

“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.

On the bridge, just about the entire crew were flung from their seats; only Peck and Cerilli managing to hold on to their consoles to keep from flying over the back of their chairs.

It took nearly a minute for Koester to fully come to his senses, having been flung back against the base of the master situations monitor with Counselor Gera. He could hear moans coming from around the entire bridge and just make out the stars moving at warp speed on the viewscreen.

“Helm, all stop!” he ordered before adding, “Computer, activate the Emergency Medical Hologram.”

A bald-headed man wearing a medical division uniform with no rank insignia on it appeared in the middle of the bridge just as the straining sounds of the ship around them quieted, eventually ceasing. “Please state the nature of the medical emergency?” he said before looking around and seeing almost all the crew lying haphazardly across the deck. “Oh, my!” Without any further prompting, the EMH moved to the closest member of the crew, scanning them with his tricorder to determine what, if any, injuries they had sustained.

“Are you alright, Counselor?” Koester asked as he helped Gera to her knees before getting himself back up.

“I’m okay. Fortunately you broke my fall, Captain,” Gera replied before turning to help the EMH as he continued to examine each member of the bridge crew.

Koester looked toward the viewscreen, where the stationary stars made him smile to himself that the plan had worked. He then noticed the pale expressions of both Peck and Wyatt Cerilli as the two officers looked at each other.

“Good work, COB. Your plan was a...,” Koester started to say as he turned toward mission ops, only then noticing the El’Aurian man laying on the deck beneath his chair, a gash across his forehead bleeding profusely. “Doctor, we have a casualty over here!”

The EMH rushed over to Chief Kyman as Gera moved beside the captain.

“Major Mendez was pretty badly hurt too,” she said. “We’ve already called down to sickbay for medical teams, but they’re picking up the pieces down there as well.”

“I can imagine. I wasn’t expecting our ride to be quite so rough,” Koester said, moving across the bridge to stand next to the helm. “Good work, Mister Peck; Mister Cerilli. Now, do we know where we are?”

“According to astrometric readings, we managed to travel about half the distance between Hoolin and *Starbase 719* once we broke away from the gravity well. Unfortunately, I’m not sure what propulsion systems we have available, so it may be a while before we can reach the starbase to effect repairs. Perhaps even years.”

“I hope not. But if the warp drive had been rendered useless like Commander Bloom predicted, we can always call for a tow back to base.”

“Not the most dignified method of returning home,” Ensign Cerilli remarked.

“Better than not returning home at all, don’t you agree, Ensign?” Koester asked before stepping back to his chair and activating the intercom. “Bridge to engineering.”

“Engineering. Bloom. Are we still going to die, or can I start effecting repairs down here?”

“Dying has been postponed until further notice, Jeff,” Koester said with a smile. “How bad is it down there?”

“It could be a lot worse,” Bloom replied. “Instruments are recording hairline fractures in port warp coils 1, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, and 15 and in starboard warp coils 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 10.”

“Does that mean we’re stuck at sub-light for the duration?” the captain asked.

“No,” Bloom replied with an exhale of breath. “I can nurse us along, but it means we’re limited to speeds no greater than warp 6.5 until further notice. Anything more and we blow out the warp engines for good.”

“Better than nothing. I assume we’re going to need major repairs?”

“Aye, sir. The sooner the better.”

“Very well. Helm, lay in a course to *Starbase 719*. Ahead warp five.”

“Course plotted and laid in,” Peck confirmed. “ETA to *Starbase 719*: 14 days.”

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

“Loop – Part 2” By PJK

Captain’s log, stardate 66094.0:

It has been two weeks since our encounter with the black hole that used to be Hoolin, and I grow ever more worried. While the crew has used the time to make whatever repairs to the ship we are capable of on our own, there has been a strange silence from Home Plate and the Fifth Fleet. None of the messages we have transmitted have received responses, though there is no indication of any incidents that might account for Starbase 719 or USS Bellerophon’s lack of communications. The only subspace chatter we have been able to receive is extremely weak, as if coming unamplified from a great distance. Commander Wallace and his staff have been working the last several days to boost the signal we have received in the hopes they will hold some answers.

Current estimates indicate we will arrive at Starbase 719 within the next ninety minutes. Hopefully our questions can be answered once we get there.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester sat in the center seat on the bridge of the starship *USS Dauntless*. He was both puzzled and concerned by the lack of response to any inquiries sent by the *Dauntless* over the last fourteen days.

“Five, have you hailed the base with our request to dock as soon as possible?” he asked the young officer with several visible Borg implants on his face and hands sitting at ops. The ensign turned partway in his seat to look over his shoulder at the captain.

"I tried hailing the station fifteen minutes ago. Again, no response on any frequency. It's almost like the base isn't there."

"Something's definitely wrong, and I don't like being in the dark," Koester remarked to no one in particular. "Even if the base were somehow destroyed, there would be someone in the vicinity to answer our hails. The *Vengeance*, the *Corsair*, even the *Pariah* should be close enough to give us some answers. But nothing!"

"Captain, entering visual range of *Starbase 719*," informed Cerilli.

"On screen."

The image on the screen changed very little, only the stars passing at mid-warp speed.

"Increase magnification."

Cerilli touched the control on his console. A moment later the star image changed slightly as the magnification of space increased, but still no discernable view of the huge Federation starbase that was supposed to be visible.

"Where's the starbase?" Ship's Counselor Tanzania Gera asked.

"It's... it's not there," replied Koester with a tone of disbelief.

* * * *

Ten minutes later, the senior staff were gathered in the briefing lounge aft of the bridge.

"Is there any indication, anything at all, what happened to the starbase?" Koester wanted to know.

"Nothin'," reported Commander Aladsair Wallace, the starship's second and chief science officer. "No indications o' an explosion or weapons fire. No debris o' any size or composition. No vessels or signs o' communications. It's almost like th' station hasn't existed fer th' last five years!"

"Could what happened to us have also affected the station? Could it have somehow been dragged into the singularity that nearly swallowed us?" Commander Setton To'Lock Arbelo, the starship's first officer, asked.

"Not likely," Wallace answered. "We were less th'n three light years from Hoolin when we were no longer under th' influence o' th' singularity's gravitational field. *Starbase 719* was o'er ten light years distant. No, there's no way th' singularity could account fo' th' station's disappearance."

"What about...?" Major April Mendez started to say when she was interrupted by the intercom.

"Captain, this is the bridge. We have a single spacecraft on an intercept course with us," announced Lt Commander John Smith.

"Maybe we can finally get some answers," Koester remarked to those gathered in the briefing lounge. Then to Smith he added, "Can you identify? Is it a Federation vessel?"

"Matching warp signature now," Smith replied. "It appears to be... Captain, the vessel is Kairn!"

"What's a Kairn vessel doing in the Typhon Sector?" asked Chief Pono Kyman, the starship's Chief of the Boat, who had recovered from the injuries he had sustained during the ship's escape from the grip of the black hole.

"This could be our explanation for what happened to *Home Plate*," Koester remarked as he rose from his chair. "Mister Smith, raise shields and sound yellow alert."

Seconds later, the senior staff had all emerged on the bridge, the captain replacing the engineering officer in the center seat.

"Kairn ship has just entered visual range, sir," Smith explained.

"I can barely see it," Koester remarked. "Increase magnification to twenty-five times."

The viewscreen blinked, and a small triangular vessel was just barely visible against the stars and blackness of space.

"Increase magnification to fifty times."

Again the viewscreen blinked, and again the image showed a closer view of the approaching craft.

