

The transport vessel had dropped out of warp a moderate distance from the Federation Ournal-class starbase and slowly approached. The vessel was still more than 400,000 kilometers away when it hailed the station.

“Commander Petersen, we’re being hailed by a civilian registered transport,” reported station chief of operations B’Elanna Torres. “Audio only.”

“On speakers,” Commander Michelle Petersen – the station’s security chief and acting commander while both Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh and Captain Cathryn Pearson were away on a mission of vital importance – ordered. A moment later what sounded like a series of grunts, clicks, and groans could be heard coming from the speakers around Ops. “Is that... Breen?” Petersen asked. “What is a Breen vessel doing out here in the Typhon sector approaching a Federation starbase?”

“Re-calibrating the universal translator,” Torres remarked as she manipulated the controls on the operations console. A moment later a highly-altered voice responded that his ship was a simple transport carrying nearly two dozen refugee families fleeing the destruction of the Breen homeworld and requested permission to dock briefly at the station in order to negotiate for supplies they were in desperate need of before continuing on in hopes of finding a planet where they could settle, at least temporarily.

“What do you think?” Torres asked Petersen. “It could be a trick of some kind. I’ve never heard of a Breen ship docking at a Federation space station, only attacking them.”

“That was before their homeworld was so badly devastated,” Petersen remarked. “Think of all the Romulan refugees that came out here after Romulus was destroyed. I say we let them dock and negotiate for the supplies they need, but we keep a very close eye on them.”

“Agreed,” Torres said before re-opening the frequency to the approaching transport. “*Starbase 719* to Breen transport vessel. You have permission to dock with the station at Docking Bay 29. Your best chance of locating the supplies you need would be to meet with the proprietor of Interstellar Outfitters or Gal-Trans Shipping in the base recreation area. I would not recommend any of your crew or passengers go ‘sight-seeing’ while you’re aboard.”

The transport’s pilot thanked Torres for her courtesy, then maneuvered their ship to dock at the indicated bay. Nearly a half-hour later, the Breen pilot and his co-pilot – both wearing the full-body thermal protection suits that allowed Breen to walk around in environments too hellishly hot in comparison to the comfortably frigid environment that used to exist on their home planet – were comparing the layout of the base rec area displayed on a directory near the entrance to that section with the location of the businesses recommended to them by the station crew displayed on a Breen padd one was holding. Once they were confident of where they were heading, the pair turned to their left, only to encounter a lone human with thinning brown hair and a tan satchel hanging off his shoulder. Unlike most humans they had encountered in the time since the attack that had devastated their homeworld, this human did not appear to be displaying any hatred or animosity. He merely looked at the two Breen and asked, “What do you want?”

“*[We have no wish for conflict. We are here to locate and purchase supplies we need to maintain the environmental conditions aboard our transport ship,]*” the Breen pilot replied in his native language. “*[We have been traveling a much further distance than our ship was designed for.]*”

“No, you misunderstand me,” the human remarked. “What do you WANT?”

* * * *

A short distance away, one of the security guards dispatched by Commander Petersen to keep an eye on the visiting Breen hid himself in the shadows of the rec area replimat and tapped his combadge.

“Lieutenant Anderson to Ops.”

“This is Petersen,” came the reply. “Is there something wrong, Lieutenant?”

“Commander, are we still looking for that former Starfleet officer that disappeared from the infirmary last year?” Anderson asked.

“Yes, we are!” Petersen replied very intently. “Why? Do you see him?”

“Yes, Commander. He’s talking to the two Breen who came aboard the station from that transport ship right now.”

A look of shock passed between Petersen and Torres in Ops. Petersen then ordered, “B’Elanna, contact Colonel McIntyre right now! Have him seal off the recreation area immediately! Every door, every junction, every hatch! Right down to every Jefferies tube! Mister Winters is not getting away again!”

As Torres obeyed the order, Petersen contacted all available security guards in the habitat section of the station and likewise had them converge, as covertly as possible, on Winters’ present location.

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“[If you mean in esoteric terms,]” the Breen pilot was saying to Phillip Winters, “[what I want is an undoing of the devastation that has befallen my people. But since what has been done cannot be undone, and as many of our survivors believe the Cardassians are somehow behind the atrocity that has been perpetrated against us, what I really want is revenge against Cardassia. They should suffer like the Breen have suffered. Likewise the Dominion. If not for their attempt to conquer the Alpha Quadrant, we would not have been drawn unnecessarily into the Cardassian’s war against the Federation and the Klingon Empire. And finally the Federation itself. They emerged from the war relatively unscathed. I would want to see tragedy befall the Federation in a similar manner it has us. THAT, human stranger, is what we want. In the meantime, we are here to obtain what we need. If you would excuse us?]”

A subtle smile played across Winters’ lips as he stepped aside to let the two Breen pass without further delay, saying, “Of course. And I’ll see what I can do to help you.” He watched the two Breen momentarily as they walked away, entering a shop in the Rec Area named Interstellar Outfitters. He then started moving toward the exit, pausing when he noticed the station security guard and enlisted Marine standing there. He turned around and headed in the opposite direction, only to find more security guards and Marines standing at the other exits.

Trying to slip into the crowds passing through one of the busiest areas of the starbase, Winters slipped through a door into the corridors behind a row of shops which led directly to a cargo transporter and turbolifts dedicated to moving inventory between cargo and loading bays and the rec area, but more Marines stood guard at intervals within the corridor. Winters, starting to grow desperate, slipped back out into the public areas and headed toward a Jefferies tube junction few knew about. It would mean a long and difficult climb to reach where he and his associates had kept themselves hidden, but it was necessary. As he reached the non-descript door, he touched the control to open it and received only a buzzing sound in return. The door remained closed. Winters tapped a combination code into the pad next to the door, but it still remained closed and locked. Someone had evidently changed the combination.

Winters started to retrieve a book-like device from his satchel when he was suddenly face to face with Colonel Sean Elliot McIntyre, the station’s Starfleet Marine Corps battalion commander.

“Good to see you again, Phillip,” McIntyre said to his former *USS Dauntless* shipmate as he placed a hand on the other man’s shoulder. “It’s been a long time. We’ve been looking for you for a while.”

“Wish I had known, Mac. I’d have come to visit you sooner,” Winters replied with a smile, though his eyes expressed a much different, darker emotion. He slowly raised his hands as several other armed Marines appeared behind McIntyre. One of them moved closer and started slipping Winter’s tan satchel strap off his shoulder. Winters moved as if he were going to resist having the bag taken from him, but resumed his gesture of surrender when two Marine non-coms pointed their phaser rifles in his direction. One of Petersen’s security officers then appeared, apparently talking to the security chief through his combadge.

“Yes, Commander,” he said as he produced a set of wrist cuffs and restrained Winter’s hands behind his back. “Winters is in custody. We’re transferring him to the max-security brig complex in Admin-10-A.”

“Very good,” Petersen’s voice replied. “Make sure he’s watched 24 hours a day, both by electronic surveillance and by actual eyes!” the security chief ordered. “No letting him slip away again.”

“Aye, ma’am,” the security officer acknowledged as he grasped Winters by the cuffs and directed him out of the rec area, surrounded by ten armed guards and Marines, as station residents and visitors watched with mouths agape. A look of frustration covered Winters’ face as he was led away.

Space the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“Fail Safe” By PJK

Admiral’s log, stardate 68012.0:

Thanks to the hard work and efforts of the engineering staffs of the Fifth Fleet, the Besiege, Bellerophon, Sarek, Triton, Arizona, and Sun Tzu have all been upgraded with the new, more-powerful super shields reverse-engineered from the technology installed aboard the USS Dauntless by the alien race we’re now calling the Phantoms – for their ability to remain invisible at will and their ships which, even when not cloaked, are nearly impossible to see in the blackness of space – and the complicated work of upgrading and installing the new shields aboard Starbase 719 proceeds. We will hopefully have the base well protected by the time the Kairn fleet – which intelligence reports indicate is massing along the border in sector 430 – launches their inevitable strike at us after the Kairn government blamed the Federation and its allies for the surprise attack – perpetrated by the Phantoms – that decimated their capitol planet Throne World and may even have killed their Emperor.

Meanwhile, Starfleet is preparing for the inevitable Kairn retaliation by sending reinforcements toward the Fifth Fleet’s AOR.

Fil, Vice Admiral, COMFEDFIFTHFLEET, out.

Catullan Vice Admiral Penji Fil, overall commander of the Federation Fifth Fleet, was leading an intelligence briefing in the wardroom aboard *Starbase 719*, the fleet’s command base in the Typhon Sector. Present for the briefing were Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, the Vulcan/Deltan commander of the base and Typhon Sector coordinator; Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson and Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, Admiral Raiajh’s second-in-command and Sector Strategic Operation Officer – or SOO – respectively; and the commanders of the seven Federation starships assigned to the Fifth Fleet present at the starbase – Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester of the fleet flagship *USS Dauntless*; Captain Jo Ann Parker of the Galaxy-class *USS Sarek*; Captain William McLeod of the Leviathan-class warship *USS Besiege*; Captain (Carrie) K’danz of the Intrepid-class *USS Bellerophon*; Captain Jason Shown of the Prometheus-class *USS Arizona*; Captain Amanda Tomkins of the Luna-class *USS Triton*; and the half-Klingon Captain K’Lith Baber of the Odyssey-class *USS Sun Tzu*, while many of the starship senior officers – including first officers and command master chiefs – were participating in the briefing through broadcasts into larger conference lounges in other areas of the starbase.

“According to Morain Intel, the Kairn government has moved its base of operations to Rianus II in Sector 50110,” Admiral Fil was explaining, pointing out the system where the Kairn originally evolved into an intelligent species almost six sectors away on a map displayed on the wall-mounted monitor screen. “It may be partly out of

tradition – we’re not sure what sense of tradition the Kairn maintain – but Starfleet intelligence believes the main reason the Kairn Imperial Government has been moved to their original homeworld is because it theoretically puts it out of reach of any further attack by Federation forces.”

“Teoretically?” asked Harkonnen, his Russian accent partly coming through in the pronunciation of the word.

“We believe the Kairn think they would be able to detect any reinforcements Starfleet sends to the AOR, since they can maintain a relatively good sensor eye on everything from their border to the edge of the Typhon Expanse,” Fil explained. “And just to keep them busy, Starfleet is sending a small task force here to the base to help protect the sector from Kairn incursion. What the Kairn do not know is the Federation Council has made a formal request of the new Romulan Imperial Senate – our first since the re-establishment of the Romulan Empire.”

“And what was that request?” Val’ri Raiajh asked.

“To allow Starfleet to pass through their sovereign territory and come around the Typhon Expanse by an undetected route.”

“Praetor Talik and the Senate allowed this?” Koester asked with surprise.

“Reluctantly, yes,” Fil replied. “The Council’s request made it clear to the Senate that, if open warfare between the Federation and the Kairn were to occur, it would probably not remain limited to just those two political entities. The Kairn would likely attack, perhaps even occupy Romulan space, and the Romulan military is still relatively weak. And our supposition that Emperor T’K’Lon and the Rihanssu Star Empire would jump at the chance to ally themselves with the Kairn was included in the formal request.”

“Starfleet covered all their bases, didn’t they,” Captain Tomkins remarked, attempting to hide her distaste.

“Admiral, we now have Starfleet sneaking through Romulan territory to reach the Fifth Fleet,” said Captain Parker. “What are they doing once they get here? Wouldn’t massing our own forces against the border just make an unstable situation even more volatile?”

“Starfleet Command’s plan is not to mass the fleet along the border here,” Fil explained, pointing at the line on the map not far from the starbase’s location.

“Then why bring them all the way out here?” Cathryn Pearson asked.

“Those elements of the fleet are going to be held in reserve deep in Morain Alliance space,” Fil said, pointing toward the large blob of orange representing the area of space controlled by the Federation’s rodent-like allies.

