

# STAR TREK

## ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.



Personal Loss

By Stephen J Dutton

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## *Personal Loss*

**By Stephen J Dutton BSc(hons) BEng(hons)**

The USS Ascension, a Miranda-class destroyer deployed to patrol the border between the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire is preparing to depart. But when the ship's commanding officer cannot be located the crew uncovers that the Klingons have infiltrated the Federation more than they could possibly imagine.

Star Trek: Ascension available online at:  
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# 1.

The K't'inga-class battlecruiser *Gjor'etlh*, meaning 'broken sword' in the Klingon language was one of the few of its class to have been upgraded with a cloaking device and its crew disengaged this while the ship was still some distance from the squadron it approached. To de-cloak too close risked being perceived as a hostile act and the commander of the *Gjor'etlh* had come here to talk, not to fight.

Although Admiral Korda wore the same uniform as the Klingon crew of the second K't'inga-class battlecruiser he beamed aboard his appearance was radically different. A victim of the disease that had afflicted the Klingon species in the twenty-second century he had never bothered with the recently developed treatments that saw the Klingons regain their species' characteristic forehead ridges. Instead his appearance was far closer to that of a human with heavily tanned skin and particularly bushy eyebrows.

"Admiral Korda," the Klingon who stood waiting for him said as Korda was stepping down from the transporter pad.

"Captain Geren." Korda replied, "I take it that Admiral Rototh is waiting?"

"He is. Come with me." Geren said.

Geren led Korda through the corridors of the battle cruiser until they reached a room that was dominated by charts showing the border region with the United Federation of Planets, highlighting the deployment of Klingon forces compared with intelligence reports of the equivalent Starfleet deployment. Admiral Rototh himself stood with his back to the door, facing away from Korda as he entered.

"Admiral Rototh, Admiral Korda is here." Geren announced.

"Leave us captain." Rototh ordered and Geren turned around and left the room, leaving just Rototh's two personal bodyguards in the room with the two admirals. Rototh then turned to Korda, "What are you doing Korda?" he asked.

"Merely expressing an opinion admiral." Korda answered.

"That we should start a war with the Federation? Look around you Korda, these charts have been compiled from our intelligence reports. Despite our public claims Starfleet is not weak. An attack on the Federation would cost tens of thousands of Klingon lives."

"Lives lost in glorious battle admiral." Korda pointed out.

"Not so glorious if we lose Korda. As well we may. That is why the high council continues to support negotiating with the Federation instead of attacking them." Rototh said.

"Admiral Rototh I have seen the same intelligence reports you have. Starfleet is developing an entirely new generation of warships while the best the Klingon Empire can do is refit our existing space frames. At this rate we will be left behind in technology by species that we were once superior to. We are Klingons, we are warriors and we should act as such." Korda said.

"Warriors yes, barbarians no Korda. Although in your case I am not so certain. Have you looked in a mirror recently? You're nothing but a mongrel Korda. A relic from a hundred years ago. In another hundred no-one will even remember Klingons like you existed. Are you looking for a way to make sure that your name at least is remembered? Or perhaps you are looking to take the rest of us down with you." Rototh said.

"Perhaps I am not so vain that I need to have my face rebuilt with technology stolen from the Denobulans just so that I fit your idea of normal." Korda said and Rototh growled. He too had once been afflicted by the virus that gave Korda his very human appearance but had accepted the treatments as soon as they had become available and now looked like an ordinary Klingon.

"Watch your tongue Korda or I may be forced to remove it. Assuming that the chancellor of the high council does not order your death first for undermining him. I suggest you return to your ship and tend to your duties."

"Are those the orders of the high council?" Korda asked.

"They are my orders Korda. The orders of your superior officer. Now go, I find the stink of your halfbreed presence sickening." Rototh told him sternly.

Korda briefly considered striking Rototh, calling out his superior for the insult but then he had second thoughts considering where he was, on Rototh's own ship and surrounded by his men. If Korda did issue a challenge then there was always the risk that Rototh would simply have him killed before the duel could take place. If Korda was going to kill the admiral then he needed to be sure of his timing so instead he chose act compliant.

"As you wish admiral." he said before turning around and exiting the room. As soon as he stepped through the doorway he found Geren waiting and the junior Klingon began to walk alongside him as he headed back towards the ship's transporter room. Along the way Korda came to a sudden halt and turned to look at the other Klingon, "I have a question to ask you Geren." he said.

When Korda returned to his ship he was met by a female Klingon who shared his human-like appearance and she smiled when she saw him.”

“What did Rototh have to say my Par'Mach'kai?” she asked.

“He reminded me that he is my superior officer Ah'ken.” Korda replied, “I was able to hold my tongue long enough to avoid telling him that he had higher rank and that was it or issuing a challenge.”

“Then the council has rejected your petition for membership?” Ah'ken said.

“The council intends to continue negotiating with our enemies rather than confronting them as Klingons should. They would deny us our very future.”

“And what do you intend to do my Par'Mach'kai?” Ah'ken said, running her fingers over Korda's shaven head.

“I cannot use the ships under my command to attack the Federation.” Korda said.

“But you do have other resources.” Ah'ken commented and Korda grinned.

“Yes, many of them and I will use every one at my disposal to show the fools who think they can give away our Klingon birthright how real Klingons should act. Believe me my Par'Mach'kai when I tell you that we will not be alone in this.”

## 2.

Stardate 8630.1 Miranda-class destroyer *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 in orbit around Archanis IV.

Although there were several orbital facilities around the Federation colony of Archanis IV the Miranda-class destroyer *Ascension* orbited independently as the Sydney-class transport *Copenhagen* approached. There were several different variants of the Miranda-class in service with Starfleet and the *Ascension* was one of the most heavily armed, with fore and aft torpedo launchers located in a weapons pod at the centre of an upper roll bar fixed to its secondary hull that also included an additional pair of phasers to those mounted in the saucer section at the front of the ship. Although it mounted a large number of weapons their combined firepower was still less than that possessed by heavy cruisers such as the famous Constitution-class or the latest Constellation or Excelsior-class vessels now undergoing trials.

"The *Copenhagen* is signalling their readiness to transport commander." the crewman manning the *Ascension's* transporter console told Commander Michael Ash, the ship's first officer who stood waiting in front of the transporter pad.

Ash glanced at his PADD one last time before looking back at the crewman.

"Energise." he ordered and then he looked towards the transporter pad just as the air began to glow from the energy involved in the beaming process. Moments later the bright pinpricks of light formed themselves into a humanoid figure, a young woman wearing the maroon uniform tunic and black trousers of a Starfleet officer. The only differences between her uniform and that of Ash were the grey colour of her shirt and the ensign's rank pin on her shoulder strap.

"Ensign Sonia Estevez requesting permission to come aboard." she said.

"Permission granted ensign." Ash replied, "Although I'd like to apologise for Captain Franklin not being here to meet you herself. She's down on the surface right now but I'm sure she'll want to speak to you when she gets back."

"Yes sir. I was supposed to report to Lieutenant Keeler. I understand that he's the chief communications officer. I'll be working under him." Estevez said.

"Ah, yes. There's been a bit of a development there ensign." Ash replied.

"Is he on leave as well commander?"

"Not exactly. Matthew Keeler is no longer a member of the crew. He requested a transfer two days ago and it was granted. I don't know where he is now." Ash told Estevez.

"So who's my new superior officer?" she asked.

"That depends ensign. You see you and Keeler would have been the only commissioned officers in the *Ascension's* communications department so with him gone that leaves you as the ranking officer. Now obviously that would mean throwing you in at the deep end but I've seen your cadet cruise report and the captain and I both think that your up to running the department if you want to give it a try. You could always say 'no', no-one will hold it against you but it could take a week or two to get a new communications officer in anyway so you'd have to fill in for them until then. So what do you say ensign?" Ash said and Estevez smiled. "What's that old saying? It is better to rule in hell than serve in heaven?" she said and Ash grinned back at her.

"That's the spirit ensign. Now come with me and I'll introduce you to the people who will be making your life hell from now on." he said.

As the two officers left the transporter room Ash checked his PADD again.

"I see your cadet cruise was on a Cole-class frigate." he said and Estevez nodded.

"Yes sir." she responded.

"Good. The Coles and the Mirandas are fairly similar so you shouldn't have much trouble adjusting. Trust me ensign there are more opportunities for officers with experience aboard a Miranda-class destroyer than any other class of ship in the fleet." Ash said.

"Really? I was disappointed when I was assigned to a frigate. The *Constellation* had just been launched and one of my classmates couldn't stop bragging about being assigned to her for her cadet cruise." Estevez said, "Mind you she wasn't as happy when I spoke to her right after the *Constellation* broke down on her maiden flight."

"You see that's the issue ensign. The Constellation-class and Excelsior-class are the future cruisers of Starfleet. They'll replace the Constitutions, Federations and all the other main line ships even if they aren't ready for general service but the Mirandas are the workhorse of the fleet. There is nothing even on the drawing board to replace them. Mark my words Estevez, ships of this class will still be in front line service when the Excelsiors are considered outdated." Ash explained.

"Are we starting with engineering?" Estevez commented when she noticed the section of the ship Ash was

leading her towards.

"Correct. That tour on a frigate taught you well." Ash responded.

"At least I won't get lost on my way to work." Estevez said and both she and Ash smiled at one another.

The *Ascension's* engineering section was a hive of activity when Ash and Estevez entered it with engineers working as quickly as they could to overhaul the ship's warp and impulse drives before it came time to leave orbit.

"Forrester," Ash called out as he walked towards a man who was visible from the waist down only thanks to being stood on an antigrav platform while he worked inside an open inspection hatch in the ceiling, "get down here a moment. I'd like you to-

"Hold on." Forrester interrupted, "Are you standing between the tape?"

"Tape?" Ash said and then he looked down at the floor to see two lengths of tape laid out, starting beneath where Forrester was working and getting wider apart the further away from him they got, "Err, yes."

"Then get back. That's the splash zone." Forrester said and both Ash and Estevez quickly jumped back from between the tape just moments before there was a sudden 'pop' and an acrid smelling dark brown slime sprayed out from the inspection hatch and landed between the two lines of tape, "There we go. The impulse drive coolant was contaminated at our last refill and it started to congeal." Forrester said as his anti-gravity platform lowered to reveal the rest of him. Unlike Ash and Estevez, Forrester wore a white radiation resistant suit that was standard issue to Starfleet engineers, "So you must be our new communications officer. Adam Forrester, chief engineer. Pleased to meet you." he said and he held out his hand for Estevez to shake.

"Sonia Estevez." she replied as she took his hand.

"So have you been told about Keeler?" Forrester asked.

"That he resigned, yes." Estevez replied.

"Resigned? Oh he did more than just resign." Forrester said.

"I didn't think she needed to be burdened with all the information at once." Ash commented.

"What information? If it's important to my job then-" Estevez began before the door to engineering opened again and an Andorian woman entered. Unlike everyone else present she was not wearing a Starfleet uniform. Instead she wore a short black dress and was barefoot, her shoes carried in her hand.

"Ah here's Teela, she'll be able to explain to you better than I can." Forrester said and then he looked at the Andorian woman and added, "So how did your date go?"

"Terrible. Remind me never to let someone set me up with a guy who's never met an Andorian before." Teela replied.

"What happened?" Ash asked.

"He said that the way my antennae moved was distracting and asked me to keep them still." Teela said as she walked over to a nearby console and sat on the edge.

"So what did you say to that?" Forrester said.

"I told him that the way my antennae move reflected my mood and that for them to stop moving entirely was a sign that an Andorian was about to enter a murderous rage and attack the first person they could get their hands on. Then I stopped moving them and stared at him. You should have seen how quickly he ran. Like cold starting a warp drive." Teela said and both Ash and Forrester smiled, "You must be Ensign Estevez I suppose. The crewman in the transporter room told me I'd only just missed you. I'm Lieutenant Commander Teela, the *Ascension's* talented and beautiful helm officer." she added.

"Modest too." Forrester muttered as he walked to where she was sat and leant on the console as well and Teela jabbed him in his side with her elbow.

"That's right. Sonia Estevez."

"I'm giving her a quick tour and making some introductions." Ash said.

"We were just telling her about Keeler's departure." Forrester added.

"Or at least they told me that you could tell me what happened." Estevez added and Teela smiled.

"Okay so it's like this, Keeler and Captain Franklin were sleeping together. They'd been in a relationship for about a year and a half. Now don't tell the captain I said this but she's had really bad luck with men in the past. She was engaged once but he expected her to quit Starfleet and she refused. Basically ever since then she's wondered whether she should have chosen him instead of Starfleet. After that she dated men who also had careers in space and inevitably they've had to move on and left her but when Keeler expressed an interest she thought she'd finally found the right guy. They served on the same ship after all so there wouldn't be long periods of time when they were apart. Only he turned out to be a jerk too. They had a massive row about something and then all of a sudden he's demanding a transfer. The captain couldn't approve it fast enough."

"And that's why you got a promotion on your first day." Ash said and he looked at the engineers at work before adding, "Now I think it's time that we leave Forrester and his people to finish putting the ship back together again. I'll show you sickbay and then the bridge."

"And we'll meet up again later." Teela said to Estevez, smiling, "I'm sure there'll be time for another girls night

out to welcome you to the crew.” and Estevez smiled back at her.

“I’ll look forward to it.” she replied. Then as she and Ash were leaving engineering Teela leant her head on Forrester’s shoulder.

“You think I’m pretty don’t you? Antennae and all?” she said.

“Teela if it wasn’t immoral and illegal I would happily use my engineering skill to place cameras in your quarters so that I could watch you doing your morning exercises naked.” Forrester replied and Teela smiled before kissing him on the cheek.

“That’s so sweet.” she said before she frowned, “How do you know I do my morning exercises naked?”

“Doesn’t everyone know?” Forrester said and Teela jumped down from the console she was sat on and then grabbed a tricorder from a nearby rack.

“I’m just borrowing this to check my quarters for monitoring devices.” she said as she walked from the room.

The *Ascension’s* sickbay was almost totally deserted when Ash and Estevez entered. Only a single medical officer was present and she was sat at her desk, facing away from the door with the trailing leads of a pair of headphones visible coming from her ears as she listened to music. Seeing this Ash smiled and raised a finger to his lips for Estevez to keep quiet while he crept up on the oblivious medical officer. When he reached her desk he carefully picked up a thick leather bound book that he suddenly slammed down onto the table.

“Wombat stampede!” he yelled at the same moment that the book struck the desk and the medical officer ripped her headphones from her ears as she spun around before punching Ash’s arm.

“Dammit Mike, that’s not funny.” she snapped.

“Yeah, yes it is Deborah.” he replied, grinning. Then he looked at Estevez and added, “There’s a serious reason for my visiting you though. Allow me to introduce Ensign Sonia Estevez. Our new chief communications officer. Ensign Estevez meet Doctor Deborah Reese. Chief medical officer and the love of my life.” and then he leant over to kiss Reese only for her to pull away.

“Not when you’re bringing up wombats Mike.” she said and Estevez frowned.

“I’m sorry ensign that probably needs some explanation.” Ash said and Reese winced.

“Mike, don’t.” she said.

“Hey, he’s bound to hear about it sooner or later.” Ash said before he turned back towards Estevez, “Reese and I went back home to Australia for a relaxing romantic vacation and while we were at a nature preserve there was an almost totally unprecedented stampede of wombats that forced the good doctor to take shelter in a tree.”

“Well at least I got to spend more time with the koalas.” Reese responded before she looked at Estevez,

“Welcome aboard the *USS Ascension* Ensign Estevez. I’ll need to arrange for your basic check up within the next couple of days. Don’t worry, I promise it won’t hurt.”

“As long as you don’t mention wombats.” Ash commented.

“I haven’t received your medical files yet though. Is there anything I need to be aware of?” Reese asked.

“No. I’ve got a copy of my records here though.” Estevez answered and she handed her PADD to Reese.

“Thanks. That’ll be quicker than waiting for Starfleet to send them over.” Reese said as she took the device and quickly connected the PADD to the *Ascension’s* network before using her own computer terminal to transfer the medical records before handing the PADD back to Estevez, “So have you met everyone yet?”

“Just Forrester and Teela.” Ash said.

“Teela’s back already? I take the date didn’t go well then.” Reese said.

“I’m sure she’ll fill you in in due course.” Ash replied, “I just need to show Estevez the bridge now and then I think I can leave her to settle in before we leave orbit. Assuming the captain gets back by this afternoon.”