"Am I wrong, or is that ship about the size of a runabout?" Koester asked.

"You are correct, sir," Cerilli replied from ops. "Vessel is a one-man Kairn scout ship. Weapons systems are minimal. He hasn't yet raised shields."

"This is very strange," Koester remarked. "Mendez, any signs of other Kairn vessels approaching? Anything at all?"

"That scout is the only ship I'm reading in the entire sector besides us. If this is some sort of Kairn trap, they're either being incredibly stupid or incredibly brilliant."

"Mister Cerilli, open hailing frequencies to that vessel."

"Frequency open."

"Kairn ship, this is Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester of the Federation starship *USS Dauntless*. Approach no closer than your current position, or you will be fired upon."

A moment later, Cerilli announced, "Captain, we're receiving a response. Audio only."

"On speakers."

"Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester of the Federation starship *USS Dauntless*; I do not know how you are aware of what I am, but I mean you no harm. I received your transmission over the last several days, and came to offer my assistance."

"Why wouldn't we know your species?" Koester asked. "After all, the Federation just fought a war with your empire only last year!"

"I am unaware of what period of time a year denotes. And while it is true that the Kairn Empire is always looking for opportunities to expand, we have been at war with no one for the last five rotations."

Koester signaled for the audio to be cut before saying, "Something is not adding up here. Is it possible this Kairn has been somewhere so isolated he has never heard of the Federation or the war fought between his empire and our fleet before?"

"I have a feeling the answer to this is something simpler, Captain," Gera remarked.

"Open audio again," Koester ordered. "Kairn vessel, are you capable of visual communication?"

"It is not normally of interest to my race to allow ourselves to be seen, especially by those who – by their own admission – are enemies of the Empire. But you intrigue me. I will activate visual communication."

A second later the viewscreen changed to the image of the inside of the Kairn craft. The interior was lit by a dull orange glow coming from recesses above the control panels in the background, and the air was heavy with humidity – almost to the point of fog forming in the cockpit. But the most striking thing about the image, at least to Fleet Captain Koester, was the pilot. His reptilian face and grey-green scales were visible above the dark grey and metallic uniform he wore with the swirling Kairn emblem on each shoulder. But unlike all his previous encounters with the Kairn, the one on the screen was not projecting emotions of anger or hatred, just curiosity and mild concern.

"You are... you are mammal," the Kairn said, looking at the screen with wide eyes.

"Some of us are, yes," replied Koester. "My race is human, but our ship represents a Federation of over 150 member worlds and hundreds – if not thousands – of different races. Do you, by chance, have a name?"

"I am called Karr'rinak. What are you doing here, in the wastelands?"

"Trying to locate our starbase. When your ship approached, we thought you might have had something to do with its disappearance."

"I have traveled the wastelands here for many rotations, attempting to find uninhabited worlds capable of supporting my species, and I have never encountered any... star... base... at this location. Are you sure you are where you think you are?"

As the conversation between the captain and Karr'rinak continued; at the science console, Alasdair Wallace's combadge chirped.

"Astrometrics to Commander Wallace."

"Go ahead," Wallace replied after tapping his communicator.

"Commander, we've managed to boost the intermittent communications signal we've been receiving. It's... well... I'm not sure how to describe it. I think you, Fleet Captain Koester and Commander Arbelo need to come down here right away."

"The Cap'n's in the middle of communicating with the Kairn right now," Wallace informed.

“This is really important, and may impact the Captain’s conversation. We need all three of you down here right away!”

“Aye. I’ll see wha’ I can do.” Wallace then looked up, saying, “Excuse me, Cap’n. Astrometrics just informed me they have important information regardin’ the weak signal we picked up earlier an’ request you, Commander Arbelo, an’ myself come to th’ astrometrics lab.”

“Can it wait?” Koester asked with a tone of annoyance.

“They say what they have learned might be relevant to your conversation with the Kairn, sair.”

Some of Koester’s frustration shown through as he returned his attention to the viewscreen.

“Something has come up that requires my immediate attention, Karr’rinak. Would you be willing to stand by for a short time while I take care of this issue?”

“I have no other placsesss to be right now,” the Kairn replied. “I will ssstand by until your return, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koesssster of the *USsssSsss Dauntlesssss*.”

“I’ll be back shortly. *Dauntless*, out.” He then looked at his chief science officer and said, “I hope this is as important as astrometrics seems to think it is. Alasdair, Exec, come on. Let’s get this over with quickly.

Several minutes later, the three were standing in front of the curved semi-circular main holographic screen in astrometrics, watching grainy footage of a shuttlecraft taking off from in front of a badly damaged building while, in the background, a bridge sat mangled and half-collapsed.”

“Earth’s been attacked too?!?” Arbelo exclaimed as he watched the image.

“I don’t think so,” Koester replied. “I’ve seen this image before.”

“So have I,” Wallace agreed. “That’s Starfleet Headquarters shortly after th’ Breen attack on San Francisco durin’ th’ Dominion War.”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” Koester agreed. “Why is this included in the transmission we barely picked up?” Koester turned to look at the technicians that had been working on boosting the communications transmission.

“From what we can tell by the embedded data in the carrier frequency, this was a transmission sent to all Starfleet ships and facilities to inform them of what is going on. The reason the signal was so weak by the time we received it was because it traveled over forty light years without a communications booster,” the technician replied.

“But there are at least six booster relays between the Typhon Sector and Sector 001!” Arbelo argued.

“Apparently there are not, at least at the moment,” the technician replied.

“Hold on! Wait!” Arbelo said. “The attack on San Francisco was during the latter half of the Dominion War!”

Koester nodded for a moment as he looked at his first officer before saying, “And we’re sitting on the spot where a starbase should be with no evidence a starbase has ever existed here, talking with a Kairn who has never heard of the Federation. The Breen attack was in 2375, and apparently... so are we.”

* * * *

Fleet Captain Koester was sitting behind his desk in his ready room, contemplating his ship’s current situation with his first officer and COB.

“Time travel? Again?” Chief Kyman questioned.

“The data from the probe confirms it,” Arbelo remarked. “We didn’t notice it at the time, obviously because it happened quicker than the eye can see, but the telemetry shows that right at the moment the probe started it’s break-away from the gravity well, it existed in two places at once, the first continuing forward, the second moving slightly backward as it broke the time barrier for exactly 0.025 seconds.”

“We forgot to take certain variables into our calculations when we made our own attempt to break away from the singularity,” Koester remarked. “And having previously performed slingshots to the past – on purpose – we should have known what to look for and how to avoid it.”

“We were too busy trying to get ourselves out of bad situation, Skipper,” Kyman said. “What now? Do we head to the nearest star and slingshot back to our correct time?”

“Can’t be done,” Koester said with a shake of his head. “Even if the nearest star weren’t weeks away, Jeff’s doing all he can to hold our warp engines together as it is. If we were to try a slingshot now, we’d blow the warp engines altogether. Then we’d either be stuck out here permanently – at least until 719 is built in ten years – or die horrible deaths as we plunge into the surface of a star. I don’t like either option.”

“Why don’t we just contact Starfleet and get their help?” Arbelo asked.

“Because we need to avoid any possibility of a paradox, Exec,” Koester explained. “Right now, in this time-frame, there is another *Dauntless* taking part in the fight against the Dominion. Another Peter Koester... Another Pono Kyman... Another Setton Arbelo!”

“I forgot about that,” Arbelo remarked. “I had already been captured by this time; was on my way to Almatha if not already there. And Annika hasn’t been born yet...”

“No. We need to find some other way of getting us back home without altering the time...”