“Held in reserve? For what?” K’danz asked. “If the base is attacked by the Kairn, keeping the reserves hidden in Morain space will be too far away to be of much help. A battle here at *Starbase 719* would be over long before they could get here!”

“They’re not being held to reinforce the station,” Fil said.

“Then why?”

“Fail Safe.”

Looks were exchanged between the various officers, most not understanding what Admiral Fil meant, so the Catullan officer explained further.

“Based on what we know about the Kairn, if they launch an attack, the odds are approximately ten to one it would start with an attack against this base. They have never more than barely tolerated our presence in what they consider their home space. But the Kairn have attacked and occupied Federation territory in the past. There is a chance they could attempt to do so again, perhaps even launch an attack against the heart of the Federation itself in the hopes of dealing a quick and decisive death-blow. In that case, we employ the reserve forces we are massing in the Morain Alliance.”

“I think I understand now,” Bill McLeod remarked. “If the Kairn launch an attack on the Federation itself, we counterattack by launching a strike on their seat of government on Rianus II!”

“Exactly. And we make this known to them! From past experience, we know the best way to restrain the Kairn is to let them restrain themselves.”

“I hope Starfleet Command’s plan works,” Koester remarked, looking at the map still displayed behind Fil. “Otherwise a LOT of people are going to die in the coming weeks and months.”

“Let’s hope we can stop the fighting before it even begins,” Raiajh stated.

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Meanwhile, in the maximum security brig in area 10-Alpha of the station’s Administration section, Commander Michelle Petersen, Colonel Sean McIntyre, and an officer from Starfleet Intelligence – Commander Stev of Vulcan – were sitting on one side of a table in a brig interrogation room, it’s forcefield humming loudly as Phillip Winters – fingers clasped on top of the table between them – simply looked silently at his interrogators.

“Mister Winters,” Stev began again. “You departed the base Infirmary without permission or authorization on stardate 67269.6. From all available evidence, you have never left *Starbase 719* in the intervening time. Where have you been living? Who has been supplying you with basic necessities? What have you been doing since you left the infirmary? Are you in any way connected with the recent attacks on the Breen homeworld or the Kairn Throne World?”

Winters looked at Stev, his expression almost one of curiosity, but still refused to say even a single word. After several more minutes of questions being answered with stony silence, the three starbase officers departed the interrogation cell, a forcefield activating behind them before the one leading out of the cell was deactivated, while Winters was directed to return to his own maximum security cell via a separate shielded doorway.

“This is getting us nowhere,” McIntyre said with a frustrated tone.

“On the contrary, Colonel,” Stev remarked. “Mister Winters’ every silence speaks volumes. For example, were he not somehow connected with those who conducted these attacks on the Breen and Kairn, he would be protesting quite vigorously his innocence.”

As the three officers moved toward the brig complex exit, a fourth officer wearing the blue uniform of the medical department was walking in.

“Good afternoon, Colonel McIntyre, Commander Petersen, Commander,” the new arrival said as he neared the three starbase officers.

“Doctor Kelley,” Colonel McIntyre replied. “What brings you here to the brig?”

“Fleet Captain Koester heard you incarcerated Phillip Winters,” the chief medical officer of the starship *Dauntless* explained. “He asked me to stop in and check on his friend and see if there was anything I could get him to make him comfortable. Has he explained where he’s been for the last eight months?”

“No,” Petersen answered. “Though were pretty sure he never left the station. Feel free to go speak to him, though you have to abide by the extreme security measures.”

“I understand,” Kelley said as he started to move toward the block of cells.

“Doctor,” Stev called out, causing Kelley to pause. “Please debrief with me if Mister Winters says anything at all to you. No matter how insignificant it may seem.”

“I will, Commander,” Kelley agreed before heading toward the lone occupied cell, in front of which two Starfleet Marines and a security officer were posted standing watch on Winters.

“Mister Winters?” Kelley said, speaking to the man still sitting inside the cell from outside the main forcefield. Winters looked up at him with a curious expression. “My name is Doctor Leonard Kelley. I’m the current Chief Medical Officer of the *USS Dauntless*. Fleet Captain Peter Koester asked me to check on you, make sure you’re alright. He wanted to come visit you himself, but...”

Winters cocked his head to one side, like a puppy looking at something it found puzzling. He then said, in a flat and monotonous tone, “Peter Koester is dead. He was killed in a terrorist attack on the planet Erminia, also known as Capria IV.”

Kelley remembered that both Koester and the *Dauntless*’ first officer – Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo – had mentioned to him that Phillip Winters had been serving as chief of operations aboard the *Dauntless* during the mission when it appeared Koester had been killed, and transferred off the starship months before Koester was recovered from his captivity by terrorists. Was it possible, in the eight months he had been loose aboard the starbase, that Winters could not have learned Koester was not only still alive, but back in command of the *Dauntless*?

Under normal circumstances, a person finding out a close friend they believed dead was actually alive would be a cause of joy and excitement. Instead, Winters was acting like a computer trying to process erroneous data. Curious, Kelley pulled his medical tricorder out of the holster on his waist, causing the two Marines to momentarily react – pointing their weapons at the doctor.

“Don’t shoot!” Kelley cried. “I just want to scan your prisoner.”

The security guard approached the doctor, examining the medical tricorder and asking, “This won’t do anything to the forcefields surrounding this cell, will it?”

“It shouldn’t,” Kelley replied. “In fact, your forcefields may prevent the scanner from working at optimal efficiency. I’m just curious about Mister Winters, considering everything that has been happening in recent weeks.”

The security guard nodded to the two Marines, who lowered their weapons. Kelley raised his tricorder and activated the scanner. A moment later his eyes went wide in shock.

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Several minutes later, Kelley was in the base’s main infirmary, in the office assigned to base chief medical officer Dr. Sylvan Xaran. With Xaran was the doctor’s wife and base CO, Admiral Raiajh, assistant chief medical officer Dr. T’Pania, intelligence officer Commander Stev, and the *Dauntless*’ executive officer, Setton Arbelo.

“I thought perhaps it was because Mister Winters brain had been used as the central processing unit aboard the Phantom ship in which he was discovered. His reactions to what I was saying seemed too mechanical... too artificial. So I scanned him, hoping to be able to read his brain wave patterns and see how they differed from what was in his Starfleet records, and this is what I found...”

Kelley had connected his medical tricorder to the wall-mounted monitor screen. He activated it, and an outline of Phillip Winters appeared in multi-colored hues. Right away, both Doctors Xaran and T’Pania reacted with shocked amazement. Arbelo and Raiajh both moved closer to the screen, trying to figure out what all the fuss was about.

“I must admit, in spite of having a PhD, I never fully understood the data compiled by medical devices,” Arbelo remarked, looking at Raiajh and adding, “I guess that’s why I never became a medical doctor.” He then gestured toward a misshapen area on Winter’s left shoulder and asked, “What is that? Some sort of flaw in the scan image?”

“If it were internal to Winters’ body, I would almost guess a tumor of some sort,” Raiajh speculated.

“You’re close, Admiral,” Kelley said. “What you’re seeing there is another of the Phantoms, very similar to the one that had been in control of Commander Bloom when he attempted to commandeer the *Dauntless*.”

The pronouncement surprised Raiajh, Arbelo, and even Stev, who had never imagined they had unwittingly captured another of the mysterious aliens behind the ongoing plot to start a war between the Federation and the Kairn Empire.

“This might explain how someone with as much neural damage as Mister Winters exhibited when he was first brought here was able to simply get up out of bed and walk out of my infirmary,” Xaran remarked.

“But, Mac told me Winters recognized him when he was captured. Even called him by his nick-name,” Arbelo said.

“Perhaps – similar to the Trill symbionts – a side effect of the Phantom’s ability to control a humanoid host is they are capable of accessing their hosts knowledge and memories,” T’Pania postulated. “But that begs the question, how did it get aboard the station in order to attach itself to Mister Winters?”

Kelley adjusted the scan image, making both Winters and the creature attached to him somewhat visible, though semi-transparent. Xaran, Raiajh, T’Pania, and Arbelo could see how the octopus-like creature had its multiple tentacles wrapped elaborately around Winter’s neck and shoulder, making it impossible to remove short of major surgery, surgery that would still likely kill the patient. Turning the image in profile, those gathered could see how the creature’s own nervous system was connected with Winters through the spinal column and into the brain stem.

“I’ve been studying the creature we captured from Commander Bloom. It is a relatively simple life-form. A decapodiformes with no internal or external skeletal structure, it would seem more at home in either a liquid or much lower-gravity environment than Earth-norm,” Kelley explained. “Its nervous system is highly evolved, though its brain is not as complex as I would have thought necessary for what it was doing to Bloom. I also could not help but notice the similarity between these alien creatures and the description of the alien invaders in the literary publication ‘The War of the Worlds’ by H. G. Wells – as octopus-like creatures having two eyes, a v-shaped beak-like mouth, and two branches of eight ‘almost-whip like’ tentacles each around the mouth – and wondered if there could be some sort of connection, particularly after reading a science journal article about a centuries-old tripod-like device that had been excavated from beneath the surface of Mars several years ago by an archeological team from the Daystrom Institute.”

“Are you suggesting, Doctor, that Herbert George Wells’ book was a work of fact, not fiction?” Arbelo asked.

“I’m only speculating, Commander,” Kelley said. “But stranger things have occurred in this galaxy. Perhaps these Phantoms are not a new threat to the Federation? Whatever their origin, perhaps they have been around for decades, maybe centuries?”

“Unfortunately, speculation doesn’t help us figure out where this Phantom creature came from or how it found itself attached to Mister Winters,” Dr. Xaran remarked. “And Winters doesn’t seem at all interested in helping us learn the answers.”

“If this creature is controlling Mister Winters like the Phantom aboard the *Dauntless* that was controlling Jeff Bloom, he may not have a choice, Sylvan,” Kelley said. “Mister Winters may be wanting to tell us everything about what he knows; Where the Phantoms come from, what’s their purpose and goal, how they got aboard the station and the *Dauntless*; but has been rendered incapable of cooperating with us. If only there was some other way! A way around the control of the alien.”

Xaran’s eyes circled the room, looking first at his wife, Val’ri Raiajh, and then Commander Arbelo, before settling on his assistant, Dr. T’Pania. Then a thought occurred to him.

“Doctor T’Pania, may I have a word with you? In private.”

“Of course, Doctor Xaran.”

The two doctors stepped out of the CMO’s office and into an unoccupied area of the infirmary.

“T’Pania, I would never under normal circumstances make the request I am about to make of you,” Xaran started. “But at this point, we have few if any other options. Would you consider performing a mind meld on Mister Winters and see if we can determine where these Phantom creatures come from and what kind of threat they pose?”

In spite of her years of discipline, T’Pania briefly let an expression of shock on her face slip though before quickly regaining her self control. She then raised an eyebrow as she asked, “Do you realize what you are asking of me, Doctor Xaran?”

“I do, which is why I am so reluctant to do so,” the Betazoid man replied. “And if we had any other possible way, I wouldn’t. But there doesn’t seem to be anything else we can do at present to obtain the information we need.”

T’Pania looked placidly at Xaran, her face betraying no other emotion. This continued for nearly half a minute, and Xaran was about to withdraw his request, when T’Pania finally said, “I will do as you have requested. But I must prepare myself. I will need at least a few hours of meditation before I attempt to meld with Mister Winters’ mind.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Was all Xaran could say before T’Pania turned and walked away. He then returned to his office to tell the others what T’Pania was going to attempt to do.

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*Station log, stardate 68014.6, Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh recording:
The upgrades to the station's defenses continue apace as we prepare for the inevitable
Kairn attack. Meanwhile, down in our maximum security brig, we are still attempting to
ascertain information that may help us stop a war before it really starts.*

Phillip Winters had been seated at a small table in the brig interrogation room, his legs shackled to the chair he was seated in, his arms to the table in front of him to prevent any attempt to either escape or prevent what was about to occur. In a chair directly next to Winters on the side opposite where scans showed the Phantom creature was attached to the former Starfleet officer and his nervous system was Dr. T'Pania, who completed the mental preparation for the meld she was about to attempt. Standing nearby T'Pania was Commander Stev, who as a fellow Vulcan understood the terrible breach of privacy that was about to occur and how a being undergoing such a process – especially one whose capabilities were not completely known – could potentially fight back in the mental realm, and was on hand to intervene should the doctor find herself in a situation outside of her control.

