother, you always knew this day would come didn't you? Is this why you wanted me to walk my path without getting involved with any other women?" Benjamin asked.

"The Emissary is destined for many things. This is one of them. Walking part of your path alone would have made the journey smoother," his mother said. When Jennifer heard this, she warmed to Sarah. The reservations this mother's alien persona had elicited in Jennifer started to crumble. It was now clear to Jennifer that Benjamin's mother was not some cold, emotionally sterile specter, but was a person with insight and respect for human emotions and relationships.

“And now you fully accept my need to be with Jennifer?” Benjamin asked.

“The Emissary’s path is not linear. Your time with Jennifer will always be a part of your existence. Nothing has changed,” Benjamin’s mother said.

“Are you saying because I had already been with her in the past, you see it as ok for me to be with her now?” Benjamin asked.

As Benjamin spoke these words he realized how far his Mother had grown in her understanding of linear time. Earlier in their relationship she, and the rest of the Prophets, would have struggled with the proposition of a relationship ending and then starting again, but now she understood it. Even though she could never experience it, his mother could express the concept with understanding and this was a major achievement.

“This is simply the path you have always been on, my son” his mother said.

Benjamin’s mother walked over to Jennifer, looked into her eyes, smiled and put her arm around Jennifer’s shoulder.

“Benjamin needs you to share his existence and now you can. The Sisko is corporeal. The emotions and comfort expressed through touch are something we cannot provide. Your presence is necessary. We have granted you and Benjamin this rejoining because it is necessary, but never again will you be allowed to modify your path in this way. Do you agree to this Benjamin?” Benjamin’s mother said. Without thinking or hesitating, Benjamin nodded, yes.

“Now go and find joy in the reunion of your existence,” Benjamin’s mother said. Then, as suddenly as she had appeared, Benjamin’s mother was gone and they were back aboard the Opaka.

The little ship had at first seemed so strange to Jennifer. Now it seemed homey and familiar to her. In no small part due to the contrast of the strange space she had just occupied.

“Well, that was certainly not what I expected, but then again, what was I to expect?” Jennifer said.

“Well put, Jen. It’s obvious my mother likes you. I was hoping she would, but most of all, it’s a great relief to know my family isn’t going to stand in the way of us being together,” Benjamin said.

“You weren’t sure they would accept what you had done?” Jennifer said.

“When I approached them about my plans to be with you again, they gave me only passive cooperation. They never said no and they never stood in my way. I don’t think they knew what to make of it. They had never had to address a situation like this before. I don’t think they wanted to encourage or discourage me,” Benjamin said.

“As alien as it sounded to me, your mother gave us her blessing, and I hope we can do exactly what she said, ‘Enjoy our existence together,’” Jennifer said.

## THE PLAN:

After Benjamin’s mother was gone, Benjamin took Jennifer on a sightseeing tour around the galaxy. They saw beautiful nebulas; some looked like giant clouds, and others shimmered with multiple colors. They paused at gas giant planets with beautiful dynamic atmospheres. They visited a sun with an irregular magnetic field. Solar energy sprayed from its poles intermittently, like huge geysers of yellow fire. Benjamin took them to the wreckage of derelict starships of various kinds and origins—some familiar, some unknown. Jennifer was enthused and exhilarated by it all.

“Wow, this is really wonderful!” Jennifer said.

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet. This is just a taste of what I want to show you. Once we get settled in, I want us to make these scenic adventures a part of our weekly routine,” Benjamin said. “I also want to take you to times you’ve never been. It wouldn’t be much of a life

for you if you could never be part of some of what you missed. Believe me it would be a terrible idea to pop in on Jake at random times during his life, but as long as we disguise ourselves and remain unnoticed, there's no reason we can't be there for some of the important times of his life," Benjamin said.

At first, Jennifer was dumbfounded by the prospect of not being completely closed off to the period of history from which she had been absent. Then, as she began to digest this facet of adventure that could be part her new life; she was filled with relief and joy.

"Would it be safe?" Jennifer asked.

Benjamin leaned forward slightly and looked deep into Jennifer's eyes.

"When it comes to temporal manipulation, I have skills and abilities that are hard to describe or even imagine. Yes, I can keep it totally safe, but you have to understand no matter how tempted you are emotionally, you can't directly interact with the events we observe. What I'm doing with you is a unique situation. It's not something I could or would ever be allowed to repeat with someone else. My family, the rest of the Prophets, we work together and we work to remain in harmony. They agreed to make this exception so I could be with you and, in return, I've agreed never to do anything like this again," Benjamin said.

Benjamin got up from the big chair he was seated in when Jennifer first came aboard the Opaka. This was where he sat when he was navigating the ship.

"I've done all the steering I can for now. I need some rest," Benjamin said.

Benjamin opened a small door in the front left section of the ship Jennifer had never noticed before.

“What’s in there?” Jennifer asked.

“It’s the sonic shower. It’s small, but functional just like the toilet facilities. There’s nothing like a good sonic shower after a rough day, so I’ll be quick, because I know you’re going to need a good long one too,” Benjamin said.

Benjamin reached into the cargo netting and pulled out house slippers and a favorite pair of under shorts Jennifer recognized.

“You still have those?” Jennifer asked with a comic tone and facial expression.

“I saved them for special occasions and this is a very special occasion,” Benjamin said.