“She’s still down on the surface? Maybe I should go down and see how she is.”

“I wouldn’t. If she is down there crying into a beer she might not want the people she’s in command of seeing it. I’m going to call her in an hour or so. I’ll let you know how she sounds then.” Ash told her and then he turned towards Estevez, “So ensign are you ready to visit the nerve centre of the *Ascension* where you’ll be spending most of your working life?”

“It looks the same as on a Cole-class frigate.” Estevez said when the turbolift door slid open to reveal the *Ascension’s* bridge. With the destroyer being in a fixed orbit above a Federation world there was no need for the bridge to be fully manned and so only a handful of the crew were present, including just two commissioned officers.

“Then I take it that there’s no need to show you to your duty station then.” Ash said stepping from the turbolift. Then he turned to address the other crew members present, “I’d like everyone to meet Sonia Estevez. She’s taking over at communications as of today. Ensign Estevez meet our science officer Lieutenant Commander Tan and my number two at navigation and weapons Lieutenant Junior Grade Etchemin. Oh and the large man in the body armour beside our science officer is Senior Chief Petty Officer

Duke, our chief of security. What brings you to the bridge Duke?"

"Just making my rounds. I want to have my security log ready for the captain to sign the moment she gets back from blasting pictures of Keeler." Duke replied.

"Captain Franklin took a phaser with her." Etchemin commented.

"At least this time she's not firing it off aboard the ship and triggering the alarms Like that other time she decided to get over a break up with a weapon and a photo of her ex." Tan added.

"I tell you what ensign," Ash said, looking at Estevez, "why don't you show us your skills that made you the chief of your department on your first day and connect me to the captain?"

"Err, okay." she responded, looking around at the communications station. As she had commented when she first stepped onto the bridge her duty station looked identical to the one she had got used to on her cadet cruise on a patrol frigate and she calmly walked over and took her seat.

"Feel free to adjust that. Perks of the position." Tan told her as she tried to get comfortable. It was obvious that Keeler had been much taller than Estevez and so she raised the height of the chair so that she could reach the console comfortably.

"I don't have a log in yet." she said.

"Ah, Forrester already set one up for you. I have it here." Ash told her and he showed her the information on his PADD screen, "Just change the security code when you get the chance."

"Okay, got it." Estevez said as she logged onto the Ascension's computer network and the panels in front of her became fully active. It took her just seconds to find the details of the communicator that Captain Franklin had taken with her to the surface of Archanis IV, "This is the *USS Ascension* calling Captain Franklin, come in please captain." she transmitted before waiting for a reply. Without an earpiece the reply would be audible to everyone on the bridge and the other officers present waited to hear their captain's voices. However, even after a delay of several seconds there was only silence, "Captain Franklin this is the *USS Ascension*. Please respond."

"Could she be in a dead spot?" Etchemin asked but Estevez shook her head as she looked at the communications console.

"No lieutenant, I'm getting a positive lock on the captain's communicator. Our signal is getting through." she said.

"She's probably just put it down and is out of earshot." Tan said, "She'll see she missed the call when she gets back to it."

"Either that or she just turned it off." Ash added, "Leave it for now ensign. Get yourself unpacked and when the captain gets back she can finish off your induction."

"And if we don't hear from her?" Duke asked and Ash thought for a moment.

"Give it an hour. If she hasn't noticed she missed a call from us then I'll beam down and find out what's going on. She may be getting over Keeler but she's still got a job to do like the rest of us." he said.



### 3.

"Admiral." Korda's aide said when he entered the admiral's private office aboard his flagship.

"Yes Markon?" Korda responded, looking up from the computer.

"Admiral we have received a transmission from one of agents current located in the Archanis system. He believes that his identity has been compromised and that a Starfleet officer may be about to expose him." Markon said.

"And what does he request?" Korda asked, "By the time we could get to Archanis the damage would be done."

"He has already arranged passage off world but there is a Starfleet vessel in orbit that could catch up with his transport before he can cross the border. If one of our scouts could-" Markon began.

"Send the closest ship available but tell them to remain cloaked. They are not to engage Starfleet." Korda ordered.

"Yes admiral, I will send the order immediately." Markon replied before he left the room.

"Avoiding combat with Starfleet?" Ah'ken said from where she had been sat listening and she got up and walked over to Korda, placing an arm around him, "What happened to using all your resources to prove we can defeat them?"

"We have scores of agents in the Federation. The freedom of one is worth less than a starship. Especially not when that agent is one who would sell out his own people just for the promise of riches." Korda told her and she smiled.

"You are as wise as ever my Par'Mach'kai." she said.

"A phaser?" Reese asked as she watched Ash load the power cell into the grip of the assault phaser he had drawn from the Ascension's armoury before coming to the transporter room.

"The captain took one. Maybe if I put a couple of shots into a picture of Keeler it will help speed up her return." he responded.

"And do you know anything about where Rachel beamed down?" Reese said.

"According to the transporter logs its an area about ten kilometres outside of Archanis Four's capital city."

Ash told her. Then he looked at the transporter operator, "You've got the co-ordinates locked?" he added.

"Yes commander. This will put you down at the same location the captain beamed down to this morning.

About ten kilometres outside the primary colony. There are a few structures nearby but the captain didn't beam directly into any of them." the operator answered and Ash nodded before turning around and walking towards the transporter pad.

"Mike maybe I should go down there with you." Reese suggested.

"Deborah I don't want to make a big thing out of this. I'll just beam down and tell the captain that we've been trying to get hold of her. I don't need a full away team for that." Ash said.

"And what if there is a problem?" Reese said.

"Then I have a communicator and a phaser. I'll be fine." Ash replied before looking at the transporter operator again and adding, "Energise."

The transporter operator activated the system and Ash was suddenly surrounded by the energy of the transporter field. Reese sighed as she watched this.

"The captain took those with her as well." she said to herself.

Ash materialised on a footpath that led from a quiet road to a small house surrounded by open grassland. There were also several other buildings nearby that looked as if they might be for storage or possibly contain localised power generation or water purification machinery. Looking around Ash could see no signs of intelligent life but the house at least gave him a place to start. Ash knew that Franklin did not own property on Archanis IV but it was not impossible that she could have rented it on short notice. If she was meeting a property agent here then she would have had to beam down outside the house so that she could be given the access codes to whatever security system was in place. Alternatively she could have been visiting the occupant of the house and not wanted to simply materialise inside their home unannounced.

"Ash to Ascension, I'm down and safe." he said into his communicator before folding it back up and returning it to his belt. Then he began to walk towards the house, looking around for any sign of Captain Franklin.

Reaching the front door of the house he pressed the bell, wondering whether it would be Franklin that answered or whoever owned the house. However, even after waiting patiently there was no response at all and so Ash decided to conduct a search around the outside of the building.

"Captain Franklin!" he called out as he began to walk around it, peering in through each window he came to but there were no signs that anyone was at home, "Rachel!" he added before coming to a halt as he looked

in through a window into what looked like a dining room and saw the distinctive shape of a Starfleet communicator on the table. Upon seeing this he smiled and took out his own communicator and set it to signal the captain's, hoping that the sound of it activating would attract her attention. He immediately heard the sound of the captain's communicator activating through the glass and he leant right up to it so that he would be seen as soon as Franklin came to answer the call but after another wait he found himself still waiting and so gave up, closing his communicator again and frowning as he looked more closely through the window and he noticed a chair lying on its side just on the other side of the table as well as a lamp lying on the floor in pieces. Nothing explained why the captain had not returned to her communicator though and so Ash continued to walk around the house until he came to the next window and looked in through it to find himself looking into a kitchen.

"Captain!" he exclaimed when he saw a woman in a Starfleet uniform lying sprawled out on the floor. There was a door close by and he rushed to it, turning the handle but finding it locked and so he took a step back before delivering a strong kick to the lock and the door flew open with a 'bang', "Captain." he said again as he rushed inside. Crouching down beside the woman he rolled her over and saw the face of Captain Franklin staring up at him with lifeless eyes and he quickly took out his communicator, "Ash to *Ascension*. Medical emergency. I need a medical and security team at my location immediately. The captain's dead."

"Commander Ash could you confirm-" Estevez's voice said but Ash closed his communicator before she had the chance to finish when he noticed that the holster on Franklin's leg was empty and that her phaser was missing. Quickly he drew his own weapon and armed it, looking around him for anywhere that an assailant might be hiding.

It was not long before Ash heard the sound of a transporter and he looked around to see four people in the process of materialising. When the process was complete Reese, Duke and another pair of security guards in body armour had beamed into the kitchen and Reese immediately darted to Frank's side, opening up her medical kit.

"Did you try CPR?" she asked but Ash did not reply, "Mike! Did you try CPR?"

"What? No. I just found her and her phaser is gone." Ash answered.

"Do you think whoever did this is still here commander?" Duke said.

"I don't know. I've not heard anything but there could be someone else in here with us." Ash replied.

"We should search by pairs." Duke said.

"We can't leave Reese alone." Ash pointed out.

"I'll be fine. I'm armed and I'll scream if I see anyone." Reese said as she hurriedly unpacked her tricorder and began to scan Franklin, hoping to find some minute sign of life that she could resuscitate.

"Duke with me. We'll search upstairs. You two search down here." Ash said and he and the security guards all made their way out of the kitchen into the adjoining hallway. Here Ash and Duke headed for the stairs while the other guards who had beamed down with Duke went into one of the other downstairs rooms.

While the rest of the house was being searched Reese frantically worked to revive Franklin but the initial signs were not promising. The temperature of the captain's body suggested that she had been dead for some time and a tricorder scan indicated that all activity had ceased within her brain. Federation medical science was not beyond solving such issues though and with no obvious injuries to the body that would prevent revival she set to work applying a set of cortical stimulators to Franklin's forehead. If brain activity could be restarted and maintained then resuscitation would be a relatively easy matter of restarting her heart and breathing cycles, something that could be done without any equipment.

Upstairs Ash and Duke went from room to room but every one was empty and undisturbed. The house contained no images of people, giving it the appearance of a rental property that was never occupied by the same people long enough for them to personalise their surroundings. Importantly the captain's phaser was not found in any of the rooms either, leaving its location still unknown.

"Anything?" Duke asked when he and Ash came back down the stairs and found the other two security guards waiting for them at the bottom.

"No, but I think there could be a problem in the kitchen." one responded.

"We thought we'd let you deal with it commander." the other added, looking at Ash.

Looking towards the door to the kitchen Ash heard the faint sound of sobbing and he rushed to see what was going on. Standing in the doorway he looked down at Franklin body, still lying where it had been earlier only now with the contents of a medical kit scattered around it while Reese sat a short distance away with her legs drawn up against her body and tears running down her face.

"I can't revive her Mike." she said, looking up at Ash, "She's really gone."

Ash took out his communicator again and after a moment's hesitation he opened it.

"Ash to *Ascension*, you better put in a call to the local police. We have a death that needs reporting." he transmitted before closing the communicator again and then making his way over to Reese, sitting down beside her and wrapping his arm around her.

The news of Captain Franklin's death had spread around the *Ascension* quickly and Ash, Reese and Duke's security team beamed back up to the ship there was a crowd of crewmen waiting immediately outside the transporter room.

"Get back. Make room." Ash ordered as the security guards attempted to carry the stretcher bearing the body of Captain Franklin, now covered by a sheet, to the ship's sick bay.

"What happened?" Teela asked as she pushed through the crowd towards Reese, "The captain can't really be dead."

"Look Teela we'll know more later. I need to get the body – the captain to sick bay. We really don't know what happened yet." Reese replied.

"Will you be okay?" Ash said to her quietly, "I can have the authorities on Archanis IV send up another doctor to carry out the examination if you'd rather."

"No." Reese said, shaking her head, "I don't want some stranger handling her."

"Okay, I'll leave her in your hands. I need to get to the bridge. Mister Duke, you're with me." Ash responded and he beckoned for Duke to follow him to the bridge.

The two men walked to the nearest turbolift, taking it to the bridge where Tan, Etchemin and Estevez were waiting for them.

"What happened down there?" Tan asked.

"I don't know." Ash answered, "The captain's dead and her phaser is gone. That's all I can tell you. Doctor Reese attempted to revive her but it was too late. She's gone to sick bay now."

"What about the police?" Etchemin added.

"Concerned." Duke responded, "Someone down there has a Starfleet issue phaser. It's a fair bet that within a day every criminal on the planet will be trying to get hold of that weapon."

"I'm not surprised, they'd out gun the police." Tan said, "Their phasers may not have the same energy output limitations as the phasers sold to civilians but even they don't need to use anything more than a basic disrupt setting."

"And someone with a Starfleet issue weapon could kill dozens of innocent people or destroy a small building before the police could bring in an emergency reaction team." Ash added.

"Commander do you want me to notify Starfleet Command?" Estevez asked.

"Not just yet. Starfleet are going to have all the same questions we do and I'd like to have some answers for them. As soon as Doctor Reese has finished her post mortem we'll forward the results to Starfleet." Ash said.

"Perhaps you should record a personal message for her family as well." Tan suggested.

"Good idea. Reese and Teela should probably do one as well. They know-" Ash said before suddenly correcting himself, "knew her her far better than I did."

"We'll need a formal announcement for the crew as well." Duke said and Etchemin nodded.

"Yeah, rumours are flying around thick and fast." he said.

The communication panel then sounded and Estevez turned to check it.

"Commander I have a message coming in from Archanis IV. It's from the police." she said.

"Visual?" Ash asked.

"Yes commander."

"Put it on the main viewscreen ensign." Ash ordered and he walked towards the centre of the bridge and leant on the captain's chair, "*USS Ascension*. Commander Ash speaking."

"Commander," the grey haired man who appeared on the viewscreen said, "I'm Detective Lawrence. I have some news about what happened to your captain."

"Already?" Ash asked, surprised that developments could be made in the investigation in just the time taken for him to return to the *Ascension*.

"Oh it's not much but it is significant. I've managed to speak to the owner of that house. As suspected they maintain it as a rental property, normally for use by executives here on Archanis Four on business who'd rather not stay in the middle of town. The front door is even listed in our transporter co-ordinate directory. Anyway the owner says that the house was rented to a Starfleet officer for a week, only it wasn't a woman, it was a man. A Lieutenant Matthew Keeler. Does the name mean anything to you?" Lawrence said.

"Keeler?" Tan commented.

"Yes we know the name detective." Ash said, "He's a former member of our crew. I'll have his file sent down to you immediately."

"You know if the suspect is a Starfleet officer then you have jurisdiction over the investigation." Lawrence pointed out.

"Yes, I understand that detective but if Keeler is our killer then we're going to need your help finding him. Just tell your men not to approach him. We'll put together a security team to apprehend him." Ash said.

"Commander this Keeler probably has a weapon that can vaporise a man in a heartbeat even if he's wearing body armour. Getting my people to keep their distance is not going to be a problem. I'll be waiting for the file. Lawrence out." Lawrence said and then the viewscreen went blank.

"Could this Lieutenant Keeler really have killed the captain?" Estevez asked, "I don't know either of them and I know they broke up but-"

"Oh they didn't just break up." Etchemin interrupted and he looked at Duke.

"They had a fight. A serious one." Ash said.

"How serious?" Estevez asked.

"Serious enough that it was heard by one of my men on a patrol in the corridor outside the captain's quarters. They were really yelling at one another." Duke said.

"What about?" Estevez said.

"The guard couldn't tell and he wasn't about to demand that the captain admit him to her quarters to find out so he called me instead. I arrived just in time to hear something smash and knocked on the door to find out what was going on. When it opened I saw a table knocked over and Keeler couldn't get out of there quick enough."

"And now we have the captain beaming down to see him with a phaser." Tan added.

"Ensign Estevez I think you had better contact Starfleet Command now after all. I think that they need to know about this." Ash ordered.

"Commander we're going to need to take a look at Keeler's quarters and personal files as well." Duke pointed out, "There could be something in them that would point towards where he's gone We may need to check the captain's as well."

"What if it wasn't Keeler that killed the captain?" Etchemin said.

"There were no signs of a struggle or a break in at the house I found Captain Franklin' body at. If there was someone else there then someone let them in and that means that Keeler or the captain probably knew them. If that's the case then either of them could have recorded that person's name in a personal log or contact list." Ash said, "Plus whether he was responsible for killing the captain or not we need to find out what happened to our old shipmate Matthew Keeler."

