

“Sound red alert!” Fleet Captain Koester ordered. “Helm, report!”

“Speed still increasing!” replied Lieutenant Peck from the helm station in front of and slightly to the right of the captain. “Maneuvering thrusters had no effect! We’re still being drawn in!”

Koester, his frustration mounting, slammed his fist against the intercom button on the arm of his command chair. “Bridge to engineering. I need more power on the warp engines or we’re all dead in less than thirty seconds!”

“Bridge, the warp core is currently at 110% of rated output,” Commander Jeff Bloom quickly responded back. “I can boost it up to 125% for a short period, but we’re going to crack a few warp coils and render the warp drive useless if we do!”

“We haven’t got a choice, Jeff. I need that power!”

There was a brief pause from the intercom, during which Koester could feel a new vibration shudder through the decks and the sound coming from the warp engines was notably further strained.

“Warp core output increased to 125% of normal rated output,” Bloom announced. “That’s all I can give you bridge.”

“Let’s hope it’s enough,” Koester said, not loud enough for Bloom to hear over the sounds of the starship straining around them before he looked at the helmsman. “Helm, sheer us away from the black hole!”

“Altering course now!” Peck announced. The *Dauntless* continued to shudder violently for several seconds more, then – like a rock being flung by a slingshot – the starship broke free of the intense gravity of the collapsed star and tumbled away from the black hole.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

“Loop” By PJK

*24 Hours Earlier...*

*Captain’s log, stardate 66055.9:*

*Starship USS Dauntless has nearly completed the new survey of sector 50102. Once complete, we intend to make a diplomatic visit at Sagion III, where Admiral Fil will sign a mutual defense treaty with the Sagions on behalf of the Federation before we resume our mission in the further sectors of the AOR.*

*Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.*

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the Federation Fifth Fleet flagship, the Sovereign-class *USS Dauntless NCC-75310*, crossed his legs as he sat back in his command chair and relaxed with a cup of coffee in his hand.

“Thank you, Yeoman,” Koester said to the woman who had just handed him his hot beverage. He then turned to the joined-Trill woman with fire-red hair sitting in the chair to his immediate left. “The next few days should be pretty quiet, at least in comparison to recent months. It should hopefully be a nice change from the usual routine.”

“After nearly nine years as your ship’s counselor, I think I know you fairly well by now,” Tanzia Gera said with a slight grin. “You’ll be bored in less than three days and craving something more exciting than simply space-mapping or diplomatic courier missions.”

“You’re probably right, Counselor,” Koester said after sipping from his cup. “But in the meantime, until I do grow bored, I’m going to enjoy our time off.”

“Captain, we have a message coming in from *Home Plate*,” announced Ensign Wyatt Cerilli, the former Borg drone also known as Five of Twelve, who was recently commissioned as a Starfleet officer after years of training aboard the *Dauntless*, from the ops position. “Captain Pearson on priority channel.”

“Well that was quicker than normal. So much for the time off,” Gera said with a grin as Koester rolled his eyes.

“On screen, Five,” Koester ordered. A second later the image of the starfield the ship was passing through was replaced by a woman wearing the red-shouldered uniform of a command officer with captain’s pips in the rank insignia area. “This is *Dauntless*. What can I do for you today, Cathryn?”

“Fleet Captain Koester,” Captain Cathryn E. Pearson, executive officer of *Starbase 719* – the Fifth Fleet’s operating base – said over the viewscreen. “719 has picked up what appears to be a badly garbled distress call originating in sector Typhon-Bravo. There is no identification, but the call is being transmitted on a Federation/Starfleet frequency.”

“Any idea who it could be?” Koester asked with concern. “The *Belle* has been operating less than a sector away from us...”

“We’ve already contacted the *Bellerophon*, and Captain K’danz assures us her ship and crew are perfectly intact. We have no other reports of any missing assets, so if the call is originating from a Starfleet vessel, it is one that we were not informed would be operating in our Area of Responsibility.”

“Let me guess,” Koester said before Pearson could go any further. “You want us to delay our mission to Sagion and investigate this mysterious distress call?”

