

STAR TREK: THE FIVE ENTERPRISES

Kenneth A. Lowenberg .1995

PROLOGUE

Q was shocked by the surprise he felt. After all, he and his fellow continuum-mates were all-knowing and all-seeing ... until now.

The force of the energy invading -- yes INVADING -- the Q-Continuum caught all Q by surprise.

The energy force probed their consciousness leaving other Q helpless in its wake.

Qs ... helpless?!

This Q, the most important in his own mind, found some satisfaction at first in finding his companions caught off guard. They, after all, had the audacity to once take away his powers, after he played some minor pranks on Picard and his lackeys.

He had presently returned to the continuum after jostling with Vash, the interesting human female who had miraculously found her way back from the Gamma Quadrant, where Q tossed her, thanks to another group of Starfleet minions on the flatly named space station Deep Space Nine.

At his arrival in the continuum, Q was overwhelmed by this energy. No longer amused, he realized its predatory powers presented a threat to him.

It was probing consciousness looking for weakness, it had locked onto Q's mind, on his thoughts of moments ago, of humans.

Q struggled, focusing his powers against the invader's. To no avail...except for an image.

An image of intent.

Conquer ...everything.

Then he felt something else, something familiar, something which gave him hope and confidence.

It was the Q, his brothers and sisters!

The ones who had been subdued found a way to channel their powers to him, the returnee. All

the power of the Q now resided in him.

The invaders hesitated a moment, caught off guard by this new defense.

Then Q grappled with the creatures, probed them back, looking for weakness... and found none, except...

...It was there and suddenly gone.

The creature fought back, focusing on what it had learned from Q. What it apparently perceived as a weakness... humans.

Humans and their homeworld, Earth.

This meant something to Q, strike at it and the Q itself would be easy to stop.

'Ridiculous,' Q thought to the attacker. 'Humans mean nothing...'

But it was too late. The attacker had found Earth, Q saw the image of the small blue world, not just now but in all moments. The planet Earth throughout time.

Suddenly Q knew the creatures' intentions, and in the mili-second the creature was occupied, Q focused all his new-found power, all the power of the Q on one word, one image, one starship. "Enterprise."

In the next millisecond, the creature erased the planet Earth from all of time.

CHAPTER ONE

"Checkmate."

Worf looked at the tri-chess board, and then at Counselor Troi, seated across the table from him. Behind her, the window showed the colorful star streaks of the Enterprise traversing space at warp speed. He scowled, "I concede the game to you, Deanna."

The Betazoid smiled and reached for the game pieces, beginning to reset the board. "Let's see. That's three. Shall we try again?"

Worf stood. "Perhaps another time, Counselor. I obviously am not having a good day."

Deanna stood up, too. "Don't fret, Worf. I was the All-District chess champion at my high school."

"So you've mentioned ... many times."

She raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. "Funny, I don't recall. Let's get a bite to eat, I'm starved." They walked out of the rec room together. Deanna was glad to have this time to spend with Worf, ever since their duty schedules matched up so they were off-duty together. Worf had been through some emotional hardships lately concerning his late father. He had been quite reserved. Geordi and Data asked her to look after their friend. She didn't need to be asked.

They arrived at Ten Forward to find a small group of officers and civilians huddled near the bar. At the center of the huddle was Dr. Beverly Crusher helping Guinan to her feet. Worf and Troi rushed over, pushing their way through the crowd.

"Step back," Worf barked as people automatically stepped away.

"Beverly," Troi said. "My God, what happened?"

"I just got a little... woozy," Guinan said as Crusher helped her onto a bar stool.

"Guinan fainted dead away," Beverly clarified. "One of her assistants called sickbay and she was still out when I got here. Frankly, Guinan. I'm concerned. We should get you to sickbay."

"Nonsense," the barkeep said. "I'm fine now."

The Doctor waved a medical sensor up and down the length of Guinan's body. "No unusual readings. Well, I can't force you to come with me. Just take it easy."

"Certainly." Guinan said. "Maybe I'll end my shift a little early."

The crowd had backed away and the others had given her breathing room. Guinan got up and stepped into the sanctuary of her office behind the bar.

Once inside, she fell onto the oversized couch facing the large viewport. Her brow wrinkled as she tried to decipher the images and feelings which temporarily robbed her of consciousness.

"Q, here! I guess I was stupid to think we would ever escape from that clown's grip," Miles O'Brien sank his teeth into a mutton shank.

"He's gone now." Keiko sat across from him in the dinning area of their quarters on the Bajoran space station Deep Space Nine. "Well, how is it?"

Miles took the napkin from his lap and swapped at his face. "It's absolutely delicious. How did you get those bloody Cardassian replicators to do it?"

"I didn't. I bought the meat from Quark."

"What?!"

"He told me he knew a supplier of Earth delicacies and he would sell it to us at a discount. Said something about owing you a favor for help at his bar."

Miles shook his head. "Honey, you should know Quark is not to be trusted."

"Not usually, I guess. But when I discovered I had the chance to fix your favorite meal, I couldn't say no."

"Ahh, that's nice sweetheart." He took another bite of his dinner. "And since Quark needs me to help keep his computers up, he probably wouldn't poison me."

Miles laughed at the look of shock that crossed his wife's face.

The perimeter alarms rang through Ops. Major Kira Nerys, the officer on duty, called for sensors. "Is a ship coming through the wormhole?"

"Negative," said the Starfleet man sitting at Dax's usual station. "Neutrino readings are normal."

"Then what?," Kira said frustratingly. The perimeter alert alarms meant something was approaching the station.

"Unknown," the man said.

"Raise shields! Scan for cloaking device signatures and get me Commander Sisko," Kira took a step toward the overhead viewer which was normally focused on the wormhole. All appeared quiet, but the damn alarms were still blaring in her ears.

The familiar hydraulic sounds of the turbolift cut through the alarms and Kira spun to see Sisko, Dax and

O'Brien disembarking onto the deck.

"Report, Major," Sisko's deep voice demanded. Even though the tone was harsh it had a surprising calming effect on Kira.

"I can't explain it, Sir. The sensors obviously think something's there but they won't tell us what it is."

Sisko walked up behind Dax, who had taken her spot at the science station. "What can you tell me, Lieutenant?"

Dax shook her head slightly, "Kira's right. The sensors are confused. But I can tell you it is more than one thing approaching us."

"Approaching us from where?," Sisko said.

Then the viewscreen changed and five Federation starships suddenly orbited Deep Space Nine.

CHAPTER TWO

Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise picked himself off the command deck and surveyed the bridge. Everyone was doing the same, no one having been able to keep their footing during the severe buffeting.

"Report," William Riker, his Number One, said from next to him.

"All systems are coming back on line," said Ensign Ro Laren from the Ops station.

"Data," Picard said coming up behind his android science officer at the helm station, "What was that?"

"Unknown, Sir."

The darkened main viewscreen encompassing the entire front wall of the bridge sprung to life, flickering into a multi-colored test pattern.

"Where are we?" Riker asked.

"Sensors will be operational momentarily," Data said.

The turbolift doors opened slowly behind the command center of the bridge. Troi and Worf emerged.

"Mr. Worf," Picard said. "As soon as the internal sensors are on-line, I need a status report."

"Yes, Sir."

The viewscreen blinked again and a very blurry image materialized and slowly coalesced into a familiar image.

"Deep Space Nine," Picard said.

Sisko and his crew stared dumbfounded at the main Ops viewscreen.

"I don't believe this," Sisko said.

"It does seem impossible," Dax concurred from behind him.

On the screen were five starships -- all named Enterprise. All from different time periods.

"Commander," O'Brien called out. "We are getting a hail from the Enterprise, ah, 1701-D, Sir."

"On the screen."

The screen changed from the historic image to one of familiarity, a Galaxy-Class starship's main bridge. In the center was Jean-Luc Picard, a man Sisko once despised, for as Locutus of Borg, Picard destroyed the Starfleet at Wolf 359, in the process killing his wife Jennifer.

Sisko's violent emotions had ebbed since he met Picard -- not Locutus -- when the Enterprise arrived to assist in the establishment of a Federation presence on DS9 earlier this year.

But the viewer's image brought back strong emotions of Jennifer, nearly overwhelming Sisko for a moment.

"Captain Picard," he said with too much emotion.

"Commander Sisko," Picard said. "I am at a lack to understand how we got here, all of us. I was wondering if you could explain further."

"I'm afraid we are as much in the dark as you." Sisko said. "However, it looks as if we are about to be a part of

history."

CHAPTER THREE

"Captain, the communications between the starship and the space station are on recognizable, albeit advanced, Federation hails."

"The code signatures from the vessels and the station fall within Starfleet parameters. There is a 92 percent probability they are Federation crafts."

The Captain spun in his chair to look at the center viewscreen. "But of a much advanced design." He got up and walked over to his science officer. The Starship Enterprise was just returning from the Khitomer Conference en route to decommissioning when the ship began to shake apart.

"So, Spock," Captain James T. Kirk said to his Vulcan First Officer, "Could the buffeting we just experienced have been a time warp?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "All evidence supports the conclusion."

"And," Kirk said, rubbing his hands together, "From what we've just heard, it seems Captain Picard of Enterprise ...D, knows Commander Sisko of DS9."

"It would seem so."

"So perhaps we are in their time period. Uhura," Kirk said to his communications officer. "Get me Captain Picard ... of the Starship Enterprise."

"Yes, Sir."

"Who?" Picard asked incredulously.

"Captain James T. Kirk," Worf repeated.

"I guess I should have expected this," Picard commented. He stood up, as did Riker and Troi.

Picard glanced toward his Number One.

"Well, Sir. It's not every day you get to address a legend," Riker said.

Picard put his hands up in front of him, as if he were pushing something away. "Now, everyone. I know how important James Kirk and his crew were to Federation history, but we must remember they are apparently here from the past. We can not let them know more about their future than is absolutely necessary. Or else we risk altering our history."

"I'm afraid it's much too late for that, Jean-Luc," said a familiar voice from behind him.

Picard spun on his heel to face... "Q!"

"Of course," Picard fumed as he took two steps toward the entity. "This little affair has your trademark of chaos all over it."

Q took two steps back. "Normally, I'd agree with you, Picard. But this time its something far worse than a common prank."

"Q!"

"Picard, this is serious, not only to you but to me."

"Oh come now, Q. What could possibly harm an omnipotent entity?," the Captain said rolling his eyes. "Now deliver those starships back to..."

"That's just it Picard. Unbelievably, something has affected me and all Q. We're immobilized."

Data stood up, "Immobilized? As I understood it, the Q Continuum was omnipotent and, to the extent of the known physical universe, all-powerful."

"A nice thought," Q said. "But, alas, no longer true. There's a new bully in the neighborhood."

Picard brow furrowed. "Indeed, and just what is this bully's intentions."

Q plopped down onto the nearest chair. "To conquer ... everything. And they've started by neutralizing the continuum and eliminating... something else."

"And what is that?," Worf asked.

"Believe me, Microbrain, you don't want to know."

"Q," Picard yelled. "Stop this evasiveness and..."

"Earth, Picard. They eliminated the Planet Earth. It never existed."

No one said anything. There was no movement on the bridge.

"Speechless," Q said. "I would never had believed it. I guess these new guys are more powerful."

"Come ...now..., Q." Picard said slowly. "If what you say were true than how could any of us be here."

"At the last moment before your beloved home was vanquished, I used all the remaining power of the Q to ... save you."

"Why?" Data asked.

"Because, my dear Data, you and your crew were all that I could think of... off the top of my head... that could help me banish these bullies."

"Really?" Picard said. "And... the other Enterprises."

"An aftereffect, I suppose, Jean-Luc. I only had a mali-second to act, and my powers were unfocused due to the

invaders. So when I thought Starship Enterprise, we got more than we bargained for."

"...And DS9?"

"Simply the last place I visited in your universe before the invasion."

"Wonderful." Picard said.

Riker stepped up next to his Captain. "It looks as if we have a problem, Sir."

"Always the master of understatement, Riker," Q said. "Well, at least you've got me along to help for the duration."

"Marvelous," Worf said.

"No response, Sir," Uhura said.

"Hmmm. Are our hailing frequencies compatible with theirs?"

Uhura shrugged, "Assuming they are from our future they should be able to read us. After all, I can read old-style radio waves."

"Good point," Kirk said. "Well..."

He was interrupted by a beeping from Uhura's station.

"Is it Picard?" Kirk asked.

"No, Sir. It's from the previous Enterprise. NCC-1701."

Kirk looked at Spock then turned slowly to the viewscreen. "Visual."

The screen wavered and a familiar visage filled it, a ruggedly handsome man, who Kirk noted with sadness, was

doomed to spend his older years crippled by Delta Ray exposure. "This is Captain Christopher Pike of the Starship Enterprise. Come in, please."

Kirk swallowed. "This is Captain James T. Kirk ... of a future Starship Enterprise."

Pike nodded, "Our sensors confirm all the starships orbiting the station are future versions of my ship."

"Yes," Kirk said. "We have come to the same conclusion."

"Mr. Spock, my science officer," Pike said, "has suggested we have as little exposure as possible so as not to further disrupt the course of future events. I just needed to confirm our findings."

"I ... understand," Kirk replied. "For now, we should limit communications to emergencies."

"Agreed, Pike out."

The viewscreen wavered and resumed the image of the Enterprises orbiting Deep Space Nine.

Kirk turned to Spock, "Do you remember ever giving that suggestion to Captain Pike?"

"Negative, Captain. I have no recollection of these events ever occurring on the other Enterprise. I will scan the library computer records."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Kirk said as he sat in his chair.

"You saved us?," Riker shook his head in bewilderment.

Q shrugged, "I admit to a touch of temporary insanity."

Picard walked to the main viewscreen. Four Starship Enterprises -- a legacy spanning the

history of the United Federation of Planets. From Captain April to Captain Garrett, NCC-1701 has defined the eras of their service. Now, if Q could be believed -- and Picard admitted he had no reason not to believe -- Earth had been eliminated, had never existed.

And through a fluke of undefinable cosmic powers, these historic ships and crews have come together to face their greatest challenge: To restore humanity.

And to defeat a force more powerful than the most powerful entity Picard had ever encountered.

"Mind-boggling, eh, Mon Capitain," Q said, coming up behind him.

Picard turned and marched past him up the ramp to Worf's security station. He turned and faced the entity, who still stood front and center. "Let's say you're right, Q, and Earth is gone."

"I AM right, Picard. I checked. It's not just gone, it was never there. Eight planets, not nine. Mercury, Venus, Mars. Earth is an asteroid belt."

"Which leaves me two immediate questions." Picard said gripping the security station. "One: why did these

aggressors spare you? And two: what has this done to galactic history?"

Q shook his head and walked toward the command chair. "Good questions. One: to taunt me, I suppose. The great taunter of the Universe, being taunted himself. They probably are having a laugh riot -- biding their time before they play out their game.

"And two: I said before humans were not important. However, you have had a large impact on this sector of space -- in another reality. Now it's open season."

"Who controls this space?," Worf asked.

"I'm not sure really," Q responded. "But, I'll bet we find out soon enough."

Data turned in his chair, "If I may, one can extrapolate, using known history as a referent, that this sector of space is probably controlled by the Cardassian Alliance. Assuming there was no Federation to help excise them from Bajoran Space."

"Assuming the Klingon Empire has not staked claim to this space long ago," Worf said with a bit of pride.

Picard looked at him with surprise. "Mr. Worf?"

"The Klingons had a strong military presence in this sector long before the Cardassians were a power. If there was no Federation..."

"You would have all died after Praxis or been conquered by the Romulans at Khitomer. Power, indeed." Q said.

Worf growled.

Q laughed.

Picard clapped his hands, "Gentlemen, this speculation is foolhardy and useless. Mr. Data. Mr. Worf. Start long range sensor sweeps. See if we can get some answers."

"Deep Space Nine may be of some assistance, Sir," Data added.

"Indeed," Picard agreed. "Get me Commander Sisko. And send a general hail to the other Enterprises telling them to stand by for more information."

"Can we confirm these are friendly vessels?," Odo asked seconds after arriving at Ops.

Sisko shrugged, "It is the Enterprise out there --our Enterprise from our time period, Constable. I have no reason to believe the others are anything but what they seem."

"Never-the-less," Odo countered, "It might be wise if we take more defensive measures."

O'Brien stood from behind his station, slightly annoyed.

"Odo, the Enterprise would never take any action against this station."

"Just the same, Chief, caution is warranted. This is a highly unusual situation..."

The security chief was interrupted by a signal from O'Brien's station. "Its Captain Picard, Sir."

Sisko moved to center of Ops and then thought twice, "In my office, please, Chief."

Sisko sat behind his desk turning his baseball over and over in his hand, tossing it between the two. He was trying to absorb the information Picard just gave him.

No Earth. Never an Earth.

Blast Q. Sisko could not believe Q wasn't behind this, and was frankly surprised at how easily Picard seems to have excepted his word. As far as Sisko could tell, Q couldn't be trusted as far as an infant could toss his baseball.

However, if there were entities more powerful than Q out to conquer the Universe, than what the hell could Sisko, could any of them do, to stand in its way?

Picard had suggested a meeting of all the captains on DS9. Sisko agreed and left the Enterprise Captain to deal with his counterparts. He had to deal with getting the station ready for the historic event and ready to deal with whatever came next.

He would need to call a meeting of his senior staff. If Picard was right and history had reset itself sans an Earth and human race, then they would inevitably encounter the political forces of the sector very soon.

Rom had rarely heard his brother laugh so excitedly.

Quark came up from behind and slapped him on the back so hard it almost knocked him over. "Don't be some glum, Rom. This is the profit-making event of the month... at least. All the Captains of the Enterprises. We'll have them all here, at Quark's Place. Who in their right mind would pass up the opportunity to meet so many heroes at one time? Everyone on the station ...on the ships ... on Bajor... will be here. Buying, gambling, drinking ...losing their money... to us."

Rom coughed. "But brother, what if the rumor is true, that Earth has been erased from existence, and that the Federation doesn't exist either?"

Quark laughed louder, "Then, finally, Sisko has no authority to check my books." And the Ferengi howled with pleasure all the way to the holo-suites.

CHAPTER FOUR

Spock looked up from his sensor station. The red alert klaxons were blaring. "The ship matches no correlations in our library banks. It is from a race we have not yet encountered."