Outside the cell, watching on a monitor that was tuned in such a way as to make the Phantom alien detectable – if not actually visible – were Raiajh and Xaran, the latter standing by with a medikit geared specifically toward a Vulcan so that he too could intervene if the situation arose. Raiajh stared at the image on the screen, saying off-handedly, “The Phantom has to know something is going on. I wonder why it hasn't abandoned Phillip and attempted to escape the cell somehow?”

“Perhaps, as Doctor Kelley said, the alien isn't capable of moving around on its own in a one-G environment?” her husband suggested. “From the scan indications, it does seem like something that would be more at home in an ocean environment.”

“Then that again begs the question; how did it get here? And how did it attach itself to Phillip Winters?”

In the cell, T'Pania took one final calming breath, then leaned toward Winters, reaching her hand toward the side of the man's face. At first he seemed unconcerned, then actively tried to lean away from T'Pania as her fingertips touched the five meld points around the side of his face.

“Our minds, one and the same...,” T'Pania started to recite. “My mind to your mind... My thoughts to your thoughts...”

Winter's eyes took on a blank expression, and he mouthed the next sentence along with T'Pania, “Our minds, one and the same...”

Winters continued to stare forward, his eyes never blinking, while T'Pania had her eyes closed. After nearly a minute, a slight expression of pain began to appear on the Vulcan woman's face, and as the meld continued, she began to grunt audibly as well. Stev took a step closer, preparing to intervene when T'Pania yelled out, “NO!” She then suddenly broke the meld, falling back in her own chair and appearing exhausted as Winters quickly blinked and shook his head, then attempted to lunge at the Vulcan doctor, only his restraints preventing him from doing so.

Stev assisted T'Pania to her feet and, after nodding at the security guards controlling the forcefields, through the egress. Winters was still struggling at his restraints when Stev and Xaran helped T'Pania down onto a gurney that was standing by and the Betazoid chief medical officer began examining his assistant.

“Did you learn anything, T'Pania?” Xaran asked as he knelt next to the gurney and waved his medical scanner over her head.

T'Pania reached up with one hand and grasped Xaran's blue lab coat as she said, “This situation is more complicated than we imagined. I must speak with Admirals Fil and Raiajh and the fleet commanders right away!”

* * * *

Less than an hour later, all the fleet's senior officers were gathered again in the station wardroom on the upper level of Ops, where Dr. T'Pania – who looked like someone who had not slept in weeks – began to describe what she had learned from her mind meld with Phillip Winters.

“The alien creatures that had possessed... for lack of a better description... Commander Bloom of the *Dauntless* and Mister Winters currently are – in actuality – merely drones for a larger and more capable race of beings,” the Vulcan woman explained, dark circles having formed under her eyes and her voice not quite as firm and confident-sounding as it had prior to her mind-meld experience. “The Phantom master race originates in another galaxy, millions of light-years from our own. Their galaxy is becoming uninhabitable, due to excessive levels of radiation. The Phantoms have, in turn, begun looking for a new home, and our own galaxy is one of several they are considering.”

“Doctor T’Pania,” said Vice Admiral Fil. “If these Phantoms come from another galaxy millions of light years away, how did they get here?”

“The Phantom’s spacecraft, those mysterious black insect-like ships we have occasionally seen over the last several years, are capable of crossing into another dimension – what we would call hyperspace – in order to traverse incredible distances in a relatively short period of time; only years instead of centuries. I was also able to learn the Phantoms established a base of operations – similar in many ways to this starbase – which they call their Colony. It is located in a stable orbit within the accretion disk of the supermassive black hole at the center of our galaxy. From there, they launch missions to almost every area of the galaxy.”

“For what purpose?” Fleet Captain Koester asked. “From what we have seen of them thus far, they certainly don’t seem to be explorers.”

“Their goal is to incite war among the intelligent species of the Milky Way galaxy,” T’Pania replied. They have been operating here for decades now, covertly inciting various species in the hopes of promoting open warfare. The memories of the drone I encountered with Mister Winters are understandably short, but from what I was able to gather, the Phantoms have had a hand in several Alpha Quadrant conflicts in recent decades, from the origins of the Federation-Cardassian border conflicts to the Klingon Civil War. They were even a motivating factor in the Dominion War and our recent war against the Kairn. Their influence has been felt across the entire galaxy! Because of the Phantoms, the Hirogen and many of the Kazon sects in the Delta Quadrant have already been nearly completely wiped out!”

“Why?” Fil wanted to know. “For what possible purpose would this extra-galactic race invade our galaxy and push all the intelligent species they encountered toward the path of war? Is it some kind of test to see which race is stronger or more resilient?”

“Perhaps we should find out?” Captain K’Lith Baber suggested.

All eyes around the wardroom table turned to look at the half-Klingon commander of the *USS Sun Tzu*. “What are you suggesting, Captain?” Fil asked.

“That somehow we find these... Phantoms... and confront them face to face. Find out definitively why they have pushed us all toward the path of war numerous times. And what their ultimate goal is.”

“But how?” Captain Amanda Tomkins asked. “The centre of the galaxy is almost 26,000 light years from here. That would take almost nineteen years at warp nine to reach it!”

“I may have the answer to that,” T’Pania said. “One more thing the drone controlling Mister Winters knew is the location and time of the next Phantom sneak attack, hoping to push the Kairn across that one final line before all-out war with the Federation.”

“We may have something that will help too,” Captain Harkonen added. When everyone at the table looked at the strategic operations officer, he added, “We still have what remains of the craft Mister Winters was discovered in by the crew of the *Bellerophon* down in this station’s research labs. The equipment aboard has long since shut-down... the craft appeared to have died, as Commander Dar described it. But the researchers studying the craft recently reported they believe they have determined how the vessel was capable of traveling faster than light. Perhaps, like the Phantom shields we have installed on the Fifth Fleet’s vessels, we can reverse-engineer their hyperspace capability and follow them to their lair?”

“All well and good,” said Captain K’danz. “Assuming we can follow them to their... their colony? What do we do once we get there?”

“If they’re in orbit around a massive black hole, why don’t we just push them in and be done with this?” suggested Captain McLeod. This prompted a few scowls from other officers, but an almost equal number of nodding heads.

“We need to see if we can negotiate with these Phantoms,” suggested Koester. “If they’re fleeing a dying galaxy, perhaps all it will take is the offer to help them find a new home here in our galaxy to placate them? Perhaps they never considered simply asking for help?”

A murmur of debate arose around the table. It took Admiral Fil standing up and phrasing his opinion as an order that finally brought consensus to the fleet.

“Doctor T’Pania, where and when do the Phantoms plan to strike next?”

“They are currently waiting to see if their attack on the Kairn Throne World was enough of a push to start a war,” the Vulcan woman replied. “If not, they will strike again within two weeks time.”

“Where?”

“Panmunjom. Specifically the Kairn garrison stationed there.”

Fil looked at the rest of the officers gathered around him and said, “We have less than two weeks to reverse engineer a hyperspace jump-engine and install it aboard one or more Fifth Fleet vessels before another attack on the Kairn occurs that they will try and blame on Starfleet. If we’re successful and reach the Phantom colony, we try and open negotiations with offers of help. If the Phantoms are simply seeking a home to call their own here in our galaxy, we can help them find it. If not... if their aim is to destroy us, perhaps even simply for their own twisted pleasure, the ships that reach the Phantom colony are authorized to take whatever means are necessary to neutralize the threat against us. Am I understood?”

A mixture of nodded heads and a muted chorus of, “Aye, sir,” was the response. Fil then ordered that engineers and science officers from each ship not currently assigned more pressing tasks to assist the starbase researchers in reverse-engineering the dead Phantom ship that had been recovered with Phillip Winters, and help install the new hyperspace jump-engine aboard each starship. It was acknowledged that not every ship would make the journey to the Phantom colony, as it was recognized some of the starships would probably be needed to defend the Panmunjom system from attack.

“Does everyone understand their orders and responsibilities?” Fil finally asked.

“Aye, Admiral,” was the general consensus.

“Very good. Dismissed,” Fil ordered.

* * * *

Engineer’s log, stardate 68035.1; Commander Dar recording:

Due to technicalities with the Phantom jump-engines and its incompatibility with certain designs of fifth-generation linear warp drive, only three starships of the Fifth Fleet – my own USS Bellerophon, the USS Triton, and the flagship USS Dauntless – have been equipped with the device making the ships capable of accessing hyperspace. All three ships are now preparing to depart the starbase, en route to Panmunjon, where we expect the next Phantom sneak attack to occur. I just hope this alien contraption the starbase engineers have installed in my engine room works as expected and that the Belle isn’t folded in half or some other incomprehensible fate.

Several of the Fifth Fleet’s senior officers – Fleet Captain Koester, his wife Commander Michelle Petersen, his daughter Ensign Gem Koester, and his ‘foster daughter’ Lieutenant Cassie Koester; *Bellerophon* commander Captain K’danz, her husband Commander Dar, first officer Tom Paris and his own wife B’Elanna Torres and their daughter Miral Paris; *Triton*’s senior officers Captain Amanda Tomkins and Commander Shawn T. Peehs; the *Besiege*’s Captain William McLeod and Commander Taras; and starbase commander Vice Admiral Val’ri Raijah,

her husband Dr. Sylvan Xaran, first officer Captain Cathryn Pearson, and her own husband Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, along with Pearson and Harkonnen's twin infant daughters, were gathered together in the private back room of the Bastogne Lodge. Not wanting to arrive in the Panmunjom system too early and risk detection by Phantom vessels, the fleet officers had gathered to share one last pleasant evening together, the unspoken thought that one or more of the ships participating on the raid against the Phantom colony might not return intact hanging heavy over the gathering.

"To the successful completion of the expeditionary force's mission," Fleet Captain Koester toasted, raising his glass of sharp-blue Romulan ale – imported from the colony world of Vorte near the Fleet AOR. "May this all be a misunderstanding due to cultural differences that can easily be ironed out without the need for further bloodshed."

"I have one concern about our mission, Peter," Captain Tomkins said after everyone had drunk their toast. The commander of the *Triton* moved closer to where Koester was sitting with his family members. "If I recall my stellar cartography from my Academy days, the center of our galaxy is surrounded by an energy field called the Great Barrier. If it is truly a barrier, as the name implies, how do we get through it to reach the Sagittarius A* black hole?"

"I read that during the 2280's, the *Enterprise-A* managed to breach the Barrier during a search for the legendary planet Sha-Ka-Ree by employing a shield configuration that negated the Barrier's energies," offered Captain K'danz. "The new shield configuration was actually so simple, a Klingon Bird-of-Prey was able to replicate it based only on sensor readings they had obtained just prior to the *Enterprise* entering the energy field."

Tomkins looked at K'danz and asked, "Does that mean we would lose the advantage of the Phantom shields we all just recently installed?"

"Actually, we have no need to worry about the Great Barrier," Koester stated. "According to all the tests performed by Commander Bloom and the researchers here aboard the station, hyperspace is technically empty. No planets, no stars, no nebula, no Great Barrier. No Galactic Barrier either, which is probably why it was so easy for the Phantoms to enter our galaxy from the outside. The only thing we'll see – via sensors – in hyperspace are mass shadows of objects in real space that we can use to confirm our position relative to normal space. Effectively, we go right around the Great Barrier, Amanda, like digging a tunnel under a prison wall."

"Just be sure you don't run into any god-like entities that want to borrow your starship once you reach the other side," Konstantin Harkonnen remarked with a smile.