## 4.

The cargo loading docks consisted mainly of numerous large cargo transporters that cargoes could be left on while they waited to be assigned a destination. Then the cargo could be beamed directly to this point that was usually an orbiting transport ship. Cargoes too volatile to be beamed to their destinations would instead be physically loaded aboard a shuttlecraft to be delivered but this was far more time consuming and less efficient than the beaming process. Although the loading docks were not intended as a passenger port it was quite common for individuals seeking passage off Archanis IV to try and book passage aboard a freighter, often offering to work off their passage in lieu of payment and so the captain of the independent cargo hauler *Merchant of Venice* was not surprised when he was approached by someone wanting transport off the planet while he and two of his crew were inspecting a cargo that was about to be loaded on their ship.

"You are going to Space Station K-seven?" a man's voice said and the captain turned around, expecting to see an individual wearing basic labourer's clothing standing there. Instead he found himself looking at a man who, despite wearing a long brown coat that covered most of his other clothing, was obviously wearing a Starfleet uniform underneath.

"Yes, we're running machine parts to Sherman's Planet. We'll be stopping at K-seven along the way. I'm Captain Legrande, captain of the freighter *Merchant of Venice*," the captain said.

"Good. My name's Keeler, I'm looking for a ride," the man in the Starfleet uniform said.

"Is Starfleet out of ships suddenly?" Legrande replied.

"No but I have business on K-seven that can't wait for a ship to become available. Don't worry, you'll be well compensated for your trouble," Keeler said.

"What trouble? I just said we're going to K-seven anyway. We should be done checking this lot in about half an hour then we'll beam it up to the ship. If you've any other business that needs taking care of before you leave then you've got that long to get it sorted. If you're not here when we beam up we're not waiting and you can find another ship to take you where you're going," Legrande told him and Keeler smiled.

The *Merchant of Venice* was obviously not a new ship and when Keeler beamed aboard he saw several places where components had been replaced with parts that were not an exact match and the ship's engineering teams had been forced to improvise connections for them. The crew appeared competent though and Keeler was not concerned that the ship would suffer a serious malfunction en-route to its destination as he was shown to the cramped cabin that he would be occupying. Once alone in his cabin Keeler began to unpack the few belongings he had brought with him in a hold all, starting by unzipping the bag and taking out the Starfleet issue phaser that lay on top of the other contents before tossing it onto his bunk.

When Ash arrived at sickbay he found the two security guards who had beamed down with Duke standing just inside the entrance.

"Is there a problem here?" he asked.

"No sir. Doctor Reese just asked us to stand guard and keep people from wandering in without a reason. Everyone wants to know what's happening," one of the guards answered.

"I don't blame them. I'm here for answers myself. Where's the doctor?" Ash said.

"In her office sir," the guard replied and Ash nodded.

"Thanks," he said as he started to walk away.

Crossing sickbay Ash walked past a treatment area that had been closed off by a curtain and given that all of the other biobeds were clearly empty it was obvious that Captain Franklin's body was behind the curtain. However, as he approached the chief medical officer's office he heard a familiar voice and he dashed to investigate.

"How do I look?" Captain Franklin's voice asked.

"Fine," Reese replied.

"Fine? You look gorgeous," Teela added. However, when Ash reached the doorway to Reese's office he saw her sat alone watching a video recording made prior to a night out that she had enjoyed with Teela and the captain, Reese and Franklin shown in the dresses they had chosen for the evening while Teela recorded them.

"I heard her voice from in there and for a moment I thought-" Ash began.

"That Rachel was still alive," Reese interrupted, "I'm sorry. Frankly I can't believe she's gone and I just needed to remind myself of her in a way other than how she is out there," and she looked past Ash to the curtained off section of sickbay.

"Have you carried out an examination?" he said.

"Yes, the cause of death was obvious very quickly. I think you should come and take a look," Reese replied,

getting up out of her chair and leading Ash to the curtain isolating one of the biobeds. Sure enough when Reese pulled this part way back Ash saw the shape of a body lying beneath a sheet and he followed Reese through the curtain before she pulled it closed again.

"Ready?" Reese said and Ash nodded.

"Do it." he said and Reese gently pulled the sheet part way down.

To carry out the examination of Franklin's body Reese had had to remove her clothing and Ash found himself feeling very uncomfortable looking at his commanding officer in such a state even though Reese only needed to bring the sheet down as far as Franklin's stomach.

"You can see the wound to the chest, right over the heart." Reese said, referring to a burn mark at the centre of Franklin's chest.

"Her uniform was undamaged." Ash said, using his statement as an excuse to look up from the body.

"Yes, it is my opinion that the captain was struck by a phaser beam from point blank range. Although the weapon was set to 'stun' it was fired close enough to her that there was enough of a pulse flash to induce total nerve seizure around the point of impact. That in turn caused a major coronary incident. She would have died almost instantly." Reese explained.

"I should have beamed down sooner. I had Estevez try to contact her but did nothing when she didn't answer. Maybe if I'd have beamed down then I could have done something." Ash said.

"Mike the window of opportunity was very small. You'd had to have reached her within minutes of her being shot and I put the time of death at about four hours before you found her." Reese told him.

"Maybe, but at least Keeler would have had an hour's less head start." Ash said.

"Keeler? Matt Keeler did this?" Reese exclaimed, staring at Ash in disbelief.

"He's connected in some way Deborah. His name was used to rent the house we found her in. I've got Duke and his men going through his quarters to see if he left anything behind that would give us a clue about where he's gone now. After that we'll have to check the captain's as well. I don't suppose she mentioned anything to you about wanting to meet with Keeler after they broke up did she?" Ash said and Reese sighed.

"She was angry. Furious even." she told him, "She said she didn't like the person he'd turned her into."

"That sounds cryptic. I didn't notice any changes in her while they were dating." Ash commented.

"Yes, Teela and I didn't really understand it either. She'd always seemed the same to us. But she was definitely happy to have seen the back of him. Nothing she said to me indicated that she was ever planning on seeing him again." Reese said.

"Well something made her beam down to a house he was renting and she took a weapon with her. There are bound to be questions about that." Ash responded.

"Thank you Starfleet. *Ascension* out." Estevez said when she was finished relaying the situation aboard the *Ascension* to Starfleet Command and she shut off the channel. Then she frowned and began to tap at her console, "Is there some special procedure for signing off?" she asked, looking around towards Etchemin but the navigator shrugged.

"Keeler never said anything about it to me." he said before both he and Estevez looked at Tan.

"Don't look at me." the science officer said but he starting walking from his console towards Estevez and added, "Why, what's wrong?"

"It's asking me what to do with some file I'm not familiar with." Estevez told him as he leant over her shoulder and looked at the display she pointed at.

"Process hidden object file?" Tan said, reading the message that had confused Estevez, "That's a new one on me."

"Could someone have tried getting malware into our system by hacking the communication system?"

Etchemin suggested and Tan stared at the younger man.

"Hacking an encrypted direct subspace link with Starfleet Command? I doubt it. I'd be worried if some civilian hacker could break into that." he said.

"What if it's a direct cyber attack?" Estevez said.

"That I'd be even more worried about but let's not jump to conclusions just yet. What about your log?" Tan replied.

"The log looks exactly as it should be. The communication with Starfleet has been logged and the file is properly saved. This is a separate subroutine running in parallel. Perhaps we should ask Commander Forrester." Estevez said.

"Try turning it off and back on again first." Etchemin said.

"What difference would that make?" Estevez asked, "I'm going to call him."

"Well it is your console so you're entitled to summon help from engineering if you want but I'd seriously consider turning your console off and back on again before you bother Commander Forrester." Tan said, backing away and leaning on the hand rail behind the communication console.

Estevez reached out to activate the intercom but at the last moment she paused and looked around at where

Tan and Etchemin were both looking back at her and they slowly shook their heads from side to side. "I think I'll just try turning it off and back on again." she said.

The process of resetting and logging back into the communication console took less than a minute but it seemed longer to Estevez as she waited to see what would happen. Then when the console was active once again and she was logged in she smiled and pointed at the screen as she looked at Tan and Etchemin. "Process hidden object file?" she said as she repeated the message that once again showed up on the screen.

"That is weird. Maybe Forrester should take a look at it." Etchemin said.

"There's one more thing I'd like to try." Tan said hurrying back to his own station, "Ensign, log out again but don't reset the console."

"What are you going to do?" Estevez asked as she logged out and the message promptly vanished, "Oh it's gone." she added when she saw this.

"That's good." Tan said, returning to her side and then he began to type.

"Why are you logging into my console?" Estevez asked.

"I think that the error is connected to your access code." Tan said and then he smiled, "Yes, see. There's no message shown when I log in. Try yours again."

Estevez entered her access code again, letting the console know that she was using it again and once more the same cryptic message appeared on the screen.

"It's back." Estevez said.

"Okay now you call Forrester. Then we get to watch while he admits he screwed up creating your clearance." Tan said.

"Finally." Estevez said and she activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering." she said into it.

"Engineering. Forrester here." Forrester responded.

"Commander there seems to be a problem with the communications console." Estevez said.

"Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" Forrester asked before she could explain the nature of the problem.

"Yes sir. It appears to be related to my access code." she told him.

"You screwed up her clearance Adam." Tan called out so that the intercom would pick up his voice.

"Her clearance is fine. I'm on my way to take a look now." Forrester said and the channel went dead.

"Do you really think he made a mistake creating my access code?" Estevez asked.

"That's what it looks like." Tan answered before the turbolift door slid open and Forrester entered the bridge, "Ah, here he is." Tan said.

"What's going on?" Forrester asked.

"My console is showing an odd message but only when it's me that's logged in." Estevez told him.

"Let me see." Forrester said, walking over to her and looking at the message on the display. Then he leant forwards and typed, "There's a subroutine running in the background. That's the source of the message." he said.

"So why isn't it showing up when Commander Tan logs in?" Estevez asked.

"Because he doesn't have enough security clearance ensign." Forrester said, "Regardless of your rank, as chief communications officer your security clearance is second only to the captain's. It has to be since every communication has to come through you. This subroutine has a high clearance rating. It's just what I've been warning people about."

Etchemin groaned.

"Come on commander. Not again." he said.

"It's right here lieutenant. See for yourself." Forrester told him.

"You'll have to excuse our chief engineer Ensign Estevez." Tan said, "He is something of a conspiracy theorist. One of his ideas is that the operating systems of Starfleet ships contain hidden subroutines to control them."

"Why else would we have remote prefix numbers?" Forrester said and then he looked at Estevez and added, "Way back when Starfleet was created someone decided that they needed a black ops unit that could take control of starships without going through the regular chain of command."

"Just fix the damned error Adam." Tan said.

"Fine but I'm telling you that what I'm saying is real. I'm keeping a copy of this and I'll prove it." Forrester said as he shut down the subroutine and the message disappeared from the console display, "Now to make sure it doesn't just restart when the console does." he said as he took a data card from a pocket and inserted it into the console. Then he moved the subroutine that had triggered the strange message from the communication system onto the card and removed it, "I'll take a look at that later and then you'll all see that I'm right." he said before he walked back to the turbolift and left the bridge.

## 5.

"Is Commander Ash in here?" Duke asked when he entered sickbay and immediately saw the two security guards just inside the entrance.

"Here." Ash called out when he heard this and he stepped out from the curtained off area, "What is it chief?"

"I thought you'd like to know that we've been through Keeler's old quarters." Duke said.

"Did you find anything?" Ash said.

"Sorry commander, nothing. When he left he took all of his belongings with him and wiped all of his personal files from the computer. Hell, a cleaning crew could hardly leave fewer traces. The most we found were a few DNA traces from him and the captain that we needed a tricorder to pick up.

"Who was there last?" Ash said and Duke frowned.

"You think Captain Franklin could have removed something?" he said.

"Possibly. So far I can't explain why she beamed down to the surface." Ash replied, "Hopefully there'll be an answer somewhere in her quarters."

"Perhaps I should be present when the Captain's quarters are searched." Reese said as she emerged from the curtained off area as well.

"Are you sure you'll be okay with that?" Ash asked.

"I'll be fine Mike. You need someone who really knew her to tell you if anything's out of place anyway." Reese replied and Ash nodded.

"Okay but feel free to excuse yourself if it gets too much for you." he said.

"I don't need my hand holding Mike." Reese responded and then she took a breath and looked at Duke,

"Shall we get on with this chief?" she said but before Duke could reply there was a chirping sound from behind the curtain.

"Is that a communicator?" Duke said, recognising the tone.

"It must be the captain's." Ash said.

"I've got the personal effects that were brought back with her here." Reese added.

"But why would someone be calling her now?" Duke pointed out and Reese led Ash and Duke through the curtain and she opened a small cupboard located beside the biobed on which Captain Frank's body was lying under the sheet. From inside the cupboard Reese took a plastic bag that contained the captain's uniform and also her communicator. Sure enough the sound was coming from the communicator and taking the device from the bag she handed it to Ash who frowned when he looked at it.

"What's wrong?" Reese asked.

"I never noticed before. This has been wedged open, look." Ash said and he held the communicator so that Reese and Duke could see the end of the audio pick up mesh. Normally this would sit flush against the body of the communicator when not in use but now this stood a few millimetres away and when Ash flipped it open he saw the small piece of plastic that had been wedged into it, "This has been active all the time." he said.

"It's transmitting?" Reese said but Ash shook his head.

"No, not transmitting. Recording. The captain set her communicator to record everything going on around but without it being obvious. That must have been why it was on the table instead of in her pocket. She needed a clear pick up. The memory must be almost full by now and that's why it's sounding." he said.

"Then that will have recorded her death." Duke said.

"We need to get the data from this now." Ash said, nodding in agreement and he and Duke hurried back out through the curtain.

"Hey wait for me." Reese called out as she rushed after them. Then as she was passing the two guards at the entrance to sickbay she added, "You two stay here. Make sure no-one goes anywhere near the captain." The trio made their way to the bridge as quickly as they could where in addition to Tan, Etchemin and Estevez they also found Teela sat at the helm.

"Teela what are you doing here?" Ash asked when he saw her.

"I could sit around in my quarters alone or start my shift early and have some company. I chose not be alone." she told him, "Is there any news about the captain?"

"Maybe but you might not want to hear it." Ash said and then he handed the communicator to Estevez,

"Ensign can you bring up the audio file that this has been recording?" he asked.

"Yes sir. That should be easy." she answered as she took the device.

"Is that the captain's communicator?" Etchemin said.

"The captain rigged it to record everything." Reese told him.

"Okay I've got it." Estevez said as she connected to the communicator from her console, "This is a pretty big file, several hours long."

"Yes it would be. Start at the beginning." Ash said and Estevez reached out to begin playing the file stored on



the communicator.

The file began with a crunching sound and Tan frowned.

"What's that?" he said.

"The path outside the house. It made the same sound when I walked on it." Ash replied, smiling before there was the sound of a doorbell.

"Matt open up." Captain Franklin's voice called out and the crew exchanged nervous glances at hearing the voice of their dead captain again.

Then there was a short pause before the sound of a door being opened.

"Hello Rachel, I didn't expect to see you again." Keeler's voice said.

"Can I come in? We need to talk." Franklin said.

"Of course. Do you want a drink?"

"No thank you Matt, what I have to say won't take long." Franklin said as there was the sound of her entering the house before that of her communicator being set down on the table where it had been found.

"So what brings you here Rachel? The last time we spoke you told me to get off your ship and never come back." Keeler replied and there was the sound of a chair being pulled out as he sat down as well, "Having second thoughts about us?"

"Don't be so stupid Matt." Franklin snapped back at him, "Our relationship is over. I've had enough of you using me."

"You seemed pretty happy to be used Rachel. Especially when we-" Keeler began before there was the sudden sound of a slap, "Whoa, looks like I hit a nerve there."

"Shut up, I've had enough of this. You're coming back to answer for what you've done." Franklin said sternly.

"For what I've done? What about what you did? Remember captain there were two of us in that relationship and you were aware of what I was doing. In fact as I remember I couldn't have managed it at all without your help." Keeler responded.

"Do you think this is some sort of joke Matthew?" Franklin asked.

"If it is then the joke's on you as well Rachel. Take my advice and go back to the *Ascension*. Nobody else knows what we did and they don't need to find out. That crew practically worships the deck plates you walk on so they won't ask any questions about what happened between us. You can continue with your dead end career and your dead end life-

"You're a real piece of work, you know that Keeler?" Franklin interrupted.

"Isn't that why you fell in love with me? Or that's how you told me you felt. How about now Rachel? The fires of passion not burning so brightly any more?" Keeler said.

