

Author's Note: This story takes place at the end of Earth year 2375 at the same time as the events portrayed in the final Star Trek: Deep Space Nine episode "What You Leave Behind."

Captain's log, supplemental:

The Dauntless has joined the armada forming at station Deep Space Nine for the final strike against the Dominion. The invasion of Cardassia Prime.

In some ways it strikes me as odd, the way the three Alpha Quadrant adversaries of a century ago; the Federation, the Klingon Empire, and the Romulans, are now all fighting side by side against a common enemy. Perhaps a hopeful indication of the future.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

The Sovereign-class starship *USS Dauntless NCC-75310* slowly maneuvered into its assigned rendezvous position around the former mining station now called *Deep Space Nine*. Around her, Federation starships of all classes and sizes gathered, joining ships of the Imperial Klingon Defense Force and the Romulan Imperial Navy as they prepared for the coming attack.

The bridge of the *Dauntless* was a hive of activity as various crewmembers darted back and forth between stations, calibrating sensors, rechecking readouts, and preparing the starship for imminent battle.

"Commodore on the bridge."

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the *Dauntless*, stepped out of the turbolift and down to where Lt Commander Kevin Fry relinquished the center seat. As Fry took his position at the helm, Koester sat in the command chair, immediately pressing the intercom button.

"Bridge to engineering. Status of propulsion systems?"

"Impulse drive at one hundred percent. Thrusters standing by. Warp drive has been re-tuned and is running at a hundred and five percent efficiency," reported the voice of Lt Nate Johnson, the vessel's chief engineer.

"Very good, Eng. Bridge to sickbay. Status?"

"Sickbay is stowed, prepped, ready, and standing by for casualties," responded **Q**, the chief medical officer, not sounding her usual upbeat self.

"Very well. I'll try not to send you too many, Poe," Koester said, just a tad informally. "Bridge to Marine Barracks. Status?"

A brief moment passed before a gruff voice responded, sounding as if being spoken around a well-chewed 400 year old cigar, "Well, ahh, Commodore, sir, we're all just chompin' at the bit down here. Me, Betty, and the lads here have a few things we'd like to, er, discuss with the Cardies and Breen!"

Koester smiled at the response from Gunnery Sergeant Christopher 'Olly' O'Laughlin and quietly explained to Fry's puzzled glance, "Betty is his phaser rifle..." then continued, "Thank you for your enthusiasm, Gunnery Sergeant, but I was referring to the status of the Hornets?"

"Oh... uh... Hold on a sec... Er, I mean, standby..."

An audible click was heard, followed by a brief moment of silence during which Koester and Fry exchanged amused glances. Finally the intercom channel reopened.

"Hanger Bay 2. McIntyre."

"Captain, what is our air-wing status?"

Starfleet Marine Corps Captain Sean Elliot McIntyre stood in the aft-most hanger bay of the *Dauntless*, which had been fitted out for and turned over to the use of the embarked Marine Special Contingent for their fighter craft. Personnel crawled over, around, under, and into access hatches of the various Hornets assembled there, making the final checks and inspections to ready them for battle. McIntyre handed the sonic spanner he was holding to one of the nearby Marines as he answered.

"We just finished prepping the six new fighters transferred from *DS9*. Gotta admit, it's nice not seeing disaster names painted on their noses. Weapons pods are loaded and ready. All ten Hornets are refueled, rearmed, and have passed initial preflight checks - we're performing the final inspections and closing them up now. As planned, we'll be holding two back as ready-fives. I'll be leading the first assault, and all other pilots have already been briefed and are standing by in the pilot's ready room." A nearby corporal handed McIntyre a padd, which the captain read from as he continued his report.

"1st platoon, Alpha and Charlie squads are standing by for Troop Drop by transporter. Bravo squad will be

standing by in the *Normandy* as well. They've all been briefed on the primary targets and the operational window. 2nd and 3rd platoons are being held in reserve. We're ready, sir."

"Very good, Captain. Remember, your ground troops will be making the assault alongside Klingon soldiers. Stay focused."

"Commodore," said Lt Commander Winters from the ops console, drawing Koester's attention. "We've just received word from the *Defiant*. The fleet's ready to move out."

