

A Universal Problem

by

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This story occurs some time after the STNG episode "The Survivor" and before the episode "Journey's End" .

What Has Gone Before

In "The Xilothian Factor" (<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9835603/1/The-Xilothian-Factor>) we learn that there are three elder races in the galaxy: the Q, the Xilothians, and the Va'Daq. The Xilothians recruit beings from all over the galaxy to observe events and report back -- they call these beings their Points of View. One Point of View, a human named Arthur, was surprised when he -- by coincidence -- came across a Borg ship in Federation space attacking the *Enterprise*. Arthur used his advanced technology to destroy the Borg cube. Afterward, in discussing the matter with Captain Picard, he learns that the Q is responsible for the Borg being in Federation space. Both a Q and a Xilothian appear on the *Enterprise*, discuss the matter, and the Xilothian banishes Arthur to the Gamma quadrant to keep him from interfering any further in the Q's plans.

Prologue

The tiny, glowing sphere shot through space. It was barely the size of a pebble, yet it was moving fast, faster than the fastest starship, as it raced across the vast emptiness. With unerring accuracy, it headed straight for its target.

Chapter One

On board the starship *Enterprise*, Wesley Crusher was sitting in bed wrestling with Alzon Taq's revised equations for quantum interdimensionality. Ever since James Kirk, Spock, and others from the original *Enterprise* crew had found themselves in a "mirror universe" (which had turned out to be a separate dimension within this universe) back in 2267, scientists had been struggling to explain how travel between dimensions worked. Taq's work was based on the theory of quantum shifts, with an instantaneous transition of subatomic particles in a body from one plane of reality to another. Wesley could sense that there was a connection missing in the numbers, and he had almost been able to articulate it twice -- but each time it slipped away as he focused on it.

But maybe that was the problem. He was trying to focus when he needed to be sleeping. He had to be on the bridge in a few hours for the start of alpha shift, and yet here he was, pulling texts and recordings from the computer, trying to find the answer to a problem that many of the most brilliant scientists in the Federation had been wrestling with for decades.

Just another typical night, he thought. For as long as he could remember, his mind would identify a problem and then wouldn't stop until he found a solution. And then it would identify a new problem. It had come as a surprise when, sometime around age 9 or 10, he had realized that not everyone operated like that.

A memory of a problem he had solved in his early days on the *Enterprise* popped into his head. He had arrived late for a study program because the turbolift was crowded and had made several stops along the way. So he wrote an algorithm dedicated to tracking every one of the lifts: where they were, who was in them, where they were going, the paths they were taking...and then he would always be able to find the fastest route from point to point, even if it meant changing lifts along the way. He had discovered that on occasion he could say goodbye to friends as they entered a lift, and then use other lifts to get to their destination first and be waiting as they stepped out. They had accused him of illegal use of the transporter until he showed them how he did it, whereupon for the next several weeks they had engaged in a series of turbolift races during shift changes (when the turbolifts were at their busiest), trying to get the fastest times on trips from one end of the ship to the other.

Wait a second, he thought, as his brain turned back to his current problem. *What if interdimensionality isn't a quantum jump, but a transition, sorta like taking a turbolift through the space between two points?* He looked down at the equations on his padd and began reworking them.

Because of his focus on what he was doing, he didn't notice the tiny glowing orb phase through the hull of the ship and enter his cabin, his bedroom, his skull...

He jumped up with a gasp, eyes wide open. "Q!", he shouted. He glanced wildly around. He was still in his quarters, notwithstanding what his brain was showing him. "Computer" he said, "What time is it?"

The answer was immediate. "It is oh-two-hundred hours."

Oh-two-hundred. The senior officers were probably all asleep. Except for one.

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The doorbell chimed. "Enter," said Lieutenant Commander Data.

The door slid open and Wesley rushed in to the room where Data was seated at a bank of computer interfaces. "Data the Q are in trouble we have to help them now!"

Data processed Wesley's demeanor and statement, and decided on a course of action he had observed previously from Counselor Troi. "Wesley" he said, "sit down and take a deep breath."

Wesley remained standing. "Data the Q are trapped!"

Data had rarely seen Wesley this agitated. "Wesley, if you are correct, we will need to discuss this with the captain. But before I will do that, I need you to calm down and explain how you have obtained this information."

Wesley started to speak, then stopped and took in a big gulp of air. "I was in bed," he began, still speaking somewhat hurriedly. "All of a sudden, images appeared - the Q were being pulled into...into...into *somewhere else*. Before they disappeared, Q -- the one who has appeared on the *Enterprise* -- sent a message. To us. To me."

Data leaned back slightly and put his fingers together, a move he had observed Captain Picard make on numerous occasions. "Wesley, being in bed and having images appear sounds very much like a dream. Are you certain this was not?"

Wesley tried to compose himself. He knew he sounded like a kid waking up from a nightmare, and this was too important to mess up. He forced himself to slow down. "No, sir, it wasn't like a dream at all. It was...it was...I don't know how to describe it, but it was real. It *is* real. It keeps playing in my head. I'm seeing it now, and I'm wide awake."

Data processed this statement, and reached an initial conclusion: *insufficient evidence*. However, he had learned that with humans, their initial description of a situation could be far from complete. He reached out and pressed a key to begin recording. "Very well. Tell me everything that the Q communicated to you."

Wesley forced himself to sit. "It's mostly images. There are a bunch of...*beings*, out in space somewhere, and most of them are made out of energy."

"What do these beings look like?" asked Data. "How do you know they are beings and not something else?"

Wesley focused on the vision that continued to play in his head. "I just *know*. There are a lot of energy beings. And the others -- the non-energy beings -- look...look...*ethereal*."

"Ethereal?" Data had learned that repeating a word as a question often prompted humans to provide additional information.

"Their shapes keep shifting," said Wesley, "and they fade in and out. And they're working together. Most of the energy ones form a big circle, but some of them are in the middle of the circle with the ethereal ones. Then energy pulses start jumping from the energy beings in the circle to the ones in the center and back again. The pulses get faster and faster, and -- *something* opens up in the ring and all of the entities are pulled inside. One of those entities is Q -- the Q that's been here on the Enterprise. He's the one who sent the images. To me."

Data wasn't sure what to make of this, so he asked "Did Q communicate why he chose you for this message?"

Wesley shook his head. "No. I don't know."

Data considered. Notwithstanding Wesley's protests, the most logical explanation was that Wesley had fallen asleep. He needed to determine if Wesley's vision was really a message or just a dream, and fortunately, there was someone on board with extensive knowledge of the dream state.

"Wesley, before we proceed any further I want to attempt to remove the possibility that this was a dream, no matter how real it may seem to you. We will visit Counselor Troi at 0320 hours. Please return here at 0310 hours."

"But..." Wesley started, and then realized he had no better recourse. How could he convince Data and the other officers that what he had experienced was real? *He* knew it was real. He had just one hour to prepare his arguments, because if Troi didn't believe him then it was unlikely that the *Enterprise* would do anything.

He decided to head to sickbay. He would scan his brain activity and compare it to previous records. Maybe a difference would show up that could be used as evidence.

#

Deanna Troi looked at Wesley and yawned. "Sorry," she said, and took another sip of coffee. Data owed her for waking her early, and she would make sure that at the very least she got some chocolate out of this. "Now tell me again about the different entities you saw. Be as specific as you can."

She wanted to determine the level of detail in Wesley's vision. More detail would give some credence to Wesley's claim that it was an actual message from Q. However, it would only add some credence -- Troi herself had experienced a few highly-detailed dreams over the years, and so she knew firsthand how real some dreams could seem. But it was a start.

So Wesley went through it again. And again. From every angle Troi could think of. How he felt at the moment he received his vision. Every detail of the entities and the thing that was pulling them in. Every meaning he could get out of the message that the Q had communicated.

"Were you in the vision?" she asked.

"No," answered Wesley, "I was just watching, like on a holodisplay."

If Wesley had been a part of the scene, thought Troi, he might have been doing something supernatural, like flying or changing shape -- a good sign that it was a dream. Still, his viewpoint on the scene may qualify, since he seemed to be watching the event unfold while floating in space. But every scene needed a viewpoint, so maybe not. She was getting nowhere.

"Did you recognize any of the entities in the vision?"

"No, just the Q that's been on the Enterprise, and only because he showed me his human appearance."

Troi sighed. Wesley believed his vision was real, that she was sure of. But from the information she had, her initial opinion was that Wesley's vision was most likely a waking dream brought on by too little sleep.

The wild card in the story was Q. Where the Q were involved, anything was possible. So she had to allow that there was a chance, however small, that Wesley actually did receive a message.

She wasn't going to be able to determine the validity of Wesley's tale by talking. There was one last thing she could try.

"Wesley," she said, "will you allow me to try and link to you telepathically?"

His eyes widened and he smiled. "Yes!" Why hadn't he thought of that? *This could do it. This could prove my story.* "What do I need to do?"

"Just sit there and focus on the Q's message," said Troi. "I will attempt to share your vision with you. But understand that it is likely I will not succeed. My abilities are limited, and in the past it took me months of work with Wi -- with another human to be able to establish the most basic telepathic link."

"I understand," said Wesley. "But it's worth the try." He leaned back, stared at the ceiling, and let himself fall into the vision that kept replaying in his head.

Troi bowed her head and concentrated. Humankind was at the very beginning of a psychic awakening, and some individuals had a small collection of synapses that might one day evolve into a true paracortex like the Betazoids and other telepathic races had. Some humans were even able to access their rudimentary abilities, but usually sporadically and without true understanding of what they were doing.

Troi had examined the brain scans of everyone on the ship as part of her job, and Wesley did have the potential for psychic development. But tapping into his dormant ability was not going to be easy, and would likely prove impossible without months or years of training on his part. *But, she thought, as he said, it's worth the try.*

As Troi focused, she became aware of the mental aura around Wesley's head, the flow of neuron energy. She tried to match it with her own, to merge the patterns, to see what he was seeing...

Her head snapped up, her eyes widened, and she gasped. Wesley heard her and brought his gaze down from the ceiling. "Did you see it?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "But something in your brain threw my mental probe back. It was almost like running into a wall." She shook her head. "Humans don't have that ability."

"Then it must be the Q," said Wesley.

Troi considered. The mental block she just experienced was highly unusual, but was it a matter for the captain's attention? Her first thought was *no, not at this time*. After day shift ended, she would take Wesley to sick bay and continue her efforts to determine what was going on.

She started to speak when Wesley asked "Is there something you can do to stop this vision from repeating in my brain? It keeps playing over and over, and it's getting stronger."

Like a tune that gets stuck in your head, Troi thought. She suddenly remembered that it wasn't that long ago when in fact a tune had been stuck in her head, repeating over and over, getting louder and louder, having been placed there by an advanced being called a Douwd...

All of a sudden Wesley's plight became both very real and very personal.

She asked the computer for the time, then told Wesley "Day shift will be starting soon. I will mention your story to Captain Picard. Can you make it through the shift? Afterwards we'll go to sickbay and see what we can do."

Wesley didn't allow his frustration to show. If his vision had happened to any of the senior officers, they would be working on a plan of action by now. Just like always, his age was proving to be a liability when dealing with adults. Maybe he could talk to mom - no, that's just what a kid would do.

And Troi didn't know that he had already run a series of brain scans, with nothing showing up different. Nothing to see, nothing to treat. So he swallowed his first reaction, said "thank you, I think I can make it" and headed to ten forward for some breakfast. When the day shift started, he would take his place at the helm and be ready when Troi and Captain Picard discussed the matter.

He had just finished his Ktarian eggs and was preparing to head to the bridge when Guinan walked in to the room. Wesley, like pretty much everyone else on the *Enterprise*, had heard of Guinan's reaction when Q had previously appeared on the ship. Before sending the Enterprise to their encounter with the Borg, Q and Guinan had had a faceoff. The gossip around the ship was that Guinan not only knew the Q, but had abilities that possibly were significant enough to stand up to beings as powerful as they were. Maybe she could tell him something about his vision, maybe even confirm that his description of the entities was accurate.

He approached her and asked "Guinan, do you have a minute?"

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Riker looked around the bridge and frowned. Day shift had just begun. Captain Picard and Counselor Troi were in the captain's ready room, and Data and Worf and all the other crew -- except for one --

were at their stations. But the navigator's chair was still manned by the third shift pilot. "Computer, locate Ensign Crusher."

"Ensign Crusher is in turbolift one," came the reply, followed by the familiar sound of the doors opening. Riker turned to see Wesley enter the bridge...with Guinan.

Guinan returned his stare. "Commander, we need to see the captain."

Riker wondered what kind of issue would be so urgent that it would bring Guinan to the bridge. And with Wesley in tow -- she did say "we" need to see the captain. "The captain is meeting with Counselor Troi at the moment," he said. In the meantime--"

Wesley knew better than to interrupt, but his vision would not be denied. It was almost as though it was pushing him forward, compelling him to take action. And it was getting stronger. "Commander, they're meeting about me." He saw Riker raise an eyebrow. "Guinan and I need to join them."

"As soon as possible," added Guinan.

Riker considered. "Very well," he said. He led them to the ready room and activated the chime. "Come," said the captain's voice from within.

They walked in, and Riker said, "Captain, Mr. Crusher and Guinan say they have something to add to your conversation with Counselor Troi."

Picard looked at Guinan with mild surprise. "Thank you, commander," he said, and Riker exited. "Guinan, how is it that you have become involved in this?"

Guinan looked Picard in the eyes. "For a few hours now, I've had a feeling that something was wrong. And that feeling continues even now." She looked straight at Picard. "When Wesley told me his story this morning, it fit. Wesley's tale may not be the cause of my feeling, but it has something to do with it." She moved directly in front of the captain's desk. "You know I have no love for the Q who appeared on this ship. And he deserves whatever happened to him. But this is bigger than just one Q, bigger than the Q continuum. Something else is happening. Something horrific. I feel it. I know it." She paused, and then added "I believe Wesley's story."

Picard leaned back slightly, touched his fingers together, and considered. Based on his discussion with Counselor Troi, he had been leaning toward dismissing Wesley's vision -- at least until additional evidence came in -- as a tired young man's overactive imagination. But even if Wesley had received a message sent by Q, Picard wasn't about to start playing their games again. And a game it was, if the Q was requesting assistance from the Enterprise. That was akin to him asking for assistance from a gnat.

But now, Guinan was backing Wesley's story. And her premonitions, or intuitions, or whatever you wanted to call them were not to be taken lightly. Plus, he knew she wouldn't come to him like this unless she was certain that something was terribly wrong. Maybe it was true that something had happened to the Q. But if so, what could the Enterprise possibly do about it?

Her testimony added a new consideration, one that had to be taken seriously. At the very least, further investigation was necessary.

He stood. "Senior officers, report to conference room one. Guinan, Mr. Crusher, please join us."