"Ok, everyone," Kirk called out to his bridge staff. "Our priority in a combat situation will be to shield NCC-

1701, Captain Pike's ship, from attack. At this point, we can only worry about the direct links to our past and let the future take care of itself. Clear?"

"Aye, Sir," Chekov and the helmsman, McGarity, chimed together.

Uhura spoke up, "Captain Picard coming on all-hail, Sir."

"On screen," Kirk said, very frustrated by this turn of events. His shields were up and his weapons primed but Kirk knew he was facing a technology out-matching his... however, that wouldn't stop him from engaging the enemy, and defeating him.

The French-accented voice of the Captain of Enterprise-D filled Kirk's bridge, "The vessel approaching is a Cardassian Galor-Class Warship. I respectfully suggest all ships remain in orbit, while 1701-D dispatches her."

The signal broke and Kirk turned to his crew. "Opinions."

"As you said, Captain," Spock began. "We must let the future take care of itself. Also, if the Cardassian craft is of Picard's time period, his ship is the best equipped to deal with it."

Kirk nodded, "I agree. I just hate to sit this out."

"Captain," Chekov called out. "Enterprise-B is breaking orbit! She is pursuing Captain Picard's ship."

"What? On visual."

The screen blipped away from Deep Space Nine to show 1701-B pursuing 1701-D toward the Cardassians.

Kirk stood up and stepped toward the viewer. "An Excelsior-Class ship. We should be able to stop her."

"Perhaps, Captain," Spock said. "Assuming the Enterprise-B is indeed a Excelsior Class as we are aware of them. She may be significantly more advanced. Also, we are not certain her actions are hostile."

"Status of 1701 and 1701-C?"

"Still in orbit," McGarity said.

"Stand by to break orbit on my signal," Kirk ordered.

"Aye, Sir," Chekov replied.

"Raise Enterprise-B!"

"No response, Sir," Worf said. "The Cardassian is somehow interfering with communications."

"It is possible in this altered reality," Data said, "The Cardassian technology is quite different."

Picard paced in front of the command chairs, glancing once at Q who sat quietly, for once, next to Troi. "Counselor, can you sense anything from the ships?"

She concentrated for a few moments, "I sense hostility and a bit of confusion from the warship. From the Enterprise, I sense confusion and helplessness."

"They've never seen the likes of us before," Riker intoned. "Captain, the Federation doesn't exist so the Cardassians have no idea what they're facing."

"All they know is we are invaders," Worf added. "And apparently that is enough."

"Get us directly between the Warship and Enterprise-B," Picard ordered.

Just then, the Galor-Class Warship opened fire, striking 1701-B with a full weapons spread. Picard and crew watched as the energy pulses danced across the other starship's weakening defense screens.

"Break orbit," Kirk ordered. "Lock phasers and photon torpedoes on the warship."

"Aye, Sir," Chekov said.

"Sir," Uhura called out, "The other ships are breaking orbit as well. Moving in to assist."

"Benjamin, if the Enterprises are destroyed, our history will be irrevocably altered, even if we find a way to restore Earth," Dax said.

Sisko made the decision he contemplated when 1701-B broke orbit. "Chief O'Brien divert all power to the tractor

beams. Hold those three starships in place."

O'Brien fingers flew frantically over his engineering board. "The power systems will be strained, Sir, especially if they attempt warp speed."

"Engage the beams," Sisko ordered.

He watched as three energy lances emanated from the outer ring of Deep Space Nine, catching the Enterprises as they began to break orbit. The lights in Ops dimmed momentarily and slowly brightened to normal.

"Got'um, Sir," O'Brien said.

Then the comm board started screaming at him.

"DS9 has them in tractors," Riker said.

"That Sisko is such a bully," Q commented.

"Status of Enterprise-B," Picard barked.

"The ship is experiences intermittent power overloads due to the Cardassian attack," Data reported. "It is unlikely they will withstand another assault."

"If we can tell that, so can they," Riker responded.

"Mr. Worf, fire phasers at the warship."

"Yes, Sir."

Daggers of power lanced forth from Enterprise-D. The bridge crew watched as the phasers struck the Cardassians, flaring on the ship's forward shields and dissipating rapidly.

"Damage report," Picard inquired.

Worf scowled and looked at his security readouts, "Minor damage to their forward deflectors. It appears the Cardassians have advanced shield technology in this reality."

Picard nodded, "Arm the phot--"

"Sir," Worf called out. "Enterprise-B has fired photon torpedoes."

On the screen, the weapons struck the Cardassians in the same spot as the phasers moments ago. This time, however, the stronger plasma blasts broke through, causing minor explosions to dance along the ship's hull.

"Helm," Picard ordered. "Get us back in between --"

It was too late. The Cardassian ship fired a full barrage of phasers, torpedoes, and something else, unidentifiable by Worf's computers.

The massive power struck the Enterprise-B dead-on.

"Damn it." Kirk yelled, "Uhura, get me Commander Sisko, now."

"They are refusing our hails, Sir, as well as the hails from the other Enterprises."

"Mr. Chekov, target the source of that tractor beam and lock phasers."

"Yes, Sir," Chekov said as his hands flew across his board.

"Fire!" Kirk said, launching an attack on Deep Space Nine.

"The Enterprise-B has suffered severe casualties," Worf reported. "They are near a power shutdown."

"What about their warp core?" Riker asked.

"Scanning..."

Picard glared at the Warship, contemplating the next move. Obviously, the Cardassian was more advanced than what he was used to, but why had Enterprise-B acted in such an irrational manner, risking so much?

"Sir," Worf said. "The other Enterprise is going to warp speed! They are on a collision course with..."

"Mr. Data, warp speed!" Riker called. "Get us out of here."

"Worf, raise the Enterprise, now!" Picard called out.

Then the explosion blanketed the viewscreen, overloading the visual circuits momentarily, as the two star crafts collided.

"Evasive," Kirk ordered, as his Enterprise, primed for battle, found itself instead riding the waves of a warp

drive explosion, pushing her back toward the space station.

"The shields will be overloaded," O'Brien cried over the alert klaxons in Ops. "Impossible to tell if they will hold."

"Brace yourselves," Sisko said, as the waves slammed DS9 throwing everyone mercilessly to the deck.

Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott saw the station approaching quickly on the main viewer in the engine room. His Enterprise would be smashed like an old wooden ocean-going craft slamming into a rocky shoreline. 'Not this ship,' he thought as he made some rapid calculations on his master controls, altering the ship's course and warp speed output just enough to push his ship above and away from Deep Space Nine.

"Never again will I loose ya," he uttered to no one as he petted his control panel. "Never."

"All systems coming back on," O'Brien said, then added with a surprise. "The Cardassian tractors held, too. The Enterprises still in the beam survived and were held away from the station."

"Enterprise-A barely missed us, Sir," Kira said.

Sisko nodded his head, "And Picard's ship."

"They went to warp speed seconds before the explosion. Sensors cannot penetrate the incident horizon," Dax said.

"In other words, you don't know," Sisko clarified.

"Correct," Dax replied.

"Status report, Number One."

The dark-haired woman turned from the helm console to look at her Captain. "All systems are coming back on line, Sir. The shields were strained by repelling the explosion. They will need some

repairs. The station's tractor beam kept us from being propelled into her hull. Dr. Boyce reports no casualties."

Christopher Pike nodded. His ship was saved by the beam trapping them from assisting the Enterprise-B and D with the alien ship. Now, Enterprise-B was destroyed, altering the future, unless that Enterprise was originally destined to be annihilated at this point. Unlikely.

Pike turned to his science officer, who was under his station examining the circuitry behind an open vent. "Mr. Spock?"

The young officer perked up, bumping his head on the vent. Pike smiled slightly, noting the brief grimace of embarrassment before the Vulcan got a hold of himself.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I am assigning you to be our liaison to the other ships and Deep Space Nine."

"But, Sir, there are higher-ranked..."

"Belay that, Mister. You got the job. Number One will assist you, but you're our man."

Number One raised an eyebrow. "Captain..."

Pike turned. "You should work with Enterprise-A, first. I recognize her captain, James Kirk. He is currently a

promising Lieutenant under Captain Garrovick on the Farrugut. Currently, meaning our time, of course. In fact, we've met. I believe his future self is our best bet for gathering information."

"Logical," Number One said.

"Indeed," Spock agreed.

"Get to it then."

"Aye, Sir," they said in unison as they departed the bridge.

"Well, how about those pyrotechnics?" Q said as he stood and stretched.

Picard clapped his hands together, "That is all you have to say? Hundreds of people just lost their lives."

Q shrugged, "Hey, what can we do? Grieve and move on, Captain. But of course you are again missing the big picture. How about you, Riker? Can you figure it out?"

Riker took a step toward the entity, "All I can figure out is I've had enough of your shenanigans, Q."

"The brilliance in this room!" Q said as he stepped toward the helm. "Data, save me from

human stupidity."

The android stared at Q for a moment and then turned to look at Picard, "Perhaps Q is referring to the fate of NCC-1701-B. In our timeline the ship was not destroyed in combat with Cardassians."

Q clapped. "Very good. You get the gold star, Data."

"Obviously, Q," Picard said loudly. "The Federation and Cardassians hadn't encountered each other during that time period."

"And now...?" Q said encouraging Picard to think more. When he didn't say anything, Q collapsed in a chair. "Why we ever got interested in you...? History is not locked in place anymore. Those bullies have released the flood gates."

"I'd say that was an obvious conclusion when they eliminated Earth," Riker said.

"But," Q said, "You see, you can't realign only a part of history. That's why tampering with the space-time continuum isn't done more often. Because you leave yourself open for annihilation."

"Q, I'm afraid we don't see the same cosmic picture," Picard said.

"Picard, listen. They erased humanity -- most of it. Now nothing's locked in place anymore. We can go back and erase them. The timestream can now be rewritten any number of times."

"This sounds like an extraordinarily dangerous option," Data commented.

"With Earth eliminated and the Q paralyzed, what do any of us have to lose? Nothing! And we've got everything to gain. How about it Picard, we can finally be a team." Q reached his hand toward the Captain.

Picard unconsciously grasped it and Q pulled him into a big hug, to everyone's surprise, especially the Captain's.

"Now," Q said, releasing Picard. "Helm, take us back to Deep Space Nine." Then he moved his right hand in a familiar gesture. "Engage!" Nothing happened as Q looked at an angry Captain. "Just kidding. Sense of humor, Jean-Luc, is a useful character trait. Look into it."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Odo, you look flustered, which I must admit is quite gratifying," Quark said as he approached the security chief in the Promenade.

"I am not flustered," Odo snapped. "Just preoccupied."

"With the Captains' meeting?"

"What captains' meeting?"

"Come on, Odo, give me a little credit. The meeting Sisko is calling for the Enterprise captains."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Alright," Quark smiled as he walked away. "But I'm inviting all of them to my bar for a celebration as soon as the meeting is over." He turned and looked behind him. "And believe it or not, you're invited."

Odo stopped his gait, shook his head and decided to walk in another direction.

"It is agreed then. The meeting will adjourn on Deep Space Nine at 1350 hours."

"Fine. I'm looking forward to it," Kirk said.

"Enterprise out," Picard's image vanished from the Enterprise-A's viewscreen.

"The Enterprise-D has resumed orbit," Chekov reported.

Kirk nodded and turned back to Uhura. "Have Doctor McCoy meet me in my quarters. Mr. Chekov you have the conn. Spock with me."

When they entered the turbolift, Kirk turned to first officer. "Well, what do you think?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "If we are to learn anything more about our situation, it will be necessary to meet with the others as Captain Picard suggests. In addition, as we have witnessed, we may have to rely on the newer class starships for future conflict."

"What about the time flow conflicts?"

"History has apparently already been seriously compromised, considering I have no personal recollection and Starfleet records show no indication of NCC-1701 ever undergoing our current situation."

Kirk nodded as the turbolift opened. Spock was right, but he didn't enjoy the idea of having to reset history. It reminded him of Edith, and threatened to unleash the emotional turmoil tied to her memory.

When they arrived at his quarters, Dr. Leonard McCoy was waiting.

"Well, it about time you decided to clue me in," he said.

"Let's go inside," Kirk responded waving his best friends through the doorway. "Would

anyone like a drink?"

Spock shook his head.

"For God's sake, Jim, dispense with the pleasantries and start talking. I hate to be in the dark."

"Sorry, Bones." He sat on his bed. "Well, it seems that we are here due to an imbalance in the powers of an entity named Q."

Bones shook his head, "Don't tell me. All-knowing, all-seeing, self-righteous..."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, Doctor, One of those."

McCoy plopped down on a chair, "Wonderful."

"It seems this Q entity was attacked," Kirk continued, "by an even more powerful being. This second entity has immobilized the Q and has erased Earth."

McCoy did a double-take, "Come again."

"Doctor," Spock began, "Earth has apparently been deleted from the time stream."

McCoy stared blankly for a moment, "Well then how the hell are we here?"

Kirk shrugged, "According to Captain Picard, the Q entity currently on Enterprise-D's bridge has had previous encounters with her crew. Q felt Enterprise could help in banishing the other entity. The rest of us are here because Q's powers were unfocused and dragged every Federation Starship Enterprise along for the ride."

McCoy stood, "And you're going over to the station to meet with the other captains."

"Yes. Captain Pike, Captain Picard and Captain Rachel Garrett... along with station Commander Benjamin Sisko and this Q. And you and Spock, of course."

"And we are all are gonna talk about ...what? Finding another home?"

Spock folded his hands together. "It would be logical to assume the topic will be rescuing Earth."

Bones stood up, "Oh sure. Maybe if we say to this super-entity 'pretty please' it will change its mind and give us our planet back. Damn it, how are we going to combat an entity that can alter history at will?"

Kirk joined them in standing, "How did we combat Apollo, or Trelane, the Kelvans... or Charlie Evans ... or Gary? We did it because we are the best crew in Starfleet. We did it because we never lost confidence in ourselves or each other."

McCoy shook his head, "Maybe we are the luckiest group of people in space. Maybe our luck is running out."

Kirk walked up and clapped his hands on the doctor's shoulders. "You don't believe that,

Bones. Now we've got a job to do, and I'll need you both. Let's show these next generation Enterprises why our crew is in the history books."

"Agreed," Spock said.

"Nice pep talk, Jim," Bones said.

"Thanks," Kirk grinned as they left his quarters.

Benjamin Sisko was getting ready in his quarters.

Sisko hated the dress uniform, but felt compelled to wear it. After all, he was about to meet some of the greatest heroes of the U.F.P. The dress uniform was the least he could do to honor them. He had read about the missions of the Starships Enterprise at the academy, some were assigned readings.

However, Cadet Sisko made Enterprise his unofficial hobby, soaking up library disc after library disc full of log reports and summaries. These stories of adventure and exploration drove him to space. However, in all his readings he never came across the logs describing this situation. Surely, it would have been recorded by Captain Pike and Captain Kirk, for they kept extremely detailed log entries. But it wasn't. Sisko double checked the records hours ago, no mention. He planned to make this a point at the meeting.

"Excited, Dad?"

Benjamin turned to see his son smiling in the doorway to his bedroom. He smiled, "Absolutely, Jake. The people coming on the station are the reason your old man joined Starfleet."

Jake looked down and frowned, "I see. That is exciting, I guess. Well, Major Kira is in the living room waiting."

Now, what was that look all about? Sisko put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Jake?"

The boy looked up and smiled. "It's nothing, dad. I just ...get into moods sometimes."

So that was it. Mentioning his entrance to Starfleet reminded Jake of his mom and her death aboard a starship. Sisko reprimanded himself, he had to be careful about what he said, the boy still hurt as much as he did, perhaps more in some ways. "Hang in there, Jake. We can talk when I get back."

Jake shrugged, "It's no big deal, Dad. Don't worry."

"That's a dad's job, Jake. I'll be back soon."

Benjamin walked out into the living room to meet his first officer.

"Snazzy, Commander," Major Kira Nerys said, looking at his attire.

"Shall we go?"

"Of course, the members of the Enterprise are aboard. Dax and Odo have escorted them to

Mrs. O'Brien's classroom."

"Excellent," Sisko said. His staff had decided the school was the least conspicuous and most secure area to hold the meeting. Odo, in fact, had already begun the security planning before the others had finalized their decision. And Sisko trusted the Constable's instincts, so the classroom became the site.

James Kirk shook Christopher Pike's hand. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Captain," Kirk said.

"Indeed, Captain. It's good to see the promising young man from the Farragut has done so well."

"Thank you, Sir. What do you think of all this?"

"I think this is an extraordinarily unusual and dangerous situation. Any wrong move on our part -- however that may be defined -- can have disastrous repercussions."

"The fate of Enterprise-B may have already caused irreparable repercussions."

"True, but we must deal with our immediate futures, Captain Kirk. As long as there is an Enterprise-A there will be a B. The Federation can be restored."

"I agree, Sir."

Spock of Enterprise-A came into the promenade and approached the two men with whom he held the most loyalty. "The meeting is ready to begin, Captains."

The chairs will set up in a circle. At the top sat Jean-Luc Picard. Then around clockwise were Q, Riker, Pike, Number One, Spock, Kirk, McCoy, Sisko, Kira, Garrett and her first officer Alexander Okuda. Outside the room, Odo and Worf led the security team.

Sisko stood first, "As commander of this station, I would like to welcome you all to Deep Space Nine. This is an unprecedented meeting of some of the most important citizens ever to represent Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets. We are honored by your presence and know that with all of us working together, we can return the time stream and the universe to its proper alignment. Thank you." He sat.

Q leaned over to Picard, "Not an elegant speech maker, huh, Jean-Luc?"

Picard brow creased, "Q, please..."

"Excuse me," James Kirk said, standing. "These pleasantries are time consuming and pointless. No offense, Commander Sisko, but if you hadn't been so arrogant as to lock a tractor beam on my ship and the others, 500 important Federation citizens wouldn't be space dust now. Now, I think we should cut to the chase and stop treating this like a mutual admiration society. We've got a universe to set right."

"Bravo," Q said clapping, "I like this one, Picard."

Kirk took two steps toward the entity, "You must be Q."

"Greetings and felicitations, Kirk," Q smiled.

"I have no use for super-powered egotistical know-it-alls, Q," Kirk said. "Now do you have something useful to offer or are you just here for comic relief?"