“I’m afraid the *Dauntless* is the only ship in the sector close to where we have determined the call is originating; and besides, Val figured you wouldn’t mind delaying another mind-numbing diplomatic function.”

“Well, when you put it that way, how can I say no?” Koester replied. “What are the coordinates of where the distress call is coming from?”

Pearson relayed the coordinates, then finished the transmission with a warning.

“Konstantin said there is something very unusual about this transmission we picked up. He believes it may be a trap of some kind, either laid by the Kairn or by one of the Romulan warlords in an attempt to draw the Federation into a new battleground. Be very careful.”

“Always,” Koester assured. “We’ll let you know what we find. *Dauntless*, out.”

The main viewer blinked to the image of the Federation emblem before quickly returning to the view in front of the fast-moving starship. Koester looked toward the bearded El-Aurian man sitting at the mission ops console on the port side of the bridge.

“COB, what’s the bearing to where this mysterious distress call is originating, and how far away is it?”

Chief Pono Kyman, the starship’s senior enlisted man, or Chief of the Boat as Koester preferred to call him, consulted his console readout before turning his chair to look at the captain.

“The coordinates are almost directly back along the course to *Starbase 719*, Skipper; 200 mark 358. Distance: Five light years.”

“Very well. Helm, alter course to 200 mark 358. Ahead warp 8,” Koester ordered.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Fleet Captain Koester was sitting at a table in the 10-Forward lounge with Vice Admiral Penji Fil – Officer in Charge of the Federation Fifth Fleet and Federation Ambassador-at-Large – and Ensign Cassie Koester – one of the starship’s operations officers and the captain’s protégé.

"I'm sorry this change delayed your mission to Sagion, Penji," Koester was saying as one of the stewards placed drinks on the table in front of the three officers.

"I really don't mind," the Catullan admiral replied. "This will give me more time to prepare for my meeting with the Sagion Prime Minister. I really wasn't looking forward to the reception ceremony anyway. From what Carrie told me about her visit to that planet, the Prime Minister is pretty stiff and long-winded. In truth I wish there were some way we could cancel this meeting entirely. Let Val and her SOO handle this."

Koester nodded in an understanding fashion, then turned and looked at Ensign Koester. The woman appeared to be only in her mid-twenties, but in actuality was several centuries old, and had been rescued from a dying planet by the captain several years earlier. After her rescue, Cassie had entered Starfleet Academy, where she assumed her benefactor's family name – not having one of her own. The captain noticed that in between sips of her Tarkasian tea, the ensign had her nose almost glued to a padd she was reading.

"What do you have there that's so interesting, Cassie?"

"I have been studying the readings from that distress call the starbase received," Cassie replied. "Five sent me a copy of the data. I'm trying to see if there is any way to determine what vessel sent the call based on the carrier frequency. Unfortunately, part of the data I need in order to make that determination is jumbled, as if the transmission was affected by exposure to an extreme gravity field that distorted the data."

"What kind of gravity field are we talking about here?" Koester asked. "If a ship crashed on the surface of a planet, would that account for the distortion you're describing?"

"No, it would have to be something much more massive than a planet. Bigger than an average star, in fact. But we just finished star-mapping the sector a few weeks ago, and there was nothing that could account for..."

"Bridge to Captain Koester."

Koester tapped his combadge before saying, "Go ahead, Exec."

"Skipper, Commander Spot is picking up some unusual readings along our current projected course," the voice of Setton To'Lock Arbelo, the starship's first officer, reported. "Something's happening up ahead, though we can't determine exactly what it is yet. Request your presence on the bridge, sir."

Koester exchanged a curious look with Fil before replying, "I'm on my way. Koester, out." He then deactivated his combadge and stood up from his seat. "If you two will excuse me," he then said to his companions before quickly heading out of the lounge.

Moments later, the starboard turbolift door swished open and Koester stepped out on his bridge. He noticed Commander Arbelo standing beside the science console, which appeared unmanned.

"Have you determined the source of the readings, Exec?" he asked.

Arbelo turned to look at Koester as he approached, explaining, "Spot has detected a neutron burst emanating from one degree port of our current course. She believes it is originating from the vicinity of the star Hoolin, located just within sector Typhon-B."