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Wesley repeated his story once again, this time for the assembled officers. He included every detail so that his description would be as real, as convincing, as possible. But still, he hesitated when he got to the end. What the Q were asking seemed impossible, but the vision wouldn't let him stop. "And then," he concluded, "at the very end, Q says to find the Va'Daq."

"The Va'Daq?" asked Geordi La Forge.

Data answered. "When the Xilothian Point of View Arthur visited the ship on stardate 43990.8, he said that there are three elder races in the galaxy - the Q, the Xilothians, and the Va'Daq."

Riker looked at Wesley and asked "Why the Va'Daq?"

"I don't know," Wesley answered. "He didn't say."

Worf asked "Did he say how we are to go about finding these Va'Daq?"

"No." Wesley shook his head. "He just said to find them. I don't think he had time to say anything else."

The officers looked at each other, trying to come up with any more questions that might provide additional information. Finally Riker said "If something is happening in the galaxy at a scale large enough affect the Q, surely someone has seen something. Have we received any reports of anything happening that might be related to Wesley's story?"

"I have received no information," replied Worf.

"Nor I," added Data. "However, the situation with the Q could have occurred well outside of Federation space, or it could have occurred on a plane of existence that would not be noticed by the Federation."

"In that case," continued Riker, turning to Picard, "I think that Wesley's vision and Guinan's feelings are not much evidence for taking action, even if we could determine an action to take." He looked over at Guinan and added "Sorry."

Picard waited to see if anyone else was going to respond, then answered. "Oh, I agree completely, Number One. However, " he looked over at Guinan -- "well, let's just say that my experiences have convinced me that Guinan's intuition is not to be lightly discounted. If we can determine a course of action, we will at least make an initial investigation." He looked down the table at the assembled officers. "I welcome your suggestions."

"We can review and monitor all reports and transmissions for anything that might be connected to this vision of Mr. Crusher's", said Riker.

"We could attempt to contact Arthur, or another Xilothian Point of View," said Data. "Since it was Arthur who told us of the Va'Daq, perhaps he knows how to contact them."

"Or," added Dr. Crusher, "we could attempt to contact the Xilothians themselves."

"How would we attempt such a communication?" asked Picard.

Data answered. "We can try to analyze and duplicate the method Arthur used to communicate with his ship."

"But the Xilothians sent Arthur to the Gamma quadrant," said Troi. "Can we hope to reach him at that distance?"

"I do not know the ability of his ship to receive signals, or the capabilities of his communications technology, so I cannot say for certain," said Data. "Also, it is likely that another Point of View is closer and may receive our signal. And perhaps the Xilothians themselves will receive our transmissions."

"Very good," said Picard. "Anything else?"

Dr. Crusher spoke up again. "Arthur also said that the Q interact with the Organians and the Douwd. Can we contact them?"

"Every attempt to contact the Organians has failed since the Neutral Zone was established," said Riker.

"But," added Troi, "we do know where a Douwd is."

"Then if no one has anything else to add," Picard paused and waited a few seconds, "Mr. Crusher, set a course for Delta Rana IV, warp 8. Mr. Worf, begin monitoring for any message or report that may relate. Mr. Data, begin your attempts to contact a Point of View. Mr. La Forge, assist Mr. Data as needed."

He stood. "We are due at starbase 301 in five days. Either we have additional evidence to pursue this investigation by then or we resume our duties. Dismissed!"

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It had been almost two days since they had started toward Delta Rana, and they were finally approaching. As he piloted the ship into the system, Wesley was still recalling every detail of the images that Q had sent him. But it was more than just a message, it was *insistent*. He had found that by focusing on tasks, he could ignore the message just enough to make it bearable. But still, every hour of every day it was pushing him to *find the Va'Daq*, and he had spent all of his free time devising ever-more-improbable schemes to accomplish that task. And all the time, the same question kept repeating in his head. *Why me?* Out of all of the beings in the universe, why did the Q contact him? What could he possibly be expected to do, other than just deliver the message?

He had considered the notion that he just happened to be the first person on the Enterprise that the message encountered, but that didn't seem right. Why would the Q send a message that could find the Enterprise but then not find the person it was intended for? No, Q had selected him to get the message,

and it followed that there was something he could do with it that others couldn't. But despite all the time and effort he had put into it so far, he still didn't have a clue what that something might be.

But then he had another thought. Maybe the message could have gone to anyone. Maybe the message gave the receiver the ability to carry out the Q's command. If so, he had to figure out how to use it. But no matter what he tried, all he could do was view the images over and over and over. *Maybe the answer is triggered by something*, he thought. But if that was the case, shouldn't the message have included information on what that something was?

And so his thoughts kept going around and around with no solution in sight. *Please*, thought Wesley, *please let the Douwd be able to help*.

Data had sent out several messages for the Points of View using all available Federation frequencies, but there had been no reply to date. He and Geordi were still trying to decipher the communication protocol used by Arthur and his ship, hoping that it would allow them to contact a Point of View or the Xilothians themselves. They had determined it used some type of multi-modal subspace chronaton effect, but they were still far from understanding it.

A readout blinked on his console, and Wesley announced "Approaching Delta Rana IV."

"Put us in orbit over the Douwd's home," answered Riker.

Wesley entered the command, and the Enterprise parked itself over the only patch of vegetation on the otherwise blasted and dead world.

Picard looked at the oasis on the viewscreen for a few seconds, then said "Mr. Crusher, Counselor, with me. You have the bridge, Number One."

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The trio materialized a short walk from the Douwd's dwelling and headed for it. As they approached, the Douwd, known to the Enterprise crew under his guise as Kevin Uxbridge, emerged from the house and faced them. "Captain Picard", he said. "I did not expect to see you again."

"Nor I you," answered the captain. "But circumstances have brought me here, along with Counselor Troi and Ensign Crusher. The Q are in trouble."

The douwd didn't change expression. "How do you know this?" he asked.

Wesley answered him. "Because of me. The Q sent me a vision."

Kevin turned and looked at Wesley, then frowned slightly. He stepped closer and placed his palm near Wesley's forehead. For a moment, his hand became energy, the true state of the Douwd. Then it reverted back to flesh and blood, and he turned to Picard. "I will go to the continuum. It won't take long. In the meantime, Rishon will attend you." Before they could reply, he turned and walked back into his

house, reemerging moments later with his wife -- or, as the Enterprise members knew, the re-creation of his wife.

"Hello Captain, she said. "Hello to you all. Please come inside."

Kevin turned to her, said "I'll be back shortly" and gave her a quick kiss. She smiled and answered "We'll be here." She held the door open. Wesley and Troi looked at Picard, who hesitated a moment, then went inside.

Kevin watched the door shut behind them, then instantly transformed into pure energy, shooting off the surface of the planet and out into space.

Inside the house, Rishon had seated the three visitors and gone to make some tea when Picard's communicator chirped. "Captain, you're needed back on the ship. Starfleet is sending a priority one message."

Picard looked at Wesley and Troi. "Wait here," he instructed, then stood. "One to beam up."

Rishon walked back into the room just in time to see him dematerialize. "My goodness, he just got here," she said.

Troi smiled. "You know what they say. The devil and starfleet captains never rest. He was called back to the ship."

"Well, I hope he returns before his tea gets cold," Rishon said as she placed cups in front of Wesley and Troi and poured.

#

Jean-Luc Picard continued staring at the monitor where Admiral Cortez had been just moments ago. *Something horrific is happening*, Guinan had said. And now he knew what it was. He just had to choose a course of action. Should he tell his officers now, or beam back down to the planet and wait for the Douwd to return? The information from the Douwd might shed further light on what he had just been told. Or, should he beam Ensign Crusher and Counselor Troi aboard and move to join the other ships Starfleet was deploying?

His decision was made for him. His communicator announced in Troi's voice, "Captain, Kevin has returned."

"On my way" he answered, and headed for the transporter.

Back on the surface, he met Wesley, Troi, and Kevin in front of the house. Apparently the Douwd wanted to give them the news without his wife present, and Kevin got right to the matter. "Captain, it's true. The Q are missing. The entire continuum is gone.

"And there's more. As I was looking, I discovered --"

Picard finished for him. "...that star systems are disappearing." Troi and Wesley gasped.

"Yes, captain," said the Douwd.

Wesley spoke up, with the force of his vision pushing him. "What about the Va'Daq? Are they missing too?"

"I don't know," came the answer. "I met a Va'Daq shortly after I arrived in this galaxy, but haven't had any contact with them since. I did not encounter any while I was searching for the Q."

So he may not be of help if we choose to follow Wesley's vision, thought Picard. "Very well," he said.

"Thank you for your help. Please contact us if you learn anything else."

He reached up to tap his communicator badge when Counselor Troi asked one more question. "Kevin," she began, "could you tell us how to contact a Xilothian Point of View?"

Chapter Two

Arthur had always found the gamma quadrant fascinating. Many of the most ancient and interesting species in the galaxy had begun there, and their artifacts were everywhere. More recently, it was fascinating to observe how different species were coming together to form a resistance against the Dominion. He had even secretly helped a couple of times, but he was limited in what he could do. The Xilothians gave him a great deal of freedom, but there was a line that should not be crossed.

He had crossed that line recently, destroying a Borg cube he had unexpectedly found in the alpha quadrant as it attacked a Federation starship. He was fortunate the consequences were only an indefinite banishment to the gamma quadrant.

During that adventure he had discovered that the Q were up to something, something he had affected by destroying the Cube. But the Xilothians and the Q had worked out an agreement, and the Xilothians agreed the Q should proceed. The Xilothians also made sure he wouldn't interfere again by sending him to the other side of the galaxy.

He wondered again -- for the umpteenth time -- what the Q might be doing, but quickly abandoned the effort. The Q moved in mysterious ways.

He glanced at the viewscreen, at the Jem'Hadar fighter squadron he was covertly following. Resa had been monitoring their communications, but so far they hadn't revealed their destination -- and their current course didn't take them anywhere near a star system. But whatever they were up to, it was bound to be violent. The Jem'Hadar didn't send warships out for no reason.

He was about to head back to the galley for some Kuvelli coffee when Resa said "The Jem'Hadar are slowing. I am detecting a group of ships 2.3 light years ahead, moving away on this heading at warp six. Tetrahedron shaped, triphene construction -- Navarites."

Aw, crap. Arthur liked the Navarites. He had spent time on two of their planets, shopped in their markets, even tried their sport of Tibala. And one thing was clear from his observations -- they hated being under Dominion rule. And now it seemed a group of them were attempting to leave, maybe to start anew outside of Dominion space. But the Jem'Hadar were going to make sure they didn't succeed.

Arthur knew his job. Observe and report. But there were times he really hated it.

He was close enough now to see the Navarite ships on the viewscreen. He knew that Resa was recording everything, so he started his commentary. "The Jem'Hadar have been pursuing a fleet of Navarite ships. It's a safe assumption that the Navarites are fleeing the Dominion, and the Jem'Hadar were sent to destroy them. Another lesson from the Dominion on the consequences of --"

Suddenly his ship stopped, spun, and shot off at maximum warp. "Emergency!" said Resa. "Deq priority, immediate return to Xilothia."

Deq priority? *Deq* priority? There hadn't been a deq priority issue in all his hundreds of years working for the Xilothians. "Resa, details."

"There are no details," the ship answered. "No further communications received beyond the emergency signal."

That was odd. The Xilothians might be cryptic sometimes, but they were not uncommunicative. Not with their Points of View, anyway. Hmmm. So he would have to wait until he reached Xilothia to find out what was going on--

"Deq-level emergency protocols established," said Resa. "Communications established between all Points of View."

--or maybe not.

The viewscreen lit up, split into many individual screens. A quick count told Arthur there were thirty-five. *So there are thirty-six of us*. He had never known how many Points of View there were, because the Xilothians didn't give out that information. He supposed it had something to do with keeping the Points of View independent so that they wouldn't influence each other's opinions. But the Xilothians also never seemed to mind when different Points of View met in the course of their work, so maybe they had other reasons for not sharing their number. *But it's a shame it takes an emergency for us to find out*, Arthur thought.

One of the Points of View -- a Berellian -- spoke up. "Has anyone heard anything from any Xilothian?" No one had, so he continued. "Has anyone reached Xilothia yet?" Again, no one had, so she told them, "I am approaching the system now. Jaith, how much longer?"

"Passing through the system shroud momentarily," answered the ship. The others waited while Jaith disappeared through the shroud and then reestablished contact once on the other side. A stunned looking Berellian was talking to her ship. "What do you mean there's no communications?"

"What I mean," answered the ship, "is that there is no one here to receive us. The Xilothians are gone."

#

Over the next two hours, most of the other points of view arrived at the Xilothian system. Every one of them performed a sensor sweep on the way in, and every one of them got the same result.

"Could they be shielding themselves from us?" asked Thella Rendin. Arthur had met her once before, when they both chose to observe the same event -- first contact between the Waarta and the Nufloc. It had been fascinating, and amusing, to watch them discover that the waste products of each race were the other race's food.

"That doesn't make sense," answered an Ibarite, bringing Arthur back to the present. "Why would they send an emergency signal and then hide from us?"

"I don't know," answered Thella. "I'm just exploring all possibilities."

"If they aren't shielding themselves," asked another Point of View, "could someone else be shielding them?"

"Here on Xilothia? That would take some doing," answered Arthur.

"But," said Thella, "what if they aren't here on Xilothia? The deq signal automatically brought us here, but what if the Xilothians initiated the signal from somewhere else?"

"That's possible," said Arthur. "But how can we find out? If they're somewhere else, where do we look?"

"There may be a way," said the Ibarite. "We don't normally have access to much of the Xilothian's technology other than uploading to the library, but perhaps the deq-level signal opened some doors. Let's see if we can access their communications array. Mekla, try to establish a link."

"Attempting to access," answered his ship. "Access denied."

"Let's try it this way," said Arthur. "Resa, can you access any systems or data that are normally not accessible?"

"Checking", answered Resa. A minute later the ship reported "No additional access available."

"Well, just great," muttered Arthur.

The Points of View began discussing different options, from going down to the planet to try and access the Xilothian systems manually to setting up a search pattern for the entire galaxy. During the discussions, the final few Point of View ships entered the system, and as soon as the last one arrived a recorded message appeared on every viewscreen.

"You have been brought here," a Xilothian hologram said, "because we are needed elsewhere. Until we return, you are the defenders of Xilothia. If the planet falls under attack, it is your job to make certain the library of galactic history remains intact. Defend it here if you can, take it elsewhere if you must, but do not allow it to be damaged. This is your only priority."

Following the message, each ship announced to its Point of View "access to defense systems allowed."

#

Arthur paced back and forth, trying to walk out his frustration. The Xilothians were somewhere, maybe in trouble, and all they wanted him to do was stay here? The message they had left for the Points of View was clear, but it was also probably generic, recorded who knows how long ago as a general-purpose command in case all of the Xilothians left the planet.