Listening to this on the bridge of the *Ascension*, Teela snarled.

"I never realised what a creep Keeler was." she said before the gathered officers continued listening to Franklin's encounter play out on the recording she had secretly made.

"You used me Keeler." Franklin's voice said, "You dragged me into your nasty little scheme and like a fool I lapped up what you said but that's over now. All of it's over. You're coming back with me and I'm handing you over to Starfleet."

"And telling them what? I scrubbed my computer before I left the ship so I'll just deny everything. Even if you prove anything I'll take you down with me. You knew what I was doing and you benefited from it as much as I did. Now unless you're planning on giving me one last night together I suggest you leave." Franklin said and there was the sound of a chair moving backwards as Franklin stood up.

"Matthew Keeler you are under arrest." she said.

"A phaser? Would you really shoot me?" Keeler said.

"It's set on stun you idiot. I can knock you out and have Chief Duke beam down to carry you back to the *Ascension*." Franklin told him.

"Maybe but if I take just one step closer to you then I get close enough that even a shot on stun could be lethal if you hit the wrong spot. So are you willing to pull that trigger Rachel?" Keeler said and there was the sound of another chair being moved as he stood up in front of Franklin.

"Back off Keeler." Franklin exclaimed and then there was the sound of someone bumping into the table, followed moments later by a 'smash' as the lamp Ash had seen in pieces on the floor fell and broke on impact.

The sound of the lamp breaking was followed by a louder 'crash' as a chair toppled while Franklin and Keeler struggled with one another and there was the sound of Franklin screaming before what was obviously her phaser fell to the floor with a clatter. It was clear from the recording that Franklin and Keeler both scrambled for the weapon, banging into furniture before there was a moment of quiet.

"Quit struggling Rachel, you'll only hurt yourself." Keeler's voice said, making it apparent that he had won out in the struggle and now had control of the phaser as well as holding Franklin in his grasp.

"Let go of me." Franklin responded.

"Oh I don't think so. Obviously I can't stay here because when you fail to show up someone from the

*Ascension* will beam down to look for you. Probably Commander Ash, your oh-so loyal first officer. I think that he deserves a reward for his loyalty, don't you?" Keeler said.

"What are you talking about?" Franklin responded.

"I'm saying that I'm not done with you just yet my captain. Specifically I'm not done humiliating you before your crew. What do you think Ash will think to beaming down here and finding you waiting for him stripped and tied to a bed?" Keeler said.

"No!" Franklin exclaimed before there was the sound of another brief scuffle as she struggled to break free. However, this ended seconds later with the distinctive sound of a phaser shot, followed by the sound of a body falling to the floor.

"Oh well Rachel, I guess Ash won't get his present any more." Keeler's voice said, "Thank you for the phaser though. It may come in useful if your crew come after me."

"Turn it off. I've heard enough." Ash ordered and Estevez ended the playback of the recording.

"He really did it. He murdered her." Teela said, struggling not to weep after listening to the killing of the woman who was both her commanding officer and friend.

"It looks that way." Tan said.

"What other way is there?" Teela said.

"I think we now have two priorities." Ash said without responding to Teela's question, "We have to find Matthew Keeler and we have to find out what he was up to that the captain tried to arrest him for."

"You don't think that the captain really was doing something criminal do you?" Etchimen asked.

"Of she wasn't! She wouldn't. How could you even think that? Teela snapped at him.

"I'm just going off what we all just heard." Etchemin responded.

"The mystery subroutine." Tan said suddenly and the others present turned to look at him.

"What subroutine?" Ash asked.

"When I contacted Starfleet my console produced a strange message. Lieutenant Commander Forrester had to come and sort it out." Estevez said.

"Did you remember to try turning it off and back on again?" Duke asked.

"Yes that point was made to me." Estevez replied, "He found a subroutine in the communication system that was only running under my access code." she continued and Reese groaned, putting her head in her hands. "He didn't say that it was proof of a secret black operation by someone deep within Starfleet did he?" she said.

"He may have hinted at that, yes commander." Estevez replied while Ash walked over to the captain's chair in the centre of the bridge and activated the intercom.

"Bridge to engineering." he said.

"I'm kind of busy here. Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" Forrester responded.

"Forrester I've just been told that you removed a subroutine from the communication system." Ash said.

"Yes commander, that's what I was just taking a look at. It's pretty weird." Forrester said.

"Forrester we've just heard a recording made by Captain Franklin. It suggests that she and Keeler may have been involved in something illegal and that's why he killed her. Is there anything in that subroutine that could relate to that?" Ash asked.

"Definitely commander. I'm on my way up now, I think it's easier if I show you. Forrester out." Forrester said before shutting off the intercom.

It did not take long before the door to the turbolift opened and Forrester hurried onto the bridge with a PADD in his hand.

"Ah commander, maybe now you can explain what's going on." Ash said and Forrester smiled at him.

"Take a look at this." he said and he pointed to the main viewscreen, connecting his PADD to it remotely so that he could duplicate what was shown on his PADD on the viewscreen for everyone to see, "The subroutine was compiled and I don't have access to the source code so I had to test its functions with a virtual machine that mocked the clearance of a communications officer." Forrester said as the main viewscreen took on the appearance of a communications console, "Now watch what happens when I mimic a data transfer between us and another Starfleet vessel. Now this could be a voice or video message or binary data. It can also be one way or back and forth, the key thing is what happens at the end." he said and the screen showed a message that confirmed the successful transmission of a data packet and Forrester turned off the fake communications system, at which point the same cryptic message that Estevez had discovered appeared.

"That's the message." Estevez commented.

"And now look at the simulation of the communication buffer." Forrester said, splitting the screen to show the operations going on behind his virtual communication system.

"There's data in the memory." Tan commented.

"Yes, that's the transmission I just simulated. Now I'm going to respond to the message that the subroutine has just received by telling it to process the hidden object file. Watch what it does." Forrester said.

Forrester tapped his PADD and the simulation shown on screen responded immediately.

"Is it activating our transmitter?" Ash asked and Forrester grinned.

"It is. A copy of the entire communication has been moved into the buffer and manual antenna alignment instructions have been loaded. Then the message is sent and the data deleted from our system without the second transmission being logged." he said.

"So with that a communications officer could send classified material off the ship without there being a record of it?" Tan asked.

"Exactly. Plus because this was taken from our communication system it doesn't matter what sort of encryption was used on the original message. The file is built up from what we see, not the encrypted data moving back and forth." Forrester said and Ash sighed.

"Where's it going?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" Teela commented.

"Of course it matters. I want to know who Keeler was passing information to." Ash said and he looked at Forrester, waiting for him to reply.

"The subroutine uses an absolute direction to aim the main subspace antenna towards Klingon space." the Ascension's engineer said and the others present on the bridge looked at him in disbelief.

"Keeler was working for the Klingons?" Reese said.

"That's what it looks like." Forrester said.

"And he dragged the captain into it as well." Ash added but Teela shook her head.

"No, no I don't believe it. The captain wasn't a traitor." she said.

"We don't know exactly what the captain knew," Ash said, "but there's going to have to be an investigation. Ensign Estevez I want you to contact the Starfleet Judge Advocate General's office. Tell them everything we know. Then contact Archanis Four traffic control and find out if any ships are due to depart for Klingon space. Keeler will probably want to get over the border as quickly as possible."

"You don't think there'll be a safe house on Archanis Four?" Tan asked.

"Oh I don't doubt that the Klingons have several here but they won't want to lose them so even if he is hiding down there he'll be looking for a way off planet as quickly as possible. There could be information inside the captain's secure files that the JAG investigator will be able to find when they crack into them."

"Mike you can check those files now." Reese pointed out and Ash frowned.

"I don't have access to the captain's secure files." he said.

"You do now." Tan said, "You're captain now sir."

Ash hesitated.

"With everything going on that never entered my mind." he said eventually, "It takes three officers to make the change."

"Do it." Reese said and Ash reached for the computer access on the captain's chair beside him.

"Computer this is first officer Commander Michael Ash requesting transfer of command codes. Authorisation Ash delta four zero." he said.

"Request acknowledged. Confirmation required prior to transfer of command." the computer's voice announced.

"Computer this is chief medical officer Lieutenant Commander Deborah Reese, authorisation Reese X-ray seven four tango, confirming transfer of command codes." Reese said.

"Acknowledged. Awaiting final confirmation." the computer said.

"Computer this is Lieutenant Commander James Tan, chief science officer. Confirm transfer of command codes to Commander Ash. Authorisation Tan kilo nine nine." Tan added.

"Confirmed. All command codes now transferred to Commander Ash." the computer said and Ash turned towards Forrester.

"Forrester I want all our system command codes changing. If the security of this vessel has been compromised then we can't take the chance on them being used to shut us down." he said.

"Yes captain, I should be able to get that done and update Starfleet in under an hour." Forrester replied, nodding.

"Good." Ash said before then looking at Estevez instead, "Ensign Estevez, enter into the log and copy to Starfleet, as of stardate eight six three zero point four I am assuming command of the *USS Ascension*." he ordered.

## 6.

The bridge of Korda's flagship was fully manned when the admiral entered. Given his own status as a Klingon affected by the genetic virus that had swept through the empire a century earlier his command crew were a mix of Klingons with and without ridged foreheads, to Korda they were all the same regardless of how they appeared.

"You have news for me Markon?" Korda asked, walking up to his aide.

"Yes admiral, we have received a transmission from our agent Keeler. He has obtained passage on a Federation transport ship that is heading towards their starbase here." Markon replied and he pointed at a display that showed the border between the Federation and Klingon Empire, the positions of each side's forces marked on. The spot identified by Markon was marked with an icon that indicated a Starfleet space station and Korda smiled.

"K-seven." he said, "Where Koloth was humiliated by James Kirk himself."

"Admiral this may present us with a problem." Markon said, "The bird of prey *Rol'taj* can make a rendezvous with the ship carrying Keeler but only when it closes with the Federation starbase. Even with her cloaking device the *Rol'taj* may not escape detection."

"The Federation will not fire without a warning. Tell the captain of the *Rol'taj* that if he is challenged then he is to deactivate his cloaking device and claim the right to visit the station accorded to us by the Organian Peace Treaty while they make repairs to their vessel." Korda ordered, "Let us consider this a test of the cloaking device's effectiveness against the finest sensors that Starfleet possesses."

Franklin's quarters had been sealed following the discovery of her body and Ash had to rip away the tape across the door before overriding the lock. However, when the door slid open he hesitated before entering the room on the other side.

"Mike is something wrong?" Reese asked from behind him as she too waited to enter.

"You know Deborah I always thought that if I ever made captain it would be something to celebrate. I never thought it would be because my commanding officer was murdered by another Starfleet officer." Ash responded before he stepped across the threshold into Franklin's quarters and looked around. He had been in this room before of course when meeting with the captain privately to discuss the operation of the ship but now it felt different. Given that these had been Franklin's private quarters it was not surprising that there were numerous personal items decorating the room, including a number of photographs either in free standing frames or mounted on the wall. Given Franklin's lack of a family of her own most of these images were of her and other members of the *Ascension's* crew, especially Reese and Teela but Ash noticed that there were now gaps where he remembered seeing pictures of Keeler in the past. Obviously Franklin had moved quickly to try and erase his presence from her quarters.

"It seems so empty doesn't it?" Reese said, putting into words what Ash had been thinking and he nodded.

"I suppose we start with the computer." he said and he pointed to the terminal on the desk at the side of the room.

Making their way over to the desk Ash and Reese sat down and turned on the computer. Now that the *Ascension's* main computer recognised Ash as the commanding officer he was able to log onto this terminal without any difficulty.

"Looks like Rachel kept her personal and official files in two separate sections. Orderly as ever." Reese commented.

"Yes, let's take a look at the official files first. Those should detail any changes she made to our computers."

Ash said and he opened up the official log file section. This was further divided by department so that records to do with each one were kept apart from one another. Before going into any of these though Ash saw a file that had been left in the root area that was simply labelled 'Final advice'. From the format of this file it was easy to see that it was a video recording of some type.

"Looks like she left you some final words Mike." Reese said when she saw the file as well, "I think you should play it."

"From the time stamp it was recorded just yesterday. Think it contains a confession that will tell us how deeply she was involved in Keeler's treason?" Ash said, looking at Reese for a moment and then he opened the file.

Immediately the computer screen showed an image of Franklin sat on the side of her bed. She wore her uniform but the tunic hung open to show the white shirt underneath.

"Michael Ash," she said, "if you're watching this then something has happened to me and you have taken command of the *Ascension*. She may not be the biggest or most powerful ship in the fleet but she's been an honour to command these past years. Obviously that comes down largely to the crew and I need to single

you out here Michael. Since you became my first officer you've been the rock on which I depended to keep me on track and I'm not ashamed to say that if I needed to then I would have tried to convince you not to accept any transfers to more important ships or even promotion to a command of your own just so I could keep you here by my side." Franklin smiled and paused at this point before continuing, "That crew as well as this ship are your responsibility now and I don't think I need to tell you what they are capable of, you've worked with them as well as me for several years now and it's always seemed to me that you get on well with them all. Especially Deborah Reese of course and that's something else I'd like to discuss with you. I made a lot of mistakes in my personal life and when it came down to dating someone who was part of my crew I think I made the biggest mistake of them all. I don't think that is the case for you though, you and Deborah seem perfectly matched and I would encourage you to make sure that you stay that way. Don't push her away for Starfleet like I did in the past. Keep her close and don't be afraid to open up to her. It can be lonely as captain and I wouldn't wish that loneliness on anyone."

All of a sudden Reese reached out and stopped the playback of the video.

"I'm sorry Mike I can't watch any more of this." she said and Ash put his arms around her.

"Hey that's okay. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you to help me with this after all." he said before the intercom buzzed and he reached out to activate it, "Ash." he said.

"Captain," Estevez's voice said, "we've just received a response from Starfleet about our last communication with them. They're sending up a pair of JAG officers."

"When?" Ash asked.

"They're beaming aboard now commander." Estevez told him.

"Understood. Ash out." Ash said, turning off the intercom and then he sighed, "You know I would have liked a bit more time to investigate ourselves before JAG marched in and took over." he added.

"I'd better come with you. I carried out the medical examination after all. Besides which I'd rather not stay here by myself." Reese replied.

Duke was already in the transporter room when Ash and Reese arrived and he turned to them when they came in through the doorway.

"They've just signalled that they're ready captain." he said and Ash was about to correct him when it hit him that Duke was correct in addressing him as 'captain' instead of commander.

"Energise." Ash told the transporter technician and moments later five glowing shapes appeared on the transporter pads, indicating that there were more than just two people beaming up to the *Ascension* from the surface of Archanis IV. As they materialised these extra three people were revealed to be a pair of security guards who were both armed with phasers and also another officer, this one wearing the green shirt of the Starfleet medical division beneath his regulation maroon tunic.

"Commander Ash." one of the JAG officers said as she stepped down from the transporter pad.

"Captain now." Duke pointed out.

"Starfleet has yet to confirm that appointment." the second JAG officer responded.

"Why wouldn't they?" Reese asked.

"That's not our decision to make." the female JAG officer said, "I am Commander Stoke, this is my partner Lieutenant Commander Black and Doctor Penn is here to carry out a full medical examination on the deceased."

"I've already carried out an examination." Reese said.

"Yes, I saw your report Doctor Reese." Penn replied, "However, Starfleet Command has requested that all of the evidence so far be double checked."

"They don't trust us." Ash said, staring at Stoke.

"It's nothing personal commander but given your last report indicating that the *Ascension* may have been passing information to the Klingons I'm sure you'll understand that we need to be cautious." she told him.

"Lieutenant Keeler was passing information to the Klingons using a computer subroutine added to the communication system." Ash said.

"A subroutine that was only visible to Keeler." Reese added.

"Your captain would have been informed of the use of the subspace transmitter in her system reports. These would have included the destination information." Black reminded her, "With two officers aboard this ship working for a hostile foreign power I'm sure you can understand why we need to review all the evidence for ourselves."

"You're right Mike. They don't trust us." Reese said.

"Or our security staff." Ash added, looking at the phasers carried by the two security guards who had beamed aboard with the JAG officers.

"Just a precaution captain. Now is there somewhere private we can talk? Doctor Penn will need access to your sickbay of course." Stoke said.

"I think we can find you somewhere." Ash replied.

"And I'll show Doctor Penn to the sickbay." Reese added.

"Hey Lawrence!" a voice called out just as Lawrence was heading for the exit at the end of his shift and he sighed.