"A neutron burst?" Koester remarked, puzzled. "Could that be the source of a massive gravimetric reading Ensign Koester says was responsible for garbling the distress call received by *Home Plate*?"

"That is unlikely," Spot remarked through the captain's combadge in his British-accented, slightly mechanical-sounding voice. "A large gravity mass would draw in neutrons, not emit them, Captain."

"What could cause a neutron burst of this type?" Koester asked.

"Typically, the first stages of a supernova, but I have no indication on sensors that one has occurred or is imminent."

"Well, let's play this safe, just in case. Exec, bring the ship five degrees starboard. We'll give whatever has caused that neutron burst a wider berth. And maintain a slightly higher alert status for the crew. No need to go to yellow alert, but make sure we're prepared for any contingency."

"Aye, Skipper," Arbelo replied before more loudly ordering, "Helm, come right to course 205 mark 358."

"Course altered to 205 mark 358," Lieutenant (JG) William Hyland III acknowledged.

"Keep me informed of any unexpected changes," Koester ordered before heading back toward the turbolift.

"You can bet on it, sir," Arbelo replied.

\* \* \* \*

Early the next morning, Fleet Captain Koester arrived on the bridge to relieve the watch after making his customary tour of the ship.

“Computer, mark 0600 hours and set the morning watch; Alpha shift,” he ordered, prompting the lights – set at half-intensity for the mid-watch – to increase to normal levels. “Helm, status?”

“Currently on course 205 mark 358; speed: Warp factor 8; estimated time of arrival at the coordinates provided by *Starbase 719*: three hours, twenty-seven minutes present speed,” reported the Bolian Lieutenant Peck. “One thing of note that was passed on to me by the Delta shift helmsman, sir; for some unknown reason, he had to make minor course corrections every hour or so. He told me the ship’s course was almost constantly moving to the left.”

“In the direction of that neutron burst Commander Spot detected yesterday? Strange, and it can’t be a coincidence.” Koester turned to look at the science console on the starboard side, where a pre-teen girl with Trill spots on her forehead and slightly pointed ears kneeled on the seat behind the console. “Ensign Arbelo-Eeta, any indications of anything that might account for our need to correct course so often?”

“Negative, sir,” the Executive Officer’s daughter replied after confirming her sensor readings.

“How about you, April? Anything on your sensors?” he asked the Marine officer at tactical.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Major April Mendez confirmed.

“Then what the...?”

“Captain!” Peck suddenly called out. “Our course has just changed four degrees left. I’m attempting to compensate. It almost feels like we’re caught in a weak tractor beam.”

“Helm, all stop,” the captain ordered. “We’re not going to proceed any further until we figure out what is going on here.”

“What about the distress call, Skipper?”

Koester turned to face Chief Kyman before responding, “They’re just going to have to wait, COB, whoever they are. Because if we get ourselves killed trying to reach them, it won’t improve their situation any more than it already is, and only make ours worse.”

“Answering all stop,” Peck reported.

As the *Dauntless* dropped out of warp, the Doppler-shift lines on the viewscreen compacted back into the light of distant stars. Both Fleet Captain Koester and Counselor Tanzia Gera happened to be looking at the viewer when one of the stars in the medium distance near the center of the image appeared to suddenly go into warp itself, quickly shrinking before disappearing entirely.

“Did you see that?” Koester asked.

“Yes, I saw it,” confirmed Counselor Gera. “What just happened?”

“Ensign?”

The young woman with the Trill symbiont implanted within her abdomen moved her fingers quickly across her console, verifying the input before replying, “Captain, according to sensors, the star Hoolin has collapsed into an intense singularity. It is responsible for the gravimetric distortion that the helmsman has been compensating for over the course of the last six to eight hours.”

“How is that possible?” Gera asked. “We only witnessed the star collapse a few seconds ago!”

“We are currently located just within one light-week of the star’s recorded position. This collapse must have occurred almost exactly one week ago and the light of the event, or rather lack-there-of, is only now reaching our position,” the science officer explained.