And surely there was more he could do than just wait for an attack that would likely never come. After all, the system was too well shielded to be found by anyone who didn't exactly where and how to look.

And even if an attack came, what could the Points of View add to a system-wide defense grid that could stop any incursion short of the other elder races themselves?

No, he thought, the "mission" they were given by the Xilothians served just one purpose. It kept the Points of View out of the way of whatever the Xilothians were doing. And having dealt with the Xilothians for four hundred years, Arthur knew they did it out of concern. They didn't want any harm to come to a Point of View.

But still, what could he do? He didn't know what was going on and he didn't know where to go, and so he paced. He needed answers, and the only ones who might give him some were.... The thought stopped Arthur in his tracks. "Of course!" he exclaimed out loud to no one. "Why didn't I think of it earlier?" He shook his head at his own stupidity and said "Resa, can you use the Xilothian communications array to contact the other elder races?"

"Access denied," answered the ship.

"Ok", said Arthur, "can you use your communications system to make contact?"

"I have never tried," answered Resa. "If they have chosen to receive signals using the same method as the Xilothians, it might be possible. I can also attempt other frequencies."

"Fine. Let the other ships know what you're doing, then move us outside of the shroud." The Xilothian communications protocol could penetrate the shroud, but most others could not -- so Resa would have to be outside of the shroud to attempt them.

If he could get the other elder races involved, maybe he could find out what was going on, and maybe -- just maybe -- he could help.

Resa announced "moving outside the shroud now. Attempting to contact the Q. Attempting to contact the Va'Daq. No response yet."

"Keep trying," said Arthur. If Resa couldn't make contact, maybe he could track down a Q or Va'Daq. It would be difficult to find a Q -- Resa didn't have the ability to enter the continuum -- but if there was a Va'Daq in this dimension...

Then, an instant later, a life form appeared on the ship, standing directly in front of him. *Ha*, thought Arthur, *it worked!* The being was using the appearance of a older human male. Arthur asked "Are you Q or Va'Daq?"

"Neither," came the reply. "Are you Arthur?"

"Yes," Arthur answered, "But who are --" The being vanished.

A minute later the starship Enterprise appeared next to Resa.

Chapter Three

Captain Picard walked toward the conference room, mulling over his options. Starfleet had ordered him to join a task force, but now it seemed as though Wesley's vision might have a part to play in the situation. He had to decide which path to follow.

Down on the planet, they had told the Douwd about their first encounter with Arthur many months ago, and then, on the Enterprise, showed him the log from that time. Kevin had told them that he might be able to help, and had vanished. If he didn't return soon, Picard would have to proceed according to Starfleet's orders. In the meantime, he needed to bring his officers up to speed on what was happening.

He entered the conference room to find them all assembled. He could see by the looks on their faces that Troi and Wesley had told them what was happening, so he got right to the point.

"Three days ago, a Ferengi ship was exploring for new business opportunities deep into unclaimed space beyond the Cardassian Union and the Breen Confederacy. Shortly thereafter, they reported a star winking out. On closer investigation, they discovered a vortex that was pulling in the surrounding star systems.

They have appealed to the Federation, and possibly to others as well, for assistance. We have been ordered to join with the science vessels Zhang Heng and Feynman to investigate."

Geordi La Forge spoke up first. "How powerful is the vortex?"

Picard answered "That's part of what we're being sent to find out. The Ferengi didn't make any detailed measurements -- they saw what was happening and then immediately returned to Ferengi space."

"Ran away, more like it," commented Worf.

"Do we know how many systems have been lost?" asked Riker.

"No," said the captain. "The Cardassians or the Breen may have more information since the vortex is nearer to their territories, but the only data we have is from a pair of probes sent to that region during the last two surveys. We think that seven systems have been pulled into the vortex so far. We don't know if they had inhabited worlds."

Beverly Crusher asked "Could there be some sort of connection between Wesley's vision and the vortex?"

Picard spoke carefully. "Possibly. Mr. Crusher's report includes a description of something like a vortex. And Guinan's intuition was that something terrible was happening. This certainly fits the description."

"If that's the case," said Riker, "then following the vision Q sent Wesley may be the best course of action."

"True, Number One," answered Picard. "But until we have a way to locate the Va'Daq, we don't have that option. Speaking of which, Mr. Data, Mr. La Forge, do you--"

A bolt of energy shot into the conference room and transformed into Kevin Uxbridge. "I have found the Point of View Arthur," he announced.

"Is there a way we can talk to him?" asked Riker.

"Yes," answered Kevin. He turned to Picard and added, "Captain, my only concern is the safety of Rishon. I go to attend to that matter now. I will not assist you further." Then he changed back into energy and was gone.

"Kevin!" Picard exclaimed.

"Well, that was odd," said Troi.

"Captain Picard." Wesley's voice floated in the room. "Sir, you need to get up here. The Enterprise just moved approximately 7,000 light years. We're next to another ship...sir, it's the same design as the Xilothian Point of View ship."

A moment later Lieutenant Keenan reported from the bridge, "Incoming signal from the ship...sir, someone named Arthur wishes to speak with you."

"Put it through down here," said Picard, and Arthur's face appeared on the viewscreen. "Captain Picard," said Arthur. "Excuse my bluntness, but what are you doing here?"

#

Picard sat in his ready room, looking across his desk at the seat Arthur had occupied just minutes before. It hadn't taken long for the two of them to bring each other up to date, although Arthur had been frustratingly vague about some things.

Data had ascertained their location -- out between two of the spiral arms of the Milky Way, with nothing around for dozens of light years. Picard had asked Arthur what he was doing in such a remote spot, but hadn't received an answer. Now, the Enterprise was waiting while Arthur "discussed the matter with his fellow Points of View." Given what he knew about the Points of View, Picard figured they were scattered all over the galaxy, and marveled at a communications system that could provide real-time interaction across such distances.

A few thousand kilometers away, inside the Xilothian shroud, thirty-five Point of View ships had observed the appearance of the Enterprise. Resa had immediately informed them that the ship was not a threat. And now, having talked to Picard, Arthur was reviewing with the other Points of View the issues that brought the Enterprise here. "We need to learn more about this vortex," he said.

"We cannot," replied another. "Our orders are clear. We must remain here."

"Our orders are always clear," said Thella. "And yet the Xilothians have always trusted us to use our own judgment, to deviate from their instructions when we find it necessary."

"How do we know their story is true?" asked another. "Can we confirm that the Q are missing?"

Arthur was prepared for that question. "After Picard told me what led to them being here, I had Resa scan the mind of the boy Wesley Crusher. His vision was implanted by a transpace telethesia sphere - and as far as I know, only the elder races use those."

"Did Resa record the contents?" asked Thella.

"To a point," answered Arthur. "Resa reported that there is information still within the sphere that has not yet been unlocked. But here is the part that was." He had Resa play back the vision for the other Points of View as he watched their shocked reactions.

"You see now why we have to help," Arthur said after the images had ended.

"Agreed," said the Ibarite, as all of the Points of View immediately indicated their concordance. "But our instructions remain, and they were given to us directly by the Xilothians. Still, it is essential that we investigate. Two should go, and report back. Doing so will allow the rest of us to determine our next course of action."

Thella immediately answered. "I'll go." She was quickly joined by Arthur.

No one else spoke up, and after few seconds the Ibarite said "The rest of us will wait to hear what you discover."

#

On the Enterprise, Picard had sent a message to Starfleet informing them of the current situation, including the fact that the Enterprise was now too far away from the vortex to join the task force.

Now he was looking out his ready room window, revisiting his doubts. What could he and the Enterprise do about a matter that was the province of the Q? He couldn't believe that the Q, even in desperation, would send a call for help to someone who couldn't help them -- so there was something about his ship and crew that could provide a solution. Perhaps the answer lay with Guinan. He knew she had knowledge and abilities that she had never spoken of or used in front of him. Or Data. Maybe something about Data's construction, or programming, was the key to finding the Va'Daq. Maybe Riker. For a while, Riker had *been* a Q. Maybe there was still some Q-like ability buried within him that would surface when needed.

Or maybe it was something or someone else entirely. This speculation was getting him nowhere. As he pondered, Arthur's ship drifted into view. It was cylindrical, with a flattened disk at one end. Picard couldn't help but wonder why that design had been chosen by the Xilothians for their Point of View ships -- was there something about that shape that helped make it possible for the ship to travel at great speed around the galaxy? As he continued thinking, a second ship appeared next to the first, seemingly out of nowhere.

His communicator beeped and Worf's voice said "Sir, Arthur would like to speak to you."

"In here," answered Picard. He moved to his chair and watched as Arthur -- and someone else -- appeared on the monitor.

"Hello Captain," began Arthur. This is Thella Rendin."

"Hello," said Picard. He had never met anyone with Rendin's appearance -- her eyes, nose, and mouth were all wide and thin, her ears were flat to her head, and her skin seemed to change colors as he watched. She nodded.

Arthur continued. "The Points of View have reached a consensus. If you agree, I will accompany the Enterprise to investigate the vortex. Thella will take whoever you choose from your crew on a search for the Va'Daq."

He considered Arthur's offer, then concurred. "I assume," he added, "that you can assist the Enterprise in reaching the area of the vortex. It would take us months to travel from here to there."

"Not a problem," said Arthur. "I can extend my shields around your ship and tractor you along."

Picard looked at Thella. "Where will you go to look for the Va'Daq?"

"Almost every species has a planet of origin," she replied. "The Q abandoned theirs for the continuum long ago. The Xilothians use theirs, in part, to serve as a home port for the Points of View. And the Va'Daq hardly ever leave theirs -- in a manner of speaking."

"In a manner of speaking?"

"Captain, the Va'Daq are trans-dimensional beings. They shift from dimension to dimension as easily as you and I move from room to room. There might be billions of them on their planet and we would never see them unless they appeared in this dimension."

Picard considered this statement. "How then," he asked, "will you find them?"

Thella sighed. "If there aren't any currently in this dimension, I'm not sure. I have some capability to scan dimensionally, but with infinity to search it's a shot in the dark. However, from what you've told Arthur, we need to try."

"Very well," said Picard. "I will have an away team join you in 30 minutes. Picard out." He tapped his communicator. "Number One, please join me in my ready room."

"On my way." A moment later the door opened and Riker walked in. Picard motioned for him to take a seat and said "I need an away team to go with a Point of View on a search for the Va'Daq."

Riker briefly considered before answering. "Mr. Crusher of course. And Counselor Troi, who might be able to assist in communicating with the Va'Daq."

"I'd also like someone on the team who has knowledge of dimensional travel," said the captain. "The Va'Daq apparently spend their time moving between dimensions."

"Data and Geordi both have some expertise," answered Riker, "and Data reverse-engineered the Ansata dimensional inverter. I'll include Data on the away team."

"Very good," said Picard, "make it so." He stood and walked out of the ready room with his first officer. As Riker headed for his station, Picard added "you have the bridge" and headed for the turbolift. "Ten forward" he said as the doors closed.

When he walked into ten forward, he found Guinan packed and waiting.

"Why does this not surprise me," he said, gesturing at her travel case.

She smiled. "I hope I'm not becoming predictable."

"Oh, never that," answered the captain. "But knowing that you have chosen to be part of the away team gives me greater hope of success." He paused, then asked "What can you tell me about the Va'Daq?"

"Not much," she said. "If what I've heard can be believed, they're isolationists. They don't believe in interfering with other species, and so they pretty much keep to themselves. Other than that, I don't know. I've never met one."

"Well then," Picard said. "Transporter room three in twenty minutes. Good luck."

"And to you," Guinan replied.

Once the away team had transported over to Thella's ship, Picard contacted Arthur. "Whenever you're ready," he said.

Chapter Four

Arthur was true to his word. The Enterprise arrived on the far reaches of the Ferengi Alliance along with the other Federation ships. The vortex was still well over a hundred light years distant.

The Ferengi vessel that had first observed the vortex was there to meet them, on orders from the Nagus. The Ferengi captain was visibly upset at being ordered to spend time on a research mission with little hope of profit, although he did try to interest Picard in the purchase of Latharian Brandy, Genuine Outer Rim TransThulium, Huthna Ultrawool, Aldenian Lobe Cream, and Zarkonian Holoventures - guaranteed to excite all your senses, even the ones you didn't know you had.

When they reached within twenty light years of the vortex, the gravitational pull was already becoming noticeable. The Ferengi announced they would go no closer. Picard didn't see any point in arguing, so the Enterprise, the Zhang Heng, the Feynman, and Resa continued on.

On the way, they discussed what might be the minimum safe observational distance. "The gravitational effects are considerable, even light years away from the center," said Geordi, looking around the conference room table at his fellow officers. "But they do taper off at greater distances."

"I can confirm that," said Arthur from the viewscreen. "The vortex currently has a diameter of twenty-seven light years. The pull increases greatly near the center."

"How close can we get to it?" asked Picard.

"We're not sure yet," answered Geordi. "The normal equations for gravity don't seem to apply."

Riker looked perplexed. "Gravity is one of the fundamental forces of the universe. And it's working differently here than anywhere else?"

"It seems that way," said Science Officer Nithara of the Zhang Heng. "If we assume a body at the center of the vortex dense enough to match our readings, then the amount of pull at greater distances doesn't fit the equations. And vice-versa."

Geordi looked up from his padd, where he had been running calculations based on the data just provided by Arthur. "But given the readings we're getting, and using the data just provided from Arthur, we need to stay farther away from the center than point two times the radius. That means if the diameter is twenty-seven light years then we can't get much closer than about two point seven light years." Then he added, "But since we're not sure if the gravitational effect will remain constant, I wouldn't recommend getting any closer than three light years -- not if you want to leave any margin for error."

"I can get closer," said Arthur from the viewscreen. "Resa says that she can handle the pull to within a trillion kilometers."

"Wow," said Geordi. "Is there any way I can get a look at your engines?"

Arthur grinned. "Sorry. Anyway, I think you've already had enough of a glimpse of Xilothian technology."

"What do you mean?" asked Riker.

"In our first encounter, you got to observe the beam I used to destroy the Borg cube. If my guess is correct, ever since then a team of Federation scientists has been working to analyze and hopefully duplicate it."

Picard had to admit he was right.

"Our ship and the Feynman don't have engines the equal of the Enterprise," said Nithara. "We'll have to stay further away, say an additional point five light years or so."

"However," added Lieutenant Wentthrop of the Feynman, "we've been modifying probes. With the extra shielding we've added, they should be able to get within a few million kilometers before they're crushed."

"Very well," said Picard. "Let's all position at three point five light years initially. Once we have additional information, then we'll determine if a closer approach is feasible. Arthur, you are of course free to pursue this investigation in any manner you see fit. Each Federation ship should transmit all sensor data to the other ships and to Starfleet in real time. Enterprise out."

The officers headed back to the bridge while the Federation ships stopped at three point five light years from the center of the vortex, positioning themselves at the points of a triangle, surrounding it.