“Bridge to Cap’n Koester.”

“Now what?” Koester grumbled as he exchanged looks with Arbelo and Kyman. “Go ahead, Commander.”

“The Kairn Karr’rinak is hailin’ us again.”

Koester’s eyes went wide as he realized he had left the Kairn ship sitting a short distance away.

“I got so wrapped up in what’s happened to us, I completely forgot about Karr’rinak. Patch him through to my ready room, Commander.”

“Aye, sair. Connecting now.”

A monitor screen rose from the top of Koester’s desk, and a moment later the image of the Kairn scout pilot was displayed on it.

“My sincere apologies, Karr’rinak. We had a... minor crisis arise and I was preoccupied.”

“Underssstandable, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koesster of the *USsssSsss Dauntlesssss*,” Karr’rinak replied. “Anything to which I can be of asssssistanssse?”

“Unless you happen to have a time machine...?”

“A what?” Karr’rinak asked curiously.

“It’s a long story. Suffice to say, we have determined we are not where... or rather when... we are supposed to be. We recently encountered a collapsed singularity that required special maneuvers to escape from the gravity well before we were crushed.”

“That would explain the ssstatussss of your enginesss,” Karr’rinak remarked.

“Yes. Well, a side effect of our escape from the singularity was the unanticipated creation of a time warp which has sent us approximately ten of our years – what you would call rotations – back in time. That’s why we can’t find the starbase to which we were headed; it hasn’t been built yet. And because our engines are as badly damaged as they are, we have no way of getting ourselves back to our proper place in time.”

“Perhapssss with my asssssistanssse...?” Karr’rinak offered.

“I appreciate the offer, but there’s no way a small ship like yours...”

Koester paused, looking up for a moment at Arbelo and Kyman.

“...Could it?”

“Kairn ships tend to be overpowered to begin with,” Kyman remarked, already catching on to his captain’s train of thought.

Koester sat silent in thought for a moment before finally saying, “Karr’rinak, would you accept an invitation to come aboard the *Dauntless* so that we may discuss your generous offer in person?”

* * * *

Fleet Captain Koester, Chief Petty Officer Pono Kyman, and Major April Mendez – a type II phaser hidden beneath the back of her uniform jacket – stood in front of the transporter platform.

“I have the coordinates, Captain,” the transporter chief confirmed.

“Energize, Chief,” Koester ordered. A moment later a large, muscular reptilian being materialized on the platform in front of them. He looked at his arms, seemingly amazed, as if not expecting them to still be attached.

“Welcome aboard the *Dauntless*,” Koester said, stepping forward.

“An amazing technology, your teleportation devisssse,” Karr’rinak remarked, looking back at the chamber as he stepped down onto the deck. “I have heard our sssscientisssstssss have been working on a ssssimilar devisssse for many rotationssss, but have not yet been ssssuccssssssssssful.”

“It took nearly 100 of our years for the transporter to be considered a safe, reliable method of transportation,” Koester replied before introducing the other two members of his crew. “Technology like this is never developed overnight.” All four then headed toward the nearest briefing lounge, where Commander Wallace and Lieutenant T’Pan waited. The male Kairn found himself having to hunch through the doorways in order to avoid bumping his scaled head.

After sitting down at the table and explaining the situation as the *Dauntless*’ crew understood it, and what would be required in order for them to get back to their own proper time period, the conversation turned to concerns.

“My biggest worry is gettin’ Mister Karr’rinak back t’ his own proper time,” Wallace remarked. “Our sensor readin’s indicate his engines, if properly tuned, are powerful enough t’ boost our own damaged warp nacelles t’ th’ proper speed we need to make breakaway and enter time warp. Bu’ it becomes a whole new set o’ numbers when it comes time t’ send his ship back, an’ I dinna think his little craft is structurally capable o’ the poundin’ it’ll have to take, no’ once, bu’ twice. I’m not even sure it’ll survive the trip forward in time, truth be told.”

“Alasdair, coordinate with Mister Karr’rinak and Commander Bloom to see if we can increase the Kairn scout’s structural strength,” Koester ordered. “We might even consider having the scout piloted remotely, and having Karr’rinak stay aboard the *Dauntless* during the warp.”

“Captain, may I have a word with you?” T’Pan asked, stepping over to a far corner of the room.

“You have a concern, Lieutenant?” Koester asked as he joined his science officer.

“Do you consider it prudent to send the Kairn back to the past should we successfully return to our own time?” T’Pan asked.

“I have no intention of leaving someone who is offering us help stranded, if that’s what you’re asking. Why?”

“Should the Kairn make it back to this time period, and be able to relate to their high command the formula for time travel, can you imagine the damage to the time line that could ensue? This is a concept and formula we have not shared even with our closest allies,” the Vulcan woman remarked quietly. “They could alter the outcome of our recent war in the Typhon Sector. Or prevent our alliance with the Morain that bequeathed us the upgrades to our shields that countered the power of their weaponry, or prevent us from developing the trilitium torpedo.” Koester was beginning to understand the logic of what T’Pan was stating. “Sir, knowing information from the future, they could even go so far as to invade Federation space literally at the moment the Treaty of Bajor is signed, attacking a war-weary populous unable to effectively defend itself. They would have been impossible to dislodge once entrenched in numerous Federation sectors.”

“What do you suggest, Lieutenant?” Koester asked. “Require Karr’rinak to remain aboard the *Dauntless* against his will if and when we get back home safely? Maybe even ensure his return trip is unsuccessful, make it look like an accident? I can’t bring myself to do that to him. He’s offered us his help when he had no reason to.”

“No reason we are aware of. Which raises another point I was about to make, Captain; you, of all Starfleet officers, have had the most interaction with the Kairn. You even participated in a special mission to observe their staging areas as they attempted to invade Federation space several years ago because of your expertise. Have you ever met a Kairn who was so easily willing to help strangers?”

“No, I haven’t, Lieutenant. But with the exception of the scientists who tried to extract my knowledge of Starfleet tactics and fleet disposition directly from my mind in our first encounter, my only experience with the Kairn has been with members of their military. Until Mister Karr’rinak proves otherwise, I am willing to take him at his word.” T’Pan’s right eyebrow shot up toward her extremely straight bangs at the captain’s remark, after which he concluded, “That doesn’t mean I won’t be keeping an eye or two on him. Thank you for your concern, Lieutenant.” T’Pan nodded, then returned to the briefing table.

“This may work, Cap’n,” Wallace commented as Koester returned to his own seat. “We’re goin’ t’ use the tractor beams that normally guide the shuttles into shuttlebays one an’ two t’ position Mister Karr’rinak’s scout ship between our nacelles an’ hold it there. His warp field will then enhance an’ expand our own. We c’n reach warp factors in the 9-plus range while our own nacelles are only functionin’ at a warp 4 output level. But it’ll mean Mister Karr’rinak canna be inside his vessel while we do this. Th’ radiation and stress factors between th’ nacelles would kill any biological being.”

Koester looked at his reptilian guest. “Having heard this, are you still willing to provide the assistance you offered, Mister Karr’rinak? We would understand completely if you answered no.”

“I undersstand, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster,” the Kairn replied. “And I am sssstill willing to offer my assssssssssstanssse.”

* * * *

As members of his crew made the necessary modifications to the Kairn scout ship – including Lt Commander Spot making subtle adjustments to the Kairn warp drive from the inside – Koester escorted his guest to the 10-Forward lounge, intending to strike up a casual conversation and see if he could determine if there was any ulterior motive in the Kairn scout’s actions. Many of the crew in the lounge looked on in shock or amazement as the reptilian Kairn ordered a drink from the bar and followed the captain to a seat across the room.

