

**Star Trek: Time  
Guardian**

**STAR TREK: TIME  
GUARDIAN**

*Complete manuscript: Prologue + 16 chapters + 4 Interludes +  
Epilogue + Final Scene*



# IN LOVING MEMORY

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*In loving memory of Peter David*

*1956 – 2025*

*Thank you for Calhoun.*

\* \* \*

## PROLOGUE — IT’S NOW OR NEVER

\* \* \*

His ship came apart in pieces. Not all at once. In the way a ship comes apart when someone knows where to hit it — saucer section fine, warp nacelles fine, starboard phaser array gone in the first second of the engagement.

“Shields to forty-one percent,” his first officer said. Her voice flat. “Starboard gone. Port holding.”

He looked at the viewscreen and did not recognize what he was looking at. Four ships. Dark. Angular in a way that felt wrong before he could name why. They were not moving like anything he had ever fought. The ship took another hit and he felt it in his knees.

“Engineering,” he said.

*Here, Captain.*

“Give me warp.”

*Working on it. Plasma manifold is not responding. I’m in there with a hammer.*

“Use the hammer.”

*Aye.*

\* \* \*

He had known, somewhere underneath the part of him that commanded a starship, that this day was coming. He had known it the way you know a storm is coming — not because anyone told you, but because the pressure in your head has been building for weeks and the birds have stopped making sound.

The memories had been surfacing for months. Not all at once. A tree he could not have seen. A woman's hand on his back. A wind moving through leaves he could hear without listening. He had told no one, because there was nothing to tell, because what he was carrying did not have the shape of a report.

But the pressure had been building, and now four ships he did not recognize were taking his ship apart, and he understood with the full clarity of a man who had run out of time to misunderstand: they were here for him. For what he carried. And if they finished what they had started, the only thing in the universe that still remembered the truth was going to die with him.

\* \* \*

“Commander.”

She turned. Her face was already set the way it got set when she knew the next order was going to be one she did not want to hear.

“You have the bridge.”

“Captain—”

“Hold us here. Whatever it costs. I need an hour.”

“We don't have an hour.”

“Then give me what you've got.”

She looked at him for a long moment, and he saw her decide — not to argue, not to ask, just to do the impossible thing he was asking her to do because he was the man who was asking. He had spent years earning that look. He hoped he was worth it today.

“Aye, Captain.”

\* \* \*

He went below. The secondary computer core was three decks down and mostly empty, because modern ships did not need a secondary computer core the way older ones did, and his ship had inherited one from a refit that nobody had bothered to decommission. He was glad for it now. He sealed the hatch behind him, crossed to the console, and activated the emergency recording system — the one buried below the captain's log, below the official channels, the one a Starfleet captain used when he did not want to be edited.

The ship shuddered. Dust fell from the overhead. A panel across the room sparked and went dark.

He sat down. He was going to tell a story now. He was going to tell it start to finish, the way it had been told to him forty years ago in a place that should not have existed, by a man whose name he was the only person in the universe who still remembered. He was going to tell it while his ship came apart around him and his crew fought and died above him, because if he did not tell it, it was going to be lost, and if it was lost, the thing that had almost eaten the universe once was going to get its second try.

He breathed. He began.

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# CHAPTER ONE: THE END OF AN ERA

*By Darren Karr*

\* \* \*

Deep breath.

Computer, begin recording. Secondary core, local storage only. Encryption level nine. Authorization override, captain's seal. Lock out Starfleet command channels. This doesn't transmit. It doesn't upload. It doesn't leave this compartment until I personally authorize it.

*Acknowledged.*

This is crazy, I know, but it's true, all of it. It's important. I'm the only one who still knows he existed. This is his story, and it's important to you, to everyone.

He was my friend. He was a son. He was a person. The universe used to know that, and now the universe has forgotten, and I'm about to tell you why.

Try to keep up. I don't have a lot of time.

\* \* \*

It didn't start as a sound. It started as the absence of one.

Wesley Crusher was sitting in the tree.

The tree was not a tree. It was how Wesley's mind rendered the timeline — the shape his perception gave to something that did not naturally have one. Travelers exist outside of time, in the gap between moments, and that gap does not have a form until someone gives it one. Wesley's mind had given it a tree. Branches reaching in every direction, each one a moment, a path, a possibility carrying weight. Roots going deeper than he could follow. Leaves moving in a wind that came from everywhere and nowhere. Another Traveler, looking at the same timeline, would have seen something else — an ocean, a cathedral, a web. Wesley saw a tree. He had found it on his first day as a Traveler, and he had been visiting it ever since.

He knew every sound it made. He knew the wind through the upper branches and the settling creak of the old roots and the particular dry rustle of the branch that reached out over the 23rd century. He had been listening to those sounds for three decades.

Now, somewhere deep in the canopy, something had changed.

Not gone. Just changed. A section of the tree that had always been bright, alive, carrying the kind of vivid green that meant the wind was full and the branches were loaded with moments — that section looked slightly off. Paler. Duller. The wind still moved through the leaves there, but thinner, weaker, as if the color had been drawn down a fraction and not yet replaced. A green going grey at the edges. Something he would not have noticed if he had not spent thirty years memorizing the exact quality of every part of this tree.

He closed his eyes.

He listened.

And somewhere, inside a century he had not visited in years, the stillness began to spread.

\* \* \*

Travelers maintained the timeline. That was the work, and it wasn't glamorous. They didn't fight wars or negotiate treaties or sit in captain's chairs. They existed outside of time, woven into the fabric of it like a nervous system is woven into a body. Their whole job was keeping things connected. Making sure that when someone somewhere made a choice that mattered, the mattering actually went somewhere — rippled forward, touched other moments, changed what came next.

They didn't do this by stepping in and fixing things. They did it by being there. Attending. Like a heartbeat — constant, invisible, and nobody notices until it stops. You weren't supposed to see them. You were supposed to feel what they maintained — in the weight of a moment, in the wind moving through the branches.

The rule was simple. Maintain the system. Don't reach in and start directing outcomes. There's a difference between the way a body regulates its own heart and somebody reaching in and forcing it into a different rhythm. Travelers were the first thing. They were not supposed to be the second.

Wesley had held that rule for thirty years. Through every manipulation he'd ever seen. Through civilizations he'd watched struggle under pressures that had no business being there. He maintained. He attended. He did not intervene.

He wasn't completely alone out there. Kore Soong — a woman he'd found on Earth and brought into the work — maintained alongside him. The only other Traveler left who still existed as an actual person. She'd been with him long enough to trust his judgment, and she'd stick around long enough to question it.

And something was wrong.

\* \* \*

He traced it back, the way the Travelers taught — the one discipline that always worked. When the wind dies in a section of the tree, you follow the stillness upstream. Past the symptoms and the noise, all the way back to the singular branch where the sound cracked.

He moved through the timeline the way Travelers move — not walking, not flying. Attending. Letting the dissonance pull him toward its origin the way grief pulls you toward a photograph you haven't looked at in years.

#### 1. The USS Kelvin.

A Romulan mining vessel called the Narada, dragged through a temporal rift that should never have formed. It came out in 2233 and destroyed the Kelvin. Killed George Kirk. Shattered the sound of the wind in that entire section of the tree.

And the crack didn't close.

Wesley could feel what the open rift was doing. Two timelines pressing against each other at the wound, the Prime and the branch that grew from it — branches tangled into each other, roots interfering, crossing into space that wasn't theirs. The wind was still there but muddied, other sounds bleeding through, the wrong leaves rustling in the wrong wind. The causal connections around the rift were weakening, moments near 2233 losing their definition, consequences that should have propagated forward arriving muffled and faded. The infrastructure Wesley maintained was eroding at the edges, and the erosion was spreading.

The dissolution wasn't fast or dramatic, but it was steady, and if it went far enough Wesley wouldn't be able to hear the tree at all.

The fracture bled forward through the 23rd century, and every institution it touched began to change. Not violently — quietly, the way a foundation shifts before a building falls.

\* \* \*

Wesley looked at what grew from the fracture.

He saw a ship called Discovery. Starfleet registry. Federation crew. Captain's chair, mission statement, officers who wore the uniform.

But the branches were wrong. The leaves were still there but nothing moved through them.

He ran the analysis the way the Travelers taught him — not looking at the events, but at their consequences. What propagates. What echoes forward. What actually leaves a mark on the timelines that follow.

Nothing did. A propulsion system that could jump instantaneously to any point in the galaxy — a technology that should have rewritten the course of Federation history — produced no descendants, no derivatives, no imitation attempts, no failed copies. It terminated with itself, as if the timeline couldn't absorb it, as if it had been rejected.

The crew's decisions showed the same pattern. Every causal pathway collapsed toward a single node — one officer, Michael Burnham. Every crisis routed through her. Every solution originated with her. The rest of the bridge crew generated almost no independent decision branches. Their agency had been flattened to near-zero, as if the timeline couldn't support more than one point of origin per moment.

And Burnham herself — no upstream origin, no downstream impact. A causal insertion that connected to nothing. Wesley didn't need to research this. He maintained the Prime timeline. He knew Spock's life the way he knew every life that carried weight in the moments he attended. Spock had no human sister. Never had. In the timeline where the wind still moved, Burnham simply wasn't there.

Wesley stared at Discovery the way a doctor stares at a scan that confirms what they already suspected. It wasn't three problems. It was one — a timeline that could not distribute consequence. This wasn't a ship that had gone wrong. This was a ship that had never been right. A branch of the timeline that couldn't sustain itself, that produced no consequences, no legacy, no future. A closed loop pretending to be history. And that was when the grief hit, because Wesley had served on a Starfleet ship — a real one.

He'd watched Geordi LaForge solve a cascade failure in the warp core at three in the morning while Picard slept, and never mention it. He'd watched Worf take a disruptor blast meant for a man he disagreed with, and say nothing about it afterward. He'd watched Data sit with a dying crew member and offer a silence so precisely calibrated to the moment that it became the most human thing Wesley had ever witnessed.

Every station mattered. Every officer carried weight. The captain sat in the center because the crew held the edges.

On Discovery, the edges had dissolved. And no one seemed to notice.

What he saw there wasn't emotion. It was performance. Officers weeping on the bridge, in corridors, during tactical briefings, and none of it changed what happened next. Emotional states that spiked and collapsed without altering a single subsequent decision, without accumulating, without carrying any weight forward.

Burnham — raised on Vulcan, trained by Sarek himself — cried more openly and more often than any officer Wesley had encountered in any timeline. Not in the rare, shattering moments that earned it, but constantly, as if emotional collapse were the primary qualification for command.

She was eventually given the captain's chair.

Wesley thought about that for a long time.

He thought about Jean-Luc Picard, who lost his brother and his nephew in a fire — the last of his family line, erased in an afternoon. Picard went back to the vineyard. Stood in the ashes. And broke.

Once.

One scene in a lifetime of holding the line. And it meant everything because of the thousand moments before it where he didn't break. Where he sat in that chair and made the impossible call and carried the weight without performing it for the room.

That was command. That was the cost of the center chair. You hold and you hold and you hold. And when you finally can't, the one moment of release carries the weight of everything you held.

Discovery didn't understand this. It had replaced weight with volume, and couldn't tell the difference.

\* \* \*

He looked further. Past Discovery, past the corrupted 23rd century, into what the fracture eventually produced.

And he found the Academy.

Starfleet Academy. The forge. The place where the next generation learned what the uniform cost — not just how to wear it, but what it demanded. Where cadets sat in ethics seminars and first contact simulations and learned, slowly and painfully, that the right answer was almost never the easy one.

The institution that produced Picard, Kirk, Janeway, Sisko. Officers who walked onto a bridge and carried the weight of worlds.

What Wesley found was unrecognizable. Cadets who treated the institution like a social gathering. Petty rivalries that belonged in a secondary school. No rigor, no reverence, no understanding that the uniform was a promise, not a costume. Decisions that resolved locally — nothing scaled, nothing echoed. A command structure optimized for moments that didn't matter.

This was where the Federation built its future. And the future it was building couldn't carry a phaser, let alone a civilization.

\* \* \*

Wesley stopped looking at the symptoms and looked at the trajectory.

He followed the corrupted branch forward — not years, but centuries — and watched the Federation that grew from the Kelvin fracture arrive at its conclusion.

It didn't fall in war or burn in conquest. It simply stopped.

A Federation that had turned inward, consumed by its own trauma and its own politics and its own endless internal theater, eventually forgot why it existed. The exploration slowed, then stopped. Ships that once pushed into the unknown began running patrol routes. Officers who once dreamed of first contact began filing reports about border disputes.

And the galaxy grew quiet.

Wesley could see them — the civilizations the Federation was supposed to find. Species on the edge of warp capability, building engines in basements and laboratories, looking up at the stars, waiting for someone to arrive and say the words that changed everything.

*You are not alone.*

In the Prime timeline, someone always came. Kirk found them. Picard found them. Janeway found them seventy thousand light years from home, because that's what Starfleet did.

It reached.

In the corrupted branch, no one came. The ships stayed close. The Academy produced officers trained for feelings instead of the frontier. And one by one, those civilizations either found their own way or they didn't. Some destroyed themselves. Some were conquered by powers the Federation should have checked. Some just waited in the dark, and waited, and no one ever came.

That was the cost. Not a battle lost or a station destroyed. A silence. A galaxy full of people who needed the Federation to be what it was supposed to be, and the Federation wasn't there.

Because it was too busy crying on the bridge.

\* \* \*

Wesley recognized it now. Not just the dissonance or the fracture — the fingerprint.

He had felt something like this before, in the wake of Borg assimilation, where entire worlds still functioned but nothing behind the function meant anything anymore. In civilizations that blinked out while he watched. In places where the timeline carried weight and then suddenly, inexplicably, didn't. He'd felt it and moved on. Absorbed it the way he absorbed everything — as background grief, the cost of attending to a timeline that sometimes lost things.

Though there was one moment he'd never been able to file away. A planet called Xenex, a rebellion, a young commander executing someone he loved because the cause required it. Everything around that moment had been thinning the way everything thinned, but that one held. Carried weight when nothing near it did. Wesley had noticed it and moved on because he had bigger concerns, but it had stayed with him the way a single clear note stays with you after the rest of the music fades.

He'd never considered that it was a pattern. Never stopped to ask whether the wrongness in those places was connected. Never examined the feeling closely enough to see that it wasn't random loss but something consistent, something with a shape.

He was seeing the shape now, and he named it in the moment of recognition — the Unmaker. Not a name from the Traveler archives or the temporal records, but a name for what he was finally seeing clearly. A tendency, a slow and patient infection that turned purpose into noise and meaning into spectacle. It didn't destroy the Federation. It didn't need to. It just made the Federation forget what it was for.

It hadn't caused the Kelvin incursion. The Narada tore through on its own — an accident, a temporal misfire, a crack in the wall.

But the Unmaker found the crack and breathed through it.

Discovery wasn't an anomaly — it was a symptom. The Academy wasn't a failure — it was an outcome. And the Federation that stopped reaching wasn't broken. It was unmade, through disinterest. A cancer of apathy wearing a Starfleet badge.

And somewhere beneath the pattern, beneath the tendency, beneath the disinterest, Wesley could feel something else. Something that wasn't just method. Something that was feeding.

He wasn't ready to look at that yet.

But this was different from all those other places he'd felt the wrongness and moved on. This was his. This was the Enterprise. This was Picard's voice saying *engage*. This was his mother staying up late in sickbay, treating species she'd never encountered, learning on the fly, never once asking whether they deserved her help. This was Data's quiet dignity and Worf's stubborn honor and Geordi's genius going unnoticed.

This was the thing that made him believe the future was worth walking into.

And the Unmaker was draining it dry.

\* \* \*

Maintain. Don't intervene.

He'd held that line while civilizations died, while memories dissolved, while the wrongness he couldn't name whispered louder in every place he attended. Thirty years of it, and now he knew what the wrongness was.

The other Travelers had held it too, until they couldn't bear the holding anymore. They hadn't disappeared. They'd stopped being separate. One by one, they'd considered what the work was costing — really considered it, in a way Wesley never had — and made a choice he didn't understand. They withdrew from individuality and dissolved back into the maintenance itself, becoming indistinguishable from the timeline they'd spent their existence tending. Still there. Still attending. But no longer distinct enough to feel the temptation to reach in. No longer distinct enough to break.

Wesley hadn't been able to do that. Couldn't stop being a person. Couldn't stop caring about the specific moments, the specific people, the specific choices being corrupted by pressures that didn't belong.

So he'd held the line instead. He and Kore. The last two Travelers who still existed as people. Maintaining, attending, watching manipulations he couldn't yet connect to a single hand, and doing nothing about them because the rule said don't.

For thirty years.

And now, standing at the edge of the Kelvin fracture, watching the thing that made him believe the future was worth walking into being drained of everything that made it matter, he couldn't hold it anymore.

Kirk wouldn't have held it this long. Kirk would have walked through the rift with a phaser in one hand and a speech in the other and dared the universe to tell him he was wrong. Picard would have sat in the chair, composed the argument, presented it to the Traveler Council with devastating precision, and then done it anyway when they said no. Janeway would have sealed the rift, made coffee, and written a log entry about it before anyone knew it happened.

These were the people the corrupted timeline would never produce. These were the people the galaxy needed.

And Wesley Crusher — boy genius, Traveler, ghost, Time Guardian, the wound that wouldn't close — was the only one left who remembered them clearly enough to fight for them.

Screw the rule.

\* \* \*

He went to 2233.

Not to the battle, not to the Kelvin. To the moment before — the fraction of a second before the rift opened, before the Narada crossed the threshold, before the crack became a canyon.

He could feel the Unmaker in the edges, not resisting, not fighting. Just watching, with something that felt like curiosity. It had never seen him act like this before. He had always been the observer, the absorber, the one who stood in the ruins and remembered while the Unmaker erased.

Not today.

He paused. One breath. The weight of what he was about to do pressed against him — not resistance from the timeline, but from himself. Once he did this, it was done. No revision, no undoing. He would have reached into time and changed it, and whatever that made him, he could never go back to what he was before.

Wesley sealed the rift.

No light, no sound, no speech, no hand-wringing about temporal ethics or the rights of corrupted timelines. He closed a door that should never have been open, and he felt the Unmaker's attention sharpen against his back like a blade being drawn.

Let it sharpen.

The Narada never arrived.

The Kelvin survived. George Kirk served out a full career, a good one, steady, the kind of career that doesn't make the history books but holds the fleet together. He raised his son. James Kirk walked into the Academy through the front door with a sharp mind and a complete inability to accept no-win scenarios.

Discovery never launched. Whatever ship carried that name in the corrected timeline was just a ship — a crew of officers who knew each other's names, who held their stations, who trusted the person next to them to do their job. No chosen one at the center, no impossible technology with no legacy, no one weeping during a red alert.

The Academy trained officers again. Real ones. The kind who could sit in the chair and make the call and carry the weight without making it a performance. The kind who produced Picards and Siskos and Janeways — not cadets who swallowed com badges and ate dirt.

The fractures healed and the bleed stopped and the Prime timeline settled back into itself, clear and steady and reaching forward.

And the Unmaker, for the first time Wesley could remember, went quiet. Not gone, but quiet, as if it was reassessing.

\* \* \*

And in the dark, on the edge of explored space, a ship dropped out of warp near a planet it had never visited before.

Sensors picked up electromagnetic signatures consistent with early warp experiments.

The science officer reported a warp signature — intermittent, unstable, but real. Someone down there had just cracked the threshold.

The captain stood up. First Contact protocol. Every officer on that bridge knew what it meant — they'd trained for this, studied for this, spent their careers hoping they'd be the crew that got the call. This was the reason. Not the patrols, not the diplomacy, not the border disputes. This.

He ordered standard orbit, dress uniforms, an open channel on all Federation frequencies.

The bridge moved. Every station, every officer. No one needed to be told twice.

The captain tugged his uniform straight and looked at the viewscreen. A blue-green world, cities visible on the night side. A civilization that had just punched through the wall between their solar system and the rest of the galaxy, and they didn't know yet that the rest of the galaxy had noticed.

The channel opened. The captain took a breath. Somewhere down there, someone had just done the impossible, and they probably thought they were alone.

Not anymore.

He started to give his name and stopped. Smiled. It didn't matter what his name was. What mattered was what came next. The same words, the same promise, passed down from captain to captain since the founding of the Federation. The words that meant the long silence was over.

On behalf of the United Federation of Planets — we come in peace.

\* \* \*

Somewhere outside of time, Wesley Crusher grinned like a kid who just got away with something.

The wind was back in the leaves. Moving through the branches the way it was supposed to — steady, layered, alive. Almost too even. As if something had been smoothed away along with the fracture, some wildness, some roughness that belonged in a healthy tree. Wesley didn't notice. He was too relieved to listen that closely.

But behind it, beneath it, in the spaces between the notes where the Unmaker lived and listened and learned, a new silence. Not empty, but attentive.

Wesley's grin faded.

The Kelvin fracture was sealed. The timeline was restored. The Federation was reaching again.

But the Unmaker had seen him now. Not as an observer or part of the background, but as an opponent.

And Wesley Crusher — who had spent lifetimes learning to carry the weight of broken timelines without breaking himself — understood something he hadn't understood before.

The war wasn't over.

It was just beginning.

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## CHAPTER TWO: THE SPREE

\* \* \*

The wind should have been enough. Wesley had sealed the Kelvin fracture and the Prime timeline had responded the way a healed wound responds to pressure released — it settled. The sound came back through the leaves, the tree found its center. Everything he'd spent thirty years maintaining was suddenly, impossibly, restored by a single act of intervention. He should have stopped there.

\* \* \*

Kore was the first to tell him. She'd been with him when he sealed the rift — not helping, not participating, but present. Maintaining alongside him the way she'd been doing since he recruited her. She'd watched him break the rule and felt the timeline respond, and she understood why he'd done it. The Kelvin fracture was eating his home — the Enterprise, his mother, Picard. Thirty years of holding the line, and the one moment he couldn't hold was the personal one.

She understood, but she didn't agree. The rule existed for a reason, she told him. Not a philosophical reason but a structural one. They maintained, they didn't intervene. That distinction wasn't arbitrary. It was the difference between being part of the system and reaching in from outside it. Maintenance was autonomic. Intervention was surgical. And surgical had costs that autonomic didn't.