Tomkins looked at the sector strategic operations officer with a puzzled expression before asking, "What would a god need with a starship?" Harkonnen's response was interrupted by the voice of Lieutenant Ashari Pel over the intercom.

"Ops to Admiral Raiajh."

Raiajh tapped her combadge and replied, "Raiajh here. Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Admiral, intel reports we just received from the Morain indicate the Kairn have launched a massive strike force across the border. It looks like their fleet is heading here. Estimated arrival time: five days."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant," Raiajh said before turning her attention on her half-Klingon chief of operations. "B'Elanna, status of upgrading the station's shield generators to match the Phantom configuration?"

"I was hoping I would have at least another week or so to finish the work, Admiral," Torres said. "But I can have it done in three days, fully tested in four or five days."

"Make it so," Raiajh ordered. She then looked at the commanders of the *Dauntless*, *Bellerophon*, and *Triton*. "Admiral Fil has assigned the *Besiege* and *Arizona* to be your escort and provide protection to Panmunjom once you are there. The rest of the fleet will remain here to help protect the base."

"Understood, Admiral," Koester said as he stood up. "Admiral Fil has already transferred his flag to the *Sarek*. All that's needed is your permission for the expeditionary force to depart the station."

"Fleet Captain Koester, you are hereby awarded a provisional battlefield promotion to Commodore. Assume command of the expeditionary force. You have permission to depart the station," Raiajh confirmed.

Commodore Koester acknowledged Raiajh's order. He then turned and gave first his wife, then his daughter tight hugs. Then Koester, K'danz, and Tomkins and their crews started heading toward the door, Koester

tapping his combadge and saying, “Commodore Koester to all expeditionary force crew members. Report to your respective starships without delay. The expeditionary force is departing the station immediately. Koester, out.”

As the door swished shut behind those departing the station, Raiajh started at the now-closed egress, remarking to herself, “Good luck, ladies and gentlemen.”

* * * *

Stardate 68048.5

Starbase 719 had remained at a modified yellow alert status for the better part of five days, awaiting the inevitable arrival of the Kairn fleet. Aside from the *USS Sarek*, *USS Sun Tzu*, and the *USS Corsair* – which had all been patrolling the Typhon Sector between the starbase and the Kairn border since word first arrived about the approaching enemy fleet – the civilian vessels *IMV Pariah*, *CC Erstwhile*, *SS Casandra*, and even the *IMV Wildcat* were patrolling close to the station, ready to lend their sensors and weapons alongside the Klingon warship *IKV hem BortaStaH* – or *Proud Vengeance* – which Admiral Raiajh had specially requested return to the starbase from a patrol near the Empire’s colony world of Kos’Karii. All the ships operating in the Typhon Sector in defense of *Starbase 719* had been upgraded with the Phantom shield configuration taken from the *Dauntless*.

It was the Klingon warship, with its superior sensors, that first detected the approaching fleet.

“General Ke’reth, I am detecting a fleet of ten battlecruisers and twenty destroyer-class vessels on direct course toward the Federation starbase,” reported KI’HQaS, the *Vengeance*’s tactical officer.

“Ten battlecruisers and twenty destroyers?” Ke’reth – commanding officer of the *Proud Vengeance* – questioned. “That’s less than a third of the ‘massive fleet’ the Morain intelligence report Admiral Raiajh passed on to us claimed was assembling in Kairn space.” The burley Klingon general turned partially in his chair and looked at his female tactical officer. “Could this be only a prelude to attack? Or just one prong of some sort of pincer movement?”

“I do not believe so, General,” KI’HQaS replied. “As seen during our war against the Kairn two years ago, the Kairn do not place too much emphasis on tactical maneuvers. They prefer blunt, straight-forward strategies. And unless the Kairn are planning to leave their flank unguarded, any sort of multi-prong attack on the starbase would require additional ships to approach from the directions the Federation starship *Sun Tzu* and/or the former Orion vessel *Pariah* are covering, and we have not heard of any such detection by either vessel.”

“Something is not right here,” Ke’reth remarked as he turned back to face the viewscreen at the front of the bridge. He then added, “Havok, battlestations! Prepare to engage the enemy!”

“Yes, General,” Commander Havok, the *Vengeance*’s first officer replied before activating the ship-wide intercom. “Defense condition one! All hands, man your battlestations!”

As several members of the crew cheered the approaching battle and the bridge lighting shifted to the proper alert status, Ke’reth looked over toward I’Sar, his security officer, and said, “Contact Admiral Raiajh. Inform her the *Vengeance* has met the enemy, and they are ours!”

“Yes, General!” I’Sar replied.

* * * *

“Admiral, The *Proud Vengeance* reports they are engaging an enemy fleet consisting of ten battlecruisers and almost two dozen smaller vessels in sector grid 430-08-10,” Lt Ashari Pel reported.

“Very well. Alert all other fleet assets to be alert to any more Kairn vessels approaching their positions, and recall the Starfleet ships to half the distance between their current positions and the base,” Raiajh ordered. “Status of Starfleet reinforcements being sent to the Typhon Sector?”

“Starfleet Special Task Force Foxtrot-Sierra is in position and standing by for orders to deploy,” Starfleet Marine Colonel Sean McIntyre reported. “A reinforcement fleet being led by Admiral Kale is en route, but not expected to enter the Typhon sector for at least 24 to 36 more hours.”

“We’ll just have to hold our own until then,” Raiajh remarked. She looked toward Commander Petersen, who was sitting at the security/tactical console, and remarked, “Which hopefully won’t be too difficult with our new shields and such a relatively small attacking force.”

“Hopefully the shields do everything B’Elanna promised,” Petersen remarked in return. “Request permission to raise alert status to condition one?”

“Good idea. Sound red alert. Man battlestations.”

As the lighting in Ops shifted to red and the alert klaxons sounded throughout the Federation starbase, Colonel McIntyre moved closer to the security console and quietly said to Petersen, “The size of the attacking Kairn force puzzles me.”

“What do you mean, Mack?” the security chief asked.

“From what Morain intel was reporting, the Kairn were massing everything they have in the Alpha Quadrant to come up against us. Unless the Kairn have managed to play a good game of sleight of hand, their fleet should be at least three or four times the size of what the *Vengeance* reported is currently heading our way.”

“If that’s true,” Petersen remarked. “Where are the rest of their warships?”

“My point exactly,” McIntyre confirmed with a grim smile.

“Something I should know about, Colonel?” Raiajh asked, having noticed the private conversation going on while the rest of the station was manning for battle.

“I was just pointing out to Commander Petersen that the number of ships reported by Ke’reth seems a bit low compared to what we know was being staged,” McIntyre replied. “I’m concerned the Kairn may either be holding something back in hopes we expend our effort repelling their initial attack and that they can hit us with an overwhelming force when we’re already weak, or...”

Raiajh looked at the Marine colonel expectantly. “Or...?” she prompted.

“...Or the Kairn are planning a surprise attack somewhere other than this starbase,” McIntyre concluded.

“Michelle,” Raiajh said, turning to face the large viewscreen mounted high over Ops. “Tactical display of the Typhon Sector and one sector in each direction around us.”

Petersen touched the controls on her console, and the main viewer switched from a view of local space near the station to a map-like display of 72,000 cubic light years of space surrounding the location of *Starbase 719*.

“There is no way a Kairn attack force can get past us to reach the colonies in the AOR without either the station or the Morain being able to detect them,” Raiajh remarked. “Likewise if they tried to attack the Morain Alliance itself. We would have detected such a massive movement in that direction too.” The admiral touched the controls on the console herself, and an arrow signifying the approaching Kairn warships extended from the border toward the station. She studied the image for a moment, playing out various scenarios in her head, much like a game of three-dimensional chess. Finally a thought occurred to her. She touched the controls again, and a second thicker arrow peeled off from the first right at the border line, curving down and heading toward the bottom of the screen. “They ARE launching a sneak attack, Colonel. But not toward the AOR. The Kairn are sending the majority of their attack fleet directly toward the heart of the Federation! It’s the only possibility!”

“What do we do?” McIntyre asked. “Contact Admiral Kale and have him divert his reinforcements to intercept the Kairn?”

“No,” Raiajh replied. “Kalin’s reinforcements would be seriously outnumbered, and they don’t have the shield upgrade that we have installed. They’d be sitting ducks against such a superior force. No, we let Kalin continue toward the station and provide backup here.”

“And what do we – or Starfleet – do about the main attack force?”

“We employ the Fail Safe. That’s what we set it up for,” Raiajh replied. “B’Elanna, open a hail on the frequencies used by the Kairn military.”

“You’re on, Admiral,” Torres replied seconds later.

“Kairn Imperial Fleet, this is Admiral Val’ri Raiajh of the Federation Starfleet. We have detected your launch of multiple attack forces toward both the Federation space station in the Typhon Sector and toward the main body of Federation space. Be advised, we already have a fleet in position to attack and destroy your home world on

Rianus II. If you do not turn your attack fleet around, we will launch this retaliatory attack. If you have no wish to see your home world and its population utterly destroyed, turn back now! Raiajh, out.”

Torres approached Raiajh once the communications frequency had been closed and said, “But Admiral, we haven’t detected any of their forces actually heading toward Federation space.”

“But the Kairn don’t know that. Let them prove otherwise if I’m wrong.”

“What now?”

Raiajh looked toward McIntyre once again and said, “Contact Task Force Foxtrot Sierra and tell them to initiate their primary mission on my authority.”

“Aye, Admiral. You realize it will take several days for the task force to reach the Alpha Rianus system from their staging point in Morain space, right?”

“I do, which gives the Kairn that amount of time to re-think their own plan and turn around. And in the meantime, we prepare for our own battle. Estimated time of arrival by the approaching Kairn force?”

“Two hours if they remain at their last reported course and speed,” Petersen replied.

“With luck, this won’t be as devastating as the last war against the Kairn,” Raiajh remarked.

* * * *

The starships *Dauntless*, *Bellerophon*, *Triton*, *Besiege*, and *Arizona* dropped out of warp within sight of the planetoid code-named Panmunjom, where the Federation had established a neutral meeting place to negotiate and maintain diplomatic relations with the Kairn Empire, a place where – though the Federation maintained a small diplomatic mission – the Kairn had deployed a military garrison to protect their interests. The crews of the Federation starships could see the trio of Kairn battlecruisers the Empire maintained in orbit over Panmunjom as they approached.

“We definitely got their attention, Commodore,” Commander Kyler Saya announced. “Two of the Kairn battlecruisers have turned toward our task force and broken orbit. Shields are raised, though their weapons systems are in stand-by.”

“They’re being understandably cautious,” Koester remarked. “At least they’re abiding by the neutrality of the Joint Security Area. I really expected, under the current circumstances, for the Kairn forces to immediately open fire on us. Mister Riker, open a hailing frequency on the lead Kairn war...”

“Cap’n!” exclaimed Commander Alasdair Wallace from the science station. “Sensor’s are detectin’ a wormhole-like formation openin’ just beyond the three Kairn ships!”

As the bridge crew watched, a blue-tinted ‘hole in space’ seemed to open not far beyond the planetoid, and three large insect-like black vessels emerged from it, almost immediately opening fire on the Kairn ships in front of them.

“Kyler, order Captain Shown to employ the *Arizona*’s vector attack mode. All other task force vessels, engage the Phantom ships!” Koester ordered.

The five Federation starship increased impulse speed and headed into battle, but it was already too late for the Kairn ship that had remained in orbit. A massive beam energy weapon from the closest Phantom ship struck the battlecruiser, cutting through it easier than a hot knife through butter. The larger section of the Kairn battlecruiser – containing the vessel’s propulsion systems – exploded, while the smaller forward half drifted away toward Panmunjom, its fiery descent through the planetoid’s thin atmosphere inevitable.

