

SILVER

Captain Leonard Thorpe had been asked to meet with Admiral Drake Holloway, his immediate superior in Starfleet. It was a meeting that the captain of the *Athena* was not expecting, and as he told his companion, Damiko Matsubara, “Unexpected meetings are usually bad news.”

“Maybe,” she suggested, “he’s just informing you when your board of inquiry is going to start.”

“That’s the best case scenario.”

“What’s the worst case scenario?” Matsubara asked.

“Holloway informing me I’m no longer the captain of the *Athena*.”

Thorpe really did not want to hear the worst-case scenario from the admiral, but had to admit that it was a possibility. The negative ideas were definitely on his mind as he walked from the apartment block where he lived to Starfleet headquarters, the bright and sunny and unexpectedly warm San Francisco day not really lifting his spirits. He just feared for his future, and what he could do in Starfleet if he lost his command. Would he be busted back to commander and assigned as a first officer on a smaller, less prestigious ship? Maybe he would be reassigned to a desk job at Starfleet Command. Of course, as he thought about the consequences of his actions in the Omerra Open Cluster, he knew he would make the same choices again, because at the time, they were the right decisions to make, and nothing had occurred since to make him change that opinion.

Thorpe entered the headquarters building, passing through the security system and then taking the lift to the admiral’s office suite. The receptionist simply said, “Go right in, captain. They’re expecting you.”

“They’re?” he thought. That was not a good sign, he said to himself.

When he entered the office where Holloway awaited him, he did see that his superior was not alone in the room. Admiral Nelson Quinn was also present. Now, Thorpe did not know what to think, since Quinn was not part of any investigative commission. That was not his area, but he could well be a witness. The only problem with that idea was that if he was a witness, he would appear at the inquiry, not in Admiral Holloway’s office.

Holloway stood up and said, “Welcome, captain. Have a seat, we have much to discuss and not a lot of time to discuss it in.”

Now Thorpe was confused. “What is this about?”

“Unfinished business from the Ksassan situation. As you know, all the planets captured by the Ksassans except one have been recaptured.”

“Waukins,” the captain remarked.

“That’s he one. It’s still under Ksassan occupation, and the exiled government there has requested our assistance to free their world.”

“But Waukins is not a member planet of the Federation, and as far as I know, they have no desire to join the Federation.”

“Yes,” Quinn started. “The Federation Council, despite the objections of Starfleet, has agreed with this request. We do not agree with this decision, but we serve our political masters and must follow their decisions, as unfortunate as they may seem.”

Thorpe started to wonder how this decision affected him, although he was getting a pretty good idea. Still, he asked, “How am I involved?”

“We’re going to form a task force to retake Waukins. There’s a Borg cube there protected with the enhanced shields, so we will need to use the probe weapons and the *Dublin* to take it out, and that should allow us to take the planet rather quickly. There has been no reinforcements of the Ksassan positions there.”

Thorpe added, “There is the possibility that the Ksassans have developed a defense against the probe weapons.”

“Yes, there is that possibility, which is why Starfleet needs to move fast on this mission. We need to remove this Ksassan bridgehead into our space, even if the planet at the centre is not a member of the Federation. As long as the Ksassans are there, we are not truly safe.”

Thorpe had one other objection. “As of now, only Lieutenant Djurkurn is capable of operating the *Dublin* in the manner that the Overseers intended.”

“We’ve been working on that too. The Vulcan Science Academy has developed a team that can operate the ship telepathically, based on studies with the Miurians.”

The surprises kept on coming to the captain. “The Miurians allowed that? I was under the impression that they wanted to be left alone.”

“I’m not an expert in Vulcan diplomacy, but they succeeded in making contact. I don’t have the details, but the Vulcans have put together a team of six, and Lieutenant Djurkurn is working to train them to operate the ship.”

“I see.”

“Although,” Holloway continued, “our long-term plan is to take the *Dublin* apart and reverse-engineer the quantum slipstream drive, right now, that ship is more valuable to us intact and operational. Your engineers have the best experience in maintaining and operating that ship, which is why the *Athena* is part of this mission.”

“And the ship is ready? The refits they were talking about?”

“What is needed is ready,” the admiral replied.

“So... when does this mission start?”

“Very soon...”

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Thorpe returned to his apartment, where Matsubara was waiting for him, while Hiroshi was taking his midday nap. A part of her wanted this surprise meeting with the admiral to end in one particular way, so that Thorpe would not be returning to space. There were many opportunities here on Earth. Since Hiroshi was born, she had done useful work, and she was sure there were good options for Thorpe as well. On the other hand, she knew that if the meeting went the way she wanted, her companion would not be very happy. It was possible that the outcome of the meeting could be completely opposite to what she was thinking—but more than likely, it would be something in between.

When the man came through the front door, she greeted him and asked, “How did the meeting go?”

“It was unexpected,” Thorpe started. “Admiral Quinn was there.” To Matsubara, that was not a good sign. “They want to liberate Waukins from Ksassan rule, and they need the *Dublin* for that.”

“And how does that involve you?”

“The *Athena* will be part of the mission, because the engineers on my ship know the *Dublin* the best.”

“What about the board of inquiry?”

“Nothing has been said about that, but I suspect that the *Athena* is not being returned to active service but is being activated for a one-time mission.”

“So you’re coming back?”

“Yeah. The Starfleet bureaucracy wants its inquiry, to justify its existence.”

“When are you leaving?” Matsubara asked, sounding tentative. There was always something that could mess up the plans, as missions like this hardly ever turned out according to plan.

Thorpe answered, “I have to head to the ship and assess its readiness.”

“Can I come along? There is Starfleet daycare, you know, for a couple of hours.”

“I guess so...”

Later that day, the two beamed up to the *Athena* as it remained moored at its berth in Spacedock. They were greeted by Rodall Dewuchun,

the chief engineer and who was, by tradition, the commanding officer during refits and otherwise when the ship was not in active service. He was taken aback by the presence of Matsubara. He knew that Thorpe was coming on board as he had received the information that the *Athena* needed to be prepared for departure. “Welcome on board, captain,” the Odonan engineer said. “Damiko, your presence is unexpected. Does this mean you’re returning to active duty?”

“Unfortunately, no. I’m just here with the captain.”

Thorpe decided to get to the point, asking, “What is the status of the ship?”

“Unless we’re dry-docked and doing major changes with pieces of the hull removed, I’m always four to six hours away from having the ship fully operational should we be called upon to conduct a mission. When I got the message, I put into effect the plan to get the ship back to operational status as soon as possible. In fact, the ship will be ready before the whole crew returns.”

“Isn’t that a problem?” Matsubara asked. “What about those who are transferring or leaving Starfleet?”

“Well,” Thorpe replied, “none of those transfers or reassignments have gone through yet. Because this mission ended before the official end of the tour of duty, they’re obligated to report to the ship when told to do so.”

“But they won’t be happy.”

Dewuchun added, “Especially those leaving Starfleet.”

“I know, but there are ramifications if they don’t report,” Thorpe said, as the three finally walked out of the transporter room. “We’ll have to deal with those on a case-by-case basis. Now, what about the ship itself?”

“There were no major upgrades yet,” Dewuchun started. “Mostly, it was scheduled maintenance and some updates on operating code. In a few cases, there were component upgrades but they were modular and we simply swapped them in and tested them. That took only a few hours. I replaced the dilithium casing for the tam-ulk-yr in the warp converter and did realignment tests. We should have full warp capability and full efficiency. Otherwise, it has been reprovisioning of consumables.” Then the engineer looked at the other two as they arrived at a turbolift station. “There is one major upgrade I should mention.”

“What?”

“We managed to get subspace transporters for the *Athena*. Because we have an Odonan core, we can run the subspace transporters since the control systems contain the necessary code.”

“How many chambers?”

“We got two.”

“Tested?”

"In station, yes," Dewuchun answered, "but not in the field. I was hoping that we could on a trial run, or on a shakedown cruise, but now I'm not so sure we'll have the time."

"And," Matsubara added, "the tradition is that the chief engineer is the first one to use the system?"

"Of course."

The three took the turbolift to the engineering deck. Adjacent to the warp converter assembly near main engineering were several unused chambers provided for future expansion or additional equipment. One of those rooms now housed the subspace transporter. A third of the space had been filled with the machinery housed in a series of large metal cabinets and bulkhead frames. The two chambers sat on the platform, docked to the system above and below. The transport chambers were about two and a half metres tall and a little over one and a half metre in diameter, and could accommodate six people. The device itself consisted of a base and a cap, and those were connected by a central pillar that housed the controls. The base and cap housed the machinery that generated the countervail fields, necessary to separate the subspace transporter effect from the personnel being carried, those effects having undesirable effects on biological matter. Thorpe looked at the device, and though he had heard about the subspace transporter and it was used during the assault on Philentrophia, he had not gone through the device before.

Matsubara had not either, but she asked the engineer, "Have you ever gone through the subspace transporter?"

"Years ago, just once," Dewuchun admitted. "Like they said, you really don't feel anything and its instantaneous as you perceive it, and since there's a quantum shift about it, it can go through any depth of material and through shields as well. As long you have a sensor read, it can go there."

"Is the technology similar to the hypergates?"

"It's related technology but there are differences in information transfer that are perhaps a little too technical to get into—not that you wouldn't understand, but it takes time to explain."

"I've got an idea of the basic theory," the science officer answered. She knew that in essence, a subspace transporter worked on a kind of swapping between a little piece of "here" and another piece of "there" through a quantum state exchange, with had the effect of a shift through subspace. The process worked better if the two segments of space were described by simple shapes, which was another reason why the cylinders were used, as that was a simple shape. The chambers also provided the "inert barrier" that the subspace transporter required. There could be nothing crossing the barrier, such as a person breathing or losing molecules during the procedure. The chambers provided that closed, isolated system during the transport process.

Dewuchun added, “I did experience the system in the older days, with the more solid chambers instead of the ones with the countervail fields, but these are smaller and yet, not so claustrophobic.”

“And six can fit in here?”

“Six Odonans, easy, but six humans can be a tighter fit, depending on the gear they’re carrying, but you’re in there for a very short period.”

“I know,” Thorpe replied. “We’ve gotten along without this technology, but it could still be a useful tool to have.”

“Yes,” agreed Dewuchun.

“And,” Matsubara added, “we’re probably the only Federation ship with this technology.”

“I believe that’s true...”

The next day, a familiar ship arrived at Earth. It was escorted into Spacedock and though Thorpe and most of the crew were back on board their own ship, Starfleet took some unusual steps. The ship was escorted in with a couple of space tugs, and a rare Starfleet ordinance was declared leaving some areas in Earth orbit off-limits to all non-Starfleet vessels. Inside Spacedock, the observation windows were all closed. Non-Starfleet contractors and assorted civilian employees were given the day off.

“The precautions seem extreme,” remarked the first officer, Julia Bayanhong. “It’s just an alien ship.”

Dewuchun added, “But a ship that could revolutionize space travel.”

“There are limits to the slipstream drive,” science officer Grace Brigrison continued. “It’s more like the hypergates in that it is a destination drive.”

“But without the need for infrastructure at the destination. It also seems likely that the Overseers had a means to communicate when the slipstream drive is active, and they had sensor abilities too. As far as I know, we haven’t uncovered those abilities yet.”

“And that does prompt the question,” Bayanhong added. “Where was the *Dublin* while we were at Earth?”

Thorpe answered, “I would imagine some top-secret Starfleet yard.”

“But they still can’t take it upon themselves to disassemble the ship and reverse-engineer it.”

Vorwoorts added, “Why not go to that asteroid where we found it and get all of those ships that apparently aren’t working anymore?”

“It’s my understanding,” Thorpe answered, “that without an Overseer, there’s no way to access it. Lieutenant Hahn was seen by the system there as an Overseer.”

“And Lieutenant Djurkurn is not?”

“I don’t know,” the captain replied with a shrug.

A moment later, Vorwoorts said, “We’re being hailed. It’s the *Dublin*.”

“On screen.”

The image on the *Athena* viewscreen changed to show the interior of the Overseer starship. The part of the bridge that they could see looked as bland as Thorpe remembered it, with little more than a viewscreen that went all the way around and the three chairs. They could see the familiar presence of Enxya Djurkurn, a Betazoid science officer who had been tampered with by the Overseer technology to change her Betazoid extrasensory abilities into those more like the Overseers. She sat in the centre seat, and on each side were Vulcans, youthful-looking, a man and a woman, and they were in Starfleet uniforms.

Djurkurn spoke up, “We meet again, captain.” She sounded like she was a commander already, Thorpe thought, but he knew that her rank was unchanged. On the other hand, she was no longer under his command, as they both answered directly to Admiral Quinn on this mission.

Thorpe did say, “I see that you have acquired a crew.”

“Yeah, a crew of six Vulcans. With me are T'Rinda and Slotok.” She did not need to identify who was the male and who was the female; their names did that for them. “They were training with the Miurians so that they would become adept at handling the Overseer technology.”

“Wait,” Bayanhong started. “I thought that the Miurians did not want to have contact with off-worlders?”

“True in general, but as you can imagine, commander, no society is completely uniform in their beliefs and practices. There are small groups of Miurians that do not support the isolationist viewpoint. The Vulcans were able to make contact with them, and they were interested in learning that some items of Overseer technology survived.”

Thorpe asked, “And none of those Miurians are on board?”

“No. As I understand it, the mental activity of all the Miurians creates a kind of white noise that somehow masks all the more discrete thoughts that they could experience. It's like a lot of yelling, obscuring the sounds of individual speakers—and then you get used to the noise and can't function without it. The noise of individual thoughts without the background noise disturbs them greatly, so they don't leave their planet.”

“I see.”

“However, Miurian mind control technology is pretty similar to that of the Overseers, so the Vulcans were quick learners and have become competent with the *Dublin*. On the other hand, they don't have engineering training and the Miurians do not know about the quantum slipstream drive.”

“So that's why the *Dublin* needs us,” Thorpe remarked.

“Exactly,” Djurkurn remarked.

Shortly afterwards, Djurkurn and the two Vulcans on the bridge with her beamed over to the *Athena*, and in the meantime, Admiral Quinn in-

formed Thorpe that he would be coming on board. “Not to worry,” he added, “I’m not taking command of your ship. I’ll be on the *Independence*, my own ship. Waukins is not that far away.”

While they waited, Bayanhong said to the captain, “The idea that the Miurians understand Overseer technology scares me.”

“Why?” asked Thorpe. “They are the descendants of the Overseers, so it’s no surprise that their technology is consistent with the Overseers.”

“That was okay when we assumed that they were isolationists and did not want outside contact. Now we learn that there are some that do want contact. Would it be a surprise to learn that some might like to be the Overseers again?”

“That depends on how much of the Overseer history they retain.”

“My impression was that they knew quite a lot.”

“Then they would know that the Overseers fell and why they fell.”

Looking at the captain as they entered the transporter room, Bayanhong said, “But we still don’t know how the Overseers’ empire fell.”

In the transporter room, transporter chief Megan Wilder reported, “Captain, Admiral Quinn signals that he’s ready to come on board.”

“Then beam him on board.”

Wilder worked the controls, and a few seconds later, Admiral Quinn stood on the transporter platform. “Welcome on board the *Athena*, admiral,” Thorpe started.

“Thank you for having me on board. Are Djurkurn and the Vulcans on board?”

“We’re waiting for them.”

Wilder spoke up, saying, “I’m getting a signal that they’re ready to beam on board.”

“Then do it, lieutenant,” Thorpe ordered. Quinn got off the platform and stood alongside Thorpe and his first officer while the woman behind the controls ran the sequence. It ended with Djurkurn standing between two youthful-looking Vulcans, though Thorpe knew that it was likely both were older than Djurkurn. To the newcomers, the captain said, “Welcome to the *Athena*.”

Djurkurn was all business, as she said, “Admiral, we should get started. There’s not a lot of time.”

Thorpe had no immediate response since he was not that aware of critical time pressure, unless there was new information that had not been shared with him. It would not be the first time. Quinn spoke up, “Agreed. Let’s get started. Captain, in your observation lounge...”

Ten minutes later, those who had beamed onto the starship gathered in the observation lounge on deck one. They were joined by Thorpe, De-

wuchun, science officer Grace Brigson, tactical officer Henrietta Vorwoorts and the intelligence officer T’Kor. Quinn spoke first, saying, “Starfleet Command has been working on a plan to retake Waukins from the Ksassans. I’m aware that Waukins is not a member planet of the Federation and some would prefer not to deal with those people. However, the Council has agreed to the plea of help from the exiled Waukinese government.”

“Which,” T’Kor pointed out, “is not necessarily the government most people on that planet would support.”

“True,” Quinn replied, “but I’m generally sure that the average inhabitant of Waukins has no interest in being ruled by the Ksassans. It’s also in our interest to drive the Ksassans from that planet. Even if it is not in the Federation, it is partly surrounded by the Federation, and their presence there gives them a beachhead into our space.”

“Still,” Bayanhong said, facing the admiral, “at what cost?”

“I understand your concerns, commander, but Starfleet is governed by the Federation Council. If they have given us an objective, we are bound to fulfill it to the best of our abilities, even if we object to the order. That’s part of being in Starfleet.”

“But the cost may not be worth the objective.”

“I’m sure that they have considered that.”

Thorpe spoke up, saying, “I understand my first officer’s objections, because we were involved at Philentrophia and so we understand the losses that are possible. Nevertheless, it is desirable to have Starfleet seen as an agent of the government, and not to have the government seen as an agent of Starfleet, something that I have heard more and more people on Earth are believing. Nevertheless, we must understand that this mission is not without significant risks. We have to assume that the Ksassans at Waukins know that their enhanced shields can be broken with our probe weapons, and they could have worked on methods to counteract our weapons.”

Quinn added, “And at the same time, we have upgraded the weapons. What we have now is much improved than the more improvised weapons we used in the initial attack. We made ample use of the data recorded in that attack and determined how the weapons could be improved, and we also considered likely ways they could counter the weapons, and then developed ways to avoid the countermeasures. We believe that we can make this attack work simply by destroying the cube and any Ksassan ship in orbit. At that point, there would be no relief for the occupiers, and so their best response would be to surrender.”

“That’s an assumption,” Thorpe remarked.

“It’s also what was observed at the other planets when they we’re attacked.”

“Philentrophia was an exception.”

“Because one of their ships was left intact, giving the Ksassans a hope for escape.”

“You do realize there were prisoners on board that ship?”

Quinn looked more sternly at Thorpe as he replied, “Captain, nobody is questioning your decision with regards to that ship. You and your crew made the right call there, but at the other planets, such prisoner ships were not found. Ksassans are not fanatical. When they know the situation is hopeless, they will surrender. Now, Waukins has been occupied long enough that it is unlikely that they will have a prisoner ship in orbit. They have been blockaded too, and so they will have no relief and no reinforcements. Therefore, the most likely scenario is that if we quickly and efficiently remove the cube and other Ksassan vessels, the Ksassans on the planet will surrender.”

Bayanhong asked, “What is the estimated number of Ksassans on the planet?”