On the bridge, Picard wondered again if this was all part of an elaborate game set up by Q, another test for the human race and especially the Enterprise. But here they were, the vortex was apparently real, and he had to proceed as though everything was as it seemed.

The viewscreen was split between images from the other Federation ships. "The gravitational effect has captured three more star systems," reported Nithara from the bridge of the Zhang Heng. "Assuming a constant pull from the vortex at current levels, the closest of the three will reach the center in approximately two months."

Well, it could be worse, thought the captain. *At least we have a little time to stop this thing.*

"Launching probes," said Lieutenant Wentthrop. Three probes, two from the Feynman and one from the Zhang Heng, shot toward the vortex. "Connections established, data is being received."

#

On board Resa, Arthur had nothing to do. Resa was handling the navigation, the scanning, and the analysis. He would be informed if anything happened that needed his attention. He watched on the main viewscreen as the Federation probes fell into the vortex.

As if on cue, Resa spoke. "Arthur, the pull we're experiencing is definitely not gravity."

"Not? What is it, then?"

"Undetermined," answered the ship. "The attractive force is similar, but the stresses are not. At our current distance from the vortex, I should be having to compensate for significant hull shear, but I am not."

"That's...odd," mused Arthur. "Anything else?"

"The vortex seems to be a portal of some kind."

"Like a wormhole?"

"In some ways yes, in other ways no. I am attempting to find a position that will allow me to scan through it, but so far I cannot penetrate past the center."

"Try a crystalink."

"Preparing," answered Resa, as the ship created a pair of quantum-entangled crystals. "Launching."

A single crystal popped from the ship and fell toward the vortex. "Receiving data. The crystal is accelerating. It is entering the vortex now. Link lost."

Lost? What in the universe could break a quantum entanglement? "Resa, what were the readings at the moment the link was lost?"

"Isolating data from the final second of the link and analyzing. Data is inconclusive, but --"

"But what?" asked Arthur.

"I need more data," said Resa. "I may be able to send an object through and use a transporter beam to gather material at the moment of transition. Please wait." Resa then used a replicator to create a six meter diameter sphere of inert matter and transported it outside the ship. As it passed through the center of the vortex, Resa activated the transporter at that spot. "Sample obtained," said the ship. A few seconds later, Resa said "Arthur, you're not going to believe this."

#

"Captain," said Lieutenant Worf. "Arthur is hailing."

"On screen," said Picard, and Arthur's image appeared.

"Hello, captain," said Arthur. "I have additional data about the vortex."

"Should I have the science staff listen in?" asked Picard.

"Probably not a bad idea," said Arthur. "They'll want to know about this."

Picard issued the command, and a minute later science personnel from all three Federation ships were listening. "Go ahead," he said.

"This is really quite extraordinary," said Arthur. "Resa was able to--" The Enterprise lurched. Picard saw Arthur take a step and catch his balance.

"What was that?" asked the captain.

"The vortex expanded almost half a light year in an instant," reported helmsman Katanga. "Holding position."

"Sir, the Point of View ship is being pulled in!" exclaimed Lieutenant Keenan from the ops console. Picard glanced at the viewscreen, where he saw Arthur talking quickly to Resa.

"Is there anything we can do?" asked the captain.

"No sir," answered Lieutenant Keenan from Data's ops station. "The Point of View ship will be at the center of the vortex--" Abruptly, the image from Arthur's ship disappeared. "--now."

"Contact the other Federation ships and calculate a new safe distance based on what just happened," said Picard. "I don't want to get caught if the vortex expands like that again."

"Yes sir," answered Lieutenant Keenan.

"Sir," said Worf, triple-checking his readings, "just before Arthur disappeared, something was beamed into conference room one."

Conference room one? thought Picard. *Why would Arthur -- oh, of course. Conference room one is the only place he's been on the Enterprise.* "Thank you, Mr. Keenan," said the captain. He turned to Riker. "You have the bridge, number one. I'm going to go see what Arthur beamed aboard."

"Just a moment, please, captain," said Riker. "Mr. Worf, can you confirm that the object beamed aboard came from Arthur?"

"Not with 100 percent confidence," answered the Klingon. "But it came from the direction of Arthur's ship."

Ever paranoid when it came to the safety of his captain, but knowing full well Picard was going to go see what was in the conference room, Riker said "Mr. Worf, accompany the captain."

"Aye, sir" answered Worf, as he joined Picard and stepped into the turbolift.

It only took a minute to reach the conference room, and Worf made sure he entered first. He visually surveyed the room, and as Picard walked in behind them, they both spied the vial and isolinear chip on the table.

Picard picked up the vial and examined it. It appeared to be empty. He then picked up the chip and inserted it into the computer interface under the viewscreen. A stream of numbers scrolled across the monitor.

"Do you recognize any of this data?" he asked Worf.

"No sir," answered the Klingon.

Picard considered, then handed the vial and chip to his security officer. "Take these to the science lab for analysis, then return here." As Worf exited, he tapped his communicator. "All senior officers and officer designates to conference room one in ten minutes. Representatives from the Feynman and Zhang Heng please join us. Bring any data and theories you have on what just happened. "

The captain glanced out the window, thinking *if Arthur had time to beam these things aboard, why didn't he beam himself over as well?* But the answer was obvious: he wouldn't leave his ship.

Picard turned to the viewscreen and put in a call to Starfleet HQ.

Ten minutes later, Picard looked around the conference room at the personnel assembled there. Lieutenant Keenan was filling in for Commander Data, while Beverly Crusher was pulling double duty, taking on Counselor Troi's assignments as well as her own. Lieutenant Wentthrop was there from the Feynman, and Science Officer Nithara was there from the Zhang Heng.

"Let's begin with the ships," said Picard. "What's the current status of the Enterprise, Geordi?"

La Forge checked his padd and said "the lurch from the vortex caused some minor stress damage to the hull. I've got a crew out with restabilizers. They should have all of the damage identified and repaired within the hour. There should be no effect on normal ship operations."

"What about the Zhang Heng and Feynman?"

"We have the same situation," reported Nithara. "The effects were negligible and will be repaired soon."

"Same here," said Wentthrop.

"Doctor?" asked Picard.

"One sprained wrist," she said. "No other reports of injury."

There were no injuries on the other ships, so Picard moved on. "Do we know what caused the vortex to expand so quickly?"

Nithara and Wentthrop glanced at each other, then Nithara said "no sir, but we've confirmed that the attractive force is not gravity. Our probes went straight into the center of the vortex without being crushed. There was no gravitational shearing or stress."

"Did they survive the trip through?" asked Riker.

"Well, that's the thing, sir" said Nithara. "As soon as they reached the center of the vortex, we lost contact. But it's possible that they're intact on the other side."

"If there's another side," added Wentthrop. "We have no data beyond the center of the vortex. Maybe it's a portal, maybe not."

"But it's possible, then, that Arthur is still alive," said Beverly Crusher.

"It's not outside the realm of possibility," answered Nithara.

"What else do we know about the vortex?" asked Picard.

"Mostly," said Wentthrop, "we know what it's not. It's not a black hole. It's not a wormhole. At least," he amended, "it's not like any black hole or wormhole we have on record. About the only thing we know at this point is that it can expand considerably in an instantaneous jump."

"Could something have triggered the jump in size?" asked Picard. "Arthur's proximity to the center, for example?"

"Any theory is possible at this point," answered Nithara. "Although when our probes were pulled in, the vortex didn't expand any further. If it was caused by Arthur's ship, it had to be something about that ship that's different than our probes."

"Anything else?" Picard looked around the table, then said "I have discussed the matter with Starfleet, and they have issued a general call, providing information about the vortex to anyone who cares to listen. The Vulcans are sending the Orensu. We can expect that other ships will be arriving at any time. It is the job of the Enterprise to assist with the study of the vortex as needed, but primarily to maintain order among all the ships that come to assess the situation." *Which could become extremely difficult,* thought Picard, *depending on who decides to show up.* "Dismissed."

#

Within hours, the Enterprise had been joined by the Vulcans and a Cardassian Galor-class ship captained by Gul Tulet, and they had been notified that a Klingon vessel was en route.

Now that word of what was happening was spreading, Picard would not be surprised if a cloaked Romulan ship was either on the way or already in the vicinity. And there were many other races that might want to observe something like this first hand.

The Ferengi, on the other hand, were nowhere to be seen. *No profit to be made,* thought the captain. What he didn't know was that Ferengi were at the next system projected to fall into the vortex, gathering samples to sell as "souvenirs of lost planets".

Picard sat alone at a table in ten forward, taking the time to enjoy a meal before things became busy again. He had just taken a second bite of his salad when his communicator chirped. "Captain Picard, this

is Science Officer Swenson. Could you join me in the science lab? I have information on the items you sent down for analysis."

"On my way." Picard took one more bite then headed out the door. *What would be so extraordinary that Swenson would hesitate to give me the details over the communicator?* A minute later he found out.

Science Officer Swenson was alone in the lab when he arrived. "Captain," said Swenson, "thank you for coming. I thought it would be best to let you see what we've found and determine the next step." He gestured toward a monitor. Take a look at that."

The screen showed several different views of what looked like a wisp of fog, with corresponding data. As he looked over the images, Swenson said "That is what was in the vial. The images have been visually modified to make it visible. The data is from the chip you sent down, and it's a chemical analysis of the material. Can you identify what it is?"

"No," answered the captain. "I've never seen readings like this before."

"Neither has anyone else," replied Swenson. "Captain, this material doesn't correspond to any known matter. And with good reason -- given the composition, it can't exist in our universe -- at least, not for very long."

Picard turned and looked at him. "So what you're saying is --"

Swenson completed the sentence. "The vortex is a portal. Not to a different region of space, or time, or even to a different dimension -- it's a portal to a separate universe."

Chapter Five

Even at the incredible speeds attained by Xilothian Point of View ships, it was taking time to reach the Va'Daq system. The Enterprise crewmembers took the opportunity to get to know Thella better, and to ask about the elder races.

When they had gathered in the galley for a bite to eat, Wesley asked "How long will it take to get to the Va'Daq homeworld?"

"Not much longer," Thella replied. "Long ago, the Va'Daq moved their home planet to a remote and uninhabited part of the galaxy. They wish to remain apart."

"But if they wish to remain apart, how did the Q and Xilothians get them to join a council?" asked Data.

"I do not *know*," answered Thella, "but I have heard rumors."

The statement got Counselor Troi's interest and she asked "what rumors?"

Thella considered, then said "Of the three elder races, the Xilothians are the undisputed masters of time. More than even the Q, they can discern future possibilities and determine likelihoods.

"Understand that the future is always in flux, and is made of possibilities, not certainties. It is rumored that the Xilothians observed a future without the elder races.

Around fifteen or twenty years ago, they presented this information to the Q and Va'Daq, and formed the council at least in part to prevent this particular future from happening."

"The council of elder races has only been around for fifteen or twenty years?" asked Troi. "I had assumed it had been around for ages."

"Not at all," Thella replied. "And it's been a rocky start from what I've heard. But the Xilothians are committed to making it work, and whether the rumors are true or not, *something* is keeping the Q and Va'Daq from abandoning the effort."

After a pause, Troi switched the subject. "Tell us what it's like being a Point of View."

Thella leaned back in her chair and looked at each of them. "Most of the time it's the best job in the galaxy," she replied. "I've been to thousands of systems, seen hundreds of different intelligent species, interacted with many of them...." After a moment, she smiled and said "There's a race in the Beta quadrant that is so delighted to meet strangers that they hold a day-long ceremony to say 'we're glad you're here'." Her smile faded. "It's only a matter of time before the Klingons or Romulans find that world and subjugate its people."

"Can't you stop them?" asked Wesley. "Like Arthur stopped the Borg?"

"No," she said firmly. "We observe and report. Although," she added, "some of us push the boundaries of our role."

"Like Arthur," observed Troi.

"Yes. The Xilothians told us of his transgression. After they told us he destroyed a Borg cube, I assumed his time as a Point of View would be ended. However, that encounter also allowed him to learn that the Q were taking actions on their own that should have been discussed in the Council of Elder Races. The Xilothians were not happy about that -- not happy at all. And since it was Arthur's actions that brought the Q's plan to the attention of the Xilothians, they let him keep his job."

"And what is the Q's plan?" asked Data.

"I do not know," said Thella for the second time. The elder races are keeping that to themselves for now."

"Well, whatever it is that Q is up to," commented Guinan, "you can be sure humanity won't like it."

Thella looked at her in surprise. "What do you have against the Q?"

"Not the Q in general," she said. "Just THAT Q, the one who appeared on the Enterprise. He can't be trusted."

"Why not?" Thella asked.

Guinan paused, considering the extent of her answer. "It's his fault my people were assimilated by the Borg. Now he's doing it again with humans."

Troi and Wesley looked at Guinan in shock. Data simply said "That explains your animosity toward Q. How did he bring about the assimilation of your people?"

"I'm not going to talk about it," answered Guinan. "But DO NOT trust that Q." She looked straight at Wesley when she said this.

But for Wesley, it wasn't a matter of trust. The images in his head kept repeating, repeating, driving him relentlessly to *find the Va'Daq*. If Thella hadn't agreed to transport him, he was certain he would have stolen a shuttlecraft and tried his best to fulfill the Q's demand, even though he didn't have a clue how to do it.

But while they were talking about the Q...

"I don't understand how the Q can be trapped," Wesley said. "Aren't they omnipotent?"

"Did they tell you that?" asked Thella back. "Well, from our perspective they're as good as omnipotent. Their ability to manipulate matter and energy is second to none. But they are not omnipotent, just one of a trio of the most highly-advanced species in this galaxy."

"With the Xilothians and the Va'Daq," Data stated.

"Yes," said Thella. And although all three species have amazing and *near*-omnipotent abilities, they each have their areas of greatest expertise. With the Q, as I said, it's matter and energy. With the Xilothians it's time. With the Va'Daq it's dimensions."

"Interesting," observed Data. "But if the Q, Xilothians, and Va'Daq are the most advanced races in the galaxy, who or what was able to trap the Q?"

"I don't know," answered Thella, "but in a little while we may have a chance to find out."

"I would like to know more about your ship," said Data suddenly. "It appears to have several android-like abilities."

Thella smiled. "Cha'taan, feel free to join the conversation."

"What would you like to know?" asked the ship.

"What is your processing capability?" asked Data.

"Classified," said Cha'taan.

Data tried again. "What is your maximum speed?"

"Classified."

"Data," Troi admonished, "ask better questions."

Data looked at her quizzically. "Counselor, I am attempting to ascertain the capabilities of the ship."

"Precisely," said Troi. "When you meet a human for the first time, you don't ask how fast they can run or how many crossword puzzles they've solved. Try again."

Data considered Troi's comment, then asked "Cha'taan, how old are you?"

"Data!" exclaimed Troi. "Never ask someone their age."