Koester took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders as he squirmed slightly in his chair.

"Very well. Mister Fry, let's take her out. Set course for Cardassia Prime!"

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

"All's Fair..." By PJK

"Jem'Hadar vessel on an intercept course, bearing 342 mark 9," announced Winters over the sound of the red alert klaxon and the rough heaving of the ship.

"Hornet first flight has launched," reported Chief Pono Kyman from the mission ops post at the port side of the bridge. The El'Aurian man turned his seat to face Commodore Koester. "Lt Zander reports second flight is ready to launch on your command."

"Hold on that, Chief," Koester ordered. "We just picked up a tail. Give me a chance to get this Jem'Hadar ship off our track." Koester turned to where his first officer, Commander Virgil Dylan Kane, stood by one of the tactical consoles.

"Well, Exec, you always said you preferred to be in the thick of things," he said with a grin.

Kane glanced at his CO as he gripped the edge of the console to keep from being knocked down.

"All things being equal, Skipper, I'd rather be on Risa."

The starship shook again as the Jem'Hadar phaser struck the *Dauntless*' aft shields again. Then unexpectedly, the ship shook more violently, but not from the blast of a phaser.

"Jem'Hadar ship has been destroyed by a Romulan warbird," reported Winters.

"I never thought I would want to thank a Romulan," Koester muttered. "COB, order Second Flight to launch!"

Down in the aft shuttlebay, four more Hornet fighter-craft flew out to join their comrades in battle. Each peeled off to pursue different Jem'Hadar attack ship.

"A Breen ship has closed to weapons range and is opening fire!" reported Lt Ga'gh from tactical.

"Evasive pattern Delta, and watch out for that squadron of Klingon birds-of-prey!"

The *Dauntless* swooped down and around, narrowly missing a collision with the four passing Klingon vessels as the Breen ship which was attempting to intercept overshot its mark and collided with a slowly maneuvering Cardassian warship.

"Good flying, Mister Fry," Koester praised his helmsman.

"Don't applaud yet! A section of that Cardassian ship is tumbling right toward us!" announced Winters, his ever-present tan satchel almost slipping off his shoulders.

"We're blocked in by the starship *Titanic* and another Cardassian ship, Commodore," Fry reported.

"Damn!" whispered Koester. "Tactical, shields emergency aft!" Then into the intercom, "All hands, brace for impact!"

The *Dauntless* shuddered less than a second later as the wreckage of the Cardassian vessel struck her, flinging crew members to the deck.

"Damage report?"

"Plasma conduits are buckling on decks 13, 14, and 15," reported Lt Dar from the port engineering console. "EPS power taps are off-line on deck 17, section 12. Engineering hull computer core is off-line."

"Place computer systems on back-up. Have damage control teams lock down the plasma conduits," ordered

Kane.

“Sickbay to bridge,” called a familiar female voice.

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“We’re getting heavy casualties from that last hit. It’s getting a little crowded down here. I could use a hand,” said **Q**.

“Counselor,” Koester started to say, but Kethry Sutherland was already on her feet and entering the turbolift.

“Counselor Sutherland is on her way down, **Q**,” Koester said.

“Good. She and the EMH can handle the crowd I have here in sickbay. I’m going to need to set up an emergency triage unit on one of the upper decks so people don’t have to be moved quite so far.”

“Very well. Bridge out. Tactical, target quantum torpedoes on that approaching Breen vessel and fire!”

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In sickbay on deck sixteen, **Q** gathered up some medikits and tricorders as she spoke to the Emergency Medical Hologram, who was busy tending to casualties.

“Kethry will be here in a moment. You’re in charge until then. I’ll signal sickbay as soon as I’m all set up on deck eight.”

“I really think I should be setting up the triage in the main shuttlebay, Doctor,” the bald-headed hologram stated. “I would be much faster setting up, and besides, that’s what they installed a hologrid there for anyway.”

“The shuttlebay is too many decks up, and we don’t know yet if we’re going to need to use the shuttles for emergency evacuations from other vessels. Placing triage in the crew lounge on deck eight will more evenly divide the ship. And as for speed; believe me, I can have the place set up before you know it.”