After Benjamin touched a panel on the wall, hidden shelves loaded with toiletries, along with a privacy curtain, appeared. He pulled the curtain shut and soon the sound of Benjamin singing “Sophisticated Lady” could be heard from inside the shower. Jennifer began to consider that she had no clothes to change into. It was not as if she had a chance to pack for this trip, but she suspected, somewhere in the cargo nets, she was likely to find what she needed. Until now, she had not taken a good look at what was contained in this huge stash. Among the artifacts were several alien looking musical instruments and an even more alien looking clock. She also saw ancient navigational equipment once used on ocean faring ships guided by the stars. It occurred to her that inspecting the cargo nets was like a trip to a museum. Then something sparked her interest. It was a piece of luggage she had used on her honeymoon. It was a large garment bag

that folded in half to make it easier to carry and stow. With more than a little effort, Jennifer pulled down and out on the netting and removed the bag. When she unfolded and opened it, she found everything she had originally packed on the day of her honeymoon inside. All the clothes inside were freshly cleaned and pressed. She flashed back to that day remembering she had somehow lost this bag on the return trip and had not seen it again until now. Looking through the contents made her laugh out loud as she recalled all that had happened and noted how much her fashion sense had changed. As she continued to look through the bag, she began to wonder how Benjamin could have found it. Benjamin had stopped singing and had begun to hum the tune. This was a sign to her he would soon be coming out of the shower. Jennifer wondered if she should close the bag and put it back in the cargo net so they could share her discovery together, but she weighed the chance he would come out before she could finish and decided against it.

When Jennifer looked up, he was already standing there looking at her with a cheery glint in his eyes.

“I see you finally found the bag,” Benjamin said.

“Alright, what’s the story here?” Jennifer said.

“Let’s just say you lost it before so you could find it now,” Benjamin said laughing. “I’m done, the shower is all yours. While you’re freshening up, I’ll get our bed ready.”

Jennifer looked at the hammocks and wondered what he could possibly have to do to them to get them ready. Benjamin walked over to the wall near the center of one side of the ship and reached just under the netting. He tapped a panel and the wall opened. Out of the

wall came what look like a giant accordion. To Jennifer's surprise, it unfurled to form a queen size bed complete with dressing and pillows.

"The hammocks are functional, but they're mostly for effect," Benjamin said with a smile.

Jennifer laughed and said, "I guess I should be impressed, but it's hardly the biggest surprise you've had for me today." She walked over to the bed and pressed on it with her hand. "This is great, firm but not too firm, just like I like it."

"But of course, how could I miss a detail like that? Have you chosen what you're going to wear? You may not have noticed yet, but I did some shopping on Risa and I added a few choices to your bag," Benjamin said.

"This time I'm going to surprise you. Maybe I'll mix and match some things," Jennifer said, then carried the bag and all of its contents behind the curtain and pulled it closed.

Soon Benjamin heard the sound of the shower. He was amused by the nervous feelings he was having. It reminded him so much of the night years ago when Jennifer and he had shared a marital bed for the first time. Benjamin meditated on whether this was a kind of time travel humans had always engaged in - recalling the past and reliving it in their minds. He reasoned that despite the preternatural things he could do, maybe he had not stepped as far out of the boundaries of mundane human experience as he had assumed.

Meanwhile, Jennifer was behind the curtain fascinated by the conversion that had come over her. The trauma caused by the shocking changes had subsided. If the events she endured had been presented to her as a hypothetical scenario beforehand, she would

have been sure she would have fallen into a catatonic state and never come out of it. Yet, somehow, a new attitude was emerging within her, an attitude that was completely subduing the initial horror that had gripped her to the core. The guilt she felt because she had survived, when others were lost, was supplanted by the gratitude of having a chance to live a joyful life. Jennifer looked through the clothes and found the new Risan outfits Benjamin had chosen. They were very sheer with bright, vibrant colors, and the fabric had a smooth, sensually pleasing silkiness to it. Jennifer picked out the lingerie she had worn on their honeymoon along with a robe and colorful headdress from Risa, then hung them up so they would be ready. Afterward, she took a very long cathartic shower. She felt as if she was washing away all the misgivings and apprehension about this unexpected path on which she had hastily been placed.

When Jennifer finished showering and dressing, she stepped out to find Benjamin lying in bed under the covers, with his fingers laced behind his head. He was lost in his thoughts. Jennifer put her hands on her hips and then cleared her throat to get his attention. When Benjamin looked over at her, his eyes widened and his smile broadened.

“Oh my goodness, the sight of you brings back memories, real good memories,” Benjamin said.

Benjamin threw back the covers and reached his arms out, beckoning to Jennifer. Jennifer tried not to walk too hurriedly so as not to appear ungraceful, but emotion and passion energized her so much she finally gathered up her robe and flung herself into Benjamin’s waiting arms. Benjamin had traveled through time to reclaim a love he could not abandon. Jennifer had push through the shock and trauma of a sudden change thrust upon her. Their paths had led them into each

other arms. Here in this little ship, in this bed, they rejoined and restarted - literally and figuratively. At this special moment in time, their new life together had its climactic genesis.

## IKON:

Benjamin slept very deeply and had a dream that seemed extremely real to him. He was having a picnic with Jennifer and his mother, but his mother was an ordinary human. She was quite pleasant and jovial. They were seated in an amphitheater listening to a Jazz quartet. When the concert ended, he got up, waved goodbye to his mother, and started walking with Jennifer toward an idyllic cottage he perceived to be their home. As they walked toward it, he noticed it never seemed to be getting closer. They walked faster, but the cottage was still the same distance away, no closer than before. Benjamin awakened to find Jennifer was not in the bed. He was groggy, and he had a fit of disorientation. The thought and feeling he had dreamed this reunion with Jennifer seized his mind. He felt a deep and pulsating sense of dread. Benjamin's heart raced and he became fully awake and alert. He sat up in the bed with a jolt. Benjamin's eyes nervously darted as he looked around, then he heard the noise of the shower and saw the clothes Jennifer had been wearing neatly laying across the chair where he sat when he was navigating the ship. Benjamin became limp with relief. He collapsed on the bed and rested for a moment to regain his composure.