"Always when I'm about to leave." he muttered and he turned around to face in the direction of the shout, "What is it Kirby?" he responded as a uniformed police officer hurried towards him, dodging past other officers, members of the public and suspects in the crowded reception area.

"Weren't you looking for a Starfleet officer?" Kirby asked.

"I was but that one's not my problem any more. Why?" Lawrence said.

"Because we just got sent this by traffic enforcement." Kirby said, handing a PADD to Lawrence, "Their cameras tagged a skimmer running a stop signal in sector fourteen. They ran the tags and it came back as a rental, registered to a Lieutenant."

"Lieutenant Keeler." Lawrence interrupted as he looked at the image on the PADD. This had been taken from the traffic camera and enhanced to focus on the driver of the compact vehicle. This enhanced image clearly showed the maroon tunic of the Starfleet uniform the driver wore while his face was a perfect match for the image that the crew of the *Ascension* had supplied to Lawrence for use in his report, "Any chance that traffic division managed to track this after it ran the signal?" he asked and Kirby grinned.

"They picked it up again about half a kilometre from there on a public safety camera. The recordings clearly show the driver getting out and heading for a nearby building. One that's supposed to be closed off due to structural damage." Kirby answered.

"Thanks." Lawrence said, grinning, "Now I get to give the good news to Starfleet." and the two police officers then made their way to Lawrence's office where he activated the communicator on his desk, "I need an off world line. Put me through to the *USS Ascension*."

Stoke and Black were both sat at the table in the *Ascension's* main briefing room, each of them looking at copies of all the reports made about the death of Captain Franklin, one of their security guards standing just inside the door while Ash stood back and watched when all of a sudden the intercom sounded.

"Ash here." Ash said into it, glad of the distraction.

"Commander there's a signal coming in from the surface for you." Estevez told him.

"Who is it ensign?" Ash asked.

"It's Detective Lawrence." Estevez answered and both Stoke and Black looked up from their computers when they heard the word 'detective'.

"I'll take it on the bridge." Ash said before looking at the two JAG officers and added, "Assuming that's okay by you two?"

"Just keep us informed commander." Stoke said and Ash nodded.

"Sure." he said, shutting off the intercom and then leaving the room.

Heading directly to the bridge, Ash paused for just a moment before he sat down in the captain's chair.

"Detective Lawrence is on the line now captain." Estevez said.

"Put him through please ensign." Ash replied and then he heard the detective's voice.

"Hello Commander Ash. How is your investigation going?" he said.

"Slowly I'm afraid detective. I'm hoping that you're calling with some good news." Ash replied.

"Yes commander, in fact I may have just found your man for you." Lawrence said and the officers on the bridge of the *Ascension* exchanged looks.

"That's excellent news. How?" Ash asked.

"It seems that Lieutenant Keeler was in such a hurry to get where he was going that he ran a stop signal and got caught by a camera. The picture matches the one you supplied me but I'm sending you a copy now for you to take a look at."

Ash looked at Estevez and she nodded at him.

"Putting it on the screen now captain." she said and then the image caught by the traffic camera appeared on the main view screen at the front of the bridge.

"That's him." Teela said, frowning.

"Another camera caught him going into a building that is supposed to be unstable." Lawrence said.

"A Klingon safe house?" Etchemin suggested.

"It certainly sounds like it." Ash said, "Detective we're going to need a warrant to search that building and the structural drawings as well."

"I thought so. I can a magistrate issue one within the hour. I take it that you'll be beaming in a security team." Lawrence said.

"No." Ash responded, "If the building is a Klingon safe house then they could have a sensor net in place that will pick up transporter signatures and alert them. We'll have to deploy from shuttlecraft."

"You're going to need an officer with you to actually execute the warrant. Can you pick me up?" Lawrence said.

"Two if possible. Do you have a shuttle pad?" Ash replied.

"On the roof. I'll be waiting there for you as soon as I've got the warrant commander." Lawrence told him and Ash smiled.

"See you soon commander." Lawrence said and then he turned off his communicator.

"Tan, Teela, Etchemin. You're with me." Ash said, getting back to his feet, "Ensign Estevez have Chief Duke form two assault teams in the hangar immediately. Then summon Lieutenant Commander Forrester to the bridge, he has command of the Ascension until we all get back."

"I don't suppose there's any point in telling you that it's risky for you to be accompanying us on this raid is there?" Tan asked as the officers joining the assault team headed for the turbolift.

"No, none at all." Ash replied.

## 7.

Keeler did not mind how cramped his quarters were but he had still spent almost the entire voyage since the *Merchant of Venice* had left orbit around Arcahins IV standing in a corridor on the outer hull, staring out of a viewport.

"What are you looking at lieutenant?" one of the ship's officers asked when he walked past Keeler again.

"Just watching the stars." Keeler replied with a smile, "I never really get the chance aboard a Starfleet vessel."

His statement was only partially a lie, he was indeed just watching the stars but he was not doing this just because it was something he had had little opportunity to do in the past. Still within the Archanis system, the *Merchant of Venice* was still at impulse speed and as such could easily be either returned to port or intercepted by a Starfleet patrol ship. Keeler was waiting to see the stars blur as the freighter entered warp, only then would he be satisfied that he had been able to outrun any pursuit. For this reason he had the phaser he had taken from Franklin tucked under his jacket, if he saw from the starfield visible outside the viewport that the *Merchant of Venice* had reversed direction then he would have no choice but to seize control of the vessel and order its crew to take him where he wanted to go.

Then the pitch of the engines suddenly changed and in place of being distinct points of light visible through the viewport, the stars blurred into lines and brief flashes as the *Merchant of Venice* reached open space and accelerated to warp speed.

"Well I suppose that's that then." Keeler said, walking past the officer and heading back to his cabin now confident that he had made his escape.

There were twenty security officers gathered in the *Ascension's* hangar where the shuttles *Stevenson* and *Faraday* had been prepared when Ash and the other officers arrived, all of them wearing body armour and carrying assault phasers while headsets connected wirelessly to communicators on their belts would allow them to talk to the shuttles while still keeping both hands free once the operation began.

"Captain." Duke said as Ash and the others approached him.

"Chief. Do you have any of those for us?" Ash responded and he pointed towards one of the nearby security guards.

"Vests and phasers right here sir." Duke replied and he opened up a nearby equipment case that contained four more assault phasers and holsters. Taking these out he handed one to each of the officers, followed by a single power cell that they inserted into the grips of the weapons. Duke then gave each of them an armoured vest of the same style worn by the security guards.

"Hopefully these won't be necessary." Ash said to the other officers, "We'll let Chief Duke and his men secure the target before Tan and I go in. Teela and Etchemin will stay with the shuttles."

"Gee thanks captain." Duke said, smiling.

"Who's in charge of the other team?" Tan asked as he secured his vest in place.

"Petty Officer Burns." Duke said and Tan nodded.

"I take it I'm in the other shuttle with Burns?" he said to Ash.

"That's right. I need you there just in case my shuttle is forced to abort." Ash replied.

"Where will we set down captain?" Etchemin asked.

"As close as possible." Ash answered.

"We should aim to drop one team on the roof." Duke said.

"That might not be possible. If the target building really is unstable then the downwards force of the shuttle's thrusters could cause a collapse." Tan pointed out.

"Unstable?" Duke commented.

"I'm hoping that's just a ruse to keep people away." Ash told him, "We'll get you the plans when we land. Now let's get aboard these shuttles and get out of here."

Ash and Teela boarded the nearest shuttle with Duke, making their way to the very front of the craft where they sat down and Teela began preparing for take off. Then she suddenly stopped and looked at Ash.

"Is there a problem commander?" he asked when he noticed this.

"Shouldn't we get permission from those JAG officers before we do this?" she asked.

"Oh them. I'm sure they won't mind." Ash replied and the pair smiled at one another before Teela returned to preparing for lift off.

Forrester was leant on the railing behind Estevez's communication station as she searched through the communication system for any other subroutines that were not supposed to be there.

"There's nothing commander." she said, shaking her head, "Everything looks as it's supposed to be."



"Yes, as it's supposed to be. Which means there are probably at least a dozen other subroutines monitoring every word of every conversation we have." Forrester replied.

"Do you really think that there's a secret black ops unit in Starfleet that operates outside the law commander?" Estevez asked and Forrester smiled.

"Of course there is. With all the rules and regulations Starfleet has to follow there has to be someone able to do all the nasty jobs. Every government has its secrets, I'd just like to know what the Federation's are." Forrester said and Estevez frowned.

"Then they wouldn't exactly be secret then, would they?" she said before the intercom sounded, "Bridge." she said into it, pressing a hand against her earpiece.

"Where is Commander Ash?" Stoke asked and Estevez turned to Forrester again.

"It's Commander Stoke. She's looking for the captain." she said.

"Put her on." Forrester said and Estevez nodded as she switched the intercom feed to a speaker.

"Lieutenant Commander Forrester speaking. Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" Forrester said, "What?" Stoke replied.

"Whatever it is that's broken, have you tried turning it off and back on again. I'm not sending any of my engineers down to you if that's all it needs." Forrester said.

"Lieutenant commander, I want to speak with Commander Ash." Stoke said sternly.

"I'm afraid he's not on the bridge right now." Forrester told her.

"Then where is he?" Stoke said and Forrester looked at the main viewscreen where a tactical display showed the progress of the two shuttles carrying the security teams to the surface.

"Just entering the atmosphere in a shuttle. Given their rate of descent I'd say that they'll reach the surface in about four minutes." he said.

"A shuttle? Commander Forrester what is going on?" Stoke said.

"What, didn't the captain tell you that he was taking an assault team down to the surface to raid a Klingon safe house? Lieutenant Commander Tan went with him as well so I'm in command until they get back." Forrester asked, smiling at Estevez as he did so.

"No he did not. Listen to me lieutenant commander I want to know the moment that Commander Ash returns to the ship. Am I clear about that?" Stoke said sternly.

"Commander it would be my pleasure. Bridge out." Forrester said and then he made a cut throat motion with his hand, signalling to Estevez that she was to turn off the intercom at that point, "Thanks." he added when she did as he wanted.

"Should we warn the captain about that?" Estevez asked.

"What's the point?" Forrester responded, "Either his mission is a success in which case Captain Ash can hand Keeler over to the JAG or there's nothing down there and it's nothing to do with the JAG at all. Telling the captain would just be a distraction when he needs to stay focused. Trust me ensign."

Lawrence and Kirby were both stood on the roof of the police station when there was the sound of engines from overhead and they looked up to see the two Starfleet shuttles descending from the sky. As the first one came in to land on the rooftop pad it turned side on to the two men. Then when it landed the hatch facing them slid open to reveal Commander Ash.

"Detective Lawrence, do you have something for me?" he called out over the sound of the shuttle's thrusters and Lawrence held up a PADD.

"One search warrant and full structural plans of the target." he responded, "Kirby here has another copy."

"Good. You get aboard now. Kirby can go in with the second team in the other shuttle." Ash said and Lawrence darted forwards, helped aboard the shuttle by Ash. Then the hatch was closed again and Teela took off from the roof.

"I suddenly feel under-dressed." Lawrence said, looking around at the Starfleet personnel filling the shuttle and seeing the body armour all of them wore.

"Don't worry detective," Duke told him, "just stick behind us. We know what we're doing. Now can I see those plans?"

"Sure. The place was a light fabrication unit before it was listed as unsafe. That means it had a good power supply and fittings for machinery. Interestingly there was no mention of it being unsafe until it was sold to a company that had never had any dealings here on Archanis Four until that point. As far as I can tell they never made so much as a steno-bolt before they self certified the building as unsafe." Lawrence explained as he gave Ash his PADD.

"Interesting. I take there were no legal claims about the sale of the building?" Ash said.

"None. So the current owners thought the structure was sound enough at the time of purchase. Makes you think they just don't want people poking around and wondering why nothing is being made there doesn't it?" Lawrence replied.

With Etchemin at the helm, the second shuttle made a low pass over the target building while Tan watched the sensor display closely.

"We're at a hundred metres. Any lower and they'll know that something's up." Etchemin said.

"That's good enough. I'm more worried that they might detect the sensor pulse. A passive scan won't tell us what the state of the structure is so I've got to use an active sweep." Tan responded. Then when the shuttle had overflowed the target he added, "Scan complete. Processing now."

"I'm not seeing any signs of activity down there." Etchemin commented.

"No," Tan replied, "if they did pick up the scan then they aren't making it obvious." then he reached for the communications, "Shuttle *Faraday* to *Stevenson*" he said.

"Shuttle *Stevenson* here." Ash's voice responded.

"Captain I've scanned the target. There are multiple lifeforms inside as well as several active energy sources. All indications are that the structure itself is sound though."

"Understood commander. Have Lieutenant Etchemin circle around and deploy Petty Officer Burns and his men on the roof. Duke and his team will go in through the main door." Ash ordered.

"Understood. Coming around now." Etchemin said, turning the shuttle back towards the target.

At the same time as the *Faraday* was descending towards the roof of the target Teela brought the *Stevenson* in to land at the end of the block.

"Go! Go! Go!" she yelled as the shuttle's rear ramp dropped open and Duke flinched.

"We're right here." he commented before his men and Detective Lawrence all rushed out of the shuttle, staying close to the walls of the buildings beside them as they approached their target while the *Stevenson* took off again. Most of the team headed for the door that had been selected as their entry point but two of the security guards instead ran around the back of the building, ready to cut off the escape of anyone who tried to get out that way when the assault team went in through the front. Clustering around the door the security guards looked at Lawrence while he took out a police issue communicator and set it to amplify his voice. Then as the *Faraday* swooped down from above Duke nodded and Lawrence brought the communicator to his mouth.

"Federal officers! We have a search warrant!" he called out, his voice booming out from the communicator and one of Duke's men fired his phaser at the door, blasting it open in a moment and allowing the assault team to enter.

Almost as soon as they stormed into the building Duke saw a man appear in a doorway with a weapon in his hand, an older pattern phaser and he fired instinctively before the other man could. The beam hit the man in his chest and he collapsed unconscious to the floor as Duke rushed towards him and leapt over him to see what it was that he had been protecting. On the other side of the doorway Duke found a room that was almost totally filled with stacks of crates, all of them marked in Klingon. Although Duke could not understand the script printed on them he did recognise the warning label that had also been applied to them that was the Klingon equivalent of a Federation explosive contents label.

"This is Duke, we've got explosives in here." he signalled.

"Are they armed?" Ash responded from the shuttle.

"Negative, just in cases but we'll need an engineering team to deal with them." Duke said, making his way further into the building.

At the same time Etchemin brought the *Faraday* in to land on the roof of the building and the security team rushed towards the entrance to the staircase that led down into the structure, Kirby following them.

"Federal officer executing a search warrant!" the police officer called out, using his communicator to amplify his voice also and the door to the staircase was blasted open with a phaser.

Immediately there was a series of energy pulses from inside the building as someone inside fired a disruptor out through the doorway and one of the assault team was hit, falling backwards with a smoking hole in his armoured vest. Two other members of the team rushed to help the downed man while the others moved out of the line of fire as further energy blasts hit the side of the *Faraday*. These were not powerful enough to inflict any damage to the shuttle's hull immediately but Etchemin still lifted the shuttle off the roof again.

Two of the security guards on the roof returned fire, shooting short bursts from their phasers down the stairs until there was a 'clump' as a body hit the floor and the disruptor fire coming up the stairs ceased.

"Move." Burns ordered, hurrying his men down the stairs before anyone else could arrive to try and stop them.

Quickly realising that they were under attack by Starfleet, the occupants of the building rushed to try and defend it, grabbing whatever weapons they could and one of them opened a crate filled with disruptors that he began to toss to his comrades. Last of all this man took one of the weapons for himself and hurried into a room that was in the opposite direction to the sounds of phasers and disruptors firing. In this room there was a subspace communication system set up, enabling the occupants of the building to send and receive messages over interstellar distances without needing to access the Federation's public communications network. He was not interested in trying to use this to summon help though, he knew that that none would be

sent. Instead he wanted to make certain that Starfleet was not able to capture any of this equipment and so he pointed his disruptor at the wall that was covered in the equipment before he fired a sustained stream of energy blasts into the equipment, causing it to burst into flames. Turning his attention to the antenna array he fired again, making sure that too was destroyed before it could be examined by Starfleet.

A window to the rear of the building exploded and two men leapt out, one of them tossing aside the large hammer he had used to break the glass and they began to run away from the building as quickly as they could.