The *Besiege* was the first of the Federation ships to maneuver between the Kairn and the attacking Phantoms. The Kairn, believing at first the Starfleet vessels had begun to attack, had fully armed their weapons and started to fire until it became obvious the five ships – the *Arizona* coming apart into three separate sections – fully armed for battle – quickly maneuvered around them and opened fire of their own on the Phantom ships.

The Phantoms, having not expected any more than a small handful of Kairn vessels, were evidently surprised by the presence of the Federation starships, even more so by the fact the Starfleet vessels were defending the Kairn, not fighting them. The Phantoms turned their powerful energy weapons first on the *Dauntless*. To the relief of Koester’s crew, the Phantom shields absorbed the energy beams with no structural damage to the ship.

“New shield configuration down by ten percent,” Kyler reported. “We may have a problem if the Phantoms continue to fire on us, but considering that between us and the Kairn they are outnumbered three to one...”

As if on cue, the Phantoms disengaged from the battle and started to maneuver away from Panmunjom. In the distance, Commodore Koester could see a whirlpool of red beginning to form ahead of them.

“The Phantoms are trying to escape through hyperspace,” he said. “*Bellerophon* and *Triton*, prepare to follow. *Besiege* and *Arizona*, remain here and help defend the Joint Security Area just in case they double back and resume their attack.”

All the Starfleet ships acknowledged their orders, and then the three hyperspace jump engine-equipped starships sped up to close on the rapidly retreating Phantoms.

“Engine room, stand by on the jump engine,” Koester ordered through the intercom.

“Phantom jump engine standing by and ready,” confirmed Commander Bloom.

“Ready...,” Koester said as the three Phantom ship entered the portal to hyperspace. “...Jump!”

In an instant, all three Starfleet vessels crossed the boundary into hyperspace, and the opening disappeared.

* * * *

Several hours later, the *Proud Vengeance* and the other Federation ships remaining in the Typhon Sector were lined up in front of the starbase. Beyond them, in the distance, two dozen Kairn vessels faced them. The *Vengeance* had already managed to destroy a handful of the smaller destroyer-class ships, receiving minor damage in the process from which the Klingons – with the help of their engineer Commander Kana – had quickly recovered.

“What are they waiting for?” Captain Cathryn Pearson remarked as she stared at the Kairn fleet displayed on the viewscreen of the *USS Corsair*.

In Ops aboard the starbase, the same question had likewise been asked.

“According to Captain Harkonnen aboard the *Wildcat*, the Kairn fired several shots at them as they retreated closer to the base, but the new shield configuration easily withstood the barrage” McIntyre remarked. “*Corsair* and *Sarek* also took a few hits with no appreciable damage. It’s possible the Kairn are wondering if the base has been upgraded as well and are figuring their odds.”

“It took the Kairn by surprise when the Morain gave us the technology to withstand their variable-frequency disruptors several years ago. One of the things I’ve learned about the Kairn during our encounters is they are no good at improvisation when they come across a situation they were not anticipating,” Admiral Raiajh observed. “They depend on brute force and strength in numbers.”

“But in the past, when they encountered an unanticipated situation, the Kairn just re-doubled their attack in the hopes of overcoming the new disadvantage,” Torres said. “Why the waiting now? It’s... unnerving.”

“Admiral,” interrupted Commander Petersen. “Captain Pearson is on subspace. She wants to talk with you.”

“On screen,” Raiajh ordered.

“Val,” Pearson started off as soon as her image appeared on the main viewscreen. “I just received a very curious message from the officer in charge of the Kairn forces.”

“A curious message?” Raiajh asked. “Curious in what way?”

“He declared a temporary truce and requested a meeting with you specifically. I get the sense from our brief conversation that he isn’t in any more of a mood to fight than we are, but is under orders from his own chain of command. He’s bending the rules to arrange this meeting.”

Raiajh exchanged a hopeful look with Petersen, then said, “Stand by, Cathryn. Michelle, get me Admiral Fil on the line.” A moment later the holographic representation of the Catullan admiral appeared in front of Raiajh in Ops. Raiajh explained the situation as best she knew to Fil, then asked if she should agree to the proposed meeting.

“If we can avoid further bloodshed, I say we take the chance,” Fil responded. “Propose to the Kairn general that we meet aboard your station, so we can show him the evidence we have proving it was the Phantoms that attacked them – trying to start a war – not us. I’ll beam over from the *Sarek* in a couple of minutes.”

“Yes, Admiral. I’ll have security escort meet you as soon as you arrive. *Starbase 719*, out.” Raiajh then returned her attention to the still-waiting Captain Pearson. “Cathryn, tell the Kairn general that Admiral Fil and I are willing to meet with him and explain everything we know about the current situation.”

“Hopefully the Kairn is as reasonable as he sounds,” Pearson remarked. “I’ll let him know you agree. *Corsair*, out.”

* * * *

The doors to the station’s main infirmary opened and a large group consisting of Vice Admiral Fil, Vice Admiral Raiajh, Taissho Ssrholm of the Kairn Imperial Military, the Kairn Taissho’s two guards, Colonel McIntyre, and a half dozen Starfleet security and Marine Corps guards entered, walking directly toward the chief medical officer’s office.

“Admiral Fil, Admiral Raiajh, I do not know either of you very well, but what I do know of you hassss led me to believe you to be more honorable than the sssircumsssstancessss that sssstarted thissss new war would imply,” the Kairn general was remarking as the group passed through the infirmary ward. “That and the messssssage I resssssently resssssieved from the garrissssson on Panmunjom are why I offered you thissss truce insssstead of ssssimply blowing your sssstation out of sssspassse.”

“And we appreciate the opportunity to show you the evidence we have compiled that we hope will prove it was not the Federation that attacked your Throne World, but a mysterious alien race we have begun to call the Phantoms,” Admiral Fil replied.

Dr. Sylvan Xaran looked up from his ever-present paperwork when he heard the noise of the approaching group, at first appearing surprised that such a large group – with no less than three Kairn warriors – was standing in front of his desk. He quickly subdued his anxiety and looked at his wife, asking, “What can I do for you and your guests, Admiral?”

“We need for you to explain the medical situation regarding Mister Winters to Taissho Ssrholm, Doctor,” Raiajh explained.

Xaran looked at the tallest of the three Kairn, who looked back at him relatively sedately – his sharp teeth barely showing – and nodded as he touched controls on his desk before standing up and moved toward the monitor screen on the wall of his office. A moment later, the image of Phillip Winters sitting in his high-security cell in the brig complex became visible on the screen. A second later, as if he knew he was being watched, Winters looked directly at the video input and smiled slightly.

“This is Mister Phillip Winters, a human who used to serve as an officer in Starfleet until a few years ago,” Xaran explained as Ssrholm looked at the monitor intently. “We’re not exactly sure how, but we believe for the last eight months or so he has been working with the Phantoms, providing them with intelligence, information, and perhaps even directives. We suspect he is somehow involved with the attack on your Throne World, though we also believe it is only because he is under alien influence forcing him to aid them against his will.”

“I ssssee no evidenssse thissss human issss under any alien control,” Ssrholm remarked.

Dr. Xaran manipulated several controls on the wall beside the monitor. The image on the screen immediately changed from a simple video feed to a medical scan. Winters’ skeletal structure and several vital organs were now easily visible, as was the Phantom drone that had been detected attached to Winters shoulder and neck. Ssrholm moved closer to the monitor screen, peering even more intently at the image.

“Your sssso-called Phantomssss?” Ssrholm asked, pointing at the semi-transparent alien in the image.

“Yes,” Xaran replied. “And besides attacking your Throne World, we believe they are also responsible for the recent attack on the Breen homeworld.”

“We’re not sure what their ultimate plan is,” Raiajh added. “But they seem to be trying to seed violence and distrust between the major powers of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.”

“Their technology is unlike anything any civilization in this part of the galaxy possesses,” Admiral Fil remarked. “Instead of warp drive they can access another dimension called hyperspace and travel great distances at

incredible speeds utilizing only sub-light engines. And their weapons are incredibly powerful. You've seen the results yourself. It took only a handful of Phantom warships to devastate both the Breen and your Throne Worlds."

"Where are these Phantomssss located?" Ssrholm asked. "What issss their basssse of operationssss? And how vulnerable issss it?"

"At present we believe their base is located in orbit of the massive black hole at the center of our galaxy," Fil replied. "And we have a plan currently underway to confront the Phantoms there and attempt to open a dialogue with them in the hopes of bringing their attacks to an end."

Ssrholm looked at Fil, his expression now one of mild suspicion as he said, "You are capable of traveling to the sssenter of the galaxy to confront thesssse Phantomssss? Are you in posssssion of any of thissss advanced technology of which you have jussst dessscribed?"

Raiajh, already alarmed that Fil had mentioned the mission of the special task force already underway, tried to subtly tell the Catullan to keep his mouth shut about exactly how much knowledge Starfleet had of the Phantom technology or how they had acquired it, but before she could prevent it, Fil replied, "We are in possession of the Phantom ship Mister Winters was discovered in a few years ago. Our scientists discovered the hyperspace jump engine aboard it that allows them to access hyperspace."

"I would be interestsssted in sssseeing thissss alien technology you possssssssss for myssself," Ssrholm remarked, sharing a look with his guards.

"Of course," Fil said before looking at Colonel McIntyre. "I believe Winters' Phantom ship is being stored in Hanger Bay 15 in the station's research section. Colonel, would you please escort the General and his guards there and answer any relevant questions they may have."

McIntyre exchanged an unsure look with Raiajh. She in turn shrugged her shoulders slightly, knowing the damage had already been done. McIntyre then looked at the taller reptilian general and said, "If you would please follow me and my men?"

Raiajh, Xaran, and Fil watched as the Kairn general and his guards were escorted to the hanger bay in the station's research section where the shuttlecraft-sized biomechanical spacecraft that had once contained Phillip Winters was stored and studied. Once the infirmary door had closed behind the departing group, Raiajh whirled on Fil and exclaimed, "Penji! We only wanted to show the Kairn the evidence we have that this war was provoked by an alien species, not us! We didn't want them to know we possess Phantom technology that could possibly be used against them in the future! Or perhaps even convince the Kairn further that Starfleet was behind the attack on their capitol!"

"Sorry, Val. I guess I didn't consider the ramifications of revealing too much information to them," Fil replied.

"Hopefully the damage done is minimal," the Betazoid medical officer remarked. "The Kairn general seems to have a high enough opinion of us that he was willing to disregard his orders to attack the base and instead called for a truce and confer with us."

"We'll have to see how this all turns out," Fil remarked vaguely.

* * * *

In Sector 430, the main thrust of the Kairn Imperial Fleet continued toward its intended target – core Federation space – with the hopes of eventually reaching and attacking the primary worlds of Andor, Vulcan, and Earth. Meanwhile, at the same time, Starfleet Task Force Foxtrot Sierra moved unobserved through Morain Alliance space toward Sector 50110 and the Kairn homeworld of Rianus II. Both attack forces were prepared to carry out their assigned missions. And neither were in a position to be stopped by outside forces.

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The opening of hyperspace appeared as a blue hole in the fabric of reality as the three Federation starships emerged a distance of only a few light-hours away from the massive black hole at the center of the Milky Way

galaxy. Almost directly ahead of the three starships was one of the most awe-inspiring sights ever seen by the human eye, Sagittarius A* – commonly called Sag-A-star – an immense singularity around which the majority of the Milky Way galaxy rotated. As the crews of the three starships watched, the accretion disk of matter being drawn into the singularity glowed brightly, providing fuel for the Gamma and X-rays flooding the region of space and lighting the vicinity with an ethereal red glow, while much further away – in the region the three Federation starships were just entering – large masses orbited the singularity in decades-long pirouettes that would eventually end as they were drawn into the supermassive black hole.

“Helm, keep us well outside of Sag-A-star’s event horizon,” Commodore Koester ordered. “The last thing we need right now is a long, painful, prolonged death as the entire ship is stretched into a string the width of a single molecule. Commander Wallace, any sign of the Phantom colony or the ships we followed here?”