"The question is permissible," said Cha'taan, "but imprecise. I will therefore use the date that I first achieved consciousness as the date of my origin. According to the Federation calendar, I am 8,493 years old."

"What other dates could you use for your birth?" asked Troi.

"The date of my initial construction, the date of my first mission, any of the dates I was moved into a new vessel...."

"Wait," said Troi. "What do you mean "moved into a new vessel?"

It was Thella who answered. "Cha'taan is the ship, but not the physical vessel itself. Every once in a while the Xilothians create new ship designs, and move the consciousnesses from the old ships to the new ships. Cha'taan, how many refits have you been through?"

"Six," answered the ship.

"Where onboard do you physically reside?" asked Data.

"Classified," answered Cha'taan.

Troi gave Data an exasperated look and said to Thella, "I'm interested in the interaction between the ship and you. Arthur told us he had been on his ship for hundreds of years. That's a long time to have a relationship."

"A few of us have been on our ships for over a thousand years," Thella replied. "Xilothian technology keeps us healthy. Some tire of the job and return to a life of participation instead of observation. More often, our reports begin to show a sameness that lessens our value as a Point of View. In either case, when it's time for us to move on the Xilothians have us find our replacement. But," she continued, realizing she had gone off track, "you asked about the relationship between the ship and the Point of View. I would answer that by saying this: it seems that the ships have an almost infinite capacity to tolerate us."

As soon as Thella said that, a stuttering vibration ran through the hull. The Enterprise members looked alarmed, but Thella just grinned and said "That's Cha'taan chuckling."

"When the ships were first built," said Cha'taan, "they were given personalities based on their builders. Each ship is an individual, and when the Xilothians recruited the initial Points of View, they chose beings with compatible personalities. When Points of View reach end of service, they tend to choose similar personalities as replacements."

"But not always, I bet," observed Troi.

"No, not always," agreed Cha'taan. "But in the ten thousand years of the Point of View corps, there have been only two instances of a ship and its Point of View having to be separated."

Troi continued chatting with the ship until she noticed an odd look on Thella's face. "Is something the matter?" she asked.

"No, not at all," answered Thella. "It's just that I've never seen Cha'taan open up to anyone else so quickly. The ship is usually quite formal around strangers."

Troi smiled and said "I'm flattered," then said "And I'm also wondering, with Points of View serving hundreds of years, do you ever have companions other than the ship? Most beings thrive on multiple relationships with a variety of others. I would go crazy without my friends and my patients and even on occasion my antagonists."

Thella smiled. "We do socialize. I have friends on several dozen worlds. Unfortunately, the nature of this job makes it difficult to see them in person more than a few times during their lifetimes. But there's also a reason the ship is large enough to hold several passengers. We do occasionally share time with companions. And for those of us who can handle it, we might even become life partners."

"...can handle it?" echoed Troi.

Thella looked down for a second, and when she looked back up Troi could see the sadness in her eyes. "It can be...difficult...watching a partner grow old and die while you remain young and healthy."

"So the Xilothians don't..." began Data, who was then interrupted by Cha'taan.

"Thella, we are approaching the Va'Daq homeworld."

Thella rose and headed for the bridge, followed by all the others except Troi. Once they were all out of earshot, Troi said, "You interrupted on purpose, didn't you? You didn't want Thella to have to dwell on a painful moment."

Her only answer was a stuttering vibration in the hull.

Troi walked to the bridge and found the others staring at a viewscreen that showed points of light in the far distance, but nothing nearby. "The Va'Daq use their dimensional abilities to restrict access to their planet," Thella was explaining. "Although their system is in this dimension, they surround it with an extrusion from a closed-loop dimension. If you attempt to enter their system without knowing how to pass through, you will be trapped in the other dimension until the Va'Daq decide to release you."

"But you know how to pass through," said Troi.

"No," answered Thella. "But Cha'taan does."

Without warning, the viewscreen went totally black. A few seconds later the blackness was replaced by a burst of light from two suns. Cha'taan sailed past seven planets before settling into orbit around one of the moons of a gas giant.

"Scanning for Va'Daq," said Cha'taan. "None detected."

"Not surprising," said Thella. "When your home is made of infinite dimensions, what are the odds you would be in a particular one?"

"How many Va'Daq are there?" asked Troi.

"I do not know," answered Thella. "I have never seen one, and have only heard of two -- the members of the council. There might be just a few -- or hundreds of billions."

"But if there aren't any in our dimension," asked Wesley, "how are we going to find one?"

Unexpectedly, Guinan spoke up. "I can help."

Chapter Six

Silana Phakkara was frustrated. *All of the capabilities of our ships*, she thought, *and we have no idea exactly what happened to the Xilothians*. She had viewed and reviewed the images that Arthur had pulled from the sphere inside the mind of the human boy, but neither she nor her ship could add any analysis beyond the images themselves.

Perhaps Arthur and Thella were right -- maybe it would be better to do something rather than stay here and guard a planet that didn't need guarding. All of the awesome power of their ships was nothing compared to the system's defenses. If a power existed that could breach those defenses, it could also stop the Points of View from escaping with the library.

And yet it was difficult to question the Xilothians. They had knowledge far beyond the Points of View, and had issued orders in the past that were enigmatic, paradoxical, and even downright bizarre -- but had turned out for the best in the end. Perhaps there *was* a need for the Points of View to remain at Xilothia. But still, there was a part of her that wished she had gone off with Arthur and Thella.

Well, there was something she *could* do, minor as it was. "Sabett," she said, "contact Resa and Cha'taan. Let's get an update on what they've found."

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The vortex was now under observation by eight ships: three Starfleet, one Vulcan, one Cardassian, one Trill, one Caldonian, and one Romulan (or at least one visible Romulan). As each of them had arrived, the Enterprise had shared its findings -- well, most of them -- with the others. So far, they had all managed to go about their business in peace, although Picard had had to diffuse a couple of situations where the condescension of the Cardassians and the smugness of the Romulans had started to lead to possible conflict.

"Captain," reported Lieutenant Keenan, "another ship is approaching."

"Is it the Klingons?"

"Yes sir," said Keenan. "A Vor'cha class cruiser. The Maht-H'a."

"Hail th--" The Enterprise shuddered.

"The vortex is expanding again," reported Lieutenant Chang, "by sixteen percent. The pull has increased another twenty-eight percent."

"Is there any danger to the ships?" asked Picard.

"No sir, all ships are holding position and early readings show no damage. But we'll have to move further away to establish a new safety margin."

"Very well, pull us back another three light years until we calculate the new minimum safe distance, then reposition the ships accordingly. I'll be in my ready room contacting the other captains."

"Aye sir."

A gateway to another universe, thought Picard as he entered his ready room, that keeps expanding. Are there any limits to its expansion, or will it just keep growing until it consumes our universe? The door shut behind him and his next thought stopped him in his tracks. *This is an issue that would get the attention of even the Q.*

Of course, if Mr. Crusher's vision was to be believed, the Q may have had a part in *creating* the vortex. Or what happened to the Q may have nothing to do with the vortex at all and could be a completely separate situation.

He continued moving toward his desk. He had informed Starfleet of their findings, and the best minds in the Federation were being conferenced together with three goals: find a way to understand the vortex, find a way to detect and rescue anyone who survived the trip to the other side (if there were any), and find a way to shut the thing. The Federation president had decided -- over the objections of the science council -- to hold off on sharing the finding that there was possibly another universe on the other end of the vortex. The President had argued that one piece of data -- the material in the vial Arthur had sent the Enterprise -- was insufficient evidence. He also pointed out that if they revealed the information, there would likely be a rush to go see the vortex, with possibly hundreds of ships arriving to gawk. He did agree, however, to release the findings when corroborating evidence became available.

By the time we have the additional evidence they want, thought Picard, several of the other races here will have discovered there's another universe on the other side of the vortex, and they won't be bound by Starfleet to keep it secret.

More immediately, he knew Science Officer Swenson was running optimized scans for more material from the other universe. They had discussed using modified probes or even torpedoes to gather samples, as well as tightly-focused transporter beams that could possibly be effective closer to the center of the vortex. He had brought Geordi in on the discussions, and he knew that if there was any way to gather more of the material, it would be done.

He sat down and turned his attention to the monitor, deciding to hail the Vulcan ship first. *They've probably already calculated how far back we need to move, he thought. Although, with just two data points, they'll be sure to mention the large margin for error.*

When Captain Shaval (*once again, thought Picard, a Vulcan male with a name beginning in "S" out of respect for Surak*) appeared on the screen, Picard attempted to be as brief and precise as possible. "Captain," he began, "did the recent expansion of the vortex cause you any damage?"

"We are unharmed," replied Shaval calmly, and then added, "Captain Picard, with eight ships now investigating the vortex, have you given consideration to coordinating their efforts for optimal efficiency?"

"I have," answered Picard. "However, I doubt the Cardassians or Romulans will give their consent to work with the rest of the ships. Or the Klingons, for that matter."

"Nevertheless," said Shaval, "the attempt could be worth the potential gains. Even three or four ships working in a coordinated manner could accelerate the gathering of data."

"And you have a plan for how this could be implemented, I presume." *Vulcan scientists always think they should be in charge of scientific investigations.*

"I do," said Shaval. "I am prepared to discuss it. I think you will agree it is the most logical approach."

Picard considered for a moment and said "Very well. I am contacting the captains of the other ships to determine if they need assistance. I will ask them if they will consider listening to your proposal."

"In the meantime," said Shaval, "all ships should move an additional two point two light years from the center of the vortex. This distance is based on a linear interpolation of the two data points obtained so far. Additional data points will be needed to determine the accuracy of this interpolation. I will --"

"Captain to the bridge!" Lieutenant Keenan's voice was urgent. "Captain, the Cardassians, Romulans, and Klingons have all fired torpedoes at the vortex!"

On the Vulcan ship, Shaval was receiving the same information, so he understood why Picard ended the transmission abruptly. *Torpedoes*, he thought, *how illogical. But perhaps some useful data can be gathered from the explosions.* He began issuing the appropriate orders.

On the Enterprise, Picard had Lieutenant Keenan hail the Cardassians, Romulans, and Klingons. Only the Klingons responded. "What do you think you're doing?" Picard asked the Klingon captain.

"Solving the problem," came the reply. "We will close the vortex and be done with it."

"Do you really think," said Picard, "that a vortex that can swallow stars and planets will be affected by a few torpedoes?"

"Ask the Cardassians," said the Klingon. "They seem to think that a combination of photon and hyperplasma torpedoes along with one of their gravitonic imploders will do the job."

Gravitonic imploders? Picard made a mental note to inform Starfleet. He gestured at Keenan, and the transmission was cut. *We should have been completely open with our findings*, Picard thought. He couldn't even begin to calculate the possible repercussions of exploding torpedoes into another universe. "Put the torpedoes on screen," he ordered.

Spots of light appeared on the viewscreen, heading away. "When will they reach the vortex?"

"Calculating," said Lieutenant Chang. "The pull of the vortex is increasing their speed. They will arrive in five point two minutes."

"Is there anything we can do to stop them?"

"We can go after them at full warp," said Helmsman Katanga. "We will catch them in just under four minutes and can destroy them with our own torpedoes. However, we will then be pulled into the vortex."

Picard weighed the information. *If those torpedoes don't close the vortex, they might enlarge it or destroy life on the other side. Or, if they do close the vortex, they might trap Arthur/Resa and anyone else who has been pulled through, assuming they survived the passage.* "Mr. Katanga, pursuit course, maximum warp."

"Course laid in," came the reply.

"Enga --"

"Captain!" said Lieutenant Worf. "Another ship has appeared close to the torpedoes!"

Picard watched the screen as the ship -- with a familiar design -- destroyed the torpedoes and held position.

A moment later, Worf said "we are being hailed."

"On screen."

The Point of View who appeared was once again from a race Picard had never seen before. Reptilian in appearance, she appeared to have a natural suit of armor. *Something like a turtle*, Picard couldn't help but observe. "Captain Picard," she said. "My name is Silana Phakkara. I've come to find out what happened to Arthur."

Chapter Seven

The homeworld of the Va'Daq had 137% Earth gravity and an atmosphere that included minor amounts of gasses that were unhealthy to the Enterprise crew members. Xilothian technology easily handled the situation, though, as Resa prepared injections customized for each of them that would mitigate the effects for several hours.

When they had beamed down, Troi remarked "That was different than Federation transporters. No tingling."

"Federation transporters tingle?" asked Data.

Troi ignored him and looked around. The planet was lush and greenish-yellow. They were standing in a meadow blanketed in a lichen-like ground covering. The brighter of the two suns was almost directly overhead, while the larger one was about halfway down to the horizon. There were trees here and there, with thick branches and small leaves that appeared to grow directly on the branches. She could see low mountains in the distance.

Data was the first to speak. "I am curious," he began. "Why did you choose to beam us down to this place?"

"Cha'taan detected a large amount of phase oscillations in this meadow," answered Thella. "It seemed as likely a spot as any to begin our search."

"Phase oscillations?" asked Wesley.

"There are different ways to travel between dimensions," answered Thella. "Cha'taan can explain it to you in some detail, but I can give you the basic concepts. The Q and Xilothians move dimensionally using quantum shifting. It's a technological solution to the problem, and it moves them instantly. The Va'Daq, though, are transdimensional beings, and they move from dimension to dimension by phase graduated kinetics. From what I've been told, it's sort of like walking down a hallway from one dimension to the other." She gestured at the meadow around them. "Those hallways fade, but they leave behind oscillations that can be detected. At least," she amended, "they can be detected by Cha'taan."

She turned to the device beside her. "The closer another dimension is to ours, the easier I can scan it," she said as he activated the power module. "But even so, I'm limited in the spacial distance I can scan. If there aren't any Va'Daq within a few hundred meters of this spot, I won't detect them in any dimension." She turned to Guinan. "You said you can help."

"I believe so," Guinan said. "May I have chairs for me and Wesley?"

"Of course," replied Thella. "Cha'taan, could --" she began, and two chairs appeared next to Guinan. "She picked one up and moved it next to Thella's dimensional scanner. "Bring the other chair," she said to Wesley, "and sit next to me."

When they were in place, she put her right hand on the scanner and her left hand on Wesley's shoulder. "Just relax and focus on the Q's vision," she said.

He wanted to reply, *I can't help but focus on it*, but he just nodded and closed his eyes.

Guinan looked at Thella. "Begin scanning."

Thella looked back at Guinan quizzically, but stepped forward and activated the device. It was set to automatically scan all the dimensions it could reach, one at a time.

Guinan let her mind drift with the scanner. She could have done this on her own, but it was easier to let the scanner make the connections to other dimensions and simply follow it. And by doing so, she had more energy to create and maintain a link to Wesley.

From Wesley, she could sense the Q's imperative: *find the Va'Daq*. She let the Q's vision flow through her as she followed the scanner away from her present reality and into

- a world that looked exactly like the one she was physically in, with another Thella, Troi, Data, and Wesley;

- a world that looked exactly like the one she was physically in, except here Thella was replaced by Arthur;

- a world with only one sun in the sky, and Data was not there;

- and on, and on, and on.