“Assuming numbers similar to the other planets, they would have only a couple of hundred, and of course, their android occupation forces.”

Thorpe sat there and was thinking that it would not be that easy; otherwise, the counterattack would have already occurred. He was pretty sure that the Ksassans would not surrender easily. They knew that they were the last bastion of the Ksassan attempt to recreate the realm of the Ancient Progenitors, whom the Ksassans claim they are the direct descendants of. They would not give up their position that easily.

Quinn had that angle covered too, “In case a ground invasion is necessary, we have squads of Klingon warriors ready to handle that.”

Thorpe had no reaction to that, but could sense that was a disaster in the making, and a lot of Klingons were going to die in glorious battle and end up in Sto-Vo-Kor. It was not that the Klingons were not valiant and capable warriors, but fighting androids was outside their concept of battle, and history had shown that the Klingons fought poorly and lost badly when the battle varied from the way that the Klingons fought. In fact, that was how Klingons could be defeated, by fighting as unconventionally as possible. Thorpe was pretty sure the Ksassan androids were programmed that way.

The admiral continued, “But captain, the ground war, if there is one, is not your concern. You will not be providing any personnel to such a mission. In fact, your mission is to provide support and assistance to the *Dublin*. That’s your assignment, to be the support vessel and the guardian of the *Dublin*, and to be ready to go during the initial attack phase, similar to what you did at Philentrophia. Are there questions?”

Vorwoorts had one, “Is there going to be a cloaked intelligence ship there?”

“Yes,” Quinn replied. “It’ll be the same format as the last time, and the *Athena* has the Dirac transmitter installed.” Thorpe just nodded at that,

as it had been installed when the ship was at Deti and had not been removed. It was like the quantum shift inhibitor, installed during Dominion War and still there and even functional if required.

Vorwoorts did ask, "Would the Ksassans be aware that such a ship is there?"

"More than likely, but there is nothing they can do about it. It's undetectable in the manner it is operating, and the Ksassans do not have the ability to detect the signals generated by the Dirac system."

"We assume," T'Kor remarked.

Quinn was surprised by the statement, and so asked, "What makes you assume that?"

"A number of the devices were installed on Federation ships to deal with the Ksassan incursion. After the conflict ended, many of those ships were like the *Athena* in that they have spent time in drydock, and during those times, the Dirac installation could have been examined by those who do not have the best interests of the Federation in mind."

"Are you suggesting that security in Starfleet installations is lax?"

"No, sir," the Vulcan intelligence officer replied. "But you must not underestimate the resourcefulness of spies."

"Of course," Quinn said, with some exasperation on his voice. "However, past experience has shown that the likelihood that the Ksassans can detect signals from the Dirac system is minimal and within acceptable levels of risk."

"These are Ksassans we're dealing with here."

"And though intelligent, they are not super-beings. Starfleet tactical planners have gone over this mission, and they have taken into account who the enemy is and their potential abilities. We have every reason to believe that this plan will work. Just remember, the *Athena* is functioning as the support vessel for the *Dublin*. The *Dublin* will be assigned the task to take out the Borg cube at Waukins, and the *Athena* will assist and likely will have its own target or will just protect the *Dublin*. That's your role. Once the ships had been taken care of, you and the *Dublin* will be available to pursue and intercept any vessels bearing Ksassans that attempt to flee. If necessary, you may have to beam boarding parties on those ships. Our scenario planners do not anticipate this being a likely operation because our initial attack should destroy all Ksassan warp-capable vessels. Your ship will not be involved in any ground action, and there will be no need to land ground forces or to beam anyone down. I assume that I am clear on these orders."

"You are," Thorpe replied, "and we will do as instructed."

"You will be relayed target coordinates when we are ready to drop out of warp and out of cloak. With luck, captain, your part in the actual conflict will last two or three minutes. Then you can sit back and watch the rest of it

unfold.”

Thorpe heard the admiral’s words, but did not believe it would be as simple as that. Things had a way of developing in an unexpected direction, as he saw at Philentrophia. Things did not go to plan on that mission, and that had been an almost-expected anticipation of how the mission would proceed. Perhaps Quinn was more confident now because they had that experience, but he was pretty sure that the Ksassans had learned too from the first round. When Quinn did not speak for several seconds, Thorpe got to the one last important matter. “When do we leave?”

“In the morning,” the older man replied. “I’m assuming that all the required equipment is on board.”

Dewuchun spoke for the ship, saying, “I personally had received the list and checked it off myself. Everything that Starfleet wants us to carry is now on board.”

“That’s good. There are two staging areas, and we’ll be heading to Ursa 269 and joining up with the rest of the fleet there. From Ursa 269, it’ll take three days to reach Waukins. Your ship can get there quicker, and the *Dublin* faster yet, but we need to arrive at the same time and coordinate our actions. Another thing to note, captain, is that from this moment on, we’re on mission and you and your crew cannot leave the ship. If you need to contact family members or whatever, no details of the mission can be revealed to them. For this reason, communications will be monitored. This embargo of information also applies to Starfleet officers who are not part of the mission.” In other words, Thorpe thought, he could not discuss this further with Matsubara, although she already knew enough of the details. “Am I clear, captain?”

“Yes,” Thorpe replied. “The announcement will be made at once.”

Quinn stood up and added, “I should be returning to my ship. Any updates on the mission will be transmitted on the Dirac system so they could not be monitored by those not involved. Now, Starfleet has done a lot of planning on this mission. As some of you have noted, Starfleet is not exactly popular with large segments of the population, so we must make this mission work as faultlessly as possible, and I’m counting on you to make this happen.”

“As usual, admiral, we will do our best.”

“I expect nothing less.”

Once the admiral had left, though Djurkurn remained. Thorpe did ask her, in private, “How comfortable are the Vulcans with operating the *Dublin*?”

“They’re comfortable with it, sir,” the Betazoid science officer replied. “Their training is specifically for the ship. The only weakness is that they’re not completely familiar with the ship itself. Vulcans may be quick learners,

but they're not going to instantly know every detail of the engine system. They don't have engineering training."

"So," Thorpe started, "that's why you need the engineers from the *Athena*?"

"Yes. Remember, the *Dublin* is basically an old ship that we salvaged from the scrapyards. It's falling apart. That's why it's not realistic to keep it going, but to eventually take it apart and reverse-engineer its secrets. I mean, do we really understand the quantum slipstream drive?"

"You'd be surprised what the engineers know already. However, it's good to know that Starfleet has no plans to keep the *Dublin* operational. If they did, I would probably lose half of my engineers."

"For now, because the Vulcans will eventually get up to speed..."

Later, Thorpe was in the Acropolis lounge, with Bayanhong and his security chief, Sal Hakamura. Bayanhong, while eating a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, started, "Somehow, I think the admiral is a little over-optimistic about what's going to happen at Waukins. Really, our participation will be just a couple of minutes or so?"

"Well," Hakamura replied, pausing as he was eating a dish of curry and rice. "If the plan works then that's how long it'll last. The *Dublin* blows up the cube, and we assist in destroying any other ship there, and hopefully the Ksassans will see the situation as hopeless and will surrender."

"There is the matter of the androids," Bayanhong replied. "Unless Quinn has a plan to deal with them that he has not disclosed with us."

Thorpe looked up from his hamburger and said, "Certainly possible."

"Why?"

"I get the feeling that Starfleet is concerned about a possible Ksassan spy infiltration, and so is providing the ships with only the information that they need. As the admiral said, we won't be involved in any planetside operations, so we have no need to know how they will deal with the androids."

Bayanhong said, "Perhaps they have refined the code that would stop the androids. Maybe they have a better understanding of how they would work."

"That's optimistic," retorted the security chief. "If something goes wrong, and I think it will, we'll be again flying by the seat of our pants. I don't like this mission. I think it'll turn out bad. At Philentrophia, we had a reason for doing what we did, but at Waukins, we don't have that same involvement. Worse, we might have learned from the attack, but it would be foolish to think that the Ksassans did not. In fact, the losers often learn more."

Thorpe continued, "But it wouldn't be good to leave that Ksassan presence this deep in Federation space?"

“And the negotiations? Previously, the Ksassans were in a position of strength and saw no need to negotiate, but that’s not true anymore. They are now in a weaker position.”

“The state of the negotiations are unclear, and might not produce a solution. Remember, the whole point of this is to free the people of Waukins from the occupation. Sal knows what that was like.” The other man just nodded at the memories. “Given that the negotiations between the Dominion and the Alpha Quadrant alliance have been going on for years, who knows what the negotiations with the Ksassans would be like.”

“Those negotiations have at least prevented the war from starting again.”

“Which explains the continuation of those talks, but there are no occupied worlds in that case. It’s possible that the Federation would have proposed negotiations after the Ksassans left Waukins.”

“Which would be pointless because then the Federation is in a position of strength and what could they offer in exchange?”

“Ending the blockade of Cas. It remains as long as there are worlds occupied by the Ksassans.”

“But I understand it is leaky.”

“But it’s the principle of the matter, I think. The Ksassans are isolated, without allies and basically condemned by the rest of the Known Galaxy for their inane idea that they’re the direct descendants of the Ancient Progenitors. Lifting the blockade would be symbolic. Remember that we have some experience with the Ksassans on their planet and not all of them think that way. The so-called ‘go fast’ approach is not even the official government policy.”

“So they say.”

“I believe them when they say that is not the official government viewpoint, because the Ksassans are not stupid. A military conquest of the Known Galaxy is impossible, even with the android army. It would be impossible to hold, because there simply are not enough Ksassans and they’re not going to give any authority or control to the androids, least they become self-aware and decide that they want to be the ruling class. The recreation of the Ancient Progenitor empire simply cannot last if created in this fashion, and I have to believe that the Ksassan government has to know this.”

“So,” Bayanhong started, “they favour the go-slow approach?”

“Yeah,” the captain replied. “The ideal is that the Ksassans convince the rest of the races that they are the direct descendants of the Ancient Progenitors and that we want to be ruled by them.”

“That’s simply never going to happen,” the first officer retorted.

“I know that, and deep down, so do the Ksassans, but their belief system is engrained in their culture and is hard to change. The go-slow

movement nods at this and attempts to carry on. It's like the old-time religion on Earth, where people would glance over inconsistencies in the Bible, conflicts with history and science and logic and carry on praying to God, but a small group would take it more seriously. They were fundamentalists and there were periods in our history when the fundamentalists were dangerous. The go-fast group among the Ksassans is another example of this."

"But," Hakamura started, "the religious fundamentalists on Earth never occupied worlds and did not have access to a powerful military. Besides, if they're fanatics, they simply won't surrender, but could well fight to the death. I still think that Admiral Quinn's plan is simplistic and will not work."

"It could work, but not as easily as he is implying..."

* * *

"Is everyone on board?" Captain Thorpe asked from his seat on the bridge.

To his right was Bayanhong, who answered, "To the best of my knowledge, yes. Everybody who is supposed to be here is logged in. DeWillis and the other engineers assigned to the *Dublin* are on that ship."

Indesakar, at the flight control station, said, "We have our departure window." As before, Starfleet was using its authority to clear the area around Spacedock of civilian craft so that they could not get a close look at the *Dublin*. Thorpe had suggested that they should give the Overseer ship a cloaking device if Starfleet did not want anybody to see it.

"Dewuchun?" the captain asked.

"We're on internal power, and the supply and support systems are disconnected and the impulse and warp engines are operational. Diagnostic checks on all systems are positive. We're ready to go."

"Very well. Release the docking clamps, and get into formation with the *Dublin* and the *Independence*."

"And once more into the breach we go," Bayanhong said softly.

"That's our fate as a ship with a reputation."

Vorwoorts announced, "We're cleared for departure."

"Then let's go," Thorpe ordered. He watched as Indesakar worked the controls to separate the *Athena* from its docking port. Once clear and in the open part of Spacedock, he slowly turned the ship around. On the viewscreen, those on the bridge could see the panoramic view of the big station, several of the berths occupied by starships of various descriptions. Only when they faced the large exit doors, still closed, did the motion stop. Ahead of them, the *Independence* and the *Dublin* were lined up. Thorpe knew the sizes of his ship and the other two, and they were dwarfed by the sheer size of this sta-

tion, a station so large that the gravitational effects of the Earth and the moon acting on it had to be factored into the design. Thorpe saw all of this, but was not thinking much about it. Instead, he was focused on what was happening. This was a mission. The ship was upgraded and reprovisioned and ready for its next mission. However, the old crew was mostly back, the transfers and reassignments not yet approved. That was the reason he was sure they were coming back to Earth after this mission to Waukins, and why Thorpe was sure that board of inquiry would be held. He was thinking of Matsubara and his son, again left behind in his apartment in San Francisco. He had gotten to enjoy their company in the time he was on Earth, and almost hated to leave. On the other hand, he was back where he felt he belonged, where he could do the most good. This was the conflict that he knew he could not resolve and no matter which way he went, there would be dissatisfaction all around. Right now, though, he just had to focus on the mission ahead and worry about the other stuff once they were heading back to Earth. He was pretty confident that they were returning because the *Athena* was not fully ready for another tour of duty.

After what Thorpe thought was an unusually long delay—likely related to the need to get the civilian ships out of the way—the doors of Spacedock finally began to part and to reveal the starry vista beyond.

Indesakar reported, “We have clearance to depart and our departure course has been provided.”

Even as the pilot was speaking, the *Independence* and the *Dublin* were moving forward. Indesakar did not wait for the order that he knew was coming; he worked the controls and the *Nebula*-class starship started to move forward, soon passing through the open hatch and into space.

Indesakar added, “Engaging course...”

“Captain’s log, stardate 56113.2. After a journey of three days, we’re approaching the red dwarf star Ursa 264, which I have learned is the site of a secret Starfleet operations base, hidden in a red dwarf system because who would ever think to look in such systems for anything interesting. We will be the first to arrive at this system, well, except for the Dublin, which is probably already there. We should arrive shortly and the Independence will follow as the other ships in the task force arrive. So far, in the times we had contact with the Dublin, they have reported no problems. For a ship that is allegedly ‘falling apart,’ it seems to be holding up fairly well.”

As Thorpe and Bayanhong rode the turbolift to the bridge, the first officer said, “So we’re the second ship here?”

“Apparently,” Thorpe replied.

“So we’ll get to see this top-secret Starfleet facility?”

"I'm sure there is a presence here besides the *Dublin*."

"Perhaps, but you never know. This idea of secret installations..."

"Is very common," Thorpe cut in. "I'm pretty sure this is not the only one."

"And as captain, you don't get to know all about this?"

"I would not be surprised if Admiral Quinn doesn't know about all of them."

"Personally, I don't like this level of secrecy, the careful hiding of the *Dublin* and all of these things that they don't want to reveal. When on Earth, I was certainly hearing from others that Starfleet is getting too big and too distant from the people, and support for it is falling. They just seem to make it worse."

"I'm sure there is a reason for the secrecy."

"Of course, doing something that would not be met with approval."

"Or," Thorpe pointed out, "doing something that we don't want our enemies to know about."

"That too could be a problem," Bayanhong replied, but the conversation was not carried further as they arrived at the bridge and the doors to the turbolift opened. The two stepped onto the bridge, and it was Vorwoorts who reported, "Sir, we're scanning the star system at Ursa 264, and there's no sign of the *Dublin*, but there is another ship there, unidentified class but probably civilian."

"Can you identify it?"

"We're out of range still," Vorwoorts replied. She had the conn until the captain arrived on the bridge, so she relinquished her seat. Thorpe, hearing that, knew there was no point in asking about lifesigns.

He did ask, "And no sign of the *Dublin*?"

"No sir."

Bayanhong added, "That's highly unusual. The last time they checked in with us, they did not report any problems, and if they have problems now, then they should be contacting us. I find it highly unlikely that they didn't beat us here."

"I agree," Thorpe replied. The two senior officers took their seats on the command deck, looking at the viewscreen as it continued to display the stars in the warp effect. "How long until we arrive?"

Indesakar answered, "We'll drop out of warp in five minutes."

"Any transmissions from the Dirac?"

"Negative, sir," Vorwoorts replied.

Bayanhong asked, "Should we inform Admiral Quinn about this mystery ship?"

"When we have more information," Thorpe replied.

For the next five minutes, the bridge was largely silent, except for

standard reports. Vorwoorts did get a closer read on the ship that they were detecting, and established that it was a common small civilian craft, of which there were hundreds of thousands made and they were used by many races. Even Starfleet had some for use as courier ships. “But it’s not Starfleet,” Vorwoorts asked.

“How do you know that?” Bayanhong asked.

“It’s not transmitting an identification code. Standard Starfleet vessels of this sort would.”

“Unless it’s involved in clandestine work.”

“I doubt that,” Thorpe replied. “We’ll know soon enough.”

Less than a minute later, the *Athena* dropped out of warp as it entered the Ursa 269 system. That allowed Brigson at the sensor console to run more comprehensive scans on the unidentified vessel. One result immediately came up, as she reported, “Civilian level craft, nothing non-standard, one lifesign on board... Ksassan.”

“Ksassan?” asked the captain.

“Clearly Ksassan, no doubt... unless it’s an Ancient Progenitor.” Nobody took that idea too seriously.

Thorpe ordered, “Open hailing frequencies.”

“Hailing frequencies open,” Vorwoorts replied.

Thorpe, in a more authoritative voice, started, “Attention unidentified vessel. This is Captain Leonard Thorpe of the Federation starship *Athena*. You are in space you are not authorized to be in. Identify yourself and state your purpose in being here.” The next stage, Thorpe knew, was to determine the defenses the ship had, and prepare a boarding party.

Vorwoorts almost immediately said, “We’re getting a response, visual.”

As much as he hated to say this, because of the effect it would have on one of the genders, Thorpe ordered, “On screen.”

The image of the red dwarf star, the ship too far away to be seen, was replaced by an interior shot of the civilian ship, in particular the small bridge, which was more like a shuttle cockpit. Sitting in one of the seats was a male Ksassan, looking like the others of his kind, youthful, intelligent, physically perfect and to the highest standards of sentient handsomeness. There was a reason that so many people of so many different races had the same standards of attractiveness and physical perfection, and this man had it all, down to the golden-brown hue of his skin and the gold-coloured irises in his eyes and the flowing shoulder-length blond hair. No doubt, Thorpe knew, he had the intellect to match his physical perfection, and then there were the pheromones as well. He glanced at Bayanhong and saw the look in her face, and had the feeling that Vorwoorts and Brigson were similarly agog. Fortunately, there were enough men on the bridge to keep things going.

The Ksassan started to speak, using English as if he was a native speaker and demonstrating the powerful intellect that the Ksassans were known for. "My name is Loranwonkodon, and I've come to this location because I know that Starfleet is using this location as the staging site for an invasion of Waukins. I am hoping that you will listen to me, because as formulated, your plan will not work."

Those words concerned Thorpe deeply, as they did to the other officers on the bridge. It was the captain who asked, "And how do you know what those plans are?"