Q grabbed one last tricorder and hurried out the door. She paused at the threshold, looking back into sickbay for a moment. A look of grief quickly passed over her Trill features and she turned to hastily head toward the nearest turbolift.

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“We’ve got ‘em on the run, Commodore,” McIntyre’s voice said over the speakers. On the viewscreen, three Hornets could be seen ganging up on one small Jem’Hadar fighter.

“*Dauntless* to Hornet flights. The Dominion fleet is starting to retreat. All fighters return to your hanger bay.”

The voices of both Capt McIntyre and Lt Zander started to reply, “Commodore, request permission to...”

“Denied!” Koester said gruffly. “Get your birds back in here. On the double!”

“Aye, sir,” both pilots responded regretfully.

“Message from Admiral Ross, Commodore,” Winters reported. “He and Chancellor Martok have agreed to press on... to Cardassia!”

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Q placed the final medikit she had brought into a locker along the lounge wall. She started moving a couple of the chairs and tables into position until she was overwhelmed by the deep sense of futility. The phrase ‘Rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*’ came to mind. She set the chair in her hands back down on the deck and walked over to the upward-curving observation windows, gazing out at the devastation outside.

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“All fighters are aboard,” reported Commander Kane.

“Helm, set course 265 mark 11, ahead one-quarter impulse,” ordered Koester. “Bring her around to rejoin the fleet.”

“Aye, sir.”

“**Q** to Koester.”

“Bridge. Go ahead,” Koester replied after hitting the intercom on the arm of his chair.

“Peter, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“Captain, there’s a Breen vessel attempting one last end-around at us!” reported Lt Ga’gh. “Bearing 185 mark 30 relative!”

“Port shields at twenty five percent!” advised Chief Kyman.

“What is it, **Q**? We’re a little busy at the moment. All phasers, target that Breen ship!” ordered Koester.

“Firing phasers!”

Phaser strips along the top side of the *Dauntless* glowed and discharged their energy, sending beams of raw power against the Breen warship’s shields and forward hull. But the sustained fire could not prevent the Breen from shooting back.

Q’s voice responded back through the intercom, saying, “I lo...”

The entire *Dauntless* shook with the impact as her shields buckled. Alert lights flashed on every bridge console. “Hull breach!” Winters announced.

“Keep firing at that warship!” Koester ordered. The Commodore knew that if the ship was still in one piece big enough for him to still be giving orders, then they were not in enough immediate danger to stop firing back at the Breen before worrying about the damage.

“Breen ship is coming into arc of forward torpedo tubes,” Ga’gh reported.

Koester smiled a cruel smile as he ordered, “Match bearings and shoot!”

A half-dozen photon torpedoes launched from the forward tubes, piercing the retreating Breen ship’s already weakened shields and blasting away a warp nacelle. The overload of power combined with the sudden release of drive plasma caused the warship to explode, debris vaporizing itself against the *Dauntless*’ remaining forward shields.

“All remaining Dominion warships are retreating back toward Cardassia Prime,” Winters reported.

Koester took a deep breath, an action repeated by almost everyone else manning the bridge. In the moment of relative calm that followed, the Commodore ordered, “Damage report from that last attack?”

Winters consulted his readouts on the ops console, reading off the statistics.

“Hull breach on deck eight, section twenty eight. Emergency force fields and structural integrity field are holding.”

“Casualties?”

“Unknown at present.”

“Sickbay to bridge,” said the voice of Counselor Sutherland. “We’re pretty full up down here. Are you done shaking us around yet?”

“For the moment, Counselor. At least until we receive further orders from Admiral Ross. Do you and **Q** still need further assistance down there? What was it she called up to the bridge for just before that last bad hit?”

“**Q** left sickbay during the height of the battle to set up a triage unit in one of the lounges on deck eight,” Sutherland said. “We haven’t heard back on her status yet...”

“Skipper!” Chief Kyman called urgently, interrupting Sutherland’s report.

“Stand by, Counselor.” Koester closed the intercom and walked up to the mission ops station. “What is it, COB?”