Wesley heard her. Listened, even. But considering that she might be right — that would have meant stopping. And he wasn't going to stop. Because the wind was back in the leaves. And it felt like proof.

\* \* \*

The problem was the backlog. Thirty years of maintaining the timeline meant thirty years of watching Future Guy's manipulations and doing nothing about them. Every moment Wesley had attended, every disturbance he'd sensed, every time he'd felt the pressure of an outside force pushing against a person's choices — he'd held the rule. Maintained around the damage. Kept the surrounding connections intact while the corrupted moment sat there, wrong, untouched. Thirty years of that.

And now the rule was broken and every one of those moments was still there. Past, present, future — all accessible, all suddenly feeling like unfinished business. Not like things he should fix, but like things he should have fixed a long time ago.

\* \* \*

Wesley had been watching Future Guy for decades. Not a name he'd coined yet — just a presence he'd been tracking across the timeline the way you track weather patterns from a distance. Consistent and systematic, appearing in different forms across different eras, operating through different intermediaries, but always with the same signature underneath.

In the Enterprise era the presence had been the most visible — a shadowy figure communicating through temporal chambers, directing the Suliban Cabal, manipulating Jonathan Archer and his crew through years of the Temporal Cold War. Wesley had watched that from outside, seen the figure's silhouette through the distortion, seen the Suliban carrying out orders from a commander they'd never met face to face.

But the presence wasn't limited to the Enterprise era. Wesley had sensed the same signature, the same underlying logic, the same calculus of controlled outcomes, across centuries. The methods and tools and faces changed across eras, but the pattern was always the same — reach into a moment, narrow the possibilities, push the outcome toward a specific result. Prevent suffering by eliminating the chance of it. Wesley had maintained around all of it for thirty years because the rule said don't intervene. Now he went back.

\* \* \*

The first one was small. A colony world in the 23rd century. A trade route decision that the presence had manipulated, pushing a colonial governor toward an agreement that sacrificed his colony's autonomy for regional stability. Wesley could see the pressure points, the places where the governor's options had been narrowed, the paths that had been hidden from him.

Wesley widened the space, cleared the manipulation, let the governor see all of his options for the first time.

The governor chose the same agreement. But he chose it freely, weighing the costs himself instead of being guided toward them. And the moment carried weight that it hadn't carried before — the decision propagated, the consequences rippled forward.

Wesley felt the rush. The restoration. The wind settling back into the leaves around a moment that was finally working the way it was supposed to. It felt like healing.

\* \* \*

He did it again. And again. Kirk at the Guardian of Forever. The presence had pushed Kirk toward saving Edith Keeler, toward preventing the suffering of watching a woman he loved die in front of him. Wesley cleared the manipulation and Kirk held Bones back and Keeler stepped into the street and history held. The most painful choice Kirk ever made, and it was his to make.

Picard as a young officer. The bar fight at Starbase Earhart that got him stabbed through the heart — the moment that taught him what it meant to take risks, to be bold, to become the captain he'd become. The presence had nudged young Picard toward caution, toward walking away, toward a safe life that would have produced a competent but unremarkable officer. Wesley cleared the nudge and Picard picked the fight and got stabbed and spent the rest of his career knowing that the worst decision of his youth was also the one that made him.

Sisko at Wolf 359. The battle that killed Jennifer. The presence had tried to redirect Sisko's ship, pull him out of the engagement, spare him the loss that would define everything that followed. Without Jennifer's death, Sisko never becomes the broken, furious, brilliant commander who rebuilds Deep Space Nine and saves Bajor. Wesley cleared the redirection and Sisko's ship stayed in the fight and Jennifer died and Sisko became the Emissary.

Each intervention felt like the Kelvin. Each one produced the rush. Each one left Wesley more certain that the rule had been wrong, that thirty years of restraint had been thirty years of watching people get used while he stood in the background and maintained. Then he went to Archer.

\* \* \*

Jonathan Archer's timeline was the most heavily scarred of any Wesley had encountered — decades of the Temporal Cold War layered on top of each other, Daniels and the Suliban and Future Guy all pulling at the same man from different directions for years. Wesley had watched it from outside during his time as a maintainer, had felt the damage without intervening, had held the rule while Archer struggled underneath the weight of forces he couldn't see.

Now Wesley went back to counter the manipulations. He started with Daniels — the temporal agent who'd appeared to Archer repeatedly during the Xindi crisis, always with information, always with an agenda, always framing the data to push Archer toward a specific decision. Wesley could see the pressure points clearly, the same way he'd seen them with Kirk and Picard and Sisko. He widened the space, cleared the manipulation, let Archer arrive at his decisions freely.

Archer made the same choices he would have made anyway. The Xindi weapon was destroyed, the Expanse collapsed, Earth was saved. Canon preserved, outcomes unchanged, the man arriving at his own decisions instead of being pushed toward them. But something was wrong with Archer, and it had nothing to do with Daniels.

Wesley noticed it after the third intervention, when he paused to look at Archer more closely instead of moving on to the next manipulation. The man was different from what Wesley expected based on the Starfleet records. The Jonathan Archer in the files was sharp, passionate, stubborn — a captain who held his crew together through impossible circumstances by sheer force of caring about them. The Archer Wesley was watching had all of that, but muted. Like a photograph that had been copied too many times and lost definition with each generation.

Archer still gave orders with authority. Still made decisions. Still sat in the chair and did the job. But the fire behind it — the thing that made Archer hold onto Trip and T’Pol and his crew as anchors against everything the Temporal Cold War threw at him — was fading. Not gone, but thinner than it should have been. The moments around Archer that should have carried the most weight — a conversation with Trip in engineering, a quiet evening with Porthos, T’Pol choosing to stay when she had every logical reason to leave — those moments were losing their texture the way fabric loses color in direct sunlight.

Dead spots. Not the dramatic, meaning-drained-to-nothing dead spots Wesley would later see in the Entity’s feeding trail. Smaller ones. Subtler. The kind you’d only notice if you were paying close attention to a person’s life and could feel the difference between what the moments weighed and what they should have weighed. Archer’s anchors were coming loose.

Wesley watched Archer sit in his ready room after a mission, alone, and the captain did something that didn’t match anything in the official record. He picked up a photograph of his father — Henry Archer, the man who’d spent his life building the warp five engine that made Enterprise possible — and looked at it the way you look at something you’re trying to remember feeling something about. Not with grief or love or pride. With effort. As if the connection to his father, the thing that had driven Archer into space in the first place, required work to feel when it used to be automatic.

That was what the dead spots did to a person. They didn't take your memories or change your decisions or rewrite your history. They took the weight out of the things that mattered to you. You could still remember loving someone. You just couldn't feel it as deeply as you used to, and you couldn't figure out why, and the not-knowing was worse than if the memory had just been erased.

Wesley stood outside that moment and watched Jonathan Archer try to feel something about his father, and for the first time since the Kelvin, the rush of intervention didn't come. Instead there was something cold in Wesley's chest — the awareness that the manipulations he was countering weren't the only thing damaging this man's life. Something else was eating at the edges of Archer's existence, draining the weight from the moments that held him together, and Wesley's interventions weren't stopping it. Might even be making it worse.

He didn't follow that thought. Not yet. He filed it in the same place he'd been filing Kore's warnings — the place where things that threatened to slow him down went to wait until he was ready to look at them. He moved on to the next intervention. Kore watched.

\* \* \*

She didn't argue after the first few. There was no point — Wesley had the evidence on his side. Every intervention produced a better moment. Every cleared manipulation resulted in choices that carried more weight, consequences that propagated more strongly, moments where the wind moved through the leaves the way it was supposed to.

But after each one, Kore felt something Wesley didn't. A faint wrongness, like a room that gets slightly colder every time someone opens a door you can't see. The moments Wesley fixed were better, she could see that. But something in the aftermath didn't sit right. The restoration was too clean, the settling too smooth, as if the moment accepted the intervention but lost something in the process that she couldn't name or measure.

She told Wesley. He asked her what specifically was wrong. She couldn't say. It was a feeling, not a finding. An intuition that something was off without any data to support it.

Wesley had data. The moments were stronger. The choices were freer. The consequences propagated. Everything he could measure said the interventions were working. Kore couldn't compete with that. She stopped arguing. But she didn't stop feeling.

\* \* \*

Wesley went deeper into the backlog. Bigger manipulations now, more confident. Each success reinforced the last.

He found the presence's work everywhere he looked. Not just the obvious manipulations — the Suliban missions, the temporal chamber communications, the direct interference with Archer's crew. Those were the visible ones. Underneath them, woven through centuries of timeline, were subtler interventions. Moments where possibilities had been narrowed so gently that even Wesley, maintaining from outside, had never noticed them.

The presence wasn't just manipulating individual moments. It was shaping patterns, building toward something. Each intervention connected to the next in a logic that Wesley was only beginning to see — a vast, patient project to reduce the variance of the timeline, to make the universe more predictable, more controlled, safer. Every intervention said the same thing — suffering that can be prevented should be prevented.

It was a philosophy Wesley almost agreed with. The only difference was method. The presence imposed outcomes, Wesley restored choice. But the underlying impulse — the inability to watch suffering and do nothing — was the same. He pushed that thought aside. He had work to do.

\* \* \*

Then he found something that stopped him — the Kelvin. Not the fracture itself, he'd already sealed that. But looking at it again with fresh eyes, with thirty years of the presence's signature catalogued in his memory, the rift that created the Kelvin timeline wasn't random. It wasn't an accident or a temporal misfire or an unlucky convergence of circumstances.

The conditions that produced the Narada's transit — the supernova, Spock's mission, the red matter, the specific trajectory that tore the rift at that specific point in 2233 — were too precise. Too perfectly arranged. The probability of all those factors aligning naturally was vanishingly small, and Wesley traced the signature. It was faint, buried under layers of apparent causality, disguised as coincidence, but it was there. The same presence. The same logic. The same calculus of controlled outcomes, applied at a scale that dwarfed anything else Wesley had found. The Kelvin rift wasn't an accident. Future Guy had engineered it.

\* \* \*

Wesley stood outside the moment and tried to understand why. The Kelvin timeline produced a weaker Federation. He'd seen that when he traced the fracture — Discovery, the Academy, the institutional decay. A Federation that turned inward, stopped reaching, forgot what it was for. Why would anyone deliberately create that? He ran the analysis the way the Travelers taught him, not looking at what the Kelvin timeline destroyed but at what it prevented.

The numbers were staggering. A Federation that stops reaching doesn't encounter the threats that reaching produces. Fewer first contacts gone wrong, fewer wars with species that might have been left alone, fewer officers sent into situations that kill them. The Kelvin timeline's Federation was weaker, smaller, less capable, and exponentially safer. Fewer fathers lost to conflicts that didn't need to happen.

Wesley stared at that. At the shape of a grief so large it had been turned into a temporal weapon. Someone who'd lost something irreplaceable and decided that the entire Federation needed to stop reaching so that no one else would lose what they'd lost.

He didn't know who yet. Didn't know the face behind the presence or the specific loss that drove it. But he could feel the architecture of the motivation — personal pain scaled to civilizational change. Love inverted into control.

The Kelvin rift wasn't an attack on the Federation. It was an attempt to protect it, by someone who'd decided that a Federation that stayed home was a Federation that stayed alive. And Wesley had sealed it without knowing any of this.

\* \* \*

He told Kore what he'd found. She listened the way she always listened — fully present, building internal models as the information arrived. When he finished, she was quiet for a long time. Then she said something that surprised him. She said it didn't change anything.

The Kelvin was engineered. The interventions were deliberate. Future Guy had a plan and a motivation and a logic that almost made sense. None of that changed what Kore was feeling after every intervention Wesley made — the wrongness, the too-clean restoration, the sense that something was being lost in the fixing.

Wesley was focused on the who and the why. Kore was focused on the what — what was actually happening to the moments they touched, regardless of who had damaged them or why.

She told him he was looking at the wrong thing. He told her the results spoke for themselves. She told him results without understanding were just outcomes, and outcomes could lie.

\* \* \*

The Traveler appeared without warning. Not the way temporal agents appeared — no flash, no technology, no announcement. He was simply there, in the space between moments, the way a Traveler was always there. Woven into the fabric, part of the background.

Wesley hadn't seen his teacher in years. The Traveler had been one of the first to withdraw, to stop being distinct, to dissolve back into the maintenance. His presence had faded so gradually that Wesley couldn't point to the moment it ended — like a color slowly matching the wall behind it until you couldn't tell where the paint stopped and the wall began.

Now he was here. Briefly, and only partially. More presence than person, as if being distinct again cost him something and he couldn't sustain it for long. He'd given up individuality, given up being a person entirely, and he'd come back from that for Wesley. Not for the timeline, not for the rule, not for the work. For the one person who could make a dissolved Traveler remember what it felt like to care about someone specific.

He looked at Wesley for a moment before he spoke, and Wesley saw something in that look that cut deeper than any warning could have. The Traveler was seeing the boy from the Enterprise. The teenager who'd felt the universe pulling at him and hadn't known why, who'd sat on the bridge asking questions that made the senior officers look at each other, who'd left everything he knew because his teacher told him there was more to see than what was visible from one ship in one time. The Traveler was looking at what that boy had become, and the distance between the two was written in the way his form flickered — as if even the act of recognizing his student was costing him coherence he didn't have to spare.

He didn't lecture or scold or tell Wesley the rule existed for a reason, because Wesley already knew that and had chosen to break it anyway.

He told Wesley that the difference between maintaining and intervening wasn't intention or method or even outcome. The difference was cost. Maintaining cost the Traveler nothing because it was part of the system. Intervening cost the timeline something every time — something small, something that couldn't be measured from outside the moment, something that the person intervening would never feel because they weren't inside the moment when the cost was paid. The cost was always paid by someone else.

Wesley started to argue — the results, the stronger moments, the choices carrying weight. The Traveler didn't wait for the argument. He was already dissolving back into the maintenance, becoming indistinct, returning to the background function he'd chosen over the unbearable temptation of individuality. But just before he faded completely, his hand reached toward Wesley's face the way it had once reached toward a boy's face on the Enterprise-D, back when a teacher first recognized something extraordinary in a child who didn't know what he was yet.

The hand dissolved before it made contact. And then he was gone, and Wesley was alone with the argument he'd been about to make and no one left to make it to.

\* \* \*

Kore left three days later. Or three moments. Or some interval that didn't translate into linear time. She didn't announce it or make a speech or give Wesley one final warning. She left because feelings don't win arguments against results. She was going to find the results.

Wesley didn't realize she was gone until he turned to say something and there was nobody to say it to. One moment she was maintaining alongside him, a presence he'd grown accustomed to, a voice he'd stopped hearing because he'd decided it wasn't telling him what he needed to know. The next moment there was just a gap where a person used to be.

He thought about going after her. Thought about finding her and explaining, really explaining, why the interventions mattered, why the results justified the rule-breaking, why thirty years of restraint had been thirty years of failure.

He didn't go. Some part of him suspected she wasn't wrong. He pushed that aside. He had a backlog.

\* \* \*

Wesley worked alone after that. The compulsion was fully in control now, though he wouldn't have called it that. He called it purpose, called it the work he should have been doing all along, called it the natural consequence of finally seeing what thirty years of restraint had allowed to accumulate.

He moved through the timeline — past, present, future — countering the presence's manipulations wherever he found them. Each one produced the rush, each one brought the wind back to the leaves, each one reinforced the certainty that he was right and Kore was wrong and the Traveler was too far gone to understand what action looked like from the inside.

He didn't notice the wrongness growing, didn't notice the too-clean quality of every restoration, didn't notice that the rush was becoming something he needed rather than something he felt. He was too busy fixing things.

And somewhere, in the spaces between the moments Wesley was fixing, something ancient and patient fed on every drop of energy his interventions released, growing and strengthening and approaching a threshold it had been building toward for centuries. Wesley didn't feel it. He was too relieved to listen that closely.

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## CHAPTER THREE: THE THING BEHIND THE GLASS

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Something was wrong with the rush. Wesley had been intervening for long enough that the rhythm should have been reliable — widen the space, feel the wind return to the leaves, move on. But the rush was arriving late now, and underneath it, in the space where silence used to be, something was listening. Getting heavier with each intervention, getting closer. His perception of the timeline had started to bend around it, moments slightly distorted at the edges, the way things look through old glass. He should have stopped. He went to the next one instead.

\* \* \*

The Enterprise. His mother's ship. Not the one he'd served on — a later version, carrying a crew he didn't know and a mission he hadn't been part of. But Beverly was aboard, and the presence had reached into a moment that touched her. A junior medical officer on Beverly's staff was about to publish research that would change how Starfleet treated a neural condition affecting thousands of officers across the fleet. Future Guy had pushed the officer toward doubt — suggesting the research was flawed, that publishing would embarrass the department, that waiting another year for more data was the responsible choice.

Wesley could see what the delay would cost. The officers who would suffer for another year while a treatment sat in a drawer because someone who wasn't even in the room had decided the timing wasn't right. And he could see his mother's face in the background of the moment — Beverly reviewing the same research, about to recommend publication, about to have her recommendation undermined by doubt that wasn't the officer's own. He widened the space, cleared the pressure, let the officer see her own work clearly for the first time. She published. And in the moment of restoration, in that fraction of a second between the intervention completing and the wind settling back into the leaves, the presence that had been building behind every rush since the Kelvin finally crossed Wesley's threshold of perception. Wesley saw the Entity.

\* \* \*

It happened in the gap between action and result. The gap opened wider than it should have, and something was in it. He couldn't hold all of it at once — edges and surfaces and depths that receded beyond his ability to follow. A structure built from consumed moments, compressed meaning, the residue of choices that had been drained of weight and absorbed into something that used weight as food. Patterns repeating at every scale, each one containing moments that had once mattered to someone and now mattered only as architecture. The worst part was how beautiful it was. Something that destroyed by being perfectly designed to destroy.

Wesley looked at it the way you look at something you've been feeding without knowing it was alive. It responded the way a gravity well responds — he entered its range and it acknowledged him. No intelligence, no malice. Just a vast automatic recognition that something had crossed its horizon.

His temporal perception shattered. He was built to sense moments, not the thing that ate them. His connection to the space between moments dropped, and for a fraction of a second Wesley Crusher was fully linear — blind to every other moment in the timeline, stripped of everything that made him a Traveler, reduced to a man standing in one place in one time with his mother's ship behind him and the thing that was eating the universe in front of him. He fell.

\* \* \*

Kore had been tracking his signature since she left. Not closely — she hadn't been following him. But she'd kept a thread of awareness open because despite everything, despite leaving and despite being right and despite the months of searching for proof while Wesley refused to listen, she couldn't completely let go of the person she'd spent years maintaining beside. She'd told herself the thread was practical — a safety measure. It wasn't. It was the thing you do when someone you care about is doing something dangerous and you can't stop them but you can't look away either.

She'd been hunting for someone — anyone — who could give her something solid. Something Wesley couldn't deny. Months of following leads that went nowhere, talking to scientists who dismissed her, carrying a wrongness she couldn't prove through a world that didn't want to hear about it. She'd doubted herself constantly — wondered if she'd walked away from the only meaningful work in the universe because of a feeling that might be nothing. The isolation of being right about something nobody believes is a specific kind of loneliness, and Kore had lived inside it for every day since she left Wesley standing in the space between moments with the argument he'd been about to make dying in his mouth. When Wesley's signature dropped to near-zero, she moved.

\* \* \*

She found him collapsed between moments, crumpled inside the space rather than standing in it. The area around him was distorted, curved inward toward something massive she could sense but couldn't see — the residue of whatever Wesley had encountered, still warping the local timeline.

She pulled him to the tree. The trunk was massive and scarred and warm against his back when she leaned him into it. The wind through the leaves was the sound of a healthy timeline — layered, constant, alive.

This was home. The only home Travelers had. Wesley and Kore had sat in its branches a thousand times before, maintaining from its shelter, listening to the wind to know where moments needed attending.

But it was different now. Kore noticed it as she settled Wesley against the trunk. A branch near the top that she could have sworn was fuller the last time she was here — still green, still carrying leaves, but lighter somehow, as if the wind had to work harder to move through it. And lower down, near the roots, a section where the bark had gone smooth in a way that didn't feel like growth. It felt like absence — like something had been worn away from the inside.

She didn't understand what she was seeing. Not yet. But she filed it the way she filed everything — carefully, without dismissing it, ready to be examined when the framework existed to examine it. She stabilized Wesley's temporal signature with her own, and waited.

\* \* \*

Wesley came back slowly. The first thing he felt was the bark against his back — massive and scarred and warm, the most solid thing in a universe that had just tried to shake him apart. The second thing he felt was the wind, moving through the leaves above him, carrying the layered sound of a timeline that was still alive even though parts of it were dying. The third thing he felt was Kore's hand on his shoulder, steady and present.

He sat against the trunk for a long time before he could speak, letting the tree hold him the way it had always held him. The place his mind had built to make the formless bearable. The one constant in thirty years of existing between everything.

And then he looked up at the canopy and saw what Kore had seen. The branch that was lighter. The section of bark that had gone smooth. Small things, easy to miss, easy to explain away. But Wesley had been sitting in this tree for thirty years and he knew what it was supposed to look like the way you know what your own face is supposed to look like, and something had changed.

He didn't connect it to the Entity yet. Didn't have the framework. But the wrongness that Kore had been feeling about the interventions and the wrongness that Wesley was now seeing in his own tree — those were the same wrongness, and the fact that they were the same was going to matter more than either of them understood yet.

\* \* \*

When he could talk, he told Kore what he'd seen — something in the gap between intervention and result, something he'd been feeling the rush instead of seeing. Something that consumed meaning and used it as structure.

Kore looked at him and the tension between them — the weight of her having been right, the weight of him having not listened, the months of separation and doubt — didn't disappear. But it shifted. Because Wesley wasn't arguing anymore. He wasn't dismissing what she'd felt or asking her to prove it with data. He was sitting against the trunk of their tree with his perception shattered and his certainty destroyed, and he was telling her she'd been right about everything.