Q smiled and nodded, standing and clapping Kirk on the shoulder. He laughed as Kirk recoiled. "I have more to offer than your puny mind can comprehend, Kirk. The question is when do I feel like offering it."

Kirk took another step toward Q. Picard jumped up and put himself between the two. "Q, Captain Kirk," Picard said. "It would be unfortunate if this cordial meeting degenerated."

"If I find you are withholding important information, Q..." Kirk said staring the entity in the eyes. They locked gazes for a long moment, then they went back to their mutual seats.

"Good combative spirit, Kirk." Q called out as he was facing away from the Captain. "Definitely old school."

"I hope you don't mind if I interrupt," Christopher Pike called over Q's remarks. "There are obviously going to be some personality clashes. However, Starfleet Academy, in my day, emphasized accomplishment of goals over dispositions. I hope that still stands with today's graduates."

"Of course, Captain," Picard said. "We are in a unique scenario obviously, and I feel Q is most qualified to introduce the situation."

"Ah, correct, Jean-Luc," Q said standing and straightening his tunic, "I'll try to make this as easy to understand as possible." He turned and smiled at Kirk. "You see, the Q, an omnipotent race of which I am very highly ranked, have been invaded, caught off guard, actually, by a very powerful -- and bullying -- entity or entities. I was the only Q to escape their grasp--"

"And the others?" Pike's Number One asked.

"They, my lady, are immobilized back in the continuum."

"Not so omnipotent after all, eh," McCoy said.

"Watch your tongue, little man," Q blurted.

Kirk jumped out of his chair, "The doctor's right. And if this entity was able to take the rest of the Q out, I don't see how you can help us."

Q's face grimaced, "As if you understand anything about the nature of the universe, Kirk."

"That's how he's gonna help us, Jim," McCoy chortled. "By hurtling insults."

"The degree of our understanding the nature of the universe," Spock said, "seems to have little to do with our

current scenario."

Q laughed, pointing toward Kirk, Spock, and McCoy. "You boys have a few puny success stories over a quarter century --less than infinitesimal in universal measure-- and you think everyone should bow. The great exploits of the Starship Enterprise." He laughed louder.

"That's enough!" Christopher Pike yelled. "Mr. Q, if you have something worthwhile to tell us, fine. Do so, without interruption and insult, or else turn the meeting over to someone else."

Q's eyed widened. "Fine, see if you insignificants can solve this without me. After all, you'd all be less than spacedust without my help. So, go ahead. I've done my share already, anyhow." He crossed his arm and closed his eyes.

Picard turned to him, "Q, this is childish."

He nodded and whispered, "Tell them when they stop acting like children, maybe I'll be willing to help." Seconds later he was quietly snoring.

"According to Q," Pike was saying, "This new force is very powerful -- it would have to be to annihilate Earth and alter history. So, we need to find allies who can help us."

"Q ... on a good day," Riker intoned.

After a moment of silence Kirk whispered, "All is as it was before."

McCoy looked at his captain and a flash of recognition crossed his face. "Many such journeys are possible. Let me be your gateway."

"Gentlemen...", Spock started but McCoy jumped in.

"The Guardian of Forever. Great idea, Jim." He let his head fall into his palm. "Ohh, but just thinking of that

portal gives me a headache."

Q perked up, "The doughnut? You guys know about the doughnut?"

Kirk gave Q a hard stare.

"Hmmm. An elementary school science project gone awry," Q said smirking.

"Elementary school science project, in a pig's eye," Bones McCoy snorted. "This Q is either a super being or

certifiable."

"Probably close to both," Kirk replied. He, Bones, and Spock were walking through the promenade of Deep Space Nine. "Spock, what's your opinion about the meeting?"

The Vulcan raised his right eyebrow. "Captains Picard and Garrett and Commander Sisko seem to be competent Starfleet officers. However, to solve this situation will require a substantial leap

beyond competency. I cannot say from our meeting whether or not these officers are up to the task at hand."

"And we, of course, are," McCoy said dryly.

Kirk shrugged and was about to reply when a voice called from behind them.

"Admiral Kirk! Admiral Kirk! We meet at last..."

Kirk turned around to see a little man with a large head and very exaggerated ears. He was from a race Kirk didn't recognize. The little man jogging toward him was holding a drink. He offered it to the 'admiral.' "Saurian Brandy?," the man said.

Kirk didn't take the proffered beverage. "And you are?"

"Me? I am Quark, owner of the entertainment capital for this section of the galaxy, Quark's."

Kirk exchanged glances with his officers. "A bar?"

"Not simply a bar, Admiral. An oasis," he grabbed Kirk's sleeve. "Allow me to show you and your men."

Kirk stood his ground and yanked his arm back. "It's Captain Kirk, Mr. Quark, and I'd thank you to not manhandle me."

"Quark!"

Kirk recognized the new voice belonged to Deep Space Nine's Security Chief.

The shapeshifter marched up to the group and grabbed Quark's arm, lifting him half-way off his feet. "I am sorry if this Ferengi pest was annoying you, Captain Kirk."

'Ferengi?', Kirk thought. 'Another new race for another century, amazing!' He glanced from Quark to Odo and shook his head. "No problem, Odo. We'll just be on our way."

"Stop by any time," Quark called out as Odo dragged him off.

"Your opinion, Commander?"

Sisko looked into the penetrating eyes of Jean-Luc Picard. "My opinion, Sir, is we have no choice but to try to restore the Federation and the universe the way it was before."

Picard nodded. "I concur. I sincerely hope we have the means necessary." The two officers arrived at Sisko's quarters, when they heard laughter. They turned to see Q leaning against a bulkhead.

Picard scowled, "I thought you said your powers were nullified."

"They are, Mon Capitan. However, my powers of stealth are fully operational. You boys are doubting if you have the proper muster? You are wise to question. This is larger than all of us."

"Q..."

"Hold on, Picard. I always let you have your speeches, now return the courtesy." Q stood tall and straightened his tunic in a blatant parody of the Enterprise-D captain. "You know, we talk about resetting the universe to its ... proper ... flow. Maybe this is the proper flow. Who's to say? Maybe we've stumbled upon reality here. No Earth, no Federation, no Q continuum. Sobering thinking, wouldn't you say? Maybe there never was any where to boldly go." Q smiled at his listeners.

Sisko grimaced and turned to Picard, "You do have quarters arranged for him on the Enterprise."

Picard nodded.

"Thank goodness."

"Christopher, is it?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Oh, please. Rachel."

"Very well. Rachel."

Rachel Garrett reached out and shook hands with a legend, Captain Christopher Pike. But, she'd be damned if she'd act like a star-struck girl. She was a Captain of the Enterprise as well and would act with proper decorum. "Can we talk for a moment before returning to our ships?"

"Of course."

"Christopher..."

He smiled, "Chris."

"Chris," She smiled back. "I have to say that I've studied the history of my ship. Of the Enterprises past. They have got into their shares of crises. Your crew, Robert April's crew before you and Captain Kirk's..."

"What's on your mind, Rachel?"

"Well, I took over the reigns of Enterprise-C on Stardate... well I guess that doesn't ... five months ago. My crew is a bit untried. Certainly not as seasoned as the other Enterprises orbiting Deep Space Nine."

"You're nervous."

She gulped unconsciously and then cursed herself, "A bit."

"So am I."

"Sir?"

They strolled through the promenade and sat down at a table near the entrance of Quark's. A strange little man with ears came up to them. Obviously the bartender. Pike waved him off, and the man left with a look of disgust on his face.

"Rachel," He continued. "Being a starship captain doesn't mean you check your feelings at the dock. However, you must learn to use those feelings advantageously."

She nodded. "I had served as a starship captain for eight years before getting the Enterprise. But, he's not just any ship."

'He? A female captain and a male ship,' Pike thought. 'Number One would appreciate this woman.' "From what I can see, the Enterprise of any era is a force to be reckoned with. Rachel, I recently dealt with a personal struggle. My CMO told me to face it head on and lick it, or turn my back and whither away. Just transfer your strength to your crew. Show them that this is the Enterprise. That they are the Enterprise. A proud legacy. They'll follow you."

She nodded and smiled. "Thank you, Sir."

"Uh-uh. Chris."

Her smile broadened. "Chris."

"Now, I think its time we get back to our ships."

CHAPTER SIX

"Captain Picard on hailing frequencies."

"Thank you, Commander. On screen." Kirk stood and glanced at his command crew: Spock, Scotty, Chekov and Uhura; his friends. He was about to rely on them to help save civilization once again. But not Sulu, he and the crew of the U.S.S. Excelsior were victims of the time distortion along with everyone else they knew, the other friends and family that filled his crews' lives. All wiped away, waiting in entropy for the Starships Enterprise to act -- if they can.

The screen flickered and a now familiar face filled it. "Captain Picard. The Enterprise-A stands ready."

"Captain Kirk, 1701-D standing by. The probes from DS9 reconfirm our findings that Cardassian forces are at least three days away. We have that long."

Kirk nodded, "Captain Pike and Captain Garrett report their ships are fully prepared for battle."

"Commander Sisko also confirms his station's battle readiness."

"Then that leaves us with our job. You have the coordinates."

"Indeed, Captain Kirk."

"Then, follow our lead, Captain Picard. Kirk out." The screen flicked back to the space scape.

"Voice only signals from Captains Pike and Garrett and the station," Uhura said. "They wish good luck."

"Acknowledge them, please, Commander. Mr. McGarity, set course for Forever World. Mr. Chekov, ahead warp factor seven. Spock, keep those sensors peeled for any party crashers. As of now, the ship is on a standing yellow alert."

A chorus of 'aye, sirs' met Kirk as he sat back in the chair, mentally wished good luck to all.

"This is interesting," Q said as he paced the bridge of Enterprise-D.

"Sit down," Riker intoned. "Stop marching like a toy soldier."

Q shrugged and sat down Indian-style in the center of the bridge.

Troi couldn't help but smirk.

"I hesitate to ask this," Picard said, "but what is interesting, Q?"

"Going to the doughnut. It is feasible it survived the alterations. It may even be useful. Q would be besides himself."

"Q?," Data queried from his seat at comm.

"Q, Mr. Data. An irascible student in his day, worse than me. I idolized him for a bit, until I got tired of his immature pranks. Anyway, Q would be besides himself to know that his little pet school project may actually help save the whole continuum ... the whole universe. Of course, if it does, I'm not going to tell him. He would be more impossible to be around."

"The Q," Riker said, "sound as if they all come from the same spoiled crib."

"Watch yourself, Riker. That crib is the essence of the universe, the previous universe ... before this one."

"Q," Picard said. "If your friend built the Guardian, then perhaps your knowledge..."

"Forget it, Jean-Luc," Q frowned, "My friend, as you call him, was very tight-lipped. You always had to ask him direct questions if you wanted answers. And after our falling out, I never wanted

to get that personal. Nope, I'm afraid I'll have to figure it out with the rest of you people ... and Worf."

Worf snarled from the above security station.

Q laughed, "I love pissing him off."

"Bajor."

"What about it, Major?" Sisko and Kira were standing in Sisko's office overlooking Ops.

"The planet is right where it was before this mess, Commander. We might find some of the answers we seek down there."

Sisko nodded and pitched his baseball between his hands. "Perhaps. But that isn't the real reason for your request."

Kira sat down on the couch. "I have to know how the planet's survived in this timeframe."

"We sent probes..."

"Which show the cities decimated, I know. But, they also indicated life around the sanctuary outside the capital."

"Bajoran life forms."

Kira leaped up again. "Yes! Maybe survivors of the Vedek Assembly or the Kai herself..."

Sisko shrugged. "Or maybe not."

"Commander..."

"Major." Sisko put the baseball back in its holder on the desk and paused for a few moments. He then turned to his first officer. "I agree with your plan. There may be clues down there to Cardassian strength and I am curious also to what Bajor is like in this timeframe. If Picard and Kirk fail, we may be here for a long time. We will need allies and supplies. Let me discuss it with Pike and Garrett. Get their recommendations. In the meantime, have O'Brien prep the Rio Grande."

Kira smiled, "Thank you, Sir."

"All scanners show clear," Number One said.

Pike squinted at the viewscreen, as if trying to increase the magnification mentally of his fully-magnified main viewer. Space. But, nothing like he had experienced. Perhaps, out there nothing was familiar. The Cardassians were powerful, they after all helped take out a ship two generations beyond his own. But, he was sure that between himself, Enterprise-C and the station they would put up a fight if necessary, enough to hold off these Cardassians until reinforcements arrived, if they ever did.

"Report at the slightest peep, Number One."

"Aye, Sir."

"Incoming signal from the station, Captain," Spock exclaimed.

"Okay, Mr. Spock. Let's have it."

The screen wavered into the image of Commander Sisko. "Captain Pike."

"Commander."

"Sir, as you know, the Planet Bajor is in this sector. We have had extensive dealings with this planet in the real time line."

"Your first officer is Bajoran."

"Yes. Our probes indicate life on the planet near a major religious enclave. Major Kira believes that members of the religious community may be alive and in need of assistance. I suggest authorizing an away mission led by her to the planet's surface."

"If the others don't succeed we will need more than we currently have to survive."

"My thoughts exactly, Captain."

Pike nodded and crossed his arms. "So, what do you need from me?"

"It was my feeling that this should be a joint operation between staffs. I will provide the runabout and assign Major Kira and my science officer, Lieutenant Dax."

Pike frowned. Bajor was on the fringes of Federation space in the 24th Century. During his time, it was years away from being even charted. Therefore, theoretically, his crew should have no contact at all with Bajor or this sector. But, they were here and they weren't going to get the Federation back by playing it safe. "Very well, Captain. Lieutenant Spock and my Number One will join your team. They will transport over to the station shortly."

"We will be ready." The screen wavered back into an image of the final frontier.

Garrett looked at Lieutenants Harcourt Long and Melanie Jacoby. They were two of her finest security personnel and they volunteered to join the officers on the away mission to Bajor. "I have the utmost confidence in you two," She said smiling. "And I want a complete report when you return."

"Yes, Sir," Jacoby snapped. Garrett went to the academy with her father, Captain Jeremy Jacoby of the U.S.S. Republic. The Captain of the Enterprise-C marveled again at the strength of will of her new crew, knowing that parents and friends like Jacoby had ceased to exist. And yet, the crew of her ship stood tall and were ready to serve. A phrase ran through Garrett's head suddenly, 'This isn't a mission, it's personal.'

Long nodded to his Captain, "You'll have it, Sir."

"Very good." She turned to the ensign behind the console. "Energize."

"ETA, Data."

The android looked up at the main viewscreen and turned to Commander Riker. "18 hours, present speed."

'IMZADI!'

The force of the thought made Riker cringe. He turned to look at Deanna at the chair next to his. She was perfectly composed, looking straight ahead. Riker's brow creased in confusion "De..."

'IMZADI, MY MOTHER. I CAN'T FEEL HER PRESENCE ANYMORE. I THOUGHT I DID BUT IT WAS JUST AN ECHO FROM THE PAST. SHE'S NOT THERE, WILL. NOT ON BETAZED, NOWHERE.'

Riker thought back, 'I KNOW, IMZADI. NEITHER IS MY FATHER.'

'OH, I'M BEING SELFISH. I'M SORRY.'

'NOT AT ALL. IT'S CERTAINLY OVERWHELMING IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT. ESPECIALLY IF YOU THINK THAT WE'RE HERE BY Q'S GOOD GRACES ...OR SCREWUPS.'

'WE HAVE TO SUCCEED, WILL. WE MUST SUCCEED.'

'I KNOW.'

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise, Picard here." Jean-Luc sat behind his ready room desk with Kirk's image on the screen. Q lounged on the couch across the room.

"Your status, Captain?"

"All is well, so far. Our sensors show clear."

"As do ours. We should start making plans for the landing party. Obviously, myself and Captain Spock should beam down since we have experience with the Guardian."

"Agreed. I will join you, as will my science officer, Commander Data and Worf, head of Security..."

A loud sneeze came from the couch.

Kirk started, "I'm sorry, Captain. I didn't get that."

"He said 'And Q,' Captain Kirk," exclaimed Q who walked up to the desk and span the

viewer to face him.

"I most certainly did not," said Picard, spinning the viewer back.

"Gentlemen, Gentlemen," Kirk cried out, "Please, I'm getting dizzy."

"You have to admit, Jean-Luc," Q declared, "I am an essential on this away team. More so than you, in fact. I can't wait to see Riker's reaction when you announce you're beaming down."

"Enough, Q. Captain Kirk, Q says a friend..."

"...acquaintance..."

"...of his constructed the Guardian. If this is so, then perhaps he may be of some use on the away team."

Kirk nodded, "Very well. Your discretion, of course, Captain. Kirk out." The screen blinked off.

"I was afraid he was going to say that." Jean-Luc looked up at Q's smiling face.

"She's ready, Sir," O'Brien said from his station at Ops.

"Sisko to Rio Grande."

"Kira here. We're all checked in and eager to go, Commander."

"Very well, Major. Good luck."

"Thank you. Kira out."

"Everyone strapped in?," Kira called back to her crew.

Dax sat next to her at the Conn. Number One manned the science station, Spock manned the sensors. Lieutenants Jacoby and Long sat in the aft compartment going over the readiness of the 24th Century phasers.

They all signaled they were ready.

"Rio Grande to O'Brien. We're out of here."

"Good luck, Major."

A surge of power and Deep Space Nine fell out from under the Runabout.

"Next stop," Dax announced. "Bajor."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Entering Forever World's system."

"Thank you, Mr. Chekov. Uhura, raise the Enterprise."

"Yes, Sir. Captain Picard on screen."

The captain of the future appeared. "Yes, Captain Kirk."

"We're almost there. Are your people ready?"

"Indeed so, Captain. We've had to go through some computer security protocol to get to your reports concerning the Guardian. The Federation has them classified at the highest level even in our time."

Kirk nodded. "I'm not surprised. The dangers involved with using the Guardian are cataclysmic. But, in our present situation I don't see what we have to lose."

"Standard orbital approach, Sir?" said Chekov and, on the screen, Ro at the same time, both gazing quickly at the other and then turning to their respective commanders.

"Affirmative," Kirk said.

"Make it so," responded Picard.

Then they both said, "Good luck, Captain."

"See you below," Kirk added before the communication ceased.