"We have extensive records on the losses of the other occupied planets. We analyzed the failures and the tactics used by the Federation and their allies. We identified why those missions resulted in our defeats. We have identified our mistakes and they will not be repeated."

"And you think we have not done the same analysis and made adjustments to the plans?"

"As a general rule, the winners adjust less than the losers. I believe that it was one of your historical figures that said that the typical general plans to fight the last war, not the next war. On the other hand, one of our historical figures said that the only way to plan to fight the last war is to lose it."

Thorpe was getting a little impatient with the verbose nature of this Ksassan, so he simply asked, "Okay, I understand all of that, but what are you doing here? What is your purpose here? Is it really to issue a warning and suggest that we call off the invasion of Waukins?"

"Actually, I do suggest that you call off the invasion, captain, because it's not going to work, even if you have the advantage of the *Dublin* and its Overseer weapons. However, my purpose is not to allow the occupation of Waukins to continue. It serves no purpose, and the people on that planet are getting too restless and clearly have no desire to be ruled by the direct descendants of the Ancient Progenitors."

"That," Hakamura added, "is true of every race in the galaxy."

"In time, it'll come, but it cannot be forced on the people. They must embrace it and come to accept it as the most natural and inevitable outcome of the evolution of life in the galaxy."

"Not in my lifetime, I'm afraid."

Loranwonkodon ignored the comment, as he added, "We understand that the occupation on Waukins will end badly, not so much for us but for the people that live there and the infrastructure on the planet. Those currently in charge of the mission there do not understand that they have failed and will continue to fail because their ideology blinds them. My purpose is to help you bring the occupation to a swift and if at all possible peaceful end."

"You're going to attempt to negotiate with your own people to surren-

der?”

“We do not surrender,” the Ksassan replied. “We are willing to retreat and return to what even the Federation recognizes as Ksassan space.”

“In exchange for what?”

“An end to the blockade and the normalization of relations between the Ksassan Realm and the other space powers.”

“That’s a pretty large project.”

“That’s the nature of our society, captain,” Loranwonkudon replied, his voice always smooth and polished. “As the Ancient Progenitors had done, the greatest project in the history of the galaxy, it’s in our genetic makeup. Compared to that, what I seek to do is minimal and over a much shorter timeframe.”

“I see.”

“Captain, I doubt that you have the seniority and the rank to command the entire task force. I am requesting a meeting with the one who is in charge, so that I can lay out my plan to him.”

Thorpe answered, “That individual is not currently here. I cannot speak for him, but I will pass the message on to him. That could take some time, though.”

“I will wait.” With those words, Loranwonkudon closed off the communications link with the *Athena*, and the default view on the screen changed to the relatively uninteresting red dwarf star that dominated the system.

“Well, what do you make of that?” Bayanhong asked.

Hakamura replied, “I think that he is full of it.”

“We all know that,” Thorpe added. “The question is, is he honest or is he following his own agenda?”

“The problem with Ksassans is that you don’t know when they’re lying. No matter how good you are at it, it’s impossible to tell whether a blonde is telling the truth, telling a lie he knows is a lie or telling fiction that he believes to be true. However, we have to assume that Loran-what’s-his-name is really a Ksassan agent whose real aim is to infiltrate us and learn our mission and convince us to alter our plans in a way that will lead to our defeat, and he’ll do it in such an earnest and understanding way that we will not know we’ve been scammed until it’s too late.”

“That is a definite risk,” the captain replied, as he continued to look ahead at the viewscreen.

“So what do we do?” asked the first officer.

“The first thing we do is inform Admiral Quinn. Heni, prepare and send a message about our contact with Loran... won... whatever to the *Independence* using the Dirac.”

“Right away, sir.” Less than a minute later, Vorwoorts added, “Mes-

sage sent.”

“How long until we hear a response?” Bayanhong asked.

Thorpe replied, “The question is more like what that response will be.”

Hakamura spoke up, saying, “What makes me nervous is how much the Ksassan knew about the plans. He knew that the staging area is here, and he knew about the *Dublin* too. He probably has a rundown of each ship’s role.”

“We don’t even have that,” the captain pointed out.

“And worse, he’ll claim that he and his people used their superior intellect to logic out this information instead of relying on their spies.”

“But,” Brigson added, “their spies have a pretty good reputation too.”

“Actually, it’s the pheromones that have the good reputation. Without that, I’d suspect that their spies would not be all that effective.”

Vorwoorts, seeing information cross her displays, said, “Incoming message from the *Independence* on the Dirac.”

“What is it?”

Reading off the screen, the tactical officer said, “Admiral Quinn is requesting that you bring the Ksassan individual on board the *Athena* and then proceed to Rigelus 6, without telling him where you are going. Inform us when you’re under way.”

“Great,” Thorpe remarked.

“What do we do?” asked Bayanhong.

“What we’ve been ordered to do. Sal, you’ll have to prepare the guest quarters for Lorna... Loran... whatever his name is. Why are Ksassan names so difficult to remember?”

“You’d think it was almost intentional.”

“Anyway,” Thorpe continued, “Sal, prepare the guest quarters. Make sure that only male members of the crew deal with him, and that includes having someone other than Lieutenant Wilder beam him over. Sanjay, set a course for Rigelus 6. How long to get there?”

“Less than a day, sir,” Indesakar replied.

“Heni, open hailing frequencies, using the same parameters as he used to contact us.”

After a few seconds, Vorwoorts said, “Hailing frequencies open. We have a response, visual response, on screen.” Once again, Loranwonkudon’s impressive blond image appeared on the screen, and the female bridge officers could again see the shape of humanoid perfection.

The Ksassan was about to speak, but Thorpe started, “I have spoken with my superiors.”□

But Loranwonkudon spoke over the captain, “But how? I’ve been monitoring your ship and there have been no communication signals from

your vessel.”

“The methods of our communications are not of your concern. What is of your concern is that my superior will meet with you and listen to your concerns about any action we might be taking at Waukins. He has asked that you come on board my ship and we will take you to where he is.”

“Can I simply follow in my ship?”

“Unless your ship has an Odonan warp core or something similar, you could not keep up.”

“Then tell me where to rendezvous.”

Thorpe had anticipated that response, and had something in mind. He said with a straight face, “We don’t know the location where the admiral will meet you. You see, the ship will be operating on autonomous secret mode. What that means is that the computer will fly the ship to coordinates we cannot access. Navigation systems we can access and sensor systems will be shut down for the duration.”

“I see,” Loranwonkudon replied, and Thorpe had to wonder of the blonde was buying what he was selling. “You and your ship can make things difficult.”

“That’s why this ship got this assignment. Do you agree?”

Loranwonkudon took the longest time to come up with a response, something Thorpe and the others found unusual from a Ksassan, who as a race were known for being decisive. “Very well,” the alien finally said. “The importance of this mission exceeds my need for personal comfort. I will do it your way, though I have never heard of this ‘autonomous secret mode’ before.”

“It’s a recent innovation.”

Once Loranwonkudon ended the connection, Bayanhong did give in to a giggle and said, “Autonomous secret mode? That’s a new one.”

“But did the blonde believe it?” Vorwoorts asked.

Thorpe answered, “I don’t know, but if he has a secret agenda and needs to carry it out, then he has to act as if he does.”

“As long as we can prevent him from carrying out his secret agenda.”

“That is our intention.”

Moments later, Hakamura and Dewuchun were in the main transporter room, with the latter behind the controls. The announcement had been made to clear the corridors, so on the way to the transporter, the two saw empty corridors. It seemed a little unusual.

Dewuchun started up the transporter system and saw the incoming signal. “He’s ready at his end,” the Odonan reported.

“Okay,” Hakamura replied. “Just make sure any electronic devices he might have on him are deactivated.”

“Very well,” Dewuchun said, adding further instructions to the pro-

gram sequence.

“Now all we need is some way to deactivate the pheromones.”

“I’m sure they’re working on it. Remember, the doctor on Quinn’s ship had started work on treatments that reduced the effectiveness of the Ksassan pheromones. I would be very surprised if Starfleet Medical was not furthering that research.”

“You’re probably right.”

Dewuchun then said, “Starting the sequence.” He worked the controls and watched the displays as Loranwonkudon disappeared from his ship and reappeared on the transporter platform. Before releasing the paralysis field, Dewuchun ran a scan that neutralized the power source of any device the Ksassan had on him, but he had just one device, and the computer identified it as a control that would allow him access to his own ship. The computer also scanned its input and output ports and their identification codes, and automatically locked it out from all of the *Athena*’s systems. Then the field was released, but there was no way that Loranwonkudon would know how long the process would take or what was done. Because every atom in his body had been scanned and identified, it was impossible to sneak anything on board by beaming onto the ship.

Hakamura stepped forward and said, “Welcome on board the *Athena*.”

Loranwonkudon looked around the room and said, “There are no women around.”

“No. I’m security chief Sal Hakamura.”

“It’s my understanding that the first officer of this ship is a woman. Would not the first officer greet guests coming on board?”

“Usually, but the privilege of rank and position is the ability to delegate, and that was what she did here. She had me do this assignment. Now, I’m here to escort you to your quarters.”

“I would like to meet with your captain and the senior officers.”

“In due time,” Hakamura replied, “but right now the captain is preoccupied.”

“How long will it take to rendezvous with your superior?”

“I don’t know. That’s the thing about the autonomous secret mode. We don’t know how long it will take to get there, so you can get comfortable in your quarters and then when the captain is ready, or if the journey is short, when we meet up with the admiral, you can tell your story.”

“Very well,” Loranwonkudon replied. He followed Hakamura into the corridor and then to the guest quarters, which were not that far away. He did notice that the corridors were cleared of other crew members, but he did not mention it. That was standard procedure on a Ksassan warcruiser when moving a prisoner, and Loranwonkudon would have been surprised if the

Federation did it any different. He arrived at the quarters, and also knew that he would be essentially confined to them and though he did not see a guard, he knew that one would be assigned as soon as he was inside, and that guard would be male. That was the way that it was done.

The quarters looked comfortable enough. There was a bed and a sitting area and the food replicator could be programmed to produce food that a Ksassan could eat. He knew that he had limited access to the computer, and there was no way for him to access systems that the crew did not want him to access. Loranwonkudon just smiled inwardly, because it was not his intention to do anything of that kind.

In his quarters, the man noticed something. The viewports were all dark. He did ask, “Why are the windows closed?”

“They’re not closed,” the security chief explained. “When the ship is in autonomous secret mode, the holographic projectors in the windows, which normally show the infinite-speed-of-light approximation, are turned off.”

“Your people seem unusually paranoid.”

“When it’s wartime, paranoia tends to rise, as does the need to take precautions.”

“We are not at war.”

“As long as Ksassans occupy planets where they are not wanted and use the android occupation army to try to social engineer the population and convince them that the Ksassans are the true direct descendants of the Ancient Progenitors and deserve to rule on that basis alone, we are at war.”

“And you know this is happening?”

“Why would Waukins be different from Philentrophia? I was on that planet during the occupation, and I saw what the Ksassans were doing there, turning my elderly parents into farmers. Really? This is an era of advanced technology. People do not have to be farmers if they don’t want to. No, that’s the sort of thing we want to end.”

Loranwonkudon sat down at the table in the sitting area of the room. He knew why the leadership on those first planets that were captured would do those things, but he did not want to defend or justify them to this Starfleet officer. Hakamura left the room, and of course, a security officer had appeared to stand guard, and of course, that guard was male.

The trip to Rigelus 6 took less than a day. Thorpe met briefly with Loranwonkudon, only to inform him that nobody would question him until they arrived where Admiral Quinn was waiting, as the more senior officer had requested. The Ksassan did protest that they were wasting time with this, but Thorpe informed him that it was out of his hands. He did have one question that he wanted to ask, because once they left Ursa 264, the small ship that Loranwonkudon started to follow, until Thorpe ordered the *Athena*

to full speed, and the cloaking device was deployed. The small ship started to follow, and the crew was worried that it could track the *Athena* with the warp signature, something that not even a cloaking device could hide. Another concern was that they had not heard from the *Dublin*, and was worried that the Overseer ship had no idea what was happening. It was no longer reporting in.

As they approached the new rendezvous site, Bayanhong, sitting beside Thorpe on the bridge, asked, "Already, the careful planning of Starfleet is breaking down."

"Only a fool would've expected the plan to go down perfectly. We know what that was like at Philentrophia."

"True," the first officer replied, "but I'm still worried about the *Dublin*."

"If something had happened to it," Thorpe said, as he looked at the viewscreen, "I'm sure we would've heard about it. I get the feeling that after we had contact with the Ksassan, an unofficial communications blackout has been imposed on us."

"I hope that is all it is."

"At least Loranwonkudon has been a model guest," Hakamura replied. "He has not requested to leave his quarters and he has made no attempt to use the device with him to access the computer or other systems. I don't know if that's a good sign or something to be worried about."

"If the man has an agenda," Thorpe continued, "it probably does not involve our ship."

Indesakar reported, as he looked up, "We're entering the Rigelus 6 system."

"Anything here?"

Vorwoorts already had the information coming up on her displays. "Scanning one vessel. It's the *Independence*."

"One ship?"

"That's all that the sensors are showing. Admiral Quinn came alone."

"This gets more unexpected all the time," Bayanhong added, as she settled restlessly in the chair.

Before Thorpe could give a response, Vorwoorts added, "We're being hailed. It's the *Independence*."

"On screen."

The image that had been on the screen was a star brighter than the rest, the orange-yellow primary of the Rigelus 6 system. It was abandoned now, but at one time it was a major base of the Orion Empire. The vast facilities had been looted over the centuries, leaving nothing now but micrometeor-pitted beams and plates of iron and other common elements. The lone planet was barely class-M, and it had been used as a prison world. When the earliest

explorers came across this system, they found a lot of bodies. As the Orion Empire collapsed, the prisoners were left to their own devices. They tried to establish a colony, but it lasted only a couple of decades, according to the records that had been left behind. The problem was that the Orions imprisoned very few women, and not enough to start a colony. The Federation had thought about using the system for its own penal colony, but thought better of it.

Now, on the viesscreen, that star vanished, and was replaced with a view of the interior of the *Independence*, with Admiral Quinn sitting in the centre seat. “Captain,” he started, “I hope that you have had an uninteresting journey.”

“If you can call a journey where we don’t know what is going on uninteresting, then yes.”

“Has your Ksassan guest given you any problem?”

“No, sir, he has been an exemplary passenger. We’ve followed all standard protocols when dealing with Ksassans, and have had no problems.”

“That’s good. For now, I don’t want to risk exposure on our ship, so you’ll be keeping him on the *Athena*. I will be beaming on board once you come alongside, and we can question him and learn what he is up to, because you know he has to be up to something.”

“That’s my thinking too,” Thorpe replied, saying those words but also thinking that he wished he did not have to keep the alien on his ship. How long could he prevent him from having an influence on the female members of the crew? At least half, he suspected, wanted to see him

“Very well, see you soon. *Independence* out.” With those words, the connection between the two ships was ended.

The captain and the first officer exchanged further glances, thinking seemingly in unison, what is going on here?

* * *

Hakamura arrived at the quarters being used by Loranwonkudon, and he pressed the door chime. The Ksassan within said, “Enter.”

The security chief did so, and saw the blond-haired man seated at the table, looking at, staring almost, at the darkened portal. It was like he was meditating, something that was unexpected from the Ksassans, a race known to be free of anything that was not rooted in practicality and hard science. “We have arrived at our destination, and there are others waiting to meet with you.”

“We have arrived already?”

“Yes.”

“And I was not able to perceive the sensation of the ship dropping out

of warp.”

“It’s the Odonan warp core. It’s very efficient.”

“Actually, I have a different theory,” Loranwonkudon replied, as he got up and followed Hakamura out of the room. “I believe that we were just flying around in circles until you decided that we have arrived.”

“If you look out into space, you will see that the stars are very different here.”

“Then why don’t they turn on the holographic projectors in the windows?”

“Not my decision to make.”

Moments later, the two arrived in the observation lounge at the rear of deck one, behind the bridge. Loranwonkudon was not terribly surprised to see that all the people at the table were men, with whom the pheromones he could not help but to release had no effect. There was an Odonan in the room, and he knew that the pheromones would have no effect on even female members of that race. They just evolved without the receptors. The introductions were made, and Loranwonkudon learned that he was facing Admiral Quinn and his new first officer, Terrance Gibney, along with Captain Thorpe and the aforementioned Odonan, Dewuchun. Hakamura remained in the room as well, and even showed the Ksassan his seat.

Quinn took the lead, asking the question that had been on the mind of many since they first encountered the Ksassan. “What were you doing at a secure Starfleet location at Ursa 269?”

Loranwonkudon answered, rather smugly, the others thought, “I was not aware that it was a Starfleet location.”

“Don’t give me that. What are the odds that of all the red dwarf systems out there, you would head to that one?”

“I was aware that this star was a destination, and not why it was a destination. Besides, my sensors do not reveal the presence of any kind of installation at that star.”

To Quinn, that sounded almost reasonable, but it did lead to a further question. “Who informed you that this star was going to be a location, that a Starfleet vessel would rendezvous there?”

“Nobody. I determined that location myself.”

“Really?” the admiral asked, the sarcasm all but dripping from that one word.

“Sure,” Loranwonkudon said. “I can lay it out in detail for lesser minds such as yours, but that would take too much time. Suffice it to say that a Federation invasion of Waukins was long in the plans, and if you can develop a plan, what makes you so sure that we could not develop the same plan? You pride yourself in developing a logical, cohesive and exacting method to carry out this plan with the balance of minimizing risk and maxi-

mizing the chance of success. The thing is, the more conditions you put in a plan, the more constraints, the fewer options that you have in your plans, just leads to the increasing likelihood that your adversaries can figure it out. In fact, it is not too difficult to develop a mathematical model that will describe in detail your plan, based on your parameters. I’m pretty sure that you have developed your own models and ran your own simulations.” Quinn was all but squirming in his seat now, as if Loranwonkudon had hit a nerve. “See, if you can develop a plan, why not us? That is in essence what we had done, so naturally we have the information we need to counter it. If you insist on going forward with your plan, you will lose and you will lose some of your ships and many of your personnel and a lot of those Klingon warriors will head to Sto-Vo-Kor long before they would want to.”

Quinn was getting a little impatient listening to the Ksassan, so when the alien paused for a moment, the admiral decided to get a word in. “If you’re so confident of victory, then why are you telling us this? Why not let us be crushed and humiliated?”

“Because,” Loranwonkudon replied, his voice measured and calm, “despite the fact that you will lose, a lot of my people will die, and many of the people of Waukins will die too. That’s what I want to avoid.”

It was not an unexpected reaction from the blonde, the Starfleet officers at the table knew. The Ksassans had no love for dying in battle, or just dying needlessly at all—at least unless the situation was hopeless and death was a better consequence. That was the reason that the Ksassans used the android armies on their occupied planets, in addition to the low numbers of Ksassans out there. Quinn, leaning forward in his seat, asked, “What are you proposing?”

“What are your terms of surrender?”