She didn't say I told you so. She told him she knew. She'd felt it well enough to stop, to walk away, to go looking for someone who could put numbers to what her gut was telling her.

She'd found someone. A Vulcan named D'Kar, a temporal physicist at the Science Academy who'd been building models that described exactly what Wesley had just experienced. His colleagues dismissed him because he had no empirical proof. Wesley was the proof — D'Kar's equations predicted that someone like Wesley would have to exist if the degradation was real.

But D'Kar's models were incomplete. He could measure the feeding from individual interventions but couldn't see the full picture — every source feeding the Entity simultaneously across all of time. For that he needed observational data from something that could see the entire system at once.

Wesley knew what that ultimately meant. The Guardian of Forever. But that was a step beyond the next step. The next step was D'Kar, getting numbers for what Wesley had seen and understanding what the Entity actually was.

Wesley told Kore to take him to the Vulcan.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: D’KAR

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Kore took him to Vulcan. Wesley’s temporal perception was still rebuilding, flickering in and out like a signal with a bad connection. Every few minutes the timeline would disappear and he’d be just a man sitting in nothing, blind to everything outside the moment he was in. Then it would come back, uneven and distorted, and he could feel the shape of the damage the Entity had left in his senses.

Kore kept him stable, held his signature together with hers the way you hold a cracked thing steady so the cracks don’t spread. She was quiet during the transit, but it wasn’t the quiet of someone with nothing to say. It was the quiet of someone deciding how much to tell.

\* \* \*

She told him about D’Kar on the way. Not the math — she’d get to the math. She told Wesley what had drawn her to the Vulcan in the first place, because that part mattered for reasons Wesley wouldn’t understand until he met him.

What drew her to D’Kar wasn’t the math, at least not at first. It was the way his colleagues talked about him — with the specific kind of dismissal that people reserve for someone who’s asking questions they don’t want answered. She recognized that tone. Her father had used it every time she’d questioned why she couldn’t leave the house, why the outside world was dangerous, why she had to trust his science over her own sense that something was wrong with her life.

Adam Soong had raised her in a controlled environment, engineered her biology, told her the world outside would kill her, and presented all of it as protection. When she'd discovered the truth — that she was an experiment, that the danger was manufactured, that her father's care was a leash dressed up as love — she'd burned the relationship to get free. Wesley had found her right after, alone and looking for a reason to exist that wasn't defined by someone else's design.

So when Kore heard that a Vulcan scientist at the Academy was being dismissed for questioning the foundations that everyone else built on — for asking whether the established frameworks of temporal mechanics were actually correct, whether the assumptions were solid, whether the thing everyone treated as settled science might be hiding something dangerous — she recognized the pattern. Someone asking uncomfortable questions and being told to stop asking. She went to see him.

\* \* \*

D'Kar was not what she expected. Vulcans who challenged orthodoxy usually did it loudly, with the particular arrogance of someone who believed their logic was superior to the institution's logic. D'Kar was the opposite. He followed protocol precisely. He published through proper channels. He attended every review his colleagues requested.

But the work on the displays followed a logic that no standard Vulcan analytical framework would have produced, because D'Kar wasn't using standard frameworks. He was questioning the frameworks themselves, and he was doing it so quietly and so rigorously that his colleagues couldn't dismiss his math — only his conclusions.

Kore had sat in his laboratory and told him what she'd felt after every intervention Wesley made. The wrongness, the too-clean restoration, the sense that something was being consumed in the fixing. She had no data, no equations, no proof. Just a feeling that she'd trusted enough to walk away from the only work that had ever given her life meaning.

D'Kar had listened the way Vulcans listen — without visible reaction, cataloguing everything. When she finished, he'd been quiet for a long time. Then he'd told her that her feeling matched his math precisely, and that she was the first person who'd ever walked into his laboratory and described from experience what his equations predicted theoretically.

Something had passed between them in that moment that Kore didn't fully understand and D'Kar would probably never acknowledge. Two people who'd been dismissed for seeing something nobody else wanted to see, finding each other in the space between gut feeling and mathematical proof. She'd stayed longer than she'd planned. They'd worked together, mapping her experiential observations against his theoretical models, and the alignment was close enough to make Kore's hands shake — not from fear, but from the particular relief of learning you weren't crazy.

When she'd left D'Kar's laboratory, she told Wesley, she'd carried two things with her: the knowledge that the wrongness was real, and the awareness that she'd met someone who thought the way she wished more people thought — from the foundations up, questioning everything, trusting nothing that hadn't earned it.

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Wesley listened to all of this and understood something about Kore that he'd missed during the months they'd worked together. He'd thought her sensitivity to the wrongness was a Traveler ability — a perceptual gift, something in her temporal mechanics that let her feel what he couldn't. It wasn't. It was personal. She recognized manipulation because she'd been raised by it. She felt the wrongness in corrected moments because she knew exactly what it felt like when someone rearranged your reality and called it helping.

Her father had narrowed her world and called it protection. Future Guy narrowed timelines and called it preventing suffering. Wesley widened timelines and called it restoring freedom. To Kore, they were all versions of the same thing — someone outside the moment deciding what the people inside the moment should experience.

She hadn't left Wesley because she was overwhelmed or afraid or not ready. She'd left because she'd spent her childhood trapped in a framework that was designed for her benefit by someone who thought he knew better, and she wasn't going to spend her adult life inside another one.

Wesley also understood, for the first time, why he'd been drawn to recruit her in the first place. Kore was a Soong — a different Soong, a different century, a different method, but the same family line that had created Data. Wesley had grown up watching Data figure out how to be a person when everything about his existence had been designed by someone else. He'd watched Data earn his humanity through choices, not through programming. And then Wesley had found Kore, another Soong creation fighting the same fight, and some part of him had recognized the echo before his conscious mind caught up.

\* \* \*

D'Kar's laboratory was immaculate. Precise instruments, the kind of order that Vulcans breathe the way humans breathe air. And on the displays, models that didn't fit any standard framework — equations that asked questions nobody else at the Academy wanted asked.

Wesley appeared at the threshold and waited. Kore walked past him into the laboratory like she belonged there, which she did — she'd spent enough time in this room to have earned the right to enter without invitation. D'Kar looked up from his displays and saw Kore first, and something shifted in his composure that Wesley almost missed. A micro-adjustment, barely visible, the Vulcan equivalent of someone's face softening when a person they didn't expect walks back into the room.

Then D'Kar saw Wesley, and the softening became something else. He stood and raised his hand in the Vulcan salute, but the way he did it carried something the standard greeting usually didn't. There was weight behind it, as if he meant the words — live long and prosper — not as protocol but as something he was genuinely asking the universe to grant this stranger who'd just walked into his laboratory. Wesley returned the gesture, and for a moment the two of them just stood there, a Traveler and a Vulcan, taking the measure of each other across a room full of equations that described the end of everything.

Then D'Kar told Wesley that his models had predicted someone like him — a being displaced from normal causality, someone who existed outside linear time. D'Kar's equations said that if the degradation he was modeling was real, beings like this would have to exist. Wesley was the proof he'd been waiting for. But Kore had been the first person to make him believe the proof would come.

\* \* \*

They worked together, the three of them. Wesley described what he'd seen in the gap — the Entity, the structure built from consumed meaning, the thing that had responded to his presence and shattered his perception. D'Kar listened and built internal models as the information arrived. Kore translated between them when Wesley's experiential language didn't map to D'Kar's mathematical frameworks, which was more often than Wesley would have expected. She'd spent enough time with D'Kar to know how he processed information, and she moved between the two of them with a fluency that made Wesley realize how much had happened between these two people while he'd been off breaking things.

D'Kar's models didn't describe the Entity as a thing — they described a process, a systematic conversion of temporal energy into something else. Every intervention released energy, and D'Kar had measured the rates from historical data and from signatures left behind by known temporal events. The Temporal Cold War factions averaged about 3.2 units of temporal distortion per event, with enormous volume over decades. The Travelers averaged 0.8 per event. Future Guy's manipulations generated approximately 17.8.

Wesley's interventions averaged 1.6. D'Kar explained the difference — Future Guy's work was forceful, collapsing possibilities down to a single outcome, shoving people toward a path they wouldn't have chosen on their own. That kind of narrowing was violent to the timeline. Wesley's work was the opposite, widening the space back open, restoring options. A lighter touch, less disruptive per event, but still disruptive, still releasing energy, and Wesley had been doing it constantly since the Kelvin.

D’Kar showed him the full pattern. Every intervention released energy without exception. The energy accumulated in the spaces between moments, building, compounding, feeding something.

\* \* \*

Wesley told D’Kar what he’d seen in the gap and D’Kar’s hands stopped moving over the display. He told Wesley that what he was describing matched his models precisely — the energy wasn’t just accumulating, it was being consumed by something and converted into structure. His equations predicted exactly this kind of organism, something that fed on temporal energy the way biological organisms feed on chemical energy. He’d never been able to confirm it because the organism would occupy spaces his instruments couldn’t reach. Wesley had reached those spaces, and the organism had reached back.

D’Kar asked Wesley if the structure he’d seen reminded him of anything in the known records. Wesley thought about it and found the connection — the Crystalline Entity from the Enterprise-D’s records, the organism that had consumed entire planets of organic life and left crystal lattices behind. Same family, different appetite. Where the original consumed biological energy, this one consumed temporal energy. Where the original left crystal lattices on dead planets, this one left dead spots in the timeline — moments stripped of meaning, structurally intact, completely hollow. And the Unmaker — the tendency Wesley had named at the Kelvin — wasn’t a separate phenomenon. It was the feeding trail, what the Entity left behind when it ate, the pattern of decay that spread outward from consumed moments the way rot spreads from a wound. Wesley had named the symptom at the Kelvin. D’Kar was showing him the disease. And Kore had felt it before either of them had seen it.

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D’Kar’s models showed the accumulation approaching a threshold — a critical mass beyond which the feeding would become self-sustaining. The Entity wouldn’t need new energy because the accumulated mass would generate its own growth, consuming moments faster than meaning could replenish.

The growth curve was steep and accelerating. Something had pushed it past a point of no return recently, a massive spike in temporal energy that had tipped the balance. Wesley knew what the spike was — the Kelvin, his intervention, the biggest single release of temporal energy he'd ever produced. He didn't say that out loud, but D'Kar could see it in the numbers and was too precise a scientist to pretend he hadn't noticed.

Kore watched Wesley absorb that. She'd been watching him absorb bad news about his own actions for the last several hours and she could see the weight accumulating the same way D'Kar's models showed energy accumulating — each new piece of information adding to a mass that was approaching its own kind of threshold.

She put her hand on D'Kar's arm, briefly, without thinking about it. A gesture that said *be careful with him* without requiring words. D'Kar glanced at her hand, then at her face, and gave a nod so slight that Wesley wouldn't have caught it if he'd been looking, which he wasn't.

\* \* \*

Wesley asked if there was a way to reverse the accumulation, to starve the Entity below the threshold so the feeding stopped being self-sustaining.

D’Kar told him the models were incomplete. He could show local damage, individual feeding rates, the growth curve and the threshold, but calculating whether reversal was possible required the full picture — every source of temporal energy mapped and measured simultaneously across all of time. His models extrapolated from known events. He needed observational data from something that could see the entire system at once.

Wesley asked why he couldn’t provide that himself — he existed outside linear time, he could attend to any moment in history.

D’Kar told him that was the problem. Wesley could attend to moments but he moved through them, experienced them in sequence even if the sequence wasn’t linear. He could visit any point in time but he couldn’t see all points simultaneously. He was inside the system. What D’Kar needed was a view from the boundary — not someone who traveled through time, but something that stood where time opened and could show the complete map without moving through it.

Wesley knew exactly what could see the complete map. He’d known about it his entire career as a Traveler — something ancient, something that stood at the boundary of all time, something that didn’t move through the timeline but existed where the timeline opened. He knew what it was and he knew where to find it.

D’Kar told Wesley to bring back the full scope data and he could run the complete model. The math would tell them whether reversal was possible, and if so, what it would cost.

Before they left, D’Kar gave Wesley a data module — a Vulcan device calibrated to his models, designed to interface with temporal phenomena and capture structural information that Wesley’s perception alone couldn’t hold precisely enough for mathematical analysis. He told Wesley to activate it in the presence of whatever he was going to find at the boundary, and let it record everything.

D’Kar handed the module to Wesley but looked at Kore when he said to be careful with it. He wasn’t talking about the module.

Wesley looked at Kore. She nodded once, and they left Vulcan with D’Kar’s numbers and a destination.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: THE GUARDIAN

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Every temporal record Wesley had ever accessed listed the Guardian as dormant. A relic on a dead planet, its power source depleted or withdrawn long ago.

Wesley followed D'Kar's logic to it anyway. If the Guardian existed at the boundary of all time, it was the only thing in the universe that could give D'Kar what his models needed. Everything else was inside the system. The Guardian was the edge of it. It wasn't dormant. It was waiting.

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Wesley and Kore approached the planet carefully. His temporal perception was functional again, mostly — Kore had stabilized him after the Entity encounter, and the time on Vulcan with D'Kar had given him room to heal. But the damage was still there underneath, like a bone that had set but not fully knit. He could feel the edges of it every time he pushed too hard.

They were still a distance from the surface when Wesley felt something he wasn't expecting. Phase-shifting signatures, the genetic enhancements Future Guy had given them. The ability to move through solid matter, to camouflage, to exist between states the way Wesley existed between moments. Crude compared to a Traveler's abilities, but effective. And there were a lot of them. They were guarding the Guardian.

Wesley stopped at the edge of the planet's temporal field and looked at the situation. At least two dozen Suliban arranged in overlapping defensive patterns around the portal. Not random placement — tactical. Someone had told them exactly how to position themselves to intercept a Traveler's approach. Future Guy — the presence Wesley had been countering since the Kelvin, the one who'd engineered the rift in the first place — knew Wesley would come here.

\* \* \*

These Suliban were holding a position, and whoever had sent them had briefed them on Traveler capabilities — Future Guy had been watching Wesley counter his manipulations long enough to know how a Traveler moved. Wesley told Kore to hold back and approach from a different angle in case he didn't make it through. Then he went in.

\* \* \*

The first group he bypassed cleanly. They were stationed at the outer perimeter, scanning for temporal signatures, and Wesley moved through a temporal band they weren't calibrated to detect. He slipped past them the way a thought slips past someone who's listening for the wrong question.

The next ring was harder. These Suliban were phase-shifting in overlapping patterns, one solid while another was phased, cycling constantly, creating a net with no gaps longer than a fraction of a second. Wesley had to time his movement to fractions of fractions, threading through windows that barely existed. He made it through. Barely.

The inner ring was waiting for him. They'd felt him pass through the second perimeter — not seen him, felt him. The temporal displacement a Traveler creates when moving between moments leaves a residue, a faint disturbance in the local timeline. Wesley had always considered it negligible. The Suliban had been trained to detect it.

Six of them converging on his position from three directions, phase-shifting in coordinated bursts that turned the space around the Guardian into a maze of solid and not-solid. Wesley couldn't slip between moments because the Suliban were occupying the spaces between, and he couldn't go around them because the inner perimeter was sealed. The only option left was to fight his way through.

\* \* \*

Wesley wasn't a fighter. The Traveler had trained him for perception, not confrontation. But thirty years of maintaining a timeline full of temporal agents had taught him things the Traveler never intended — how to collapse a manipulation field, how to overload a moment with conflicting possibilities until the interference pattern shattered. Skills built for maintenance, now used as a weapon.

He created a temporal disruption, a burst of conflicting possibilities centered on his position. Every Suliban in range suddenly existed in three possible states simultaneously, their phase-shifting cycles thrown out of sync. For two or three seconds the net collapsed.

Wesley moved. He covered half the remaining distance before the Suliban reorganized. One of them caught him — a phase-shifted strike to his shoulder that felt like being pulled in two directions simultaneously, his temporal signature stretching in a way it wasn't supposed to.

He kept moving. Another strike, this one to his side, harder, the Suliban fully materializing at the moment of contact to maximize the physical impact. Wesley felt something give — the damage from the Entity encounter, the part that hadn't fully healed, giving way under the impact. His connection to the space between moments flickered and stuttered, and for a terrifying instant he was fully linear, fully present, fully vulnerable. The Guardian was twenty meters away. He couldn't reach it.

\* \* \*

Kore hit the inner perimeter the way Wesley used to hit temporal manipulations — without hesitation, without doubt, without the weight he now carried. What she did was nothing like what Wesley had done. Wesley had created confusion — a burst of conflicting possibilities that scrambled the Suliban's coordination. Kore did something Wesley didn't know was possible. She reached into the temporal substrate underneath the Suliban's enhancements and pulled the foundation out from under them. Not disrupting their phase-shifting cycles but removing the between-state entirely, collapsing the space the Suliban occupied into a single fixed moment where their genetic enhancements had nothing to work with. Like pulling the water out of a pool while someone was swimming in it.

The Suliban dropped out of phase-shift one by one, each one suddenly and completely solid, stranded in linear time with no way back. It took her less than a minute.

Wesley watched it happen and felt something between admiration and unease. What Kore had done was intervention on a level he hadn't known a Traveler could reach, the kind of fundamental manipulation of the timeline's structure that the rule existed to prevent. She'd spent her years away not just observing but developing abilities that went deeper than anything Wesley had ever attempted, and using them now was costing her something. He could see it in the way she held herself afterward — tense, shaking slightly, the look of someone who'd just done something they'd promised themselves they'd never do.

She reached Wesley, steadied his flickering temporal signature with her own, got him on his feet, and walked him to the Guardian of Forever, which stood at the center of a clearing that shouldn't have existed. The planet around it was barren, dust and rock and the remnants of a civilization so old that even its ruins had become geological features. But the clearing around the Guardian was clean, no dust, no debris, as if time itself refused to accumulate within a certain radius of the portal.

The portal itself was larger than Wesley expected. He'd seen records, read accounts, studied Kirk's encounter with it over a century ago. But the records hadn't captured the weight the thing carried. It felt old the way a mountain feels old — not just in duration but in density, as if time itself had accumulated around it and compressed into something you could feel against your skin.

Wesley felt the difference immediately. This wasn't like being a Traveler. Travelers moved through time, entered moments, altered them, left. They navigated time the way a ship navigates water. The Guardian didn't move at all. It stood where time opened, and time moved through it. Wesley could change a moment. The Guardian could only show you what changing a moment actually did.

That was why he was here. Not for another perspective from inside the damage, but for the view from the threshold — the place where every intervention and every consequence passed through on its way to becoming permanent.

The Guardian communicated the way it always had — not through language but through direct transfer, meaning arriving in Wesley's mind fully formed before he had time to process how it got there. Kore, standing behind him, couldn't hear it the way Wesley could, but she could feel the edges of it bleeding through their connection — the weight of something ancient acknowledging them, cataloguing them, deciding what to show.

It told Wesley it had been watching, and that Wesley already knew more about what was happening than he was willing to admit. Wesley knew better than to ask why it hadn't intervened. The Guardian was a doorway, not a counselor. It existed at the threshold of time the way a scar exists at the surface of a wound. It didn't warn or advise or choose sides, but it could show, and it was ready to show Wesley everything.

Wesley activated the data module D'Kar had given him.

The module lit up immediately, projecting a three-dimensional map into the space between Wesley and the Guardian. The Guardian was feeding data into it faster than Wesley could follow — every source of temporal energy across all of history, mapped and measured simultaneously. The view from the boundary that D’Kar’s models needed.

The Entity sat at the center of the map, feeding lines radiating outward from every direction. The Temporal Cold War factions, each one a tributary pouring energy into the organism. The Travelers, their work forming a steady stream. Future Guy’s manipulations, thick and constant. And Wesley’s interventions — a parallel stream running alongside Future Guy’s, feeding the same appetite from the opposite direction.

Wesley tried to reject what he was seeing, because the map put his interventions on the same diagram as Future Guy’s manipulations — parallel streams, same destination — and intent had to matter. The difference between clearing corruption and performing it had to mean something. Otherwise everything he’d done since the Kelvin collapsed into a single devastating equivalence.

The Guardian didn’t argue. The feeding lines didn’t care about intent. They measured energy — released, consumed, converted into the dead spots spreading across the timeline. Wesley’s stream and Future Guy’s stream entered the Entity from different directions, carried different justifications, served different philosophies, and the Entity metabolized them identically.

Wesley stared at it until the resistance broke. His jaw tightened, something hot and useless rose in his throat, and then the anger collapsed because it had nowhere to go. The math didn’t need convincing. It was just there.

Then the map did something unexpected. One of the feeding lines brightened and extended beyond the Entity's structure, pointing toward a specific location in the timeline — not a moment or an event, but a person. A presence existing between linear and non-linear time. The Celestial Temple. The Prophets' space. The data module pulsed and labeled it in D'Kar's notation system: EMISSARY.

Wesley asked about the dead spots. The Guardian showed him those too — the feeding trail, the places where the Entity had consumed so much temporal energy that the moments couldn't sustain meaning anymore. Spreading and connecting, the patches growing into sheets.

Wesley asked how much time they had. The Guardian didn't answer in units. It showed Wesley the growth curve — the Entity's expansion mapped against the remaining density of meaningful moments in the timeline. The curve was steep and accelerating. The threshold Wesley's Kelvin intervention had pushed it past was a point of no return — the Entity was now growing faster than meaning could replenish.

D'Kar's data module was already transmitting the scope data back to Vulcan in real-time — the device had established a subspace link the moment it activated. D'Kar would have the full picture before Wesley and Kore left the planet. Every source mapped, every rate measured, every feeding line quantified. The math would run itself.

But the Guardian wasn't done. The map shifted, and the line pointing to the Emissary brightened again. The Guardian communicated one more thing directly to Wesley — that the Emissary understood something Wesley didn't. Something about the cost of watching someone you love make choices that destroy them, and choosing not to intervene. Something about the difference between inability and restraint.

The Guardian couldn't tell Wesley what to do. But it could tell him where to look, and it was pointing at Benjamin Sisko.

Wesley looked at Kore. She looked back at him the way someone looks at a person they've already decided to follow into something they know won't end well. They left the Guardian behind, and the portal stood in its clearing, ancient and patient. A doorway that never closed. Behind them, the Suliban were already regrouping.