A few minutes later, Jennifer emerged from behind the privacy curtain fully dressed. She was wearing a dark blue skirt with light blue leggings and a frilly blouse. It was comforting to Benjamin to see her looking as beautiful as ever, and more importantly, real as ever. Then, just as he had recovered from his latest traumatic episode, Benjamin

saw something that alarmed and puzzled him. In Jennifer's hand was something that looked familiar to him. It was an ancient relic, a figurine. It reminded him of the ones used as Ikons by the cult of the Pah-wraith, the malevolent enemies of his people the Prophets. Benjamin knew these Ikons had special properties making them dangerous to handle because the Pah-wraith used them as points of contact in the material world. Since the Pah-wraiths were non-corporeal, like the Prophets, they used these Ikons to contact and influence their worshippers. The Ikon looked like halves of two different sculptures melded into one. One side was the image of a man, and the other side looked like a dark grey corkscrew imbedded with a multitude of small red gems. As he stepped closer, Benjamin was aghast when he realized the man the Ikon depicted was himself.

"Jennifer, where did you get that?" Benjamin asked, while trying to remain calm.

"I was going to ask you the same thing. I opened one of my shoe compartments hoping to find my blue pumps and instead I found this. What is it?" Jennifer asked.

"I'll tell you, but first I'm going to walk over to you and I want you to carefully hand it to me. Don't drop it," Benjamin said.

"OK," Jennifer answered.

Benjamin walked over and reached out and carefully took the Ikon from Jennifer and held it securely with both of his hands.

As soon as he grasped it, he found himself in a dimension akin to the one he occupied when he met with his mother, but this one was horrific. He was encompassed and engulfed in transparent flames, yet, instead of heat, a bone chilling aurora of evil surrounded him.

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him, both familiar and strange. It was deep and resounding.

“Hello, Benjamin,” it said.

Benjamin was staggered. He slowly turned around to face the voice to see who it was, but in his heart, he already knew who it was even though his rational mind could not accept it. When he turned, he saw a reptilian humanoid with blood red eyes, dressed in a long black hooded robe. It was his old nemesis, the Cardassian, Dukat. Dukat had been in charge of the space station, Deep Space Nine, when it was still a Cardassian ore processing center called Terok Nor. This was the beginning of the antagonism between the two because Dukat always resented the fact Benjamin had taken his place. Later, when Benjamin was revealed to be the “Emissary of the Prophets”, a religious figure revered by the Bajoran people, a vindictive rage churned in Dukat because he had always wanted to be loved and revered by the Bajorans despite the fact, in reality, he had been their cruel oppressor. Dukat and Benjamin had what Benjamin believed was their ultimate confrontation in a place on Bajor called the Fire Caves. The “fire” in the Fire Caves was a physical manifestation of the presence of scores of intangible beings, the Pah-wraiths, trapped there. Dukat, motivated by his blind lust for power and irrational desire to supplant Benjamin, had aligned himself with the Pah-wraiths. With a few exceptions, the Pah-wraiths had been contained in the Fire Caves where they could do no harm for generations, but they had used Dukat as a pawn in an attempt to finally be free to wreak havoc and create carnage on an unprecedented scale. Benjamin had plunged Dukat into the gulf in the Fire Caves where the Pah-wraiths were contained, destroying the book of infernal incantations Dukat planned to use to free the Pah-

wraiths, and also trapping Dukat and the Pah-wraiths. Now, the finality of his victory was in question.

“Benjamin, how awkward and pleasant it is to see you again,” Dukat said, with a menacing smirk.

“You’re half right Dukat. This is awkward. I want to know how and why you’ve brought me here!” Benjamin said.

Dukat smiled with satisfaction and moved a few steps closer to Benjamin.

“It wounds me to hear our meeting again isn’t pleasant for you and its somewhat ironic considering it was you, and not I, who made this intimate reunion possible,” Dukat said.

Benjamin felt immediate anguish over even the implication he had given Dukat access to the outside world from what was intended to be his eternal prison. Benjamin knew Dukat well and he found Dukat’s use and nuanced phrasing of the words “intimate reunion” troubling. Had Dukat somehow been an undetected voyeur during the time Jennifer and Benjamin had spent together? Just considering the possibility made Benjamin sick. Benjamin did his best not to project the seething emotions he was feeling. He knew this would give Dukat perverse pleasure and possibly an edge in the battle between them Benjamin sensed was imminent.

“What kind of twisted game are you playing Dukat? You know full well I would never do anything that would make me have to share the same space with you again,” Benjamin said.

Dukat put his arms at his sides and relaxed his expression and posture, then he said, “That’s exactly why this meeting is so ironic. You implied I was playing a game, so I’ll explain the events and

circumstances that brought this game into existence along with rules and the goal of this game.”

“I’m listening,” Benjamin said, in a low voice that sounded like a muted roar.

As Dukat began to speak, a look of delight registered across his face. “The Ikon you found was an attempt by the true gods of Bajor to contact you long before you ever set foot on DS9. It was created as a special gift for you; unfortunately, the opportunity for you or Jennifer to look through her effects after your honeymoon never presented itself. It’s a rare kind of relic. There were only a few ever made and no more can be produced. These Ikons allow us to contact the world outside of our realm of existence and influence those who possess them if they are open to us. When you and the Prophets so unjustly imprisoned us here they all became completely inert to us. We had lost all hope of contact with the outside world. Then, inexplicably at first, one of the Ikons reconnected with us. You see, thanks to you, time is now on our side. By dragging the Ikon through time and space along with you on your little romantic excursion, you energized it in ways we could never have anticipated and now, as you see, it has become more than just a point of contact. It is becoming a conduit that can allow us to travel to the time and place the Ikon resides. At present, the door is only cracked, but as you keep carrying it with you, through all the spatial and temporal distortions you’re causing, the crack is growing ever wider. Soon, we will be able to exit this place through the Ikon to wherever it may be. Oh, did I tell you, very slowly, even if you stop moving it, the crack continues to open, ever wider. You have set in motion dynamics within the Ikon causing it to draw energy simply by moving through time at the natural rate. Eventually,

inevitably, we will all be free to claim our place as the rightful rulers of the Alpha quadrant,” Dukat said.