Quinn wanted to make the standard remark that surrender must be unconditional, but if he said that, this meeting, he surmised, would come to a quick end. Instead, he asked, “What would you suggest those conditions be?”

“Free and guaranteed passage off of Waukins and a return to the Ksassan realm.”

Quinn paused for a moment, and then asked, “And an end to the blockade?”

“That would not be my request to make. I cannot speak for the government back home.”

“And you have authorization to speak for the government and others at Waukins?”

“I can get it.”

That statement puzzled Quinn, who did know something about Loranwonkudon, which he had not shared with the others, until now. He did say, “We have observation ships at Waukins, and our sensor net is tight

enough that a small piece of debris cannot pass through without us knowing about it. You did not come from Waukins.”

“That is quite correct, admiral. I’ve come from the staging site, where the incursions began. I was part of the team that worked with the Borg cubes we captured, and which we developed techniques to build. Basically, we adapted Borg technology to adapt and assimilate and replicate itself, but without the assimilation of biological components.”

“The implications are... frightening,” Thorpe remarked.

Quinn said, “Especially if that technology gets out of hand. The last thing that we need now is machine Borgs.”

“That won’t happen,” Loranwonkudon replied, still sounding smug and confident. “Our control of the technology is too tight.”

“Famous last words,” muttered Hakamura. The Ksassan could hear him and glanced briefly in his direction.

Looking back at the others, Loranwonkudon added, “I mention what I did not to scare you and the like, but to simply give my credentials. I am the one who has worked on the Borg slipstream drive and also integrated the advanced shield technologies into the Borg systems. I also know the ways to countermand those systems and take out the Borg cube. I don’t propose to destroy it because there is a Ksassan crew on board, but I can render it inoperable so that it is little more than an orbiting hulk. Borg systems, because so many diverse technologies are involved, can be difficult to maintain and easy to foul up. I’m sure that the Federation knows this, because defeats of the Borg usually involve technological failure on their part.”

“And you can do this?” Quinn asked.

“I believe that I can access the computer systems on the Borg cube and enter the code that would render the cube inert.”

“And you think that you would still have access to the systems? You’re sounding like you’ve gone rogue.”

“How would they know?” Loraneonkudon replied. “Isn’t Waukins blockaded by the Federation? Aren’t communications being jammed?” Quinn acknowledged both statements with a slight but noticeable nod of the head. “The occupying forces have no knowledge of what is going on beyond Waukins. They would know me by my position at the staging site.”

“And yet,” Thorpe started, “what about the staging site? Wouldn’t they know about your absence and come looking for you?”

“No, because the staging site was overrun and destroyed, and few managed to get away. That’s another reason why I feel we must end this, preferably without bloodshed.”

Quinn asked the obvious question. “Who destroyed the staging site?”

“It was the Odonans who found it and destroyed it.”

“That’s news to me,” Quinn remarked, as he leaned forward in his

seat.

Thorpe looked in the direction of his engineer and asked simply, “Rodall?”

“I’ve heard no news like that,” the Odonan answered.

“Can you check on that?”

Before Dewuchun could answer, Loranwonkudon spoke up, saying, “Because it was an intelligence-led operation, it’s unlikely that they will come right out and admit it.”

“I have sources,” Dewuchun replied, but he did not immediately leave the room.

Quinn was doubtful of what the Ksassan was saying, and thought that he was just boasting. Still. If he had a plan in mind, Quinn wanted to hear it, even if the plan would never be implemented. “Okay,” the admiral started. “You’ve stated your credentials. What is the plan you’re proposing?”

“Because of communications jamming, the best way would be for a single ship to approach the system, and not a Starfleet vessel. In fact, it’s my understanding that you have an operational Overseer ship.” The Federation officials did not acknowledge what Loranwonkudon had said, but they let it pass. “An unfamiliar ship with a Ksassan on board will not provoke a defensive response like a Starfleet vessel or recognizable Federation ship would. Once I identify myself, they will assume I have another alien ship under my control, and I’ll be able to access the Borg cube computer and insert the shutdown code.”

“And what makes you so sure that you won’t betray any trust we have in you as you somehow capture the ship?”

Loranwonkudon just laughed as he answered, “No doubt, sir, you will have your officers on board that ship as well, watching my every move.” The Ksassan reached into a pocket in his jacket—an act that got Hakamura’s attention—and removed the electronic device that had been detected and deactivated when Loranwonkudon was beamed onto the *Athena*. He explained, “This device contains the code that will shut down a Borg cube. We developed it and used it to capture the cubes in the first place, and we refined it so that if any of the cubes are lost or turned against us, we can shut them down.” Loranwonkudon put the device down on the table and slid it across to Quinn. “I’m sure that Starfleet has experts familiar with Borg computing technology. Have them look this over. They will confirm it is valid. As for why I am doing this, I am a scientist. I’m not a believer in what you call the ‘go fast’ movement, because I see that approach leading only to disaster and destruction. That’s why I want to end this situation at Waukins and work to normalize our situation with respect to the rest of the Alpha Quadrant powers.”

Quinn did take the device and said, “Yes, we will look into this. What

you're asking is somewhat risky on our part, and you must understand that we cannot make a snap decision on this."

"Of course, but time is important."

Quinn had Hakamura escort Loranwonkudon back to his quarters, and Dewuchun went to confirm what the Ksassan had said about the Odonans taking out the staging site. Nobody even knew where that was. That left Thorpe with Quinn and his first officer, Gibney. The admiral asked, "So, captain, what do you make of that?"

"Assuming the story is true," Thorpe started.

"There's no proof of that, captain," Gibney quickly replied.

"I know that. I'm just starting the conversation with the assumption that the story is true. The question is, do we trust him enough to put him on the *Dublin* and send that ship in alone to Waukins? That could be what the Ksassans really want, to get their hands on that ship. The risk is using the computer on that ship to interface with the Borg cube and download its software into the cube. That could give him more access to the computer on the *Dublin* than we'd be comfortable with."

"I personally don't like that idea," Quinn started, as he looked over the other two men on in the conference lounge. "On the other hand, the idea of taking Waukins without a fight is appealing, and if this Ksassan can do it what he says he can do, we should at least consider the option. I'm pretty sure that if we can neutralize the Borg cube, the Ksassan hold on that planet would be much reduced."

Gibney had his own objection, "There is still the android army. We know from the other planets that the Ksassans show no reluctance to turn those androids onto the local population."

"Which is why Loranwonkudon is also talking about negotiations. Without the Borg cube, the Ksassan presence on the planet becomes tenuous. Sure, they could turn the androids onto the local population, but that is something that you do only when you're doomed and don't want to leave anything behind. Taking out the Borg cube gives us that edge in any negotiations, something we can bargain with. If we can get them to surrender and offer them safe passage home, that could be to our benefit."

"Can we get that?"

"I'm sure that in exchange for the peaceful surrender of Waukins, the Council will agree to the safe return."

Gibney added, "But before we can make a decision, we need to confirm as much of this story as possible."

"Yes, and then we can go from there," Quinn continued. "But as the blonde said, time is important..."

Quinn and Gibney returned to the *Independence*, and both ships

remained in the Regilus 6 system for now, while maintaining subspace silence. Thorpe was in his ready room, going through the transcripts of the meeting with Loranwonkudon, as it had been recorded, and looking over what he thought were inconsistencies in what the Ksassan had said, mostly about what the occupiers at Waukins would know. He was distracted by the chime sounding. Almost automatically, Thorpe said, “Come.” Then he wondered who it could be.

Dewuchun entered the room. That was when Thorpe realized that an hour had passed since the engineer had been asked to confirm the role the Odonans had played in bringing Loranwonkudon to this point in space. An hour did seem a long time for Dewuchun to get information from his people. Looking up, Thorpe asked, “What did you learn? Does the story check out?”

“In a sense.”

Now the captain was concerned. “What do you mean?”

“I heard back from Captain Chiang. If anyone would have access to information, it would be him, but even he was not clear. If I can read under the lines—that is the correct expression?”

“Close enough,” Thorpe nodded.

Dewuchun continued, “What apparently happened was that a Ksassan was captured and put into a heliograph, and his mind read. The purpose was to locate the staging site, which is accessible only through the transwarp conduits. Whatever information they got prompted the Space Service to obliterate the staging site, and they sent the Arosian Battlesphere to do it.”

“That would be extreme.”

“The way that Captain Chiang said it, they wanted to get there fast and did not trust the conduits, and that seemed to imply the Battlesphere. He talked about wormholes. They also did not like what they found there.”

“Mechanized Borg?”

“That’s what Tron implied. He also said the staging site was completely obliterated by the Battlesphere, and there were no Ksassans there when the Sphere arrived, no trace of them apparently.”

“That’s not a good sign.”

“Very worrisome,” Dewuchun agreed. “They’re confident that they got it all but there’s no way to tell for sure.”

“Why was this mission not generally known?”

“I’m not sure, but my guess is that those who authorized the raid might not want this fact to become known. The staging site could become a salvage site and those that go there could bring back contaminated materials.”

“What about Loranwonkudon and the device he brought back?”

“Whatever it was beyond an information storage device, it was rendered inert in the transport process, and the Ksassan himself is what he says

he is, at least biologically speaking. There are no Borg components on or in him. Since we controlled the transport process, there's no way for him to hide anything like that."

"What about the ship he was on?"

"I can't say for sure," answered the engineer. "My guess is that some of the Ksassans might have abandoned the staging site when they lost control of the technology, and arranged for the information to reach the Odonans because only they had the technology to stop this, without relying on Borg technology."

"Then why is Loranwonkudon so willing to help us now at Waukins?"

"Maybe he fears that the cube there is a potential risk, if there is a connection to the staging site and the cube there could be contaminated too."

"Then why not come right out and tell us that?" Thorpe asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps he was hoping to keep the information to himself if possible. Clearly before he told us, we did not know about this, so he might've kept quiet about it until he had some indication that we knew, or he could not produce a better argument for us to agree to what he wants."

"I see. Clearly I will have to update Admiral Quinn on this. This development is worrisome."

"It is," agreed Dewuchun.

A short time later, Thorpe was speaking with Admiral Quinn, using electromagnetic communications because their ships were adjacent. He repeated what Dewuchun had told him about the Odonan mission using the Battlesphere, and the implications from that. Quinn said, "I will attempt to confirm that with my sources. I wonder about your engineer's source, though. Why would that source have such information when it is not generally available to us?"

"I don't know," Thorpe replied, again thinking about the perpetual need for secrecy in so many affairs. Was it true that so many people could not handle the truth?

"Do you have any idea who this source is?"

"It's possible that it might be a well-connected captain we had dealings with before."

Quinn wasted no time in guessing, "Let me see, that could be Captain Tron Chiang and his mother Counsellor Chiang."

"Could be."

"They would know if this event actually happened."

"I find it strange that the Odonans would collaborate with the Ksassans in this manner to make something up."

"Captain, there's nothing in the galaxy that would be strange, that would surprise me. I'll have to consult some of my sources. In addition, I did transmit that information that the blonde gave us, and they agree, it is code

that is compatible with Borg technology. Apparently they have some experience handling it and can identify it. However, they have no idea what it can do, however.”

“I see,” Thorpe replied, speaking slowly as he was thinking this over. “So, what do we do?”

“It’s your call, captain. If you believe in Loranwonkudon and trust him on board the *Dublin*, you can give the go-ahead. The *Dublin* is still under your authority, and the crew except for the Vulcans, are yours.”

“I see.”

“What is your position, captain?”

Thorpe hated to be put on the spot with the need to make a snap decision. They usually ended up being wrong. “I will have to think about it, do some further research.”

“But not long, captain. We must move on this quickly.”

After signing off with the admiral, Thorpe returned to the bridge, where Bayanhong was occupying the centre seat. She saw him approach and asked, “What did Quinn say?”

“It’s up to me,” the captain replied.

“This is not going to plan,” Brigson remarked from the central console.

“I never thought it would.”

Bayanhong added, “But a lot of this depends on whether or not we can trust Loranwonkudon. I keep thinking there is an ulterior motive here.”

“Even with confirmation about the attack on the staging site?” Hakamura asked. “It’s beyond belief that the Odonans and the Ksassans would ever collaborate on anything.”

“They were allies during the Dominion War.”

“But they were part of a larger group then.”

Thorpe got the topic back to where it started. “Admiral Quinn has basically left it up to me whether or not to allow Loranwonkudon on the *Dublin*.”

“If he’s on board, we’re going to need tight security.”

“I know,” the captain agreed. “That will be your department, if we go that route.”

“Can we afford not to?”

“Remember, we must not let what we’ve learned about the staging site and machine-intelligence Borg cloud our judgement. The primary mission is the liberation of Waukins. Loranwonkudon believes he can convince the Ksassans there to surrender, and one way to do it is to render the Borg cube inert.”

“I’m still worried that there’s more to this than we’ve been told.”

“So am I,” Thorpe admitted.

"It's more of that Starfleet secrecy," Bayanhong added.

"Well," Brigson spoke up, "if we want to go all conspiracy theory on this, we can even speculate that Starfleet's real reason for attempting to retake Waukins is that they fear that the cube there might've been compromised."

"In which case," the captain quickly replied, "we would've been informed, because even though Starfleet might like secrecy, they don't want it to compromise missions. The decision to go with Loranwonkudon's plan is mine to make."

"Because Starfleet wasn't expecting the Ksassan?"

Thorpe could not come out and admit that he did not want to make this decision because he did not want to bear the consequences. He just had the feeling that this could go wrong, especially if Loranwonkudon was what he said he was, a leading expert on slipstream drive technology. He could deliver the technology behind the slipstream drive to his people and set the Federation back. He could also be leading the *Dublin* and its crew, and whatever support vessels accompanied it, even under cloak, into a trap. If only he had more information, but he was not sure what information would satisfy him. At some point, he would have to take a chance. He was also thinking of what could happen if he did not go through with this plan. Could Starfleet retake Waukins without the assistance of Loranwonkudon and his threat—or warning—of catastrophic failure? Either alternative could lead to disaster, and he had no idea of the probabilities either way. He also knew he really could not wait for further information.

A short time later, Thorpe headed to the guest quarters where Loranwonkudon was staying, and the Ksassan let him in. "Well, captain," he started, speaking in a smug tone that just made Thorpe's job more difficult. "Have you confirmed the information that I provided?"

"Yes. I heard indirectly that the Odonans used the Battlesphere to destroy the staging site, and I heard that the computer code you provided is consistent with known Borg systems, but they don't know what it actually does."

"It does what I said it would do, shut down the Borg cube and render it inert and in such a way that they cannot undo what the code does. It's the Borg's failsafe mechanism."

"The Borg have a failsafe mechanism?"

"Of course, everybody does. No doubt, the *Athena* contains such systems so that if the ship fell into the wrong hands, you can do something that would render it inert and worth nothing more than scrap metal." Thorpe just nodded at the comment, since it was true. There was a reason that spaceships rarely ended up in the hands of other species if the ship was taken

under hostilities. “The Borg are the same. The code I have is what is needed to render the cube inert and worthless. At that point, those on Waukins would really have no other option but to surrender.”

“There is the android army,” Thorpe pointed out.

“Dependent on the Borg cube.”

“That’s not been my experience.”

“Even so,” Loranwonkudon continued. “Without the Borg cube, especially given my presence, their only option, their only realistic option, is surrender.”

“Your presence?” Thorpe asked, and though he was tempted to say that the Ksassan was flattering himself by saying that, he resisted.

“Yes, as my presence here and what I did would be undeniable proof that the staging site is no more and without the staging site, this branch of the ‘go fast’ movement is over. They know that already. They hold Waukins only under the hope that the staging site is available and that relief might be possible. It’s highly probable that the Ksassans there, without relief, have suffered casualties, and they don’t know if relief is coming because of communications blackouts. If we can offer them safe passage home, they will accept. What was it that the Klingons say, only a fool fights in a burning house? We’d say, only a fool continues to fight for a house that has already burned down. We’re not fools, captain.”

“And your concern about the mechanized Borg doesn’t factor into this?”

“Of course it does, but I believe that has already been dealt with. Sure, the cube at Waukins is a potential risk, but this code will also remove that threat. My main concern is to end the occupation and get my people home.”

Thorpe had one more question to ask Loranwonkudon, “Do you support the ‘go-fast’ movement or the ‘go-slow’ movement?”

“Neither,” replied the Ksassan in his smooth voice. “The ‘go-fast’ movement will never work because you can’t force someone to believe in something they don’t want to believe in, even at the point of a gun. On the other hand, the ‘go-slow’ movement will take the rest of time, as even if the people accept the basic truth of what we say, that doesn’t mean they’ll take it to the next level. No, most Ksassans accept the obvious—we are the direct descendants of the Ancient Progenitors, but that in the long run means precious little.”

“So why were you at the staging site?”

“The opportunity to work with some amazing technology, and the fact I don’t believe in the ‘go-fast’ side is why I wasn’t there anymore when someone did something stupid and activated mechanized Borg.”

“I see,” Thorpe replied, but he still was not sure about the Ksassan

and his story. The Ksassans were known for spinning stories and were experts at lying and changing the details as it suited them—something Thorpe was sensing was happening here—so it was hard to tell what part of Loranwonkudon’s story was true and what was false. Thorpe had once heard that the best person to interview a Ksassan was an Odonan of the opposite gender disguised as a human. The Ksassan, while feeling frustrated because the pheromones were not working, would reveal more about himself and his intentions than someone like Thorpe could. The captain did not have that luxury, though. He only had himself, and his meagre ability to read a person, especially an alien.

“Is that all you wish to talk about, captain?” Loranwonkudon asked, after the silence became too long.

“For now.”

“You don’t trust me, do you?”

“I have had experience that the Ksassans are not always trustworthy.”

“Then what would it take to earn my trust?”

“The successful completion of the mission you proposed as you proposed it.”

“Then that is what we should do.”

Of course, Thorpe knew, Loranwonkudon sounded confident and even trustworthy, because that was just what the Ksassans were, smooth and glib and had the ability to get people to understand and trust them—or at least understand what the Ksassans wanted them to understand. “Very well. I will let you know my decision shortly.”

Of course, Thorpe knew, there was no easy answer to this problem. There was no way to predict or logic out the outcome. Either approach could lead to a disaster or to success. If he agreed to the plan, then the best that could happen would be that Loranwonkudon would render the Borg cube inert, the Ksassans would retreat and Waukins would be liberated, perhaps without firing a shot. The worst that could happen would be that the plan would be a scheme to deliver the *Dublin* into the hands of the Ksassans, which would be a serious loss to the Federation and the end of Thorpe’s Starfleet career. Waukins would remain under occupation, and the request to help the people of that planet would fail. On the other hand, Thorpe could say no to the plan, and the original plan would be carried out. Then, the best that could happen would be the defeat of the Ksassans at Waukins and the liberation of the planet. The worst that could happen would be a defeat of the Federation forces as Loranwonkudon outlined. Would Thorpe be blamed for that, for not taking the alternate route? He really did not know. What had happened at the staging site and Dewuchun’s confirmation that the Odonans were involved just made matters more complicated, because it implied that

Loranwonkudon could be more trustworthy and without the staging site, the “go fast” movement in its current form could not build on its occupation of Waukins, given its defeats at the other occupied planets.