\* \* \*

## INTERLUDE

\* \* \*

Felt that.

The ship just took a hit. Hard one. Lights cut, deck went sideways for a second, came back. Recording held. I'm on the floor and there's a piece of paneling near my head that wasn't near my head a minute ago.

Shelby. Comm.

She says we're holding. Doesn't elaborate. Shelby doesn't waste words on a captain who can't help. Told me to do whatever I was doing and signed off. Good. I will.

But I want to tell you about something I felt right before the hit. Not the explosion. Before that. About a minute before.

The air changed.

Not in any way I could measure. Just — thinner. As if the room had decided it didn't need quite so much atmosphere. My words felt different in my mouth. Lighter. The way words feel when you're sleep-deprived and you're not sure if you said something out loud or just thought it.

Then the hit. Then the lights. Then back to recording.

I don't know what that thinning was. I don't know if it's coming back. I just know I felt it and I want it on the record in case it matters later.

Where was I. Wesley at the Guardian. Suliban swarming. The fight he wasn't built to win.

I know what that's like. Different war, different enemy. But I know what it feels like to be the wrong tool for what's in front of you. The Traveler trained Wesley for perception, not combat. I was trained for combat from the time I could hold a weapon, and most days I still wasn't the right tool either.

You go anyway. You do what's in front of you with what you have.

That's the only choice anyone ever gets.

Back to it.

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## CHAPTER SIX: GUINAN AND Q

\* \* \*

They both felt it leaving the Guardian's planet, a pull that had nothing to do with temporal mechanics. A direction, not forward through the timeline but backward through Wesley himself. Back to who he was before any of this — before the Traveler, before the rule, before thirty years of maintaining a timeline that was being eaten from the inside.

Wesley needed to find someone who remembered that person. Kore knew it too. They looked at each other and said the name at the same time. Guinan.

Wesley hadn't thought about her in decades but the moment her name landed in his mouth it felt obvious. The bartender on the Enterprise who'd served him hot chocolate in Ten Forward when he was a teenager trying to figure out if he belonged on the bridge. The woman who'd been alive for centuries and had a way of hearing what you were really saying underneath the thing you thought you were saying. Kore had crossed paths with Guinan through Picard's circle back when Wesley recruited her, and she'd recognized immediately that Guinan was something different from the usual people who orbited Starfleet captains. They went to New Orleans.

\* \* \*

The bar was small, tucked into a street in the French Quarter that didn't draw attention. Wesley and Kore walked in expecting to find Guinan polishing glasses behind the counter. They found her in the middle of an argument. Kore stayed near the door — this looked like something for Wesley alone.

Guinan was standing at the far end of the bar, leaning forward with the particular intensity she reserved for beings she'd known long enough to stop being polite with. Across from her, sitting in a chair that seemed barely able to contain what was happening to him, was Q.

Wesley had never met Q directly but he'd grown up on a ship Q had visited multiple times. He knew what Q was supposed to look like — the arrogance, the theatrical confidence, the sense that reality was a toy he was choosing to play with. His mother and Picard and the entire senior staff had described that presence often enough that Wesley thought he knew what to expect. What he saw was something else entirely.

Q was coming apart. Not metaphorically, not philosophically — physically. His presence was destabilizing in ways that Wesley's damaged temporal perception could read like a diagnostic. The vast intelligence was still there but the structure holding it together was failing, shedding coherence the way a star sheds matter when its core can no longer sustain fusion. He was flickering between states — solid, translucent, something that wasn't either — and each fluctuation was clearly causing him pain in a way that a being who'd never experienced pain before didn't know how to manage.

And Wesley could see something else, something that made his damaged senses flare with recognition. The patterns on Q's destabilizing form were familiar. The same signatures Wesley had seen on the Entity in the gap between intervention and result. The same feeding trail he'd learned to identify in dead spots across the timeline. The Entity wasn't just consuming temporal energy from the timeline. It was consuming whatever the Q Continuum was made of, and Q was wearing the evidence. Guinan and Q both stopped talking when Wesley entered.

\* \* \*

The silence lasted long enough for Wesley to understand that the argument he'd interrupted wasn't casual. Guinan's expression carried the weight of someone who'd been watching an old adversary die in front of her and couldn't decide whether to grieve or keep fighting. Q's expression carried nothing recognizable — he was beyond the emotional vocabulary he'd spent his existence refusing to develop.

Guinan spoke first. She told Wesley she hadn't known he was coming, which meant something had arranged this that was beyond her ability to sense. She looked at Q and told him the same thing — that his showing up at her bar at the exact moment a Traveler walked in was not the kind of coincidence she believed in.

Q told her he hadn't come because of Wesley. He'd come because the Continuum was collapsing and Guinan's bar was where he always ended up when things fell apart, because she was the only person in the universe who would tell him the truth about what was happening to him even if the truth was something he couldn't survive hearing.

Wesley asked what was happening to the Continuum. Q told him. The Continuum had been aware of something feeding on temporal energy for longer than most civilizations had existed. They'd ignored it the way you ignore a parasite that seems too small to threaten you. But the parasite wasn't small anymore and the Continuum was discovering that its own existence — the reality-reshaping, the timeline-bending, the casual manipulation of causality that the Q had practiced for eons — had been feeding the thing just as surely as the Temporal Cold War and the Travelers and Future Guy and Wesley himself.

The Q Continuum was dying of the same disease Wesley's timeline was dying of. Same Entity, same feeding, same cost. The only difference was scale — the Continuum had been generating temporal energy for longer and in greater quantities than any other source in existence, and the Entity had been consuming it patiently, growing in the spaces the Q never thought to check.

Q looked at Wesley and told him that if Wesley found a way to starve the Entity, it might slow or even reverse the Continuum's decline. He wasn't asking for help. He was stating a fact — their problems shared a root, and solving one might affect the other. It was the first honest transaction of Q's existence, a dying god offering what he knew in exchange for the possibility that someone else's path might lead somewhere useful.

\* \* \*

What Q knew was this: power without cost was the most dangerous thing in the universe, not because of what it did to the universe but because of what it did to the one who held it. Q had spent his existence reaching into moments and reshaping them for curiosity, for entertainment, for the sheer experience of being the one who decided what happened next. And it had taught him nothing because there was never a cost. He'd reach in, reshape, withdraw, and Q remained untouched, unchanged, separate.

That separation was the thing that was killing him now. Not just the Entity feeding on the Continuum's energy, but the deeper realization that he'd spent an eternity interacting with the universe without ever being part of it. Every test he'd imposed on humanity was a question he could have asked himself and never did, and now at the end the only question that mattered was the one he'd spent his existence avoiding.

Wesley pushed back. He told Q he wasn't the same — Q had reached into moments for entertainment, Wesley had done it to help people, to restore freedom. The intention had to matter.

Q told him the intention was different but the structure was identical. Power applied from outside, without submitting to the conditions inside. Reaching in, reshaping, withdrawing. The moment changed and Wesley remained untouched. That was the part that mattered — not why he reached in, but that he never stayed.

\* \* \*

Guinan had been listening to both of them the way she always listened — with the particular stillness of someone who'd been hearing arguments for centuries and could identify the exact moment when both sides were wrong.

She told Q he was close but not right, that there was a difference between what Q had done and what Wesley was doing, and Q was too busy dying to see it clearly. Wesley's problem wasn't that he operated from outside. It was that he couldn't stop reaching in. He'd made intervention his identity, and the moment you can't stop, you're no longer choosing.

Q turned to her with the weight of centuries between them — arguments that predated most civilizations, grudges that had outlasted empires. He told her that was easy to say for someone who'd survived by doing nothing, that endurance wasn't wisdom, that watching the Borg consume her world and rebuilding afterward wasn't moral superiority but stubbornness dressed as philosophy.

Guinan told him the difference between endurance and stubbornness was that endurance changed you. She'd rebuilt differently every time, lost differently, loved differently. She'd been inside every moment of it, subject to the same conditions as everyone around her. Q had never been inside anything, and by the time he understood what that cost him he didn't have enough left to change it.

Q didn't respond to that. He flickered again, harder this time, the destabilization visible across his entire form. For a moment Wesley could see through him to the chair behind, and the feeding patterns on his surface pulsed with the same rhythm Wesley had felt from the Entity in the gap. Q was being consumed in real time. Sitting in a bar in New Orleans, arguing with the only person who'd ever told him the truth, and the Entity was eating him while he talked.

\* \* \*

Wesley did something he hadn't planned. He reached out and steadied Q's temporal signature the way Kore had steadied his after the Entity encounter. Not healing, not fixing — just holding the coherence together for a few more minutes. Buying Q time with the same Traveler ability that had been feeding the Entity every time Wesley used it on the timeline.

The irony wasn't lost on him. Using the ability that caused the problem to temporarily help someone suffering from the same problem. But Q was coming apart in front of him and Wesley couldn't watch someone disintegrate and do nothing about it. That was the compulsion Guinan had just named, and he was proving her right in the act of ignoring her warning.

Q looked at Wesley with something that was unmistakably gratitude, which was probably the first time in Q's existence that the emotion had crossed his face without irony. He told Wesley to go find the Emissary. That whatever Sisko understood about watching someone you love destroy themselves without intervening — Q needed Wesley to learn it, because it might be the thing that saved both of them.

Guinan told Wesley she agreed. The Prophets had positioned Sisko for exactly this, and Wesley was as ready as he was going to get.

Kore had been standing near the door through all of this, watching Q come apart and Wesley hold him together and Guinan navigate between two beings who were both dying of the same thing in different ways. She didn't say anything when Wesley turned to leave. She just followed.

\* \* \*

They stepped out of the bar and into the New Orleans evening, and something was different. The air hit Wesley differently than it should have. He'd existed outside of linear time for thirty years and the physical world had been something he moved through rather than inhabited, the way you move through a room you're not staying in. But walking out of Guinan's bar onto a street in New Orleans in the evening, he felt something he hadn't felt in decades.

He was hungry. Not for answers or understanding or the next piece of the temporal puzzle. Physically hungry. His body telling him it needed food in a way that Travelers' bodies never did because they existed outside the biological demands of linear time. The sensation was so foreign and so ordinary at the same time that it stopped him on the sidewalk.

Kore noticed. She asked him what was wrong and he told her he was hungry, and they both stood there for a moment processing how strange that was.

She wanted to walk. She'd been stabilizing Wesley, fighting Suliban, sitting in a Vulcan laboratory and a bar, and she wanted to feel ground under her feet and air on her face. Wesley agreed because walking felt right in a way he couldn't explain and the hunger was pulling him in a direction he didn't question.

They walked through the French Quarter like two normal people, and Wesley experienced something he'd forgotten existed — being in a place without attending to it. Not sensing the timeline, not tracking temporal signatures, not measuring the weight of moments. Just walking down a street and smelling food and hearing music and existing inside a single moment the way everyone around him existed inside every moment of their lives.

\* \* \*

They almost walked past it. A restaurant on a corner, warm light through the windows, the kind of place that had been there long enough that the neighborhood had shaped itself around it rather than the other way around. But the smell stopped Wesley mid-stride — something rich and layered, better than anything else on the street, the kind of cooking that takes hours and doesn't apologize for it. He stepped back, curious, and looked up at the hand-painted sign above the door. Sisko's. Wesley stared at the name for a long moment. Then he went inside.

Wesley walked in. Kore walked in behind him and then she wasn't there anymore. Not dramatically — she just couldn't cross whatever the threshold had become. The space inside had shifted into something between linear and non-linear, and it wasn't for her. She could feel it and she understood it and she waited outside.

Inside, the restaurant was warm and real and smelled like gumbo and fresh bread and decades of meals served to people who needed feeding. A man came from behind the counter — older, solid, with the kind of presence that comes from spending a lifetime in a kitchen that feeds a neighborhood. Joseph Sisko.

He seated Wesley without asking if he wanted a table, brought him a bowl of gumbo without asking what he wanted to eat, and sat down across from him like this was perfectly normal — a stranger walking into his restaurant at this hour looking like he hadn't eaten in thirty years.

Wesley ate. Actually ate, actually tasted food, the heat and the spice and the weight of something made by human hands landing in a body that had forgotten what it meant to be nourished by something physical. His eyes burned and he didn't know if it was the cayenne or something else entirely.

Joseph talked the way fathers talk to people who need feeding more than they need advice. About the restaurant, about the neighborhood, about how a good roux takes patience and you can't rush it no matter how hungry the customer is. Simple things said simply by a man who understood that sometimes the most important thing you can do for someone is put food in front of them and not ask why they came.

Wesley was halfway through the bowl when he heard it from somewhere behind him. “Dabo!!” He turned. A Dabo table, a Bajoran woman spinning the wheel, patrons cheering and groaning and pushing latinum across the felt. The sounds and the lights of a place Wesley had never been to but recognized instantly from a lifetime of Starfleet records.

He turned back to the table expecting Joseph and gumbo and the warm light of a New Orleans restaurant. Benjamin Sisko was sitting across from him. The restaurant was Quark’s Bar on Deep Space Nine. The gumbo was still there. Sisko looked like he’d been waiting.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE EMISSARY

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The gumbo was still in front of him. Wesley stared at the bowl — the same bowl Joseph had brought him, the same recipe, still warm. But the restaurant was gone and the man sitting across from him wasn't Joseph anymore and the sounds of a New Orleans evening had been replaced by the ambient noise of a Bajoran space station's social hub on what seemed like a perfectly ordinary night.

Quark's. He'd never been here but he'd heard about it his entire career — the bar on Deep Space Nine where Starfleet officers and Bajoran merchants and Ferengi bartenders occupied the same room and somehow made it work. The Dabo table was still spinning behind him, patrons were still pushing latinum across felt, and the whole place was alive with the particular energy of a community that had survived a war and a occupation and a wormhole to alien gods and come out the other side still willing to sit down and have a drink together.

Benjamin Sisko was eating gumbo with the unhurried pleasure of a man who understood that a good meal was not a thing you rushed through on your way to something more important. He looked up at Wesley and something in him lit up — not a smile exactly, though it became one. Something deeper, a warmth that started behind his eyes and radiated outward until the whole man seemed to glow with it, the way certain people glow when they're exactly where they're supposed to be doing exactly what they were made to do. He told Wesley he was glad he'd enjoyed his father's cooking.

Wesley asked about the disguise. Why Joseph first. Sisko told him it wasn't a disguise. It was a choice. He said he'd known Wesley was coming since the Guardian pointed him this way, and he'd known Wesley wasn't ready. A man who'd just watched Q coming apart in a bar and had his own compulsion named by a centuries-old El-Aurian wasn't in a state to hear what Sisko needed to tell him. He needed to eat first, needed to sit across from someone who didn't want anything from him except to see him fed, needed to be inside a moment — a real one, with real food and real warmth — before the conversation turned to things that would make him want to step outside of moments forever.

His father was better at that part than Benjamin was. Joseph Sisko could make anyone feel like they belonged at his table, and that was a skill that had nothing to do with the Prophets or the Emissary or non-linear time. That was just a man who'd spent his life feeding people because he believed that was the most important thing a person could do.

Sisko told Wesley he'd needed to remember what that felt like — being taken care of without an agenda — before they talked about what it cost to take care of someone and not be able to do anything for them.

Then he spooned more gumbo and told Wesley his father's recipe was better than his own and he'd never admitted that to anyone. Joseph's secret was patience — he let the roux go longer than Benjamin ever had the nerve to, trusted the process when it looked like it was about to burn, and somehow it never did. Benjamin said he'd spent his whole life trying to learn that kind of patience and his father had been born with it.

For a while they just ate. Sisko asked Wesley about the Enterprise, about Beverly, about whether Picard had ever lightened up or if he was still walking around like a man who'd accidentally been given command of someone else's ship. Wesley told him Picard had always been exactly who he was, and Sisko laughed — a full laugh, the kind that belonged in this bar, that bounced off the walls and made a Bajoran waitress look over and smile because laughter at Quark's was a sound the station had earned the hard way.

Sisko talked about building the house on Bajor. About the soil there, how different it was from Louisiana clay, how he'd had to learn everything from scratch because Bajoran earth didn't respond to the same techniques. He talked about Kasidy and the baby he'd left behind when the Prophets took him and how the hardest part of non-linear existence wasn't seeing all of time simultaneously — it was knowing that his wife and child were living their lives in real time and he was experiencing those lives the way you experience a book you've already read.

He talked about Jake as a boy. How Jake had wanted to be a writer since before he could properly hold a stylus, how he used to sit in their quarters on DS9 and work on stories for hours because he believed that if he could find the right words for what he saw, he could make other people see it too. Jake at fifteen was one of the most earnest people Benjamin Sisko had ever known — not naive, but earnest. He understood that the world was hard and he believed it was worth describing honestly. Writing was the way Jake made sense of things, the way he processed a universe that didn't always make sense on its own.

Wesley listened to a father describe his son and felt the weight of it settle into the gumbo in front of him — something warm becoming something heavier with every sentence.

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Sisko told Wesley what happened. He didn't start with the strategy or the scope of what his son had done. He told it the way a father tells it — starting with the loss. The Fire Caves. Dukat and the Pah-wraiths. The final confrontation that Sisko won by throwing himself and Dukat into the fire together. The Prophets taking him at that moment — not a choice, not a negotiation. A consequence. He defeated the enemy and the reward was being removed from the life he'd built. He told Kasidy he'd be back. He didn't know when.

Jake lost his father to something he couldn't fight or negotiate with or understand. Not death — that would have been comprehensible, grievable, something with a shape he could hold. This was worse. His father was somewhere, alive in some sense, but unreachable and untouchable and gone in a way that had no resolution because it had no ending. Jake — the boy who believed the right words could make people see — tried to find the right words for what had been done to him. And couldn't.

\* \* \*

Mid-sentence, the bar was gone. Wesley was standing on the upper level of the Promenade looking down at the life of the station — merchants selling goods, officers off-duty, a group of Bajoran children chasing each other through the crowd. Sisko was beside him, still holding his gumbo, spooning it like the location change was the most natural thing in the world. The whole messy beautiful life of a community that Sisko had spent years building from the wreckage of a Cardassian mining station was happening below them, and Sisko watched it the way a man watches something he built with his hands.

Wesley sensed the weight of this place the way a Traveler senses moments. The wind moved through it — the leaves were alive here, connected, carrying consequence the way healthy moments should, each one connected to the ones around it, propagating forward, mattering. Sisko had built that by being present in one place for years and caring about the people in it.

Sisko spooned his gumbo and kept talking about Jake, and the warmth in his voice started to carry something heavier. Jake had always dug into things — underneath the surface, into the why of how things worked. That's what made him a writer. After Sisko left, that same instinct turned toward temporal mechanics, because that's where his father had gone. He started studying time to understand the thing that took his dad.

But Jake was brilliant, and that was the tragedy. His father's son — stubborn, capable, the kind of person who holds a course through impossible conditions. The studying became research, the research became experimentation, and somewhere along the way Jake crossed the line between understanding time and manipulating it. Each step was small enough to justify, and by the time the line was behind him he couldn't see it anymore.

Once he could manipulate time, he decided he should. Because no one else should have to feel what he felt. Because suffering that could be prevented was suffering that should be prevented. Jake had the tools and the pain and the conviction, and that combination only produces one outcome.

Sisko stopped and looked at Wesley across the cooling gumbo. He told Wesley that the presence he'd been fighting across the timeline, the shadow behind the Suliban, the one Wesley had been calling Future Guy — that was Jake. His son. The boy who wrote stories about the world as he found it had become the man who was trying to rewrite all of them.

Sisko watched Wesley absorb that. Watched the enemy become a person in Wesley's mind, watched thirty years of fighting a faceless shadow collapse into a father sitting across a table telling you about his kid over dinner. Then Sisko told Wesley he'd watched every step of it from inside the Celestial Temple.

\* \* \*

They stopped at the viewport. The wormhole was visible from here — or the place where the wormhole would open, a patch of space that looked ordinary but contained the doorway to the Prophets, to non-linear time, to the place where Benjamin Sisko existed now. Wesley looked at it and understood that he was looking at the thing that had taken a father from his son and a son from his father, and that the man standing next to him holding a bowl of gumbo had been on the other side of that doorway watching the consequences unfold for years.

Sisko stopped eating. It happened quietly — the spoon settling against the side of the bowl, his hand going still, the rhythm of eating that had carried him through the conversation finally stopping. Wesley noticed because the absence of that rhythm changed the quality of the silence between them the way a heart skipping a beat changes the quality of a body's stillness.

Sisko told Wesley he could see all of Jake's paths. Every version, every choice, every branching possibility from every decision Jake had ever made or would ever make. He could see the paths where Jake found peace and the paths where Jake destroyed himself and the paths where Jake's manipulations helped people and the paths where they devoured everything. He saw all of it simultaneously, without the mercy of sequence. And he chose not to stop any of it.

Wesley asked why. Sisko looked at him across the bowl of cooling gumbo with an expression that had nothing to do with wisdom or philosophy or the cosmic perspective of a man who existed in all moments at once. It was the expression of a father who was watching his child walk toward a cliff and had decided that the cliff was Jake's to walk toward or turn away from. He told Wesley that knowing what someone will choose doesn't mean you should take that choice away.

\* \* \*

Wesley pushed back. Hard. He told Sisko that was easy to say from inside the Celestial Temple. That it sounded like wisdom but felt like abdication. That Jake was out there right now manipulating moments, feeding the Entity, creating dead spots where meaning used to be. People were losing the capacity to care about their own choices because of what Jake was doing, and Sisko could see all of it and was choosing to let it happen.

Wesley's voice was louder than he intended, and he kept going before Sisko could respond. He told Sisko that choice didn't matter if it destroyed everything, that freedom was meaningless in a dead spot where people could choose all they wanted and none of it carried forward. Jake's freedom to manipulate was eating everyone else's freedom. At some point restraint stopped being love and became negligence, and at some point a father who could stop his son and didn't wasn't respecting Jake's choices — he was hiding behind them. The Dabo wheel spun somewhere behind them and someone cheered and the sound landed in the silence between Wesley and Sisko like a coin dropped in an empty room.