The young lieutenant tossed and turned in his bed, on the verge of sleep. Days after being assigned to the Enterprise, hand picked by the captain, the ship and crew were flung into a situation in which he felt helpless. 'Damn,' he thought in a half-conscious haze. 'I can't let this ship or this captain down, not like when...!' Sleep captured him finally, cutting off all conscious thought.

The familiar beeping broke through his dreams. The lieutenant sat up quickly, drenched in sweat, unaware of how long he had been resting. The beep recurred. Someone was at the door to his quarters. A glance at his chrono indicated his shift was still ninety minutes away, but in their present situation... "Hold on a moment."

He jumped out of bed and wrapped a robe around himself. Stepping forward, the sensor automatically detected his presence and opened the door to reveal ... the captain.

"Sir?," he said fumbling at his half-open robe.

"At ease, Castillo." She said glancing at the blushing officer. "May I come in?"

"Of course," Richard Castillo replied, regaining his composure.

Captain Garrett walked past him and sat down on the nearest chair.

"Can I get you anything, Sir? Coffee, maybe or..."

"No time, Lieutenant."

Castillo blinked in surprise. "Of course, Sir."

"I realize you have logged very little time on a starship, but as you know, I chose you for your excellent academy credentials. You had more than your fair share of crises as a cadet. You know our current situation?"

"Yes."

"Then you are aware we are preparing to re-engage the Cardassians. You also know we have no backup support save a rickety space station and a starship that belongs in a museum. There is no guarantee that the other Enterprises will succeed in their mission. I need my best people in positions where they will be of the best use. Therefore, I am promoting you to the bridge as helmsman."

"Sir?," Castillo was genuinely taken aback. Garrett was leapfrogging him over a dozen officers.

"You would have made it there eventually, but I don't have time to put people through the ranks. The Cardassians and our other enemies aren't giving us such luxury. I'm just sorry your new duties will have to be performed in a situation such as this one. Your shift starts in thirty minutes, helmsman. See you on the bridge."

And she was gone, leaving a flabbergasted man in her wake.

"We should land near the arboretums adjacent to the Vedek Assembly," Kira said.

"If they exist," Dax countered.

Kira shot her a vexing glance.

Number One, from the original Enterprise, stood and walked toward the front of the runabout where the two DS9 officers were seated. "It is logical to assume the conditions of the planet in which you are familiar will vary with those on the planet below, Major Kira."

"I understand, Sir," Kira responded in a fluster. "But we have no choice but to assume we can accomplish our mission."

"I agree," Number One concurred.

Spock monitored the science console. "Sensors indicate Bajoran life forms in the area

designated by the Major."

"Bingo," Kira cried out, clenching her fist. "Everyone prepare for descent."

The sounds brought back the agony. Kirk watched as the landscape that is forever burned in his memory materialized around him. Kirk turned to see Spock standing next to him. Moments later, a nearly familiar sound filled Kirk's ears as the Enterprise-D's transporter deposited Picard, Riker, the android Data, the Klingon security officer Worf (Kirk caught himself tense and quickly regained composure), and Q on the planet's surface.

"Well, well. Could use a good cleaning service," Q said as he bounded toward the Guardian. "Come along everyone."

Worf grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Caution is warranted, Q," Picard said.

"Get your Neanderthal off me, Jean-Luc."

"Worf is mainly here to keep you in check, Q. I commend him for his quickness."

Kirk and Spock stepped toward the away team. "Captain," Kirk said, "I know this is cliché, but time is of the essence."

Q groaned.

"Right then, Captain," Picard said. "Shall we?" he gestured toward the Guardian.

"That's where I was going," Q gasped. "I see. One of the headliners has to move the plot along. Well, let me just say... Owwww, Microbrain, that hurts. Stop squeezing so hard."

Until now, the Entity monitored the last vestiges of the two species with curiosity and humor. It enjoyed watching them flop around the galaxy like fish out of water. But, it started feeling something more, restlessness and annoyance. It was almost time to move on, which meant squashing the last of the bugs...

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Ask it the right question, or else. I didn't nick-name it the Blabberer of Forever for nothing,"

Q smiled, and shot Worf, who still held him, a menacing glance, "I hope you're enjoying that arm while you can, Klingon."

Looming before the six men was one of the most ominous encounters in Federation history, the Guardian of Forever. Kirk swallowed unconsciously. "Let's get on with it."

Spock nodded, "Guardian, this is Spock from the Federation Starship Enterprise. Do you remember us?"

"I RECOGNIZE THREE WHO STAND BEFORE ME. TWO FROM TRAVEL AND ONE FROM THE BEGINNING." The voice seemed to emanate from everywhere at once.

The officers turned and looked at Q.

Q smiled and pulled himself free from Worf. "See, see. Didn't believe me, did you? Well, from now on I certainly expect..."

"Guardian," Kirk said cutting Q off. "Can you show us the history of my home planet?"

"BEHOLD"

The center of the vortex filled with mist and phantom images appeared. Images of a molten world, suddenly cooling. Reds gave way to blues. The smallest of creatures became the largest.

Q yawned, "Seen it, been there."

"Quiet, Q." Picard said, his eyes however remained transfixed to the center of the time vortex.

"Analysis, Data," Riker said in a whisper.

"We are seeing the birth of Earth. Moving through the ages of history. Jurassic, Cretaceous, Triassic ages."

"Dinosaurs," Riker said.

"Correct, Sir. We are now moving beyond into the Paleolithic era. Old Earth calendar, approximately 500,000

B.C."

"Amazing," Picard said.

"Spock," Kirk said looking at his science officer, concentrating on his tricorder. "Does this jive with your

original Guardian recordings?"

"Yes, Sir."

Picard turned to his science officer, "Data, does the Guardian's images match actual Earth history."

"Yes, Sir."

Kirk and Picard glanced at each other and then returned their gazes to the Guardian. Images of cave drawings and early humanity.

"Neolithic Age," Data said. "7,000 B.C."

Suddenly a flash appeared and filled the center of the vortex, forcing everyone except Data and Q to shield their

eyes. When they were able to look again, the Guardian was inactive.

"THE HISTORY OF YOUR WORLD HAS PLAYED ITS COURSE."

"What?," Riker and Kirk said together.

"Guardian," Spock said taking a step forward. "This is not correct. You say you remember us from traveling before. We traveled in an era much later than the one just concluded."

"HISTORY HAS BEEN RESTORED. THE PLANET EARTH'S HISTORY IS AS IT WAS BEFORE."

Kirk smiled for a moment until he realized that the situation was not good. The Guardian actually thought that Earth history was supposed to end with the Neolithic Age. Somehow, the entity that had destroyed humanity had also affected the Guardian. "Suggestions," he said turning to the others.

"We must try to restore history," Picard replied. "And this seems to be our best option."

"The Guardian appears to have been altered along with the universe around us," Spock said. "It doesn't seem to have a recollection of the previous history. However, whatever occurred apparently did so in Earth's Neolithic Period."

"We have to stop it," Riker said.

"Oh, right," Q replied. "Let's just go get our phasers, tricorders, and universal translators and get the entity that took out the continuum and destroyed humanity. Good idea, Riker."

"I don't see another choice," Picard said.

"Neither do I," Kirk said.

"There is the question of where to travel," Data said. "Assuming the entity was on Earth during the Neolithic Period, how do we get close enough to encounter it?"

Spock nodded. "We have to assume that even in its altered state, time still retains the equivalency of a river, with eddies and backwash. The same flow that pulled the entity from our time to

Neolithic Earth will bring us there as well."

"Everyone ready," Kirk asked.

"No," Q said. Worf squeezed his shoulder. "Uhh ... Yes."

"Stand by." Kirk turned back to the vortex. "Guardian, Can you show us Earth's history again?"

"BEHOLD."

"They're definitely coming."

"Very well, Mr. O'Brien," Sisko said from behind his desk in the office above Ops. "How long do we have?"

"Twenty hours until the Cardies bring their weapons to bear."

"Send a signal recalling the Rio Grande, and get me Captains Pike and Garrett."

"Yes, Sir."

O'Brien left the office. And suddenly an image filled Sisko's mind: Jennifer's lifeless body beneath the rubble of their quarters on the U.S.S. Saratoga, minutes before the Borg destroyed her and the majority of Starfleet at Wolf 359. A hopeless battle.

Captain Pike sat in his command chair looking at the split screen images of Benjamin Sisko and Rachel Garrett. "I disagree with recalling the runabout. We have twenty hours. Let's use them."

"I will not have my crew returning in the middle of a firefight with the Cardassians," Sisko said.

"Our crews, Commander. I have my Number One and science officer down there as well. They just landed on Bajor. We need to give them time to accomplish something."

Garrett was nodding. "If they can do any good we need to give them the chance."

Sisko's face hardened. "Very well, but I want them back in our protection before the attack force arrives."

Pike smirked, "I don't think anyone would disagree with that." 'Even though a twenty-fourth century runabout may be nearly as well equipped as my Enterprise in this battle,' he thought.

"The Vedek Assembly complex is due north, 1000 meters." Kira said glancing at her tricorder.

The crew disembarked from the Rio Grande onto the lush ground. Number One analyzed her

tricorder readings, "Major, didn't you say the assembly consisted of 112 members?"

"Yes."

"The tricorder's life indicators show..."

"Yes, I know, I know!" Kira called out.

"...considerably less," she finished.

Dax frowned and looked at her friend, then called back to the group. "Red alert everyone. Let's stay on our toes."

Spock raised an eyebrow and fell into step behind his commanding officer. Everyone had their phasers drawn. The procession headed north into the unknown.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends...", Kirk said as the team leaped through the Guardian.

The winds changed, the ground changed, the sound changed.

Out of nowhere, "Henry V. Act Three, Scene One," an android and a Vulcan said in unison on Earth in 7,000 B.C.

"Is everyone okay?," Picard asked.

"Please, Daddy? Can we do it again?," Q replied.

"Tricorder," Kirk said.

Data and Spock didn't need to be told. They were busy with their devices.

"At least we skipped that period where everything smells like sulfur, Whew." Q said, crinkling his nose.

Spock and Data conferred momentarily and then Spock turned to the group. "All readings seem to indicate we are in the Neolithic Era of Earth History."

"Something's coming," Q said a bit nervously. "Phasers ready."

Picard shot a look at him. Then glanced at the science officers. "Anything?"

Data looked at his tricorder. "An animal lifeform, I believe it's..."

"A dog," Kirk said as a large dog, very similar to a gray wolf, came into view, tail wagging. As it approached the party it lowered its head. "Seems friendly enough."

"At this time in history," Data said. "Humans began domesticating animals, including canines."

Picard moved toward it when it suddenly barked and turned back the way it came, turning its head toward the group and then started walking quickly away from them.

"Come on," Picard said and followed after the animal, with the others close behind.

Q started to complain, but shut up when Worf growled at him.

"Too bad they never learned how to domesticate on the Klingon Homeworld."

The once-beautiful Vedek Gardens were overgrown with weeds. It pained Kira to see it like this. She was nearly tempted to get down on her hands and knees and begin to clean the place up. But, there was more important things to accomplish.

"Life forms are emanating from the building beyond," Spock said pointing to the monastery beyond the growth.

Kira swallowed. "Let's go." She moved forward accompanied by the security officers and Spock.

Number One touched Dax's arm. "Lieutenant, a word please."

"Of course."

"Major Kira obviously has close personal feelings toward this place. Do you think she can handle herself if events continue to take a bad turn?"

"Commander," Dax replied. "Kira Nerys has been fighting for her life and the lives of her fellow Bajorans since she was 12 years old. Granted she is devoutly religious and therefore has strong ties to the Vedek Assembly and what they stand for, but have no doubts. She will do her job to restore Bajor, the Federation, and the universe, if possible."

"If she incurs such loyalty in one who has lived as long and seen as much as you have, Dax, I will trust her, too." Number One pointed toward the building. "Shall we go?"

The monastery was in shambles. Stained glass windows were smashed. Rubble was strewn everywhere. Kira trudged through it, face steeled ahead, all business. "Life forms?"

"The next room," Spock replied.

Just then, a painful groan emerged from the indicated doorway. Kira's heart clenched and she ran into the room.

A man knelt on the floor, head down, facing a charred painting of one of the Tears of the Prophets. He mumbled to himself.

Kira walked up next to him, unwilling to interfere with his prayers. Then, the man looked up at her. Kira's heart

fell further. "Vedek ... Vedek Bareil?"

A shadow of confusion crossed the man's face. His voice was weak and cracked, "Do I know you, child?"

'May the Prophets help me,' she thought. "My name is Kira Nerys. I am ... a freedom fighter. These people are my associates."

The man who she respected, who meant so much to her religiously and otherwise looked up at her hauntingly. Fear touched his eyes, "Run, Kira. All of you. Save yourselves before he returns. Hurry."

The dog lead the team to a young woman, trapped beneath a fallen tree. The animal went to her, licking her hand. She stirred and reached weakly for the dog's snout. Then, she caught glimpse of the six strangers and snarled, terror in her eyes.

"We must get that tree off her," Riker said.

Data and Spock were there immediately, lifting the broken trunk off the frightened primitive, ignoring the crying and snarling.

"You really couldn't communicate too well at this point in history," Q said to no one in particular. "Thank goodness you had the animals to help."

The women, once freed struggled to her feet and started limping away as quickly as possible, looking back a few times with fear and horror in her eyes. The dog followed.

"What could have frightened her so much?," Riker said.

"Ever look at Worf?," Q asked.

Riker nodded.

Picard smirked, "Yes, of course. How soon we forget?"

Q turned suddenly, a look crossed his face like none Picard had seen before, "Or maybe not..."

Kira reached down and took Bareil by the arm. "You are coming with us."

The Vedek struggled against her grasp, "No, please, child. I am sworn to protect the Monastery."

Confusion crossed the Major's face, "Who did this?"

Suddenly her communicator beeped, "Kira here."

"Major, this is Lieutenant Long. I think you and the others better get out..." Static and silence.

"Too late," Bareil cried.

Kira, Dax, Spock and Number One ran to the security officers' location.

They were greeted by a bearded, gray-haired, elderly humanoid in flowing, black robes. His black eyes were wild with mania.

They were greeted by hideous laughter.

Q's voice shook. "Who are you?"

The others turned to see a bearded, gray-haired, elderly humanoid in flowing, black robes. His black eyes were wild with mania.

The others heard his hideous laughter.

Kirk and Spock stepped forward.

The Captain's mouth went dry. "Ayelborne."

CHAPTER NINE

"YOU KNOW ME, PUNY ONE. HOW INTERESTING. THE ENTERTAINMENT VALUE GOES UP."

The voice was deafening. Kirk took two steps closer to the entity. "Ayelborne, what have you done?"

"EVERYTHING I HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO DO. EVERYTHING I COULD NEVER DO UNTIL NOW." The entity smiled widely. "YOU SURPRISED ME. THAT GRANTS YOU AND THE OTHERS A REPRIEVE, JAMES T. KIRK. USE IT WISELY."

Suddenly everything changed, and Kirk and the others stood before the Guardian.

Kira and crew were aboard the Rio Grande in deep space. "What happened?"

"Unknown," Number One and Dax said in unison.

Everyone was aboard including the security team, although the two men had no memory of the strange humanoid.

"What is our course?," Spock asked.

Dax studied her instruments, "Headed back to the station. Fascinating."

Kira jumped out of her seat. "We've got to reverse course and save the Vedek Assembly from that madman."

"Incoming signal from Deep Space Nine," Spock said suddenly. Moments later he looked gravely at the others. "Five Cardassian Warships have entered the system."

Data regained his composure first. "Guardian of Forever, can you show us the Planet Earth's history?"

"BEHOLD"

Once again the early eras of Earth played before the command crews of two Starships Enterprise and Q. The images reached the Neolithic age, the flash. Darkness.

"Nothing has changed," Picard said.

"Damn," Kirk muttered.

"Who is Ayelborne?," Riker asked.

Kirk nodded to Spock, who spoke up, "He is the leader of the Council of Elders on the Planet Organia."

"Organia?," Worf asked. "As in The Organian Peace Treaty?"

"Correct," Kirk said. "Ayelborne is not humanoid at all, obviously. The Organians are extremely powerful non-corporal entities."

"Sworn to the ethics of non-violence, I thought," Picard said.

"So did I," Kirk replied. "Something is very wrong."

"Imagine the audacity," Q said. "Immobilizing the continuum ... for entertainment."

Riker rolled his eyes, "Yeah, imagine anyone as horrible as that."

"Well, we seem to have a reprieve of some sort," Picard said.

"I suggest returning to Organia," Spock said. "If Ayelborne has gone mad, we must enlist the other members of the council to assist us in containing him."

"Agreed, Spock," Kirk answered. "We'll head there. Captain Picard..."

"There is the matter of the Cardassians returning to attack Deep Space Nine and the other Enterprises," Picard said. "We need to dispatch assistance."

Data stepped forward. "If the mission to Organia is not successful, it will be only a matter of time before the Cardassians overwhelm us. However, Ayelborne would expect an attempt to travel to Organia. If his fellows are a threat to him, he will try to stop us from gaining their assistance."

Spock looked at him, "So, logically, the more powerful starship should head to Organia."

Kirk shook his head, "I don't think so, Spock. We need to take care of Organia personally. Captain Picard is more experienced with combating the Cardassians."

"Switch ships."

They all turned to Q.

"Well, isn't it obvious, people? La Forge could spruce up Kirk's Enterprise, hand it to Jean-Luc, and off they go to fight side by side with Sisko and clowns. Meanwhile, Kirk and Spock could have a reunion with their superbuddies on the supership, such as it is. But one thing is certain. I am going to Organia to take on this Ayelborne. I've got a vendetta to carry out."

Everyone stood silent for a moment.

"Logical," Spock said.

"Indeed," Data replied.

"I dinna know if I can approve, Sir."

James Kirk, back aboard the Enterprise, 1701-A, was in the briefing room with his staff: Spock, McCoy, Uhura, Chekov and Scott. The Captain looked at his trusted Chief Engineer. He knew Scotty would not be keen to the idea of a new commander handling what Kirk knew the Scotsman considered as his ship.

"Don't worry, Scotty. You'll be staying aboard to insure she's treated right."

Scott frowned, "It's just as well, Sir. But I canna approve of this La Forge poking around m' engine room, either."

Kirk nodded, "I understand your concerns and I'd be lying if I said I didn't share some of them. However, the Cardassian ships are from an advanced time. We need to give the Enterprise a fighting chance against them."