Benjamin was stunned and mortified by what he had just heard. Just the idea he could be responsible for allowing Ducat and Pah-wraiths to have another chance to desolate the Alpha Quadrant made him immobile with guilt. Was his desire to be with Jennifer a blind spot, a fatal flaw, which was going to undue all he had accomplished as Emissary of the Prophets?

“I know what you’re thinking, Benjamin,” Dukat said.

Benjamin was totally engrossed in the emotional trauma he was feeling; to the point he had almost become numb to Dukat’s presence. Now, after hearing Dukat’s voice, he began to regroup. He began to question Dukat’s motivation for telling him what was going on. Was he simply gloating, or was he trying to manipulate him with lies into making a mistake? Either way, Benjamin decided he had to keep a cool head and fight to the end even if the situation was possibly hopeless.

“Tell me, Ducat, what is it I’m thinking?” Benjamin said.

Benjamin was trying to probe Ducat for insights and information about what was really going on. One of Ducat’s weaknesses was once he started talking; it was difficult for him to stop. Benjamin hoped, in this state of exuberance, he would say too much and disclose knowledge that could allow him to find a way to rescue the Alpha Quadrant from the evil works Ducat and the Pah-wraiths would perform if they escaped their prison.

“You’re thinking if you just destroy the Ikon, the door will be slammed shut and all will be just as it was. It pains me to disappoint you, but it

isn't that simple. Know this, if you destroy the Ikon, one of us will be set free and whoever is nearby, you're precious Jennifer perhaps, will become the vessel of our will, becoming our emissary to the outside world and find a way to release us. You may recall you only got the best of me during our last encounter because I erred by becoming distracted. You won't get that chance a second time," Ducat said.

Benjamin was no surer about what action to take, but at least he now believed shattering the Ikon was not an option. He had also learned that Ducat could not read his mind because destroying the Ikon was something he had not yet considered.

"You're batting a thousand so far Ducat; go on, what else am I thinking?" Benjamin said.

Then Ducat looked at Benjamin with a feigned expression of compassion and said, "You're thinking if only you had let go of Jennifer none of this would be happening. You're thinking you're about to make the entire Alpha Quadrant pay the ultimate price for your selfish vanity, but I say none of that is in the least bit relevant. The truth is we both lost women we loved in this conflict and if I had been given the opportunity, I would have done exactly as you have. Who is to say what is happening to set us free wasn't going to take place anyway, if not in the way it has happened, then in some other way? So don't feel burdened by the consequence of your actions. Perhaps, it was always fated for me to triumph over you. At least you got a final goodbye with your beloved Jennifer. That must be of some consolation to you. This penultimate reunion has been extremely satisfying for me. It's been like two old close friends meeting for one last time and sharing one last cherished goodbye when one is on his death bed. Our soon certain, final encounter has the promise of being even more fulfilling."

After saying this, Dukat stared directly into Benjamin's eyes with an empty, hollow grin on his face. Suddenly, Benjamin was back on the Opaka with Jennifer. Benjamin didn't know how much of what Dukat said was true, but one thing he did believe, time was on Dukat's side, a betrayal he never could have conceived was possible.

## INTERLOPER:

"Benjamin, are you alright?!" Jennifer asked.

Benjamin had stood frozen and entranced for nearly a minute, putting Jennifer in great distress. As Benjamin settled into the trauma of the realization his plan to be with Jennifer, and his universe, were in peril, he smiled and reassured her all was well, but it most certainly was not.

"I'm fine, just a little tired from all the excitement, that's all," Benjamin said. He had decided not to share the situation with Jennifer, not because he wanted to hide it from her, but because he felt it was his responsibility alone to battle Dukat and the Pah-wraiths. Benjamin believed telling her would only traumatize her for no useful purpose. Besides, he was not even sure if he could spare the time to tell her. In a ghastly twist, time, the wave he was riding for amusement and fulfillment, had become the tsunami threatening to obliterate all he had achieved as the Emissary of the Prophets, as a Starfleet officer, and as a man.

Benjamin was, first and foremost, a man of action. He quickly decided to gather as much information about the Ikon as he could as fast as he could. He was afraid to use his ability to manipulate time, so he started to construct a scheme to get help in hurry. He told Jennifer he had to take a break from temporal propulsion because the continual

use of it was straining him. Next, he sent out a transmission to some Ferengi he had done business with in the past. To insure their silence, he had them all sign a contract that carried the authority of the Grand Nagus, the supreme political and economic leader of the Ferengi Alliance. Benjamin had been given a few pre-signed contracts as gifts by the Nagus to use at his discretion. The contract called for the confiscation of all their assets, and would abolish their authority to do business if they ever spoke of this affair. Benjamin put his ship inside the Ferengi freighter and directed them to carry him to DS9, where he could get help from two friends he trusted were up to the task.

It was not difficult to convince Jennifer she had to stay in the Ferengi freighter out of sight once they docked at DS9, but finding a way to enter the station and get the help he needed without contaminating the time line, or using his preternatural abilities, was going to be challenging. Benjamin's plan was to take the station's doctor, Julian Bashir, and the Chief Officer of operations, Miles O'Brien, into his confidence. He would have them analyze the Ikon, learn as much as he could and then make his next move. A Ferengi freighter docking at DS9 was not unusual. Ferengi business men were always on the lookout for opportunities to make a profit and there were always numerous prospects to do this on the station. What could be disastrous, and raise great suspicion, would be Benjamin Sisko appearing in two places at the same time. Not wanting to risk using his temporal wizardry, Benjamin decided to use an ancient form of camouflage. Using the diverse cargo aboard the Freighter, Benjamin applied a pigment to dye his skin blue. Along with his new pigmentation, he added fashionable clothes complementing his own purple hooded cape. He was now ready to enter the station just as any other tourist would. Using the hood to obscure his face, Benjamin headed straight for the infirmary. There he could tell Doctor Bashir

about the situation, and get Chief O'Brien involved, while remaining out of sight. After placing the Orb of Sanctuary in a black cloth sack, and instructing the Ferengi to hold it for safe keeping, Benjamin kissed Jennifer and left.