Thorpe found himself tapping his commbadge, saying, “Thorpe to Dewuchun.”

“Dewuchun here,” came the prompt response from the chief engineer.

“What I need you to do is to come up with a way to destroy the *Dublin* if this becomes absolutely necessary, because I want there to be no chance that the ship will fall into the hands of the Ksassans.”

After a slight pause, Dewuchun replied, “I think that can be done.”

“Then go ahead and do it.”

“Right away, sir”

Thorpe tapped off his commbadge, and as he headed to the ready room to contact Admiral Quinn and inform him, he was just hoping he was doing the right thing.

* * *

Four individuals beamed over to the *Dublin*. They were greeted by one of Vulcan officers, Slotok, who was standing in for Djurkurn. Thorpe wanted to keep Loranwonkudon away from as many women as possible, because he simply did not trust him. Also beaming over with the Ksassan were Thorpe, Dewuchun and Hakamura, the latter two having drawn the assignment to watch Loranwonkudon, Dewuchun because Odonans were immune to the pheromones, and Hakamura was the one providing oversight. Thorpe could not afford any slipping up on this assignment. He had decided to let Loranwonkudon try to negotiate the surrender of the Ksassans at Waukins, while neutralizing the Borg cube. Quinn had gone along with the plan, and it would be carried out under his supervision. The rest of the fleet would be hanging back, while the *Athena* would be heading in under cloak. Thorpe knew that he would wear the success or failure of this mission, so he and his crew had to get it right. He simply did not have the confidence that Loranwonkudon had in his abilities. If a Ksassan set his mind to it, he can do anything and do it well, or so the blonde said.

“Welcome on the *Dublin*,” Slotok started. “I will show you to your quarters.”

Loranwonkudon looked around, and asked, “Why is this ship in such poor condition?”

“This is how the ship was found. The crew of the *Athena* essentially salvaged it from a storage facility.”

“Still, you could have spent a little time and effort to clean it up.”

“We did,” Dewuchun said, adding, “So if this is what the ship looks

like now, imagine the state it was in when we found it.”

“I can’t believe a vessel in such poor condition actually is operational.”

“That’s because the Overseers concentrated on getting their ships to work, not to make them look pretty.”

Despite those comments, Thorpe had the feeling that Loranwonkudon was not happy with the condition of the ship, and by extension, his quarters. That did not displease the captain at all.

Slotok led the Ksassan to the quarters, and as expected, he was not pleased. “This is not satisfactory,” Loranwonkudon remarked, sounding like he believed his voice mattered.

Calmly, in that Vulcan way, Slotok replied, “All the quarters are like this. This is the way that the Overseers had their quarters.”

“This is not the civilized way to live.”

Thorpe asked, “Would you like to reconsider your presence on this ship?”

“You need to reconsider the level of accommodations on this ship. Look at this, a bare metal floor and metal walls, and this... bed bolted to the floor. The furniture is plain, basic gunmetal gray metal, and there’s no computer terminal or replicator terminal here. Don’t you trust me, captain?”

“There are no computer or replicator terminals in any of the quarters,” Slotok pointed out. “The Overseers had no need for them and it’s not our intention to retrofit the ship for that.”

“But I will register my displeasure with the quality of the accommodations. Where is the captain? I demand to speak to him.”

Thorpe replied, “You have been speaking to him.”

“You command this ship too?”

“When I am on board it, yes. I have appointed an officer to command the vessel in my absence, but when I am on board, I am the commander. Your concerns about the quality of your quarters have been noted and filed. Now, though, we need to get to work. You’ll need to download your code to disable the Borg cube into the computer and then you’ll need to learn how to handle the communications systems so that it can connect to the Borg. You can do that?”

“Of course I can do that.”

Thorpe was not entirely convinced that he could, despite the reputation that the Ksassans had for being intelligent and quick learners. There was something about this one, though.

Loranwonkudon asked, “When we depart, how long will it take to get to Waukins?”

“Not long,” Thorpe answered. “With the quantum slipstream drive, travel times are not long.”

“I know that. In all likelihood, the Overseers got their version of the

quantum slipstream drive from the same race that the Borg got it from. That’s the thing about this technology. It was only invented once, and everybody else who has it got it from another race. That’s exactly what the Federation is going to do, isn’t it? Your aim is to reverse-engineer the technology and develop your own version of it.”

“We already have a version of it.”

“Perhaps, but the *Sun God* project was written off as a failure, if I’m not mistaken.”

Thorpe was not that familiar with the *Sun God* project, but was not so sure that it was a failure. It did work to a degree, but clearly the technology needed refinement, and the Overseer ship could help in that regard. To Loranwonkudon, he did say, “And I’m sure that your people are doing the same with the Borg technology.”

“We would like to get our hands on an older, more pure form of the technology. The modifications that the Borg made to it has reduced its efficiency and are difficult to unravel.”

“That’s curious,” Dewuchun spoke up. “I was always under the impression that the Borg were pretty good at getting the most efficient use of their technology.”

“No, because the Borg modified it work in the transwarp conduits, but it can work without them too, as the *Dublin* demonstrates. The transwarp conduits are good because they allow very fast travel along the established corridors, but this ship can go anywhere. That’s the technology we’re trying to recover.”

“I see,” Dewuchun remarked, but he had the feeling that Loranwonkudon really wanted to get his hands on the engine systems here to help the Ksassans get the quantum slipstream drive. Dewuchun thought it was a bad idea for the blondes to get that technology.

“Would it be possible to see the engine systems?”

“There’s not much to see, as it is all in sealed systems. However, that would be a decision for the captain to make.

Thorpe headed to the bridge of the *Dublin*, which was as sparse as ever, just three seats on the upper level, and no controls. There was a viewscreen that went all the way around, and which was showing just a lot of stars, one of which was a nearby red dwarf. There were control consoles on a lower level, for those who could not control things mentally. Djurkurn did not have that limitation. Her mind had been accidentally altered by an Overseer machine, and she had exploited that in being able to control the *Dublin* with her thoughts. As adept as the Vulcans were in the mental arts, none were as able in controlling the ship as she was, or as Kelsey Hahn was when he was alive. They were doing their best, and short of finding friendly Overseer survivors or convincing the Miurians, this was the best that they could man-

age.

With all of these thoughts on her mind, she did not even sense that the captain was on the bridge until she heard his footsteps. “Ah, captain,” she said. “You know, I’m still surprised that Admiral Quinn okayed this mission.”

“Well, he did,” Thorpe replied. “Do you think that you and the Vulcans can handle this ship in this mission?”

“I think we can do it. The original plan was to come out of slipstream and fire on the Borg cube, and we have enough of the high-quality probe weapons that I’m sure that we can take out the cube. We did learn enough from the first line of attacks that we would have been more successful this time.”

“Perhaps, but the Ksassans have been learning too.”

“But how? There’s an effective communications blackout. We have all subspace frequencies jammed. How could the Ksassans at Waukins know in detail what is going on elsewhere?”

“Apparently that was something that Quinn decided not to take a chance on. If we could negotiate the surrender of the Ksassan forces on Waukins without firing a shot, so much the better.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Djurkurn replied. “I’m also thinking that perhaps Starfleet would not mind getting their hands on that code that can shut down and make inert a Borg cube in case we run into the real thing some day.”

“That too.”

“But I still worry about having a Ksassan on board this ship.”

“Just keep him away from female members of the crew.”

“I will try.”

“Male members of the *Athena* security division will always be with him when he’s out of his quarters.”

“Which no doubt he complained about.”

“Of course.”

Djurkurn had one more question, “When are we departing?”

“Shortly. I want the *Athena* to get a head start so that it arrives at Waukins when the *Dublin* does. It’ll be the backup should something go wrong.”

“Do you think something will?”

“Well, very little has gone right since this Ksassan incursion started, so we need to do what we can to finish it off now.”

Once the *Dublin* got underway, Thorpe did allow Loranwonkudon to enter the engineering bay on the *Dublin*, because when the quantum slipstream drive was operating, it could not be accessed, and he doubted that the Ksassan could interpret the Overseer graphics and the language. Even the

Federation, despite the head start and Djurkurn’s abilities, was still having difficulties with the language.

As Hakamura guided Loranwonkudon into the engineering bay, he said, “Remember, you can take a quick look around, but don’t touch anything. We have to get your Borg-killing code installed into the communications system and set it for transmission.”

“There’s plenty of time.”

“Actually, there isn’t,” the security chief quickly retorted. “We’ll be at Waukins in about twelve hours.”

“Twelve hours?” Loranwonkudon asked, sounding incredulous.

“It is the quantum slipstream drive.”

Dewuchun and one of the Vulcan engineers, Sorak, was manning the main console. Loranwonkudon looked at the two, and wondered once again where the female members of the crew were. So far, since beaming over, he had seen just male members. That was not a coincidence, he was sure. Hakamura approached the main console and asked, “How is everything holding out?”

“As well as can be expected,” Dewuchun replied, “given what we have to work with here.”

Loranwonkudon started to look at the displays, which laid out the components of the engine system and their status and assorted information about them. Hakamura was pretty sure the blonde could not read the language, but it seemed like he recognized the layout of the system and the various components. “Yes,” he started, “I can see where the Overseers got their technology from.”

“You know?”

“The Borg did not develop it themselves. Like all of their technology, they stole it from other races, but even the race that they stole it from did not originate the technology. As far as we have been able to determine, a race we call the Baaladi invented the technology, although we’re not sure how. Nobody else, to our knowledge, has duplicated that discovery of the Baaladi, and all who have it have taken it from them or a subsequent race. The Baaladi existed millions of years ago in what you refer to as the Beta Quadrant, and they had expanded without warp drive to occupy many worlds, travelling between them in multi-generational ships. They were quite the scourge in the galaxy, exterminating worlds and raping the system for resources and settlement for a period of time before moving on. Then they discovered the secret of the quantum slipstream drive, and that led to their downfall.”

“How?” Hakamura asked. “You would think they could expand faster.”

“True, but they did not need resources or living space any faster, but they overextended themselves trying to hold on to these things before they

needed them. They also started to fight with each other, as the various groups had been out of contact for so long they were essentially different races, different languages, different social customs and even in some cases, no longer genetically compatible; that is, different species. That's what happens when a race expands this way over millions of years by sublight travel."

Hakamura added, "You'd think they would've developed conventional warp drive."

"And," Dewuchun added, "I'm pretty sure we can figure out how the quantum slipstream works. We already have a good idea."

"No doubt," Loranwonkudon replied. "It's standard science, as you see the phenomenon and you attempt to explain it, but if you don't see the phenomenon, then how can you know it exists? How can you even know the existence of something that you've never experienced and which your theories do not account for? Has your kind ever experienced something that you could not explain at the time and which the science behind the quantum slipstream is the only explanation?"

"I would not know enough to answer that," replied Dewuchun.

"I'm pretty sure the answer is no, your kind has not encountered such phenomena. Even the transwarp conduits are not part of that. I know it's true for my kind, and the Federation would say the same thing. However, something prompted the Baaladi to come up with the concept and the explanation and the practical application. What that is, we don't know. All we know is that they discovered the practical method to exploit the concept, and all other implementations of the technology uses the same basic components and concepts. It's really remarkable technology, and we have not seen a very good implementation of it until now. I can see the definite advantage the Federation would get if they developed the technology."

"Well, that's the way it goes."

Facing the security chief, Loranwonkudon asked, "Aren't you fearful that that kind of power in your hands could be abused?"

"I'm pretty confident that we can handle it. It's not like our mandate is to rule the galaxy."

"It isn't?" Loranwonkudon asked, and to the other two men, he sounded like he was serious. "That's not what I heard from others, among my people and others. To them, humans are like the Baaladi, dedicated to expanding and controlling as much space as possible, and you're following their time frame too. If total dominance takes a million years, that's how long you'll take."

"I find it hard to believe our society will even exist that long, much less expand and occupy a lot of the galaxy."

"I believe that mine will," the Ksassan replied, and Hakamura was even more doubtful of that happening. The Ksassans were making too many

enemies to last for any length of time.

Hakamura was also getting impatient with this conversation, so he said, “We need to get the upload done, so that we’re ready when we get to Waukins. Rodall, we’ll need your help to operate the communications system. I’m assuming that the computer systems for communications are separate from the other systems on the ship.”

“Of course,” the engineer replied. “That’s standard security protocols.”

“Let’s get started, then. We need this done and ready to go once we arrive at Waukins.”

“Of course,” Loranwonkudon said softly, as he pulled away from the engine systems that he would rather be studying.

Dewuchun led the Ksassan over to the communications console, the function of which they had somewhat figured out. Another of the Vulcans, Tozar, was there, and he had been working on the communications console and programming it to interface with non-Overseer systems, all in an attempt to solve the problem of communicating with the outside world while in slipstream mode. They could communicate with other ships when travelling normally or using the standard warp engines, but to use communications while using the quantum slipstream drive required programming adjustments nobody had been able to figure out yet. Dewuchun thought that was to their advantage since it meant that there was no way that Loranwonkudon could introduce malicious code into the computer, or extract code and information from the computer systems on the *Dublin*.

Looking at the panel of controls in front of him, Loranwonkudon remarked, “This is a communications panel?”

“Yes,” Tozar replied in his calm, Vulcan voice.

“It’s a disorganized mess.”

“I’m sure that the Overseers had a reason for doing it this way. Nevertheless, the necessary controls are here. Now, the first thing we need to do is to enter the Borg system coding algorithms and align them with the appropriate comm ports and comm functions.”

“I’ve got the download ready.”

“We can’t do it that way.” Tozar started, his voice unemotional as always. “Each correspondence must be set manually because we have no way of converting such Overseer code to ours. We need to set up the links ourselves.”

Loranwonkudon was surprised to hear that, and said, “We basically have to create the comm parameters from the origins?”

“Yes. You do know the individual Borg code parameters?”

“Yes, but if we have to enter them all, at the most basic level, that’s going to take time.”

“Then I suggest we get started.”

As the Vulcan and the Ksassan got to work—and not unexpectedly, the latter quickly picked up what the former was showing him—Hakamura said to Dewuchun, “Isn’t he the biggest pain in the backside?”

The chief engineer hesitated for a moment, then said, “If I understand the idiom correctly, I would agree. He is typical of his kind.”

“Let’s just hope this works.”

“And that Loranwonkudon does not have a secret action on his mind...”

A half-day later, Captain Thorpe was on the sparse bridge of the *Dublin*, with only Djurkurn and one of the Vulcans accompanying him there. Djurkurn was able to access the controls of the Overseer ship with her mind, but the Vulcan, despite their native abilities and the practicing, could barely sense the mental presence of the ship. To Djurkurn, the presence seemed somehow real, almost like a living entity, though it was scary to think of a machine in that sense, especially since there was no evidence that any of the computer systems on the *Dublin* were showing any signs of sentience. To her, it just seemed like the ship itself was some kind of entity.

Seeing Thorpe on the bridge, Djurkurn reported, “The *Athena* has just sent a message through the Dirac that they are in position now.”

“How far are we?” Thorpe asked.

“We’ve been flying in circles. We can be there in less than an hour. We stayed far enough away so that when we dropped out of the quantum slipstream to communicate, we’re far enough from Waukins that we can’t be detected from there.”

“Anything from the spy ship?”

“No change from the last report,” Djurkurn remarked, as she continued to look forward. “The cube is in a predictable location at Waukins, a powered geostationary orbit over the city that is the Ksassan headquarters, as far as we know. There are three warcruisers in orbit, but it is assumed that they are in degraded condition because they no longer have been doing system patrols.”

“Not an assumption we’re going to make,” Thorpe replied. “We’re working on the assumption that they are fully capable vessels. Now, prepare to drop out of the quantum slipstream and compute exactly how long it will take to get to Waukins and at the exit position near the cube, then transmit that information to the *Athena*.”

For a moment, the Betazoid officer sat in the centre seat, motionless, but Thorpe knew better. Not much changed on the viewscreen for a few seconds, until the stars seemed to settle into the background. Then Djurkurn said, “We’re in normal space... course computed and arrival time calculated. I’ve relayed the information to T’Zhon, who’s at the Dirac transmitter. That’s

our technology and the mental interface doesn’t work with that. I’m waiting a response... T’Zhon has told me that the message has been sent and acknowledged.”

“Set course.”

“Course set and executed.” Once more, the starscape changed to reflect the transition to the quantum slipstream mode.”

“How long?” asked the captain.

“Fifty-seven minutes,” Djurkurn replied. Now, Thorpe knew, it was time to feel nervous again, but the Betazoid was thinking something else. “This ship is amazing. It’s a real shame that eventually, once this business with the Ksassans is settled, they will take this ship apart to learn its secrets. I think it would be more useful intact, available for missions like this one.”

“Unfortunately, the ship is falling apart. About a third of it is uninhabitable because life support is failing. I assume that you’ve seen the list of problems the engineers are dealing with?”

“I know. Last night I had problems with the lights in my quarters. They would not turn off. Even so, this is a unique ship with unique abilities. I still think this ship has more usefulness intact rather than taken apart so that the engineers can study the engines.”

“But in the long run, they need to be able to take the ship apart to reverse-engineer the engine technology and incorporate it on Federation ships, ones more familiar to us.”

“But can they understand the technology? Would it really work as well transferred to a Federation design?”

“That’s for the engineers to find out.”

Loranwonkudon barely had time to rest in his quarters, if this bare metal shed that looked and felt freezing cold could be called “quarters,” when he was called back to duty. He first thought that it was an engineer who was coming to fix the heat in his quarters. It was Hakamura. “What are you doing here? I need an engineer to fix the heat in this room.”

The security chief stepped into the quarters and said, “The heat is fine here.”

“It’s freezing in here.”

“In case it has escaped your notice, the whole ship is like this.”

“The engineering bay is not.”

“That’s heat leaking from the power systems. Anyway, I’m here to inform you that we’re almost at Waukins and your presence is required in the engineering bay—where it is warm anyway—to download the code into the Borg cube.”

“Already?” Loranwonkudon asked with obvious disbelief.

“Yes, the quantum slipstream drive is pretty efficient, which is why everybody wants it.”

With a shrug, Loranwonkudon left his quarters and followed Hakamura to the engineering section of this ancient starship, where, as the man said, at least it was warm. There, the Vulcan Tozar was waiting. Loranwonkudon did not particularly like Vulcans, as he found them to be cold and unemotional, and Vulcans who had particularly effective control of their emotions could also effectively resist the effect of the pheromones. It was difficult for him to get anything past Tozar, because he observed him carefully and was able to remember every step of everything he did.

Now, Tozar asked, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” the Ksassan replied, knowing it was a bad idea to appear weak in front of the Vulcan.

“I’ve activated the communications port needed to download the code to the Borg ship. I confirmed that the information is consistent to what we know of Borg communications technology, based on past experiences.”

“You checked my work?”