Scott nodded.

Kirk looked around the table. "I know all of us share concerns about the mission. But be aware that Jean-Luc Picard and William Riker are extremely experienced Starfleet officers. I expect all of you to follow their commands to the letter, just as you would if I were giving them. I know you will. Any comments?"

McCoy snorted, "Yeah, why not switch doctors, too?"

"Bones, you are the most familiar with sickbay and with the medical records of this crew. You are essential for this ship, just as Beverly Crusher needs to remain with the other Enterprise."

"I don't like sending you off like this."

The others agreed.

Kirk stood, "I am appreciative of your concern. I know we've been through a great deal together over the years, but we must put our personal concerns behind us. It is paramount that we restore history and this course is the best to accomplish that goal ... besides I will be more comfortable knowing my trusted officers and friends will remain onboard to look after my ship."

Silence fell.

Then Uhura stood and stepped toward Kirk, "Good luck, Captain, Mr. Spock."

Kirk smiled, "To all of us."

"I cannot sanction this course, Captain."

"Mr. Worf, I know you are doing your duty in voicing your concerns, however, we must carry forth." Picard looked over his crew in the observation lounge behind the bridge.

"We cannot be sure if the other members of the Organian High Council have been affected like Ayelborne," Data said.

"You must ascertain that, Data," Riker said.

"All of you," Picard said. "I know all of you are somewhat familiar with the service records of James T. Kirk and Spock. You, therefore, know that the Enterprise will be in the best hands."

"Almost," Crusher uttered.

"Good luck, Captain, Commander," Troi said.

Picard was about to respond but was cut off by loud snoring from Q in the corner of the room.

"Let's get this over with," Riker said.

"The updated phase inducers will give you a burst of speed when you need it."

Scotty poured through the spec sheets La Forge gave him an hour ago. "Aye, if it doesn't sheer the ship in half."

La Forge looked at the older man, "These Enterprise-Class ships were able to take a lot more

than the designers originally intended."

"Ach, designers. They never logged a single star hour and they think they know what needs to go into a starship."

La Forge smiled, he had run into a few designers in his day and couldn't agree with Scott more. "The new refitted parts from my Enterprise will give your weapons an added kick and firm up the shields."

Scotty looked at the blind man intensely, "Will it be enough?"

La Forge shrugged, "It's the best we can do. It would help the odds against the Cardassians I'm familiar with, but the ones we just faced showed abilities beyond what I'm used to."

Scotty sighed, "It pains me to say this, but it will take more than the machinery. I'd feel more comfortable if James Kirk wouldna leave the center seat. No offense."

La Forge felt a flush of anger but quickly pushed it aside. After all, this man had served with Kirk for years, was used to his style of command, just as La Forge was used to Jean-Luc Picard. "I'm sure we'll all be okay."

Scotty smiled, "We've got good people around us. The universe canna be in better hands."

"Amen."

James Kirk entered his ready room. The room was nearly as large as his quarters on the original ship, the one now orbiting Deep Space Nine. Kirk looked at the book encased on the desk near the entrance. Shakespeare. Henry V. Appropriate in any era.

Then, the captain walked over to Livingston, swimming carefree in his aquarium. Carefree, Kirk couldn't remember when he felt that way, did he ever feel that way?

A twinkling chorus of bells filled the air. After a moment, Kirk recognized the 24th Century door chime. "Come."

The door swooshed open, "I am used to free access here you understand, Kirk," Q said as he marched in and flopped onto the couch.

"Get used to disappointment."

"Now, now. If we're going to work together you should be more cordial."

"Cordial." Kirk walked toward the entity, stopped and placed his hands on his hips in annoyance. "I didn't know that word was in your vocabulary."

"I have a large vocabulary, Kirk. Many things about me are large, and you're going to need all of them to take out this Ayelborne fellow."

"Q, I have managed quite well through the years without the help of entities like you. In fact,

I've found the ones I've encountered to be pains in the neck."

"Picard used to think the way you do, but now you see that we're fast friends."

Kirk raised his eyebrows and was about to say something when Spock's voice filled the room, "Captain Kirk, report to the bridge, please."

"On my way. Q stay here."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

Q laughed and got up to leave, when suddenly Kirk pushed him back down, "Let's get this straight here and now, you may have charmed Jean-Luc Picard, but on this ship -- now my ship -- I expect my orders followed. And I will not have you in my way. Am I clear?"

Q's eyes darkened. "You are tempting fate, James T. Ki--"

"Save it, Q. I've got work to do." And he was gone, leaving Q to stew.

"Mr. Chekov, ship's status?" Picard sat in the center seat, and immediately noticed how uncomfortable it was. He glanced at Riker, who was standing and fidgeting. There was no place for a first officer to recline on this ship. Picard repressed a grin.

"All systems on line," the navigator said.

"Very good," Picard responded. "Mr. Uhura, please signal Captain Kirk."

"Enterprise-D on the screen," she said.

Riker stared at the cavernous bridge of his Enterprise, noting with envy how much space and elegance the command center on the screen had. He felt he could reach every point on the bridge of Enterprise-A if he stretched out far enough. This somehow annoyed him.

"We are ready to depart for the station, Captain Kirk," Picard said.

"And we for Organia, Captain Picard. Good luck."

"And to you," The screen filled with stars. "Mr. Chekov, engage."

"Aye, sir."

On the massive screen in front of the bridge, Kirk watched Enterprise-A entered warp space. He stood for a few moments, as Spock walked up to him, "Captain?"

"I just have this feeling, Spock..."

The Vulcan lifted his left eyebrow, "Feeling?"

Kirk nodded toward the empty starfield, "Like I'm never going to see her again." Kirk turned and stepped back toward the command center. "Let's get the hell out of here. Mr. Data, take us to Organia. Warp factor 5."

The android tapped his console and the Enterprise-D jumped into action.

CHAPTER TEN

"We're as ready as we'll ever be," O'Brien reported to his commander.

Sisko nodded, "Time?"

"Twenty minutes till they bring their weapons to bear."

"The Rio Grande?"

The Chief Engineer checked his console. "Docking now."

Sisko nodded, relieved, "Have Major Kira and Lt. Dax report to Ops immediately. And have the others transported to their respective Enterprises. They are going to be needed there."

Moments later, Sisko's First Officer and Science Officer arrived. Their commander looked up at them intently. "What was it Major? What was down there?"

Kira looked flabbergasted, "A wildman, Sir. His eyes were intense. I haven't seen anything like that since the Cardassians occupied Bajor and saw their marksmen shooting our children in cold blood..."

Sisko's brow ruffled in concern, "Dax, your report?"

The Trill shrugged, "Definitely humanoid in appearance, but my tricorder registered nothing."

O'Brien's eyes brightened. "A Q?"

Dax shrugged again, "The possibility exists."

Sisko shook his head, "It doesn't match his style. I think we're dealing with a creature who will do anything it pleases including annihilating whole cultures. That isn't Q."

Odo spoke up, "Might I remind everyone that why we're speculating so freely, the Cardassians are getting closer."

Jean-Luc Picard span his chair around 360 degrees. These people on this bridge defined

Starfleet in their time. Their missions, their exploits were legendary. Through his readings and studying, Picard came to know these people and their accomplishments from a perspective even they would never understand. 'I know you better than you know yourselves,' he found himself thinking.

So why did Jean-Luc feel so uncomfortable around them. Was it because he suddenly felt as if he was flying into battle with a boatload of children? Ridiculous, but the Captain of the Enterprise couldn't shake the irrationality. 'I'm the fish out of water here,' he thought.

"Deep Space Nine rendezvous in six minutes," Lt. McGarity reported from the helm.

Picard nodded.

"Sensor report," Riker called.

Chekov hovered over the rear science console. "Sensors indicate five Cardassian warships bearing down on the

station and the Enterprises. Their weapons are discharging."

"Red alert," Riker intoned.

"Full power to the shields and weapons," Picard ordered. He met Riker's eyes briefly. They were about to take the most renowned ship and crew in Starfleet into an impossible battle.

Even if they were victorious, they had no home.

"Time till Organia," Kirk asked.

"Thirty minutes," Data and Spock replied simultaneously.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Kirk said.

Suddenly, an incoming communication announced itself on Mr. Worf's rear panel. "Captain Kirk," the Klingon said as he tapped some buttons on his board. He growled, "It is our opponent."

Kirk slowly stood. "On screen."

Q bounded out of the ready room as a transparent figure coalesced against the starfield on the main viewer.

Kirk's memory swam with images of Apollo and 'Abraham Lincoln.' Ayelborne's presentation was similar to theirs many years ago.

"This is Kirk."

"DO NOT PROCEED, CAPTAIN."

Q bounded toward the screen. "Getting scared, Organian? Are we touching nerves?"

"Q!!" Kirk grabbed the entity's arm. "Worf, restrain him."

"Aye, Sir," Worf replied with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

"Don't you dare, Kirk, Klingon," Q barked. "This is personal." Then Q spun back toward the screen, venomously thundering at the screen. "Frightened of humans and machines. Why not finish your cowardly act, Ayelborne? Wipe us out of existence, too."

Kirk stepped forward, leaving Q be. "Or raise the entertainment factor more, Ayelborne. If it's a game you want, a challenge, a battle, we'll give you one. But you have to play more fairly..."

"...To get the full value, to relish in the conquest," Q continued.

Kirk stepped past Q, almost nose to the viewer. "Up till now it's been so easy, Ayelborne, wave a magic wand and wipe away the challenge before it's begun. No guts, no glory, no victory, Ayelborne. Championship. You have no idea what it is, because you've raided the game. But you have a reprieve. A fair fight and all the rewards are yours, but you have to let us get our sword, before we enter the arena. And then it's a fight you will never forget. I promise."

The visage on the screen hardened and then exploded in a phantasm of lights and sounds, buffeting the Enterprise and throwing Kirk back...

... Into Q's arms. He smiled as the captain straightened. "The ultimate battle is about to begin, my ally. And the only thing we have to lose ... is everything, everywhere."

Kirk glared at Q and then turned toward Spock and Picard's crew. "At least we get a chance to fight. Continue on course for Organia, best possible speed, Mr. Data."

Q stepped toward the screen as the ship jumped into warp, "To boldly go where all men have died before..."

"Captain's Personal Log. No Stardate. On final approach to Organia, with a starship and crew a generation beyond me. Never-the-less, Spock and I have been here before. The Organians insisted on a society without violence and war. Their peace treaty forged the way for what I now know to be an alliance between the Klingons and the Federation. In fact, it was Ayelborne of Organia who told Captain Kor and me that such a forging of powers was inevitable. Now, it seems Ayelborne has destroyed humanity. How can such a difference of personality occur? And if he is such an unstable entity, how am I going to restore humanity, next generation allies or not?"

"It is simply not there," Data said from the conn.

"Recalibrate the sensors," Kirk ordered as he looked over the android's shoulder. "Spock, are these the correct coordinates?"

Captain Spock, at Science station one at the rear of the bridge, keyed the padd. The screens

in front of him looked like a kaleidoscope. "Affirmative, Sir. Sensors indicate we are where we're supposed to be."

Kirk grimaced. "Explanations," he said to no one in particular.

Worf scowled, "The planet could have been destroyed, like Earth."

"Unlikely," Data replied.

"Indeed," Spock concurred. "A planet's destruction would leave some residual indications, even if it occurred millennia ago. There is no such evidence."

'That's a relief,' Kirk thought. If the Organian's were destroyed...

"There is another explanation," Q said, from his position next to Spock. He walked toward Kirk, "The bad guy could have stuffed it."

Kirk turned, annoyed, "Come again?"

Q laughed, "You humans. Stuffed it away. It's cut off from the rest of the universe, while the inhabitants don't know anything's wrong. It's like putting the whole planet inside one of those holodecks."

Everyone on the bridge stared at the entity.

Q spun around slowly so he could see everyone as he spoke, "The Q would do it all the time. If there was some cosmic event - actual or helped along- and we didn't want primitives to know about it, we would stuff them for a while until we were finished. They would have no clue there were fireworks going on in their galactic back yard because everything looked normal from the planet's surface, or orbit, or star system, whatever was necessary. We even practiced on starships at times." His smile grew very broad on that last remark.

"Fascinating," Spock said.

"Annoying is more like it," Kirk replied.

"How often would you practice this stuffing, Q?," Troi asked.

He shrugged, "Me? Hardly ever. If I take the time to set off fireworks, Counselor, I want everyone to enjoy the show."

Kirk returned his gaze to the viewscreen, stepping forward, "Is there any way to tell if Ayelborne has ... stuffed ... Organia?"

Q put his palms up in front of him, "Not in my condition, and certainly not with this equipment."

Kirk spun and faced the entity, "That's not the right answer, Q. I want you, Spock, and Data working on a way, immediately."

Spock and Data were about to respond when Q put up his hand. "If it's that important -- which I guess it is -- I can give you a solution, but you're not gonna like it."

Kirk put his hands on his sides, "And that is?"

"Plow right into the center of the planet. If it's there, if it's not there, we'll know pretty quick."

"We'll break into the pocket?"

Q laughed, "Oh, yes."

Worf's scowl deepened, "... and crash into the planet."

"A side effect," Q snipped.

Kirk turned toward the front again. "We don't have a lot of time to second guess. We need to know now. Mr. Data, set a course for coordinates: planet center. One quarter impulse power."

"Faster," Q said.

"Faster?," Troi gasped.

"If we don't want to bounce off the pocket," Q replied.

Kirk stared hard for a moment, "Full impulse power." He ordered, glancing at Q.

Q nodded, "That ought to do it."

And Enterprise-D leapt toward it's destiny.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Hit, port nacelle. Shields holding, but weakening," Ckekov reported.

"Shield strength?," Riker asked.

"Seventy-six percent of normal."

Picard grimaced. They had arrived at Deep Space Nine almost simultaneously to the Cardassian attack force. Picard had no time to confer with the other Enterprise Captains or Sisko before the enemy engaged his ship in battle.

Garrett had engaged two warships and was taking a beating. However, she was dishing it out as well. Both Cardassian vessels had substantial damage. The battle continued.

Two warships were engaging the station. Pike was keeping within range of DS9, apparently trying to make use

of the station's mass and shield formation to enhance his own defenses. The original Enterprise had a nasty disrupter scar blazed across her main hull. The image shook Picard, for some reason. Like a classic woman who had been raped.

As for his Enterprise-A, a fifth Cardassian ship had broken away from the station to engage them on arrival. The warship had just taken the first shot.

Picard stood and walked toward the conn. "Lock all weapons on target. Full spread on my mark."

The Cardassian was coming around, bringing her forward disrupters to bear.

"Fire."

Chekov's fingers flew across his board. Streams and balls of energy leapt from the Enterprise's weapon emitters, striking the warship. Picard's jaw dropped when the ship imploded.

"We got him, Sir." Chekov exclaimed, fists clenched in victory.

Picard walked backwards to his chair, eyes never leaving the collapsing remnants of the Cardassian.

Riker grabbed him on the shoulder, a look of shock on his face as well, "I guess the old folktale about Kirk and

his Enterprise are true."

Picard nodded, "Fortunately for us, Number One. Commander Uhura, raise Captains Pike and Garret and Commander Sisko. Inform them of our arrival. Commander Chekov, let's give Enterprise-C a hand, shall we."

"Setting a course, Sir."

"Time to impact."

Worf didn't hesitate, "Fifteen seconds."

Kirk gripped his seat arms. "Mr. Data, prepare to swing us into orbit as soon as we get the first glimmer of Organia's bearings."

"Aye, Sir."

Kirk smiled, his experience with androids had not been pleasant, but he was glad to have one at the helm today. With his computer speed, Data was their best bet for not impacting on the surface.

Suddenly the ship buffeted hard, "Report," Kirk called.

"The pocket's outer sleeve, as it were," Q said.

"Status."

Spock scanned, now thoroughly familiar with Enterprise-D's science stations. "Still no sign ...
Organia, we have just entered the outer atmosphere."

The buffeting drastically increased. The automatic red alert activated.

"Mr. Data," Kirk yelled over the noise.

"Orbital heading laid in, Sir. Adjusting course now. I have activated reverse thrusters and
impulse engines to slow our decent."

"Outer hull temperature up 39 degrees," La Forge reported from engineering.

"Structural integrity field weakening," Spock said.

"Our course is leveling," Data said. The shaking lessened, "We are in atmospheric orbit, upper
stratosphere."

"Spock," Kirk turned to his first officer.

The Vulcan was consulting his computers, "We can maintain this orbit for approximately five
hours before the strain on the shields and SIF will pose a threat to the ship."

"Can we get any higher?"

"Not without risking entering the pocket."

Kirk shrugged, "Very well, we've got a job to do and very little time to accomplish it. Spock,
do you have the coordinates to the Organian Council Rooms."

"Affirmative."

"Mr. Spock, contact Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi. Have them meet us in the transporter
room. You, Mr. Worf,

and Q with me. Mr. Data, you have the conn."

"Aye, Sir," Data said.

Q sidled up to Kirk, "Good choice, Mon new capitan."

Kirk shot Q a dagger-like glance, "Don't make me regret it."

Q shot Kirk a 'What, little old me?' look and they all entered the turbolift, to Organia.

"We'reingood ...fight," The crackle from the ship-to-ship pierced Enterprise-A's bridge.
Garrett was an excellent tactician, it seemed. Of the two warships engaging her, one was apparently
crippled, while the other continued to blast away at the near-crippled Enterprise-C.

Picard paced the bridge, "Lock phasers on the active Cardassian. Commander Uhura, signal Captain Garrett. Tell her she's got pleasant company now."

Uhura smiled and turned to her station.

Riker looked over Chekov's shoulder, "Cardassian in range... now."

"Confirmed," Chekov responded, "Phasers locked."

"Fire," Picard ordered.

Again, beams of death leapt from the starship, chopping into the Cardassian.

The Castle rose from the mist, just as Kirk remembered. The coordinates were the same as years ago. Before, people wearing robes and sandals walking the dirt street they materialized on, oblivious to the technology witnessed. The elderly man approached the party, "Welcome..." Now.

Kirk stared at the old man.

"You!," Q barked as he lunged.

The heat of explosion burned the back of Picard's neck. The Cardassian had successfully returned fire. The lieutenant at the burning science station was down. Riker leapt to assist. "Medical emergency, to the bridge," Number One declared.