Once she was sure of her link to both the machine and Wesley, she began to amplify the Q's message through her, using it to try and extend the range of the scanner. Dimension after dimension after dimension went by, but the Va'Daq were nowhere to be found.

Next to her, Wesley sat oblivious to the world around him. He was finally able to stop pushing the Q's message aside and surrender himself into it.

After a minute or two, he began to sense -- something. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before, a little like the feeling he got in sickbay when his brain was being scanned. But that was a passive scan. This felt -- well, *active* -- like it was searching for something.

How can I tell that? he thought.

The feeling narrowed in to a particular spot on his brain and became stronger. When it did, the Q's vision faded. No, that wasn't it -- it hadn't faded, but it was no longer focused on him. Instead, it was playing its message to the other presence in his mind.

He felt another part of his mind respond to the feeling, reaching out to make a connection...and suddenly another presence was in his mind, calm and resolute. *Follow me*, it seemed to say, although he didn't hear any words.

The presence started moving away, and he tried to maintain the connection, but it faded. However, a moment later it was back, and over the next few -- seconds? minutes? hours? -- it worked with him as he began to understand how to exercise the part of his mind that was connected. Finally, he was able to follow it as it moved away.

Moments later he began to see images, images of planets like the one he was on, but not clearly. It was almost like looking through gauze. He tried to look around, but his field of view didn't move the directions he intended. *I'm not there*, he thought. *I'm seeing through Guinan's eyes*. And somehow Guinan was able to follow the dimensional scanner as it moved from dimension to dimension. That meant that he looked where she looked, saw what she saw.

Although Wesley was seeing these other places, that was all. He had no ability to smell, or feel, or otherwise experience his surroundings.

He wanted more than that. Could he send his consciousness along the path established by Guinan and be able to experience each dimension more fully? Could he unlink from Guinan and track the Va'Daq through dimensions on his own? To do so, he would need abilities he had never exhibited. *Or tried*, he thought. His brain scans showed that, like some other humans, he had the primitive beginnings of what Counselor Troi labeled a paracortex. Could he access it? Was he accessing it now? Could he use it to both send his consciousness across dimensions and then across space in those dimensions, to find the Va'Daq wherever they were?

Was it possible that whatever the Q had done to him would give him these abilities?

He decided to see if he could reach out to Guinan. They were already connected somehow, so maybe she could show him more. He tried to focus as completely as he could on the mental link they were sharing. *Guinan?*

No response.

He continued his attempts to communicate, but without success. He eventually concluded that while she had a connection to his mind, he didn't have one to hers. She was simply feeding him images. The link he felt was probably into his visual cortex only and had nothing to do with his psychic potential.

He wanted, he needed, to be able to do more. He stopped drifting within Guinan's view of the other dimensions and brought his consciousness back to his own. When he did, Guinan somehow sensed it and returned as well. "Is something wrong?" she asked when he opened his eyes.

"I need to talk with everyone," he said, looking around. Thella and Troi were nearby, but Data was farther away, scanning everything he could find. It only took a minute for him to return, however, and Wesley explained what he wanted to attempt. "And I think the Q might have given me the ability to do it," he concluded.

Data immediately stated the obvious counterpoint. "Then why did they not give you the knowledge to use this ability?"

"I can't explain the Q," answered Wesley, feeling as ridiculous as he did when he first tried to explain his vision to Data. "All I know is I have the same feeling about this that I did about the message the Q sent me -- I just know it's right."

He turned to Guinan and asked "Were you physically moving through the dimensions with the scanner?"

"No," she answered. "I can see dimensionally, but I can't move dimensionally without some type of transport device."

"Can you teach me how to do it?"

Guinan considered. "I'm not sure, but I think it's unlikely. When I was taught this ability, I was told it was something only a handful of my people could do."

Wesley turned to Data and said "When this all started I was working with Alzon Taq's equations for quantum interdimensionality. I knew there was something missing, and I think I know what it is." He looked at Thella. "You said the Q and Xilothians use quantum shifting to move through dimensions, but the Va'Daq use phase shifting. I know the Q are energy beings, but what about the Xilothians and Va'Daq?"

"The Xilothians are energy beings as well," she said. "The Va'Daq -- well, I suppose you could say they're corporeal, but not in the sense that you and I are. They are -- I don't know if there's an exact word -- *insubstantial*."

"But insubstantial or not," said Wesley, "they're *matter*. And you said they phase shift. And that's the problem with Taq's equations -- he was trying to apply quantum shifting to matter."

Data reviewed his knowledge banks. "That is why the Ansata needed their dimensional inverter to move life forms and objects between dimensions - it allowed them to phase shift. And it is also why dimensional shifting happened on the original Enterprise through the transporter, which converted the matter of the crewmen into energy and allowed for quantum shifting."

"Yes!" said Wesley. "I should be able to quantum shift my neuronc energy and send my full consciousness across dimensions. *That's* what the Q have done to me to let me achieve their demand."

"I don't understand," said counselor Troi. "Even if you can prove mathematically that you can quantum shift consciousness across dimensions, that's still different from actually doing it. And if the Q haven't told you how, then what will you do to make it happen?"

"Wesley looked back at her and said "That's where you come in. I think the same psychic abilities that allow for telepathy are similar to what's needed for dimensional projection. I need you to show me how it's done."

She considered what he was asking. "I can try," she slowly said, "but remember what happened the last time I attempted a telepathic link."

"But the Q weren't ready for me to do it then," said Wesley. "This is the time and the place. Please. Help me try." *Find the Va'Daq* was an imperative that he could not refuse, and he would make the attempt with or without the Counselor's help. He looked at her and waited.

"Oh, all right," she said. "How much do you know about telepathy?"

"Only the basics from RoVan's Guide," he answered. "One of the universal fields, like the electromagnetic field, is the psionic field. Some races can access different portions of the field, usually through a part of their brain that has evolved for that purpose."

Data decided to expand the conversation. "In addition to telepathy," he said, "the psionic field allows for other abilities. For example, on stardate 5784.2, the Enterprise-A encountered the Platonians, who could manipulate objects with their minds using the lower bands of the psionic field. Their abilities were due to the addition of kironide into their systems. And there are reports of races in other quadrants of the galaxy that use the psionic field for precognition."

"Yes," said Wesley, "and what I'm really interested in is astral projection. Have there been any instances of races using the psionic field for that?"

"I have no record of any," answered Data, "although it has been postulated that the upper bands of the psionic spectrum could provide a means for viewing other places and times."

"All right," said Wesley to Troi. "How do I start?"

Troi hesitated. The memory of the jolt she had received on the Enterprise when she tried to link with Wesley popped into her mind. It had not been pleasant, and now she was going to have to put that memory aside and possibly run into that brick wall once again. She was not looking forward to it. "We need to enhance the area of your brain capable of accessing the psionic field," she said. "An injection of psilosynine should do it." Troi looked at Thella. "Can Cha'taan provide any?"

"How much do you need?" came Cha'taan's voice, floating in the air.

#

After her arrival at the vortex, it hadn't taken Silana long to prove that Sabett was more than a match for Cardassian, Klingon, and Romulan technology, as Sabett shut off the weapons launchers in all three ships. The Romulans then engaged their cloak and, according to Sabett, backed away 2.2 light years. The Klingons also engaged their cloak and left, but not before the Klingon captain spent several minutes railing at Picard about how the Empire would demand an accounting of this.

Picard wasn't worried about the protests of the Klingons. He was far more concerned about how the Cardassians managed to organize a common activity with both the Klingons and Romulans. *Hopefully this is a unique circumstance*, he thought.

Now, he stood once again in the Enterprise conference room. Riker and Keenan were there, along with T'Paan from the Vulcan ship, Hanor Pren from the Trill ship, and Jaloc from the Caldonian ship. The

Federations scientists Wentthrop and Nithara sat together. Somewhat surprisingly to Picard, the Cardassian Gul Marratt had also sent a science representative to the meeting, Ulani Belor. And the Point of View Silana was there as well.

They had all just finished watching the Enterprise's recording of the first expansion of the vortex and the disappearance of Arthur. This was the moment that Picard had called them all together for. Once those torpedoes had been fired at the vortex, he realized he couldn't wait any longer.

"Right before Arthur disappeared," said the captain, "he managed to beam a vial and an isolinear chip to the Enterprise with his findings. When we analyzed the data and the sample, this is what we found." He put the analysis on the viewscreen and watched as the eyes around the table widened. "Fascinating," said T'Paan.

"With this information," asked Picard, "will it be possible to stop the vortex? And will we be able to retrieve any survivors from the other side?"

"This information," said the Caldonian Jaloc, "is insufficient. We need to understand the other universe. And now we know how to begin obtaining that data. We can use tethered probes."

Hanor Pren spoke up, expanding on what Jaloc said. "We can connect two probes with a few hundred kilometers of reinforced takamite nanowire and send them into the vortex. For a brief time, one will be in our universe, while the other will be in the other universe. The physical connection will hopefully allow the first probe to communicate with the second one, which can then relay the data to us."

"Make it so," said Picard. "The Enterprise will assist in any way possible."

The next hours were filled with the scientists calculating exactly how long the wire could be, the length of time the probes would be in both universes, exactly how much data could be transmitted in that time, and exactly what data they should attempt to obtain. In the end, they decided that they could obtain one visual image, one short-range multi-band sensor sweep, and one long-range single-band sensor sweep. After that, the second probe would be through the vortex. However, they programmed the probes to continue to run continuous sweeps -- if they were somehow able to recover one or both, they would then have the additional data to examine.

Geordi worked with the scientists to increase the shielding of the probes and to create sturdy connections for each end of the wire. They didn't know what would happen when the first probe entered the other universe -- would it stop? would it accelerate? would it change direction? would it explode? would it do something completely unexpected? -- and so they wanted to do everything they could to ensure that the probes would remain tethered.

And then it was time to launch. The Enterprise moved closer to the center of the vortex, almost as close as they could get without being pulled in, dropped the probes, then moved back and watched as the probes accelerated toward the center.

Each ship had the frequencies and was listening in. On the Enterprise, Lieutenant Keenan reported the time remaining until the first probe crossed over. "Ten seconds...five...now." A second later the other probe disappeared into the vortex and communications was lost. "Data received," said Keenan. "Everything worked as planned."

"Let's see it," said Picard, and Keenan put the image returned from the probe on the screen. "Mother of Pearl," whispered Helmsman Katanga as he stared wide-eyed at the picture.

Everything that had gone through the vortex was there. Every sun, every planet; all intact, all seemingly unharmed, all impossibly close to one another.

#

"You may experience what seem to be hallucinations," said Troi as she injected Wesley with the psilosynine. "Don't fight them -- they're your brain trying to make sense of its access to the psionic field."

"Ok," said Wesley.

"I will attempt to guide you, but if I'm rebuffed like I was last time you'll be on your own."

"I understand," he said. He was already beginning to feel the effects of the injection. Everything was becoming more dreamlike, and it was much easier to slip down into his mind than focus on his surroundings.

The Q's vision was still there, it was always there, but once again it receded into the background, almost as though it was getting out of the way to let him focus on the task at hand.

Ok, now what do I do?

He needed to mentally access the psionic field, but how? He remembered what it felt like being pulled along with Guinan as she traversed dimensions. He was just a rider on that trip, now he needed to be the helmsman. He needed a course to follow.

Or did he? He didn't need to make an effort to see things, or hear things, or smell things. If a psychic sense worked the same way, all he had to do was let it happen.

The problem was, how would he recognize what he was sensing? He had no experience at it. It would be like hearing sounds for the first time -- how would you recognize what you were hearing?

Or, what if psychic abilities were more like touch, where he needed to reach out and make contact? But Counselor Troi had said she would attempt to communicate with him, so at least in that instance just being receptive should be enough.

C'mon, Q. Help a guy out. I'm trying to do what you want.

He tried to reach out with his mind, even though he didn't know how to do so or what he was reaching for. As he slipped further into a daydream state, familiar images from his life appeared and vanished, but none of them seemed to be anything more than memories.

What was that?

Nothing.

Wait, there it is again.

A black ribbon was floating in the air a long distance ahead. He wasn't sure if he was seeing it with his eyes or with his mind. *Must be my mind*, he thought as he floated toward it. He could not feel Troi's presence, or even if she was attempting to connect with him. It didn't matter. The ribbon was the answer he was looking for. He just knew it.

As he got closer to the leading edge of the ribbon it became larger. Soon it was longer than he could see and as wide as a shuttlecraft. He began to float along it, and as he did he began to hear low-pitched static. He floated on, and now the part of the ribbon under him was dark purple. He passed by blue, and green, and yellow, and orange, and red, and still he floated on. The static had become a high-pitched whine.

Without transition, he entered a new region, with tiny bits of matter all around him. As he floated along, the bits became distinct molecules, then atoms, then protons and neutrons, then leptons...

And then he entered a region he didn't understand. Sounds and images surrounded him, but abstract, almost completely incomprehensible. Still he floated on.

Just ahead was a region of less abstraction, with sounds and images he could at least partially recognize. He allowed himself to float into and across it.

"Wesley."

He stopped -- how did he do that? -- and looked around. The static in the background was now recognizable as many -- thousands? millions? more? -- voices, and the images, while constantly changing, were of people and places and events and maybe more, but it was difficult to focus on any one.

He tried to form a question. "Counselor?"

"Yes," she answered. "I've been attempting to contact you without success. Then your presence just appeared. I don't know how you did it, but you've managed to access your telepathic abilities."

"I'm not sure myself. But I think I'm on the right track." He continued floating forward.

Far ahead, he heard the lowest note he had ever heard in his life. Actually, it would be more accurate to say he felt it more than heard it. But it was still in the distance, and he intuited he would reach what he was looking for before he got to that point.

He was right.

As he continued forward, the ribbon seemed to rise up on either side and circle over him, until he was surrounded. Stars appeared in the fabric, and galaxies, and he could see...everything. And right in the middle of it all was the Q's vision. He drifted toward it, joining the beings in the middle of the circle as they combined their abilities, creating an exotic and immensely powerful form of energy that the universe quite possibly had never seen before, and then channeling that energy through a phase tunnel with a quantum shift at the end. And then, unexpectedly, in the middle of it all, the Enterprise appeared, grew larger...

Wesley returned to the present with a snap. He no longer felt any effects of the psilosynine. Troi and Guinan and Data and Thella surrounded him. "I know where the Va'Daq are!" he exclaimed. "We need to get back to the Enterprise!"

#

Picard couldn't remember a mission that had given the conference room such a workout. Once again he was at the head of the table surrounded by his officers, scientists from various races, and a Xilothian Point of View. Others were watching via the viewscreen.