Entering the station disguised was an interesting experience, but he had no time to savor it. Just when Benjamin began to think his plan would run smoothly, something he had not accounted for happened.

"Pardon me," an authoritative voice said. "I'm Odo, Chief of Security. I'm sure it's just a coincidence, but you fit the general description of a man wanted for jewel theft on Bolarus IX, so I'll need to see your identification before you're free to enjoy your time on the station."

Benjamin stopped in his tracks unsure of what to do. He did not want to add another person to his circle of confidence, but, of all the people on the station, he knew this man was one he could trust. Besides, he had neglected to fabricate phony identification documents, and it was a remote possibility Odo would not see through his disguise.

With those points in mind, Benjamin said, "I don't have proper ID, but I can assure you that I'm not the Bolian you're looking for and you should let me enter." With a look of shock, inquisitiveness and whimsy on his face, Odo leaned in and spoke softly, because he supposed this situation was of a covert nature.

"Captain, I knew you liked to keep my security officers on their toes, but I must say this is level of commitment, although admirable, is quite unexpected," Odo quipped.

Benjamin was laden with anxiety, but allowed himself the frivolous luxury of smiling at Odo's remark. He said, "I'm on a mission that will

decide the fate of the Alpha Quadrant and beyond. Your help could be critical to the outcome. Most importantly, you can never speak to anyone about this, especially me, because this situation involves the potential for temporal paradoxes. I'm going to keep my head down and walk as if I'm impaired in some way. I want you to arrest me and take me to the infirmary, so Doctor Bashir can confirm my identity and put all your minds at ease. I want guards posted so no one can enter the infirmary until my business there is complete. Oh, one other thing, have Chief O'Brien meet us there."

Odo put restraints on Benjamin's wrists and began to march him toward the infirmary.

"Odo to Doctor Bashir," Odo said over the communication system.

"Yes, Odo," Bashir answered.

"Doctor, I have a prisoner I want you to see immediately. The reasons will become obvious very shortly. And have Chief O'Brien meet us in the infirmary; I'll need his services. Makes sure he understands I need him and him alone," Odo said.

"Understood, I'll tell him," Bashir answered.

The sight of Odo taking someone into custody was not at all out of place, so no one paid any special attention to the disguised Benjamin Sisko and Odo making their way to the infirmary. Also, calling Chief Miles O'Brien to work with Doctor Bashir in relation to a prisoner was not strange either. On other occasions, prisoners were found to be implanted with technology for illegal purposes that needed to be neutralized or removed. This required the collaboration of the doctor and the engineer. When Odo and Benjamin entered the infirmary,

Doctor Bashir and Chief O'Brien were ready and waiting for them, both holding scanning devices.

"Hello, gentlemen. Before we proceed, I'll need a DNA verification of this man's identity. Just in case I'm mistaken about who he is," Odo said.

Quickly, Bashir took a sample of Benjamin's blood and analyzed it. It took only a moment to confirm his identity. "Captain, why the elaborate hoax?" the doctor said.

"I'll have to explain quickly. I had to enter the station without being recognized because I'm not the Captain Sisko congruent with this timeline and we are all in danger from the Pah-wraiths. I don't know exactly when the doorway will open, but I know it's imminent. I need your help to stop them from destroying the Alpha quadrant" Benjamin said.

From under his robe, Benjamin took out the Ikon and placed it on one of the medical beds. "Somehow this Ikon is a temporal doorway the Pah-wraiths can use to reenter space-time, even though I've trapped them for safekeeping in the future. It may have some kind of special connection to me and I need to find a way to turn it off, or destroy it, without allowing any of them to escape," he said. As Bashir and O'Brien began to scan Benjamin and the Ikon, Odo excused himself to check on the security officers he had posted outside of the infirmary.

While continuing to scan, O'Brien said, "You know, I've had some experience with these Pah-wraith devils. We're going to have to tread lightly, because they may have already anticipated the moves we're going to make and set a trap for us".

As O'Brien and Bashir began to analyze and collaborate on conclusions based on the information they had collected, Odo was facing a crisis outside of the infirmary. Captain Benjamin Sisko, the one who actually belonged in this place and time, had appeared on the scene and was asking why the infirmary was being guarded.

"What's going on here Constable?" Captain Sisko asked.

Odo was not certain what would happen if the two Siskos met, but he decided he was not going to find out. He had been charged with keeping this operation a secret and protecting the integrity of the timeline of history; therefore, he would do whatever was necessary to fulfill his charge. If it meant forcibly blocking this Sisko from entering or even arresting him, and claiming he had mistaken him for a changeling, he would have to do it. As usual, Odo remained calm. He believed the story of arresting a criminal wanted on Bolarus IX, who had been implanted with technology for illegal purposes, was solid.

"It's nothing that needs to disrupt your routine, Captain. I've taken a man into custody who is suspected of a crime on Bolarus IX. He's been implanted with some kind of technology. I believe it's a masking device used to obscure stolen goods he may be carrying. He may have accomplices on the station, so I want to maintain a security presence outside the infirmary to discourage any attempt to rescue him. Doctor Bashir and Chief O'Brien are working on removing the device right now," Odo explained.

"Well, rarely a dull moment on DS9. If you need any extra help to bolster security just let me know and I'll assign some officers to assist you," Captain Sisko said.

With a sense of relief, Odo nodded and said, "Thank you, Captain. I'll do that." As Captain Sisko walked away Odo hoped the Benjamin

Sisko in the infirmary would be done with his business soon, so he would not have to continue to cover for him.