"On my way," McCoy replied.

"Status," Picard asked.

Chekov's hands flew. "Shields penetrated, main connection struts. Latching integrity system damaged."

Picard thought back to his academy days. Enterprise-A had the ability for saucer separation, although he couldn't remember when -- if -- it was ever used. But, at least it presented another option. "Engineering, firm up the shields. Priority one."

"I'm doin' all I c'n for ya'. She's packin' quite a wallop," Scott responded over the intercom.

"Shields firming," Chekov reported as McCoy entered the bridge.

"It's time to hit back," Riker said as he stepped down to give the doctor space to work.

"I concur," Picard replied as he stepped toward the main viewer again. The Cardassian swung back into their crosshairs. "Fire!"

Worf had Q by the throat. "Do not struggle!," The Klingon growled, "If you know what's good for you."

Ayelborne ignored this, turning to face Kirk and Spock. "Your presence is a surprise, Captain. I thought we had

asked to be left alone at our last encounter."

Kirk winced, "Circumstances warranted our return."

"Indeed," Ayelborne replied. "Curious. Perhaps, then, we should adjourn to the council room." He swung his arm

toward the castle.

"It's a trap!," Q gurgled through Worf's clenched grasp. "Damn you, Klingon." Q jabbed Worf in the ribs ... hard. The Klingon surprisingly stumbled back, releasing the entity.

Crusher turned to tend Worf, who clutched his chest.

Troi grabbed Q's wrist, "I sense no deception, Q."

Q smiled, "You are way out of your league, Counselor."

Crusher turned to Q, "Two of Worf's ribs are cracked."

"Serves him right," the entity replied.

"Enough!," Kirk called out. "Doctor, tend to him. Q, explain yourself."

"He was being a brute..."

"No," Kirk stepped menacingly toward Q. "About the 'trap'."

Ayelborne stood by, face unwavering, as Q began, "He is Ayelborne. He tried to stop us too many times, now we are standing here defenseless. Isn't it obvious, Kirk? he has us right where he wants us."

"I disagree," Spock finally spoke.

"Oh, really."

"Yes, Q. As you said, this planet is locked in a temporal pocket..."

Ayelborne gasped suddenly, "Temporal pocket, you know of such things?"

Kirk stepped forward, "Organia is locked within one right now."

"Impossible. We would know... Come, to the council. I must speak with Trefayne." And he turned and started walking.

Q grabbed Kirk's arm, "You're making a big mistake, Kirk. Strike him down, now."

"Assuming I could, which I won't, where'd that leave us, Q? Still no Earth, still no continuum. Besides, I believe you're wrong."

Kirk and the party started following the Organian.

"Isn't this fun...," Q said as he followed Kirk, with Worf behind him. "Can't take a little ribbing, Microbrain...?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Quark looked at the blood on his hands.

"Just keep at it, Quark," Dr. Julian Bashir cried out from across the Promenade. Quark glanced at him. The young doctor was covered with the blood of the wounded personnel and civilians splayed across the deck. "Apply pressure. Stop the bleeding. I need your help while everyone else is in ops."

"It's not that," Quark looked down, through misting eyes, and placed his hand back on his patient's bleeding chest. "Just hold on. You will be okay."

"Thanks, Quark," Jake Sisko said weakly as he lost consciousness.

Benjamin Sisko watched the disrupter blast tear into Christopher Pike's Enterprise. "Maintain shield integrity around 1701!"

"We can't expend the energy," O'Brien called out.

"We're barely shielding the station," Kira said.

"Damn," Sisko muttered under his breath as his peripheral vision registered another blast strike DS9. He braced himself for the buffeting. He knew the battle wouldn't last much longer. Not much at all. Images of Jennifer and Jake flooded his mind as he gave the order to fire one of the last of DS9's photon torpedoes.

"Station Deep Space Nine can no longer protect us," Spock raised his voice above the sounds of crashing circuitry and exploding consoles.

Christopher Pike assessed the situation and thought about the actions of Enterprise-B.

"Number One, theoretical analysis. What would be the results of a space warp-powered collision with one of our Cardassian friends out there?"

Number One turned to her Captain, "Just what you would expect, Sir. However, I do not recommend such actions."

Pike shrugged, "I don't know, Number One. I once read somewhere about the needs of the many outweighing the needs of the few."

"Charles Dickens," Spock said.

"Yes, Mr. Spock. A prolific man," Pike nodded. "Prepare parameters for a space warp drive collision sequence, Number One. I want all options open."

She turned to her board, "Yes, Sir." So much for commanding a starship, she thought. Then chastised herself, she wasn't -- they weren't -- dead yet.

Castillo held on for dear life. Bridge duty was more challenging than he imagined. Suddenly, the Conn panel erupted into flame. Ensign Johannson was flung to the deck. Castillo turned to her.

"Maintain your post," Garrett ordered above the din. "Engineering, emergency bypass: Conn control to aft bridge stations. Medical: Dr. Cochrane to the bridge. Hold on people. Phasers..."

"Emergency full, on your order, Captain." Castillo reported, ignoring the unmoving body of Johannson.

"I'm sending a nurse up, I can't leave with all the casualties, Captain." Cochrane's message registered in the Captain's mind as she concentrated on the flickering viewscreen.

There they were ...point-blank.

"Fire, Castillo!"

The starship let loose. The Cardassian took the full force of the third generation's phasers. And exploded.

-- Engulfing Enterprise -C in a plasma explosion.

The ancient doors mysteriously swung open to reveal the chamber of the Organian Council of Elders. Sitting behind the table were a group of ancient men, all with far away looks on their faces. Ayelborne took his place seated at the center, facing Kirk and the away team.

Q took a step forward, "What! These ... sheepish old men, with their corny smiles, are going to help us?"

Kirk stepped past him, "Others once made the mistake you are making now, Q."

Worf nodded, "Indeed. My people's history tells us they are not to be underestimated."

Ayelborne spoke: "You, Kirk, and a Klingon working together."

Kirk nodded, "It seems you were correct all those years ago. But we have more pressing matters."

Another council member spoke, "It has been 90 cycles, yet the visitor looks so young. I did not think humans were

so long-lived. How are we mistaken?"

Ayelborne reached and touched the man's arm. "Not to worry, Trefayne. Captain Kirk indicates Organia is enveloped in a temporal pocket. Indeed, his youthfulness tells us something is very wrong."

Trefayne looked puzzled, "A pocket, impossible."

"The evidence indicates he is correct, my friend," Ayelborne said. "What can you sense?"

The older-looking man concentrated.

Dr. Crusher touched Troi's shoulder, "Deanna, can you sense anything?"

Troi shrugged, "I know this sounds a bit cliché, but I sense power beyond anything I've ever encountered."

"Ohhhh..." Trefayne moaned and slumped over. Crusher jogged around the table, Med-kit in hand.

Q laughed, "Give it up, Doctor. Your inept ministrations can barely help humans, let alone entities."

Kirk shot him a glance.

"What?!", Q said.

Ayelborne put his hand on Trefayne's temple, reminding Kirk of a Vulcan mind meld. Trefayne stirred and sat up. "Incredible," he said.

"Please explain, my friend," Ayelborne prompted.

"The universe seems correct, then I peered beyond and saw nothing is as it should be. Most distressing," Trefayne shook his head sadly.

Ayelborne and the elders sat up in astonishment.

Q laughed, "You boys have been duped. Tell me, how does it feel to join our club?"

Spock stepped past him, "Gentlemen, what can we do now to correct this problem? It seems someone or something is impersonating Ayelborne and is responsible for annihilating Earth and paralyzing

the Q Continuum, altering the dynamics of the universe."

The leader of the Elders nodded. "It is obvious now what you say is true. We must take action."

Trefayne shook his head, "If we act too rashly he will know. We will give up our advantage."

"Surely," another Elder spoke, "The fact the humans have penetrated the pocket has alerted Ayelborne."

Kirk's brow furrowed, "Ayelborne?"

The leader stood up and pointed at Q, "You penetrated the pocket with the starship. You are not human."

"Thank goodness," Q said.

Ayelborne stepped around the table, toward Q, "You are an energy being, like ourselves. We can merge with you. Then Ayelborne will be caught off guard, thinking we did not leave the pocket."

"You know that will not be enough," Trefayne said.

"It is a start."

"If he can create a pocket, then so can we," Trefayne said.

Kirk nodded, annoyed that he was not more involved in the decisions occurring around him, "A cloak."

Spock raised an eyebrow, "Indeed, if we can find a way to cloak the Enterprise, it would perhaps give us an advantage."

Q coughed, "You have got to be kidding. A cloaking device will be useless against someone of such abilities. After all, I can see right through them."

"Q is correct. A standard mechanical device would be useless. However a temporal cloak would fool Ayelborne the same way it has fooled us," Ayelborne said.

"Excuse me," Dr. Crusher interrupted. "Aren't you Ayelborne? To whom are you referring?"

"Perhaps an explanation is in order. I am Ayelborne. One time, many cycles ago, we were like you. However, as we evolved, we were able to separate the violent part of ourselves, just as you are able to repress your own violent tendencies."

"And this Ayelborne is your violent self?," Troi asked.

Trefayne sighed, "We were able to separate and extinguish the worst part of ourselves. My friend, Ayelborne, however, was hesitant."

Ayelborne nodded, "I concluded that extinguishing a part of myself was in itself a violent act. So I refused. Instead I, for lack of a better term, locked it away."

"Locked?," Kirk asked. "Where?"

"First, inside my self. However, as we evolved and became more powerful, I thought about banishing it. It was becoming too dangerous. So, I did, making sure it would be powerless, but free."

"Something went wrong," Q said.

Ayelborne nodded, "Apparently my violent half was able to rebuild it's powers after all these millennia."

"So, because you were weak we are all now paying the price," Q said.

"Enough, Q," Kirk scolded. "Ayelborne, your violent half is only as powerful as one Organian, correct."

"However, he has altered the universe into his image, which gives him an advantage."

"How much of an advantage?," Worf asked.

Ayelborne shrugged, "We should be able to equalize things by using Q's body."

Q stepped back, "Now wait one moment, I don't know if I can approve of this."

Dr. Crusher put her hand on Q's shoulder, "Frightened, Q?"

The entity frowned, "I thought the Betazoid was the shrink, Bev."

Troi nodded, "I would say terrified ... Bev."

"I had him marked as a coward since Farpoint," Worf snarled.

"And we didn't know him before that," Crusher said.

"Once a coward...", Worf began.

"Okay!," Q bellowed, turning to the Organians, "Do what you must ..." Then he spun menacingly toward the Enterprise-D crew, "As for you, I will someday have my powers back..."

Suddenly, the chamber was filled with bright light and a chilling noise. The Starfleet officers covered their ears and squinted.

Then, Q collapsed into a fetal position ... eyes glazed over, face frozen in shock.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The away team materialized. Every one stepped down immediately except Q who gazed wide-eyed, turning his head slowly to take in his surroundings.

The captain glanced up. "Kirk to bridge."

"Data here," the android's disembodied voice responded.

"Status?," Kirk asked as the team left the transporter room, marching toward the turbolift. Q lagged slightly behind.

"We have 20 minutes before the Structural Integrity Field goes critical."

"Acknowledged. On my way." he said as he entered the lift. As the lift began moving upward, Kirk turned to Q. "And now...?"

Q looked gazes with him. The entity's eyes were intense and unblinking. "It will take a few of your minutes to create the pocket. Then we can proceed to the station." Q's voice echoed, as if emanating from more than one set of vocal chords. The sound created streams of memories for Kirk: memories of Gary Mitchell and Apollo -- entities that started out as peaceable and then grew into very dangerous adversaries.

"Please go ahead," Kirk said.

"Aye, aye Mon Capitan," Q said smiling.

The turbolift doors opened, revealing the bridge. Worf went to his station immediately. Q took two steps out of the lift and stopped. Spock, Troi, and Crusher followed Kirk to the command level. "Engineering, I want full warp power on my command."

LaForge's voice piped in from the lower decks, "For how long, Sir?"

"As long as it takes, Commander. Mr. Data, set course for Deep Space Nine."

"Aye, Sir," the android said unfazed.

"Spock, passive scanners only, but keep your eyes and ears open," Kirk ordered.

The Vulcan simply nodded and stepped back toward Science I.

"Now, Kirk." Q said finally. "The Enterprise has been enclosed in a temporal pocket similar to Organia. Ayelborne will look right past us ... hopefully."

Kirk shrugged, "I've said it before, risk is our business. And the stakes are very high. In other words, Mr. Data, take us out and give us all she's got."

The explosion temporarily blinded the captain. The automatic viewscreen filters were not a necessity and its power was diverted to the phaser blast just emitted from Enterprise.

The Captain's vision began to clear.

"That's all of them, Sir."

The Captain smiled.

Jean-Luc Picard sat slowly into the command chair, "Hailing frequencies, please, Commander."

Uhura sighed, glancing quickly at the bridge of the Starship Enterprise with pride. "Aye, Aye, Sir."

On his bridge, Christopher Pike glanced at the burn marks on his hands, the panel on his chair erupted in flame from the last impact.

Dr. Boyce was spraying ointment on the injuries. He clapped a hand on the Captain's shoulders. The older man whispered in his ear, "Good work, Chris. More exciting than a horse farm, too."

Pike smirked, "Thank you, Phil. Please start tending to the others."

Boyce nodded, "Right away, Captain."

"Incoming message from Captain Picard on 1701-A."

Pike nodded, "Main screen, if you would, Spock."

Castillo's vision blurred, his mind fogged. Suddenly, there was a shape over him. "Hold on, Lieutenant..."

"Captai---"

"Don't try to talk. Dr. T'Ress is on her way up. You'll be fine. And, Castillo, you are one hell of a helmsman."

The young man smiled faintly and passed out.

Garrett lowered his head gently to the deck just as the turbolift opened letting the medical team on to the bridge. Dr. T'Ress rushed to Castillo's aide. "Bring the gurney down here," the Vulcan said, checking the unconscious man with a tricorder. "He will be fine, Captain."

Garrett nodded, returning to her seat. Her crew had many casualties including Dr. Jeremy Cochrane who had signed aboard Enterprise at Garrett's request. 'Can't think about this now.'

"Captain," her Comm officer called.

"Yes, Lt. Varrington?"

"Captain Picard on all hail, Sir."

Garrett sighed deeply, "On visual, please."

"I'd say we're in pretty good shape, considering." O'Brien said to no one in particular.

Dax and Kira were running through station diagnostics and both concurred with the operations manager.

"Any word from sickbay?" Dax asked.

"Nothing." Kira looked up at her friends. "I'm sure Jake is okay."

A beeping emanated from O'Brien's board. "It's the Captain... Captain Picard, signaling for Commander Sisko."

"I'll take it," Kira said. "Let's leave the Commander be with his son for now. On main screen, Chief."

Picard watched the rear screens on the Enterprise-A bridge as each became one of the Captains of another Enterprise, except Major Kira of Deep Space Nine. "It is most gratifying to see you all. Congratulations on beating the odds."

"For now," Kira said. "If there is one constant in any universe, it is the Cardassians are persistent. They won't be gone long."

Pike nodded, "I agree with the Major. We probably don't have much of a reprieve."

Garrett nodded, "I don't know about you, but I'm not in any position to put up much of a fight without some repair time."

"I think we can all agree to that," Picard said. "Major Kira are the station's docking rings in decent shape."

"Decent enough," the Bajoran said. "Just don't expect any R and R, we're picking up the pieces here, too."

"Acknowledged," Picard said. "I believe we should all dock at the station and pool our resources."

The others agreed and signed off. The Starships Enterprise, safe for the moment, began limping toward the docking rings of Deep Space Nine.

As Picard's borrowed starship moved into position, Jean-Luc couldn't help thinking that the

most challenging part of their 'mission' was still on the horizon.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rachel Garrett stared at the brutal, burning scars all over his body. The air left her throat momentarily. How could she have done this to him, after he entrusted so much to her.

"Captain?"

She slowly turned away from the viewport and looked at Christopher Pike.

Pike saw the haunted look and recognized it from the mirror. "It is hard. They mean so much ..."

She shook her head, "I can't understand it, I've been on other ships, even as captain. I've been in combat, but ..."

They both turned and gazed at the scared and pitted visage of the Starship Enterprise-C.

"It's the name, isn't it?," Garrett said.

"To me?," Pike commented. "My Enterprise is nearly at the beginning of what I can see will be an elaborate historical tapestry." He shook his head slowly, "No, not the name, not the history. It's the imagination, the human potential. That's what she represents to me. That's what kept me aboard her. That's why Enterprise is special. My Enterprise."

Garrett nodded as Miles O'Brien approached them. "Captains, the engineering teams report all ships are progressing as expected. Captain Picard requests a Command level meeting in Commander Sisko's office as soon as possible."

They nodded, "Inform Captain Picard we are on our way," Garrett said as O'Brien left.

As the two turned away from the viewport, Garrett touched Pike's arm. "Thank you, Captain."

He smiled, "Not at all, Captain."

The meeting adjourned almost immediately after it started, DS9's sensors activated the red alert. The commanding officers uniformly jumped out of their chairs. "Ops, report," Sisko demanded into the air.

O'Brien's concerned voice filled the office, "Unidentified ship decloaking..."

"Pike to..."

"Garrett to...

"Picard to ...

... Enterprise. Beam me aboard."

Three transporter hums filled Sisko's office as the Commander crossed the threshold into Ops. He glanced at the viewscreen in time to see a decloaking wave unlike any he'd seen before, which shouldn't be surprising, he thought, considering where he was. Before the wave entirely dissipated, the screen blinked and the main bridge of the arriving vessel appeared.

James Kirk stood in the center of Sisko's screen.

Then, suddenly, without warning, a deafening, hideous, laughter filled every speaker, every ear, encompassed everything around the station and the Enterprises.

Just as loud came three words, echoing off every surface.

"TIME TO DIE!"

"Now," Q yelled, and staggered against a bulkhead. Five energy patterns fled his body, expanding, until they engulfed the Enterprise-D's main bridge. As soon as they appeared, they were gone.

And the ship began to shake itself apart.

"Report," Kirk yelled as he was flung to the deck.

"Readings are off the scale," Spock replied.

"The surrounding space is charged with an energy I have never encountered," Data said.