The Caldonian Jaloc was presenting the analysis of the scans. "The short-range scan," he said, "shows a spherical area -- you could call it a bubble -- beginning just a few meters into the other universe and with a diameter of approximately one point three light years. This area is, as far as we can tell, similar in composition to our own universe, most likely because it *is* our universe, or at least part of our universe that has gone through the vortex. The long-range scan, on the other hand, shows us a universe very much unlike our own. We only had approximately one second of scanning time and therefore do not have a high degree of certainty in our results, but the data indicates that the other universe is essentially empty."

"That makes sense," said the Point of View Silana.

Everyone turned to stare at her. "It does?" asked Commander Riker.

"Yes," she answered. "Consider. The Q were involved in the creation of this vortex, but something happened to pull them inside. The..."

"Wait," interrupted Picard. "You're certain the Q were involved? How do you know this?"

"Arthur discovered it. I assumed he had told you."

Riker looked at Picard. "I wonder what else Arthur didn't tell us."

Picard said to Thella "No. We knew it was a possibility, but Arthur did not provide any confirmation."

She shrugged. "Well, consider it confirmed then. Now, if the other universe is essentially empty, it is possible some effect caused our universe to be pulled toward it, like high pressure to low pressure. But

with the Q on the other side, they are holding together that part of our universe which has passed over. Which explains the short-range sensor readings."

"If that truly is the case," said Riker, "then how can we get them back and close the breach?"

"Based on the data I've obtained so far, not even the Point of View corps can do that," answered Silana.

"What about the Xilothians?" asked Picard. "Could they assist in this matter?"

"The Xilothians are...unavailable."

Riker looked at Picard. "Which brings us back to Wesley's mission to find the Va'Daq. They may be the only ones who can close this thing."

"They are not the only ones," said the Cardassian captain from the viewscreen. "We would have closed the portal already if you had not interfered."

"And doom everyone on the other side to remain there, maybe forever, if you succeed," retorted Riker.

"What of it?" asked the Cardassian. "It's a small price to pay for ensuring the safety of our universe. Even now the fringes of the Cardassian Union are feeling the pull of the vortex. But perhaps that is what you are waiting for -- you will let the Cardassians be pulled in before you make a serious attempt to stop it."

"Gul Tulet" said Picard rather forcefully. "We are using every means at our disposal to find a way to bring back those trapped on the other side *and then* close the vortex. We will consider your solution only after we have determined that we cannot save those who have been pulled into the other universe."

He turned to Silana. "If what you hypothesize is correct, can the Q keep a pocket of our universe intact over there indefinitely?"

"I am not an expert on the Q," she said. "But I would assume no. There will come a point when so much of our universe will be pulled through, it will be too much for even the Q to hold together." She looked around the table. "It may be that they have reached this point already, and that is why they are holding everything so close together."

"All the more reason to stop it now," said Gul Tulet.

Silana looked back at him. "I will not allow anyone to close the vortex until a successful rescue takes place."

"You," said the Gul, "no longer have a say in the matter."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Picard.

The Cardassian glanced away as if checking something, then looked back with a smile. "In just moments," he said, "a Cardassian fleet will be here. You cannot stop us all."

Silana simply answered "That's possible. But even so, you underestimate the capabilities of a Point of View. Not only did I know about your plan, I am no longer alone."

Picard's communicator chirped. "Captain, at least six...no, ten...no, twelve...and more Point of View ships have arrived. They seem to be deploying themselves all around the vortex."

"We will reconvene later," said Picard to the assembled scientists & crew. "Dismissed." He turned and headed for the bridge. Moments later, over two hundred Cardassian ships dropped out of warp all around the vortex and opened fire.

#

Picard sat on the bridge, watching a simulation of the vortex and the surrounding region on the viewscreen. As Gul Tulet had said, the outermost systems of the Cardassian Union were just entering into the pull of the vortex. But unless the vortex made several more sudden jumps in size, it would be months before they started to fall in.

That hadn't stopped the Cardassians from attempting to close the vortex now, an attempt that was easily thwarted by the Points of View. He wondered what the reaction of the Cardassians had been when the Points of View effortlessly turned all of the torpedoes away, took control of every Cardassian ship, turned them all around, and sent them all back to their points of origin.

He had contacted Starfleet to let them know what had happened, and to get an update on the research that was now well underway. The news was not encouraging. There were still no practical plans for a rescue. And although there were theories on how the vortex might be closed, at some point it would be so large that the combined efforts of the Federation and other cooperative races would be insufficient to do so. *If that moment hasn't happened already*, he thought.

He had been told that many higher-ups in Starfleet privately agreed with Gul Tulet's assessment of the situation, and that time spent on planning a potential rescue mission was harming any chance, however small it may be, of closing the vortex. They were advocating cooperation with the Cardassians, and Romulans, and Klingons, and anyone else who thought they had a plan to end the threat.

But now that option had been taken from them. Picard could think of no one who would be able to close the vortex with the Points of View guarding it. After the attack, Silana had contacted all of the ships remaining in the vicinity and reiterated her terms -- "no one will be allowed to close the vortex until a successful rescue is made."

Why is she so adamant? thought Picard. *Is this all for Arthur -- will the Point of View Corps go to any length to save one of their own?* It couldn't be that they were doing it for the Q -- their allegiance was with the Xilothians.

And the Xilothians are unavailable.

Picard suddenly realized that he knew exactly where the Xilothians were.

Chapter Eight

About fifty light years away and closing fast, Cha'taan reported "The Cardassians are attempting to close the vortex."

"Good luck with that," said Thella. They had earlier received an update from Silana/Sabett, and were aware of what was happening. "With over a dozen Points of View guarding it, the Cardassians don't stand a chance."

Troi wasn't so certain. "But what if they happen to succeed?" she asked.

Thella smiled. "They won't. You'll get to see for yourself -- we'll be there in less than 30 minutes."

Twenty-seven minutes later, Cha'taan dropped out of warp next to the Enterprise, and there were no Cardassian ships to be seen. Data, Troi, Guinan, and Wesley beamed back to the Enterprise and made their report to Captain Picard in his ready room.

"That's extraordinary," said Picard when they finished. He turned to look at Wesley. "So the Va'Daq are with the Q and Xilothians? Then why did the Q instruct you to find them?"

"Actually, sir, they aren't" replied Wesley. "They helped the Q and Xilothians open a portal to another universe, but they weren't pulled through. I'm not exactly sure how, but they wound up trapped between the two universes."

"You saw this."

"Yes sir. I need to figure out how to contact them, to see if we can find a way to bring them back to our universe."

Picard was familiar with telepathy -- he himself had shared a mind meld with the Vulcan ambassador Sarak, and had dealt with other telepathic species (an image of Lwaxana Troi popped unbidden into his head and he forcefully shoved it away) -- but it was difficult to believe that Mr. Crusher had suddenly developed what appeared to be advanced psychic abilities. However, he reminded himself, with the Q involved, anything could happen. And both Guinan and Counselor Troi supported Wesley's story.

"Very well," he said. "Begin whenever you're ready."

"Thank you sir," answered Wesley. "I think I'll be most comfortable making the attempt from my room."

"Would you like someone with you?" asked Troi.

Wesley thought it over, then said "No thank you. But if I need anything I'll let you know." He stood. "I'll begin right away."

After he exited, Troi looked at Guinan. "I'm uncomfortable leaving him alone to make this attempt."

Guinan smiled. "He won't be alone."

#

Wesley sat in his room with the lights low, trying to prepare himself for the effort he was about to make. He had told the others he wanted to be alone, not because he wouldn't welcome their support, but because he didn't want them to watch him fail.

When he had used his newfound abilities back on the Va'Daq homeworld, when he had been inside the vision, he had seen what happened to the Va'Daq, although he didn't understand it. Right after the portal opened, as the Q were being pulled into the other universe, the phase shift tunnel that the Va'Daq had built had sealed itself, with all of the Va'Daq inside. It then kicked sideways into nothingness. He had tried to follow it with his psychic consciousness, but he couldn't get past the center of the vortex. Apparently the psionic field did not extend outside of this universe.

And if that's true, thought Wesley, then there's no way I can contact them.

His distress was making it difficult to relax. *Maybe I should get some psilosynine.* But he didn't want to be dependent on a drug to be able to tap his psychic potential, so he pushed down his fears. He had to try, and the sooner the better.

He started by tensing up as tight as he could, then allowed every part of his body to relax. *Just let your mind wander,* he told himself. *Don't force it. Remember the ribbon.* But he was still too awake, too nervous, too afraid of failure. And the vision was still front and center in his mind. Instead of receding like it had last time, it seemed even stronger, perhaps because he was so close to carrying out his goal.

After several minutes, he gave up and headed to sickbay for some psilosynine.

#

Guinan sat in her quarters, surrounded by lit candles, focusing her mind on Wesley. She didn't know if she would be able to establish a link without physical contact, but she thought it might be possible given that she had formed a connection with him previously. The difference this time was that instead of letting him see what she was seeing, she needed to reverse the process so that she could see what he was seeing.

Initially, she let her mind follow the passageways down to the lower decks, along the corridor to Wesley's quarters, then inside -- but to her surprise she did not sense him there. She then allowed her consciousness to expand, to search, and after a minute she located him in sickbay. She followed along as he made the trek back to his quarters. Once she detected his use of his psychic abilities, she would make the attempt to connect to his mind.

If she could do so, she might be able to help him find the Va'Daq. But that was actually her secondary purpose. He was attempting to make a psychic connection that was literally out of this universe, and she could serve as a lifeline, a way for Wesley to find his way back if he got lost.

He must have given himself the drug, she realized as she sensed him dropping into a state of deep relaxation. She let her consciousness hover there, waiting.

#

Once he was able to relax, Wesley discovered that accessing his psychic abilities was much easier this time around. The Q's vision, always there, welcomed him down into it, to the center of the circle, where the Va'Daq created a passageway that was the first step toward opening a portal to another universe.

But this is the past. I need to find them in the present.

He watched again as the Q and Xilothians used their abilities to create exotic energy at a level that could easily destroy entire star systems, perhaps even entire regions of space, if it wasn't contained within the Va'Daq's tunnel. Then all at once, they pulsed the energy through the tunnel and into a quantum shift that tore through the fabric of this universe, jumped the gap, and blasted a hole into the next universe. He felt the surprise when they realized that the other universe was pulling them in, saw the Va'Daq close their tunnel, saw the Q and Xilothians attempt to kick the tunnel back, only to have the pull of the vortex catch it and spin it off into the space between universes, saw one Q create and launch a message toward the Enterprise...

Wesley's consciousness floated on this side of the vortex, the pull of the other universe having no effect on it. He attempted to pass through and couldn't. He attempted to move sideways, into the nothingness between universes, and couldn't.

He thought back to his initial discussions with Guinan, and Troi, and Data. He had been certain that he was going to need to quantum shift his consciousness across dimensions to find the Va'Daq, but instead discovered them here in this dimension. He therefore had never made the attempt to perform a psychic dimensional shift. *I wonder if I can use a quantum shift to move directly to the Va'Daq.* In theory, he was fairly certain it was possible. But how could he actually go about it?

He thought back to Guinan, to the way she pulled him along with her from dimension to dimension. He needed to better understand how she did it. *All right, Guinan, he thought, just what did you do to make the jump from here to there?*

And Guinan's voice said in his mind, *let me show you.*

#

"You're telling me the Xilothians are trapped over there as well?" Admiral Cortez stared at the image of Jean-Luc Picard as he tried to determine the ramifications of this news.

"Apparently so," answered the captain. "It seems that all three elder races were cooperating to create a portal into another universe."

"Any idea why?"

Picard shook his head. "None."

"From the result," said Cortez, "we can assume they weren't expecting what they found. And now this boy..." he paused, searching for the name.

"Wesley Crusher."

"Yes, thank you, Wesley Crusher is now exhibiting advanced psychic abilities and is attempting to contact the Va'Daq. Assuming for the moment that his abilities are real, any thought on what the Va'Daq might be able to do if Crusher does manage to make contact?"

Picard shrugged. "Until we know more about them, we can assume the Va'Daq are as capable as the Q. I don't know what they might be able to do, but they likely have considerable and advanced capabilities."

"But not enough to extricate themselves from their current dilemma," said Cortez. He looked straight at Picard. "Captain, Starfleet has made the decision to do everything in its power to close this vortex as soon as possible."

"Sir, that will be...difficult...as long as the Points of View are guarding it."

The Admiral pursed his lips, then said "we are aware of the issue. But if they get in the way, we'll be forced to remove them."

Picard leaned back, his eyes widening. "You have the reports on what a handful of them were able to do to a large Cardassian fleet. How do you propose to overcome their technological advantage?"

Cortez became even more serious. "Captain, what I'm about to tell you is confidential and to be shared with no one. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," answered Picard.

"Starfleet research has made a breakthrough analyzing the weapon that the Point of View Arthur used against the Borg. We are installing prototypes on three Defiant-class cruisers and sending them to your location. They will be available to make sure the vortex is closed."

Picard remained silent, wondering who had convinced the Admiral that this plan was viable. Even if the weapon worked, and even if they managed to disable or destroy one or more Point of View ships, the other Points of View would make sure they never fired again.

And then the Points of View would have good reason to never trust the Federation again.

"Sir, with all due respect..."

Cortez held up a hand. "I know what you're going to say, Jean-Luc. But we have a plan that we think will work, and it will be executed in less than one hour. You are ordered to stay out of the way. Cortez out."

Picard stared at the now-blank screen and considered. He knew that there were some in the Federation and in Starfleet who would be more than happy to lock the Q away in another universe. They would see it as a fitting outcome for beings who had put the entire human race on trial. But to be willing to shut off the Xilothians, and Arthur, and perhaps billions of others if any of the planets that went through were inhabited -- *they must have determined that the vortex is already so large that it's forcing them to take this action*. Given the choice between closing the vortex or waiting while it potentially pulled in the entire universe, they chose to make the attempt to close it now before it grew any more. And they were going to attempt to go right through the Point of View corps to do it.

He wondered what the plan of attack could possibly be. A single Point of View ship was extraordinarily capable, and with sixteen of them out there surrounding the vortex, it seemed unlikely at best, and more likely impossible, that anything the Federation could do would work. But whatever it was, it could happen at any time. *Less than an hour*, Cortez had said. Was he obfuscating? Was "less than an hour" really *far* less than an hour?

And he was ordered to stay out of the way. So given that, what should he do? What *could* he do?

Maybe it didn't matter. The Points of View knew beforehand that the Cardassians were going to attempt to shut the portal, and they probably would know that the Federation was going to attempt the same thing. *And*, he thought, *if they are monitoring communications, it's likely they can easily break Starfleet encryption protocols, even for the most secure channels*. Like the one he had just been using. In which case, the Points of View had just heard Starfleet's plans.

#

Psychic dimensional travel had taken Guinan months of practice to learn. Of course, she had been just a child when she was taught, so maybe it would be easier for a teenager. *Every dimension is linked to those closest to it*, she communicated to Wesley. *You just have to find a link and follow it*.