“I must admit, you have to be the friendliest of any Kairn I have ever met,” Koester said as the two sat down in the corner of the room near one of the forward windows. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but in my previous encounters, the Kairn have always seemed... aggressive, I guess is the appropriate word.”

“If your interaction hasss been with our Imperial military, I am not ssssurprised, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster,” Karr’rinak replied, pausing for a moment from using his thin, forked tongue to drink his beverage from his glass. “The military hasss alwaysss been the purview of our mossst aggressssssive warriorsss, those closssssst in nature to our predatory ansssssstorssss. Thosssse among the Kairn in whom that key sssspark of aggressssssion issss not identified early in life are ssssorted into other fieldssss of apprentisssship.” Koester noticed a look of pride spread on Karr’rinak’s face as he added, “It was my own ssssenssse of adventure and longing for disssscovery that ssssteered me to my field as a sssscout; looking for the ressssourssssss my people need to ssssurvive, including room to expand. Though I am looked down upon by the ssssoldierssss, I consider myself more fortunate than thosssse consssigned to the Imperial military for that reasssson.”

“Is it that sense of adventure and discovery that also prompted you to offer your assistance to us? You do realize there is a distinct possibility that either none of us will survive the trip to the future or, once there, that you and your ship will be unable to return?”

“How doesss one learn without taking any risk, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster?” Karr’rinak asked. “Even failure takesss you a sssstep clossser to eventual ssssuccssssssss.”

“But how can anyone learn from your mistakes, or successes, if no one is there to observe them?” Koester asked.

“You refer, of courssse, to my sssstatussss asss a lone sssscout,” Karr’rinak said. “What you do not know is no Kairn sssscout issss ever truly alone.”

“What do you mean?” the captain asked, confused.

“Our sssscout shipssss are equipped with a transssponder that consssstantly updatesss the sssscout coordinatorssss on the Throne-world of our sssstatussss. Our shipssss are alwaysss broadcasting our positionssss, sssspeed, direction, ssssensor readingssss, and sssscout logssss, jusssst in cassse anything unexpected were to happen to one of our sssscout craft. In that way, the Throne-world knowssss of our disssscoveries, our adverssssitessss, new ressssourcessss to exsssploit, and new enemiiessss to conquer, without ussss having to actually ssssend reportssss. Otherwise, it could take many rotationssss and the livessss of numeroussss sssscoutssss should one of ussss ever come upon an unexpected danger and otherssss have to be ssssent to track ussss to learn what happened.”

“Quite logical, Mister Karr’rinak,” Koester commented while making a mental note to himself.

* * * *

“It’s true, Captain,” Lieutenant Tom Riker confirmed as he, Fleet Captain Koester, Commander Wallace, and Major Mendez looked at a tactical display on the main screen in astrometrics several hours after the captain’s conversation with the Kairn scout in 10-Forward. “It’s an extremely narrow-beam transmission, easily overlooked under the natural background emissions of stars and regular subspace channels. I never would have found it had I not been aware of what to look for.”

On the viewer, a representation of both the *Dauntless* and the Kairn scout ship – the Starfleet delta with a Kairn swirl superimposed over it – emitted a narrow line representing the data transmission directly toward what Starfleet called the Kairn Nebula, behind which was believed to be the location of the Kairn Throne-world.

“So the Kairn Empire knows we’re here,” Koester said. “Or they will as soon as this transmission reaches their Throne-world. But have we inadvertently revealed the secret to time travel to them when we modified Karr’rinak’s ship?”

“I do not believe so, Captain,” replied the voice of Lt Commander Spot through Koester’s combadge. Koester looked down at both the red and pink circles of light on the deck near his feet. “Dot and I went over the vessel’s transceiver completely. As Karr’rinak stated to you, it is designed to transmit the ship’s current location in a four-plane grid, heading, speed, and sensor readings. It is incapable of registering the modifications we have made to the vessel’s engines or structural supports, at least until we attempt to slingshot around the star Gatria.”

“Aren’t the Kairn going to be curious as to how their scout ship, which was built to be able to travel at speeds up to warp 6.3, is doing more than warp 8 right now?”

“By the time they receive the transmission, we will have already either warped back to our proper time or failed entirely.”

“Let’s just hope they don’t figure out what we’re doing from the data they do receive and are waiting for us to emerge once we make it back,” Koester remarked.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate approximately 52750:

The Dauntless and Kairn scout ship are nearing the vicinity of Gatria, a star much like Sol at the center of Earth’s solar system, where we hope with the aid of Karr’rinak’s vessel to employ a slingshot trajectory around the star and create a time warp back to our own proper year and date.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

The *Dauntless* and its ‘passenger’ neared the yellow star in the distance. In his seat in the captain’s chair, Koester looked toward his right, past where his first officer was seated, toward both the science and tactical consoles.

“Ship is at red alert, Captain,” Mendez reported.

“Very well, Major. Mister Wallace, have you computed our trajectory so that we emerge back on the date when we encountered the singularity?”

“Lieutenant T’Pan, Commander Spot, an’ myself have been computing th’ formula fo’ th’ last five days,” Wallace confirmed. “I can guarantee a margin o’ error of plus or minus three days from th’ day we got caught up in the gravity well of the Hoolin singularity.”

“Plus or minus three days, huh? I guess it will have to do. Better than trying to stay hidden or being considered missing for a decade or more.” The captain glanced at his first officer, who was once part of a starship crew lost in time for nearly eighty years. “Mendez, is our guest comfortable?”

“I explained to Mister Karr’rinak that he would not be allowed on the bridge during the time warp,” Mendez explained. “He said he understood and decided to wait it out in 10-Forward. He’s going to have some spectacular views down there, I would think. I have Lieutenant Jeong-Hwan and the Gunny down there keeping an eye on him just in case.”

“Good. I doubt Mister Karr’rinak will be any problem, but we’ve given him too much information about his future as it is. I’m already not looking forward to the visit by TI.” Koester then turned his attention to the helm. “Mister Hyland, prepare to shift control of the helm over to the science console.”

Lieutenant (JG) William Hyland III touched several controls on his console. A second later, the holographic display turned from greenish to red.

“Helm at the science officer’s command, Captain,” Hyland reported.

“Very well. Mister Spot, you have the conn.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Lt Commander Spot’s voice replied. “Interface with the Kairn scout vessel is nominal. All systems aboard the *Dauntless* stand ready. Entering course 085 mark 5 into the helm. Helm ready, sir.”

Koester looked over at his first officer, trying to smile.

“I ever tell you how much I hate doing this, Exec? I keep feeling like the ship is going to break apart around me every time we make one of these slingshots.”

“Probably one of the reasons why Starfleet doesn’t task its starships with this kind of maneuver too often,” Setton To’Lock Arbelo agreed.

Koester nodded before saying, “Mister Spot, whenever you’re ready.”

“Accelerating to warp now,” Spot reported. A moment later the *Dauntless* and the Kairn scout jumped to warp speed, heading almost directly toward Gatria. “Tractor moorings on the scout vessel are holding. The Kairn scout is reinforcing our warp bubble as expected. Accelerating to warp 9.2.”

Koester could already feel the vibrations increase through the armrests of his chair. He looked over, noting that Counselor Gera was gripping her own armrests tightly, her teeth clenched.

“Relax your jaw, Counselor,” the captain advised over the increasing maelstrom of sound. “You’ll break your teeth like that!”