“Ensign Spot has surveyed the damaged area at the hull breach. The entire breach is contained within the deck eight crew lounge. The entire lounge has been destroyed.”

Koester’s face turned white as he quickly tapped his combadge.

“Koester to **Q**. **Q**, please respond!”

Silence.

“Dammit, **Q**, respond!”

Silence.

Koester looked at Kyman. All other eyes on the bridge watched the Commodore.

“There’s a chance she...” Koester started saying.

Kyman shook his head, explaining, “Mister Spot surveyed the entire affected compartment and the surrounding areas. No signs. Not even a body.”

Koester paused a moment, visibly composing himself.

“Understood. Thank you, Chief.”

With an effort, Koester returned to his chair. Winters started to say something, but Koester simply glanced at him, silently shaking his head, and returning his attention to the remainder of the battle ahead of them.

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First Officer's log:

With the majority of our battle damage repaired or cleverly jury-rigged by Engineering Department, we have rejoined the fleet.

We count ourselves among the lucky. Four dead, including one of Captain McIntyre's Hornet pilots; twenty-two wounded; one missing - our Chief Medical Officer. But we do not have time to mourn our dead and injured.

At the agreement of Admiral Ross, Chancellor Martok, and Captain Sisko of the Defiant, the fleet is re-grouping for the final, decisive strike on Cardassia Prime.

Kane, out.

The entire voyage to Cardassia, the bridge was solemn and quiet. Only the background chirps and beeps of the consoles, broken by the occasional job-related report, could be heard. No one engaged in conversation. No one laughed or joked.

The mood on the bridge, and from there the entire ship, was influenced by the commanding officer. Commodore Koester sat brooding in his center seat, occasionally barking off one order or another, a puzzled, disbelieving expression clouding his features from time to time. The entire crew was of course aware of the relationship Commodore Koester and Commander Q had shared, so his behavior was understandable to them. Nobody, however, seemed to quite know how to handle it. Offers to relieve the commodore of the conn, to give him a chance to rest, relax, or simply reflect, were rebuked to both Commander Kane and Commander Jeff Bloom, the ship's second and chief science officer.

"Status?" Koester asked for the fifth time in the last half-hour as Counselor Sutherland emerged from the turbolift. Her concern was evident on her face as she approached the captain's chair.

"We remain on course 265 mark 1," reported Lt Commander Kevin Fry for the fifth time. "ETA to Cardassia Prime, one hour."

"Captain, you should get some rest," Sutherland said, gently placing a hand on the quarter-Betazoid man's shoulder, using her empathic abilities to 'read' him. "You've been through a lot..."

"We're about to go through a lot more, Counselor," Koester growled without even looking away from the viewscreen.

"You should at least try and get some rest, Peter," Sutherland added gently. "At least lay down for a little while in your ready room. You've been up here since before we entered battle."

"Counselor...!" Koester said, a harsh edge to his voice, an edge that died as he looked up at the half-Betazoid woman. "Counselor, if I go anywhere else, I'll have time to think. And I don't WANT to think right now." A lone tear ran down Koester's cheek. "I need to be HERE right now!"

Sutherland nodded in understanding, taking her usual seat to the commodore's left, her hand discreetly holding Koester's as the *Dauntless* once again neared battle.

* * * *

One Week Later – Fleetyards - Vulcan

The war against the Dominion had ended six days earlier. With the allied fleet's attack on the Dominion forces at Cardassia Prime, the unexpected last-minute switch of the Cardassian forces from the Dominion side to the Alliance, and the capture of the Founder Leader, all Dominion assets in the Alpha Quadrant surrendered and within days a treaty was quickly signed aboard station *Deep Space Nine* officially ending the war.

In the days that followed, many of Starfleet's starships and warships made their way to the various shipyards and dry-docks scattered across the Federation. The *Dauntless* soon found itself moored at the site of its construction, the *Starfleet Yards* orbiting the planet of Vulcan. As repairs commenced, crew members departed on leave, wounds healed, and life slowly returned to normal on the starship.

However, not all of the crew's wounds needing healing were physical ones. And the ship's counselor found her schedule booked solid many days.