“Standard operating procedure, and to confirm that the system here can do what it is being asked to do.”

“Can it?”

“All indications are that it can.”

After a brief pause, Loranwonkudon asked, “When do we do it?”

“As soon as we’re informed from the bridge that we’re out of the quantum slipstream and in position...”

Thorpe and Djurkurn were the only ones on the bridge. The Betazoid had enough experience operating the *Dublin* that she could handle the ship by itself. She said mostly for Thorpe’s benefit, in case he could not interpret the holographic displays floating in front of them, “Ready to emerge from quantum slipstream, and we’ll come out at very low speed. Shields are ready to come on automatically when we return to normal space, and the probe weapons are ready in case the Ksassan’s scheme does not work.”

“Will the probe weapons work?”

“Hopefully. Most of the time the initial attack worked. Philentrophia was the exception.”

“I know.”

Thorpe did not get an immediate response from Djurkurn, and as he looked at her, she was lost in thought, no doubt communicating telepathically with the ship and getting set to drop them back to normal space. When it happened, Djurkurn did not say anything, as she was concentrating on the multitude of tasks she had to perform. Thorpe saw the change as the pattern of stars shifted and when they settled, the background was the class-M world

of Waukins, but dominating the view was the menacing, dark shape of the Borg cube. Thorpe sat there hoping that this would work.

Observing this was the *Athena*, with Bayanhong in temporary command. It had arrived earlier, under cloak. The approach took some time since they had to drop out of warp some distance away, else their deflectors would give them away. They entered the system not so much on impulse but on inertia, using the gravity drive to slow them down. Since their arrival, and especially since she got the arrival time of the *Dublin*, the ship had been using passive sensors to monitor their surroundings and what the Ksassan ships and the cube were doing. She was looking for any signs that the Ksassans knew what was about to happen, but she saw none of that. As the moments counted down to the expected arrival of the *Dublin*, Bayanhong put the ship on yellow alert, and felt the tension rise. This was like Philentrophia all over again, and though they ultimately won there, it was not without a cost. She did not want to see a repeat of that cost here.

Then Brigson reported, “The *Dublin* has appeared... approaching the Borg cube... there is communications between the two.”

“Go to red alert,” Bayanhong ordered, and almost immediately those on the bridge could hear the klaxons sound.

“Any reaction from the Ksassan vessels?”

“They are moving to intercept,” Vorwoorts reported from the tactical console.

“Are we in the line of fire?”

“Negative.”

“Are we ready to help the *Dublin* if necessary?”

“Yes, the enhanced probe weapons are ready and other weapons are on standby.”

“How long to intercept?” asked Bayanhong.

“Two minutes,” Vorwoorts reported, and that was two minutes of rising tension, as they had no idea if this was going to work or not.

“Any indication that this scheme is working?”

“I can’t tell,” Brigson replied. “Passive sensors can’t really read what’s happening on the cube, and active sensors will give us away.”

On the *Dublin*, there was no such concern about using active sensors, but Thorpe really could not interpret the data displayed around the holographic representation of the Borg cube, except for what looked like a communications stream between the *Dublin* and the cube, a stream that appeared to have ended. “Is it done?” the captain asked.

“I believe so,” Djurkurn answered.

“Any change on the cube? Are those enhanced shields still up?”

“It seems that way. Three Ksassan warcruisers are converging on this

location.”

“Can the probe weapons work on all three ships?”

“Affirmative, as long as we don’t have to use them on the cube.”

“How long?” Thorpe asked nervously.

“Less than two minutes... wait, we’re being hailed.”

“On screen.”

A few seconds later, a Ksassan woman, as lovely and beautiful as it was possible for a humanoid to be, appeared on the forward screen, replacing the view of the Borg cube. “Explain your presence in this system,” she demanded. “Our sensors detect a Ksassan on board. I demand that I speak to him, and if he is a prisoner or has been coerced into helping you, your ship will be destroyed.”

“He is here of his own free will, and is cooperating with us,” Thorpe answered.

“I demand to speak with him.”

Turning to the other person on the bridge, Thorpe asked, “Can you route communications to where Loranwonkudon is located?”

“I believe so.”

In the engineering bay, Loranwonkudon was with Tozar, monitoring the transmission that the Ksassan had made to the Borg cube. Loranwonkudon was worried because he was not seeing the results that he was expecting. He found it impossible to accept that the Ksassans at Waukins could have altered the programming on the cube to such an extent. However, he did not show any disappointment, because disappointment was a sign of weakness, and would make Tozar, and the Vulcans in general, feel he was incompetent at his task. That was the last impression that he wanted to make, because it would mean that they would start to look more closely than he would want. It was best to make it seem like everything was proceeding as it should.

Then the comm system came on, followed by the voice that Loranwonkudon recognized as belonging to Djurkurn, the nominal captain of this ship when Thorpe was not around, “We have three Ksassan warcruisers approaching us. The commander of one wants to speak with you. I’m putting you through. You’d better be honest with her.”

“I am always honest,” Loranwonkudon replied. “That is a Ksassan trait.”

“Hardly,” Djurkurn replied.

Tozar used the controls to bring up one of the viewscreens and set it for two-way communications. On the screen appeared one of the impossibly beautiful Ksassan women, with the smooth, dark skin, the flowing blond hair and the sharp and piercing golden eyes. Loranwonkudon did not recognize her, but she sure recognized him. “Loranwonkudon!” she spoke up. “What are you doing on that ship with a menagerie of Federation lifeforms on board?”

Are you in command of the ship, and what kind of ship is it?”

The Ksassan answered none of those questions, but had one of his own, “How much information have you received since the invasion has begun?”

“Invasion?” asked the Ksassan commander, and it took her a few seconds to realize he was talking about the incursion into Federation space, the spreading of the power and influence of the rightful rulers of the galaxy. She said, “The Federation has jammed all signals and blockaded the system since the counterattacks began. We have little information.”

“Well, I’m here to tell you that things have gotten very bad and the plans as currently formulated are unsustainable.”

The commander replied, “What do you mean?”

“Waukins is the only planet still under Ksassan control and only because it is not a Federation world. All the others had been lost.”

“I was aware of that, but I had been led to believe that at the staging site, we were setting up a new and more extensive campaign that would’ve greatly increased our chance of success.”

“We’ve lost the staging site too.”

“Impossible!” retorted the blond woman, anger seemingly rising within her. “The only way to the staging site is through the transwarp conduits, and we control them.”

“There is one other way, the Odonans’ wormhole-generating vessel and its powerful weapons. It destroyed the staging site totally, with only a handful of survivors.”

“Of which you are one?”

“Yes.”

“But how could the Odonans have possibly found the staging site?”

“We told them,” Loranwonkudon said simply, and the look on the face of the commander was one of anger. If she was in the same room as Loranwonkudon, she would have reached out and strangled him. He explained, “We had no choice. As I said, there were only a handful of survivors, and that was well before the Odonans’ Battlesphere got there. The planning and programming for the second wave went badly wrong, though I’m not fully sure how. The result was that we were that close to releasing a mechanized Borg on the galaxy. Imagine the Borg as nothing but machines with the mission to eradicate all life that was not like its own. Mistakes, bad mistakes, were made, and what we did got out of control. We had no choice. We had to go to the Odonans on hands and knees, we had to grovel before them, to get to use the one vessel that could stop this, and we barely were able to do it. There is the possibility through unseen or unknown neural net links, existing Borg cubes might have been compromised with this new threat. The cube must be neutralized.”

For a moment, the commander did not say a word, as she was digesting what Loranwonkudon had just told her. Thorpe and Djurkurn could see this conversation as holograms in front of them. The Ksassan woman was especially alluring, but Thorpe had already experienced that aspect of the blondes and did not want to tempt that again. Thorpe, and Tozar in the engineering bay, was thinking that if anybody but a Ksassan, anybody but Loranwonkudon, had told her that news, she would have laughed it off. It was inconceivable that the man would have turned against his beliefs.

She did have one question, asking, "What are you doing on a ship that appears to be operated by the Federation?"

"The Federation is planning an invasion, on the request of the Waukinese people. I convinced them that the invasion might not succeed, and that it would be bloody. As our scheme is now impossible, it is time to retreat and plan anew. I'm here to help negotiate our surrender and return to Cas."

"We can defend this planet!"

"But for how long, and for what purpose? You are aware that the warcruisers are not fully operational and that reserves for most consumables are low. This system contains no dilithium, and the antimatter generating facility is not defensible by our forces should the Federation choose to attack it. You cannot hold out for long, and the people on the planet are revolting."

"How would you know all of this?" asked the commander.

"I was speaking to the strategy planners. These things were taken into account. We were supposed to establish supply lines for reinforcements and materials we could not acquire locally. However, the weapons that the Federation developed were not anticipated. We took a chance on what we were doing at the staging site, and that was a gamble we lost. In addition, we made a philosophical decision to force the populations of occupied worlds into a more primitive environment thinking that would reduce their ability to resist our rule. That was a policy that I disagreed with, and for the reasons that were in fact experienced. It made our rule more difficult and increased resistance. Am I right?"

"Nothing we can't deal with."

"But that is not what we want, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

Loranwonkudon explained, "We want the people of the galaxy to accept us as the direct linear descendants of the Ancient Progenitors, the race that seeded humanoid life through the galaxy. We want them to accept that it is the natural and proper order of things. However, ruling under the spectre of the gun and with an army of androids at our sides is not the way to achieve it. I believe that now. We cannot achieve our goals, our dream, this way. All we are is an occupation force that will be resisted and eventually defeated, as we were at all the other planets, and as we will be here too."

“You sound like a traitor or at best a sympathizer for the ‘go slow’ movement.”

“I’m not a traitor.”

“How much have you told our enemies?” demanded the commander.

“I have told them nothing.”

“You told the Odonans about the staging site!”

“I had no choice. As I said, we had already lost the staging site. We were just containing the damage.”

“Were you on the Odonan vessel?”

“No. They would not let non-Odonans on that vessel.”

“So you don’t know what they might have recovered from the staging site?”

“I don’t believe they recovered anything. The site was contaminated with the possibility of mechanized Borg. In fact, all Borg technology is potentially contaminated. There is the chance that all of this Borg technology could turn on us at any time.”

“Loranwonkudon,” the female commander started, “your claims are increasingly outrageous and not supported with a single fragment of evidence. I have to conclude that you have betrayed your people and have turned into a traitor. What you should be doing is delivering that ship to us, and not working with them. In fact, I demand that you beam over to my ship and be put under arrest. As for the commander of that ship—and I am fully aware that you are monitoring this conversation—lower your shields and stand by to be boarded. Your vessel is no match for our ships and the weapons at our disposal.”

On the bridge, Thorpe asked, “What do you make of that?”

Djurkurn replied, “Sensors show no change in the Borg cube. Its enhanced shields are still in place.”

“Loranwonkudon transmitted his data?”

“Indications are that he did.”

“But if it does nothing, then what was the purpose?”

“With computer code, it’s hard to tell, but the system used for transmission was completely isolated, no physical connection to the *Dublin’s* own systems.”

Thorpe did ask, “What is your opinion of the warcruisers? What do the sensors show?”

“Their crew levels are low, but these series of Ksassan warships are very advanced and can be operated with reduced crew levels. They appear to be fully fueled and provisioned. They appear to have access to the antimatter generating facility here in the Waukins system, but Loranwonkudon is right, they have no realistic means to defend it should we attack. We do have the element of surprise as there is the *Athena*, and no indication that the Ksas-

sans know your ship is here too.”

While Djurkurn was giving this assessment, Thorpe was watching the holographic representations of the two Ksassans. It appeared that the female commander had muted the link at her end and was talking to someone else. He had to wonder what that conversation could be about. Were they debating the statements that Loranwonkudon had given or were they dealing with what had happened to the Borg cube? Thorpe had the feeling that the female commander would not admit to a problem with the cube, so what she might say when the conversation resumed could not be anticipated.

Loranwonkudon was thinking the same thing, but in characteristic Ksassan style, he was reading lips to see if he could determine what she was saying. It took a particular skill to read lips while looking at a person from the side. However, he was getting enough information. “It appears that my plan worked,”

Tozar asked, “How would you know?”

“I can see it on the lips of the commander. She is talking to one of her officers and is expressing surprise, or perhaps that is discomfort, that they have lost control of the cube.”

“But it appears that the shields are still up.”

“The power system appears to be running, and the shields are not Borg technology, it is added-on technology. It wouldn’t be subject to control by the Borg systems, so it would continue to run. However, weapons and propulsion would be useless, and life support would be shutting down.”

Finally, the Ksassan commander released the mute on the link, and said, “I will need further information to substantiate your story. I’m ordering you to beam on board my ship for a thorough debriefing.”

Tozar, and the captain and Djurkurn, as they were listening in, immediately thought that this was a stalling tactic. Perhaps Loranwonkudon thought that way too. He said, “I don’t believe the captain of this ship will allow that.”

“Why is that? Are you a prisoner on that ship?”

“No, but if the situation is reversed, would you allow it?” The commander was about to say something, but then stopped. Loranwonkudon assumed that she was going to say something that was knowingly untrue and then decided that lying to a fellow Ksassan in this situation was a bad idea. Instead, the commander muted the signal again.

On the bridge, Thorpe was following the exchange and contemplating his options. He knew what the best one would be, so he said to Djurkurn, “Inform Loranwonkudon that he can invite the Ksassan commander onto this ship if she wants to meet him.”

“Is that wise, captain?” the Betazoid officer replied. “There would be a male and female Ksassan on this ship, and so it would be difficult to deal

with them because of the pheromones.”

“It’s a chance we have to take. I’ve had some experience dealing with Ksassan females, so I know what I’m getting into.”

“Very well,” sighed Djurkurn, who was still thinking that this was not a good idea. On the other hand, this could be part of the stalling actions. “I’ll pass the word on to Tozar.”

Moments later, the Vulcan had received the message from the bridge, and passed it on to Loranwonkudon. The Ksassan thought the idea was ridiculous, because the commander would never agree to come over alone, unless this was a stalling tactic or she thought she could influence the Federation officers with the pheromones. The problem was that the woman on the warcruiser was still talking to someone off-screen, and had her back to the video pickup. Loranwonkudon could not read her lips from the back of her head.

On the bridge, Thorpe asked, “What’s going on?”

“The longer this goes on, the more I’m convinced they know there’s a problem with the Borg cube,” Djurkurn replied. “I’m also convinced that the commander is increasingly suspecting that we somehow sabotaged the cube, which we of course did.”

“How are the warcruisers positioned?”

“They’re in a conventional attack formation, but if we don’t have to worry about the cube, then we should be able to deploy a sufficient number of probe weapons to incapacitate their ships. We also know that if we successfully deploy the probe weapons, their ships are essentially doomed. The presence of the cube does change those factors somewhat.”

“And we have to hope that they have not developed countermeasures to the probe weapons, including the simple and obvious one.”

“What’s that?” asked Djurkurn.

“Drop the enhanced shields and rely on the original shields, because they can fire their weapons through their own shields and pick off the probes. If they do it fast enough, their shields can resist the smaller explosions.”

“And while the probes are there, they can’t redeploy their enhanced shields, and so would be vulnerable to our other weapon systems.”

“As would we,” Thorpe pointed out. “And we’re outnumbered.”

“There’s still the *Athena*.”

“We’re still outnumbered. Those are top-line Ksassan ships out there, equal to our best...”

* * *

In the engineering bay, Dewuchun came over to where Tozar and Loranwonkudon were at the communications console. The link was still open

but muted, and the Ksassan commander had left the range of the video pickup. "What is going on?" asked the Odonan.

"Nothing," Tozar replied. "The Ksassan commander is acting in an atypical manner. This is not normal behaviour from them."

"It has to be the cube," Loranwonkudon added, as he turned to look at the other two. "They suspect that we had something to do with what happened to it, but don't want to provoke this ship until they get control of the cube back."

"Can they?" Dewuchun asked.

"No. Core routines have been deleted. Borg ships do not carry archive backups but can connect through the neural net to reload the code, but even that base routine has been altered. In addition, the neural net doesn't exist right now."

"And you're sure of this?"

"I was part of the team that neutralized it. Remember, we basically took out the Borg, rendered them impotent. The cube is scrap metal now, and the commander understands that without it, their grasp on Waukins is tenuous at best, and they're deciding how to deal with it."

"Surrender would be their best option," Dewuchun remarked.

"They won't surrender to just us."

"Do you think they suspect that there is a fleet out there waiting to come?"

"They might not suspect that as well as they understand that to be intrinsically true," Loranwonkudon explained. It was obvious to him that the Federation would have a fleet assembled even if Waukins was not part of the Federation. Having a hostile force this deep into overall Federation space was intolerable. "They are considering our offer, I believe."

"To them," Tozar remarked, "it looks like we came to Waukins with a Ksassan on board so that they could not immediately attack, and that gave us enough time to sabotage the Borg cube. Once the cube is neutralized, the rest of the invasion fleet can come and the Ksassan ships here would not be enough to hold off the attackers, especially since the latter will have the probe weapons. The Borg cubes, at the other occupied planets were able to resist the weapons for some period of time, and in some cases, it took secondary attempts to finally destroy them. Otherwise, the warcruisers quickly fell to the weapons. Without the cube, they may not have defenses against even us. If the rest of the fleet were to show up, the Ksassans could be defeated."

"The rest of the fleet will not just show up," Dewuchun pointed out. "I don't believe Admiral Quinn would do that, and besides, the Ksassan sensors would pick up those ships long before they get here."

"Not unless they're cloaked."

"Cloaked ships?"

“The *Defiant*-class ships have cloaks, as do the Klingon ships. If those ships were to show up now without the Borg cube on the side of the Ksassans, the battle would be short. It is possible that was the intent of Admiral Quinn in approving this mission. If Loranwonkudon could do his part, that would make the subsequent battle more in our favour. In fact, I would say that the odds are overwhelmingly in our favour.”

“And the Ksassans are smart enough to figure that out,” Dewuchun added.

“That is my belief too,” Tozar remarked.

Loranwonkudon spoke up, “Then surrender will be their best option, but they still have the androids on the surface. They are independent of the Borg cube.”

“But surely,” the Odonan engineer added, “they know that they cannot maintain their hold on the system.”

“They might know, but they won’t tell us.”

Suddenly, the stunningly attractive blond Ksassan woman was on the viewscreen again, and the mute on the link was released. She spoke, “I have been in touch with the governing council on Waukins, and they have informed me that Loranwonkudon must be transferred to my ship so that he can be arrested and tried for treason. Then, you will allow a boarding party on board so that we make take your ship under our command. If you fail to comply, we will use all methods at our disposal to destroy your vessel. Against the three warcruisers, you do not have a realistic chance of surviving. Conduct yourself accordingly.”

On the bridge, Thorpe and Djurkurn heard the words from the Ksassan commander, and that was not exactly the response they were expecting or hoping. The Betazed science officer said, “I don’t know about the communications. The sensors do not indicate any communications except between the ships.”

“She’s bluffing?” Thorpe asked.