“If we’re still such a distance away from this newly formed singularity, how could it be affecting us as much as it has?” Koester asked.

“Evidently this is not a typical star collapse, as evidenced by the neutron burst we detected yesterday,” Arbelo-Eeta remarked. “The star appears to have collapsed so tightly and so densely that the gravity effects extend for light years in all directions. This entire region of space for more than one light year in every direction is going to have to be designated a zone of no entry lest...”

“Captain!” Peck called out. “I know you ordered full stop, but I have just determined the *Dauntless* is in fact in motion.”

“Don’t tell me the gravity well of that singularity has gripped us already?”

“I’m afraid so,” Peck said.

“Mister Peck, set course 090 mark 0. Sheer us off.”

“Coming right to 090 mark 0,” Peck confirmed. As the stars moved right to left on the main viewer, Koester could subtly sense a change in pitch in the ship’s impulse engines.

“Mister Cerilli, call down to engineering and inform Mister Bloom that we’re probably going to be taxing his engines for the next few minutes as we break free from an intense gravity well.”

“Aye, sir,” Cerilli replied.

“Captain, we’re now on course 090 mark 0, but it appears we’re still being drawn toward the singularity,” Peck reported.

“Full impulse, Mister Peck,” Koester ordered. Again he could sense the subtle strain on his ship’s engines increase.

“Speed increasing, but in the wrong direction,” Peck informed.

“Take us to warp, Mister Peck.”

“Increasing speed to warp.” Koester could hear the warp drive activate, but something in the vibration he could feel through the soles of his boots did not feel right. “Captain, something is wrong. All indications are we are at warp speed, but we’re only barely maintaining our distance from the singularity, like we were attached to it with a cable and were orbiting it at a great distance. It’s almost like the more power we put into trying to escape the singularity’s gravimetric pull, the stronger the pull we’re feeling.”

Koester looked toward the girl manning the science console and asked, “If what Mister Peck is saying is true, would you recommend we drop down to one-quarter impulse and try and pull away like that?”

“I do not have enough data to form a comprehensive opinion, but the logic seems sound,” Arbelo-Eeta replied.

“Helm, alter course to 115 mark 0, then drop us to one-quarter impulse power.”

“Coming right to 115 mark 0. Slowing to one-quarter impulse.”

Koester patiently awaited a report that would inform him that his ship was moving away from the unusual phenomenon, however slowly, as he could feel the vibration beneath his feet be replaced with an almost gentle wave rippling through the deck. After nearly a minute, the report still had not come.

“Status?” he finally asked.

“It’s slower, but we’re still being drawn toward the singularity,” Arbelo-Eeta announced.

“Damn. Any suggestions?”

“Do we call for help from either the starbase or one of the other fleet vessels?” Gera asked.

“I’m not sure how that would help,” Koester said. “If another ship were to get close enough to us to help, they would likely also be trapped in the gravity well with us.”

“I have a suggestion, Skipper,” Chief Kyman said. “Program a class-three probe to mimic the operating envelope of the *Dauntless* and launch it to see how the gravity well affects how it maneuvers at different speeds. We can then alter our own maneuvers to compensate for what we learn.”

“Good idea, COB. Five, program a class-three probe. Let me know as soon as you’re ready to launch.”

“Aye, Captain,” Cerilli replied. Several moments later the operations officer turned to look at Koester and announced, “Probe is programmed and in the tube, sir.”

“Launch probe,” Koester ordered.

The probe, built within a torpedo casing, launched from the torpedo tube beneath the main saucer hull of the starship, just forward of the yacht docking port. The probe maneuvered away from the *Dauntless* before activating its sublight engines. It appeared to move ahead of the starship for a distance, its progress growing incrementally slower with each meter. Within seconds, the probe came to a stop relative to the much larger starship.

“Probe is currently at full-impulse output,” Cerilli announced. “Programmed to enter warp in 5... 4... 3...”

On the screen, Koester could see the aft end of the probe start to glow as the micro-warp drive activated. For a moment the probe seemed to disappear.

“Probe has entered warp and is moving away from the singular... wait!”