“Radiation readin’s are almost off th’ scale, Cap’n,” reported Commander Alasdair Wallace. “Fortunately, the Phantom shields are withstandin’ most o’ it. We should be capable o’ operating in the vicinity o’ Sagittarius A* for up to twelve hours without any appreciable risk o’ ill effects.”

“Very well,” Koester replied. “Keep me apprised of any change in shield status, no matter how insignificant. Commander Kyler, any sign of the Phantoms?”

Kyler Saya consulted her sensor readings. The Bajoran ripples on the bridge of her nose became more pronounced as her frustration grew.

“Radiation levels are interfering with sensor readings, Captain,” Kyler finally reported. “We lost the three ships we followed through hyperspace as soon as they re-entered real-space. I’m detecting several large masses in irregular orbits around Sag-A-star. If it’s really here, any one of them could be the Phantom colony.”

“Mister Riker,” Koester said. “Contact the *Belle* and the *Triton* and see if they are having any better luck seeing through this muck than we are.”

“Communications are intermittent, Captain,” Lt Commander Tom Riker replied. “Again, interference from the radiation being produced by Sag-A-star.”

“Well, see if you can contact the other ships somehow,” Koester implored. “Smoke signals... flashing lights... sign language...!”

“I’m re-tuning the subspace transmitter to compensate for the excessive radiation levels,” Riker informed.

The Commodore’s thoughts were interrupted by a sudden shudder and the sound of weapons fire hitting the *Dauntless*’ shields. A moment later one of the insect-like Phantom ships flew past the main viewer, silhouetted against the glow of the accretion disk.

“Shields holding,” Kyler reported. “I think we found our three missing Phantom ships.”

On the main viewscreen, the three Phantom warships the Starfleet vessels had followed to the center of the galaxy could be seen attempting to attack both the *Bellerophon* and *Triton* as well, with little result. The Phantom beam energy weapons fire was merely absorbed by the shields the Phantoms had inadvertently given their adversaries. Likewise, thought the three starships returned fire with their phasers, it had little effect on the Phantom vessels. After some time, the three alien ships turned and sped off toward an irregularly-shaped mass in an orbit just a little further out from Sagittarius A* than where the three starships had emerged.

“Cap’n, I think we found their base o’ operations,” Wallace reported.

* * * *

“Admiral Fil has returned to the *Sarek*,” Commander Petersen reported as Admiral Raiah exited the turbolift into Starbase Ops. “The Kairn report Taissho Ssrholm and his staff have safely returned to their vessel as well. No other change in the Kairn fleet disposition.”

“Very well,” Raiah remarked, taking her position next to the master system display and hoping, after sharing what they knew about the Phantoms – perhaps sharing a little too much, thanks to Penji Fil – the Kairn would turn around and go home, recalling their fleet heading toward Earth at the same time. “Status of fleet assets?”

“No change,” Petersen replied. “All vessels still report they are manned for general quarters and...”

“Admiral! The Kairn flagship and two smaller ships have broken off from the rest of their fleet!” Lt Ashari Pel reported.

“Where are they heading?” Raiajh requested as she tried to call up the relevant information on the MSD.

“The destroyers appear to be engaging the two closest Fifth Fleet vessels, the *Wildcat* and the *Corsair*,” Petersen reported, a look of concern on her face. “The flagship, a battlecruiser-type vessel, is heading directly toward the station! They’ll be in weapons range in fifteen seconds.”

“Open hailing frequency,” Raiajh ordered. “General Ssrholm, this is Admiral Raiajh. I thought we had come to an agreement that Starfleet was not responsible for the attack on your Throne World?”

“Battlecruiser in weapons range in seven seconds.”

“Admiral Raiajh, you have not shared everything you know of the enemy with ussss,” replied the voice of the Kairn general. “After all, it wassss the Empire that wassss attacked. We are only taking what issss rightfully ourssss.”

“What do you mean; taking?” Raiajh asked.

“Kairn battlecruiser now in weapons range,” Petersen announced.

“Shield status?”

Raiajh looked over toward the engineering station when she did not receive an immediate report. She was shocked to see the expression of concern displayed on B’Elanna Torres’ face.

“Admiral, the Phantom shield upgrade is functioning as expected around the Admin, Spacedock, and Habitation sections of the station. I’m getting negative indications from the Research and Communications sections. I KNEW I needed more time to test these new systems!”

The station shook as Kairn weapons fire hit the shields, and Raiajh grabbed hold of the edge of the MSD table as she said, “You assured me you would have the shield upgrades ready when we needed them, B’Elanna.”

“I said I would try, Admiral,” Torres responded. “I had crews working 24 hour shifts for days. I thought I had managed to overcome the conflicts with the shield generators. I don’t understand why they’re not working on the lower sections.”

Raiajh whirled on Petersen and implored, “Michelle, please tell me we have standard shields available to protect the R and C sections!”

“Standard shields with the Morain upgrade are operating in those areas, but they’re not going to last long...” Petersen paused as the station shuddered violently again under further weapons fire. “...They’re not going to last long under prolonged fire, Admiral.”

“Admiral, the shields over R-section, quadrant 2, levels 1050 through 1250 are buckling,” Ashari Pel reported.

* * * *

The *Dauntless*, *Triton*, and *Bellerophon* slowly approached the immense Phantom colony. Like their space vessels, the colony looked like it had been grown from some large crustacean shell but on an immense scale, the multi-armed star-shaped structure large enough to dwarf even *Starbase 719*. Approaching from within the shadow cast by the Phantom colony – mostly blocking the interference caused by the radiation spewed out by Sag-A-star – the three starships had managed to re-establish communications, and the commanding officers were finalizing their plans to negotiate with the mysterious Phantoms.

“Amanda, I’m placing you in command of the task force while Carrie and I beam over to the Phantom’s base,” Koester said.

“I’m not sure I like this plan of action,” Captain Tomkins remarked over the viewscreen. “What do I do if the two of you are captured or killed?”

“You take the task force back through hyperspace to *Starbase 719*, and once you’re there you consult with Admirals Fil, Kale, and Raiajh and determine what your next steps should be. I don’t want you sending over any rescue parties. We’re not worth the effort or resources.”

“Hey, speak for yourself, Peter!” Captain K’danz interjected.

“You can still back out of this, Carrie,” Koester offered.

“And miss the party? Never!” K’danz assured.

Koester turned his attention on his own first officer and said, “That base is pretty large, but I’m relatively sure from the sensor readings we have obtained where we can board it and make contact with someone in a leadership position over there. Give Carrie and I two hours to board, find our way around, and open a dialogue. If you don’t hear back from us by then, assume something has gone wrong.”

“Are you sure you should be doing this, Skipper?” Commander Arbelo asked. “It would better suit regulations, not to mention my own personal preferences, if I were going over there instead of you.”

“I think Carrie and I should be able to handle this, Exec. But thanks anyway. Just keep a lock on us both and listen for the code.” Koester then returned his attention on the main viewscreen and asked, “Does everyone understand their orders?”

“Yes, Commodore,” Tomkins replied.

“Of course, Peter,” K’danz assured.

“Aye, Skipper,” Arbelo added.

“Good. Carrie, I’m beaming over to the *Belle*. We’ll both beam to the Phantom colony from your ship. Amanda, the task force is yours until I get back.”

“Good luck, Peter and Carrie,” Tomkins commented.

* * * *

Several minutes later, two transporter beams materialized in the forms of Commodore Peter Koester and Captain K’danz. Once materialization had finished, both looked around. They were standing in a chamber about as large as the shuttlebay aboard the Intrepid-class *USS Bellerophon* with what looked like red vines of some kind covering the walls and parts of the deck.

“It stinks in here,” K’danz commented, waving a hand in front of her face. “Almost like rotten meat.”

“Could be a byproduct of the biotechnology the Phantoms utilize,” Koester suggested as he pulled a tricorder out of the holster on his waist and started scanning. “Neither Doctor Kelley nor Doctor Xaran were able to locate any olfactory senses on the Phantom drones they studied, so it is possible the Phantoms don’t even smell it themselves.”

K’danz, a former security officer before transferring to the command division, had pulled her hand phaser out and was warily turning around looking for any potential threats. “Any idea of where we’re going or what kind of resistance we’ll encounter trying to get there.”

“Carrie!” Koester said, continuing to scan the locality. “We’re not alone.”

“What do you mean?” K’danz asked, all the more alert and glancing in Koester’s direction.

“I’m detecting the life signs of five Phantoms surrounding us. They’re visibly cloaked somehow, like the drones.”

As if knowing their cover was blown, the five alien creatures appeared visible around Koester and K’danz. None appeared armed, but that did not make them any less intimidating in any way. They were each similar in appearance to the drones that had taken over Phillip Winters and Jeffrey Bloom, except that they were nearly as tall as Koester’s 182 centimeters, their heads – if that was what they indeed were – 120 centimeters across with a lipless v-shaped mouth dripping saliva underneath a pair of pale eyes that appeared to stare at the two humans. Like the smaller drones, they almost looked like octopods, with the exception of having only four tentacles instead of the drone’s ten. And unlike the drones – who apparently could not move easily on their own – these larger Phantoms had six insect-like legs holding them up and allowing them to move easily across the deck as they slowly and warily circled around Koester and K’danz.

“What do you think they want?” K’danz asked, keeping her phaser raised while trying not to look threatening.

“*What do YOU want?*” a voice said in both the human’s heads. A look of shock appeared on K’danz’s face and Koester – momentarily surprised – briefly looked around as if looking for the source of the voice before

realizing he had sensed it rather than heard it. Then he noticed the one Phantom that had stopped directly in front of him as the other four continued to circle, its dead-looking eyes peering directly at him.

“Are you... speaking to us?” he asked.

‘We do not use any manner of communication as crude as speech,’ the voice replied, again inside both the human’s heads. *‘What are you doing here? What do you want?’*

“We want to speak... to communicate with your leaders. To open a dialogue. We believe there has been a misunderstanding and we want to clarify the present situation before things get too far out of hand,” Koester replied.

All the circling Phantoms suddenly stopped and froze in place. Koester was unsure what was happening, but had the impression they were all conversing telepathically, trying to decide what to do with the aliens in their midst. After several seconds, both Koester and K’danz heard the voice in their heads again as it said, *‘You will follow us. If you deviate, defy, or delay you will be disposed of.’* The Phantom that had been staring at Koester then turned around, its insect-like legs clacking on the deck, and started moving off, two of the other Phantoms following close behind it. Koester and K’danz exchanged a silent look, then proceeded to follow, the two remaining Phantoms taking positions following directly behind the humans.

They walked through the Phantom colony for nearly a half hour, passing through many seemingly empty chambers and past portals that led to other areas of the structure, never seeing any others, though Koester understood that not seeing the Phantoms did not necessarily mean they were not present – they had not been named Phantoms for no reason – and he had a strong sense, probably due to the nascent empathic abilities he inherited from his half-Betazoid mother, that he and K’danz were being watched closely by innumerable alien creatures.

Finally they reached an area of corridor containing a wall seemingly untouched by the red weed-like plants that seemed omnipresent everywhere else in the Phantom colony. Two of Koester and K’danz’s escorts moved toward the empty spot, taking positions one on each side, like guards, while the Phantom that had led the group to this spot moved to the center of the wall and, using one of its flexible tentacles, touched various places on it. It then took a step back as the blank wall irised open into a rounded doorway leading into a dark chamber. The leading Phantom stepped inside. Koester and K’danz hesitated for a moment before being pushed through the opening by one of the Phantoms behind them. It took several seconds for their eyes to adjust to the relative darkness, but once they had, the sight they observed stunned them.

Across the chamber, half-sitting – half-encased in a mechanical structure, was the largest Phantom life-form the two humans had yet seen. Wires, cables, and connectors were attached to various places around the creature’s bulbous head, connecting it to computer consoles and other equipment around the chamber, and after a moment K’danz recognized that it looked very similar to how they had found Winters in his Phantom spacecraft several years earlier, tied into the ship’s systems, his brain acting as the vessel’s central processing unit.