Inside the infirmary, Doctor Bashir and Chief O'Brien had finished studying the Ikon. As the two discussed their findings and prepared to give a concise report, Benjamin was revisiting feels of guilt for having created this situation. "Damn, folly and hubris, for selfish reasons," he thought to himself.

"Captain, we're ready," Doctor Bashir said.

Chief O'Brien started by saying, "It was a trap set specifically for you. This Ikon is a resonance device tuned to a temporal signature that is unique to you. When you touched it, you 'turned it on' and now there's no stopping it,"

"But couldn't I just travel back to the time before I touch it and stop myself?" Benjamin asked.

The Doctor replied: "No, I'm afraid not, the Ikon, once activated, shifted into a state where it's inert to temporal influences. So, if you go back and stop yourself from touching it, it will simply appear to self-activate at the time you touched it before."

"It's in the process of polarizing at a molecular level. We can assume that when this Ikon is completely polarized, the doorway you told us about will be open. The good news is you have some time before that happens. The bad news is it's only four hours, twenty minutes and thirty-one seconds, plus or minus five seconds, based on the rate of polarization," O'Brien added.

"I was told if I destroyed the Ikon, only one of the Pah-wraiths would escape. Maybe taking my chances dealing with just one of them is my best option," Benjamin said.

Then Bashir said, "There's a problem with that strategy, Captain. Because of the unique temporal qualities of the Ikon, the Pah-wraith could be released anywhere from the time the Ikon was created to the instant you destroy it. There would be no way of knowing or controlling it. My initial thought was to advise you to go back and stop the Ikon from being created in the first place, but that could create alternate timelines where the Ikon is made some place else or even generate an outcome where this conversation never takes place and the Pah-wraiths have already won".

Benjamin grimaced, looked into the eyes of both men and said, "Normally I could navigate, alter, splice and meld timelines without damaging their integrity or continuity, like a seamstress making a quilt, but this Ikon is mocking me. It's taking everything unique about me and using it against me. It's taken my human desires and used them as bait and it's used my abilities as a Prophet to trap me."

O'Brien stared straight ahead with a contemplative expression and said: "If only we had more time, we could set a trap for these devils. If we could build a containment field large enough to hold all of them and build an array to fire a massive blast of chronoton particles at them, we could settle this for good. I was thinking, instead of you going back and trying to affect this Ikon in some way, you could go back and tell me to build the containment field and the array. Then it would be here now for us to use."

Suddenly, from outside the infirmary, the discussion was interrupted by the sounds of disruptor and phaser fire. The infirmary had come under attack by a group of Bajorans. As Odo and his security officers took cover and held them at bay, they were quickly joined and assisted by Starfleet officers. Almost as abruptly as it started, the fight was over. The congruent Captain Sisko came rushing in to find out

what had happened. Five Bajorans, three men and two women, lay dead. Four of them died in the fight and one had committed suicide rather than surrender. The congruent Captain Sisko talked with Odo for a few moments and then left after posting extra security.

Odo entered the infirmary and asked, "Is everyone alright?"

"Yes, we're all fine. What happened?" the doctor asked.

"Five Bajorans attacked the infirmary. Four died during the melee and one took his own life before we could capture or question him, so we may never know their motivations," Odo said.

Then Doctor Bashir came to a grizzly conclusion. "Oh my God, why didn't we realize?!! The Pah-wraiths, they're aware of us! Perhaps they can even see and hear us!" he said. He then grabbed a container designed to hold and ship fragile medical equipment. Using large tongs he placed the Ikon inside the container and sealed it. "This container blocks all vibration and light, so we should be free to speak now. Somehow the Pah-wraiths got their followers to attack you here. They know you're trying to circumvent their objectives and they may have heard everything we've discussed," the Doctor concluded.

"If they've heard everything we've said, and you try to go back and tell me to make preparations, the Pah-wraiths will be trying to stop me at every point in time. It will become a war that could contaminate the timeline in ways even you couldn't predict or repair. They may just have their followers wait for you to contact me and kill you, or both of us," O'Brien said.

Suddenly, Benjamin stood up, draped his hood over his head and said, "Nothing like that's going to happen Chief. Your idea is sound, but we just have to employ it in a different way. There's a blind spot the Pah-

wraiths have. They're non-corporeal life forms and as such they have no true conceptual understanding of maneuvering through space, and that is the key to defeating them, not time manipulation."

"Whatever you're planning Captain, I suggest you don't tell us. Can we really be sure of what they're capable of?" As the engineer glanced at the container an idea came to him. "I want to install a timer on this crate so you'll know how much time you have left," he said.

"A very good idea Chief," Benjamin said.

## CHECKMATE:

"I'll need a shuttle to Bajor," Benjamin said.

Odo nodded thoughtfully. "That shouldn't be a problem. You've become a 'hot potato' our Captain Sisko is very eager to get off of his hands. If I tell him I want to take you to Bajor to conduct an investigation into what these Bajorans were up to, I'm sure he'll be very accommodating."

Benjamin thanked all of them and said goodbye to Doctor Bashir, realizing this might be his ultimate farewell to him and the station. Benjamin instructed Chief O'Brien to get the Orb of Sanctuary from the Ferengi freighter and bring it to the runabout. Odo placed restraints on Benjamin, as he had before, and walked him cautiously to the starship that would take them to Bajor. He made arrangements to take Benjamin to Bajor in a runabout ship called the Rubicon. Odo had the route to the docking bay very heavily secured with Bajoran and Starfleet security officers, along with a sizable entourage of officers escorting Benjamin and the Ikon.

Once they were alone onboard the ship, away from curious eyes, Odo removed the restraints and said, "She's all yours, Captain."

Benjamin quickly took control of the ship, laid in a course for Bajor and got underway.

"The Pah-wraiths know I'm here in this time so I'm going to have to do some temporal backtracking to elude them. Don't worry you won't feel a thing," Benjamin said.