As Cerilli tried to evaluate the readings the probe was sending him, Koester could see the device become visible on the screen again; its aft end glowed a deep orange color as the on-board warp engine tried to propel it faster than the speed of light.

“Why is it coming back, Mister Cerilli?”

“Gravimetric stress on the probe has increased ten-fold,” Cerilli announced. “It’s almost like the singularity is alive and a tentacle made of gravity is reaching out and grabbing the probe and dragging it back.”

“Do you mean that literally, Ensign? Is that... thing alive?” Koester asked.

“Negative, sir, though it would give me a greater sense of confidence if it were. At least we would have a chance to out-think something that is alive! More likely the singularity has collapsed into subspace. As a result, anything in warp would feel the gravimetric pull more strongly the faster it is attempting to move.”

“That would explain why we felt the gravimetric effect long before the light of the star’s collapse reached us,” Arbelo-Eeta remarked.

“Probe speed increasing to warp 2,” announced Major Mendez. Koester returned his attention to the screen, where the probe continued to be dragged backward ever closer to the *Dauntless*.

“It’s definitely not working. What do we have to do to break free from this singularity’s grip?”

“I’m getting some good data from the probe, Skipper,” Kyman reported, filing everything that was coming in from the class-three probe before getting out of his chair to speak with both the science and tactical officers across the bridge. “I just need to coordinate with Ensign Arbelo-Eeta and Major Mendez.”

The science officer, Marine officer and chief petty officer huddled around the science console, Arbelo-Eeta occasionally entering commands or calculations into her console. Koester exchanged a look with Counselor Gera, then watched with worry as the probe slid back past the *Dauntless*, moving ever faster as its warp speed increased.

Several minutes later, Kyman turned and looked at the captain.

“We have a plan, Skipper, but it may be risky.”

“I see little other choice at this time, COB,” Koester responded. “What’s your plan?”

“We’re fighting the pull of gravity and making no progress. I suggest that instead of fighting the gravity, we let it help us. We turn the ship in the direction of the singularity and use its gravimetric pull to help sling us around the black hole and away in the opposite direction.”

“Will this work, Ensign?” Koester asked his science officer.

“I have no way of knowing its chance of success or failure until we actually make the attempt, Captain,” Arbelo-Eeta replied. “But the simulations I have run indicate we have a better chance of breaking away from the gravity well using the method proposed by Chief Kyman than we have had thus far.”

“Can we use the probe we have already launched to test the COB’s theory?”

“Affirmative,” Arbelo-Eeta replied.

“Do it!”

Arbelo-Eeta transmitted the necessary data to the ops console. Within seconds, Ensign Cerilli entered the necessary commands and transmitted them to the probe. On the holographic projection above the console, the tactical display showed the relative locations of the probe, the *Dauntless*, and the singularity. Course plots on the two space vessels changed as the probe turned nearly 180 degrees and started heading at faster-than-light speed toward the very edge of the singularity’s event horizon, the point at which it would be impossible for anything to escape the massive gravity well, not even light. The new probe course projected the device skimming the outer edge of the event horizon, using the pull of gravity to achieve a break-away at its closest point of approach.

“Probe is approaching the event horizon,” Arbelo-Eeta announced. “Probe will reach EH plus five kilometers in seven seconds... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... Passing EH... now!”

On the ops console’s projection, the captain could see the probe shoot around the singularity and continue on in almost the same direction, the device’s course only changed a few degrees by the effects of gravity. Within

seconds it had continued on past the influence of the gravity well and disappeared into warp, where it would eventually emerge several light years away to transmit any additional data gleaned from the experiment.

“That looked successful,” Koester remarked with a grin. “Can we program the same course into our own navigation computer?”

“It will not be hard to do,” Arbelo-Eeta answered before addressing the officer at the helm. “Lieutenant, lay in course 272 mark 0; speed: one-half impulse. As soon as the ship has come about on the new course, go to maximum warp.”

“Laying in course 272 mark 0, speed one-half impulse,” Peck acknowledged.

“Captain, before we do this, may I suggest we bring the ship to yellow alert status?” Counselor Gera recommended.

“Good idea, Counselor. Mendez, sound yellow alert.”