The shaking increased dramatically with each passing second. Consoles began to explode from the quaking. "Will the shields hold?" Kirk asked, trying to be heard above the din.

"Unknown," Data answered.

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Jim."

The serenity of unconsciousness shattered around the Captain. Dizziness and nausea replaced the peace. Kirk struggled to identify the voice, it seemed like eons since he heard anything. "...Bones?"

McCoy stood up, away from his friend. "He'll be alright, thank goodness." He mentally thanked Dr. Bashir for keeping a well-stocked infirmary on Deep Space Nine, since most of the crews of each Enterprise were beamed aboard the station after the conscious Captains deemed DS9 the sturdiest place to be after the evil Ayelborne's sudden reappearance.

"That is agreeable, since we will need him for our endeavor," Ayelborne said.

"I am still unclear as to what this endeavor will accomplish," Jean-Luc Picard said. He stood over Kirk, brow furrowed with concern.

Q shook his head, "You know, Jean-Luc. Sometimes you can be so daft. Oh, well. Believe it or not, Ayelborne and I agree that you will be required as well."

"Bones...", Kirk said weakly, trying to push himself onto his elbows.

"Now, Jim. Be careful. You're not ready to be going after bad guys quite yet."

"Bad guys... Ayelborne."

Spock stepped into his Captain's view, "The 'evil' Ayelborne is contained for the moment, Sir. You can take a few minutes to recuperate."

"Recuperate from what?"

Picard stepped forward, "The Organian council members caught our opponent by surprise when they suddenly separated from Q. However, the ensuing conflict was engaged just beyond Enterprise-D's shield perimeter. The ship was moderately damaged and you were knocked unconscious."

Kirk sat up completely and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He now could see everyone in the room, standing toward the back of the infirmary were Scotty, Uhura, and Chekov. They smiled at Kirk. Kirk nodded back, then looked at Picard. "Casualties?"

"Surprisingly minimal," Picard said. "And the ship is under repair. LaForge says she will be fully operational within hours."

"Scotty," Kirk said.

"Sair," the engineer replied stepping forward.

"Please assist Commander LaForge."

"Aye, Sair. It's good to have you back, Captain."

Kirk nodded and slowly stood up. Picard grabbed his arm to steady him. "She's a fine ship,"

Kirk smiled, "And a good crew."

Picard nodded, "I was about to say the same thing to you."

"Can we stop the mutual admiration society, please." Q grimaced. "In case anyone's forgotten, we've still got a lot of work to do."

Kirk and Picard, arm over arm, looked at the entity. "Lead the way," Kirk said.

"Indeed," Picard replied.

Q opened and closed his mouth in shock. "Well, it's about time."

The four captains, Sisko, Ayelborne, Trefayne, and Q sat in DS9's observation lounge.

"Where is the other Ayelborne?," Kirk asked.

Trefayne nodded, "Perhaps you should explain it to the Captain, my friend."

"Very well," Ayelborne laced his fingers in front of his chest and took a deep breath. "My other self is trapped, temporarily to be sure, in a pocket similar to the one around Organia."

Kirk hesitated for a moment, "I see. But as soon as he realizes its a pocket..."

Ayelborne nodded, "He will do what he can to break free."

Q nodded, "Which will be tougher than he thinks."

Picard looked at his nemesis, "Explain."

Q smiled, "Well, in a justifiable twist of fate, we've put a kibosh on his powers."

Ayelborne nodded, "Q speaks the truth but only temporarily. His powers will gradually return in the pocket and instantly return if he leaves."

Kirk nodded, "And where do we come in?"

Ayelborne looked gravely at the Captain, "Ayelborne is not easily duped for long. He will realize he is in a pocket and escape, unless the pocket is fortified. That we must do."

Pike looked confused, "How could he possibly escape without any powers."

Trefayne spoke up, "Remember his powers will slowly return, therefore the pocket must be powerful enough to hold him for all time. We will be using our inherent energies to strengthen it. If Ayelborne senses our endeavor, he will be able to turn those energies back and break free."

Sisko, "And then we'll be back to square one."

Kirk stood up, "Which is why you need Picard and me. To keep Ayelborne occupied why you strengthen his prison."

"That is correct," Ayelborne said. "We will transport you into the pocket and then begin reinforcing it."

Pike stood, "Why only Kirk and Picard?"

Q, "I'll field this one. Because the Organians are familiar with Kirk's abilities and I volunteered Jean-Luc. Don't worry, Pike. You'll have plenty to do."

Ayelborne, "Moments before we finish with the pocket, the Captains will need to be transported out. We will be too occupied to do so, therefore we surmise that interlinking the transporter systems on the four ships and the station and diverting all power to them should generate enough to ...how do you say ...beam ...Kirk and Picard out of the pocket."

Garrett, "There will only be enough energy for two transporter signals?"

Q, "Yes. Yes. Sorry you get to miss the fun."

Ayelborne, "It will require a very delicate balance of timing and energy for the transport to be successful."

Picard, "When do we leave?"

Ayelborne, "As soon as possible."

Kirk, "Let's do it."

Miles O'Brien wiped his brow, standing up from the splayed system components laid out across the deck. "This is going to be very tight, Sirs. To do what the Organians request will require nearly every ounce of power we can generate by all our systems combined, from all sources."

Sisko nodded, and stepped toward the console of Enterprise-D's transporter room, where all the commanding officers had convened, "Can you do it, Chief?"

"It will require the coordinated efforts of the Enterprises' engineering staffs, but I think its possible."

"Good," Picard said.

"How long until we can leave?," Kirk asked.

O'Brien looked at the floor, "As soon as I can put this back together. Fifteen minutes."

The Captains and first officers of the Enterprises, along with Sisko and Kira stood in the

observation lounge behind Enterprise-D's bridge. Kirk stared at the visage out the large viewports. The Starships Enterprise and Enterprise-A were clearly visible. 'My whole life,' he thought. 'All that I am.' Suddenly another thought, 'Is there nothing more?' The question Spock posed from the refurbished 1701's sickbay, the wonderings of V'ger as it strove to identify itself.

'Is there nothing more?,' Kirk thought. 'My god, we were on our way to be decommissioned before Ayelborne and Q interfered. And if we succeed in restoring history? Where does that leave me?'

"Captain," Picard called, breaking through Kirk's reverly. "We don't have much time."

"Of course," Kirk said. "Captain Pike, as elder statesman of our group will you please make the declaration."

Pike stood, "Thank you, Captain Kirk. In the event that the mission about to be undertaken by Captain James T. Kirk and Captain Jean-Luc Picard fails, it is declared on this date, New Stardate 44001.1, that Captain Rachel Garrett, Commander Benjamin Sisko, Captain Spock, Commander William Riker and I will adopt the Constitution to our present timeline and thereby reestablish the United Federation of Planets. The Starships Enterprise will be the foundation of the new Starfleet, with Deep Space Nine to be recommisioned Starbase One. It will be our first priority to ask Bajor and Organia to join the UFP. Defenses will be created against our Cardassian neighbors and space exploration will begin anew with the purpose of finding a way of one day restoring the timeline."

"A tall order," Riker said.

"But a sense of purpose and identity," Picard countered.

"We must put the Declaration to official vote," Kirk said.

Each name called by Captain Spock, each reply, "Agreed."

Pike nodded, "Then by unanimous vote of command level personnel, I hearby officially establish the United Federation of Planets in our present timeline."

"Good luck, Captains," Garrett said.

"To us all," Kirk replied.

"We are ready," Ayelborne said.

Kirk noticed that his eyes were glazed over, as were the four other Organians who stood together in the empty promenade of Deep Space Nine. Q leaned against a wall, but even he seemed transfixed by the Organians' actions.

Picard glanced at Kirk. Kirk at Picard. They each felt their utility belts. Phaser, tricorder, and Kirk had his communicator. Picard's was of course built into his insignia pin.

The two captains nodded to each other. Then Kirk turned to Ayelborne. "Go ahead."

Kirk's senses exploded and everything he knew was gone.

Moments later, Sisko's voice carried over the station's speakers, "Red Alert!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"They came upon us quickly," Spock said, reporting to his Captain on the bridge of Enterprise.

Pike stared hard at the Cardassian Warship approaching the station. "Battle status."

Number One looked up from her console, "All systems are committed to the transporter sequence for Kirk and Picard. If we divert power for battle, we may not be able to beam them out of the pocket."

"The same is true for all the Enterprises and the station," Spock said.

Pike stared hard at the viewscreen, "If we respond to the Cardassians, the Captains could be trapped in the pocket with Ayelborne for eternity."

Doctor Boyce, standing to the left of Pike, put his hand on his captain's shoulder, "Then, Chris, either they're dead men or we're sitting ducks."

Kirk lifted himself off the ground spitting out a mouthful of dirt. All around him was a barren field. Picard stood near surveying the surroundings with his tricorder.

"Are you alright, Captain?," Picard asked.

"Yes, just a little dazed. Where are we?"

"We appear to be on Bajor. Or a reasonable facsimile."

Kirk looked up at the sky, which was a very odd color of off-blue. "Of course, the Organians recreated the nearest planet so as not to alert Ayelborne prematurely."

Picard nodded, "Or part of the planet. In any case, we are within the temporal pocket."

Kirk took out his tricorder, "Life signs?"

Jean-Luc pointed toward some hills in the distance. "Over there."

Kirk scanned, "Very slight. But there's nothing else registering. It must be our man." He pulled out his phaser. "Shall we?"

The two of them headed off into the hills.

"There is one alternative," the elder Spock said as he stared at the commanding officers on the screens of 1701-A's

bridge. "There are independent systems..."

"The shuttles," Garrett said. "But they can't withstand a battleship..."

"Weapons range in three minutes," Data said from behind Riker.

"We don't have any time," Riker said. "We need to launch the shuttles now."

"Not the shuttles," Pike said.

"The Runabouts," Sisko said.

"They are our best bet," Spock said.

"Fine," Pike said. "I'll be right over."

"As will I," Garrett responded.

"What?," Sisko asked.

"You heard the declaration, we are responsible for defending the new Federation," Pike said before cutting the connections.

"Besides," Garrett replied, "We're the Captains."

The launch bays of Deep Space Nine were prepped in record time. The Ganges under command of Sisko with Dax; the Rio Grande under command of Garrett with Data; and the Yangtze Kiang under command of Pike with Kira, launched three minutes after the communiqué on the respective bridges ended.

And as they launched, the Cardassian started firing viciously.

On the promenade, Trefayne's eyes opened slightly, "This is getting harder."

"Concentration," Ayelborne responded, eyes squeezed shut. "Concentration, my friend."

The height of the hills was an optical illusion. As the captains got closer, they realized how

slight they were. But they were high enough to hide a man.

Ayelborne leaped from his hiding space and tackled Picard, "What do you want of me!"

Kirk crouched phaser ready, but Ayelborne was surprisingly quick, kicking the weapon from the Captain's grasp. Kirk grabbed the man's shoulders pulling him off Picard, spinning him into a head-lock. "That's as far as you go, Ayelborne!"

The man gasped, repeating his original question. Then, "I am peaceful here, why do you invade my home?"

"You destroy my entire race," Kirk spit, "And you wonder why I traipsed across a field. Sorry it doesn't wash, pal."

Ayelborne gasped, "I--I don't know what you're talking about--"

Picard grabbed Kirk's arm. "A moment, Captain."

Kirk glared at Picard, and then loosened his grip, but still holding the entity around the neck.

Picard stared at Ayelborne, "What do you mean, you don't know --"

Tears began to flow down the man's cheeks, "All I know is you came near my home uninvited. I was afraid you would harm me."

Kirk grimaced, "So you attacked us. Good strategy."

Ayelborne was crying now, unable to speak. Kirk loosened his grasp. The entity fell to the ground sobbing heavily. Kirk stepped over and retrieved his phaser, aiming it at Ayelborne. "Opinion?," Kirk whispered to Picard.

Picard shrugged, "It is possible that his battle with the Organians has affected his memory?"

Kirk nodded, "It's a ruse."

"Perhaps, but if he honestly has no memory of what he's done--"

"We still watch him carefully and wait for beam out."

The Ganges took the lead, as Sisko and Dax were the most familiar with runabouts. "Someday, old man, we might want to think about a larger ship to guard the station," Sisko said.

"Agreed. Hope we get the chance to petition for it."

Sisko nodded and opened a channel to the other runabouts. "Everyone, Pattern Jen 1 now."

The Rio Grande and Yangtzee Kiang sent signals of concurment, and they began their moves.

On the bridge of Enterprise-A, Uhura stared at the main viewer, as the runabouts began their formation around the Cardassian. Scotty was busy running between engineering and the main transporter rooms finalizing the power links for the Captains' beamout... And she felt helpless, and hated it. 'If only we had a prefix code...' She suddenly smiled and turned to the center seat. "Mr. Spock, would it be fair to say that during your tenure on Enterprise-D, you familiarized yourself with their databanks on Cardassian technology?"

Spock turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "Indeed."

McCoy, standing to between Spock and Uhura, turned toward her. "What have you got in mind, Commander?"

Uhura stood and leaned with her hands against the upper level guardrail. "If I got you a line into their computers, Spock. I assume you could wreck some havok with their systems. Correct?"

"Perhaps. But I must remind you that all our systems, including communications, have been diverting for the beamout."

Uhura's smile grew wider, "There are other power sources than just what the ship can provide."

McCoy turned to Spock, "Ahhh... wait, like Murasaki all those years ago. Phaser energy, Spock. Brilliant, Uhura."

Spock shook his head, "We utilized phaser energy as a fuel substitute for the old-style shuttlecraft. It cannot be adapted for a communications panel, Doctor. However..."

"...The power cells from communicators and tricorders could be networked together," Uhura finished.

"Highly logical, Commander."

Uhura bounced on her heels, "Twenty plus years is rubbing off, Captain. Chekov, Doctor. If you could grab as many tricorders and communicators as possible, Spock and I can give the Cardassians a very large headache."

McCoy and Chekov nodded and bounded for the turbolift.

The disrupter blast caused the Yangtze Kiang's shields to explode in sparkles of deadly energy.

"Chris!," Rachel Garrett shouted suddenly from her viewpoint at the helm of the Rio Grande. She sighed as the attacked runabouts shields finally dissipated the blast.

Garrett choked back on her words, embarrassed by the flair of emotion. She glanced at her co-pilot. Data was unlike anything she had seen before, the first sentient android in Starfleet... was staring at her.

"Commander," she said.

"I am curious as to your exclamation. It is as if you have a deep attachment to Captain Christopher Pike."

Garrett looked icily for a moment, "You deduced that from one exclamation? I am just concerned for any human's life."

"I see. This makes sense, since there are so few left." Data concluded as he resumed his Ops duty. "It is time for

our attack run."

"Engage," Garrett said, and the Cardassian warship seemed to leap toward them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"You know, Doctor McCoy said the same thing..."

"McCoy!!" Kirk grabbed her shoulders. "Leonard McCoy?"

"Yes," she said, startled by his emotion. "He's in the mission."

Kirk turned and started across the street, turning back briefly. "Wait! Wait right there! Spock!" He called after his Vulcan friend who started down the New York City street moments before. "Spock!"

The Vulcan seemed to appear from nowhere, "What is it?"

"McCoy! He's in the mission."

As if on cue, Doctor McCoy stepped out from the doors in front of Kirk, "Jim!"

"Bones," Kirk said delighted, as Spock, in a lapse of control, grabbed McCoy in a seeming bear hug.

Then, McCoy's eyes widened, something behind him.

Kirk turned, "Edith!" His voice, a ghostly gasp.

McCoy tried to push past. Kirk turned, grabbing him, his comrades screaming something, his name, Kirk didn't hear. He buried his face in his friend's shoulder. A screech of tire.... a final scream.

"I could of saved him. Jim, do you know what you just did?," said the anguished voice. An unexpected voice, Kirk

looked up at the person he was holding:

Carol Marcus. "Do you know what you just did?"

Kirk blinked. What?? He turned to the crowd gathering in the street. On the ground was the broken body of ... David. His son, his dead son.

He turned back to Carol, shocked. What...?

"He knows, Doctor. He knows."

Kirk looked past Carol.

And saw Ayelborne smiling, delighted.

Kirk awoke with a start, his head swimming. Standing over him was Jean-Luc Picard.
"Wha..?"

"Jim, Ayelborne attacked, suddenly. Knocked me down, and grabbed you. You passed out."

Kirk put his hand on his head, "Some sort of mind game. I'm not amused." He reached for his phaser, on the ground next to him, and tried to stand, but couldn't get his bearing. Picard grabbed him before he fell. "Which... way...?"

"Ayelborne took off over the hill." Picard pointed past the hills before them. "You recover. I'll go after him."

Kirk nodded. "Be careful, I'll be right there."

Picard nodded and left in a sprint.

Kirk tried to calm the 'Red Alert' blaring in his head.

Above, the skies grew into a darker red.

Linked tricorders and communicators snaked along the floor of the bridge away from Uhura's station. Her head was buried beneath her console. Chekov stood over her.

"How's it going?," he asked.

"A few moments more," her muffled voice answered.

Spock was busy at his station, McCoy standing near him.

"Think it will work?," the Doctor asked.

"I estimate a 57.4 percent chance of success." Spock said, looking up momentarily. "For even though I analyzed the databanks, the Cardassians of this timeline have displayed altered abilities. Their computer system may also be different."

"You can do it, Spock. If any one can."

"Curious."

"What?"

"As illogical as it seems, sometimes I miss your ... barbs."

"That's only human," McCoy beamed. "Now stop wasting time and get back to work."

Spock did.

Q stared at the old men, gathered in DS9's Promenade. 'Old men,' he winced. 'How foolish a thought. I must get out of this human guise soon. I'm starting to lose intellect.' Of course, they were not old men, these Organians. They had kept their presence hidden from the Continuum. Formidable indeed. Q thanked --God?-- ('another human concept?', he thought.) that the Organians had nonaggressive tendencies. If one Organian, or part of an Organian, could pop the Continuum like Ayelborne had... no, that was because of surprise. If it were a fair fight, it would be the battle of the universe. A menacing smile came to Q's lips, 'Of course, that would never happen.'

Ayelborne and his compatriots were on another plane, even though their humanoid doppelgangers remained visible on the Federation Station.

'Do you hear the Q's thoughts?,' Trefayne projected to him.

'I do. He is but a child, daydreaming. It is of no consequence. Remain focused, our job here is not completed.'