Sisko didn't get angry. He leaned forward and asked Wesley a question. He asked Wesley what it had cost the timeline for Wesley to counter Jake's manipulations. What it had cost the moments he'd reached into. What it had cost the people inside those moments who never knew he was there.

Wesley couldn't answer, because the answer was the Entity, the answer was the dead spots, the answer was everything he'd been learning since the Kelvin.

Sisko told him that was the difference between what Wesley had done and what Sisko was doing. Wesley acted, and the cost landed on everyone but him. Sisko stayed, and the cost landed on no one but himself.

Sisko picked up the gumbo again. Not because the hard part was over — because he was choosing to stay inside the moment even when the moment was unbearable. That was the lesson, Wesley realized, and Sisko wasn't teaching it with words. He was teaching it by eating.

Sisko asked Wesley the question. The one Wesley had known was coming since the Guardian's data module had pointed him here. What are you willing to lose?

Wesley didn't answer. Not because he didn't know, but because the answer was too heavy to say out loud in a place where all moments existed simultaneously and the weight of a spoken word never dissipated.

He looked at Sisko — at this man who had given up everything and stayed, who had watched his son become the thing Wesley had been fighting, who had carried the cost of restraint in his own body without passing it to anyone else. A man who could sit at a viewport overlooking the doorway that had stolen his life and eat gumbo because eating gumbo was how he stayed human.

And Wesley understood, for the first time, what it might actually require to stop feeding the Entity. Not just stopping, not just stepping back. Staying inside the cost without moving, without fixing, without reaching. Being present in the damage the way Sisko was present in Jake's choices, and carrying it without passing it on.

Sisko told him there was nothing to thank him for. Then he told Wesley that the question wasn't how to fix the Entity or how to stop Jake or how to reverse the damage. The question was whether Wesley could live inside the cost of the answer without reaching in to make it hurt less — for himself or for anyone else. Because the answer, whatever it turned out to be, was going to cost something that couldn't be fixed afterward, and Wesley would have to carry that without passing it to someone else the way he'd been passing the cost of his interventions to the timeline.

Then Sisko's expression changed. The warmth was still there but something moved underneath it — a tightening, a shift in the way he held himself, like a man who hears a car pulling into the driveway and knows who's in it before the door opens. He set the gumbo down and looked toward the far end of the Promenade as if he could see through the walls of the illusion to whatever was approaching from outside. He told Wesley it was time to go.

Wesley asked what was happening. Sisko told him the door he'd opened to let Wesley into the Temple — the threshold at Joseph's restaurant, the crack in the Celestial Temple's walls that the Prophets normally kept sealed — that door hadn't fully closed behind Wesley. And someone who'd been trying to get through for years had just felt it open.

Sisko's face was calm. Not peaceful — calm in the way a man is calm when he's already decided how he's going to handle what's coming and the deciding was the hard part. He told Wesley to leave, and the way he said it wasn't a suggestion.

The illusion dissolved. The Promenade faded, the viewport dimmed, the sounds of the station went silent one by one. The gumbo went last. And Wesley was standing outside Joseph's restaurant in New Orleans, on a sidewalk, in linear time, with Kore waiting for him across the street. She looked at him and knew something had changed.

He looked back at her, and before he could explain, he felt it — a violent disturbance in the direction of the Celestial Temple. Temporal technology tearing at the crack Sisko had opened for him, forcing it wider. Someone hammering through a door that had been closed to them for years and was suddenly, briefly, not fully sealed.

Wesley recognized the signature. He'd been fighting it since the Kelvin. The shadow behind the Suliban, the presence across all of Trek history, the one he'd been calling Future Guy. Jake. Sisko's son. The boy who wrote stories, forcing his way into his father's prison with technology that was destroying him just to use it.

And Sisko had known this would happen. Had opened the door for Wesley knowing it would give Jake the crack he'd been looking for. Had fed Wesley gumbo and told him about his son and timed every moment of it so that Wesley would be standing right here, right now, close enough to feel Jake arrive and close enough to go back and witness what came next. Wesley understood. Sisko's final lesson wasn't in the conversation. It was in what was about to happen — and Sisko needed Wesley to see it.

He told Kore to wait. Then he went back.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER EIGHT: JAKE

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Wesley went back through the crack. The threshold at Joseph's restaurant was still open — barely, and closing — and Wesley slipped through it the way a Traveler slips between moments, fitting himself into a gap that was already narrowing. Behind him, the New Orleans street disappeared. Ahead, the Celestial Temple reassembled itself around him, but wrong. The Quark's illusion that Sisko had built was fracturing, tables phasing through each other, the phantom lighting stuttering between warm and cold. Someone was forcing their way in from outside and the Temple was fighting to maintain its structure against the intrusion.

Wesley found a place to watch from outside the moment. Not inside the illusion, not part of what was about to happen. Adjacent. The way Travelers exist adjacent to moments they're attending — present but not participating, close enough to see and feel everything, unable to be seen.

He didn't intervene. After everything Sisko had just told him, after the gumbo and the Promenade and the viewport and the question he couldn't answer, the idea of reaching into this moment felt like reaching into someone else's surgery. This wasn't his. This belonged to Sisko and to the person forcing their way through the crack.

\* \* \*

Jake materialized in the wreckage of Quark's. Not cleanly — the temporal technology he was using screamed against the non-linear space the way metal screams against stone. He phased in and out, his form flickering between states, the device he carried burning through power at a rate that couldn't be sustained. Whatever he'd built to get himself in here was destroying itself to maintain his presence, and it was hurting him. Wesley could see the damage accumulating in Jake's temporal signature with each second of sustained presence — the kind of damage that doesn't regenerate.

He was concealed. Masked by the same temporal distortion Wesley had been tracking across centuries — the shadowy, shifting presentation that made Future Guy impossible to identify. From a distance, through the distortion, you'd see what Wesley had always seen: a figure without a clear face, a presence that operated through intermediaries, an enemy defined by what he did rather than who he was. But Wesley wasn't at a distance anymore. And he already knew who was behind the mask because a father had told him over gumbo an hour ago.

\* \* \*

Sisko stood in the middle of what was left of the illusion. The illusion of Quark's was breaking apart around him — walls dissolving, the Dabo table frozen mid-spin, phantom patrons flickering out of existence as the Temple's processing power redirected to managing the intrusion. The warm, lived-in space that the Prophets had built so Sisko could remember what it felt like to be human was crumbling, and Sisko stood in the wreckage of it the way he stood in everything — present, upright, and not reaching for anything to hold onto.

He looked at the figure materializing in front of him and his expression carried nothing Wesley had seen on any version of Benjamin Sisko in any moment he'd ever attended. Not surprise, not anger, not the command face of a Starfleet captain assessing a tactical situation. Pain. The specific pain of a man who had watched this moment approaching across every possible timeline and had chosen not to prevent it. Sisko said one word. Jake.

\* \* \*

The concealment didn't drop immediately. It faltered — the outermost layers of masking failing first, the temporal distortion peeling back in stages as the technology burned itself out. Through the gaps Wesley could see fragments of the person inside — a jawline, the set of shoulders, hands gripping a device so tightly the knuckles had gone white. Young. Early thirties. The age Jake would have been when the obsession took hold and the capability caught up with the grief.

Jake was holding a weapon — something Wesley had never seen before, improvised from pieces of temporal mechanics that were never meant to be combined into a single device. It looked unstable. It looked like it was hurting him to hold it. He pointed it at his father.

And Wesley, watching from outside the moment, finally understood something that all the data and all the math and all the conversations hadn't been able to teach him. Future Guy — the shadow he'd been fighting, the presence he'd been tracking, the enemy he'd built his post-Kelvin identity around opposing — was a kid pointing a weapon at his dad in a broken bar because he didn't know what else to do with thirty years of missing him.

Jake couldn't fire. Wesley could see it in the temporal signature of the moment — branching possibilities collapsing and expanding and collapsing again as Jake's finger tightened and loosened on the device. A thousand timelines where he pulled the trigger, a thousand where he didn't. The moment oscillating between them so fast it created its own interference pattern.

His hand shook. The weapon's instability amplified the tremor, temporal feedback turning a human tremor into something that distorted the space around his arm. The technology was burning him visibly now, his form losing definition at the edges the way a signal loses clarity when the source is failing.

And still he couldn't fire, because the man standing in front of him wasn't Future Guy's enemy or the Prophets' instrument or the Emissary of Bajor. He was Jake's father, and some part of Jake — buried under years of grief and obsession and the absolute certainty that he was right — still knew that. The weapon dropped. Jake's arm fell to his side. The device clattered against the floor of the broken illusion.

And then Jake broke. Not cleanly. Not the way people break in stories where the breaking leads somewhere meaningful. This was ugly and graceless. Jake's grief expressed itself as fury because fury was the only container he had left for something that had been building since the day the Prophets took his father.

He came at Sisko with his hands. No weapon, no technology, no temporal manipulation. Just a son hitting his father because he didn't know how else to say what he needed to say. Open-handed, closed fist, it didn't matter — the violence was formless, the physical expression of a man trying to beat an answer out of someone who refused to give one. He grabbed Sisko's shoulders and shook him and pushed him and hit him again.

Sisko didn't fight back. Didn't block, didn't dodge, didn't use whatever power the Prophets had given him to deflect or absorb or redirect. He stood inside his son's rage the way he'd been standing inside his son's choices for years — present, receiving, carrying the cost in his own body without passing it on.

Wesley watched from outside the moment and felt his hands ball into fists. Every instinct he'd built over a lifetime — every Traveler reflex, every compulsion to reach in and fix and widen and restore — screamed at him to do something. Collapse the weapon's temporal field, stabilize Jake's signature, widen the possibility space so this moment could play out without violence.

He didn't move. Because of Sisko's face. The face of a man who had just taught Wesley about restraint by eating gumbo, and was now demonstrating what restraint actually cost when it wasn't a philosophy lesson in a phantom bar but a father choosing to let his son hit him rather than take away his right to be angry.

\* \* \*

Sisko tried to speak. Between the blows, while Jake's fury burned through its fuel, Sisko tried to tell his son what he could see from non-linear time. That what Jake had built — the controlled timeline, the softened Federation, the universe where suffering was prevented by eliminating the possibility of it — wasn't safety. That the moments Jake had manipulated still existed but they didn't carry weight anymore. That preventing pain and preventing meaning were the same thing, and Jake's solution was producing a universe where losing a father wouldn't even hurt because nothing hurt in a dead spot.

Jake couldn't hear it. Wesley watched the words land on Jake the way his own interventions landed on dead spots — technically delivered, carrying nothing. The rage was too loud, the grief too structural. You can't hear truth from the person you're beating. The fists aren't just hitting — they're drowning out everything the target is saying, because hearing it would mean the hitting has to stop, and stopping would mean sitting with the pain that started the hitting in the first place. Sisko's words landed on nothing, and he took the next blow knowing they hadn't.

\* \* \*

Jake's fury burned itself out the way fires burn out — not because someone extinguished it but because it ran out of fuel. The punches slowed, the grip loosened, Jake's legs gave way and he sank to the floor of the shattered bar, hands still reaching for his father's jacket, holding on because letting go would mean admitting that this hadn't changed anything.

Sisko went down with him. Not to comfort, not to hold. Just to be at the same level. Eye to eye. Father and son on the floor of a broken illusion surrounded by the debris of a place that had been built to help Sisko remember what it felt like to be human.

Jake spoke. His voice was wrecked — raw from the effort, from the temporal burns, from the weight of what he was about to say out loud for the first time. He told Sisko he knew about the spreading corruption, the places where choice was dying, the thing consuming reality. He told his father he'd been trying to cauterize it by eliminating all uncertainty, removing the possibility of bad outcomes before they could occur. Controlling the timeline so tightly that nothing could go wrong in it again. Better a controlled universe than chaos. Better certainty than entropy.

\* \* \*

Wesley heard Jake's reasoning and felt something shift inside him that went beyond understanding. He tried to hold onto the distinction — Jake controls, Wesley restores. Jake narrows, Wesley widens. They are not the same — and felt himself gripping it the way Jake had gripped the weapon, tightly, desperately, because letting go meant admitting something he wasn't ready to admit. Different wounds, same response — reach into time and make it stop hurting. Wesley let go of the distinction. It didn't fit anymore and holding it was costing him something he couldn't afford. And it had been costing him long before this. The distinction had been the permission. As long as he believed he wasn't the same as Jake, he could do what Jake did and call it something else.

On the floor of the broken illusion, Jake's temporal technology was giving out. The device he'd used to force his way into the Temple was failing, its energy spent, and Jake's presence was starting to flicker the way it had when he first materialized — except now the flickering was pulling him out instead of holding him in.

Jake looked up at his father. Their eyes met. Sisko's face carried everything he couldn't say and Jake's face carried everything he couldn't hear, and for one moment they were just a father and son sitting on the floor of a broken room with nothing between them but the distance that neither of them knew how to close.

Jake's head dropped. A tear hit the floor of the illusion — a real tear, from a real person, landing in a place that wasn't real and making a sound anyway. Then the temporal field caught him and pulled him out and he was gone.

\* \* \*

The Prophets spoke. The Prophets' voice filled the fractured space the way water fills a cracked vessel — finding every gap, every break, every place where the illusion had shattered and reality showed through. They spoke to Sisko, not to Wesley, and what they said was short and cryptic and delivered in the non-linear way the Prophets always communicated — meaning arriving before sequence.

They told Sisko that his son's path was not finished. That the one who had witnessed this — and Wesley felt their awareness brush against him like wind through an open door — carried what Jake needed to see. They didn't explain what that meant or when it would happen or how. They confirmed one thing only. Sisko's choice to not fight back was correct, and it would matter.

\* \* \*

Sisko sat alone in the wreckage of Quark's bar. The illusion slowly rebuilt itself around him — tables reassembling, lights stabilizing, the phantom sounds of a normal evening returning one by one, filling the silence Jake had left behind. Bruises forming on a face that hadn't defended itself, damage that would heal on a body that existed in non-linear time, where healing meant something different than it did for people who lived in sequence.

Wesley watched from outside the moment — watched a father who had just taken a beating from his own son without raising a hand sit back down at his table and pick up a bowl of gumbo that had gone cold.

Sisko looked at the gumbo for a long time. Then he started eating again. Cold. Because eating was how he stayed inside the moment, and this was a moment he was choosing not to leave.

Wesley left the Temple for the second time. The crack closed behind him. This time it sealed completely. He was back on the sidewalk in New Orleans. The evening air hit him and he stood there for a long time, not moving, not speaking, trying to hold everything he'd just witnessed in a body that wasn't designed to carry that much weight at once. Kore was across the street. She could see his face and she didn't ask what happened.

\* \* \*

## INTERLUDE

\* \* \*

Hold on.

Something just moved out there. Different from before — closer, or smarter, or both.

All clear. For now.

Where was I.

The son and the father. The fight in the Temple. A kid beating the hell out of his dad because he couldn't figure out how else to say I miss you.

I need to tell you something about that part of the story, something that's harder to narrate from a distance than I expected.

I know what it's like to kill someone you love because you believe the cause requires it. To stand over a man who raised you and do the thing your people need to see done, because if you don't, the mission falls apart and everyone who's counting on you loses the one thing holding them together. I made that choice when I was barely old enough to understand what choice meant, and I've been carrying it since.

What Sisko did was different from what I did. I acted. He didn't. I chose the cause over the man. Sisko chose something that doesn't have a clean name — something between action and restraint that only makes sense if you've been inside it. Watching his son beat him and not fighting back wasn't weakness. It was the hardest kind of strength there is, the kind where you absorb the cost in your own body so nobody else has to carry it.

I didn't understand any of this when the information was first dumped into me. Didn't understand it for decades. But telling this story is making me process things I carried without examining. That's what happens when you finally open a door you've been walking past your whole life.

They're getting closer. I can hear them in the corridor now — not running, not rushing. Walking. Methodical. Checking compartments one by one. A minute ago I heard a door open three sections down. Now two. They're not in a hurry because they don't need to be. They know I'm on this ship and they know I can't leave.

I need to finish this.

But the next part — the conversation between Wesley and the boy — that matters. That's where they stopped being enemies and started being the same person standing on different sides of the same wound.

Stay with me.

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## CHAPTER NINE: THE MIRROR

\* \* \*

Wesley could feel Kore where he'd left her, patient, steady, the way she'd been through all of this. He didn't go back to her. He followed Jake's temporal signature instead — the same signature he'd been tracking since the spree, the one he knew better than any other in the timeline. Jake's failing technology had dumped him somewhere after the Temple, and the trail was easy to follow because Jake wasn't trying to hide anymore.

Wesley found him in the wreckage of a moment. Not a dead spot — something worse. A moment Jake had tried to fix and broken instead, an Andorian trade negotiation from the mid-24th century where two factions had been on the verge of an agreement that would have reshaped their economy for generations. Jake had reached in and pushed, tried to guarantee the outcome he'd calculated would produce the least suffering, and the negotiation had shattered under the imposed certainty. The agreement the factions reached felt hollow to both sides and collapsed within months. Within a year they were at war.

Jake was standing in the aftermath, watching the thing he'd tried to save burn. His temporal technology was damaged from the Temple — the device that had forced him through Sisko's door was barely functional, flickering at the edges the way Jake himself had been flickering since the Prophets pulled him out. He looked smaller than Wesley expected. Not the shadowy presence that had haunted the timeline for years, not the faceless manipulator behind the Suliban. Just a man in his thirties standing in a place where his best intentions had produced the worst possible outcome. Wesley appeared behind him and waited for Jake to notice.

\* \* \*

Jake didn't turn around immediately. He stood still the way someone stands when they know they're being watched and are deciding how to handle it. When he finally turned, his expression wasn't what Wesley expected — not surprise or hostility or the cold calculation of a temporal strategist confronting his opponent.

He looked tired. The kind of tired that goes deeper than exhaustion and settles into the architecture of a person's face. His voice still carried the damage from the Temple, raw and rough, and when he spoke it was without any of the commanding presence that Future Guy's distorted communications had always projected.

He told Wesley he'd been expecting this. That after the Temple, after his father, after everything — of course Wesley would come find him. The man who'd been countering his work across the timeline finally had a face and a name and a father who made good gumbo, and now Wesley wanted to talk. There was something bitter in how he said it, but the bitterness was pointed at himself rather than at Wesley.

\* \* \*

They stood in the ruins of the Andorian moment together, two people surveying damage they'd collectively contributed to, and for the first time neither of them was trying to undo what the other had done.

Wesley told Jake he hadn't come to fight. That he'd learned some things since the Kelvin that changed what he thought he knew about his own work, and he wasn't sure the two of them were as different as Wesley had believed. Jake went quiet at that. It wasn't what he'd expected to hear from the person who'd been opposing him.

Wesley told him the short version — the spree, Kore leaving, the Entity shattering his perception, D'Kar's math, the Guardian's map, Q dying in a bar, his father's gumbo going cold on a table in a place that didn't exist. Jake listened the way someone listens when the person talking is describing a version of their own life from a different angle.

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Jake told Wesley about the Dominion War. Not the strategic overview — the numbers. Eight hundred million dead. Cardassian children starving in the aftermath. Whole civilizations ground down to nothing by a conflict that most of the galaxy's population couldn't have pointed to on a map before it started. He told Wesley about sitting in his quarters on DS9 as a teenager, reading casualty reports that arrived faster than his father could process them, watching the man he admired most in the universe carry the weight of decisions that sent people to die by the thousands.

And then the man who carried all of that weight was taken away by beings who existed outside of time and didn't experience loss the way linear beings did, and Jake was left in a world that had just finished bleeding from a war his father helped fight, without a father to help him understand any of it.

He asked Wesley what he was supposed to do with that. With the capability to reach into time and the knowledge that eight hundred million people had died in a conflict that a single well-placed intervention could have prevented or shortened or redirected. With a father who chose the Prophets over staying, who chose to exist outside of time while his son lived inside it, carrying the grief alone.

Wesley told Jake that he understood. That he could see what had driven Jake to do what he'd done, and that it made sense in a way that was harder to argue with than anything Wesley had expected when he was fighting a faceless shadow across the centuries. Jake's expression shifted at that — something cracking underneath the exhaustion. He told Wesley that understanding wasn't the problem. Understanding was the easy part. The problem was what it produced.

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Wesley asked Jake what he meant. Jake told Wesley to look around. At the Andorian negotiation he'd tried to fix. At the agreement that shattered, the war that followed, the lives that were worse because Jake had tried to make them better. And this wasn't the worst example — this was just the one he happened to be standing in when Wesley showed up.

He told Wesley he'd known for years that something was wrong with his work. The moments he fixed didn't hold, the outcomes felt brittle, the universe kept rejecting the certainty he tried to impose on it. So he'd pushed harder and the wrongness got worse, and he'd pushed harder still because the only alternative was admitting that the thing he'd built his identity around was the thing causing the damage.

Wesley's hands went cold. He was listening to someone describe his own condition — the compulsion, the inability to stop, the identity so wrapped around the mission that removing the mission meant removing the person. Jake was saying it about himself but it applied to Wesley with the same precision, and standing in the wreckage of Jake's work while hearing his own reflection described back to him was the kind of recognition that doesn't leave room for denial.

\* \* \*

Jake asked Wesley what the solution was. Wesley told him he didn't have one yet. That D'Kar's math was still running with the Guardian's scope data, that the picture was incomplete, that he was following threads and talking to people and trying to understand the problem well enough to see the answer inside it.

Jake told Wesley that whatever the solution turned out to be, it wasn't going to be cheap. He said it quietly, not as a threat or a warning but as someone who'd spent enough time inside the problem to know that structural problems demand structural costs. The closer you are to the center of the problem, the more it takes from you to fix it.

Wesley heard that without fully absorbing it. It sounded like philosophy, like the kind of thing people say when they don't have specifics. He didn't yet understand how literal Jake was being.

Jake told Wesley he'd started to suspect something about his own role in the equation — that the math might look better without him in it. He hadn't followed that thought all the way to its conclusion. Couldn't bring himself to, because following it meant accepting that the thing he'd built his life around was the thing that needed to be removed.

Wesley heard that and thought about the Kelvin. About D'Kar's 1.6 per intervention. About the Guardian's map showing his work on the same feeding lines as Jake's.