Gera nodded her head, though it could barely be perceived through the vibrations, and opened her mouth – mentally concentrating not to clench her jaw again.

“Passing twelve million kilometers to the star’s surface, speed now warp 8.9 and increasing. Breakaway point in twenty-five seconds,” Spot announced through the entire bridge crew’s combadges. “Detecting high stress levels on the tractor beams holding the scout vessel.”

“Can we boost power to the tractor beams and strengthen our hold on the vessel?” Koester asked.

“Not without taking power from other systems vital to our transit, Captain,” Spot replied. “Fifteen seconds to breakaway point.”

“Everyone hold on!” Koester announced.

In spite of the fact that the starship was shuddering so badly and there was so much noise that few other than Vulcans could hear, Spot started counting down to the point where the *Dauntless* would turn away from the gravity of the star, creating the time warp that the crew hoped would take them home. “10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... Starting breakaway maneuver... Now!”

Koester was nearly thrown sideways out of his seat in the direction of Counselor Gera. It took all his strength to hold on as it felt like the *Dauntless* wanted to tear itself apart.

“We have entered a forward time warp!” Spot announced.

“Captain!” Lt Riker called out. “The tractor beam above shuttlebay two just failed! We’re losing control of the Kairn scout!”

“Can you put the image on screen?” Koester shouted. A moment later the stretched Doppler lines of space was replaced with the view of the area between the Sovereign-class starship’s warp nacelles. The triangular-shaped Kairn scout ship was starting to fish-tail slightly, held in the grip of only a single tractor beam, threatening to strike the nacelles on either side of it.

Koester struggled in his chair, attempting several times to press his intercom button before finally succeeding. "Bridge to engineering... We need that second tractor beam restored or we're going to lose the Kairn ship!"

"Several circuits overloaded and blew once we broke away from the star's gravity," informed Commander Bloom from engineering. "Attempting to re-route the conduits, but it's going to take time!"

"Skipper, the Kairn vessel is starting to fish-tale between our nacelles!" Chief Kyman reported. "If it hits either nacelle, it'll blow up the ship!"

"How much longer until we reach our correct time period?" Koester asked.

"Twenty seconds," Spot replied.

"We can't wait that long, Skipper," Kyman implored.

"Damn!" Koester cursed under his breath. "Okay, no choice. Release the tractor beam from shuttlebay one. Dump the scout vessel, then bring us out of warp!"

Between the starship's nacelles, the small Kairn scout whipped wildly back and forth, coming ever closer to striking the larger vessel's field grilles. A moment later, the sole tractor beam still holding the small craft released, and the vessel tumbled up and away from the *Dauntless*. Seconds later, it reached the edge of the warp field enclosing both ships and tumbled back into real-space, breaking apart as it did. Less than five seconds later, the *Dauntless* also dropped out of warp, its engine nacelles immediately going dark.

"Status?" Koester called out in the relative quiet, the bridge having gone almost completely dark as well as soon as the warp engines had failed.

"We're currently on emergency batteries," Riker reported as his console re-booted and lit up again. "Looks like Commander Bloom and his staff are conducting emergency repairs."

"Let's give them a few minutes," Koester said, knowing the captain was the last person the chief engineer wanted to talk to under the circumstances. "Mister Spot, did we do it? Are we back on the date we're supposed to be?"

"Hard to tell, with so many systems down, Captain," Spot replied. "Long range sensors are off-line. Short range systems are on minimal power. And the subspace transceiver has been damaged in the time warp."

"I want full damage and casualty reports to the XO in ten minutes. Make sure the word is passed."

"Engineering to bridge," said the voice of Jeff Bloom just as the lights returned to near-normal levels.

"Good work, Jeff. What's your status?"

"We've got auxiliary power restored. Should have the mains back on-line within the hour. But the warp drive is wrecked. We're not going anywhere faster than one-quarter the speed of light for the foreseeable future."

"Thanks, Jeff. Pass my compliments on to the engineering crew," Koester said. He then addressed Lt Riker as he said, "I'm going to have faith that Mister Spot's calculations were close enough to bring us back to where we belong. Issue a general distress call to *Home Plate*. Make sure they know our warp drive is down and we're going to need to be towed back into spacedock... again."

"Aye, Captain. Transmitting a general distress call on all Starfleet frequencies."

"Now what, Skipper?" Chief Kyman asked, looking over at Koester from his seat at mission ops.

"Now... we sit and wait. And tell Mister Karr'rinak what happened to his ship and hope he accepts our apology."

* * * *

Several minutes later, Koester and Mendez were in the guest quarters that had been assigned to Karr'rinak for the duration. The Kairn had tired to make the sparse stateroom more like home by raising the temperature to almost 41°C and the humidity to nearly 90%, comfortable enough for a reptiloid, but stifling for the two human Starfleet officers.

"We have some good news and some bad news," Koester said to Karr'rinak. "The good news is we have determined we are back in our proper time period, more or less. We've even picked up some broadcasts from *Starbase 719* to the Fifth Fleet. The bad news is our warp drive is inoperable, so we're going to have to depend on

another starship towing us back to the starbase. We also had a problem with the tractor beams during the time warp which resulted in the loss of your scout vessel.”

The captain had expected the Kairn to become angry at the news, perhaps even violent in response to losing his vessel. Instead, to both Koester and Mendez’s surprise, Karr’rinak took the news in stride.

“Then it issss a good thing I wassss not aboard it when it wassss desssstroyed.”

“You’re not angry or upset?” Koester asked.

“For what? I knew there were risssskssss when I volunteered to help you, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koesssster.”

“But this might mean we can’t get you back to your own proper year. What about your friends? Your family?”

“I undersssstand the conssssept of friendship from witnesssssing it in the coursssse of my travelssss, but the Kairn do not fossster sssuch relationshipssss. To the Kairn, a sssibling issss just another mouth you musssst compete againssst for vital ressssourcessss.” Karr’rinak looked around the stateroom and added, “I am sheltered. I am fed. That issss all the contentment a Kairn sssseekssss. I have no – what you would call – loved onessss I have left behind.”

“I wish all the Kairn we have encountered were as easily content as you, Mister Karr’rinak.”

“Pleasssse, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koesssster, do not misssstake contentment for sssself-ssssatisfissssion. There will come a time, ssssoon, when I will again feel the need to wander and exsssplore.”

“Well, in the meantime, until that day comes and/or we can find a way of safely returning you to where you belong, consider yourself our guest here. After all, it may take a few days before help reaches us.”

* * * *

Ten Days Later

Aboard USS Bellerophon NCC-74705

Captain (Carrie) K’danz was sitting behind the desk in her ready room, relaxing with a cup of coffee while reading a new crime novel on her monitor screen. Across the room, near the couch beneath the large forward-facing windows, her husband – the *USS Bellerophon*’s chief engineer, Dar – was playing with the couple’s adopted nine year old son, Jacob Danz. The two had assembled a model train set, and each was wearing an old-fashioned striped engineer’s cap as they played with the trains on the deck.

“Bridge to Captain K’danz,” said the voice of the starship’s first officer, Commander Tom Paris.

“Go ahead, Tom.”

“Captain, priority message coming in for you from *Home Plate*.”

K’danz exchanged a look with her husband before saying, “Pipe it in here, Tom.” A moment later, the pages of the novel the captain had been reading were replaced on the monitor screen by the image of Captain Cathryn E. Pearson, executive officer of *Starbase 719*. “What can I do for you, Cathryn?”