“I’m not sure if the Phantoms understood what you meant by leader,” K’danz whispered to her companion. “This is how we found Phillip, tied into the systems of the ship he was in.”

“You mean the Phantoms are using one of their own as a central computer processor for their colony?” Koester asked.

‘I am much more than simply a processor, Fleet Captain Peter Koester,’ a voice boomed inside both human’s heads, prompting Koester to try and cover his ears at first. *‘I am coordinator. I am historian. I am protector. I provide purpose to my people.’*

Koester, who quickly recovered from the shock of having telepathic conversation projected directly into his mind in what seemed such a powerful manner, looked at the Phantom coordinator – as it called itself – and asked, “You speak and understand English?”

‘What you perceive in your primitive brains you hear because it is all you are capable of understanding,’ the voice replied vaguely.

“Who are you?”

‘We are the Mothrai. We seek a new home. You must not stop us.’

Koester took a step closer to the Phantom – now Mothrai – leader. K’danz at first moved to hold her former captain back, but resisted the urge.

“Our galaxy is a big place,” Koester stated, his hands held wide. “I’m sure, with the Federation’s aid, you can find an uninhabited planet that meets your environmental needs and your people can colonize it in peace. That is why we came here. To offer you...”

‘UNACCEPTABLE,’ the voice boomed in both the human’s heads again, prompting a more than mild headache in Koester. The Commodore looked at the Mothrai leader with confusion.

“Why?” he asked. “Why is our offer of help unacceptable to you?”

Images formed inside Koester’s head. Images of a galaxy millions of light years away. A galaxy that once held innumerable forms of intelligent life. But one by one, each of those civilizations was wiped out. War... Disease... Painful deaths caused by a severe rise in the radiation levels of that galaxy. Koester began to understand that the Mothrai were seeking escape from their home galaxy because it had become unlivable after eons of rising radiation levels.

Then the images became more specific. It was the Mothrai themselves who were responsible for the deadly levels of radiation in their galaxy as they used singularities – both natural and artificial – similar to the black hole their colony currently orbited, to wipe out competing life forms. Over ages, the Mothrai positioned themselves to be not the dominant life forms in their home galaxy, but the sole life forms. And over the millennia, they had grown used to the solitude and seclusion until forced to flee their home as it became unlivable, spreading out through hyperspace to reach other galaxies.

“They intend to repeat the process here!” Koester whispered hoarsely to K’danz. “They want solitude and seclusion, so they intend to provoke war and disaster in order to wipe out all other life here in our galaxy! So they can be alone once again!”

“But don’t they realize if they do here what they did in their home galaxy, it will only mean having to repeat the process again some time in the future when they make the Milky Way unlivable?” K’danz asked.

Koester looked at the Coordinator and said, “She’s right! Eventually you will have to abandon this galaxy too if you continue on this path. Your efforts would all be a waste of time. Can’t you realize you would be better off cooperating with us instead of attacking and trying to wipe us all out?”

‘The Mothrai require solitude. We cannot coexist with other life forms such as yourself. You are too much of a distraction, like the gnats of your own homeworld, constantly buzzing about and becoming a nuisance. As for the poisoning of this galaxy, that is a crisis later generations will be required to deal with. It is of no concern to me. Only the sterilization of our new home.’

“You realize, of course, that we cannot let you do this? All the civilizations of this galaxy, in spite of our past differences, will inevitably join together to defeat you once the threat is understood,” Koester warned.

‘By the time your galaxy fully realizes the threat it faces from us, it will be too late,’ the Coordinator projected into Koester and K’danz’s minds. *‘The Mothrai are inevitable. We must survive! We will survive!’*

The Coordinator’s rant was interrupted by the entire colony trembling. Then Captain Tomkins voice sounded over Koester’s combadge, sounding like she was in near-panic, as she said, “*Triton* to Commodore Koester!”

Koester noted the Mothrai around him reacting to the violent shuddering of the colony, one rushing to the Coordinator and taking a protective stance in front of it while the other two rushed out of the chamber. Koester shared a look of concern with K’danz as he tapped his combadge and said, “Go ahead, Captain.”

“Commodore, a fleet of Kairn warships has just appeared out of hyperspace and started attacking the Phantom colony with nuclear-armed missiles!”

“The Kairn?! How did...?”

‘YOU!’ the coordinator’s thoughts formed in Koester’s head, again hitting him like a spontaneous migraine. *‘YOU have led others to our colony! YOU have threatened our ascendancy!’*

“We have no idea how the Kairn found your colony,” Koester protested. “We only wanted to speak with you, to offer our assistance to help your people settle in our galaxy peace...”

‘You stall for time with distractions while your allies arm for battle against us! You will be destroyed, as will all those that have knowledge of our colony!’

Without hesitation or further attempts to negotiate, Koester again slammed his combadge and said, “Koester to *Dauntless*! Code: Recover!”

The Mothrai that had remained in the chamber to initially protect the Coordinator lunged at Koester and K’danz, its intent to snap their necks for their insolence, but both humans were immediately surrounded by the annular confinement beam of a transporter and dematerialized before the alien creature could get close. Seconds later both were re-materializing on the transport platform aboard the *Dauntless*.

“Good work, COB,” Koester remarked to Chief Pono Kyman as the El-Aurian joined both K’danz and himself as they rushed out the door and into the nearest turbolift. Seconds later they all emerged on the bridge of the Sovereign-class starship, Kyman heading directly to his regular battlestation at mission ops as Koester and K’danz stepped down to the command arena.

“Status?” Koester asked as Arbelo relinquished the center seat.

As K’danz sat down in the seat normally used by Counselor Gera to Koester’s left, Arbelo returned to his own seat on the right and explained, “A fleet of fifteen Kairn ships – including eight battlecruisers – somehow emerged from hyperspace and have engaged the Phantom colony. So far none of the Kairn warships has targeted our three ships, so Captain Tomkins ordered we move a moderate distance away from the colony until we could recover both you and Captain K’danz. Orders?”

On the main viewscreen, the Kairn fleet could be seen moving to surround the Mothrai colony. Every vessel had its missile launch tubes open and ready for attack, each missile armed with one or more nuclear-tipped warheads. Chunks of the colony’s external structure had already been damaged, with pieces breaking away and starting to fall toward the black hole in the distance.

“Have either you or Captain Tomkins attempted to hail the Kairn ships?” Koester asked.

“The *Triton* challenged them as soon as they emerged from hyperspace, but they refused to respond.”

“Captain, the Phantom colony is now launching ships of its own,” Commander Kyler reported. Koester looked again at the screen, where dozens of insect-like black spacecraft were emerging from the colony, each heading straight for one of the Kairn warships.

“I’m not getting caught in the middle of this,” Koester remarked. “In this instance, discretion is truly the better part of valor. Mister Riker, to all Task Force vessels: withdraw to a safe distance and prepare to jump into hyperspace back to the station.”

“Commander Bloom reports he is not sure we can safely activate the hyperspace jump engines under these conditions, Captain,” Lieutenant Joella Faggio-Hyland remarked from the engineering console. “The nuclear detonations combined with the natural occurring radiation from Sag-A-star has flooded the region with excessive levels of radiation and radioactivity. He believes it may interfere with the ability to open an entry point into hyperspace using our jury-rigged jump engines. He doesn’t recommend use of warp drive either under these circumstances.”

“Then let’s get as far away as we safely can on impulse power before we attempt to open an entry point,” Koester ordered.

As the *Dauntless*, *Bellerophon*, and *Triton* started to maneuver carefully away from the battle, the Kairn vessels engaged the Mothrai. Missiles exploded against the Mothrai ships, sending them tumbling away as the warheads exploded against their powerful shields but otherwise causing little damage, while three Kairn destroyers were quickly destroyed by the Mothrai beam weapons. Meanwhile, the Kairn battlecruisers launched another volley of nuclear missiles directly at the Mothrai colony. Mothrai warships attempted to intercept the missiles, but most managed to get through, exploding in spectacular fashion against the outer structure of the colony and gouging huge openings into the unprotected hull.

“Cap’n, th’ Phantom colony has sustained severe damage,” Alasdair Wallace reported from the science console. “Th’ thermo-nuclear explosions have de-stabilized the colony’s orbit! It appears they’re tryin’ t’ keep from bein’ dragged into Sag-A-star.”

“Captain,” said Lt Commander Tom Riker at ops. “I’m detecting strange readings coming from the Phantom colony.”

“What kind of readings, Commander?” Koester asked.

Chief Pono Kyman cut in, saying, “Skipper, based on these readings, it looks like the Phantom colony is trying to open its own hyperspace jump point.”

“It looks like th’ Phantoms are tryin’ to maneuver their colony into hyperspace to escape th’ Kairn and keep from bein’ sucked into th’ singularity,” added Wallace.

In the distance, just beyond the Mothrai colony, Koester could see the now-familiar swirl of red light that indicated a hyperspace entry point opening. The opening was huge – larger than any similar wormhole or transwarp conduit he had ever encountered before – large enough for the entire colony to enter. More than big enough for the three ships in his task force to enter.

“Riker, to all task force vessels: Come about and head toward that opening into hyperspace! If we can’t open an exit out of here ourselves, we’ll use the door the Mothrai are providing!”

As the three Federation starships maneuvered back around, heading back toward the Mothrai colony and the hyperspace opening beyond, several Kairn warships made another run on the alien structure, firing more missiles just before half of them were incinerated by the weapons fire of the Mothrai ships chasing them. The nuclear missiles exploded against the structure of the colony – momentarily overwhelming the viewscreen on the bridge of the *Dauntless*. Once the image had returned – and Koester blinked his eyes several times to clear them – the crew could see the Mothrai colony was starting to fall much faster toward the black hole in the distance. Fortunately, the opening to hyperspace remained.

“Helm, ahead full impulse!” Koester ordered, hoping that both the *Bellerophon* and the *Triton* would quickly follow likewise.

“Passing through hyperspace jump point in thirty seconds,” Lt Peck announced from the helm.

“No vessels, either Kairn or Phantom, in pursuit of us,” Kyler announced. “It appears they’re both too busy fighting each other to be concerned we’re escaping, though it’s not going to last much longer. The Kairn are being massacred!”

“I don’t think the Phantoms will come out of this much better than the Kairn,” Kyman remarked. “The colony has passed the point of no return in relation to Sag-A-star. There’s no way, short of a miracle, they can escape the gravity of the black hole at this point.”

“Not my concern, COB!” Koester said. “I’m more concerned with getting my task force home.”

The seconds quickly ticked by, and the three Federation ships crossed the threshold of hyperspace. Right away they knew something was different, as the passage through hyperspace seemed more like riding the rapids of a fast-moving river than the gentle eddies of a lake like it had on their initial trip toward the center of the galaxy.”

“What’s causing that?” Koester asked, tightly gripping the arms of the command chair.

“A combination o’ x-rays, gamma rays, alpha particles, neutrons, and electrons from both th’ black hole an’ th’ Kairn weapons have flooded hyperspace through th’ openin’ and caused a volatile reaction,” Wallace replied. “Even with th’ Phantom shields raised, th’ radiation level’s are becomin’ life threatenin’.”

“COB, have sickbay release an adequate dosage of hyronalin to counteract the radiation, then make sure both the *Belle* and *Triton* do the same,” Koester ordered.

“Aye, Skipper,” Kyman replied before contacting sickbay.

Koester turned to the woman sitting to his left and said, “Sorry, Carrie. We can’t get you back to your ship until we’ve exited hyperspace.”

“No problem, as long as I know the *Belle* is safe,” K’danz replied. “What do you suppose is happening back there in the center of the galaxy?”

“I can’t be sure, but I have a feeling we may not have to worry about dealing with the Mothrai again for quite some time.”