Trefayne projected acknowledgment and returned to their duty at hand.

Kira Nerys struggled at the controls of the damaged Yangtze Kiang. The other runabouts were drawing the Cardassians' fire away from them. But they couldn't wait much longer. "I'm having trouble holding the ship on course, Captain. The helm controls were damaged by that blast."

Christopher Pike frowned. He knew the ship wasn't going to make it. He glanced briefly at the sensor display of the four remaining Starships Enterprise docked at Deep Space Nine. 'My legacy,' the words flashed in his mind. It was true, in his day Starfleet was an upstart association, daring to think they could go where no man had gone before. The U.S.S. Enterprise, his Enterprise, was the most advanced starship in the young fleet, having successfully completed a shake-down tour under Robert April, she was handed over to Pike. He was supposed to be the man who would go beyond human ken, exploring new worlds, and seeking out new life. I only scratched the surface, Pike knew. But if he, his crew, and his

starship hadn't been the intrepid explorers, then there may never have been an Enterprise -A, B, C, or D, or what was still to come. It was a legacy he must protect at all costs.

"You served in the Bajoran Underground against the Cardassian occupation of your planet. Correct, Major."

She shook her head and turned to look him in the eyes. "One last blow against tyranny, Captain?"

He nodded. "Prepare to engage the warp engines."

She swallowed, but didn't hesitate. She grew taller in her chair, bringing herself to the attention she knew all of Bajor, of the Federation, deserved at this moment. "Bringing the mains on line."

Jean-Luc Picard reached the other side of the hill and saw the Chapel of the Vedek Monastery. Its large wood front door was open wide, almost begging someone to cross the threshold. He glanced up to the ever-reddening sky. It became harder to see, with the amber sheen over everything. The Captain pulled his phaser from his belt and walked toward the entrance. He turned back momentarily, no sign of Kirk. Picard hoped his counterpart had recovered.

Picard crossed the threshold and listened. Utter silence. In front of him was a typical layout for a place of worship. Rows of pews before a raised alter. The room was very dark.

Except, something glowed from the alter.

The Captain stepped carefully and methodically, looking at each row of pews before moving on. No indication of Ayelborne.

Moving closer to the alter, Picard made out the glow: a Tear of the Prophet, one of the 'hourglasses' from the beings living inside the newly discovered wormhole. He swallowed, the tears were very powerful. Although the extent of their abilities were unknown, Sisko -- the 'Emissary,' as he became known not long after accepting his position at DS9 -- had reported in depth about their abilities to manipulate time, at least for an individual exposed to the tear. Why was one here, in the Organian's temporal pocket?

Picard climbed the steps of the alter and stepped toward the tear in its transparent casing. The item's warmth calmed him, the transparent casing, apparently sensing the presence of a body, opened. Picard felt compelled, almost hypnotized, as he reached for the tear---

--- Just as Ayelborne, leaping from somewhere above the alter, tackled Picard to the ground.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Ready, Mr. Spock."

"As am I, Commander Uhura. You may begin."

The Commander played her console like a master pianist. Moments later, she smiled. "We're in. Work your magic."

Spock's left eyebrow rose slightly, as he began to weave a web around the Cardassians' data streams.

Montgomery Scott tensed slightly as he made the final adjustment. There. He signaled his counterpart on Enterprise-D. "Mr. LaForge, can I count on ya?"

There was a smile in the voice that came back over the comm system, "Yes, Sir. Mr. Scott. The power link is

completed and acknowledged on all ships and the station. We're ready for the beam out anytime."

Scott smiled broadly, "Ayyyyy," he said with pride. "And laddie, call me Scotty."

"There is a fluctuation in their shields," Dax reported on the Ganges.

"Excellent," Sisko said from beside her. "I see it. Just enough Old Man, to punch some holes."

Dax nodded, "But where did their sudden power lose come from?"

Sisko shrugged his shoulders, "All I care about for now is that its there. Contact the others. Tell them to commence with round robin fire patterns."

Dax reached for the comm board, when she noticed the readings coming from the Yangtzee Kiang. "Kira!"

Onboard the Rio Grande, Data analyzed his readings, "They appear to be energizing their warp engines. I can only surmise their course of act---"

"Chris," Garrett punched the comm. "Wait." She heard a signal overlapping from the Ganges, essentially the same hail. "Chris. Don't do this --- We need you," her voice cracked slightly, "I need you."

Pike closed the comm channels. "Are you sure you're ready for this, Major?"

"Their shield degradation is strongest along the upper pylon struts," she snapped militarily.

Pike nodded. He reached out and touched her hand. "Engage."

"May the Prophets be with us."

The Yangtze Kiang went to warp speed.

Picard's head struck the hard wood surface, dazing him.

"SO RELIGION IS YOUR DEATH KNELL, PICARD." Ayelborne's voice echoed through his already ringing head. No longer meek like outside, the Captain could only surmise that the being's powers were returning. How could he deal with that?

With a back hand punch and a roll Picard shook himself free momentarily from the entity. He tried to get up, but stumbled.

Ayelborne held his hand to his head, where the Captain struck. "PAIN... A UNIQUE FEELING. ONE I CAN LIVE WITHOUT. FEEL YOUR LAST PAIN, PICARD."

Ayelborne stepped forward, Picard rose to his knees, trying a crouch stance.

"Freeze!"

The voice came from the back of the room. Ayelborne looked up, startled for a moment, to see James Kirk pointing a phaser at the entity's chest.

Ayelborne laughed. "TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE, EXCELLENT."

He swung his arm back with lightning speed... and shattered the Tear of the Prophet.

On the Promenade, Ayelborne opened his eyes and turned to Q, "Now."

Q looked puzzled, "Now?... ahh, oh, Now! Now!" He ooked up to activate the station's comm system, "Attention, everyone. This is Q." He pulled down on the front of his Starfleet tunic. "Now." He said with infinite calm.

The sky was falling. Kirk dodged immense shards of wood and glass, covering his eyes and face as he moved as best he could toward the disintegrating alter. "Jean-Luc!"

Picard was blown off the alter stage by Ayelborne's actions, landing on his side at the first row of pews. He tried to get up, sharp pains, 'broken ribs,' Picard thought. Chapel pieces were falling all around him, a chapel that if Picard couldn't move would become a tomb.

The communication system worked perfectly as Scotty, La Forge, O'Brien, Kyle, and Bailey energized in sync. All power diverted to the linked transporters, in an attempt to grab two patterns from the nearly-sealed pocket.

And the attempt failed.

Kirk saw Picard struggling toward the back, the debris piles were growing all around him. Huge amounts were blocking his path to the other man. Kirk decided to use his phaser to blast a path.

Picard heard the familiar whine, still getting to his feet, "Damn the pain," he thought to himself.

And then Ayelborne's laughter returned.

"Resets in place," Miles O'Brien said from his location on DS9. "Emergency systems are shunted to the pattern buffers."

"Energize," Scotty and LaForge ordered together.

Jean-Luc Picard rose, and limped, albeit quickly, through the newly cleared path.

James Kirk met him as their eyes locked, "Let's get out of here, Captain."

"I second that, Captain."

They turned around to begin their trek, and then Ayelborne yelled.

"NO!!!!"

And Picard and Kirk no longer controlled their destinies.

And Picard and Kirk once again controlled their destinies.

EPILOGUE

The doors shwooshed open and Christopher Pike gladly crossed the threshold into his quarters. He yawned and rubbed his eyes. It wasn't an overly stressful assignment the Enterprise was carrying out, but perhaps he was still recovering from the events of Talos IV. He tugged at his uniform tunic, contemplating changing into something more comfortable, but the bunk was too alluring. He flopped onto it.

Not knowing how much time had passed, or even if he had fallen asleep at all, the next thing Pike heard was the pinging of his door chime. "Come," he said sleepily.

The door opened to reveal his young -- for a Vulcan -- science officer. "I apologize if this is a bad time, Captain."

Pike sat up, "No, not at all, Mr. Spock. How can I help you?"

The Vulcan stepped inside and the door closed. Pike noticed he was holding a bottle of liquor. "Saurian Brandy," Spock said. "I understand it is a delicacy you appreciate."

Pike nodded, "Indeed. Join me in a toast?"

Spock hesitated a moment, he normally didn't imbibe, but he did bring the brandy. "Of course."

Pike relieved him of the bottle and found two glasses.

"I am here to ... thank you, Captain."

Pike hesitated, "Thank me?"

"For allowing me to join the crew."

Pike chuckled, "Don't be ridiculous, Spock. I didn't allow you to do anything. You certainly earned this posting." He offered Spock a glass.

Spock took it, "Perhaps you are aware of the ...disappointment in some quarters by my actions."

Pike knew indeed. Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan was a living legend in Federation Diplomacy. The fact that he strongly opposed his son's entrance into Starfleet wasn't as well known, "I'm aware of your father's displeasure."

"It has not made my life easy," Spock admitted, throwing Pike off guard by the candidness. "I am glad there are still individuals in my life to who I can turn for guidance and acceptance."

Pike raised a glass, "I am honored you feel you can come to me. I'll try not to let you down."

They clinked their glasses. Spock raised an eyebrow, "What are we toasting, Sir?"

Pike thought but a moment, "To the future."

The two comrades and friends drank their drink.

'What about the future?,' James Kirk asked himself, as he sat on the bridge of the battle-weary Enterprise-A. On the screen was the Planet Earth, and the massive orbital Space Dock that was this ship's last port. "Stand by, automatic approach system." His words sounded as if they were coming from

somewhere else. "Advise approach control."

Uhura nodded, and ever so tentatively, at least that's how it looked to Kirk, she tapped a key on her console, "Approach control this is Enterprise-A, Ready for docking maneuver."

The controller replied over the intercom in such a cheery voice, Kirk almost made a vow to track him down later and punch him in the nose. "Enterprise-A is cleared to dock. Welcome Home."

"See to it, Mr. Chekov." Kirk replied and left the bridge.

Moments later, he was walking toward his quarters where he was suddenly met by Spock and McCoy. "Hey, Jim," McCoy called out. "Spock has a surprisingly good idea. Follow us."

Kirk shrugged and wordlessly followed his two best friends to Spock's quarters. The door opened to reveal a table setting for three and a bottle ... of Saurian Brandy. Well, this might be a fine idea after all. "Spock, I'm shocked."

"It is somewhat of a tradition of mine to have a toast with my Commanding Officer."

Kirk smiled sardonically, "And it took nearly 25 years for me to learn of this tradition?"

Spock nodded, "I cannot think of a more fortuitous occasion."

Kirk nodded, "Join us, Bones."

"Actually I thought I'd count the sparkles in Spock's IDIC display over here ...of course I'll join you."

Spock poured the brandy and handed the glasses to his friends. "To the future," he said as he raised a glass.

"And to the missions of the Enterprises' past," Kirk added.

They clinked their glasses and drank.

Then Kirk sat down, "This is it for me, you know. After they retire her, that's it. I'm through with starships and hopping galaxies."

McCoy and Spock glanced at each other with knowing looks, as the three friends sat infinitely comfortable in each other's presence.

Captain John Harriman was infinitely uncomfortable, 'How could this have happened? This was supposed to be a spin around the block! ...around the block!' Instead Enterprise-B, on her maiden voyage had encountered a spatial anomaly, it almost tore the ship apart. More importantly, on his first watch as Enterprise Commander, he had lost one of the most important figures in Federation history. James T. Kirk was dead.

Harriman shook his head slightly, he still couldn't believe it. But it was true, he stood at the rear of the ship's chapel. In the front row stood Captain Montgomery Scott, Captain Pavel Chekov and

Ensign Demora Sulu. They were conducting a private memorial service, as Enterprise-B limped back to Earth.

Harriman bowed his head, and left the room. Kirk had saved the Enterprise, as he had done so many times before,

different ships, linked together by one legacy. It was Harriman who should have made the sacrifice. Kirk should be alive and well, sitting in that chair on the bridge, certainly John felt he didn't deserve to be there. The Captain silently made a pledge to himself, a pledge only someone familiar with the intricate possibilities of space travel could sanely make: 'If I ever have a chance to sacrifice myself to preserve you or your progeny, James T. Kirk, I will not hesitate. I owe you, Captain.'

Rachel Garrett stood up from the center seat of Enterprise-C and stepped down to the command console. "How does it feel, Mr. Castillo?"

Richard Castillo just began his first watch as helmsman. "Wonderful, Captain, Thank you."

"Don't thank me, Lieutenant. You earned this." She patted him on the shoulder and returned to her chair. This was a fine ship and a good crew. Enterprise-C would indeed live up to the name's legacy, she would insure it. Suddenly, an intense beeping emanated from the communications station.

The young woman manning it, Ensign Terri, spoke up. "Emergency distress signal, Sir. From the Klingon Outpost

Nirendra III. They are under attack."

Garrett stood, "Distance."

"8 hours at present speed," Castillo announced.

Garrett shook her head, "Not good enough. Go to warp 8, Mister. Course, Nirendra III. Ensign Terri, signal the

Klingons, help is on the way." 'Time to live up to the legacy,' she thought.

And Enterprise-C warped toward her future.

Deanna Troi stood up from the chess match, "Don't fret, Worf. I was the All-District chess champion at my high

school."

"So you've mentioned ... many times."

She raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. "Funny, I don't recall. Let's get a bite to eat, I'm starved." They walked out of the rec room together. Deanna was glad to have this time to spend with Worf, ever since their duty schedules matched up so they were off-duty together. Worf had been through some emotional hardships lately concerning his late father. He had been quite reserved. Geordi and Data asked her to look after their friend. She didn't need to be asked. In fact, she was surprised and confused

by her new feelings for the Klingon. 'Maybe I need to talk to the ship's counselor.' She smiled to herself.

They arrived at Ten Forward to find the Captain seated alone, nursing a cooling cup of Earl Grey tea. Troi and Worf exchanged glances. Then Troi asked if he wanted company.

"Certainly Counselor, Lieutenant," He stood in welcome as they sat.

"It is unusual," Worf said, "to find you here."

Picard smiled, "I suppose so, Mr. Worf. I was just watching." He pointed at the large picture windows adorning one side of the lounge. Stars flew by, altered by the warp field effect. As always, it was beautiful. "It's nice to see them for real once in a while, not through some view screen sensor array. And away from deck one."

Troi nodded, "I understand. Is something bothering you though, Captain?"

Picard shook his head, "Not really Counselor, I guess I'm still awed now and again by the scope of the universe. How much is still out there..."

Just then, Guinan appeared from seemingly nowhere, "Well, it's always a pleasure when my little hole in the wall is graced by such company. Here," She placed a bottle and some glasses down in the center of the table. "On the house."

Troi and Picard smiled at the barkeep. Worf nodded as she left. "What is it?," the Klingon asked.

Picard picked up the bottle, admiring it, "Saurian Brandy. The perfect drink to share with friends." And the Captain of the Enterprise began to pour.

Ben Sisko wasn't sure about this idea, but how could he say no to Dax, after all they had to find a way to recover from Q's disruptive visit to the station. The dip and chips Dax insisted on had arrived, and it was almost time for her, Kira, O'Brien, Keiko, and Bashir to arrive. He was putting on his fatigues when a knock came to his door. "Come in."

Jake bounded in his room, holding a deck of cards. "Well, I'm ready."

"Readyfor what?"

"For the game. So is Nog. He's on his way over."

Sisko shook his head, "Oh, no. Poker is a grownups' game, Son."

"Ahh, come on, Dad. how come when it's time for me to do chores or homework I ..." he lowed his voice to simulate his dad "...have to start acting like a grownup... but when it comes to the fun stuff, I'm just a kid."

Sisko was about to say, 'because I said so,' but thought twice. "Just don't fight me on this, Okay, Jake."

His son paused for a moment with a droopy look on his face, "Okay, Nog and I will just go to Quark's. Tonight's The Dabo Girl Talent Show in the Holosuites."

"... you understand the difference between a straight and a straight flush?"

Sisko draped his arm around his son as they left his room.

Q arrived home with a headache. 'How can this be? I don't get headaches, and where the hell was I just now? On that decrepit space station?' Yes, that was it, but he had a feeling there was something more to it, a lot more. If only his mind would clear.

"So," came another's voice, "Out late again last night."

Q looked up to see the face of his friend, not that he actually had any real --friends -- in the continuum. At least this one came the closest to one he cared anything about, for now. But, he was annoying him at the moment. "Excuuuse me. Have you found that asteroid belt, yet?"

The other smirked and went about his business.

As for Q, his head was clearing, and he had an unmistakable urge for a doughnut.

Outside the Organian counsel room, Ayelborne and Trefayne looked up into the night sky.

"The pocket around our world is indeed gone," Trefayne said. "All is as it was before."

Ayelborne nodded, "I cannot help but feel that this was all my fault."

"It was," Trefayne said.

Ayelborne looked at his compatriot, "I can never fault you for your honesty, Trefayne."

"Unlike the rest of us, you did not kill, Ayelborne. Not then, not now. If that is a fault," Trefayne shrugged, "it is one I believe you can live with."

The other nodded. And then in two flashes of light, they moved on.

Ayelborne stepped out from the rubble of the destroyed Vedek Monastery. Fury was the only emotion he felt. He looked up into the blazing red sky. A temporal pocket, they got him at his own game. He underestimated the abilities of the humans, of Kirk and Picard. He envisioned tearing the captains apart, tearing his other self apart. They deserved no better. But, they had escaped, with simple transporter technology, they survived. Fury grew in its passion.

Ayelborne scanned the night skies, and for the briefest of moments, he thought he saw a little black mixed into the red. Perhaps not.

Ayelborne thoughts were molded into one word, one word to obsess on for eternity if that's what it took....

The temporal pocket filled with hideous laughter.

The author would like to acknowledge the friends and family who doubled as an editorial board for this story: Ray Clark, Jason Dzubow, Matt Ferry, Dan Hegarty, Daniel R. Lewis, Marc Lowenberg, Mike Poaletta and Jerry Smolens. The author would also like to thank the 600+ America Online readers who have commented and waited patiently for part two.

The opening segment of Chapter Seventeen is adapted from "The City on the Edge of Forever" by Harlan Ellison.

All elements of Star Trek are copyrights and trademarks of Paramount Communications Corporation.

All other elements and content are copyright by Kenneth A. Lowenberg.

The story is dedicated to Stuart William Lowenberg.