"Tan to ground teams, looks like you've got a couple of runners." Tan broadcast when he saw this from the *Faraday*.

"Copy that commander. We're on them." the two guards deployed to cut off any escape responded and they emerged from cover with their phaser in their hands, "Starfleet security! Stay where you are!" the guard yelled. The other two men continued to flee before there was the whine of a phaser discharging and a bright blue beam passed in front of them, at which point both men ground to a halt and raised their hands.

Inside the building the occupants continued to put up a fight despite being heavily outnumbered by the Starfleet assault teams. Their defensive effort was hampered further by the plans provided to the assault teams by Lawrence before the raid. Their only means to try and slow down the attackers' advance was to use the various choke points offered by doorways and stairwells to strike at the security guards where they would be vulnerable but the troops from the *Ascension* had other ideas and when some of his men reporting being pinned down Duke took out his PADD and then pointed to a nearby wall.

"There." he said and as his men moved to the wall he adjusted his phaser, increasing the setting to near maximum instead of the stun level he and his men had been using to this point. Pointing the weapon at the wall between the other guards he fired a sustained beam. Upon hitting the wall the energy of this was dispersed across the surface and in under a second a circular hole large enough for a man to step through had been burned in it. Wasting no time that would allow the building's occupants to react to the formation of this hole the security guards leapt through it, firing their phasers at the defenders on the other side from an unexpected angle.

"Chief it looks like we've got a fire here." Burns transmitted when he came across the destroyed communication equipment.

"Is it serious?" Duke asked.

"Doesn't look it yet but we'll need an extinguisher. It looks like someone didn't want us looking at their communications gear." Burns told him.

"Get it put out as quick as you can. Commander Forrester might still be able to make something of it." Duke ordered as he followed his men through the hole he had blasted in the wall, relieved that his team had been able to secure the store of explosives before the building's occupants had been able to try destroying them. The men defending the room he had just entered surrendered rapidly after one of them was stunned and Duke looked around, seeing nothing of any interest among the battered furniture.

"Duke to all teams, sit rep." he broadcast.

"Everything looks secure chief." Burns responded, "We've joined up with some of your team so I don't think that there's anywhere left for anyone to be hiding."

"Okay, what about that fire?" Duke asked.

"Crawley found an extinguisher and we're dealing with now but there's not a lot left of the transmitter chief." Burns said and Duke nodded, "Captain Ash I-"

"I heard." Ah interrupted, "We're on our way down now. Have all the prisoners brought out. Let's see if Matt Keeler's among them."

"Copy captain. We're on our way out now." Duke replied.

## 8.

The two shuttles from the *Ascension* set down in the parking area outside the raided building while the prisoners were being either led or, if they had been stunned, carried outside and lined up. Shutting down the *Stevenson's* engines Teela got up to exit the shuttle but found her way blocked by Ash.

"Where are you going lieutenant commander?" he asked.

"To see the prisoners Chief Duke has." she replied, pointing out of the shuttlecraft.

"Not just yet you aren't." Ash said and he held out his hand, "I'll take the power cell from your phaser first."

"Why?"

"Because I know you Teela and I don't want to take the risk that you'll shoot Keeler dead before we can question him." Ash said and Teela frowned and sighed before she drew her phaser, ejected the power cell and handed it over to Ash.

"Happy now?" she asked.

"Happier." Ash replied, tucking the power cell into his pocket, "But just remember one thing out there commander, I will not tolerate you beating Keeler if he's among the prisoners."

"So don't do it. I understand." Teela said and Ash grinned.

"No, just realise that you'll be dragged off him after your first punch so make sure that it's a good one. A kick somewhere really sensitive would be best."

Teela suddenly wrapped her arms around Ash and hugged him.

"I love you captain." she said.

Walking out of the back of the shuttle Ash and Teela immediately noticed that a crowd was starting to gather, attracted by the unusual sight of a pair of Starfleet shuttles landing and the weapons fire. Ash was pleased to see that already Kirby and a trio of security guards had gone to keep the civilians back, although there was nothing that could be done to prevent them from using cameras to record what was happening from a distance.

"Looks like that kick's out of the question now." Teela muttered, "It would be all over the news."

"I don't see Keeler anyway." Ash replied, looking at the prisoners although he could only see the faces of the captives on their knees with their hands on their heads. Those who had been stunned had all been lain down on the ground. He also saw that Tan and Etchemin had already disembarked from their shuttle and were walking along behind the row of prisoners while Tan looked at his tricorder.

"Is Keeler among them?" Ash asked when Duke approached him.

"Sorry captain, no-one's reported seeing him." Duke answered.

"That slime ball probably just oozed out through the floorboards when the shooting started." Teela said just as Tan and Etchemin came walking up to them as well.

"Captain I think you're going to want to see this." Tan said and he held out his tricorder for Ash to take.

"What am I looking at here?" Ash asked.

"I scanned all of the prisoners and there are a couple of anomalous readings. One from the man third from the end and another from one of the stunned prisoners. I'd want to run them by Doctor Reese first to be sure but I think they're both Klingons." Tan explained.

"You don't see many of them looking so human any more." Duke commented, "I fought a few when I first joined up but it's been at least ten years since I saw one without the ridges on their heads."

"Maybe they can explain what caused the differences." Etchemin suggested.

"I doubt it. I've never heard any Klingon discuss it." Ash said as he hand the tricorder back to Tan.

"Pretty much confirms that this was a Klingon safe house then." Etchemin commented and Duke nodded.

"The crates I found marked with explosive warnings all had Klingon writing stamped all over them and most of the weapons the prisoners used against my men were Klingon in origin." he added.

"So no sign of that missing phaser then?" Lawrence said from beside Duke.

"No. Just the Klingon weapons."

"I'd have thought you'd be glad to have them taken out of circulation detective. The Klingons aren't known for producing disruptors with limited energy settings for our commercial market." Tan pointed out.

"Oh don't get me wrong, I am but I'll still be happier when that phaser of yours is back where it belongs."

"Chief Duke I want all the human prisoners handed over to the local Starfleet outpost. We'll take the suspected Klingons back to the *Ascension* for Reese to examine. Assuming that the local police don't intend to exercise any jurisdiction?" Ash said and he looked at Lawrence.

"Don't worry about that. My department has enough to worry about with ordinary criminals without spies and terrorists thrown in." Lawrence replied.

"Excellent. In that case we can have them all beamed over to Starfleet now and with any luck that will give that pair from the JAG office all the reason they need to get off the *Ascension*." Ash said.

"So is my competence as a medical doctor going to be called into question?" Reese asked when Doctor Penn appeared in the doorway of her office.

"I wasn't brought here to undermine you Doctor Reese." he replied.

"That's not what I asked." Reese pointed out.

"Well no, I am not going to contradict any of your findings." Penn answered, "Captain Franklin was killed by a phaser set to stun that was fired from point blank range. The resulting energy shock paralysed her heart and she died within moments. Resuscitation techniques may have been able to save her but they would have to have been administered within a few minutes of her dying to stand any chance of being effective. Since the body wasn't discovered for several hours after there is nothing that could have been done to revive her."

"Thank you. Now maybe the JAG can drop the ridiculous allegation that the *Ascension* was the hub of some Klingon conspiracy." Reese said.

"That will be up to Commander Stoke. All I can do is present my findings to her." Penn said.

"Which happen to be the same as mine, meaning that Stoke and Black have already had them." Reese replied but before Penn could respond the intercom sounded and Reese activated it, "Sickbay." she said.

"Doctor we've just received a message from the surface." Estevez said, "The captain is on his way back with two prisoners for you to examine."

"Prisoners? Is one of them Matt Keeler?" Reese asked.

"I don't know doctor. Captain Ash just asked me to tell you to be ready to receive them. Do you think I should inform the JAG officers as well?" Estevez said and Reese looked at Penn

"Don't worry ensign, I'm sure that that's already been taken care of. Tell Captain Ash to bring his prisoners straight here when he arrives. Sickbay out." Reese said before she shut off the intercom and then looked at Penn, "I think your masters will want that information doctor. So how about you get out of my sickbay and give me room to work?"

Penn frowned before he exited sickbay along with the security guard who had accompanied him and Reese got to work preparing one of the treatment stations for a patient.

It took just a few minutes before the doors to sickbay slid open and Ash entered with Tan, a group of security guards, two of them holding onto one of their prisoners while the other pair carried a stunned man on a stretcher.

"I thought we'd take the quick way back to the ship." Ash said, "The others will follow in the shuttles but we beamed up."

"Okay so what do you want me to take a look at?" Reese asked, "Is he injured?" and she looked at the man on the stretcher.

"Just stunned doctor." Tan told her, "I took these scans of the prisoners taken during the raid and I think you'll find them interesting." and he handed her his tricorder to Reese. Taking the device from him she looked at the two stored sets of scan results and her eyes widened.

"You've got to be kidding me." she said before she handed back the tricorder and then hurried to fetch a specialised medical version along with its accompanying probe. Then she rushed over to the prisoner who was still standing and began to scan him, "Blood pressure, body temperature, heart rate. None of it matches what I'd expect for a human Mike. Internal organ structure is all wrong as well, I'm picking up multiple redundant organs." she said, "This man is a Klingon all right."

"Well isn't that interesting?" Ash said, staring the Klingon prisoner in his face, "Most of your people we see nowadays have those ridges." and he brushed his hand over his forehead where a Klingon's would be ridged, "I don't supposed you like to explain why you don't would you?"

"PetaQ." the Klingon said, sneering at Ash.

"Looks like I struck a nerve there." Ash said, smiling at Reese and Tan.

Just then the doors to sickbay slid open again and Stoke and Black entered with Penn and their two security guards.

"Commander Ash would you like to explain what's going on here?" Stoke demanded and Ash turned to her.

"Law enforcement on Archanis Four was able to track Keeler to a supposedly disused building that my crew just raided. Legally I might add, a magistrate issued a warrant that we executed." Ash told her.

"Do you have Lieutenant Keeler in custody?" Stoke asked.

"No but among the individuals who were detained were these two." Ash said, indicating the two Klingon prisoners.

"They're Klingons." Reese added, "Now why would Captain Ash be breaking up Klingon spy rings if he was part of one?"

"Commander Ash-" Stoke began, emphasising the word 'commander'.

"Captain." Ash interrupted, "Whether you like it or not Commander Stoke, I am the senior ranking officer among the *Ascension's* crew. That makes me the captain of this ship whether the JAG office likes it or not. Now if Starfleet Command wants to turn down my promotion or even bring someone in to replace me then

that is their right but until that happens you will address me by my position. Am I clear about that?"

Stoke glared at Ash while Reese could not help but notice a slight hint of a smile on Penn's face when she looked at him.

"Of course, captain." Stoke replied after a brief pause, "So what is your next course of action?"

"I doubt the Klingons will have moved Keeler to another safe house so that probably means he's already off planet. There's a cargo loading port just a short walk from the building we raided so that's where we'll be starting. I've asked Teela and Etchemin to go and ask if anyone matching Keeler's description was seen there recently and Estevez is checking with traffic control for a list of all ships that have left Archanis since Captain Franklin was killed." Ash responded, "I take it that that meets with your approval commander?"

"Of course captain." Stoke said.

## 9.

Ah'ken smiled as she dangled the writhing gagh above Korda's mouth before he lifted his head far enough to grasp the worm between his lips and sucked it down his throat.

"As delicious as ever my Par'Mach'kai." he said, pulling her closer before the intercom activated, "What is it Markon?" he asked.

"Admiral we've just received word from home, the link with Archanis Four has been severed." Korda's subordinate told him.

"I take it that this is not a technical fault?" Korda said.

"No admiral. The data link registered the energy spike of a disruptor before it was terminated." Markon told him.

"Then Starfleet have found it. Make sure that the Rol'taj is on schedule and warn Keeler that Starfleet are coming for him." Korda ordered before shutting off the intercom.

"If Starfleet found the safe house then it I because Keeler led them to it." Ah'ken pointed out.

"Probably, yes. What of it?" Korda replied.

"Then why send a ship for him my Par'Mach'kai? He failed us and the damage he has caused will set your plans back by months. Years even. Your enemies on the High Council will undoubtedly use that against you."

"Keeler may still have his uses to us Ah'ken. But rest assured that when his usefulness is at an end then he will feel the blade of my own d'k tahg between his shoulders." Korda said and then he and Ah'ken both smiled at one another and laughed.

"I'm just saying that every so often you'll meet a few creeps hanging around space ports." Duke said as he walked across the hangar with Etchemin and Teela at the same time as Forrester entered.

"Something happen down there?" Forrester asked when he heard this.

"We encountered a Starfleet groupie that was eager to show just how much they liked Starfleet officers." Duke told him and Teela winced.

"It was disgusting. Old, fat, ugly and bad breath." she said, shuddering.

"Sorry about that Teela." he said.

"Oh it wasn't Teela." Duke commented.

"It was me." Etchemin added, frowning.

"That woman was gross." Teela said.

"So I hear that you have equipment for me to examine?" Forrester said and Teela gestured back towards the shuttle she had piloted.

"Yes, it's all in there. What's left of it anyway. The Klingon agents did a pretty thorough job of blasting it to stop us examining it." she said.

"Thankfully they didn't try the same thing with any of the explosives we found stored down there. The local boys are bringing in an ordnance team to deal with them. At least we got a lead on Keeler." Duke added.

"A security guard had someone flash a Starfleet ID at him this morning. He didn't remember the name but when we showed him Keeler's picture he thought it was him." Etchemin said.

"Where's Captain Ash?" Duke asked.

"On the bridge with Estevez running checks on the comings and goings of starships in the system. We've finally got rid of those two fools from the JAG." Forrester said.

"The bridge it is then." Teela said and then she looked at Etchemin and added, "Maybe when I tell our new captain about her he and Reese will double date with you and new girlfriend."

"Please don't." Etchemin replied as he and Teela walked past Forrester.

"Make it worth my while and I might not." Teela said, nudging him gently in the side.

When the pair reached the *Ascension's* bridge they found Ash and Tan standing either side of Estevez.

"Ah there you are." Ash said when he saw them enter from the turbolift, "Any luck?"

"We have a possible sighting at the space port in the cargo loading area." Teela replied, "What about here?"

"Five ships have left the system today and headed towards Klingon space." Tan said.

"So you definitely think Keeler's heading for the border then?" Etchemin asked and Ash nodded.

"It would make no sense to head deeper into Federation territory with everyone looking for him. Throwing himself on the mercy of his employers is his only hope now." he said.

"Klingon mercy. Now's there's an interesting concept." Tan commented.

"Two of the ships that left were a pair of Cole-class frigates heading out on patrol. Which pretty much rules them out." Estevez said.

"The others are commercial vessels though." Ash added, "We've got the *Merchant of Venice* heading for Sherman's planet, the *Surak's Katra* going to conduct a private survey of the Azure Nebula and the *Revival*

en-route to Gamma Hydra.”

“The Azure Nebula has been used in the past by Klingon vessels looking to slip over the border to raid shipping.” Tan pointed out.

“Yes and the Klingons also keep sneaking ships across near Gamma Hydra to lay mines and to get to Sherman's Planet means going past K-seven with is less that four light years from a Klingon outpost.” Ash said.

“Three point two six.” Etchemin added.

“Thank you Lieutenant Pedantic.” Teela said. Then she looked at Ash and added, “So if we have three ships that need checking can we get those frigates to help? That would be one ship each.”

“No, they're too slow.” Tan said, shaking his head, “At warp six they'd never be able to catch up with any of the ships before they reached the border.”

“Whereas at warp eight we can intercept just one.” Ash said.

“We could send a request for them to return to port.” Estevez suggested.

“You never dealt with commercial captains on your cadet cruise then ensign?” Tan said.

“Transport captains are going to want to know why they have to burn the fuel to return as well as likely missing a deadline that could cost them a bonus. Two of those ships don't have Keeler aboard so they'd be losing that for nothing.” Teela said.

“Even with compensation for this run they aren't going to be happy about their schedule being disrupted.” Tan said.

“Plus if we tell them that we're looking for Keeler it could tip him off.” Ash said, “I don't want to be responsible for him hijacking a ship. We're going to have to figure out which ship he's on and go after him ourselves.”

“So which one?” Etchemin asked, looking at the list of vessels that Keeler could have escaped Archanis IV on.