“Carrie, several days ago the base received a badly garbled distress call coming from somewhere in Sector Typhon-Bravo, as you know. The *USS Dauntless*, as the closest starship to the source of the transmission, was assigned to investigate. We have not been able to establish contact with the *Dauntless* for the last three days, and Konstantin fears the worst, believing the so-called distress call may have been a ruse to lead one or more of our starships into a trap. What is your vessel’s current location?”

“We’re currently three light years beyond Woodron,” K’danz answered.

“The *Besiege* is already en-route to the *Dauntless*’ last known location, but McLeod and his crew were patrolling along the Morain/Kairn border and it will be at least five days before they can arrive. The *Bellerophon* can be there in two.”

“Send me the *Dauntless*’ last known coordinates and the approximate location of the distress call. I’ll turn the *Belle* around immediately.”

“Thanks, Carrie. There is one other thing you should be aware of. Try and avoid the vicinity of the Hoolin system. In the last twenty four hours, our Stellar Cartography section confirmed that the star has collapsed into a subspace singularity, a black hole of immense size and magnitude. Unfortunately, the star was directly along the course the *Dauntless* would have taken to investigate the mysterious distress call we have received, and they probably would not have seen it at warp speed until it was too late, which could explain why the ship has suddenly and unexpectedly gone silent. Be careful.”

“We will. *Bellerophon*, out.” She then touched the intercom on her desk and said, “Bridge, this is the Captain. We should be receiving a set of coordinates related to a distress call *Home Plate* picked up several days ago. Set course for those coordinates, but be sure to give at least a five light year clearance to the Hoolin system. Captain Pearson has informed me the star has collapsed into a subspace singularity.”

“Understood,” replied Paris. “New course is plotted and laid in.”

“Engage warp, ahead factor 9.” She then remarked to Dar, “Let’s hope there’s still something left of the *Dauntless* to locate.”

* * * *

In the eleven days since warping back to their own time period, the crew of the *Dauntless* had learned more systems than simply warp drive had been overloaded by the stresses of time travel. Life support was down by a third, defensive systems aside from basic shields and screens were non-functional, and the subspace transceiver had been damaged; able to receive subspace transmissions but unable to transmit on anything other than normal sublight radio carrier waves. The only subspace communications that appeared to be working was the emergency transmitter that continued to broadcast their distress call, and even that the crew was not entirely positive could be heard beyond five or so light years.

“You know what would be ironic, Skipper?” Chief Kyman asked as he stood beside the captain’s chair. “If we were responding to our own distress call when this all started.”

“Wait... What?” Koester replied after thinking about Kyman’s remark for several seconds, looking back at the bearded El’Aurian man. “What do you mean, respond to our own distress call?”

“Well, the distress call Captain Pearson assigned us to investigate came from the exact area of space where we are currently located. What if Commander Spot’s calculations were off slightly or the loss of Mister Karr’rinak’s ship caused us to return a week before we went back in time?”

“That’s called a predestination paradox, COB, and it’s the kind of discussion that gives me a headache when I have to sit down with agents from Temporal Investigations to try and explain it.”

“Which reminds me. Have you cleared off a few days in your schedule, Skipper?”

“For...?”

“Your meeting with Temporal Investigations. I’d love to hear how you explain bringing a Kairn from prior to the Federation’s first encounter with their Empire back to the present with us.”

“Say another word, COB, and you will be attending that meeting with me once we reach the starbase instead of playing golf on the holodeck,” Koester threatened. Kyman raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Captain, sensors are detecting a space vessel on an intercept course with us,” reported Major Mendez.

“About time someone from the base found us,” Koester remarked with a grin toward his tactical officer.

“I’m not sure it’s one of our ships,” Mendez cautioned. “In fact...”

The Marine officer’s sudden silence alarmed the captain. He quickly stood up and moved over beside the Major. “What is it, Mendez?” he asked.

“Captain, with our sensors not fully functional I’m just barely reading it, but the warp signature of the approaching vessel matches that of a Kairn battlecruiser!”

“Sound red alert. Raise shields!” Koester ordered.

“Captain, keep in mind, in our present state, we can’t employ the Morain shield upgrade and we have no phasers or torpedoes,” Mendez advised.

“Perhaps these Kairn are willing to be as reasonable as Mister Karr’rinak?” Koester suggested, resuming his seat in the command chair as the alert klaxon sounded throughout the starship and crew members rushed to their battlestations. “In fact, have Karr’rinak escorted to the bridge. Perhaps he can once again help us? At the very least, perhaps he may wish to return to his Empire if given the chance under these circumstances?”

“I’ll have the Gunny escort him up,” Mendez confirmed.

Koester turned his attention to the man sitting at ops. “Mister Rikeri, has the Kairn ship attempted communications with us?”

“Negative. Still approaching at low warp. Short-range sensors are indicating their missile tubes are open but disruptors are not armed.”

“They’re being cautious but not moving to attack. That’s a good sign. Perhaps they learned from their defeat last year?” Koester remarked. “Open hailing frequencies.”

“Not positive they will be able to receive carrier wave radio signals, but they will be within range in fifteen seconds. They’re dropping out of warp.”

On the viewscreen, the captain could see the Kairn warship, roughly comparable to his own Sovereign-class starship in weapons and capabilities – had his own starship not suffered the damage it had over the preceding weeks – appear out of warp and slow to a stop a distance in front of the *Dauntless*.

“Kairn warship, this is Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester of the Federation starship *Dauntless*. State your purpose for being here.”

Koester waited several seconds, but there was no response from the Kairn vessel. Koester addressed Riker as he said, “Any indication they are receiving?”

“No way to tell, Captain,” Riker replied.

As Koester contemplated hailing the Kairn warship again, one of the turbolifts opened and Karr’rinak and Gunnery Sergeant Christopher ‘Olly’ O’Laughlin emerged. The Kairn male, who once again had to duck while going through the turbolift doorway, looked around the bridge with curiosity.

“How do you function in such darknessssss, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koesssster?” the Kairn asked, comparing the Federation starship’s bridge to his own hot and brightly lit cockpit.

“We manage,” Koester replied before drawing Karr’rinak’s attention to the ship on the viewscreen. “I believe we have encountered some friends of yours.”

“An Emperor-classssss cruisssser! Unussssual... They only launched the firsssst ssssuch vessssssel around the time I lasssst made a sssstop at the Throne-world, nearly three rotationssss ago. I would not have imagined the Imperial fleet would ssssend ssssuch an advanced ship thissss far out into the wasssstelandssss.”

“Actually, that would have been over thirteen years ago now,” Koester pointed out. “Do you know if they are capable of receiving carrier-wave based radio frequencies? It’s currently our only way of transmitting at the moment.”

“It would take ssssome fine tuning, but yesss, they should be able to recssseive.”

Koester looked over at Mendez and said, “Maybe we’ll get a response if we let Mister Karr’rinak speak on our behalf?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Mendez replied.

“Hail them again, Mister Riker,” Koester ordered before looking up at the Kairn standing next to him. “The radio mike is yours.”

Karr’rinak looked at the screen as if talking directly to the ship displayed there. What emerged from his sharp-tooth-filled mouth was a series of hisses and grunts, the likes of which Koester had never heard before. Then Koester was as surprised as the rest of the bridge crew when, as Karr’rinak paused, hisses and grunts replied through the bridge speakers. As the crew watched and waited, the conversation continued back and forth for some time. At one point, Karr’rinak looked shocked, glancing down at Koester briefly before continuing to talk.

After several minutes, Karr’rinak said, “You may sssstop transsssmittng.” On the screen, the Kairn battlecruiser slowly turned away from the *Dauntless* and moved off, eventually entering warp. The captain looked back up at his Kairn guest, who now looked emotionally drained, his scales appearing more grey than normal.