"I sense you're still not handling your loss any better now than during the first days after she was killed, Peter," Counselor Sutherland said to Commodore Koester, who sat reclining on the counselor's couch.

"You don't understand, Counselor," said the agitated Koester. "She CAN'T be dead! It's impossible!"

“Reluctance to acknowledge the loss of a loved one is often one of the symptoms of a sudden, unexpected death of somebody close like this.”

“But you don’t know her the way I do, Counselor. She just can’t... die...”

“I know it seems that way, especially with someone like a joined Trill. Usually the host dies, but the symbiont and all the shared memories go on. But in this case, Peter, she’s gone. All of her. There is no symbiont to pass on, and there is no possible way **Q** could have survived. You have to recognize this first. You must let go and move on before your grief will begin to subside, or it will eventually overcome you.”

“No, you don’t understand!” Koester grunted with a sigh of frustration. There just seemed no way to make the counselor understand without getting into things he knew he could not discuss. The commodore glanced over at the chronometer on the wall, drawing a deep breath as he did.

“I’m sorry, Counselor. I know you’re trying to help. But there’s so much about **Q** I just can’t share with you or anyone else. So much that makes it impossible to simply let go and believe she’s dead.”

Sutherland nodded sympathetically.

“I have to go now, Counselor,” Koester said, getting up from the couch. “Now that the war has ended, Gem’s returning to the ship later today, and I have a few things to attend to before she arrives.”

Sutherland smiled at the mention of the commodore’s young daughter, transferred off the *Dauntless* during the war to live with her grandparents on Earth, along with the few other civilians who normally lived and worked aboard the starship. She picked up a nearby padd and started tapping information into it.

“If you should need me for any reason, anything I can do for you, just call,” she said. “In the meantime, I’ll book you for this same timeslot again next week?”

Koester smiled back, a wan smile.

“Thank you, Kethry.” Koester disappeared into the corridor, the doors swishing shut behind him.

* * * *

It took Koester a few minutes to reach his quarters. As he entered, his eyes settled on the two small boxes sitting on the glass coffee table. Some of **Q**’s personal belongings that had been kept in his cabin – as she had rarely spent time in her own quarters during the past year - now neatly packed away. Koester was not sure what he was going to do with the stuff. It was not as if **Q** really had a next-of-kin he could return them to. And keeping them would constantly reopen old wounds.

As he started to remove his duty uniform jacket, Koester noticed the blinking light on his computer monitor on his desk.

“Computer, status?” he queried as he ducked into the head and splashed water on his face.

“You have one message,” the computer’s female voice reported.

“From?” Koester asked as he dried his face on a nearby towel.

“Message has no annotated point of origin.”

Koester moved into the bedroom, rummaging around in the drawers for a clean uniform to wear.

“Play message.”

The computer beeped acknowledgement, then another familiar female voice filled the room.

“Hello, Pooh-Bear.”

Koester stopped mid-dressing, slowly walking back out toward his desk. In a weak voice he asked, “Poe?” Lotus **Q**’s face appeared on the monitor screen. She was smiling as she spoke, but her eyes held an infinite sadness.

“I’m sorry I had to leave as suddenly and unexpectedly as I did. I really wasn’t planning on it myself. But you’ve known for a long time what I am and whom I must occasionally answer to. The *Continuum* is undergoing some radical changes. Some of those changes are because of me. And those changes require my attention right now. I didn’t want to just up and leave you behind, but under the circumstances, I figured this way would avoid the most questions. It is unlikely what I need to do will be done quickly as you measure time, which is why the *Continuum* devised this method of explaining my ‘disappearance.’”

Tears started running down Koester’s face as he watched the monitor screen.

“I’m sorry I won’t be there like I’d hoped, to see Gem grow up, to watch over you as you yourself grew old.” **Q** smiled at her own remark for a moment, then her saddened expression returned. “Perhaps this is for the best, my love.” She paused for a moment, then concluded, “I’ll always remember you, Pooh. For eternity.”

The image on the screen froze for a moment, **Q**’s face smiling back at him as Koester reached out to touch the monitor. Then the image blinked out, replaced for a moment by the silver Seal of the Federation.