How do I recognize a link? he asked.

It looks just the slightest bit out of place, out of sync, out of focus. It's almost impossible to notice until you learn how to see.

Where do I look? she heard him reply.

Everywhere. Anywhere. Let your mind explore.

Wesley wanted to reply, *could you possibly make a more frustrating answer?* But he realized it wasn't Guinan's fault that she couldn't be more specific.

When I see it, what do I do?

You have to shift your focus to match it.

There was nothing else to do but try. He let himself drop deep into the effects of the psilosynine, let his consciousness expand until it encompassed most of the Enterprise. No -- that was too large of an area. He narrowed his focus down to the corridor outside his room and began drifting along it, looking for anything that didn't seem quite right.

He fervently hoped that he was on the right track, and that the technique of moving to another dimension was what he needed to move between universes.

You just passed one, he heard Guinan whisper in his mind.

He stopped. The floor? Nothing looked out of order there. The walls? They looked like walls. The interface panel? It looked normal. The ceiling? Nope.

Where? he thought.

You need to find it on your own, came the reply.

He was too deep into his psilosynine-induced dream state to make a snarky reply. Instead, he slowly rotated, trying not to focus on anything in particular, just let his mind notice what was there...

There! One edge of the doorframe to his left. It was there, solid and normal, but it also was -- *elsewhere* -- slightly unfocused. Now that he saw it, it was much easier to sense the elsewhere-ness of it than the out-of-focus aspect. And down the hall, another one, there on that access panel. And another one floating in the air beside the turbolift.

They're everywhere, he thought.

Yes, said Guinan. *Now pick one and bring it into focus.*

Wesley stared at the edge of the doorframe, trying to mentally adjust it so that it was perfectly sharp and clear. Nothing happened. He drifted down the corridor and tried it with the access panel. Still nothing. What was he doing wrong? *Think, Crusher.* He needed to perform a quantum shift, to bring himself into alignment with the other dimension. *Wait, that's it.* He needed to shift there, not make there shift here. But how? Ok, the first thing to realize was that he wasn't shifting *him*, he was shifting his consciousness. Which was energy. And energy could move to higher and lower states instantly. And therefore, it was likely that the next dimension over would be a single energy shift up or down. He reached out with his consciousness, tried to get a read on the elsewhere-ness of the dimensional link.

Up. Definitely up.

Now, how to shift? Maybe he could use the link. He drifted to it, tried to merge with it, tried to will himself to match its energy...

And it vanished.

He looked around, and could see more dimensional links, but they were now in different places. *What happened?* Well, there was nothing to do but drift to one of the other links and try again.

His consciousness was floating down the corridor when Captain Riker walked by.

Chapter Nine

Admiral Cortez was not optimistic about the plan. The information Starfleet had on the Points of View led him to the conclusion that they would somehow know what Starfleet was doing and try to stop it.

But there was just the slightest of chances, and it had started with him giving false information to Captain Picard. In reality, Starfleet wasn't anywhere near to understanding the energy beam Arthur had used to destroy the Borg cube. But maybe the thought that they had such a weapon would make the Points of View pause for just a second.

He glanced at the countdown on his screen. In just five minutes they would either make a successful attempt to close the portal or be rebuffed like the Cardassians. He pictured the scene in his mind: fifty-seven Federation ships arriving at the vortex simultaneously (three for each Point of View ship), approaching from all vectors and laying down a confusing array of cover fire while three Defiant-class ships drop out of warp and act like they're going to directly attack the Points of View.

And all of it was just a feint to make the Points of View hesitate for just one second, while the cloaked implosion device exited warp right in the center of the vortex. There would be no time to stop it, and if the weapons department was correct in their calculations, the vortex would then collapse in upon itself and disappear.

The universe is saved, and anyone on the other side is abandoned. He downed another shot of Saurian brandy.

#

"Captain," said Lieutenant Keenan, "we are being hailed by the Point of View Thella Rendin. She wishes to speak to you privately."

"In my ready room," said Picard, already on his way there. He sat, then turned the viewscreen toward him. "Thella. What can I do for you?"

She said "this is a courtesy call, captain. You have been cooperative with us, and we wish to return the favor. We know that the Federation is on the way here to attempt to close the vortex."

Picard knew better than to deny it. "Yes, I figured you would. The Federation's assessment is that the vortex cannot be stopped if it is allowed to grow any further." He paused, then added "I hope you choose not to harm the Federation ships."

She smiled. "Captain, we do not cause damage unless it's necessary. We will turn your ships and send them away like we did with the Cardassians, but we will not allow the portal to be closed."

"Why?" asked Picard. "Is it because the Xilothians are on the other side?"

Thella started to retort sharply, then stopped and sighed. "Yes," she admitted glumly. "The Xilothians are on the other side. And there's nothing we can do about it."

#

I did it, thought Wesley. I'm in another dimension. His mind briefly wandered, considering what might have happened in this dimension to make Riker captain, but he quickly turned back to the matter at hand.

Ok, I went up an energy level to get here, so going down an energy level should take me back. Can I just do it or do I need to find a link? Guinan had said he needed to follow a link, but he wasn't so sure. Maybe that was true for the way she moved dimensionally, but if it truly was just a matter of psychic energy levels...

He concentrated, trying to remember what it felt like when he moved into this dimension, only this time he wanted to reverse it. He willed himself to drop down a level. And when he looked around, the dimensional links were back to where they had been before. *Yes!* he thought. *I can do it!*

And the transpace telethesia sphere inside his head released the rest of its contents.

#

The Federation ships were just seconds from dropping out of warp and engaging the Points of View. There were twelve manned ships and the rest were drones, there for a single purpose: to fire a wide spread of flash torpedoes and return home. On board the Defiant-class ship Alaric, Captain Jim ("yes, my middle name is really Kirk") O'Toole was hoping for the best and expecting the worst. He figured that most of the other ships would get the same treatment as the Cardassians, but his ship and the other two Defiant-class ships were not there to attack the vortex, they were there to mount a pseudo-attack on the Points of View themselves.

It would take only a second or two for the Points of View to realize that the energy beams coming from the three ships were nothing like the one that the Point of View Arthur had used to destroy the Borg cube. And that was ok, because all they needed to do was be the focus of attention for just a brief moment. But what if the Point of View ships responded immediately, before they realized the Alaric and the other two Defiant-class ships couldn't harm them? He had no doubt that any one Point of View could destroy them all in an instant.

Well, he thought, glancing at the chronometer, *whatever is going to happen will happen in 10...9...8...*

#

Directly in front of Wesley, another dimensional link formed. At least, it looked like a dimensional link.

The message inside his head seemed to focus on it, telling him that here, at last, was his means to *find the Va'Daq*. He drifted forward, attempted to match its energy level...and nothing happened.

He drifted back, then probed the link with his mind. As he did, the Q's vision became truncated, showing him only the final few moments of the scene, when the V'Daq, Xilothians, and Q create *a phase-shift*

tunnel with a quantum shift at the end... a phase-shift tunnel with a quantum shift at the end... a phase-shift tunnel with a quantum shift at the end...

And Wesley realized that he needed to replicate what he was seeing. But how? He had just learned how to quantum shift his psychic energy, but how was he going to create a phase shift? Phase shifting was for matter, not for his consciousness. Yet there had to be a way. There *had* to. The Q were giving him a path, and he needed to figure out how to follow it.

He could talk with Data and Geordi, see if they could use the Ansata dimensional inverter to create a phase shift tunnel. But before he did that, he wanted to try and solve the problem himself. *Just like always*, he thought.

Ok. He didn't know how to create a phase shift, but the Va'Daq did. If he could use the link in front of him to connect to them, they could take care of the phase shift. *Just the opposite of what happened at the vortex*, he thought. *Instead of a phase shift tunnel with a quantum shift at the end, I need to create a quantum shift and then the Va'Daq can add a phase shift.*

But he had just tried a quantum shift and nothing had happened. Why?

The quantum shifts he had just performed were to other dimensions. This one was to -- what? It wasn't to another universe, it was to the gap of nothing between universes. And nothingness would have an energy state of zero.

But if he reduced his psychic energy to zero, how could he do anything with it? Zero energy was zero energy. It was nothing.

And the gap between universes was nothing.

But wait. The gap was nothing, but the Va'Daq were inside their phase tunnel somewhere in that nothing. He didn't have to reduce his psychic energy to zero, he had to make a quantum shift through the gap, go instantly from here to the Va'Daq's phase tunnel. And the link in front of him was the path -- *it* was the phase shift.

He didn't need to just change an energy level. He needed to match his quantum shift to the phase shift. Which, since it was phasing, would consist of multiple frequencies.

So how to do that? Quantum shifting was here/there, off/on, one/zero. Phase shifting was graduated steps. One was digital, the other analog.

He had to create a digital-to-analog conversion. Points to waves.

The simplest way to do that was with pulse-width modulation. And he was the switch.

He drifted forward into the link again and started attempting to match not a simple energy shift up or down, but a series of shifts at the frequency of the link.

#

3...2...1...

The Federation ships and drones dropped out of warp. As programmed, the drones fired their spread of flash torpedoes. Each of the manned ships was programmed to lock on to a Point of View ship and head directly toward it.

Captain O'Toole was surprised, therefore, when his ship simply stopped. "What happened?" he exclaimed.

His helmsman checked her readings. Then checked them again. Then confirmed them with other systems. "Sir, we're not at the vortex. None of us are."

On the main viewscreen, the torpedo flashes slowly faded out and were replaced by an image of a serenely-orbiting Earth.

#

Captain Picard sat on the bridge, watching the screen for the attack he knew could come at any time. *Desperation*, he thought. Despite all of the amazing things that had been experienced since Cochrane invented warp drive, Starfleet command still considered their analyses the final word on matters. To Picard, it seemed likely -- perhaps inevitable -- that there was someone out there who could rescue anyone and everyone in the vortex. But since Starfleet didn't -- yet -- have a way, they decided they had to act now.

He wondered what Admiral Cortez would do after the attempt failed. He couldn't fathom Starfleet HQ mounting another attempt to close the vortex.

"Captain," said Lieutenant Keenan, "I am detecting multiple warp signatures closing fast."

Here we go, thought Picard. *I hope the Borg-destroying particle beam is...* There was a flash of light just inches in front of him, and there, staring down at him in a Starfleet captain's uniform and with a familiar cocky expression, was Q. "Hellloooo, capitan!"

Q? Back in this universe? "Mr. Keenan, what's the status of those warp signatures?"

"They're...gone, sir, I can't explain it."

"Ah, captain Picard," said Q. "Did you come to rescue us?" His gaze turned menacing. "Or seal us off?" The he smiled. "No matter -- I have sent your little flotilla back to Earth."

"Sir," said Keenan, "the vortex is gone!"

"Of course it is," said Q. "And everything is back as it was."

Picard stood. "Has this been another one of your games, Q? Have you been testing us again?"

"Not at all. There *has* been a test going on, an unexpected test, but it had nothing to do with you."

Picard had decided long ago to never trust anything Q said. "So you could have returned from the other universe anytime you wanted?"

"Do you really think that we couldn't extricate ourselves from such a minor situation?" Q scoffed. "No, Picard, the mistake we made was choosing the spot where the two universes were closest together to create a portal."

Picard didn't understand. "What does that mean?"

Q sighed. "Let me explain at a level your primitive brain can comprehend. Universes are truly separate. Not even the Q can know what's in another universe until we open a connection. Imagine our surprise to discover that the universe next door is one giant Great Attractor. It pulled us through -- not that we didn't want to go -- but it also pulled a nearby star system through -- one with a pair of inhabited planets."

He vanished and reappeared standing next to Picard, his arm around the captain's shoulders. "When that happened," he continued, "the *Xilothians*" -- he said the word like a curse -- "insisted that we stay and protect all who came through. Their bleeding-heart concern for insignificant life is the cause of all this."

"But if you could return," replied Picard, "why didn't you do so and bring the star system with you?"

Q removed his arm from around Picard. "Ah. Returning against the pull of the Attractor would have caused some -- minor damage. The *Xilothians*" -- again he spat the word out -- "wanted to find another way."

"What kind of minor damage?" asked Picard.

"Oh, just completed devastation for a few dozen light years," said Q. "Nothing important, really. Is there anything else? I really must be going."

"Just one thing. Why did you do it?"

Q vanished again, reappearing in the captain's chair. "Loathe as I am to admit it, Picard, the Q has something in common with humanity. We need new frontiers to explore, new challenges to meet. This universe has become boring. But," he said, smiling, "it does still have a few interesting moments here and there." He vanished and did not reappear.

#

Wesley sat in his room, exhausted by the mental effort he had just made. The effects of the psilosynine were wearing off, but paradoxically, the more he came out of his dream state the more tired he felt. But he had succeeded. He had managed to make the exact quantum to phase conversion needed to match the link, and for one brief moment he had been in the Va'Daq's phase tunnel, their ghost-like presences all around him. Then he heard Guinan whisper *this way*, and he let himself follow her connection back here.

He had no idea what had happened next. Did the Va'Daq escape the gap between the universes? Were they able to rescue the beings in the other universe? He wanted to find out, but the effort of getting out of the chair, or even of asking the computer, seemed impossible. He would just close his eyes for a bit...

Flash. Congratulations, young Mr. Crusher," said Q. "I'll take that back now." Q held out his hand while a small glowing orb exited Wesley's skull and landed in his palm.

So the Va'Daq did it, Wesley thought. He roused himself enough to ask "why me, Q? Why did you send me the message and give me the ability to complete your mission?"

Q tilted his head. "You think we gave you that ability? Oh no no no." He walked over to a table, where a potted plant was wilting. A wave of his hand and it perked back up and quadrupled in size. Then he turned back to Wesley, completely serious. "You have no idea what you're capable of." He vanished, and reappeared beside Wesley, his face next to Wesley's ear. "But I do," he whispered, and was gone.

Epilogue

The council of elder races was in session.

You deviated from the plan, said the Va'Daq.

The opportunity presented itself, answered the Q.

The Wesley Crusher human is young and immature, said the Xilothians. *He should not have begun his evolution this early.*

You have never known how to take risks, replied the Q.

At least Guinan was there to guide him, said the Xilothians. *You must admit our foresight to place her on the Enterprise was for the best.*

We admit nothing of the sort, said the Q. *And we continue to protest her selection.*

Your objections have been noted, said the Va'Daq. *She will remain.*

Now that the Wesley Crusher human has unlocked this aspect of his latent genetic potential, said the Q, *we should accelerate the next phase of his training.*

The pieces are in place, said the Xilothians. *He will meet the Traveler at the appointed time.*

Now that we have altered the timing of his development, when should he learn of his destiny? asked the Va'Daq.

When the time comes, answered the Xilothians, *we won't need to tell him. This session of the council is hereby adjourned.*