Jake looked at Wesley, and stripped of the temporal masking and the fury and the certainty, he looked like what he was — a man in his thirties who had lost his father and spent his entire adult life trying to make sure no one else ever had to feel what he felt. He told Wesley that the cost always lands on the people still living in linear time, that the agents come and go and the manipulators push and pull but the people in the moment carry everything.

Wesley thought about his mother. About the photograph on her desk. About her voice saying his name to an empty sickbay. He thought about everyone he'd met on this journey — the ones who'd stopped, the ones who'd stayed, the ones who'd never paid for anything and were dying of the debt. Every one of them had someone, an anchor, a reason that existed in the present tense rather than in the mission. Wesley didn't have anyone right in front of him. He hadn't for thirty years. That was the cost he'd already paid without noticing.

Jake saw it on Wesley's face — the recognition of a loneliness so familiar it had become invisible. And Jake did something Wesley didn't expect from the person he'd spent months fighting across the timeline. He sat down in the wreckage of the Andorian moment and told Wesley to sit with him, and for a while neither of them said anything. Two people who'd been destroying the timeline from opposite directions, sitting in the ruins of one of those destructions, keeping each other company because there was nobody else in the universe who understood what they were carrying.

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## CHAPTER TEN: THE MATH

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D’Kar was waiting for them. The data module had been transmitting the Guardian’s scope data to his laboratory in real-time since Wesley activated it, and D’Kar had been running models with it for what amounted to days in his timeline. The displays that had once held theoretical projections now held the full picture — every source of temporal energy mapped and measured simultaneously across all of time, rendered in the precise mathematical language that his colleagues had spent years calling speculation.

He looked different than the last time Wesley had seen him. The composure was still there but it was working harder, carrying more weight than it was designed for. Whatever the complete model had shown him, it had cost him something to look at.

Kore crossed the laboratory to D’Kar and stood near him, not touching, just present. D’Kar glanced at her and something behind his control settled slightly. Wesley watched that and understood it was none of his business.

\* \* \*

D’Kar walked Wesley through the complete model the way a doctor walks a patient through a diagnosis — carefully, making sure each piece was understood before moving to the next.

The total accumulated energy from all sources across all of time. The threshold below which the Entity could no longer sustain its own growth. The gap between where the Entity was and where it needed to be. The gap was large, and removing one source — even a significant one — wouldn't be enough on its own. The Temporal Cold War's contributions were already consumed. The Travelers who'd dissolved had stopped contributing but their historical energy was in the system. Future Guy's manipulations were massive but removing Jake's energy alone wouldn't close the gap because the base was too broad.

Wesley asked what would close it. D'Kar showed him. The model identified one configuration that worked — the removal of a variable whose contributions were consistent, sustained, and distributed across enough moments to create a measurable reduction when subtracted from every point in time simultaneously. Wesley's interventions averaged 1.6 per event, individually small compared to Future Guy's 17.8, but Wesley had been intervening constantly since the Kelvin and because he existed outside linear time his removal would subtract those contributions from every moment at once. D'Kar didn't say Wesley's name. The math identified the variable by its properties, and the properties described only one being in the timeline.

\* \* \*

Wesley pushed back. He asked about natural dissipation. D'Kar had run it — negligible compared to the accumulated mass. He asked about stopping all intervention from every source. D'Kar had run that too — it would slow the growth but not reverse it. He asked about removing Jake instead, since Jake's output was more than ten times Wesley's rate. D'Kar showed him that model — Jake's removal got the Entity closer to threshold but not below it. He asked about removing both of them. D'Kar told him it was redundant — Wesley's removal alone was sufficient.

Wesley stared at the model and asked D'Kar one more time if there was any other way. D'Kar's composure cracked — a fraction of a movement in his jaw, barely visible. He told Wesley the mathematics were elegant and terrible, and he couldn't finish the sentence after that. Kore put her hand on D'Kar's arm and whatever passed between them in that moment was private enough that Wesley turned away.

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Wesley told D'Kar he wasn't ready to accept that. He wanted to try stepping back first — stopping all intervention, giving the timeline a chance to stabilize without adding more energy. D'Kar told him the models predicted stepping back would slow the growth but not reverse it. Wesley said he wanted to try anyway. D'Kar nodded with the patience of a scientist who understood that the patient needed to see for himself.

Wesley went back to the timeline and stopped reaching into it. Maintained the way he'd maintained for thirty years before the Kelvin — attending without acting, present without pressing. Kore sat with him and maintained alongside him the way they used to.

There was a girl on a colony world that Wesley had been maintaining around for years — a teenager who reminded him of himself at that age, curious about everything, asking questions the adults around her didn't want to answer. He'd watched her grow up the way a Traveler watches anything, from outside, attending to the moments that shaped her without reaching in.

Jake had found her too. Wesley could see the manipulation — Jake's signature pressing against her curiosity, narrowing it, steering her away from the questions that would lead her somewhere dangerous. In Jake's calculus she was better off not knowing, safer in ignorance, protected from the consequences of the answers she was looking for.

Wesley stood in the space between her moment and the next one and did nothing. He watched Jake's pressure close around her options and he felt every Traveler instinct he had screaming at him to widen the space, and he didn't move. The girl stopped asking the question. Went back to her life. Accepted the narrower version of her future without knowing a wider one had existed.

Wesley felt something break inside him that wasn't perception or temporal mechanics or any of the abstract things that had been breaking since the Entity shattered his senses. This was simpler and worse. This was watching a specific person he cared about lose something she'd never know she lost, and choosing to let it happen because helping would feed the thing that was eating everything. And the dead spots kept spreading. D'Kar had told him this would happen. Wesley had chosen not to believe it. Stepping back changed nothing.

\* \* \*

He went back to Kore. She looked at him and saw what stepping back had cost him — the damage to the last thing he'd been holding onto, the hope that there was a version of this where he got to keep existing. He told her it didn't work. She told him she'd known it wouldn't.

She told him there was a difference between stepping back and what D'Kar's math was describing. Stepping back meant Wesley still existed, still occupied the space between moments, still carried the entanglement with every moment he'd touched since the Kelvin. His existence was a weight on the timeline whether he acted or not — not because of what he was doing but because of what he'd already done. D'Kar's math wasn't asking him to step back. It was asking him to step out.

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Wesley worked through what that actually meant. If he was erased, his interventions since the Kelvin would unmake themselves. Every moment he'd widened, every manipulation he'd countered — gone. The Entity would lose his temporal energy and drop below threshold.

But the Kelvin rift was Jake's work. Jake had engineered it. And if Wesley was erased, the dynamic between them — the push and counter-push that had driven Jake to escalate — would never have existed. Without Wesley as an opponent, Jake's path changed. Without the escalation, Jake would never have reached the level of manipulation that produced the Kelvin rift in the first place.

Wesley's erasure wouldn't just remove his energy from the Entity. It would remove the escalation dynamic that drove Jake to his worst extremes. Without Wesley to fight, Jake never pushes hard enough to engineer the Kelvin rift. The rift was never created. The Prime stays intact.

But Jake still hurts. Still loses his father to the Prophets. Still carries the grief, still studies temporal mechanics, still becomes some version of Future Guy. A less extreme version — intervening at a lower level, feeding the Entity but not enough to push it past the self-sustaining threshold. D'Kar's math accounted for a still-active Jake. It was Wesley's consistent, distributed contributions across all moments that tipped the balance, not Jake's larger but less sustained ones. Remove Wesley and the Entity feeds but doesn't reach critical mass. The erasure doesn't fix Jake — nothing fixes Jake except Jake. It just stops making Jake's path worse by removing the opponent that drove the escalation.

Wesley sat with the strange mathematics of that — his sacrifice removing the need for his biggest sacrifice while leaving everything else wounded and uncertain. The Federation he loved would keep reaching. Jake would keep hurting. Sisko would keep waiting. And whether Jake ever found his way home was between Jake and his father, not something Wesley's erasure could guarantee. Beverly would never have had a first son. No one would notice the gap.

Wesley's hands started shaking — not from cold or exhaustion but the way they shake when the body understands something the mind is still trying to negotiate with. He sat with it for a long time. Kore sat with him and let the weight fill the silence. Wesley told Kore he wasn't saying yes. She told him she knew. He told her he wasn't saying no either. She knew that too.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN: BEVERLY

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Before he could say goodbye he needed to see her one more time without being seen. He didn't analyze why. Didn't construct a justification about gathering emotional data or assessing the cost in concrete terms. He just needed to stand in the same room as his mother and remember what it felt like to be near someone who loved him, before he became someone who had never existed.

\* \* \*

Beverly was in sickbay. Late. The kind of late that happens when going back to your quarters means being alone with the silence, and the silence has gotten louder over the years.

The Enterprise — not the one Wesley had served on but the one that carried his mother now — was quiet at this hour. The day shift had cycled out, the emergencies had been handled, the patients who needed monitoring were being monitored by systems that didn't need sleep. There was no reason for the Chief Medical Officer to be running tests at this hour. She was running them anyway.

Wesley stood in the corner of sickbay and watched her. Close enough to see the grey in her hair that hadn't been there when he left. Close enough to see the lines around her eyes that mapped the years he'd missed — the patients, the crises, the losses, the mornings she'd woken up and gone to work because that's what Beverly Crusher did.

On her desk, half-hidden behind a stack of PADDs and a cold cup of something she'd forgotten to drink, there was a photograph. Him. Sixteen. Academy uniform. The smile of a boy who thought the future was something you walked into, not something that walked away from you. She glanced at it while she worked. Not consciously — the way you glance at something that's been on your desk so long it's become part of the furniture. But Wesley saw the glance land, saw the micro-pause in her hands, saw the fraction of a second where Beverly Crusher wasn't the Chief Medical Officer or the researcher or the professional. She was a mother whose son had left and never fully come back. She said his name. Not to anyone. Just to the room. The way you say a word to keep it alive.

Wesley almost answered. The need to say I'm here rose in him — not the Traveler compulsion, not the intervention reflex. Something older and simpler. But answering would mean staying, and staying would mean the Entity kept existing in its current state, and that meant more moments losing their weight across the timeline. He couldn't trade the world for a conversation with his mother. Even though the world felt very abstract and his mother felt very real. He left. She went back to her enzymes. The photograph stayed on the desk.

\* \* \*

He came back. Not the same night. Later. After the math had hardened into a decision and there was nothing left to delay with, he came back to say it to her face. Carrying D'Kar's numbers and Kore's question and Sisko's lesson and the weight of everything that pointed to the same conclusion. This time he didn't stand in the corner. He appeared.

\* \* \*

Beverly looked up from her work and saw her son standing in sickbay. She didn't move for a long time — the kind of stillness that happens when reality offers you something you've wanted so badly that accepting it feels dangerous, because if it's not real the disappointment might be the thing that finally breaks you. Wesley watched her decide it was real. Her face did something complicated — relief and grief and joy and fear all arriving at once, none of them winning. She stood up from her workstation and her hands were shaking and she didn't try to hide it. She said his name again, but this time it wasn't a word spoken to an empty room. It was a question aimed at a person.

Wesley told her he was there, that it was really him, that he was sorry it had been so long. She crossed the distance between them and held him — not gently but tightly, the way you hold something you're afraid is going to disappear. Her arms around him and her face against his shoulder and the years of absence compressed into a grip that said everything words couldn't. Wesley held her back and memorized it. The weight of her, the smell of sickbay antiseptic and the coffee she forgot to finish, the way her breathing steadied against him — not calming down but anchoring herself to the reality that her son was in the room.

\* \* \*

She pulled back and looked at him. Studied his face the way a doctor studies a patient and a mother studies a child — both at once, the professional and the personal occupying the same pair of eyes. She told him he looked tired. He almost laughed. Thirty years outside of time, carrying the weight of a dying timeline, and his mother's first observation was that he looked tired. That was Beverly — cut through the cosmic and land on the human.

She asked him why he was here. Wesley didn't know how to start. He'd rehearsed versions of this conversation in the space between moments, different openings, different framings, different ways to explain temporal entities and dead spots and the mechanics of erasure to a woman whose expertise was cellular biology not temporal physics. None of them worked because the conversation wasn't about temporal physics. It was about a son telling his mother that he was going to stop existing.

He told her he had to go, that he wouldn't be coming back, that this time it was permanent. Beverly's face went still — the relief from a moment ago draining out of it, replaced by the controlled expression of a woman who'd been receiving bad news her entire career and had learned to hold herself together while the world explained how it was going to hurt her this time. She asked if he was dying. He told her it was worse than that. That she wouldn't remember him, that nobody would, that he was going to be removed from the timeline in a way that meant he'd never existed — not dead, not gone, just never there. The photograph on her desk would vanish. The memory of the boy in the Academy uniform would dissolve. Everything she felt right now, this moment, this conversation, her arms around her son — would unhappen. Beverly didn't break.

\* \* \*

She was quiet for a long time, processing, running the information through whatever internal system Beverly Crusher used to evaluate impossible things — the system that had been tested by Borg attacks and temporal anomalies and alien diseases and every other thing the universe had thrown at a woman who refused to stop showing up for work. She asked if there was another way. Wesley said no. She asked if he was sure. He told her about D’Kar’s math — not the details but the conclusion. That the numbers only worked one way, that he’d tried everything else, that stepping back wasn’t enough because the damage was already done, that his removal was the only variable that fixed the equation. She listened the way she’d listened to diagnoses her entire career — with the stillness of someone who understood that arguing with pathology didn’t change the pathology. She asked if he’d tried everything. He said yes.

She looked at him — not at the tired man standing in her sickbay but at the boy, the one in the photograph, the one who used to sit on the bridge of the Enterprise and ask questions that made the senior officers look at each other, the one who left with the Traveler because the universe was bigger than one ship and he couldn’t resist finding out how much bigger.

She held him again. Tighter this time. And said something small, not a speech, not a plea, not the kind of farewell that gets recorded in ship’s logs. She told him she knew. The day he left with the Traveler, she knew she was never really getting him back.

\* \* \*

Wesley broke. Not Beverly. Him. Because she was stronger than he was. She'd always been stronger. She'd lost her husband and raised a son alone on a starship and treated patients through wars and plagues and the daily accumulation of human suffering that most people couldn't face for a week let alone a career. She'd watched her son leave and waited and hoped and put a photograph on her desk and said his name to empty rooms and kept going. She held and she held and she held. And Wesley — who had spent lifetimes learning to carry the weight of broken timelines without breaking himself — couldn't carry this.

He cried. The first time in thirty years, longer probably. He'd forgotten what it felt like — the physical mechanics of it, the way your chest seizes and your vision blurs and the sound that comes out of you isn't something you choose to make.

Beverly held him through it the way she'd held him when he was five and his father died, the way she'd held him when the Academy was hard and he wanted to quit, the way she'd held every patient who needed holding and never asked whether they deserved it.

She didn't tell him it was okay because it wasn't. She didn't tell him she was proud because pride didn't matter here. She didn't tell him she understood because she didn't — not the temporal physics, not the Entity, not the mechanics of erasure. She understood that her son was in pain. That was enough.

\* \* \*

Wesley stayed longer than he should have. He knew that. He stayed anyway because this was the last time. The last time Beverly Crusher would hold her son, the last time either of them would exist in the same moment. After this she would go back to her work and her patients and her life, and eventually the erasure would reach backward through time and subtract Wesley from all of it, and she would never know what she'd lost because she'd never had it. The photograph would vanish from her desk. She wouldn't notice it was gone.

When he finally let go, Beverly looked at him with dry eyes and steady hands and the absolute devastating composure of a woman who'd decided that if this was the last time her son would see her, the last thing he'd see was her strength. She told him to go do what he had to do.

Wesley turned toward the door. Stopped. Stood there for a moment with his back to her, not turning around, not changing his mind, just letting himself exist in the same room as her for three more seconds. Then he left. The door closed behind him.

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Beverly stood in the middle of sickbay and listened to the silence her son had left behind. Then her knees buckled. She caught herself on the edge of the workstation. Didn't fall. But her body made a sound she didn't recognize, something between a breath and a collapse, and for a moment she was just a woman alone in a room where the most important person in her life had just told her he was going to stop existing.

She cried. Not the way Wesley had — not the breaking of a dam. This was quieter, private, the kind of crying that happens when no one is watching and there's no reason to shape it into something presentable. Her shoulders shook. Her hands gripped the workstation. She let it move through her. It lasted a few minutes. Maybe less.

Then she straightened. Wiped her face with the back of her hand. Took a breath. Looked at the photograph. She picked it up. Held it for a moment. Set it back down exactly where it had been. And then she went back to work.

\* \* \*

## INTERLUDE

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That part almost broke me to tell.

Not the math, not the Entity, not the dead spots or the Guardian or the fight in the Temple. Those are mechanics, things that can be described from a distance without the distance costing you anything.

But a mother holding her son for the last time, knowing it's the last time, choosing to be strong because that's the last thing he'll see.

I've held people I was about to lose. I've made the call that ends someone. I know what that room feels like.

She was braver than any captain I've ever served under, and no one will ever know it happened.

That's the part that gets me. Not the erasure, not the timeline healing. The fact that Beverly Crusher held her son and said goodbye and then went back to work, and the universe is going to take even that from her. Not just the boy — the memory of the boy, the grief, the strength it took to hold together. All of it, subtracted, smoothed over, gone.

\* \* \*

The air just changed again.

Same thing as before. The thinning. Stronger this time. My words are getting lighter as I'm saying them. The recording's still picking them up — I can see the indicator — but they don't feel like they have weight when they leave me.

There's something at the door.

Not an attack. Not a breach. Something on the other side, standing there.

It speaks. I think it speaks. The sound that reaches me isn't a sound exactly. It's the shape of speech without the substance of it. And what lands in me as meaning isn't a sentence, isn't a sequence of words — it's a recognition.

It's not just me. Not just this recording. They want what's inside everything that still matters.

And it isn't one. The shape of the speech is layered. Many somethings, somehow saying the same thing. One mind through many voices. I've heard about that before, in lectures at the Academy, in old briefings about a species we hoped never to encounter again. But this isn't them. This is something using their architecture for its own purpose.

I don't know what that means. I'm not going to pretend I do.

The air came back. Whatever was at the door moved on. Or moved through. Or changed its mind.

Or it's still there and I just stopped being able to feel it.

If the recording survives and I don't, somebody needs to know what I just felt. Whatever they are, they're not just hunting Wesley's story. They're hunting the part of any story that still matters to anyone. If you're a person who carries weight, if you remember something with all the weight intact, you're a target.

That's not a future problem.

Where was I. Wesley needed one more goodbye before he walked through. Beverly was the hardest one. Jake was the one he wasn't sure he could survive.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE: JAKE

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Wesley found Jake on Deep Space Nine. The station was a hundred years older than the version Jake had grown up on, the Promenade rebuilt twice, the merchants different, the uniforms changed. Jake didn't belong here in the linear sense — his time on this station ended decades ago — but he was here anyway, sitting in the old replica of his family's quarters, the rooms the current crew had preserved as a small historical exhibit. A guest no one could see.

He looked up when Wesley appeared and didn't seem surprised. He said he'd been expecting one of them. Not Wesley specifically — but someone. The math had to land somewhere, and once Wesley left the wreckage of the Andorian moment he'd known one of them would come find the other before it was over.

Wesley sat down across from him on a bunk that had been Jake's at sixteen. Jake on the bunk that had been Benjamin's. The room hadn't been theirs in a hundred years and they sat in it as if it still was.

Wesley told him. Not the long version. The short one. D'Kar's math, the configuration that worked, the variable whose properties described one being. The part Wesley had spent days trying to argue out of. The part that wasn't going to argue back.

Jake didn't say anything at first. His face went the way it had gone in the Andorian wreckage when Wesley described his own condition back to him — the recognition of a wound he'd been carrying without naming. He said one word. *When*.

Wesley told him soon. After he found someone he needed to find first. Jake asked who. Wesley told him about the commander on Xenex. About the moment that wouldn't break. About needing to spend his last days with someone who carried weight the way that man carried it, because the weight Wesley was about to carry was heavier than anything he'd ever held and he didn't know how to do it alone.

Jake nodded the way you nod when someone tells you something you understand all the way down to the bone. Then he said the thing he'd been working out as Wesley talked. He said if Wesley was erased, Jake wouldn't become Jake. Not the Jake sitting here. The escalation that made him who he was — the Temporal Cold War, the Suliban, the rift, the Temple — all of it tied to the dynamic between them. Without Wesley to push against, Jake's path bent. A less broken version of him. Maybe better. Maybe worse. But not him.

Wesley said yes. Jake said he hadn't worked out yet how he felt about being unmade by his only friend's sacrifice. That it was too clever a problem and not enough time to think about it. Wesley said he hadn't worked out how he felt about it either.

They sat in the quarters and let the question sit between them. Outside, the Promenade hummed — a hundred years past Jake's childhood, full of people who didn't know either of them existed, alive in the way places stay alive when they outlast the families who built them.

Jake said the thing Wesley had been waiting for him to say and dreading at the same time. He asked Wesley not to do it. Wesley told him he had to. Jake said he knew. He said he knew the way Beverly had known. The way Sisko had known about Jake. The way you know something is going to happen and can't stop yourself from asking anyway, because asking is the only thing left when the answer is already settled.

Then Jake said something Wesley hadn't expected. He told Wesley he was the first person who had ever made Jake feel less alone in a way Jake hadn't earned. That every other connection Jake had — his father, the people he'd worked with in the Temporal Cold War — had been built around Jake being useful or being right or being needed. Wesley was the first person who'd shown up after Jake had been wrong about everything and stayed anyway. Stayed, and listened, and sat with him in the wreckage of his work without trying to fix anything. Jake said he didn't know what to do with that. He didn't know how to be a friend to someone who'd just told him they were going to disappear and he was about to lose the one thing that had ever shown him what friendship looked like in the first place.

Wesley reached across and put his hand on Jake's shoulder. He told Jake he didn't know what to do with it either. That the friendship had been the closest thing to peace Wesley had felt in thirty years. That walking through the Guardian was going to take that away from both of them, and he was sorry, and there wasn't anything he could give Jake that would make it not true.