“Initiating yellow alert,” Mendez confirmed. Several seconds later she added, “Ship is at yellow alert.”

“Very well. Helm, come about on new ordered course,” Koester ordered.

“Coming about to ordered course 272 mark 0,” Peck confirmed. On the viewscreen, the distant stars moved again. As the ship settled on its new course, Koester could almost make out the intensely black region where the singularity was located, devouring all the light around it.

“Mister Cerilli, polarize the main viewscreen so we can see the singularity as we approach.”

“Polarizing main viewscreen,” Cerilli confirmed. A second later the image on the viewer took on a different color tone and the singularity and its event horizon were clearly visible – the singularity a large near-perfect circle of blackness surrounded by a swirling purple and red shape like water set afire disappearing down a bathtub drain.

“Wow! That’s a monster!” Koester remarked.

“Increasing speed to maximum warp,” Peck announced. Again, the captain could feel the shudder through the decks, the feeling like his ship was struggling against a giant hand trying to subdue it and literally throw it through the gates of Hell. As the ship neared the black hole, the vibration running through the spaceframe increased.

“I’m having a hard time holding her on course, Captain!” Peck announced. “That singularity is trying to drag us right out of space!”

“Hold her steady, Mister Peck! Hold her steady,” Koester ordered before saying to the operations officer, “Five, can you compensate and send the engines a little more power?”

“Not without taking it from either life support or artificial gravity, and under the circumstances, I don’t think you want me to rob from either system!” the former Borg drone replied.

Koester hit the intercom on his chair, saying, “Bridge to engineering.”

“Engineering. Bloom,” came the quick reply.

“I need more power, Commander!”

“We’re doing the best we can down here,” the emotional Vulcan man responded. “I’m overriding the safety protocols as it is, or else you would have already lost all warp power!”

“If we’re off on our trajectory by more than a degree and a half, this isn’t going to work, and sooner or later we’re going to die.”

Koester could hear Bloom sigh through the open communications channel. Then the chief engineer said, “I’ll see what I can do, but I’m not making any promises.”

“Understood. Bridge out.” Koester then said to the officer at the helm, “See if you can use maneuvering thrusters to compensate for the additional drag we’re experiencing!”

“Activating all port thrusters,” Peck confirmed, prompting additional vibrations through the entire hull.

“It feels like she’s starting to shake apart!” Gera announced, gripping the arms of her own chair tightly.

“She’s being torn in two directions, Counselor. She IS shaking apart,” Koester shouted back above the ear-shattering noise around them. Koester then looked up toward the ceiling of the bridge and softly said, “Hold together, baby.”

Almost as if in response, a loud bang could be heard throughout the ship, and the deck felt like the crew was riding an old-fashioned roller coaster.

“Forty-five second until we pass the event horizon, Captain,” Arbelo-Eeta announced.

“Sound red alert!” Koester ordered. “Helm, report!”

“Speed still increasing!” replied Peck. “Maneuvering thrusters had no effect! We’re still being drawn in!”

Koester, his frustration mounting, slammed his fist against the intercom button on the arm of his command chair. “Bridge to engineering. I need more power on the warp engines or we’re all dead in less than thirty seconds!”

“Bridge, the warp core is currently at 110% of rated output,” Bloom quickly responded back. “I can boost it up to 125% for a short period, but we’re going to crack a few warp coils and render the warp drive useless if we do!”

“We haven’t got a choice, Jeff. I need that power!”

There was a brief pause from the intercom, during which Koester could feel a new vibration shudder through the decks and the sound coming from the warp engines was notably further strained.

“Warp core output increased to 125% of normal rated output,” Bloom announced. “That’s all I can give you bridge.”

“Let’s hope it’s enough,” Koester said, not loud enough for Bloom to hear over the sounds of the starship straining around them before he looked at the helmsman. “Helm, sheer us away from the black hole!”

“Altering course now!” Peck announced. The *Dauntless* continued to shudder violently for several seconds more, then – like a rock being flung by a slingshot – the starship broke free of the intense gravity of the collapsed star and tumbled away from the black hole.

*To Be Continued...*