“Are you alright, Karr’rinak? Would you like to go to sickbay and have Doctor Kelley examine you?”

“No, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster. I jussst need to ressst for a short time and procssssssss what I have been told.” Karr’rinak turned to walk back toward the turbolift, Gunny O’Laughlin moving up behind him, when he paused at the turbolift threshold and said, “I would ssssspeak with you later, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster. There are factssss of which you should be aware.”

“I’ll meet with you when I get off watch,” Koester agreed.

* * * *

Several hours later, Fleet Captain Koester entered 10-Forward and looked around, noticing Karr’rinak sitting in a chair in the corner by one of the large forward-facing windows, staring out into space. He quietly crossed the room and stood next to the Kairn scout.

“Are you alright, Mister Karr’rinak? It looked like you received some bad news during your conversation with that battlecruiser,” he commented.

“It issss not every day one learnssss you alone are ressssponssssible for a war that hassss killed thoussssandssss and desstroyed more than half of the Imperial fleet, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster,” Karr’rinak responded.

“Huh? Are you referring to the war between your Empire and the Federation that occurred last year?” Koester asked. “You weren’t even here at the time. You skipped over the last decade because of our time warp. How could you be responsible for the war?”

“Do you recall that I told you my vessssssel automatically broadcasssst itssss vital information, including periodic logssss, back to Throne-world at all times, no matter where I wasss?”

“Yes. We hoped the information it transmitted prior to our attempt to return to our own time would not corrupt the timeline and create a temporal paradox,” Koester replied.

“Among the logssss that were transsssmitted back wasss my dessscription of my vessssssel’ssss encounter with an unknown sssspasssecraft called *USsssSsss Dauntlessssss*, operating under the authority of an alliansse called the Federation, under the command of a mammalian being called a human named Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster,” Karr’rinak explained. “When I disssappeared shortly after my encounter with the mysssterioussss sssspasssecraft, the Imperial Fleet High Command turned itssss attention toward the Federation, of which it had only previousssssly heard rumorssss, sssspesssifically sssseeking out Fleet Captain Peter J. Koessster in the hopesss he had information about what had occurred to their sssscout and his vessssssel as well as tactical plansss and information that could lead to a ssssuccssssssssssful expansion into the Federation ssssphere of influensse.”

“So what you’re saying,” Koester said, trying to straighten everything out in his brain, “is that your offer to help my ship and our accidental destruction of your scout vessel led directly to your Empire seeking me out and kidnapping me over seven years ago in an attempt to try and extract information directly from my mind? That it led to the subsequent invasion of Federation space, which in turn increased tensions even further after that invasion was pushed back and *Starbase 719* was built in what the Kairn Empire considers its back yard? That in turn then led to the war between your Empire and my Federation a year ago in which most of the Kairn fleet was destroyed?”

“I am afraid sssso,” Karr’rinak replied with a nod. “And becausssse I have been misssssing – pressssumed killed or held prisssoner – for the last thirteen rotationssss, I am considered dead by my people. I can never return to my home sssspasse.”

Koester began to understand the mood his Kairn guest had exhibited ever since talking to the battlecruiser they had encountered earlier; in spite of the Kairn’s dog-eat-dog attitude, their guest had lost all connection to his race and heritage, and that had to hurt deep inside.

“The Federation has opened diplomatic relations with the Kairn Empire in the months since the war ended. Perhaps we can work through diplomatic channels to get you back...?” Koester started to offer.

“You do not undersstand!” Karr’rinak shouted, his forked tongue flicking between his teeth, showing the first flashes of anger and aggression normally associated with the Kairn and drawing the surprised attention of nearly everyone in 10-Forward. “Among my people there issss no return from death!”

“Fortunately my culture doesn’t feel the same way,” Koester remarked cryptically. “Surely they would not abandon you once you explain...?”

“I am no more than a ghossst within the Empire. I have lossst my ship and my purposssse. I can never go home. My life, for all intentssss, hassss ended.”

Koester silently looked at the Kairn for several seconds as he turned his attention back to the starfield outside the window. Finally he said, “I won’t make you any promises, Mister Karr’rinak, but once we’re back at base, I’ll do everything I can to see to it that you get your life back. You said you had a sense of adventure and a longing for discovery. That can still be put to good use somewhere, somehow!”

Karr’rinak looked at Koester, his face still a little mad, but mainly sad.

“If only I had not resssponded to your transsssmisssssionssss, none of thisss would have happened. None of the death and desssstruction... on both ssssidesss.”

“It’s not your fault, Karr’rinak. None of it. That you must believe if nothing else. The results preceded the cause from our point of view. Nothing could change what happened.”

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 66069.6:

We have spent the last two days in search of the starship Dauntless, with no indications as to whether the ship has been destroyed or is simply lost. We are now coming up on the location of the garbled distress call picked up by Starbase719. I’m hoping whatever we find will provide some answers instead of more questions.

K’danz, out.

“Approaching coordinates of the distress call,” reported Lieutenant Xin Zhadesh, the *Bellerophon*’s Efrosian chief operations officer.

“I’m detecting warp eddies in the vicinity,” the tactical officer, Starfleet Marine Captain Michael C. Drake stated. “Kairn warp signatures.” The Marine officer looked over toward where the captain sat. “No indications of any weapons fire.”

“Could the distress call have come from a Kairn warship and one of their own ships came and rescued them and left?” Commander Tom Paris asked.

“On a Starfleet frequency? And that still doesn’t explain what happened to the *Dauntless*,” Captain K’danz remarked. “At least, not in a good way. No, there’s something more going on here.” K’danz turned to look over the rear railing at her operations officer. “Mister Zhadesh, are we still receiving the so-called distress call?”

“Affirmative, Captain,” Zhadesh replied. “Though the signal is now much weaker.”

“Bearing?”

“Roughly 190 mark 3.”

“Helm, alter course to 190 mark 3. Tactical, keep an eye out for anything – anything at all – that could be broadcasting that transmission; from a Borg Cube to a one-man escape pod.”

“Aye, Captain,” Drake replied.

“On new ordered course, 190 mark 3,” Lt Commander Walter Hickam, the starship’s chief helmsman reported.

Not long after the course change was complete, Drake reported, “Captain, I’m detecting a vessel ahead, eighteen million kilometers. It’s...” Drake looked confused for a moment, as if not trusting his sensor readings. “It’s traveling at sub-light, only point-two-five C. How the hell did it get all the way out here?”

“Confirmed,” stated Zhadesh from across the bridge. “Subject vessel is traveling on impulse power only.”

K’danz could not help but get her hopes up somewhat, but instead asked, “Is it the Kairn ship whose warp eddy we detected earlier?”

“Negative. The warp eddy headed in the direction of Kairn space. This vessel is on course directly toward *Starbase 719*,” Zhadesh replied.

Now K’danz could not hold back her excitement. “The *Dauntless*?” she asked with hope.”

“Subject vessel is not giving off any indications of warp capability, but mass and configuration match with Federation Starfleet Sovereign-class starship design.”

“Oh, thank God,” K’danz exclaimed with relief. “Mister Zhadesh, hail them.”

“No response on subspace, Captain,” Zhadesh reported a moment later. “I am, however, picking up a faint signal on a radio carrier-wave in the amplitude modulation range.”

“Radio carrier-wave?” K’danz remarked, looking at her first officer in the seat to her left. “What did Peter get himself and his crew into this time?” She then ordered, “On speakers, Mister Zhadesh.”