Benjamin maneuvered the ship away from the station and toward Bajor. He placed his hand on the Orb and instantly, in front of them, a short distance away, was a small ship.

Odo peered out the forward window, recognition showing on his face. "That ship looks familiar. It's much like the one you built and famously piloted to the Cardassian sector. Much to the chagrin of Gul Dukat and other puffed up Cardassians like him."

"Good eye, Constable. It's actually Akorem Laan, the great Bajoran poet, making one of the first Bajoran attempts at interstellar travel," Benjamin said.

Odo was shocked by the realization he was now hundreds of years in the past. "Well, I must say, that was a smooth ride through time," Odo said.

"I needed to arrive on the planet during a period where there are no sensors to track our movements, so we don't attract attention. Once we make a landing, I'll leave you here while I travel to a future time to finish my work," Benjamin said.

"And what if you don't make it back?" Odo asked.

“Let’s just say things will get very complicated and extremely unpleasant. We’ll be landing in a remote location where rarely anyone travels, so you shouldn’t have to worry about anyone snooping around.” Benjamin made a landing in the middle of a rocky landscape near a ridge behind a grove of trees. He then grabbed the Ikon, still inside the container where Doctor Bashir had placed it. After securing the Orb in his other arm, he ran out of the ship.

As Odo watched, Benjamin suddenly vanished after taking only a few steps. Benjamin was now in this same place, but at a time when he had previously faced the Pah-wraiths. He positioned himself above an entrance to the place called the Fire Caves. He watched as Gul Dukat, his enemy, and Kai Winn, the supreme religious leader of the Bajor people, entered the caves on their quest to release the Pah-wraiths from these caves, their place of imprisonment. Blinded by her lust for power and self-exultation, Kai Winn had been seduced into becoming a puppet of the Pah-wraiths. Dukat and Winn carried with them the book of the Kosst Amojan, an ancient text that held the key to freeing these evil beings. Soon after, Benjamin saw himself enter the caves in pursuit. He had been sent by the Prophets to stop Dukat and Winn. Benjamin had to be cautious about not following Dukat, Winn and himself too closely, because he did not want to upset the scenario that had already played out. He only had minutes to execute his plan and there was no way to change or side step this reality. Benjamin had not felt this sense of time pressure in a very long time. The Ikon had changed his world. Benjamin climbed down to the cave entrance and carefully entered. Rapidly, but with stealth, he took a position behind a rock where could hear what was going on without being seen. He heard Dukat chastise Kia Winn. He heard himself speaking. He heard Kia Winn shriek. Finally, Benjamin heard the cue he was waiting for, a gasp from Gul Dukat.

Benjamin looked down at the timer on the container. It read three minutes and sixteen seconds. He had time to spare, but not much. Benjamin walked out from his hiding place. Gul Dukat, Kai Winn, and Benjamin's temporal doppelganger were gone, but he was not alone. The huge stalagmite filled chasm in front of him was alive with fire. This fire was not caused by fuel being consumed; instead, it was a manifestation of the Pah-wraiths who had been energized by incantations read by Kai Winn from the book of the Kosst Amojan. The fire was very slowly waning as he watched. Benjamin looked at the timer mounted on the outside of the container, which now read less than two minutes, and flung the container into the burning gorge. It came to rest between two of the stone spires. Benjamin stepped back as he saw the container melt away and expose the Ikon. The Ikon turned red, and then, white hot. About one hundred meters away, the surface of the top one of the stone spires began to dissolve into dust that fell to the cave floor. To Benjamin's astonishment, as the dust fell it exposed a giant replica of the corkscrew side of the Ikon hidden underneath. This corkscrew tipped spire turn red, and then white hot, just as the Ikon had. The flames began to swirl into a vortex with the corkscrew tipped spire at the center. As the flames spun around, the spire seemed to absorb them, until, with a short burst at the end, all the flames were gone, all was silent, and the Ikon again appeared dark and cold. Fear gripped the depths of Benjamin's being as he stared at the Ikon. Then, as he watched anxiously, the Ikon began to vibrate and glow as before. The Ikon exploded into a cloud of powder and the huge chasm was refilled with fire. The Pah-wraiths had used the Ikon to open a tunnel in time-space, but Benjamin had out maneuvered them. By placing the Ikon in the fire caves, he had made their tunnel lead back to their prison, where they were again safely contained. Benjamin dropped to his knees, exhausted and relieved. Immediately,

he was in a place of white light. He saw his Prophet mother, Sarah, approaching. She put her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

“Your work is finished, my son. Now is the time for the Emissary to rest,” she said.

## ALCEMENA'S SANCTUARY:

Suddenly, and without warning, Benjamin's mother was gone and Benjamin was back in the fire caves, but the fire had left and a calm cool stillness filled the area. Benjamin felt revitalized. The tension in his body slowly dissipated as he walked out of the caves, into the fresh air and sunlight. Right away, his thoughts turned to Jennifer. Jennifer was on the Ferengi freighter, spared from the knowledge of the trial Benjamin had just endured. The Ferengi were busy doing inventory and calculating how much they would charge Benjamin for their time and miscellaneous services rendered. Jennifer found the Ferengi business protocols interesting and their occasional flirtatious goading amusing. When one of the Ferengi commented he would trade all the cargo on the ship for her heart, Jennifer's thoughts shifted to Benjamin and what an amazing treasure their time together would be.

Benjamin startled Odo as he approached him from behind.

“What are you waiting for, Constable? Let's go home” Benjamin said.

“So, I take it you've subdued the Pah-wraiths and put everything in order?” Odo asked.

“Why, Constable, you say that as if you doubted me,” Benjamin said.

“Quite the contrary, Captain. I’m certain you’re the Emissary of the Prophets for good reasons, and a propensity for failure would be inconsistent with that. I was merely curious about whether you had completed the task or not, and what part, if any, I had in the rest of your plans,” Odo said.