“Good-bye, Poe,” Koester whispered softly and smiled.

* * * *

A number of days passed, and the repairs to the *Dauntless* progressed. During that time, Commodore Koester had taken time off the ship and, once his daughter Gem had arrived, spent a few days planet-side, exploring the Vulcan city of Shi-Kahr and climbing the steps of Mount Selaya at sunset to participate in a Vulcan ritual of renewal. Upon his return, the crew easily noticed the change in their CO’s general demeanor.

Kethry Sutherland looked up from her monitor as she heard the door chime.

“Come,” she said.

“Counselor! Got a minute?” Commodore Koester said as he stepped into Sutherland’s office.

“For you, always,” the counselor replied with a smile.

“I need to ask you a favor, Kethry,” Koester said, taking a seat opposite the half-Betazoid woman. “With Q gone, I need someone I can trust to fill in the CMO position. Our EMH can handle most of the day-to-day duties, but I need a flesh and blood person to run sickbay. With all the war casualties, Starfleet doesn’t have any other doctors they can spare right now. I hate to have to burden you with all the extra paperwork, but...”

“Don’t worry,” Sutherland said with a gentle smile. “I can handle it. And thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Thank YOU! I’ll make this up to you somehow,” Koester remarked as he headed back out the door.

As the doors closed, Sutherland’s smile changed to a frown, and she spent a moment simply thinking. Then sudden realization dawned on her face and she tapped her combadge.

“Counselor Sutherland to engineering.”

“Engineering. Johnson,” came the reply.

“Mister Johnson, I have a little pet project I’m going to need your assistance with. Could you meet me in Holodeck 3 in fifteen minutes? I can outline the design parameters with you.”

“Aye, Counselor.”

Sutherland tapped off her combadge, and with a satisfied nod, set off for the holodeck.

* * * *

“Fleet Captain on the bridge,” Virgil Kane announced. Those who were not working on vital systems respectfully stood at attention.

“As you were,” Koester ordered with a smile, taking his seat in the captain’s chair. “Status, Exec?”

“Repairs are progressing on schedule,” Kane reported as he too sat down in the chair to the commodore’s right. “We should be ready to leave dry-dock as scheduled in five days. And Starfleet has already given us our next assignment.” Koester raised an eyebrow in a decidedly Vulcan-like gesture until Kane explained further. “Star mapping in the Cerberus Sector.”

“Well, after everything we’ve been through lately, that should seem like a vacation,” Koester said with a sigh. As he finished, the turbolift doors swooshed open, admitting Kethry Sutherland onto the bridge.

“Counselor!” Koester said enthusiastically. “Or should I say Doctor?”

“Counselor will suffice,” Sutherland said with a smile, taking her normal seat next to the CO. “My, it seems like some time off has done you a world of good. Can I take this to mean I can cancel your appointment on Tuesday?”

“Some time off, and some answers to questions that were haunting me,” Koester responded rather vaguely. “Yes, you can cancel. And what have YOU been up to in my absence?”

“Lieutenant Johnson has been helping me acquire some... assistance... ..for my new position as CMO. Yes, the EMH will be able to handle most of the routine sickbay duties, but I felt the combined paperwork of chief medical officer with my own job of ship’s counselor was just a tad overwhelming.”

Koester pondered a moment how the starship’s chief engineer could possibly help out with Sutherland’s paperwork problem, but figured he would learn the answer eventually.

“Well everyone,” the commodore said, clapping his hands together once to draw the bridge crew’s attention. Everyone gathered around looked toward the center seat. “The war is finally over. We’re almost repaired, and things are almost back to normal. Plus we have a mission ahead of us. It’s about time we get back to being explorers.”

“To slip the surly bonds...,” offered Lt Commander Phillip Winters.

“To boldly go...,” Kane added with a smile.
Koester nodded and smiled, then with a flourish, pressed his chair’s log recorder button.
“Captain’s log, stardate 52939.6....”

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Her ongoing mission:

To Seek; To Chart; To Explore...

Slipping the surly bonds of Earth, going where none have been before!