They stayed in the quarters longer than they should have. Eventually Wesley stood up. Jake stood up with him. At the door, Jake said he wasn't going to be okay with this. Wesley said he hadn't expected him to be. Jake said he didn't know what he was going to do. Wesley said he didn't either.

He left Jake standing in the quarters that had been his at sixteen and stepped back out into the timeline, looking for the light. Behind him, he could feel Jake's signature shift — the destabilization that meant a man was making a decision he wasn't telling anyone about. Wesley felt it and did not turn around. Whatever Jake was going to do, he was going to do it. The compulsion that drove Wesley to step in was the same one Wesley had been trying not to feed for the last three days, and the only way he knew to honor what Sisko had taught him was to let Jake have the choice he was making, even if the choice was to come find Wesley at the Guardian and try to stop him.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE TREE

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After Jake, Wesley went looking for the light. He'd seen it once before — back at the beginning, when he was tracing the Unmaker's fingerprint through the places where the timeline was losing weight. Everywhere he looked the branches were thinning, the leaves going grey, the wind dying in one section after another. But there had been one moment that held. One branch where the leaves still moved, where the weight refused to drain, where something about the moment itself was too real to be consumed. A planet called Xenex. A rebellion. A young commander executing someone he loved because the cause required it.

Wesley hadn't understood why that moment held weight when everything around it was failing. He'd noticed it and moved on because he'd had bigger things to deal with. Now, with Beverly's voice still in his ears and D'Kar's math carved into his chest and nothing left to deal with except the thing he was about to do, he went back to find it.

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The moment was still there. Still holding. Wesley could feel it from a distance — a section of the tree where the wind still moved strongly, where the leaves were green and full, where the branch carried its weight the way branches are supposed to carry weight. Everything around it was thinning but this moment sat in the middle of the decay like a heartbeat that refused to stop.

He went to it and found the young commander. Barely more than a boy. Standing over a man who was kneeling with his hands bound, waiting for something they both knew was coming. The commander's hand was steady on the weapon but his eyes carried everything his hand wouldn't show — the full cost of what he was about to do, held and considered and not looked away from.

Wesley watched the commander and understood why this moment wouldn't break. It wasn't the action that gave it weight. It was the consideration. This young man wasn't just executing someone. He was carrying every gram of what it meant, feeling the cost before he paid it, refusing to pretend it didn't hurt. The moment held because the person inside it held it — through nothing but the honest weight of being fully present in the worst thing he'd ever done.

Wesley needed that. Needed to be near someone who carried weight the way this man carried it, because Wesley was about to carry something heavier than anything he'd ever held, and he didn't know how to do it alone. He stepped into the moment, paused it, and pulled the young commander aside.

\* \* \*

The commander's eyes went wide when the world stopped around him. The wind on Xenex froze, the dust hung in the air, and a stranger was standing in front of him who hadn't been there a second ago.

Wesley didn't explain what he was or how he'd gotten there or what was happening to the timeline. He told the commander his name was Wesley and that he needed somewhere to sit for a while, and he asked if the commander would come with him.

The commander looked at Wesley the way a person looks at someone they can tell is carrying something unbearable — not with understanding, because he couldn't understand, but with the recognition of weight. One person who was about to do the hardest thing in his life looking at another person who was about to do the same. He said yes.

\* \* \*

Wesley brought him to the tree. The commander had never seen anything like it and Wesley didn't try to explain it in terms that would make technical sense. He told him this was where he lived, the only place that had ever been home, and that it would make more sense the longer he sat in it.

They climbed to a broad branch where Wesley had sat a thousand times before and the commander settled against the trunk and looked out at what was spread around them — the whole structure of time visible to him for the first time, alive and growing and, in places, dying.

The commander could feel it. Wesley watched the moment it registered — the young man's hands going still, his breathing changing, his body recognizing something his mind hadn't caught up with yet. The timeline was flowing through him. Not painfully, not overwhelmingly. The way water flows around a stone in a river — present, constant, something you feel against your skin without being harmed by it.

The commander sat with it for a long time without speaking. Not because he had nothing to say but because he was doing what Wesley had watched him do at the execution — considering. Taking the experience in fully instead of rushing to a response. Letting it be what it was before deciding what it meant. Wesley had never met anyone who did that as naturally as this man did.

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They stayed for days. Time didn't work the same way in the tree — a day inside it could be a second on Xenex or a century, depending on things Wesley had never fully understood and had stopped trying to. What mattered was that the days felt like days, and they spent them the way two people spend time when one of them needs to talk and the other is the rare kind of person who knows how to hear what's actually being said.

Wesley talked. He told the commander about growing up on the Enterprise. About his mother running sickbay and his absent father and the crew that became his family — Geordi's late-night engineering, Data's quiet dignity, Picard's impossible standard. He told him about the Traveler, about leaving Starfleet, about the choice to step outside of time and maintain instead of live.

He told him about thirty years of holding the rule while the timeline suffered around him. About the Kelvin fracture, the moment he broke, the way it felt to seal the rift and hear the wind come back through the leaves and believe he'd done something right.

He told him about the spree. About the Entity in the gap, the thing that was feeding on every intervention he'd ever made. About D'Kar's math showing Wesley was part of the equation and the Guardian's map showing his work on the same feeding lines as Future Guy's.

And he told him about Kore. Not just her role in the story — her leaving, her wrongness, her coming back. The things Wesley had never said to anyone, including Kore herself. That finding her on Earth had felt like finding the last person in the universe who might understand what he was carrying. That recruiting her wasn't just about the work — it was about not being alone anymore. That watching her leave had broken something in him he'd pretended wasn't broken, and that her coming back hadn't fixed it because the break wasn't about her absence, it was about knowing she'd been right to go. That what he felt for her didn't fit any word he knew — not love the way people usually meant it, not friendship, not partnership. Something deeper and less defined that had to do with the specific experience of being two people who existed in the same impossible space and chose each other's company inside it. He told the commander these things because he was about to die and he'd never told anyone and he didn't want to go through the Guardian carrying them unsaid.

He told him about Sisko and the gumbo and what it cost to watch your son destroy the timeline and choose not to stop him. About Jake, who turned out to be the shadow Wesley had been fighting for years — a broken kid who loved his father too much and pointed every gift he had at the universe and tried to make it stop hurting. Wesley told the commander that Jake was the first person who'd ever made him feel less alone in a different way than Kore did — not the loneliness of existing outside time without a companion, but the loneliness of carrying a compulsion nobody else understood. Jake understood it because Jake had the same one. Sitting with Jake in the ruins of the Andorian moment, neither of them trying to fix anything for the first time in either of their lives, had been the closest Wesley had come to peace since before the Kelvin. And he told the commander he'd seen Jake again, just hours ago — on a Deep Space Nine a hundred years past Jake's childhood, in the quarters that had been Jake's at sixteen, telling Jake the math face to face. That Jake had taken it the way Beverly had taken it. That he didn't know what Jake was going to do with what he'd been told, and he wasn't going to interfere with whatever Jake decided.

He told him about Beverly. About standing in sickbay invisible while his mother said his name to an empty room, and then going back and appearing to her fully — solid, real, her son standing in front of her for the first time in thirty years. About watching her hold together while he fell apart and knowing she was stronger than he'd ever been. About the sound she made after the door closed, the sound he heard because he hadn't left yet, the sound of a woman whose strength finally ran out in the privacy of an empty room. He told him what D'Kar's math said he had to do. And that he was terrified.

The commander listened the way he did everything — fully, carefully, with the consideration that made his moment on Xenex the one point of light in a greying timeline.

He didn't try to fix Wesley's problem or offer solutions or tell him there had to be another way. He'd spent his own life making impossible choices and he knew that when someone tells you the math says they have to die, the right response isn't to argue with the math. It's to sit with the person. So he sat with Wesley. And he talked too.

About Xenex — not the rebellion the way history would record it, but the way a kid lived it. About being fourteen when his father was killed by the Danteri and deciding that same night that the occupation would end because of him. Not out of strategy or politics — out of fury. About learning to turn fury into something people could follow, which meant learning to carry it instead of swinging it. About the fighters who trusted him because he was the one willing to go first into anything, and the ones who trusted him because he was the one willing to sit with them the night before and not pretend it wasn't terrifying.

He told Wesley about growing up in a war, about never having the luxury of a normal childhood, about watching friends die beside him and not being allowed to stop because the people still alive needed him to keep going. About the specific loneliness of being the person everyone looked to — the one who couldn't break down because if he broke, the whole thing fell apart. Wesley recognized that immediately. Different war, different scale, same weight.

The commander talked about D'n'rai — not the execution, the man. His teacher, his surrogate father, the person who'd taught him how to fight and how to think and how to tell the difference between a battle worth dying for and a battle worth walking away from. He told Wesley that D'n'rai used to say the hardest thing a leader does isn't deciding to fight — it's deciding what fighting costs the people who follow you, and carrying that cost yourself instead of passing it down.

Wesley sat with that for a long time because it sounded like something Sisko would say, and something Wesley had spent thirty years failing to learn.

The commander asked Wesley about Picard — he'd heard of Picard, the Federation captain whose reputation had reached even Xenex. Wesley told him about serving under Picard as a teenager, about the impossible standard the man set just by being in the room, about learning more from watching Picard sit in a chair and make a decision than most people learn in a lifetime of study. The commander listened with the particular intensity of a young man who wanted to be that kind of leader and wasn't sure he knew how. Wesley told him he'd get the chance. Didn't say more than that.

They listened and recognized something familiar in each other — two people built the same way, carrying different weights. And the commander asked questions. Not temporal mechanics questions — human questions. What did Beverly look like when she saw you? What did the gumbo taste like? What does Kore sound like when she's angry? The questions of a person trying to know another person, not a student trying to learn a subject.

Wesley answered them all. And somewhere in the answering — in describing Beverly’s grey hair and the cayenne in Joseph’s recipe and the way Kore’s voice went flat when she was furious because anger for her was the opposite of volume — Wesley realized he was doing something he hadn’t done in thirty years. He was being known.

Not understood, not analyzed, not evaluated. Known. The way you know someone when you’ve sat with them long enough and asked the right questions and listened to the answers without an agenda. The commander knew Wesley now — not because of the quantum connection or the temporal mechanics, but because he’d spent days in a tree with a man who was about to die and he’d cared enough to ask what his mother looked like.

\* \* \*

On the last day — or what felt like the last day, before the weight of what was coming became too heavy to sit with any longer — the commander asked Wesley one question that Wesley hadn’t expected. He asked Wesley what the tree sounded like to him.

Wesley told him. The wind through the leaves. The layered, constant, living sound of a timeline carrying weight. How it sounded when it was healthy — full, rich, the rustle of a billion moments connected to each other. How it sounded when it was dying — thin, patchy, sections going still. How it sounded right now — damaged, struggling, still alive but losing ground.

The commander closed his eyes and listened. Wesley watched the young man's face and could see his eyes moving beneath his eyelids, slowly, tracking something invisible, following the sound of the wind the way you follow a melody when you're trying to learn it by ear. The movement was rhythmic — in time with the leaves, in time with the branches, as if the commander's body was aligning itself with the tree's pulse without being told how.

Wesley understood then why he'd come here. Why this moment held weight when everything else was failing. Why this man, out of everyone in the timeline, was the one whose branch wouldn't break.

Because Mackenzie Calhoun didn't just hear things. He let them in. And in a universe being destroyed by people who acted on things without ever letting those things in first, that quality was the rarest and most necessary thing left.

\* \* \*

Wesley returned the commander to his moment on Xenex. The wind unfroze, the dust moved again, and the man with bound hands looked up at his commander with the calm acceptance of someone who'd already made peace with what was coming. The commander looked down at the weapon in his hand and Wesley could see the difference in his eyes — the same consideration that had been there before, but deeper now, carrying something it hadn't carried before. Days of conversation, a tree between worlds, the sound of wind through leaves. All of it stored somewhere underneath the immediate weight of what he was about to do. The commander acknowledged what his mentor meant to him. Considered the cost. Then paid it.

Wesley watched from outside the moment and felt the branch hold. Stronger than before, if anything. Whatever he'd given this young man in those days together — the story, the sound of the tree, the experience of being fully inside the timeline's structure — it had added to the weight that was already there. The moment that refused to break was carrying more now, not less.

Wesley left. Behind him, the quantum connection between them settled into permanence — not because of a technology or a device or a Vulcan data module, but because two people had spent days together in a tree and one of them had considered everything the other said, and that kind of connection doesn't dissolve just because the people are separated.

The information Wesley had shared settled into Calhoun — not as conscious memory but as something deeper, held in the same place where the sound of the wind through the leaves was held.

Wesley didn't know any of that. He just knew he'd spent his last days as a person with someone worth spending them with, and that was enough.

He went to find Kore.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: I KNOW

\* \* \*

Wesley found Kore in the tree. She was sitting on the branch where they'd sat together a hundred times before — the broad one near the trunk where the wind was strongest, where you could lean back against the bark and feel the whole timeline moving through you. She was waiting for him the way she'd been waiting for him since Beverly, since the math, since everything pointed to the same place and Wesley kept finding reasons not to walk toward it.

He climbed up beside her and before he could say anything she told him she'd already packed — which was a joke, because Travelers don't pack, and Wesley laughed harder than the joke deserved because it was the last time something was going to be easy between them and they both knew it. Wesley told Kore it was time. She told him she'd been ready since before he was.

\* \* \*

They climbed down from the tree together and Wesley felt every branch under his hands as he descended, memorizing the texture of bark that existed between moments — massive and scarred and warm against his palms. The feeling of a place that had held him for longer than most human lives.

At the base of the tree, he stopped and looked back up at the canopy. Branches spreading above them, some sections full and green and alive with wind, others grey and still. His home. The space his mind had shaped into the only constant in thirty years of existing outside everything.

He wasn't going to see it again. Not like this. Not as a person standing under it and looking up. He put his hand on the trunk one last time — massive and scarred and warm against his palm — and held it there the way you hold the hand of someone you're about to leave. The tree had been his more than anything in his life had ever been his, more than the Enterprise, more than the work, more than the thirty years of purpose that turned out to be the wound. This was the thing he'd built from his own mind to hold himself together, and he loved it the way you love the place that kept you alive when nothing else could.

\* \* \*

They traveled to the Guardian's planet together. Wesley's temporal perception was functional, rebuilt from the damage the Entity had caused, steadier than it had been in weeks. Kore moved beside him through the space between moments the way she'd moved beside him since the day he recruited her — present, capable, carrying her own weight without needing him to carry it for her. The planet was quiet. The Suliban were gone.

Wesley had wondered about that. The last time he'd come here the clearing had been held by two dozen phase-shifted soldiers arranged in defensive rings Future Guy had taught them specifically to stop a Traveler. Wesley had fought through them once and barely made it. He had expected them to be here again. They weren't. And Wesley did not need Kore to tell him why.

Somewhere between their argument in the tree and her coming back to him after everything that followed, she had gone alone to this planet. Had spent whatever time she'd spent here taking every last Suliban off the board, one by one, without ceremony and without witnesses. She had never mentioned it. She had never needed to. When he'd arrived today and felt the absence of them in the clearing, he had understood it the way you understand anything someone you love does for you without being asked — by the silence where the obstacle used to be.

The Guardian's clearing sat empty under a sky that didn't change because the planet had stopped having weather a long time ago. Just dust and rock and the ruins of a civilization too old to remember, and at the center of it the portal, dark and patient, waiting the way it always waited. Wesley stood in front of the Guardian and looked at it for a long time.

\* \* \*

Kore stood beside him. Not behind, not ahead. Beside. Wesley turned to her. Everything he'd told Calhoun in the tree — the feelings for Kore he'd never said out loud, the unnamed thing between them that didn't fit any word he knew — all of it was in the space between them now. Not because he'd said it to her but because she'd always known. She'd known since before she left, since before she came back, since before she pushed through Suliban and steadied his broken perception and sat with him through every terrible discovery. She'd known the way you know the weight of something you've been carrying — not because someone told you it was heavy but because your arms remember.

Their eyes met. Wesley had looked at a lot of things in thirty years of existing outside time. He'd looked at the Kelvin fracture and the Entity's structure and the Guardian's map and the inside of dead spots where meaning had been drained from moments that should have mattered. He'd looked at his mother's face and Sisko's pain and Jake's fury and D'Kar's cracking composure. None of those looks lasted the way this one did.

This wasn't a look between two people saying goodbye. It was a look between two people who had arrived at something that went deeper than any word either of them knew — deeper than love, deeper than trust, deeper than the bond of two Travelers who'd maintained the same dying tree. Something that existed because they'd been through everything together and come out the other side still choosing each other, and the choosing was so complete and so unconditional that it didn't need to be said. Wesley said it anyway. He told her she had been right — that she had seen it before he did, and he had heard her and hadn't been ready to stop. He told her he loved her. Kore looked at him with steady eyes and said she knew.

\* \* \*

The moment held. The wind moved through nothing because there was no tree here, just a dead planet and a portal, but Wesley could swear he felt leaves rustling somewhere. Then Jake arrived.

He phased into the clearing the way he used to phase into moments — sharp, sudden, the temporal technology that had defined Future Guy for decades still functional despite everything the Temple fight had cost him. He materialized between Wesley and the Guardian, and the look on his face wasn't anything Wesley expected from the man he'd sat with in the ruins.

Not anger, not the calculated certainty of a temporal manipulator assessing a situation. Fear. The specific fear of a person who is about to lose the only friend they have and has decided they're not going to let it happen.

Jake told Wesley to stop. Wesley told him he couldn't. Jake told Wesley he didn't understand what this would do — not to the timeline, not to the Entity, but to Jake. That Wesley's erasure would change Jake's path. The escalation that made Jake who he was would never have happened. Everything Jake had done, everything he'd been — the Temporal Cold War, the Suliban, the Kelvin, all of it connected to the dynamic between them — would shift. The Jake standing here right now, the one who'd found a friend in the ruins of his own mistakes, would be replaced by a version of himself who never went as far and never needed to come back.

Jake told Wesley that the person he was right now — broken, compulsive, dangerous, everything wrong that Future Guy had ever been — that person had ONE thing that mattered, and it was the friendship they'd built in the ruins. And Wesley was about to take that away by walking through a door, and Jake wasn't going to stand here and let the one real thing in his life disappear.

Wesley told Jake he understood. That losing the one person who understood you was the worst thing he could imagine, because he'd been living inside that loneliness for thirty years. Jake said understanding wasn't enough. And he moved to block the Guardian.

\* \* \*

They fought. Not with temporal mechanics, not with the precision of two beings who existed outside time. With hands. The way Jake had fought Sisko in the Temple — graceless, desperate, the physical expression of someone trying to hold onto something they're losing. Jake grabbed Wesley and Wesley grabbed Jake and they were two men wrestling at the foot of an ancient doorway on a dead planet, and neither of them was fighting to win. Jake was fighting to keep and Wesley was fighting to let go and the difference between those two things was the difference between everything the story had been building toward.

Kore watched. She could have stopped it. Could have used the technique she'd developed — made the temporal substrate rigid, collapsed Jake's enhancements, ended it in seconds. She didn't, because this wasn't her fight. This was between two men who loved each other the way people love each other when they're the only two people in the universe who understand the same wound.

But she could see what Jake couldn't — that every second Wesley spent fighting was another second Wesley wasn't walking through the portal. That the fight itself was the compulsion in its final form — Wesley unable to stop engaging, unable to stop reaching in, unable to let Jake's pain exist without trying to do something about it. Jake had given Wesley one more reason to stay, and Wesley was taking it, and the tree was dying while they rolled in the dust.

They ended up in front of the Guardian. Jake had Wesley by the shoulders, Wesley had Jake by the arms, both of them breathing hard, both of them looking at each other with the specific desperation of people who know this is the last time.

Kore stepped forward and put her hand on Wesley's back. Not hard. Not violent. A push — firm, deliberate, the way you push someone through a door they've been standing in front of for too long. The way you let someone go when letting go is the hardest thing you've ever done and you do it anyway because staying is worse for everyone.

Wesley felt her hand on his back and understood in the fraction of a second before the push what was happening and who was doing it and why. And in that fraction of a second he felt everything — the bark of the tree warm against his palms, the wind through leaves he'd never hear again, Kore's hand the last human contact he would ever feel, the look in Jake's eyes as the person he was holding onto was taken from him. Wesley went through the Guardian.

\* \* \*

The portal closed behind him. Kore did not move. Jake stood beside her, frozen at the threshold of a moment he could not undo. The dead planet held its silence.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE WALK

\* \* \*

There was no light. No sound. No dramatic cascade of temporal energy reversing itself in a visible wave across the timeline. The Guardian was not a spectacle. It was a threshold. And crossing it was the quietest thing Wesley had ever done.

One moment he was standing in front of the portal. The next, he was inside it. And inside was not a place — it was an undoing. A gentle, systematic subtraction of everything Wesley Crusher had ever been.

He felt the Kelvin go first. Of course the Kelvin. Thirty years of holding the rule, and one breath of decision had ended it — his mother's ship in danger, a fracture he could close, the choice he could have not made and made anyway. That was where he had crossed the line. He hadn't been deciding since the Kelvin. He had already decided. Every correction after had been the same reach, easier each time — the completion of the choice he'd already made. The Kelvin had been the door, and all of it since had been the walking through. The seal he'd placed on the rift releasing, the fracture reopening, the Narada arriving in 2233 the way it was always supposed to. The timeline bleeding forward through the centuries.

And he saw the loop he had been inside. Jake escalating because he had an opponent, the rift built because Jake escalated, the rule broken because the rift was there. He hadn't started the loop, but he had kept it spinning.

He felt the colony administrator's moment revert. The manipulation reasserting. The free choice collapsing back into the pressured one. He couldn't see whether her stubbornness would hold — whether she'd push through Jake's pressure on her own, without Wesley's correction. He couldn't know. He let it go.

\* \* \*

He felt the corrections unravel one by one. Every moment he'd widened. Every manipulation he'd countered. Every possibility space he'd restored. Each one releasing its hold, returning to the state it would have been in if Wesley Crusher had never existed to reach into it.