“Trying to hook up with a raiding ship through the Azure Nebula or a mine-layer near Gamma Hydra would need a Klingon ship to happen to be there and I suspect that the flow of information between Keeler and the Klingons is all one way, they won't be telling him where their ships are. On the other hand if he's called for help then they can get a ship from their fleet base to K-seven pretty quickly even if they didn't already have one in the area.”

“I don't know captain.” Teela said, “I wish we had more evidence to go on than that.”

“I am not bound to please thee with my answers.” Ash said and Tan grinned.

“Huh?” Teela said.

“It's a quote Teela.” Tan told her.

“Let me guess,” Etchemin said, “from the Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare.”

Although it was still quite possible that the *Merchant of Venice* could be ordered back to port even after going to warp, Keeler was confident that he would be able to tell when the ship dropped to impulse in order to make the course correction and so he returned to his cramped quarters where he was sat on his bed reading from his PADD when there was a knock at the door.

“Come in.” he said, his hand reaching for his phaser but keeping it out of sight as the door to his quarters slid open.

“We've just received a message for you lieutenant.” the crewman standing in the corridor outside said.

“Who from?” Keeler asked.

“There was no ID or origin and the file itself is encrypted. The captain told me to bring you this.” the crewman told him and he held out a data card towards Keeler.

Taking a chance on leaving the phaser hidden where he was, Keeler got up to take the card.

“Thanks.” he said, smiling at the crewman as he took hold of the card and the crewman nodded as he let go of it and then turned to leave.

Returning to the bed Keeler inserted the card into his PADD and called up the contents. Immediately he saw a request for a pass code and Keeler entered it, triggering the decryption routine built into his PADD that unpacked the message.

STARFLEET RAID ON ARCHANIS IV SAFE HOUSE YOU PASSED THROUGH CONFIRMED. BE ALERT FOR PURSUIT. EXTRACTION SET FOR YOUR ARRIVAL AT K-7.

Keeler's eyes widened when he saw this, wondering what mistake he could have made that would have led Starfleet to the safe house. At the very least this meant that Starfleet now had a good idea that Keeler had left Archanis IV and would be checking the manifests of departing vessels to try and find which one he had used in his escape. The one part of the message from his Klingon handlers that gave Keeler hope though was the news of the extraction, the loss of the safe house was a blow to the Klingons' intelligence gathering operation on Archanis IV and undoubtedly questions would be asked about how it had happened. However, if



the Klingons thought that Keeler was responsible for the loss then they would not be sending a ship to extract him, instead they would leave him to be arrested by Starfleet.

Keeler still had to contend with the possibility that Starfleet would either order the *Merchant of Venice* back to port or send a starship in pursuit though and if either of those eventualities happened then he would have to take drastic action to make sure that the freighter made it to the rendezvous at space station K-7 and connecting his PADD to the ship's computer network he called up a design schematic and began to study the number of ways to reach the bridge.

"Course laid in for space station K-seven captain." Etchemin said, "Phasers and photon torpedoes all available."

"Thank you lieutenant. Hopefully we won't be needing them." Ash replied.

"Sensors show no vessels in our path." Tan said, "Based on the departure time and cruising speed of the *Merchant of Venice*, I estimate that at warp eight we will intercept them in approximately sixteen hours. Well short of K-seven."

"Very good. Do we have clearance for departure ensign?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. Archanis Four traffic control confirming that we are free to break orbit." Estevez answered.

"Thrusters and impulse drive on line captain." Teela added and Ash nodded.

"Thank you commander." he said before activating the intercom, "Bridge to engineering we are ready to depart. Do we have warp drive? I want to take us to maximum warp." he said.

"Yes captain." Forrester responded, "Warp drive is available as soon as we're in clear space. We can't stay at warp eight indefinitely but we'll get to K-seven."

"Good, from the sound of it we won't even need to get that far. Ensign Estevez inform Archanis Four traffic control that we are about to depart. Lieutenant Commander Teela engage thrusters then take us to full impulse. As soon as we're clear of the orbital plane take us to warp eight." Ash said.

"Yes captain, ready whenever you give the word." Teela replied.

"The word is given commander." Ash ordered.

"Firing thrusters to break orbit." Teela reported and the *Ascension* began to turn away from Archanis IV. Then when the ship was underway she cut the power to the thrusters, "Going to full impulse." she added and the *Ascension* shot away from the planet, accelerating rapidly along a heading intended to take the ship out of the orbital plane occupied by the system's planets, moons and other bodies as quickly as possible. Only once clear of all these possible obstructions could the *Ascension* engage its warp drive without risking a collision.

"Now out of the orbital plane captain." Tan reported, "We are clear for warp."

"Engaging at warp eight." Teela added and leaving behind a brilliant flash of light the *Ascension* sped away from the system.

Keeler made his way from his quarters to the *Merchant of Venice's* bridge. This was a far more compact space than the equivalent on a Starfleet vessel, with just enough room inside for a flight crew of three, including the captain who in this case also doubled as the ship's helmsman.

"Bored with your cabin Lieutenant Keeler?" Legrande asked when he noticed the man stepping through the hatchway, "I can always find work for you if you want."

"How fast are we travelling captain?" Keeler asked, ignoring the comment.

"Warp three point eight. We should have you at K-seven by this time tomorrow if that concerns you."

Legrande told him.

"It does. The communication I received came from Starfleet Command and the nature of my assignment has become more urgent. I need to reach K-seven as soon as possible. I understand that this ship is capable of travelling at warp four point six when fully laden." Keeler said, lying.

"Yes but do you know how much fuel that will consume? Our speed gives us the optimum balance between arrival time and fuel efficiency. If we burn the fuel needed to move at four point six then we won't have enough to get us to Sherman's Planet." Legrande said. Unlike a Starfleet vessel that would operate with a full fuel load regardless of the journey it was undertaking, commercial vessels carried only what they needed plus a limited reserve.

"You'll be compensated." Keeler reassured him, knowing that that was also a lie. When the Klingons arrived to collect him, the last thing on their mind would be paying the freighter crew for their trouble, "By my calculations we could reach K-seven in about sixteen hours. You can refuel there."

Legrande frowned. He was not happy about the idea of increasing his fuel consumption, no matter what vague promises he was given about compensation later on. However, he also did not want to annoy Starfleet and after a few moments of hesitation this won out over considerations of cost and he reached for the intercom.

"Engineering this is the captain." he said into it.

"Engineering here captain." a voice responded.

"I want to take us to warp four point six. Can the engines handle being brought up to full power?" Legrande said.

"Affirmative captain but at that speed we'd exhaust our fuel supply well before we reach Sherman's planet." the engineer reminded him.

"I am aware of that. We'll have to refuel at K-seven." Legrande told him.

"If that's what you want captain-"

"It's what Starfleet want." Legrande interrupted, not wanting his crew to blame him for any of the extra work in refuelling and maintenance that pushing the engines harder would require of them.

"Understood captain." the engineer responded and Legrande shut off the intercom.

"Accelerating. Warp three point nine. Warp four. Four point two. Four point four." Legrande said and Keeler noticed a slight shudder all around him as the ship's warp drive strained to propel the ship at this increased speed, "Warp four point six." Legrande added and then he looked at Keeler, "Satisfied lieutenant?" he asked.

"Yes thank you captain. I'll be in my quarters if there are any more messages for me." Keeler replied before he turned around and left the bridge.

# 10.

Ash was sat alone in his quarters when there was chiming sound from his door.

"Come in." he called out, turning the computer display he was looking at so that it could not be seen from the door. However, when the door opened it revealed Reese outside and he relaxed, "Deborah come in, close the door." he told her.

"Looking at something embarrassing?" she asked as she stepped through the open doorway.

"In a sense. I've been going through Captain Franklin's files and there are a few oddities in them. I don't like to ask but could you answer a few questions for me? You knew her better than I did." Ash said and Reese sighed.

"I suppose so Mike but I'm still having a hard time seeing her as a traitor." she said.

"Thanks, I'm sorry to have to go through this but it could be important." Ash replied and he looked at his screen again, "Did you ever see anything that suggested she was in a better financial position than she should have been?"

"Mike are you suggesting that Rachel was taking bribes?" Reese responded.

"Maybe. I don't have access to her financial files, those are behind a lock out that will take more than just a captain's access codes to break through but I have found some interesting messages that she exchanged with Keeler. The first just tells him that something has arrived and she was very happy with it but the message doesn't say what. Then there are a few messages between them that talk about acquiring various luxury goods." Ash explained.

"I think I remember Teela commenting about the contents of Rachel's wardrobe once and she didn't seem to want to discuss it. I just figured that there was something in there that was gift from an old boyfriend she didn't want to talk about but wanted to keep whatever it was that he gave her." Reese said before the intercom on Ash's desk sounded.

"Ash." he said into it.

"Captain I thought you'd want to know," Tan's voice said, "we've just picked up the Merchant of Venice on our long range sensors. I think you should come and see this."

Ash and Reese looked at one another.

"I'm on my way now." Ash told Tan and then he shut off the intercom.

Ash and Reese made their way to the bridge where Tan had already vacated the captain's chair and was at his science station monitoring the *Ascension's* sensors.

"Are they in visual range?" Ash asked as he sat down, Reese leaning on the back of his chair.

"Just about captain." Tan replied.

"On screen." Ash ordered and the main viewscreen changed to show the rear of the freighter Merchant of Venice as it flew directly away from the *Ascension*, following the same course as the Starfleet destroyer.

"They're on course for space station K-seven." Etchemin said.

"We're gaining on them." Teela added.

"But not fast enough." Tan said, "The freighter is moving at warp four point six. Under normal circumstances they should be doing no more than warp four with a full cargo hold. They'll be consuming fuel at a much greater rate than a freighter captain would normally be happy with."

"Do they still have enough to reach K-seven?" Ash said.

"Scans suggest just about, but they won't be able to reach their logged destination of Sherman's Planet without refuelling there." Tan said.

"Why would they be running so fast unless they knew we were after them?" Estevez said.

"They wouldn't." Etchemin replied, "Keeler must have talked them into going faster."

"Looks like you made the right call captain." Reese commented.

"Captain at their current speed we won't catch up to them before they get to K-seven. They'll only get there about ten minutes ahead of us but-" Tan began.

"But ten minutes is more than Keeler needs to beam aboard the station and either lose himself in the crowd or get aboard another ship that will take him across the border." Ash interrupted.

"Shall I order them to stop captain?" Estevez suggested.

"Commander Tan is there any indication that the Merchant of Venice is aware of our presence?" Ash asked.

"No captain. They're close to the limit of our sensor range. We're beyond theirs. Keeler may suspect a pursuit but he won't know for sure." Tan told him.

"In that case I don't think that there's any point in ordering them to stop. If they stop then Keeler would know we were on our way and he could try to seize control of the ship. Then he could have them set off for K-seven again and we'd be in a worse position than now." Ash said.

"So what do we do?" Reese said.

"Ensign Estevez I need to talk to the administration of K-seven." Ash ordered and Estevez quickly opened a subspace channel to the space station.

"Space station K-seven this is the *USS Ascension*, respond please." she transmitted and after a few seconds delay there was a reply.

"*Ascension* this is K-seven control. Go ahead."

"K-seven this is Captain Michael Ash," Ash said, "I need you to put your station on lock down and raise your shields."

"That's a lot to ask captain." a different voice responded and Ash guessed that this was a senior station officer instead of the communications operator who had previously spoken.

"I understand that but there is a vessel approaching that cannot be allowed to dock or transfer passengers to your station." Ash told him.

"What ship *Ascension*?" the station officer asked.

"The transport Merchant of Venice." Ash told him.

"The Merchant of Venice is on our schedule *Ascension*. In fact they've already contacted us to request a refuelling. I'm going to need a good reason to deny it permission to dock."

"We suspect that the ship is carrying a Klingon agent who will use your station as a waypoint to get back to Klingon territory. The *Merchant of Venice* will be low on fuel by the time she reaches you. She won't be able to go anywhere else and the spy will be trapped until we can get there and deal with him."

"And how long will that take?" the station controller said.

"I'm told that we'll reach you less than a quarter of an hour after the *Merchant of Venice*. You only need to stall them for that long."

"Stall them? Stall them how?"

"Tell them that Starfleet suspects that a raid from Klingon territory is likely and you need to keep your shields up. Raise your shields as soon as possible, they'll probably detect it on their sensors and the spy will know it's to do with him if you only do it when his ship arrives."

"Very well *Ascension*. We've no other ships due before the *Merchant of Venice* so we'll raise our shields now. But you better be right about this. I'll be registering a formal complaint with Starfleet if this all turns out to be for nothing. K-seven out." the station officer said and then the channel was cut off.

"What's our ETA at K-seven?" Ash asked and Teela checked her instruments.

"About six hours and twenty minutes captain. Exactly as predicted." she replied and Ash leaned back in his chair, looking over his shoulder at Reese.

"Six and half hours and this will be over." he said to her.

Legrande had never felt such relief on a cargo run as he did when space station K-7 appeared on the *Merchant of Venice*'s sensors. Unlike a Starfleet vessel that could scan vast regions of space the sensors aboard the freighter had only a limited range and to see the space station on them meant that the journey was nearly over and his Starfleet passenger would be off his ship.

"Captain these scans look odd." the crewman sat beside Legrande said and the captain looked at him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Look at their energy output. They're pushing their reactors hard. It looks to me like they've got their shields up."

"Their shields? Let me find out what's going on." Legrande said before he activated the ship's subspace communications, "Space station K-seven this is the commercial vessel *Merchant of Venice* on approach. Our ETA is twenty minutes. Are we cleared to dock?"

"Negative *Merchant of Venice*." one of K-7's officers responded, "Our station is on red alert."

"Red alert? What for?" Legrande said in surprise. He knew that a red alert status meant that the station was expecting an attack and he did not want to be caught up in a battle, especially not when his ship was almost out of fuel and would be lucky to be able to get clear of the combat zone before it ran out altogether.

"Starfleet has warned us of the proximity of a Klingon battle group. They haven't attempted to make contact with us and are assumed to be hostile. You are advised to activate your defences *Merchant of Venice*."

"Defences? K-seven we've got basic deflector shields and that's it. We don't have so much as a single pulse turret to protect us. We need to dock with you."

"Negative *Merchant of Venice*. We cannot lower our shields."

"Understood K-seven." Legrande said before he shut off the communications link.

"Captain we're too far from any other port to make it there with our current fuel levels. What do we do?" the officer beside Legrande asked, obviously as concerned about getting caught up in a battle as much as the captain himself was.

"We get that Lieutenant Keeler up here on the double." Legrande replied, "Maybe he can make himself useful and get K-seven to lower their shields long enough for us to dock."

Being summoned to the freighter's bridge made Keeler nervous. The crew had already demonstrated that

they would deliver any messages that came from the Klingons to him in his quarters, so this would have to be something more serious. Ideally he would have liked to have brought his phaser with him but he still wanted to keep the weapon's existence a secret from Legrande and his crew.

"Captain Legrande, is there a problem?" he asked as he was shown into the cramped bridge

"You bet there is Lieutenant Keeler. K-seven has raised its shields and we've been denied permission to dock because of some Starfleet order." Legrande replied and Keeler suddenly feared that he had been exposed and wished that he had brought the phaser with him. But then he reasoned that Captain Legrande would not have had him brought here if he suspected something was amiss with him.

"What order?" Keeler said.

"Starfleet is monitoring a Klingon task force just over the border and the station is on red alert. Total lock down. We can't dock or beam over while their shields are raised and thanks to your insistence that we travel at maximum warp we don't have enough fuel to get us to any other ports. So unless you want to be sitting around waiting and hoping that our shields hold up if the Klingons do attack I suggest that you find a way of getting them to drop their shields long enough for us to dock." Legrande told him.

The thought of revealing his presence aboard the *Merchant of Venice* did not appeal to Keeler but the only alternative was to sit on the freighter and wait. If this was some scheme by Starfleet to prevent him from escaping then they must already know that he was aboard and speaking to the station would make no difference. On the other hand if everything was as he had been told then he may just be able to talk the crew of K-7 into letting the ship dock.

"Get me a channel." he said and Legrande pointed.

"Subspace is right there." he told him.

"Space Station K-seven this is Starfleet Lieutenant Keeler. I am aboard the commercial vessel *Merchant of Venice* and need urgent clearance to dock. Lower your shields when we arrive." he transmitted.

"*Merchant of Venice* this is K-seven. Please hold." a voice responded and Legrande looked at Keeler.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he said.

"Captain K-seven is hailing us." Estevez said.

"Put them through ensign." Ash replied.

"*Ascension* this is K-seven." the voice of the station's administration officer said.