“But that’s curious, because she would know we could detect that. Why would she claim that she spoke to her superiors?”

“Because she has no better plan?”

“Perhaps.”

Now Thorpe got to the one issue that did concern him. “Do they have control of the Borg cube?”

“That’s what I can’t say for sure. The sensor data suggests that the cube remains powered, but there are no sensor beams or other signs of active use of the equipment on board. I can’t be sure.”

And Thorpe knew that he had a choice to make. If he was sure that Loranwonkudon’s code worked and the cube was not a factor, he could do one thing, but if they had control, he would need a different scenario. Perhaps one

way to approach this would be to get the Ksassans to show that they had control of the cube. It was a risky approach, but any other decision would rely on what was essentially random information. He simply would not know. He turned to Djurkurn and said, "Put me into that link with the Ksassan ship."

"What are you going go to?"

"Something I hope does not turn out to be an unwise decision."

With some reluctance, Djurkurn issued the mental commands to open up the link with the Ksassan warcruiser, and then gestured for the captain to go ahead.

The man started, "This is Captain Leonard Thorpe of the Federation starship *Dublin*. Your threats are idle. We do not believe you have control of the Borg cube. I should warn you that the weapons systems we have on board are more than adequate to deal with your vessels, and once they are used, your ships are doomed and we are in no position to rescue the crews on those ships. Engaging us is ill-advised. Because of your current situation, it is strongly advised that you heed the advice from Loranwonkudon and negotiate your surrender of the Waukins system and your safe passage back to Cas."

Once he was finished. Thorpe sat there and wondered what the response from the Ksassan commander would be. Somewhat unexpectedly, she did not offer an immediate reply. Djurkurn said, "I think she's dealing with the fact that we know they don't control the cube right now. She's probably stalling."

"For how long?"

"Until they get control of the cube back."

"Which Loranwonkudon said was impossible because there's no on-board backup and the neural net has been disrupted."

"As far as we know, but are we sure?"

Finally, the blonde appearing as a hologram before the two on the bridge said, "We don't know what you have done to the Borg cube. We don't know about the story that your Ksassan prisoner has provided, and we don't know your ultimate intention, captain. However, we're calling your bluff, which is what I believe your human expression is. You have five minutes to turn over the traitor and surrender your ship." With those words, the Ksassan terminated the link at her end, causing her hologram to vanish. The display reverted to the default view of the ships and their relative locations. Even at that scale, the Borg cube loomed large.

"Who's bluffing now?" Djurkurn asked.

"At least we have confirmation that they are not in control of the Borg cube. Do we have enough of the probe weapons to handle the three war-cruisers?"

"Yes, and attack patterns are loaded in to the control systems. All

rounds will fire simultaneously, and the patterns should work. If they drop their enhanced shields to use their weapons to attack us or the probes, we have a means to handle that too. This ship is a formidable warship.”

“As long as it can hang together in battle.”

“There’s that,” relented Djurkurn. “The engineers keep bringing me a list of problems, mostly affecting secondary systems.”

During those five minutes the Ksassan had given him, Thorpe exchanged messages with the *Athena* on the Dirac system, and learned that the other ship had been monitoring communications, and had tapped into the internal communications systems on Waukins, following information from the spy ship. Through that, Thorpe heard worrisome information that the androids were starting to act “erratically” in some locations. He found it hard to believe that the Ksassans would unleash the berserker mode on the androids before a shot was fired in space. Thorpe also ordered the *Athena* to stay out of the battle unless he gave explicit orders otherwise.

With less than a minute to go before the ultimatum ran out, Djurkurn reported, “Captain, two of the warcruisers are moving off.”

“Is the one that is staying the ship the commander we spoke to is on?”

“All indications are that it is.”

“An interesting ploy.”

“What do you mean?” asked the Betazoid officer.

“She doesn’t know the capabilities of our ship and so doesn’t want to expose all of her ships to that risk, but she is exposing her own...”

In the engineering bay. Loranwonkudon and Tozar could see that two of the Ksassan ships were moving away, and the Ksassan could not explain why. “I don’t know what her thinking is. A lot of what she does doesn’t make sense to me. She should realize that her situation here is no longer supportable. It must be a case of pride, but pride is not a desirable feeling among my people. We’re supposed to do the right thing, even if it harms a sense of pride, which of course no true Ksassan has.”

“Like you?” Dewuchun asked.

“I am doing this because it is the right thing to do, knowing that my standing amongst my own people has diminished greatly. I can just hope that in the long term, my actions proved to be the right ones.”

“Well,” Tozar suddenly said, his voice as always so calm, “we’ll soon know. The warcruiser is starting its attack run.” Just then, the red alert klaxons sounded.

On the bridge, Djurkurn reported, “Here they come, attack run.”

“That wasn’t five minutes,” Thorpe quickly replied.

“They probably don’t understand human time conventions.”

“Shields?”

“Ready.”

The Ksassan warcruiser opened fire first, hitting the *Dublin* with a round of disruptor fire that rocked the ship, but the displays, as far as Thorpe could interpret them, showed the shields were holding. "Probe weapons?" the captain asked.

"Ready," Djurkurn replied, as she got information on the shields. The Ksassan vessel had to temporarily lower the enhanced shields to fire their weapons and rely on the regular shields for protection. Djurkurn was monitoring that as the Ksassan ship made its turn for another run. Using sensor data that was going right into her mind, she was anticipating the right moment to launch the weapons, assuming that the captain gave the okay.

"Fire," Thorpe ordered, and if he added anything about how the Ksassan commander deserved whatever fate was coming her way, Djurkurn did not really pay attention. She was concentrating on the right moment to fire the weapons. She did not immediately fire the weapons, and if Thorpe said something about that, she ignored that too. At the right moment, she gave the mental command to launch the probe weapons. From the multiple launchers located along the wing-like structure of the ship, the small weapons were launched and they streaked forward and swarmed the warcruiser. The Ksassan ship did fire and the *Dublin* was hit, and even one of the probe weapons was destroyed, but the rest had their intended effect. They attached themselves to the original shields on the warcruiser.

Thorpe did say, "You hesitated in firing."

"Too much going through my mind to explain, captain," Djurkurn replied, "so I could not explain, but I wanted to get the weapons underneath the enhanced shields."

"Did you?"

"Yes, and they're working too, power drains on their ship are starting to pick up."

"The other ships?"

"Holding back for now, but probably not for long. The remaining spreads of the weapons are ready." Then the sensor inputs that Djurkurn was getting showed something more ominous, so much so she issued some mental commands to the ship to conform the readings. "Oh no," she said, rather loudly.

"What?" Thorpe asked, with obvious concern.

"The Borg cube is powering up, weapons coming online."

"So Loranwonkudon failed?"

Before the captain had the words fully out, the Borg ship opened fire with its powerful main weapons. The *Dublin* was hit hard, with enough momentum transfer to spin the ship, with internal gravity compensators and the inertial diameters not keeping up. On the bridge, the aging structure started to give way, with showers of sparks coming down.

“Damn,” Thorpe muttered.

In the engineering bay, the three men picked themselves off the floor, with Loranwonkudon saying sharply, “That should not have happened. There’s no way the people here could regain control of the cube.”

“But they did,” Tozar pointed out.

Dewuchun had other concerns. “That hit did damage to the ship. This old vessel can’t take more of this.”

“What went wrong?” asked the Ksassan.

On the bridge, Thorpe and Djurkurn were barely back in their seats when the Borg vessel opened fire again—but this time, the target was the Ksassan ship, something that caught the two on the bridge by surprise. The enhanced shields were running on that ship and so it absorbed the powerful weapons and reradiated the energy back into space. However, power was still being drained by the probe weapons and the warcruiser did not appear to be under control. The Borg ship apparently decided that its first attempt did not do enough damage and so fired again. The enhanced shields held, but for how long, those on the bridge wondered.

“What is happening?” Thorpe asked.

“I don’t know,” Djurkurn replied, and then she added, “We’re being hailed, the Ksassan ship.”

The female blond commander appeared on the screen again, looking more frazzled this time, and there was clear damage and obvious smoke in the background. She had a simple question, “Captain, how do we get these... things off my ship?”

“There’s no way,” Thorpe replied. “I warned you about that.”

“I could deal with them if it were not for the Borg cube?”

“Why are they firing on you?”

“We’ve lost contact with our people on board. There was some attempt to reactivate the systems, and—”

The link was cut when the Borg ship fired on the Ksassan ship again. It was as if they were ignoring the *Dublin* and perceived the Ksassan ship as a more dangerous immediate threat. Thorpe also thought of something else, and that was what Loranwonkudon had said about the mechanized Borg. There were likely no biological Borgs on board, so the ship was acting as its own entity... but how? Thorpe knew what his priority was.

Djurkurn reported, “Sir, the Ksassan enhanced shields appear to be holding, but the probe weapons are draining power from the ship, and they can’t keep the shields up much longer.”

“And they can’t move the ship either,” Thorpe added. “There’s no subspace factorization.”

“Sir, the other two ships are approaching.”

“Their target?”

"I can't tell."

"Reconfigure the remaining probe weapons to fire on the Borg cube. Do we have enough?"

"Barely, doing it now." For a moment, the Betazoid officer was lost in thought, while Thorpe watched the holographic representation of the sensor readings. He could see that the Borg cube had stopped firing on the lead Ksassan ship and was perhaps preparing to face the new threat. The sensors did not show the *Athena*, and Thorpe was hoping that Bayanhong would continue to follow orders and stay out of the battle unless he explicitly ordered her.

"Ready," Djurkurn finally said.

"Fire."

With a mental command to the ship, Djurkurn had the vessel fire a complete spread of the probes at the Borg vessel, which rapidly spread out and surrounded it, before diving in and attaching themselves to the enhanced shielding. The other two Ksassan ships, seeing the probes launched, thought they were for them and so opened fire, but all the rounds missed. Then they fired on the *Dublin*.

"Fools!" Thorpe shouted. "Don't they know what the real target is?"

Then the Borg ship fired on the *Dublin*, rocking it and causing more damage and displays of sparks. Djurkurn said, "The weapons fire is degrading us. Life support is out over many areas of the ship and we have some structural failures in the lower decks. We need to get out of here."

The Borg stopped firing as it relied on the enhanced shields to keep the probes back, and if whatever was controlling that ship realized that with the probe weapons in place they could not lower the shields. On the other hand, the two Ksassan ships coming to the aid of the crippled ship came after the *Dublin*, and though their weapons were not as powerful as the Borg weapons, there were two of those ships and they were mobile as well. Worse, the *Dublin* had no more probe weapons left. The *Athena* was going to have to join the fray, but they did not have enough of the weapons for both ships. The *Dublin* was jolted by the disruptor beams fired from the Ksassan ships. The ship was rocked, and the displays were showing damage that even Thorpe could interpret. It was clear that the age of the ship was catching up to them.

"Okay," Thorpe started, "get us out of here."

Before Djurkurn could carry out that order, she got new information. "Vessel decloaking," she reported. Thorpe was about to say something about Bayanhong not following orders, but Djurkurn added, "Two *Defiant*-class vessels decloaking."

"What the," muttered the captain, as he could see the displays that showed the small but powerful Federation warships appear seemingly out of nothing. They attacked with a spread of quantum torpedoes, which had a

negligible effect on the enhanced shields of the Ksassan warcruisers. It was as if Admiral Quinn agreed to Loranwonkudon’s plan because he had the cloaked vessels in his fleet trail him without his knowledge, just in case. Thorpe did wonder if Quinn was in the vicinity and if he realized what was fully happening here.

The Ksassan ships fired on the *Dublin* again, rocking the ship and causing some power fluctuations. Now that assistance had arrived, Thorpe saw no need to stay behind, so he said again, “Djurkurn, get us out of here.”

“Can’t, sir, there’s a problem with the engines.”

Tapping at his commbadge, Thorpe said, “Dewuchun!”

Bedlam was starting to erupt in the engine bay, forcing the engineers into action. Loranwonkudon could just stay out of the way, with Tozar making sure that the Ksassan did not interfere. Alert lights were flashing, warning sounds filled the space and the displays were increasingly meaningless. There was just one conclusion, and the Odonan did not like this. Then his commbadge chirped. He tapped it a little harder than he would have liked, but said, “Dewuchun here.”

“This is the captain. What’s happening down there?”

“We’re losing the engines, sir. As far as I can tell, the pattern of singularities that controls the quantum slipstream effect is destabilizing, and the power flows are becoming unstable.”

“Can you fix it?”

“I don’t even understand it. However, when we lose power, if the pattern is too unstable, they’ll collapse into a single singularity.”

“A mini black hole?”

“Basically, and they’ll take everything around them into the black hole as well.”

“For how far out?”

“Unknown.”

“Do what you can to slow this down or stabilize it, and try to get us some kind of propulsion, even gravity drive.”

Before the engineer could reply, the ship was rocked again.

On the bridge, Thorpe could see that a lot was happening and that the situation was getting chaotic. The *Defiant*-class ships used their probe weapons on the warcruisers, which was perhaps not the best thing to do because that immobilized those ships and made them vulnerable to the Borg cube. Then the cube shut off the enhanced shields—or perhaps they were turned off beyond their control—and the probe weapons rushed inwards and released all of that accumulated energy against the structure of the cube-shaped ship. Large segments of it blew into space as explosions rippled over the surface of the cube. However, that was not enough to destroy or even significantly damage the massive ship. Instead, the damaged sections

started to regenerate themselves.

"This is not going well," Thorpe remarked. "Do we have propulsion?"

"Nothing yet," Djurkurn replied. "But we can't run yet. We've got to do something about that cube. It's under the control of the mechanized Borg."

"We need more of the probe weapons."

"Does the *Athena* have any?"

"Not enough, but if Admiral Quinn and the rest of the task force is nearby."

The *Dublin* was rocked again, and this time, power fluctuated on the bridge. The holographic displays disappeared, so Thorpe suddenly had no idea what was happening outside of the ship and had no idea what Djurkurn had access to. He did hear the commbadge chirp, so he tapped it and said, "Thorpe here."

"Dewuchun, sir," came the curt reply. "The control systems are failing. The main computer is out and the hardwired backup systems are not working properly. They are probably too old and too deteriorated."

"Do we have any kind of control?"

"Not really, and if the singularities fail and this thing becomes a black hole? We need to get off the ship. It's doomed."

An idea was forming in Thorpe's head.

* * *

Captain Thorpe knew what he had to do and what needed to be done, but it would be at a cost. It was desperate and perhaps foolhardy, but given their current situation, he could not think of an alternative. "Rodall, concentrate on giving me propulsion, even if it is the gravitonic induction drive and even if it is for a short distance."

Djurkurn had an inkling of what the captain was thinking. "You're going to destroy the ship?"

"I have no choice," Thorpe replied. "You heard the engineer, the engines are failing and he cannot prevent that. We have little control left. Right now, the Ksassans have done something to the transwarp conduits, so the Borg can't travel that way, but if this cube gives the mechanized Borg a foothold in this region of space, we're in trouble."

"But the technology of the quantum slipstream drive will be lost."

"We're going to lose it anyway. This way gives us something in return."

"But—"

Thorpe cut her off, saying, "Is there anything you can do to stabilize the system?"

"No. The computer system has failed. I have just communications. It's

how I’ve learned that the androids on Waukins have gone berserk.”

“The Ksassans have unleashed the berserker mode on Waukins?”

“I don’t think so. The androids are attacking the Ksassans too. It’s their communications I’m monitoring. Now, I believe the Klingon ships are appearing, their warriors to go after the androids.”

Just then, the *Dublin* was rocked again, making Thorpe wonder how long the shields would hold out. He had no idea what was going on outside the ship. “You have access to communications?”

“Yes,” the Betazoid answered.

“Shipwide.”

“Okay.”

Thorpe spoke up, although there was no real need to. “This is the captain. Prepare to abandon ship. All personnel, congregate either on the bridge or in the engineering bay for beam-out, and prepare to go on instant notice. Bridge out.” Turning to Djurkurn, the captain added, “Open a link to the *Athena*.”

“By the Dirac?”

“No, normal channels. There’s no need to hide its presence.”

Then Dewuchun contacted the captain and said, “Sir, there’s nothing I can do about the singularity array. It’s destabilizing and part of the blame is the old ship. Parts are failing. We have minutes left.”

“What about propulsion?”

“I can manually fiddle with the gravitonic induction drive but I can’t promise any speed.”

“I don’t need much.”

“Where are we going?”

“Straight at the Borg.”

“*Ov dok don*,” the Odonan muttered, immediately contemplating the captain’s plan. “There is the risk that they might fire on us as we get closer.”

“A chance we’ll have to take.”

A few seconds later, Dewuchun said, “Okay, I’m ready to do this, but sensors are down and I have to basically look through a window. The other ships are firing on the Borg cube, but the Borg weapons do not seem as agile, and there’s a lag in their targeting. I think I can exploit that.”

“Why would that be?” asked Djurkurn.

“The cube might be controlled by remote,” Thorpe suggested.

The doors to the bridge opened and several members of the crew, borrowed officers from the *Athena* and some of the Vulcans arrived on the bridge. They looked around and saw that the panoramic viewscreens were all dark, and most of the consoles were not operating.

Thorpe, through the commbadge link, asked his engineer, “How long?”

"A couple of minutes, and I'm hoping that the singularities continue to exist for that long. The Borg cube is attempting to move."

"We're blind up here," one of the newly-arrived crewmembers said as he looked around.

Djurkurn spoke up, "Sir, I've lost communications except for the Dirac."

"The Dirac?" asked Thorpe.

"It's an add-on system, not part of the ship and its computer system."

"Then use it and inform the *Athena* to get into position to beam us off."

"Sir, I have no control of the shields."

"You can't shut them off?"

"No, the computer system is damaged. It is not responding to controls."

As Djurkurn spoke, the ship was jolted again, severely enough that several of the newcomers to the bridge fell over because there was nothing for them to grab onto. "What was that?" Thorpe asked. "That did not feel like a weapon hit."

"I don't know," Djurkurn replied, her voice still slightly panicky. "Sensors are down."

Then Dewuchun contacted Thorpe again, saying, "Sir, the Borg have grabbed onto us with a tractor beam and are pulling us in. They probably detected unknown technology on board and want to examine it."

"How long?" the captain asked.

"A couple of minutes, assuming that the singularities can hold together that long."

"Okay, we can't lower the shields and so to get off, we'll need to use the subspace transporters. They are ready for use?"

"Yes, but we never field-tested them."

"Consider this the field test. I'm assuming that others have been trained in their use."

"Yes," replied the engineer.

"Okay, contact the *Athena* and coordinate with them, one chamber in engineering and one here."

"I'll see what I can do, but we don't have that much time."

"We also don't have any other options."

"Understood," Dewuchun replied, and then he tapped his commbadge to close the link.

Djurkurn asked, "You have subspace transporters on the *Athena*?"

"Yes," Thorpe replied quickly.

"From the Odonans?"

"Yes." Then he quickly added, "Can you access internal sensors?"

“No,” the Betazoid woman remarked.