* * * *

Back near the center of the galaxy, the last of the Kairn warships were being destroyed, but not before launching their last remaining missiles at the Mothrai colony. The Mothrai ships quickly returned to their colony once the Kairn fleet had been defeated, but all their efforts were in vain. The colony continued to slide deeper and

deeper toward the event horizon of the massive black hole – eventually disappearing from view as gravity overwhelmed even light from escaping. But due to the idiosyncrasies of physics and gravity, enough of the colony remained in existence – trapped for eternity within the event horizon – to keep the artificial fissure opened, allowing deadly radiation to continue flooding the dimension known as hyperspace.

* * * *

Hours later, repairs to the research section of *Starbase 719* were being wrapped up when Lt Ashari Pel announced the opening of a hyperspace portal almost one hundred thousand kilometers away from the station. Vice Admiral Raiajh and Captain Pearson – who had returned to the station once the Kairn fleet had disappeared into hyperspace and the *Corsair* had moored in spacedock to conduct its own repairs – looked up at the main viewscreen above Ops, both expressing anxiety that the Kairn fleet had returned with intent to resume their attack on the Federation starbase.

“These readings are highly unusual, Admiral,” Pel reported. “High levels of Gamma and X-rays. Also detecting Delta radiation and Berthold rays. Whatever is coming out of hyperspace, I would be surprised if their crews are still alive!”

“Stand by on weapons systems,” Raiajh ordered. “If it’s the Kairn fleet returning, there may still be some fight left in them yet.”

The crew in Ops watched anxiously as three vessel emerged from the blue-swirled opening.

“Hold fire!” Commander Michelle Petersen exclaimed, recognizing the shapes of the Sovereign, Luna, and Intrepid-class starships. “Those are our ships!”

“Hail the flagship,” Raiajh ordered, hoping the attempt was not in vain.

“*Starbase 719*, this is Commodore Peter Koester aboard the *USS Dauntless*. Request clearance to enter spacedock and commence decontamination procedures. The new shields protected us all pretty well, but the hulls have still sustained some minor radiation contamination.”

“Peter, thank all the Dieties you’re alive!” Raiajh responded. “When the Kairn disappeared into hyperspace a nearly twelve hours ago, we feared the worst.”

“Speaking of...,” Koester’s voice responded. “Just how did the Kairn get hold of hyperspace jump engine technology?”

“I’ll explain everything once your ships are moored in spacedock,” Raiajh replied. “The Fifth Fleet Special Task Force has permission to dock.”

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 68070.6:

Shortly after our return to Starbase 719, we received word that the main attack force of the Kairn Imperial Fleet heading toward Federation space received a subspace transmission from Taissho Ssrholm sent just prior to his own fleet entering hyperspace, ordering the force to turn around and return home. As a result, Starfleet Task Force Foxtrot Sierra was likewise immediately recalled and a devastating war averted. Unfortunately, none of the Kairn ships that journeyed to the center of the galaxy have returned, and we can only assume Taissho Ssrholm and his fleet have been completely destroyed.

So embarrassed by what had occurred and how easily they were manipulated by the Mothrai – almost provoked into a war that would have probably destroyed their own Empire as well as the Federation – the Kairn have cut all diplomatic ties and completely withdrawn to within their own borders, similar in manner to what the Romulans had done for fifty years between 2315 and 2365. They have even abandoned their garrison on Panmunjom for the present. And while there is no indication how long this period of Kairn isolation may last, my gut tells me we won't be seeing the Kairn again anytime soon.

Whatever the results of the battle between the Kairn and the Mothrai at the center of the galaxy, one of the side effects appears to be the flooding of hyperspace with deadly amounts of radiation – too intense even for our Phantom shield-equipped vessels to withstand. Hyperspace as a conduit of faster than light travel is no longer a viable option, at least in our quadrant of the galaxy. The bright side of this turn of events is we probably will not need to worry about a re-appearance of the Mothrai in this – or any other – area of our galaxy.

Meanwhile, starships Dauntless, Bellerophon, and Triton have been decontaminated and restored to full duty, and – with the return of our ships to the Federation Fifth Fleet – I have relinquished my battlefield promotion to Commodore, preferring to remain a simple Fleet Captain in command of just my own starship.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester was sitting in the wardroom of *Starbase 719* with the base's commander, Vice Admiral Raiajh; her strategic operations officer, Captain Konstantin Harkonnen; chief medical officer, Dr. Sylvan Xaran; executive officer, Captain Cathryn Pearson; and admiral's aide Lt Commander Marie Quintero, as he presented his mission debriefing report. One exception notable by his absence from the meeting was Vice Admiral Penji Fil, who would normally be the officer in charge to oversee such a debriefing.

"Finally, I wish to add my recommendation of commendations to all the vessels of the Fifth Fleet into my report, but in particular to Captains McLeod and Shown and their respective crews – without whose support the special Task Force could not have successfully followed the three Mothrai ships back through hyperspace to their colony – and to the crews of *USS Triton*, *USS Bellerophon*, and *USS Dauntless* for their actions under extremely difficult circumstances that contributed to the successful completion of our assigned mission," Koester was saying.

"So noted in the log, with my concurrence," Raiajh remarked. "Are you sure you don't want to keep your promotion, Peter? After all, after everything you have done, you certainly deserve it."

"I've had this discussion with Kate... Admiral Janeway... in the past. As I told her, I've held flag rank before. All it meant for me was the burden of additional paperwork and headaches. No, I'm quite content to return to my bridge and my center seat for as long as possible," Koester replied.

"Very well. Do you have anything else you wish to add to this debrief, Fleet Captain? Any additional comments or questions?"

"Just one question – off the record," Koester said, waiting a moment for Quintero to pause the recording of the meeting. Once Raiajh nodded, Koester asked, "Just how did the Kairn get their claws on the hyperspace engine? How did they know where we were and what we were doing out there?"

"As I'm sure you probably heard through the rumor mill, Penji came to the conclusion this situation with the Phantoms – or the Mothrai as you now call them – had to be resolved once and for all, and felt it had to be resolved in a way neither Starfleet nor the Federation would condone nor could be seen being a part of, particularly if it went wrong. So he 'accidentally' leaked your task force's mission and the location of our jump engine prototype from Phillip Winters' ship to the Kairn General, Ssrholm, while the Kairn were here to examine the

evidence we had proving it was the Phan... I mean, Mothrai that attacked their capitol planet and not Starfleet, even going so far as to make sure the General knew exactly where aboard the base the jump engine was located by having Mack escort him there personally. Then, before returning to the *Sarek* to oversee our fleet, he somehow sabotaged the shield upgrade around that area of the station to allow the Kairn an opportunity to steal it for themselves in the hopes they would do exactly what they did. It's no wonder the Kairn felt used by the Mothrai and have withdrawn into seclusion. It seems they really are easy to manipulate in service of a nefarious purpose."

"I see. Well, I can't say I exactly agree with what Penji did, but I can't say I completely disagree with it either. Where is Penji now?" Koester asked out of curiosity.

"Heading back to Earth with Admiral Kale," Raiajh replied.

"He's not...?!" Koester started to ask, alarmed.

"No, Penji hasn't been relieved of command of the Fleet," Raiajh replied. "Though he probably should be for his actions. But I suspect there are several other Admirals at Starfleet Command who secretly agree with what Penji did as well. Still, the Commander-Starfleet has ordered him to appear in person in San Francisco to explain what occurred out here. He should be back in a few weeks, perhaps as much as a few months."

"In the meantime, I suppose it's back to business as usual for us out here?" Koester remarked.

"Until I hear otherwise, the Fleet will resume normal operations, including exploration of the AOR," Raiajh confirmed.

"Good. I'm tired of all this shooting. I just want to get back to surveying a nice class-M world somewhere." Koester gathered his isolinear chips and started to get out of his chair, when he looked at Raiajh once again and said, "I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to pay Phillip a visit before I return to the *Dauntless*. I want to find out just how much he can remember about what went on the past few months. And I haven't had a chance to see him since my rescue from Capria IV."

"Actually, Fleet Captain," said Dr. Xaran. "There's a problem regarding that..."

* * * *

Several minutes later, Koester and Xaran were in the station's main infirmary. In a private ward to one side of the main ward, the pair were observing Phillip Winters. Winters was once again laying in bed, unresponsive, his eyes closed as if in a deep sleep.

"Just before your ships emerged from hyperspace, the guards in the brig complex reported Mister Winters experienced what appeared to be a seizure," Xaran was explaining. "By the time medical staff arrived, he was back in a coma lying on the deck of his cell, the Phantom drone that been attached to him visible and dead beside him."

"Do you think it's connected with the destruction of their colony?" Koester asked, his eyes expressing deep sympathy for his old friend.

"Probably," Xaran confirmed. "I can't think of any other reason this would have happened. And maintenance crews found the bodies of three larger Phantoms... I think you called them Mothrai... also dead, down in an unused section in the communications area of the base. We think that was where Mister Winters was hiding when he wasn't provoking wars across the Alpha Quadrant. No one is sure how they got aboard the base or if there are any more of them around, though Mack and Michelle have members of the Marine battalion and security division searching just in case."

"It's a shame," Koester remarked. "I would like to know for certain that Phillip was acting against his will during the course of these events. I guess we'll never know for sure now, unless he somehow wakes up again." Koester then looked at Xaran, who merely shook his head at the likelihood. Koester then said, "Take good care of him. He may have seemed a little strange sometimes, but he was a good friend for many, many years."

"Don't worry, Fleet Captain," Xaran assured. "He's in good hands with us."

Koester smiled slightly, then looked back down at Winters, placed a hand on the comatose man's shoulders, and said, "I wish you well, Phillip."

* * * *

Stardate 68084.9

Starbase 719

It had been several days since the Federation Fifth Fleet had resumed normal operations, and with all the starship crews back out on assignment, *Starbase 719* was relatively quiet – particularly in the base infirmary as many of those injured in the brief attack by the Kairn were healed and released.

The infirmary doors opened up and Commander Stev stepped in, followed by a doctor and two attendants – one pushing an anti-grav gurney in front of him. The duty nurse looked up at the sound of the door opening.

“May I help you gentlemen?” the nurse asked, half out of her chair before the doctor flashed an ID badge at her. Her eyes went wide and she sat back down.

“These men are from Starfleet Medical on Earth,” Stev explained, his voice calming, almost hypnotic. “They will be escorting the patient back to Earth.”

“Yes, Commander,” the nurse replied as she shut off the infirmary monitoring system, erasing the recordings accumulated since the start of her shift several hours earlier in the process. Stev, the doctor, and the pair of orderlies then moved across the ward to one of the private rooms on the far side. Once inside the room, the two orderlies gently placed Phillip Winters on the gurney and strapped him securely.

“The bag,” the doctor remarked to Stev. “The Director placed special emphasis on the patient’s bag. Where is it?”

“Most likely in the security section near the primary brig,” Stev replied. “It should be no problem to obtain. I will meet you at the airlock.”

Several minutes later, the gurney carrying Phillip Winters arrived at an airlock connected to a Starfleet medical frigate. Before the orderlies could push the gurney into the airlock, Stev arrived.

“Do you have it?” the doctor overseeing the two orderlies asked the Vulcan.

“Yes,” Stev replied, pulling a folded tan satchel out from under his uniform jacket and handing it to the doctor. The doctor unfolded the tan-colored cloth satchel and looked inside, smiling slightly when he saw the metallic padd-like device inside.

“Section 31 has been looking for this for several years. We lost track of it when the patient resigned from Starfleet. The Director will be pleased.”

“None of Commander Petersen’s staff were ever able to make the device function,” Stev explained.

“No matter. Soon we will know all we require,” the doctor said, glancing down at Winters. “But now we must depart.”

“Give the Director my best,” Stev remarked, then quickly turned and walked away. The doctor watched Stev go for a moment, then turned toward the airlock and said to the pair of orderlies, “The Director is waiting.” The two orderlies – one still pushing Winters on his gurney – followed the doctor through the airlock. A moment later the door hissed shut, and it was as if the medical frigate had never docked at the starbase.

The End