“Now that you mention it, there is something I need from you even though the Pah-wraiths are defeated. I need for you to come up with an explanation as to how you lost custody of your prisoner when you report back to your Captain Sisko without arousing suspicion or triggering further investigation,” Benjamin said.

“Understood, Captain. You can count on me,” Odo said.

Odo and Benjamin got back into the runabout and headed back to DS9. After leaving Bajor, Benjamin placed them back in the appropriate time and they arrived without incident. Benjamin signaled to the Ferengi freighter and they transported him on board. He settled his account with the Ferengi by giving them latinum and gems he had among the many things stowed onboard his exotic little ship. He couldn’t resist buying Jennifer a few gifts from the diverse assortment of contraband the Ferengi had accumulated. He bought her some scarves and other accessories.

As Benjamin and Jennifer entered the Opaka, Benjamin’s beautiful little ship, Benjamin’s face bloomed with joy as he realized his plan to finally be with Jennifer was about to come to fruition. What circumstance had stolen, he had redeemed. What the Borg had shattered, he had reassembled and reclaimed. The Ferengi opened the Cargo bay and the Opaka slowly drifted away toward the Wormhole, the home of Benjamin’s non-corporeal alien family, the Prophets.

“What’s our next stop?” Jennifer asked.

“We’re going to our new home. A place I prepared for us. Somewhere we can be together without contaminating the timeline or being reminded of all the ordeals we’ve passed through,” Benjamin said.

Benjamin caused the ship to accelerate and they entered the Wormhole. Benjamin wondered if his mother and the other Prophets would try to contact him, but they made no attempt to do so, even though they were aware of his presence. After a moment, they were back in normal space, but Jennifer noticed things were different. DS9, the space station they just left, was no longer in view, but she could see Bajor and the other planets in the system.

“What happened to the station?” Jennifer asked.

“We’re a long time and a long way from home Jen. This place is familiar to you because, in many ways, it’s just like where we came from, but it’s not at all,” Benjamin said.

As the ship approached Bajor, Jennifer could see DS9 in orbit around the planet. She was baffled not only by the change in its location, but also by the dramatic change in the station’s appearance. The station was resplendent with a chrome finish and dazzlingly brilliant lights that framed its contours.

“Oh my, what happened?” Jennifer asked.

“It’s a little gaudy, but I like it. The chrome finish is actually a very advanced form of ablative armor and the lights make the station somewhat of a navigational beacon, but they’re mostly decorative. This Station is virtually identical to our DS9, but we’re actually in an alternate universe that’s had contact with ours at different times in history. I was one of the contacts that played a role in shaping the

history of this universe. The events I was part of happened over three hundred years ago here and the station is now a museum. Hopefully, if you approve, it will also be our new home base,” Benjamin said.

Jennifer was thrilled. She looked at the station with new eyes as she realized it could be her home.

“I see you aren’t displeased by the thought of living here,” Benjamin said.

“Not at all,” Jennifer said.

Benjamin slowly circled the station and then carefully entered a docking bay.

“We won’t worry about moving any of our cargo in until you have a look at our quarters. I’m going to get cleaned up, wash this blue paint off of me, and change clothes. Then I’ll call for the Curator to greet us,” Benjamin said.

After Benjamin showered and changed clothes, Jennifer decided to do the same. Benjamin wore a black three piece suit with a metallic gold tie, and Jennifer wore a purple dress accentuated with the accessories Benjamin had just purchased for her from the Ferengi. When they were ready, Benjamin grabbed a small duffel bag of effects and used an odd looking silver pad to send a signal to the Curator. Soon, he arrived outside of the air lock. Benjamin and Jennifer walked out to meet him.

“It’s so good to see you again, Benjamin. Everything is ready for you just as we agreed,” he said.

The curator was a tall, middle aged human male with blazing red hair. Jennifer found his demeanor a bit stuffy, but his smile and voice very hospitable.

“Welcome to the Station, Mrs. Sisko, I’m Seamus O’Brien, the museum curator,” he said.

“A pleasure to meet you”, Jennifer said.

“I can’t wait for you to see your new home,” O’Brien said.

Seamus O’Brien was the great great-grandson of the Miles O’Brien from this alternate universe. The fact Benjamin, and the Jennifer Sisko from this universe, had been involved in the war for human freedom here gave Benjamin leverage to ask for favors and assistance. The stories of Benjamin’s heroics were a major part of Seamus’ family lore and he was more than happy to help his hero. Jennifer and Benjamin were going to earn the right to live on the station in exchange for becoming part of the station’s rich ambiance by cosplaying “Benjamin and Jennifer Sisko”. Seamus would be the only one who would know how authentic these “cosplayers” were. As they made their way to their quarters, Benjamin and Jennifer were greeted by museum visitors. Some wanted to take pictures with them and others wanted to pretend to meet and talk with historical figures. Benjamin thought about how strange yet familiar this experience was.

After a while, the buzz of their arrival subsided and they made it to their destination.

“Here is your new house, I’m sure you’ll make it a grand home,” Seamus said. The quarters were spacious and luxuriously decorated. Priceless works of Bajoran and African art adorned all of the walls. The light fixtures were huge incandescent crystals and, in one of the far

corners, a large fragrant illuminated fountain was alive with flowing rose-colored liquid. The fountain had an empty pedestal at the center. Benjamin opened his bag and took out the small sphere containing the sand from the beach where Jennifer and he had first met. He carefully placed it on the pedestal in the center of the fountain then smiled and sighed with great satisfaction. Seamus appeared from a back room with three small copper colored metallic drinking vessels shaped like wine glasses. He walked over to the fountain and carefully filled each chalice from one of the many streams cascading down. Then, he walked over to where Jennifer and Benjamin stood holding hands and watching him. Seamus handed one of the copper flutes to each of them and then he raised his chalice in a toast.

“To home!” Seamus said.

“To home!” Jennifer and Benjamin echoed.

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