“Okay. Repeat the abandon ship order and contact the *Athena* and make sure everyone is in the two evacuation locations.” Thorpe got out of the seat and faced the others who had arrived on the bridge, most of whom were *Athena* engineers and support officers, so they would have been aware of the subspace transporters. For the benefit of the others, he explained, “We are evacuating the *Dublin* using subspace transporters, which require the use of chambers. Each one can accommodate six to eight people plus the operator. When it arrives, quickly board and when it arrives at the *Athena*, get off quickly.” Then Thorpe used his prerogative as the captain and arbitrarily divided the group into two groups of eight, leaving him, Djurkurn and the Vulcan Soruk for the last group, if there was time. He also told them the order they would be going.

Djurkurn reported, “The *Athena* has informed me that all the crew on the *Dublin* are in the evacuation sites. The transporters are activating now. One warning, there might not be time to evacuate everybody in engineering.” Thorpe knew what that meant; the chamber here would have to make additional trips to the engineering bay, cutting it close on this end. The one thing he did not know was the cycle time for the whole process

Then the ship was jolted again and power went out on the bridge. Emergency backup power came on, and that included gravity, but at reduced levels. It was a bit disorienting to suddenly weigh less, Thorpe knew. The subspace cylinder appeared, and the first group as determined by the captain climbed on board, and once they were on and the countervail fields reset, the cylinder vanished.

“That’s fast,” Djurkurn remarked.

“Hopefully, it will be fast enough,” the captain replied.

“I also lost contact with the Dirac unit, and though there is light, there’s no life support, so the only oxygen we have is what is here now.”

“That should be enough.”

In engineering, the situation was more chaotic, because there were more people at this evacuation site and there was no clear command structure to organize the people. Dewuchun was too busy trying to keep the singularities from collapsing before they were ready, or was trying to shut off the shields so that the regular transporters could operate. Tozar was doing his best to coordinate things, but few were listening. They all knew that they were being drawn into a Borg cube that was apparently under the control of the Borg, and anyone who did not get off on time was risking being assimilated. Nobody wanted that, so there was some pushing and shoving as people tried to get in front of the lineup despite the fact nobody knew where the subspace transport chamber would appear.

When it did appear, the eight closest pushed their way onto it.

“Caution, people,” Tozar spoke up, trying to be heard above the voices of the others and the groaning structure of the ship. “If we do this in a more disciplined approach, we’ll get off in time.”

One of those not attempting to quickly leave the *Dublin* was Loranwonkudon, who was within earshot of the Odonans as he said, in his language, “There’s probably not enough time.”

Loranwonkudon’s translation implant could handle Odonien, so he said, “You don’t think so?”

“Too many people.”

As the ship shook some more, Loranwonkudon asked, “What’s that?”

“The tractor beam is causing the shields to destabilize, and the power flows needed to keep the singularities in the proper locations restarting to affect other systems.” Already, power was reduced and as far as Dewuchun could tell, life support was not working and oxygen levels were dropping as there were a lot of people in this part of the ship.

The subspace transport chamber appeared again and again there was a scramble to get on board, even as the operator shouted for the people to show more discipline and more of their Starfleet training.

Tozar, who had a view through a viewport, said, “I think that we are almost inside the Borg cube now. It is fascinating that the self-repairs are so fast you can see it happen.”

“That’s not good,” Dewuchun remarked, but then again, he was not sure how long the ship would last. It was definitely falling apart now, and he used what control he had to shut off power to more and more of the ship, as the amounts of energy needed to keep the singularities in some semblance of a pattern kept rising. He hated to think what would happen should the power system overload, but it would not be good.

The subspace transport chamber reappeared, but it did not come alone. The second one also appeared. “What is happening?” Dewuchun demanded. “Is the bridge location cleared?”

“No,” replied the operator, “but the captain ordered us to help here.”

Dewuchun had no time to ask how many were left on the bridge, because the operator soon had a full load and was setting for the return trip.

On the bridge, Thorpe thought it was suddenly lonely again, as it was just him and Djurkurn and Soruk. He had the operator of the subspace transport chamber head to engineering instead because more people were there, and he hoped that they would not forget about him. One reason that he stayed was that he needed Djurkurn to handle whatever was left of the ship, which was not that much—and then it was even less.

“There’s nothing left on this ship,” the Betazoid woman said. “The mental contact is completely blank. There’s no control at all.”

“Sensors? Communications?”

“Nothing, not even the internal check system.”

The ship shook again, and Thorpe had no idea what was causing that. He was completely blind, with no idea of what was happening outside of the *Dublin*, and he was realizing that this old Overseer ship was now little more than a pile of scrap metal. Now that he thought about it, he was surprised that it had lasted this long after they had found it and reactivated it.

Djurkurn thought that about the ship as well, but she had a more personal connection to the vessel. “We wasted a great opportunity here, and when we lose this ship, I think that we will regret it. We had some incredible technology at our fingertips and we let it slip away.”

“This was not the anticipated outcome.”

“Even so,” Djurkurn started, and then she was disrupted when the ship was jolted again, this time severe enough that the three of them were almost knocked off of their chairs.

“What now?” Thorpe asked.

“I don’t know,” Djurkurn answered as she looked around the darkened bridge.

Soruk added, “I believe that we have docked.”

“How can you tell?”

“The subtle jerking motions of the Borg tractor beam have disappeared.”

Then from the walls themselves, it seemed, came the Borg’s mechanized voice. “We are the Borg. The technology of this vessel will be incorporated into the collective and the biological units on board will be exterminated. Resistance is futile.”

“Oh great,” Thorpe remarked.

In the engineering bay, Dewuchun and the others heard the same thing. As he did, the two chambers returned, and the last full groups climbed on board. The Odonan was thinking that only one more trip was needed. However, through his tricorder, Dewuchun noticed something unexpected. “That’s not good,” he said.

Tozar replied, “What do you mean?”

“Something has stabilized the singularities.”

“The Borg?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but to set them off, we’re going to have to do it manually. When we do, we might have a minute.”

“Is the captain and the rest on the bridge off the ship?”

Dewuchun knew there was one way to find out, so he tapped his commbadge and made the request. However, there was no response, so he said, “He must’ve returned to the ship.”

Once again, the ship shuddered and groaned, the reverberations coming through the very structure of the ship, Tozar remarked, "We need to hurry. How can we set off the singularities?"

"There's an explosive charge that can manually cut the power, a kind of self-destruct sequence."

"When it's done, how long until the ship is destroyed?"

"A matter of seconds, I think." Dewuchun knew how to do it too. He had a phaser with him, and withdrew it. Loranwonkudon saw that, and was worried what the Odonan might do with that. He was worried that he would be left on the *Dublin* and told to set the self-destruct device, as punishment for what had happened here. He had made a mistake, or perhaps the Ksassans on the cube had made a mistake, and when mistakes were made, someone had to pay the price. He was prepared for that, and would do what was asked voluntarily. His attempt to stop the mechanized Borg had been a failure, as they were here now and they needed to be stopped now. If the Odonan engineer was right, this was the only way to do it. Still, in the back of his mind, he did not want to die. He still had much of his life to live, his wife to love, children to bring into this universe. He knew that his errors meant that his position in the upper reaches of Ksassan society was over, but there were other options. No, he thought, this was not his time, unless it was demanded of him. If only he returned to the Federation ship... no, because that meant a lifetime in a Federation prison camp.

Then the transport chamber arrived, and Dewuchun called out, above the rising noise, "Time to go! Loranwonkudon, time to go!"

The Ksassan approached the chamber, and saw that Dewuchun and Tozar were already on it. He asked, "How are you going to set off the self-destruct?"

"Like this," he answered, aiming the phaser at where the explosive device had been set. "Now get on board, time is running out." Loranwonkudon did not hesitate. If these two did not want him to stay behind and answer for his mistakes, he was not going to argue with them. He got onto the chamber and then watched as Dewuchun fired the phaser on a tight beam. The explosive device went off with a flash of light.

"Go!" Dewuchun said hurriedly to the chamber operator.

On the bridge, Thorpe and the others were finding it difficult to stand as the ship was shaking and the power was fluctuating, including the artificial gravity. "The Borg are trying to break through," Djurkurn started. "I don't know if they had gotten through the shields yet. How much longer until the chamber reappears?"

"I don't know," Thorpe replied. "I'm not that familiar with how fast the subspace transporters can operate. They're still new to the ship." Still, he decided to check in with Dewuchun for a progress report. He tapped at his

commbadge but got no response.

“He’s not on board?” Soruk asked.

“I don’t know.”

Then the subspace transport chamber appeared, just metres behind them. The operator on board said, “Engineering is almost clear, one trip left.” That meant the other chamber was handling it.

Given the lack of a response on the commbadge, Thorpe surmised that they had already left, so he said, “Let’s get going.” He got up, just as the artificial gravity failed, and the shaking became more intense. “Oh great,” he said, grabbing onto the chair.

Soruk was more composed as he knew what to do in a zero-gravity environment. He was able to launch himself at the chamber and calmly floated through the air to reach it. He grabbed onto the pole to slow his momentum down. Then he was able to grab hold of Djurkurn as she made her way across the short distance. Thorpe too knew what to do since long ago there were exercises in Starfleet Academy in handling zero-gravity situations, and he simply had to keep in mind Newton’s Third Law, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction in the opposite direction. The idea was to walk on such a way that there were no forces up or down. It was possible, and at this moment, it was tough to remember how it was done. Somehow, stiff-legged and light-headed, Thorpe covered the distance but was more floating than walking and both Soruk and the operator had to grab him and pull him in.

“Everybody on board?” the operator said. “Be prepared for gravity. Let’s go.” He hit the icon on the panel that activated the countervail field and another that sent the subspace transport chamber back to the *Athena*.

Almost instantaneously, the chamber arrived on the *Athena*, and the first thing that Dewuchun noticed when the countervail fields were shut off was that the ship was at red alert. The second thing he noticed was that the second transport chamber was not on its platform. “Where is the other chamber?” he asked, seeing that Bayanhong was present.

She answered, “Retrieving the captain and the others on the bridge of the *Dublin*.”

“But I...”

On board the *Dublin*, the singularities that created the quantum slipstream effect, that created the portal that allowed the ship to tunnel into subspace and travel at incredible speed, were suspended in such a manner that their mutual forces kept them in place even without external power, but they required a vacuum for stability. Over time, that vacuum had decayed just a bit, so that when enough force was applied to the singularities, they would overcome their state of meta-stability. Their masses were no longer precise, so they started to drift. With the ship systems falling apart, the

vacuum was breaking down and the masses were increasing. By applying more power, it was possible to keep the singularities apart through their motions, but at the cost of efficiency. The quantum slipstream drive on the *Dublin* was faster than anything in the Federation fleet, and though Dewuchun and the other engineers did not know it at the time, the efficiency of the system was only a fraction of its peak. Then, suddenly, Dewuchun severed the power connection, the very feed from the system itself. Without the power, the singularities would come together, but not immediately because of their momentum. It would take a few seconds. In addition, the explosion disrupted the vacuum, and though the volume that the singularities occupied was only a couple of cubic centimetres, the in-rushing air was enough to increase their mass alarmingly. The heavy machinery surrounding the singularities collapsed under the gravitational fluxes, and that set off a chain reaction.

The *Athena* was a fair distance from the cube, just in case the predicted effect would not happen. Sure enough, there was a flash of light as explosions ripped apart the interior of the Borg cube, with the debris starting to blow out. Then a second, brighter flash of light erupted and seemingly consumed the cube and the debris around it. When the light flashed off again, there was nothing where the Borg cube had once been.

Actually, sensors did pick up something.

In the subspace transporter staging area, Bayanhong heard her commbadge chirp. She tapped it, and heard Vorwoorts' report, "The Borg cube has exploded... no, imploded. It's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Unknown."

Dewuchun looked at the empty platform where the second chamber was supposed to be standing. "If the cube exploded and is gone, where did the other chamber go?"

"What did you do?" the first officer asked.

Tozar answered for the engineer, "He fired a phaser at a power coupling, to somehow disrupt the singularities and to cause a self-destruct to go off."

"Would that instantly destroy the quantum singularity drive?"

"In the deteriorated condition of the *Dublin*, yes," Dewuchun replied.

"And you did not think to confirm that the captain and the others were off the ship?"

"I tried to contact the captain through the commbadge but they were not linking. I assumed he had left the ship, and the Borg were attempting to break into the ship. Time had run out."

Bayanhong knew that was curious, since the commbadges were an independent system, not tied in to the systems on the *Dublin* in any way.

Anything that affected the ship should not have affected the commbadges, and if Dewuchun was right, then the badges were not even linking. One would assume the captain was no longer in range.

The engineer at the control panel had called up information, and reported, “Commander, according to this, the second chamber did go through the subspace transition and the power flows indicate a successful dematerialization.”

Dewuchun went over to the panel and accessed more of the controls. The subspace transporters were Odonan, so he was more familiar with their inner workings, while the other engineers we’re still learning. “This I don’t understand. The chamber did leave the *Dublin* but never appeared here. Somewhere is a data drop.”

“Where did it go?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it materialized in space.”

“Could it survive in space?”

“The countervail field is a forcefield. It’ll keep the atmosphere in and there should be a few minutes of air.”

Bayanhong slapped at her commbadge, and said, “Commander Briggson, scan space around the ship and look for a missing subspace transport chamber.”

When the operator of the subspace transport chamber activated the device, Thorpe saw the darkened bridge of the *Dublin* and he expected that to change to the staging site on the *Athena*. That was not what he saw, however. The interior of the ship was replaced with...space.

“What the...” mumbled the captain as the chamber began to spin and he had to grab onto the hand grip on the central pillar to hold his position. He instinctively held his breath while fearing being blown into space, but the atmosphere remained intact. Thorpe realized that the countervail field was also a forcefield, but at the same time, the chamber had no life support system.

“Something has gone wrong,” the operator said.

“No kidding,” replied Djurkurn. She was facing the other direction and was not looking at deep space and stars. Instead, she was facing Waukins, which looked large as a fat crescent, blocking the system sun. “We’re in orbit around Waukins” she added

Thorpe said, “But we’re spinning and it looks like we’re spinning around something... and we’re moving faster.” It was also apparent that whatever was causing them to spin seemed to be pulling them away from the planet. He tapped his commbadge and said, “Thorpe to *Athena*,” but there was no response.

Surok added, “The ship is likely out of range, captain.”

“Now what?” asked Djurkurn.

"We assume that when we don't arrive on the ship, they'll search for us."

"But we're nowhere near the Borg cube. Where is it? Doesn't the chambers have some kind of distress signal?"

The operator answered, "I don't believe so, since the chambers are supposed to be connected to their platform, and what has happened to us, according to Rodall, should not have happened."

Surok added, "Actually, what's left of the Borg cube is right here. It was reduced to a microscopic black hole from the singularities in the *Dublin*."

"So we're going to be crushed by this black hole?"

"I think we'll run out of breathable air long before that happens."

"But," Djurkurn added, "if we're in the area of the cube, why can't the ship scan us? Are they assuming we never left the Borg ship before it was destroyed?"

"I'm not sure," Thorpe replied, "but only if there's some way to attract attention out here—and waving is not going to cut it, so there must be something on this panel that will do that, some kind of beacon or whatever." Thorpe was about to shift position, even within the tight confines of the transport chamber, to see what was available on the minimal control panel that was provided. However, before he was able to do that, the transporter effect overcame them.

In the *Athena* cargo transporter, Lieutenant Wilder had carefully calibrated the system to take hold of the chamber, which was spinning around the black hole that was just metres from it. There was no chance that the transporter could grab it because it was far too massive, but it was making getting a transporter lock on the chamber too difficult. She had the bridge move the ship so that the beams had a different orientation with respect to the chamber and the black hole. Now she had more success in getting a target lock, but she still had to cancel out the momentum and kinetic energy on the chamber, which was a bit trickier. However, she was finally able to make the necessary adjustments so that she could safely beam in the chamber and those on board. Still, there was always the chance that something could go wrong because the black hole was unstable and leaking radiation. At the right moment, when she was confident she could predict the motions of the chamber in the next few seconds, she activated the remote dematerialization sequence—and then held her breath.

Fortunately, the transporter grabbed onto the chamber and rematerialized it on the platform of the cargo transporter. Over the open commlink to the bridge, Wilder said, "I got them, ma'am..."

"Captain's log, stardate 56142.7. The situation here at Waukins is resolving itself. We managed to get on board the Athena without injury, but

we had been informed that we were not that far from the black hole, all that was left of the Dublin and the Borg cube and we had absorbed enough radiation that Dr. Psakolaps is concerned. I have also learned that all three of the Ksassan warcruisers were destroyed by the cube weapons, and we lost one of the Defiant-class ships, and another was badly damaged. On Waukins, it appeared that the android army came under the control of the mechanized Borg, and started attacking indiscriminately, Ksassan and Waukinese alike. They were only stopped when the Borg cube was destroyed, and that rendered them inert. Without their android army, the Ksassans on Waukins had no choice but to surrender. The Ksassan incursion into our section of the galaxy is now over, but I fear a more dangerous menace has been unleashed. At the same time, Waukins has something new orbiting it, and if there's a way to move or remove a black hole, we don't know it yet. Right now, its orbit is stable and it's not a hazard to the planet, but we have put warning buoys around it.”

“I'm not sure what happened with the subspace transporter,” De-wuchun explained to the captain as both of them stood in the staging area for this particular type of transporter. The two chambers stood on their platforms, and the whole system was powered down. “As far as I can tell, the chamber was not able to return because it could not accurately detect its landing point, and failsafes kicked in to prevent it from rematerializing in the middle of a deck. Then it was trapped between the two points until one was clear, and that would have been where the *Dublin* was before it all imploded and cleared the space. That's the only explanation for the time discrepancy that I can find—not including the time dilation that you experienced orbiting the black hole. I'm sure that there is a paper or two that will come out or this.”

“Good to know I'm on the leading edge of subspace physics,” Thorpe replied, with a slight laugh.

“But back home, they are concerned about this unexpected outcome, which was not predicted in the equations. That's why the notice went out throughout the Space Service to use the subspace transporters in severe emergencies only, until they understand what happened.”

“And that applies to us too?”

“It certainly does, captain.”

A short time later, Thorpe met with Djurkurn, saying to her, “So you're not staying with the *Athena*?”

“No,” the Betazoid scientist replied. “We lost the *Dublin*, and that was valuable technology that we no longer have. I don't believe that Rodall and the other engineers understand enough to duplicate the technology.”

“You’re probably right.”

“But there are other ships in that asteroid we found the *Dublin* in back in the Omerra Open Cluster, so the technology of the quantum slipstream drive is still there. Admiral Quinn wants me to work with that small group of Miurians that decided they don’t want to remain isolated, since they might have the means to get us inside that asteroid and salvage those other ships. There is valuable and important technology here, and based on all of this worrisome talk about mechanized Borg, this is technology we cannot afford to ignore.”

“I understand.”

“The secret of the quantum slipstream drive,” Djurkurn added, “I think we’re going to need it.”