“About time you got here,” said the static-infused voice of Fleet Captain Koester.

“We would have been here sooner, but we decided to stop for shore leave for a few days,” K’danz replied to her fellow starship captain’s sarcasm.

“Only a few days? We’ve been stuck out here without warp drive for almost two weeks!”

“Two weeks?” K’danz looked confused. “*719* only reported you missing five days ago.”

“Five days?” Koester said back, suddenly sounding unsure. “Looks like I might owe my COB an apology.”

“I don’t understand,” K’danz said.

“I’ll explain everything once you come alongside. We have a lot of equipment that needs repair, and we’re going to need a tow back to base.”

“I’ll have Dar prepare the tractor beam for warp towing. Can’t wait to hear this story. See you in person soon. *Bellerophon*, out.”

* * * *

Several Days Later...

The door chime sounded and Captain Cathryn E. Pearson looked up from the report she was reviewing, just barely able to make out the Starfleet uniform through the windows of her office door.

“Come,” she said.

The wooden doors parted and Fleet Captain Koester walked in, placing a small Starfleet padd on Pearson’s semi-circular desk before saying, “Repairs on the *Dauntless* are proceeding on schedule. You have a good shipyard repair crew here, Cathryn.”

“They should be. They’ve had a lot of practice in the last year or two,” Pearson replied with a smirk. “Glad to see you made it back in one piece. I read your debriefing report. It sounds like you escaped that singularity by the skin of your teeth.”

Koester helped himself to a cup of tea from the Russian samovar Pearson kept on her office coffee table – a gift from Konstantin Harkonnen – before taking a seat across the desk from the starbase’s executive officer. “It would have been nice knowing it was there, but I guess collapsing stars don’t always announce themselves in advance.” He took a sip from his teacup before adding, “Did you by chance read my proposal?”

“I did. And I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“Why not? You’re the representative for the Starfleet Office of Technical Training in this sector. And Starfleet has had an officer exchange program in place for twenty years!”

“That’s part of the problem right there, Peter,” Pearson said, calling up a file on her computer monitor. “He’s not an officer. In fact, as far as I can tell, he’s never even been a part of their military.”

“No, but he’s an explorer. And what is Starfleet’s stated goal...? ‘...To boldly go where no one has gone before!’ Plus, to this point, we’ve depended on our alliance with the Morain to provide us insight into the Kairn and their motivations. He can provide us with more knowledge of Kairn culture and history than a battalion of Morain spies. He can help open more new diplomatic channels into their Empire than we could have hoped for prior to this

point. All I need is your signature to make it official!” Koester pushed the small padd partly across the desk toward Pearson.

“According to the report filed by Counselor Wyatt, he’s suffering from severe and deep depression,” Pearson remarked, pointing toward the file on her monitor. “Your own report mentions placing a suicide watch on him for a few days following your encounter with the Battlecruiser. How can you be sure he’ll be able to do what you hope he’ll do? How do you know he’s not going to fall deeper into depression or, even worse, actually become suicidal – and try and take you and your entire crew with him?”

“Cathryn, I’ve had several conversations with Karr’rinak,” said Koester. “Both prior to and since his encounter with the Kairn battlecruiser near Gatria. In the beginning it was an attempt to determine if there was any duplicity in his offers to help us; to see if he was actually attempting to spy on or sabotage us. I am now convinced he truly believes in the virtues of which he spoke. And most importantly, deep inside, he’s an explorer! Once he’s back out there, uncovering the unknown, I’m sure his depression will evaporate. Counselor Gera is sure of this. Doctor Kelley is sure of this. His current mental state is due to the fact he has been... rejected, for lack of a better word... by his own people. His family, if you will – though the Kairn have a different concept of family than most of us in the Federation. He can find a new family among us.” Koester looked at Pearson with pleading eyes, again nudging the small padd closer to her. “He gave everything he had to help us when he didn’t have to. Let me give him something back. Please!”

“Alright,” Pearson finally relented with a huff of breath. “But he’s your responsibility. Keep him in line.” She picked up the padd and activated it, quickly reviewing the file written there before pressing her thumb against the screen, adding her digital signature to the paperwork.

“I don’t think keeping him in line is going to be a problem,” Koester remarked. “Once he understands our rules and procedures, I think he’s going to fit right in among the crew of the Fifth Fleet.”

* * * *

The senior officers and several other members of the *Dauntless* crew gathered on the bridge of the starship. The ship was still undergoing repair, and it would be several weeks before she left spacedock again, but while work was progressing in other areas of the ship, none was currently being accomplished on the bridge.

The port-side turbolift door opened, and Chief Kyman called out, “Crew... A-ten-SHUN!” The entire crew snapped to attention in unison.

From the port turbolift emerged Karr’rinak, wearing a rather bulky looking oversized version of a sciences-blue Starfleet uniform – made so by the fact that the Kairn required a body heating device normally built into their own uniforms to counter the relatively chilly normal temperature aboard ship – escorted once again by Gunnery Sergeant O’Laughlin. Karr’rinak stepped forward to the center of the bridge and turned to face Fleet Captain Koester, who stood in front of the captain’s chair.

“You understand what you are about to do, do you not?” Koester asked.

“I do,” Karr’rinak responded with a nod.

“Please raise your right hand and repeat after me,” Koester instructed as he lifted his own right hand. “I, Karr’rinak of Kairn...”

Karr’rinak raised his right hand. “I, Karr’rinak of Kairn...,” he repeated.

“...Do solemnly swear...”

“...Do ssssolemnly sssswear...”

“...That as a member of the Starfleet Officer Exchange Program...”

“...That assss a member of the Ssstarfleet Offfissser Exssschange Program...”

“...I will support and defend the Constitution of the United Federation of Planets against all enemies, foreign and domestic...;”

“...I will ssssupport and defend the Consssstitution of the United Federation of Planetssss against all enemiiesss, foreign and domesssstic...;”

“...That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same...;”

“...That I will bear true faith and allegiansse to the sssame...,”

“...And that I will obey the orders of the President of the UFP and the orders of the officers appointed over me...”

“...And that I will obey the orderssss of the Presssident of the UFP and the orderssss of the offisserssss appointed over me...”

“...according to Starfleet regulations and the Starfleet Code of Military Justice.”

“...according to Ssstarfleet regulationssss and the Ssstarfleet Code of Military Jusssstisse.”

Koester lowered his hand, prompting Karr’rinak to do likewise, as he then said, “I am proud to hereby appoint you to the brevet rank of Ensign in the Starfleet Officer Exchange Program.” Koester reached up and attached a single square pip to the rank insignia area on the Kairn’s uniform. He then offered his hand to the reptiloid as he said, “Congratulations, Ensign Karr’rinak.”

“Thank you, Fleet Captain Peter J...” Karr’rinak paused for a moment, as if remembering something he had been told. “Thank you, Captain,” he finally said, returning his commanding officer’s handshake to the applause of those gathered.

Koester then clapped his hands loudly a couple of times, looking around as he loudly said, “This ship isn’t going to get out of spacedock by itself. Everybody, back to work!” He grinned as he watched the crew rush back to their assigned duties before turning to Ensign Karr’rinak and saying, “Report to Commander Wallace, Ensign. He’ll have work for you to do. The sooner we get her back out into space, the sooner we can resume our mission of exploration.”

“Aye, sssir,” Karr’rinak replied, quickly moving over to where Wallace, T’Pan, Ensigns Aroe Euwess and Annika Arbelo-Eeta, and the circle of red light that was Lt Commander Spot were gathered around the science console.

The End