Some of them held. The people inside them — the stubborn ones, the brave ones, the ones whose own integrity was stronger than the pressure being applied to them — they held. Wesley could feel it as the corrections dissolved. Not all moments needed him. Not all choices required clearing. Some people would have chosen freely regardless.

Others didn't hold. The corrections dissolved and the manipulations reasserted and the choices collapsed, and the people inside those moments would live in the pressured version without knowing there had ever been another option.

Wesley felt each one. Every loss. Every moment that needed him and would no longer have him. Every person whose freedom depended on a correction that was ceasing to exist. He carried them for as long as he could — which was not long, because he was ceasing to exist too.

The faces came to him as the corrections dissolved. The girl on the hillside, looking up. His mother's hands. Sisko sitting alone in a phantom bar, carrying the weight of restraint in a body that had chosen to stay.

\* \* \*

The subtraction moved backward through his life.

The Traveler years dissolved. The training, the perception, the ability to exist between moments. The recruitment of Kore — undone. She would live a different life. Find a different path. Maybe the same destination. Maybe not.

The Enterprise years dissolved. The bridge. The conn. The senior officers who'd tolerated a teenager in their workspace because they saw something in him that he didn't see in himself yet. Geordi alone in the warp core. Data's quiet dignity. Worf's stubborn honor. Picard's voice saying *engage*. Gone. Not destroyed. Never happened.

Beverly would have one son instead of two. Jack would be her only child. She would never set a photograph on her desk of a boy in an Academy uniform who smiled like the future was something you walked into. She would never say his name to an empty room.

\* \* \*

The last thing Wesley felt was not sadness. Not fear. Not the weight of sacrifice or the nobility of giving everything for the greater good. It was relief.

The compulsion that had driven him for thirty years — the inability to stand in a moment and not reach in, the need to correct and counter and restore — it was dissolving along with everything else. And as it went, Wesley felt something he hadn't felt since before he became a Traveler. Stillness. Not the unbearable stillness of the space between moments where he'd sat with Kore after the visions hit. Real stillness. The kind that comes from not needing to do anything. Not needing to fix anything. Not needing to be anywhere.

For the first time in thirty years, Wesley Crusher was not attending to the timeline. For a fraction of a second that contained no time at all, he was just a person. Existing. Without purpose, without mission, without the weight of a dying universe pressing against him. Then he was nothing. And the nothing was quiet.

\* \* \*

Behind him, on the dead planet, Jake screamed. Not a battle cry, not a shout. The sound a person makes when the last thing holding them together is pulled away and there's nothing left to hold onto. The sound his father had never made when the Prophets took him, because Sisko held it in. Jake had never been able to hold anything in. That was the difference between father and son, and it had been the difference the entire story.

The scream echoed across the dead planet, off the ruins, off the Guardian's dark surface that had gone darker the moment Wesley passed through.

Kore caught Jake as his legs gave out. Held him the way you hold someone who's just lost everything — not gently, not carefully, tightly, because the person in your arms is shaking apart and you're the only thing between them and the ground. She told him to come with her. Took his hand. Brought him to the tree.

\* \* \*

They sat together on the branch where Wesley and Kore used to sit. The broad one near the trunk where the wind was strongest. Jake leaned against the bark and Kore sat beside him and they looked out over the branches of the timeline the way Wesley had looked over them for thirty years.

Jake asked Kore if she'd known Wesley was going to go through with it. She told him she'd known since the day she came back — that the wrongness she'd felt in Wesley's work had always pointed toward a cost that Wesley would have to pay, and that she'd come back because she couldn't let him pay it alone.

Jake asked her what the thing between them was — between her and Wesley. The thing that didn't have a name.

Kore told him it was the thing you get when two people trust each other completely and neither one of them ever needed the other to be different than what they were. She said it was rare and she said it was enough and she said Wesley had told her he loved her and she'd told him she knew, and that was the truest conversation she'd ever had.

They could feel the correction beginning. The timeline adjusting around Wesley's absence, moments rewriting, interventions unmaking themselves. The branches shifting, some strengthening as meaning returned, others changing shape as the paths that Wesley had influenced reverted to what they would have been without him.

Jake could feel his own path shifting. The version of himself that had become Future Guy — the version that had fought Wesley, that had engineered the Kelvin rift, that had beaten his father in the Temple — that version was becoming less solid. Not disappearing, not being erased the way Wesley was erased. Just becoming less certain. A path that was still possible but no longer inevitable. He held Kore's hand and she held his and they watched the tree change around them.

They started to fade. Not painfully, not violently. The way leaves detach from a branch — gently, naturally, the timeline letting go of versions of them that belonged to a world where Wesley Crusher had existed. Kore felt herself becoming less distinct, her Traveler abilities thinning, the space between moments becoming less accessible. Jake felt the compulsion loosening its grip, the urgency that had driven him for decades softening into something quieter.

Kore leaned into Jake and he put his arm around her and they held each other the way family holds each other when the world is ending — not with romance, not with agenda, just two people pressing together because being alone in this moment was more than either of them could carry. Then they were gone.

\* \* \*

The tree was alone. And in that aloneness — in the absolute solitude of a space that had been home to the last Travelers in existence — the tree drew a new breath. Not dramatically. Not with light or sound or any visible change that would have meant anything to anyone watching. Just a deepening. A settling. A warmth moving through the roots and the trunk and the branches that hadn't been there a moment ago, as if something had joined the structure from the inside — not added to it but woven into it, becoming indistinguishable from what was already there. The wind through the leaves changed. Fuller than before, carrying something it hadn't carried a moment ago.

\* \* \*

On the dead planet, the Guardian stood in its clearing. The portal dark. The doorway closed. Something had passed through it. Something that was no longer part of the timeline's memory. The Guardian — which existed at the boundary of time, which had witnessed everything that had ever happened and everything that never would — recorded the absence the way a scar records a wound that has healed. Something had been here. Now it wasn't. The clearing was empty.

\* \* \*

The Entity shuddered. Across the timeline — across every moment, every era, every branch and possibility and consequence — the Temporal Crystalline Entity felt thirty years of temporal energy vanish from its mass. Not consumed. Not digested. Simply gone. As if the meals had never been served.

The growth curve flattened. Then reversed. The self-sustaining threshold — the point of no return that Wesley's Kelvin correction had pushed it past — dropped below the Entity's remaining mass. The dead spots began to heal. Not quickly. Not dramatically. Slowly. Not by replacing what was lost, but by allowing what remained to carry weight again.

Moments that had been grey began to regain texture. Choices that had been hollow began to propagate consequence. The Narendra III sacrifice — still happening, the Enterprise-C still dying — began to matter again to the Klingons watching it burn.

The wind came back through the leaves of every healthy timeline. Rough. Imperfect. A wind that carried the scars of everything the timeline had been through — the Temporal Cold War, the Travelers, Future Guy, the Entity's feeding. Not restored to some pristine state. Just functional. Alive in the way that living things are alive. Messy, wounded, carrying forward.

\* \* \*

Jake Sisko felt it. He was in the middle of a manipulation — reaching into a moment, applying pressure, trying to eliminate uncertainty the way he'd been doing for decades — and the moment resisted. Not because someone was countering him. Because the moment itself was stronger than it had been a second ago. He tried again. The resistance held. He stopped.

For the first time in years, Jake Sisko stopped reaching into the timeline and stood still. The absence of his opponent — the man who'd been countering him for thirty years — registered not as victory but as loss. Something fundamental had shifted. The dynamic that had defined Jake's existence — the push and counter-push, the endless chess match with an opponent he could never quite see — was gone.

Without Wesley to fight, the purpose that had sustained Jake's obsession lost its structure. Without an opponent, the game made no sense. Without the counter-corrections justifying escalation, the escalation had no engine.

Jake stood in the space between moments and felt something he hadn't felt since he was a boy sitting on Deep Space Nine writing stories about the world as he found it. Quiet. Not the quiet of dead spots. Not the quiet of meaning being drained. The quiet of a man who had been running for decades finally stopping — not because someone caught him, but because there was nothing left to run from.

\* \* \*

The Celestial Temple felt the change. The Prophets — who existed in all moments simultaneously, who had watched Jake's path from beginning to end without intervening — registered the shift in their son's trajectory. The paths that led to destruction, to escalation, to the thing Jake had been becoming — those paths thinned. Didn't disappear. But lost their inevitability.

Other paths strengthened. Quieter ones. The path where Jake put down the temporal technology and walked back to the Temple. The path where he stood in front of his father and didn't bring a weapon. The path where a man who'd spent decades trying to control the universe decided to stop.

Sisko felt it too. He was sitting at his corner table in the illusion of Quark's bar. The phantom noise of a normal evening. And something changed in the quality of the silence — not the silence of the bar, but the silence of his son's future. For the first time in years, the paths where Jake came home outnumbered the paths where he didn't.

Sisko set down his glass. Picked up the spoon. The gumbo was warm again. He looked at the empty chair across from him. And waited.

\* \* \*

Wesley Crusher never existed. The timeline carried the scar of his absence the way a body carries the scar of a surgery — evidence that something was removed, without memory of what it was.

Across the timeline, in a single shared moment that nobody would connect and nobody would understand: Guinan stumbled behind the bar — something she'd never done in centuries of pouring drinks. A splash of amber spilled across the counter. She stopped pouring, looked at the spill, and smiled. D'Kar looked up from his equations and one variable resolved itself that hadn't resolved before. He stared at it, and his hand moved to his chest in a gesture that no Vulcan would have recognized as involuntary. Q, somewhere, human, diminished, took a breath that came easier than the last one. Archer looked at a photograph of his father and felt something he hadn't felt in years. He held the photograph a little longer than usual.

\* \* \*

A girl on a hillside on a colony world looked up at a cargo hauler breaking atmosphere. Without Wesley's correction, Jake's manipulation pressed against her — fear, smallness, the suggestion that the sky was dangerous and staying on the hill was the only safe choice. She felt it. She didn't know what it was. She looked up anyway.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE SCAR

\* \* \*

The universe corrected. It did this the way all large systems correct — imperfectly, unevenly, with loose ends and leftover pieces that didn't fit the revised version of reality. The timeline that emerged from Wesley Crusher's absence was functional but scarred. A body that had undergone surgery and healed, carrying evidence of the procedure in places no one thought to look.

\* \* \*

Q woke up human. He didn't remember why. One moment he was Q — omnipotent, eternal, insufferable — and the next he was standing on the bridge of a starship he didn't recognize, wearing a uniform he hadn't earned, with a heartbeat he'd never needed before. The Continuum was gone. Not collapsed or withdrawn. Just absent from his perception, the way a frequency disappears when you lose the ability to hear it.

He had hands. They shook. He had lungs. They needed air. He had a body that required maintenance and attention and would eventually, inevitably, stop working.

No one could explain it. The ship's doctor ran scans and found a perfectly healthy human male with no record of origin. Starfleet had no file on him. No planet claimed him. He existed without context — a person who appeared in a corrected timeline with no upstream origin and no explanation.

Q knew something had happened. He could feel the shape of the absence — the outline of knowledge he no longer possessed, the ghost of power he no longer held. Something had changed, and the change had taken everything from him except the awareness that everything had been taken. He couldn't remember what.

\* \* \*

The Guardian of Forever went dark. The portal that had stood on its dead planet for longer than any civilization in the galaxy — the doorway that had shown Kirk his past and offered Wesley his ending — ceased to function. The surface that had once rippled with temporal energy became stone. Cold, inert, indistinguishable from the ruins around it.

Scientists who visited the site recorded an anomaly: the clearing around the Guardian still existed. No dust accumulated within it. No debris settled. As if the space remembered being something other than empty, even though whatever had occupied it was gone. The Guardian wasn't destroyed. It was dormant. Waiting for something it could no longer name. A scar in the shape of a doorway.

\* \* \*

Section 31 officers across the Federation woke up with gaps. Not amnesia — gaps. Specific, surgical absences in their operational memories. Files they couldn't access. Missions they couldn't recall. Protocols that referenced events no database contained. Their black badges — the ones that granted access to classified temporal operations — stopped responding to authentication.

They remembered working on something important. Something involving time. Something that required secrecy and precision and the kind of moral flexibility that Section 31 specialized in. They couldn't remember what.

The gaps didn't heal. They sat in the officers' minds like empty rooms in a house — present, accessible, containing nothing. Some officers filed reports. Others quietly retired. A few spent years trying to reconstruct what had been removed, following trails that led to dead ends and classified archives that no longer contained what they were classified to protect.

\* \* \*

In the oceans of 23rd-century Earth, two humpback whales swam. George and Gracie. Brought forward from 1986 by a temporal incursion that the corrected timeline could not fully erase. They shouldn't have been there — their species was extinct in this century, their presence an impossibility that biology couldn't explain and history couldn't account for.

They swam anyway. Fed. Sang. Existed in a time that hadn't produced them, carrying genes that belonged to a century no one alive remembered visiting. A scar in the shape of a song.

\* \* \*

D'Kar stood in his laboratory and stared at equations that no longer made sense. The models were still there — every calculation, every projection, every variable mapped and measured with Vulcan precision. The mathematics were rigorous. The methodology was sound. The conclusions were supported by the data. But the data referenced a variable that didn't exist.

Someone had been in this laboratory. Someone had stood where D'Kar was standing and provided the empirical proof his models had been missing. Someone whose temporal signature had validated the entire framework — the degradation, the mechanism, the cost.

D'Kar could see the shape of the proof in his equations. Could trace the outline of the variable in his models. Could feel, with a certainty that defied Vulcan logic, that someone had been here and that the someone mattered.

He had no name. No face. No memory of the encounter. Just numbers that described a person who no longer existed. And the absolute, illogical conviction that the numbers were correct. He began a new project. Not temporal physics. Not degradation modeling. Something simpler and more impossible. He began trying to reconstruct a person from mathematical residue.

\* \* \*

## INTERLUDE

\* \* \*

You should know how this started.

I was awake. Couldn't have told you why. The ship was between assignments, the crew asleep, the corridors quiet in the way that corridors are quiet at three in the morning when everyone who has somewhere to be has gone there.

I was sitting on the edge of my bed with my hands on my knees and a feeling in my chest I couldn't name. Not pain. Not grief. Something more like a pressure — as if my ribs were holding something my mind couldn't identify. A weight that had no source. A fullness that contained no content.

I'd felt this before. For years, actually. A low-grade sense of carrying something — something important, something I was supposed to protect — without any awareness of what it was or where it came from. I mentioned it to the ship's counselor once. She called it unresolved stress. I accepted that because the alternative was accepting that I was carrying information I couldn't access, stored in a part of myself I didn't know existed, placed there by someone I'd never met in a moment I couldn't remember.

That night was different. The pressure was building. Not gradually — rapidly. As if whatever was stored inside me was pushing against the walls of its container, demanding to be opened. My hands were shaking. My vision was doing something strange — not blurring, but layering. As if I were seeing the room I was in and another room simultaneously. A room that didn't exist. A room that had never existed. A clearing on a dead planet with a dark portal at its center.

The memories hit me like the visions had hit Wesley. Not gently. Not in sequence. All at once. Thirty years of temporal observation flooding through a quantum connection that had been dormant for decades, activated by the pressure of being hunted — because something had been hunting me, I realized then. Something that cleaned up anomalies. Something that was approaching this ship right then, drawn by the scar I carried.

The Kelvin. The fracture. The Entity. The dead spots spreading. A man named Wesley Crusher standing outside of time, reaching into moments, feeding the thing he was trying to fight. Archer. The Guardian. Guinan and Q. Sisko in a phantom bar, asking the question that broke everything open. Jake — first met in the wreckage of his own work, met again in the quarters that had been his at sixteen. D’Kar’s math. Kore clearing a path. Beverly holding her son for the last time. The walk through the Guardian. The quiet subtraction. The relief. The girl on the hillside, looking up anyway.

All of it, pouring through me in a torrent of someone else’s life — someone who no longer existed, someone the universe had subtracted, someone whose only remaining trace was the quantum connection to a moment on Xenex where a young commander had killed his mentor and carried enough weight in the doing of it that reality itself couldn’t drain the meaning away.

I understood then. Why the moment had always felt different. Why the execution of D’n’rai had never faded the way other memories fade — had never softened with time, never become manageable, never reduced itself to a scar I could stop touching.

Because someone had been there. Had felt the weight of it and chosen it as an anchor. Had poured everything into the connection between us because the moment was the only thing in a dying timeline that refused to break.

I understood what I was carrying. And I understood what was coming for me.

So I got up. Came down here, to this compartment. Found this recording system — old, buried, the one nobody uses anymore. The one a Starfleet captain uses when he doesn't want to be edited.

And I started telling you the story.

That was a few hours ago. I've been talking ever since. The hunters got closer while I talked. The ship started taking damage. Shelby's been holding the bridge, doing whatever she does up there that makes her Shelby. I keep talking. There isn't anything else to do.

The next part is the part that's mine.

\* \* \*

## EPILOGUE

\* \* \*

That young commander on Xenex — the one who killed his mentor and carried the weight of it for the rest of his life — was me.

My name is Mackenzie Calhoun. Captain, USS Excalibur. And I'm the only one in the universe who remembers that Wesley Crusher existed.

He gave me everything. Not just what he knew when he found me — he existed outside linear time, so everything meant everything. But he didn't give it to me the way you transfer a file or upload a record. He sat with me. In a tree that shouldn't have existed, in a space between moments that his mind had shaped into something beautiful, he sat with me for days and told me his story the way a man tells his story to a friend. Not data. Not information. Just a man talking to another man because he was about to die and he didn't want to go alone.

I was nineteen. I didn't understand most of what he told me. But I listened, and I let it in, and it went somewhere deeper than memory. Took decades for any of it to surface.

Now it's surfaced. And I wish it hadn't.

\* \* \*

The hunters are on the ship.

Shelby's been holding them off from the bridge — she doesn't fully understand what they want with me or why I've been locked in this compartment recording instead of commanding, but she's Shelby, and when I told her I needed time, she gave me time. The crew is fighting for something they can't see because they trust the person who asked them to, and if that isn't the whole point of Wesley's story I don't know what is.

I can hear them in the corridor now. Three sections down. Two. Methodical, unhurried. They know I'm here and they know the recording is transmitting and they want to destroy both.

\* \* \*

I'm not asking you to fix anything. That's the whole point of the story — fixing is what caused the problem. I'm asking you to remember. Because if no one remembers what Wesley proved — that the instinct to reach in and fix things is the thing that breaks them — then the next person who has the power and sees the suffering will do exactly what he did. They won't be able to stop themselves. No one can. That's not a flaw in certain people. That's what caring looks like when it has access to power. The cycle won't start again because someone makes a mistake. It'll start again because someone does what feels right. And this time there won't be anyone left to walk through the doorway.

A man became nothing so that everything else could mean something. If you forget why, it will happen again.

Wesley Crusher was not a hero. He was a man who couldn't stop helping and learned, too late, that the helping was the wound. He was flawed and stubborn and brilliant and lonely and he loved the universe more than it will ever know — because it can't know. He's not in it anymore.

But the girl on the hillside looked up. The wind came back through the leaves. The dead spots are healing.

And a father is waiting at a table in a bar that doesn't exist, for a son who might finally come home.

That's enough.

It has to be.

\* \* \*

The door to the compartment blew inward.

Two hunters came through, armored, scanning, weapons trained on the recording device on the table in front of me. They were fast and professional and they'd been tracking me across three systems and they were about to end the last trace of Wesley Crusher in the universe.

The bulkhead behind them exploded.

Shelby came through first, phaser in each hand, the look on her face that I'd learned years ago meant she was done waiting and done asking and done being patient. Burgoyne was behind her, moving in that way Hermats move when the situation has gone past talking. Two hunters went down before they finished turning around.

Shelby looked at me, at the recording device, at the wreckage of the door, and said exactly what I expected her to say.

We're getting the fuck out of here, Captain.

The recording was already transmitted. Already scattered backward through time. Already landing somewhere around 2025, in a place I didn't choose, in a form I couldn't control, carrying the story of a man who gave up everything so that everything else could keep going.

I grabbed the device, looked at Shelby, and followed her out.

*End recording.*

\* \* \*

## FINAL SCENE

\* \* \*

The meadow was somewhere in Montana.

She did not know the name of the place. She did not need to.

She was a woman in a field on a good morning, and that was all she was, and she felt unusually satisfied in a way she could not quite account for — as if something had been decided for her while she was not paying attention, and the decision had been a kind one.

She walked.

She had no particular place to be. She was not sure, in fact, why she had come this far from the road. The grass was tall. The sky was wide. Those were reasons enough.

After a while she stopped.

She put her arms out to her sides, the way a person does when the air is good and the light is good and the body wants to be a little bigger for a minute. She closed her eyes and tilted her face up toward the sky and drew a long breath, and the air was grass and soil and something warm a long way off, and it was an entirely ordinary breath except that it made her smile for no reason at all.

She held it.

She let it out.

She turned — slowly, without thinking, the way a person turns when they are enjoying a field and want to see more of it. A full circle, eyes half-closed against the sun, the meadow moving past her in bands of gold and green.

Her head lowered. Her eyes opened.

And she saw the tree.

It was standing alone in the middle of the meadow, massive and green and impossibly old. A tree in a field. Grass at its roots. Branches spreading wide and full, leaves moving in the same wind that was moving through her hair.

She found herself walking toward it before she thought about walking toward it.

She did not hurry. There was no reason to hurry. She walked the way a person walks toward a thing that is pulling them gently, without force, the way you walk toward music you recognize without knowing the song. Her fingers trailed through the wildflowers as she went — yellow and pale blue and white — the blossoms nodding against her palm as she passed.

She reached the tree and put her hand against the bark.

Massive and scarred and warm. The warmth moved into her hand and up her arm and settled somewhere behind her breastbone, and for a moment she felt a familiarity so deep and so unreasonable that she almost laughed — as if she had been here before, or the tree had been somewhere she had been before, or something she did not have the words for.

She left her hand there a long time.

Then she walked around to the broad side of the trunk where the grass was deepest, and she lay down at the base of the tree with her back against the roots and her legs stretched out in the sun.

She looked up through the branches.

The light came down in pieces, gold on gold, the leaves moving gently over her face.

She smiled.

She closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

*The End. For the Time Guardian. The beginning of a New  
Frontier.*