"K-seven this is the *USS Ascension*. Go ahead." Ash said.

"*Ascension* the *Merchant of Venice* just hailed us. They have a Lieutenant Keeler aboard who is asking us to lower our shields so that the ship can dock." the administrator said.

"That Denebian slime devil." Teela said, "He's actually trying to use his rank to get them to lower their shields."

"K-seven do not lower your shields. That freighter needs to be kept outside until we can get there. Do you understand?" Ash said.

"Affirmative *Ascension*. We'll hold them here. K-seven out." the administrator said and then the channel went dead.

"Ensign Estevez inform Starfleet that we have confirmed the location of Lieutenant Keeler. We'll let them know as soon as we have him in custody." Ash ordered.

"*Merchant of Venice* this is Space Station K-seven. Be advised that we cannot lower our shields until given the all clear by Starfleet." one of K-7's communication officers told the freighter and Legrande turned to glare at Keeler.

"So what now Keeler? If I hadn't listened to you then we could still reach Sherman's Planet. Now we're stuck. We'll have to hold position by K-seven and hope our shields stand up if the Klingons do attack." he said angrily.

Keeler knew immediately that something was wrong. Starfleet would not order a space station to deny a civilian vessel shelter in the face of imminent attack and that meant only one thing, that this was a ruse to prevent his escape. Arresting Keeler would require a security team to beam aboard and locate him though and that gave him an chance. As long as the freighter's shields remained up no-one was beaming in or out. Of course Keeler needed to make sure that the shields remained up.

"Do you have any weapons aboard?" he asked, "If the Klingons do attack they'll likely try and board us. Shooting down a freighter isn't much of a test of their warriors' mettle. Hand to hand combat is a bit different."

"I have an old phaser in my locker but it's a civilian model with a carbon coil." Legrande replied.

"Is that all?" Keeler said.

"This isn't one of your fancy Starfleet ships with a fully stocked armoury you know." Legrande commented.

"That will have to do captain. I'll need to borrow the phaser." Keeler said.

"Then what do I do?" Legrande asked.

"You stay here and fly the ship while I protect you. Trust me captain I'll be able to do more with that phaser

than you can." Keeler said.

"Fine come with me while I get it." Legrande said, getting out of his seat. He then led Keeler to his quarters, another cramped room that was not much larger than those given to Keeler and he went to a locker on the wall, entering his access code before taking out his phaser and handing it to Keeler.

"Thank you captain." Keeler said, "Are there any spare power packs?"

Just as Legrande had told Keeler the phaser was an obsolete type, at least twenty years old and it consisted of the basic Type I hand phaser clipped into the larger Type II pistol frame that then used its power cell as a detachable grip. The lack of any Starfleet markings confirmed that it was a model made for the civilian market and as such would have a restricted energy output. It could still stun or kill but it would not be capable of disintegrating a person like the modern assault phaser Keeler still had hidden in his quarters. This phaser was also incapable of being overloaded, the lower tolerance of its components would melt the weapon into slag before a critical amount of energy could be built up.

"No, just the one in it. I keep it fully charged though." Legrande replied.

"Like said before, this will have to do. The limited power output should prevent me from running out of ammunition too quickly though." Keeler said. His main concern had not been to arm himself though, all he wanted was to make sure that there were no other weapons on the ship that could be used against him if he needed to take control and now that he had Captain Legrande's phaser in addition to the one he had taken from Captain Franklin he was satisfied that this was the case. Having a spare weapon also presented him with more options should the ship be boarded, he could overload the assault phaser and not leave himself completely defenceless.

# 11.

"I have a visual on K-seven and the *Merchant of Venice* now captain." Tan said, looking up from his console. "On screen." Ash said and an image of K-7 appeared on the main view screen. Not far away and dwarfed by the station itself was the freighter *Merchant of Venice*.

"We'll be there in nine and a half minutes captain." Teela commented.

"Captain the *Merchant of Venice* has her shields raised." Tan said.

"Not surprising. They're expecting a Klingon task force to turn up at any moment." Ash said before activating the intercom built into his chair, "Chief Duke are you set?"

"Security team assembled in transporter room one now captain." Duke responded.

"Very good. Our ETA is just under ten minutes. I'll join you when we drop out of warp." Ash said.

"Captain are you beaming over?" Estevez asked in surprise and Ash grinned.

"You bet I am ensign. I want to be there to see the look on Matt Keeler's face when I personally put a set of handcuffs on him." he replied.

"What shall we do about their shields captain?" Etchemin asked.

"We should be able to just order them to drop them." Ash said, "If that fails then we'll find out how good your aim is lieutenant."

"Captain we've got a ship coming in at warp eight." the crewman sat at the rear of the bridge said.

"Klingon?" Legrande asked, scared that his ship really was about to be caught up in a space battle.

"Negative captain, it's following the same vector we did from Archanis Four. I think it's a Starfleet ship." the crewman replied and Legrande relaxed.

"Finally. Maybe now we can finally dock." he said and then he called out, "Hey Keeler your friends are here."

"What?" Keeler responded as he rushed into the bridge from the corridor outside and Legrande pointed to a nearby monitor.

"Look, there's a Starfleet ship coming in at warp eight. At that rate they'll be here in a couple of minutes" Legrande told him.

"They're hailing us captain." the crewman beside Legrande added and he activated a speaker in the main console.

"*Merchant of Venice* this is the *USS Ascension*. You are ordered to lower your shields and prepare to be boarded." Estevez's voice announced.

"What the hell?" Legrande said when he heard this.

"Ignore them. Keep the shields up." Keeler told him.

"I can't ignore a Starfleet order." Legrande responded and he began to reach for the controls to the freighter's deflector shields. However, before he could deactivate them Keeler reached behind his back and produced his assault phaser, "You already had a phaser." he added.

"Yes and thanks to you giving me yours I am the only one aboard who does." Keeler responded, "Now keep the shields up."

All of a sudden Keeler noticed a movement in the corner of his eye and he spun around just in time to see the crewman at the back of the bridge dive towards him. Before the man could tackle him though there was a flash of blue light and a high pitched whine as Keeler fired his phaser. The beam struck the man in the centre of his body and in an instant he was enveloped in a bright blue light that persisted for just a few moments before it vanished along with the unfortunate crewman.

"You murdered him!" Legrande snapped.

"Yes I did captain and he won't be the last if you and your crew don't do exactly as you're told." Keeler warned him.

"Captain the *Merchant of Venice* is not lowering her shields." Tan said as he studied his scans of the freighter when the *Ascension* dropped out of warp.

"Ensign Estevez have they responded to our hails yet?" Ash asked.

"Negative captain. My console shows that our signals are being received, they're just refusing to answer them." Estevez replied.

"Orders captain?" Etchemin said.

"Lock phasers on target lieutenant. Target their shield generator." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain, locking phasers on target." Etchemin replied.

"Ensign warn the *Merchant of Venice* that we will open fire if they do not comply."

"*Merchant of Venice* this is the *USS Ascension*, we have a weapons lock. Lower your shields or you be fired upon." Estevez transmitted.

"No change in their shields captain." Tan reported.

"Phaser lock established captain. Though I recommend closing to less than a hundred kilometres for better accuracy." Etchemin added.

"Teela take us in. Close range flyby. Mister Etchemin if they do not drop their shields voluntarily then you may fire at will." Ash said and Teela smiled.

"Hang on, here we go." she said and the *Ascension* sped towards the *Merchant of Venice*.

"Firing phasers." Etchemin announced as the destroyer passed by the unmoving freighter and blasts of bright red energy erupted from one of the phasers mounted on the *Ascension's* roll bar.

The first of these blasts struck the *Merchant of Venice's* shields and there was a flash as the defensive barrier collapsed, permitting the next blasts of phaser energy struck the freighter itself. Etchemin's fire was well aimed and the explosion caused by the phasers destroyed the *Merchant of Venice's* shield generator entirely.

"Captain their shields are down." Tan announced and Ash leapt from his seat.

"Commander Tan you have the conn. Teela keep us close. I'm beaming over there now." he said, rushing for the turbolift.

Ash headed straight for the transporter room where he was surprised to find not only Duke and three other armed and armoured security guards but also Doctor Reese with a medical kit over her shoulder and a phaser on her leg.

"Deborah what are you doing here?" he asked as Duke handed him an assault phaser.

"Coming with you. If Keeler resists then you might need a doctor." she replied.

"And the phaser?" Ash added as they all stepped onto the transporter pad and Reese smiled.

"I'm hoping Keeler resists." she said and Ash turned to the transporter operator.

"Energise." he ordered.

The *Merchant of Venice* rocked when it was hit by phaser fire and alarms began to sound. Keeler staggered while Legrande and the second bridge crewman steadied themselves on the flight console.

"We're hit! Our shields are collapsing. They must have got the generator." the second crewman exclaimed.

"Then we're about to be boarded. Legrande replied and he turned to look at Keeler, "So where does this leave your plan Keeler? Whatever it really was."

Keeler backed away, pointing his phaser at the two crewmen until he was outside the bridge. Then he closed the door and adjusted his phaser to a lower setting before firing it at the side of the door, melting a section of it into the frame and sealing it shut. Then he turned around and started to run.

As soon as they materialised the boarding party from the *Ascension* looked around, making sure that there was no-one nearby. Satisfied that their arrival had not been observed Ash opened his communicator.

"Ash to *Ascension*, we're down and safe." he said before folding the device up again and adding, "Okay we head for the bridge. If Keeler was giving orders then that will be where he went."

The boarding party had materialised in the cargo section, the area of the ship least likely to contain any crewmen and from the plans of the class they had studied they knew that the bridge was located above them and so they headed for the nearest ladder shaft and began to climb.

"Why can't they have a turbolift?" Reese commented as she grabbed hold of the ladder.

"They do doctor but you wouldn't want to risk it. If Keeler was waiting at the other end he could hit us all with one wide angled phaser blast." Duke pointed out.

"Oh great. This way he gets to pick us off one by one." Reese replied.

Ash and Duke were the first to leap out of the ladder shaft into the corridor that they knew would take them directly to the freighter's bridge and they saw a pair of crewmen ahead of them.

"Starfleet! Stay where you are!" Ash shouted as he and Duke pointed their phasers at the two men who in turn raise their hands.

"Don't shoot!" one called out, "We're just trying to get the door open."

"What happened?" Ash asked.

"That Starfleet officer who came aboard, he killed one of our crew and jammed the door to trap the captain in there." the crewman responded.

"So Keeler's not in there?" Duke asked and the crewman shook his head.

"Mike look. Keeler used a phaser to jam the door. He must have been outside when he did that." Reese pointed out when she saw the damage to the door and wall.

"Do you know where he went?" Ash asked the two crewmen.

"He looked like he was heading for engineering when he pushed past us." the second crewman said and Ash looked at Duke.

"Engineering it is then." he said and the boarding party broke into a run again, this time heading towards the rear of the freighter.



The impulse engines on a ship of the Merchant of Venice's class occupied every level of its structure and so the ship's engineering section was also spread over and could be accessed from every level. This allowed the *Ascension's* boarding party to get there without needing to change decks again. However, when they reached the entrance Duke signalled for them to stop.

"Perhaps my men should lead the way. You two aren't wearing any armour." he said to Ash and Reese and Ash nodded.

"We'll be right behind you." he said before Duke opened the door and dived through.

It was a generally accepted fact it was the third man in any assault force that was in greatest danger when making a forced entry. The first man through alerted the defenders to the attack, they would focus their attention on the point of entry while the second man was coming through and then fire on the third. Sure enough Keeler opened fire from the level below when the third of Duke's team, including Duke himself, came through the door. The phaser beam hit the guard in his chest and he collapse, injured by the beam but not killed thanks to his armour.

"Mike go. I'll see to him." Reese said, holstering her phaser and opening up her medical kit.

Ash nodded and charged into engineering just as Duke and his men were returning fire.

"Where is he?" Ash asked.

"By the warp core. Look." Duke told him and Ash looked over the side of the walkway they were on towards the base of the warp core. There he saw one of the freighter's engineers sprawled out on the floor and a figure partially concealed by the core itself, "He knows we can only fire our weapons set on stun while he's there. Anything more and we risk destroying the core entirely." Duke added before a phaser beam shot past the two men after burning a hole in the walkway.

"On the other hand Keeler can fire at us on any setting." Ash said, "Chief I want you and your men to keep firing. Make sure you keep Keeler's attention focused on you."

"Where are you going?" Reese asked, looking up from her patient while still removing his body armour so that she could get to his wound.

"I'm going to get closer." Ash replied.

Keeping low, Ash then hurried along the walkway to a ladder that led all the way down to the lowest level of the engineering section and he slid down it. He was still quite a distance from the warp core but the floor between him and Keeler was covered with enough machinery for him to use as cover while he moved in closer. Unfortunately for him Keeler noticed him as he approached and fired his phaser at him. The beam passed close by Ash and he was forced to duck behind a fabrication unit for protection.

"Give it up Keeler." Ash shouted, "We know all about you working for the Klingons. You and Captain Franklin. We know you killed her to keep her quiet. She recorded everything on her communicator. Including you killing her."

"Ha! Rachel did think she was smart didn't she?" Keeler called out in response, "Not so bright when it came to men though. Just a few fake words and I had her eating out of the palm of my hand. You know your precious captain was so dumb I had her believing that all I was doing was helping Federation business concerns plan their expansion around Starfleet intelligence reports? You should have seen the look on her face when she finally figured out who was really buying the information." and then he fired his phaser again. This prompted another volley from above as Duke and his men opened fire with rapid blasts from their weapons. Even though he knew that they would only be set to stun Keeler still pulled back out of sight. Being hit could easily mean being knocked unconscious and he did not want to wake up in the *Ascension's* brig Ash saw this and took the opportunity presented to him to dash forwards, his phaser held ready just in case Keeler reappeared.

"Hold fire." Duke told him men as Ash got closer to the warp core, not wanting to risk him being hit by a stray shot and a soon as there was a break in the firing Keeler appeared from behind the warp core again with his phaser in his hand. Ash was close enough to him now though that he was able to reach out and knock the weapon from Keeler's hand.

"Stay still Keeler!" he snapped and for a moment Keeler froze, staring directly at Ash.

"Are you really going to risk shooting me Mike? You're pretty close." he said.

"Not so close that a stun shot will kill you Matt. I'd tell you that Doctor Reese is up on the walkway and could probably revive you anyway but you did kind of kill her best friend and think she'd think it poetic justice if you died the same way." Ash replied.

"But you think differently, right Mike?" Keeler said.

"Not really. But I'd really like to see you facing a court martial before rotting on a penal colony for the rest of your life." Ash told him.

"The Klingons are sending a ship for me Mike. I've got a transponder they have the code for. You could just wait and let me go. The *Ascension* is yours now thanks to me."

"You think I owe you? You're insane." Ash said.

"No, just not in the mood to be arrested." Keeler replied and then he glance up towards the walkway where

Duke and his security team were still in position. Then all of a sudden he reached behind his back and produced Captain Legrande's phaser.

Both Ash and Keeler dived aside, firing as they leapt and the two phaser beams passed over their intended targets. However, when Ash landed he hit a bulkhead and the impact caused him to drop his weapon. As he looked up he saw Keeler aiming his obsolete phaser directly at him and smiling.

"I really am sorry it's come to this Mike. It's nothing personal, honest." he said but before he could fire he was suddenly enveloped in the energy field of a Klingon transporter.

"Ash to Ascension." Ash said into his communicator as quickly as he could take it out and open it, "Keeler just beamed out. Are there any Klingon ships nearby?"

"Negative captain." Estevez responded, "Our sensors are clear. They must be cloaked."

"Damn it!" Ash exclaimed, "He got away."

# 12.

When the *Ascension* returned to Archanis IV it was not the only Starfleet vessel in orbit. The Constitution-class heavy cruiser *Lexington* was present in the company of three other Miranda-class destroyers, two of them of the light variant that lacked the additional weapons mounted on a roll bar while the third was a fast destroyer where the upper module mounted a secondary impulse drive instead of torpedo launchers.

"That's Admiral Clarke's flagship." Etchemin said when he saw the heavy cruiser.

"Captain the *Lexington* is hailing us. Admiral Clarke wants to speak with you in person." Estevez said.

"Tell them I'll beam over there. Commander Tan you have the conn." Ash responded and he got up out of his seat.

"So what do you think the admiral wants to speak to the captain about?" Estevez asked when Ash had left the bridge.

"Nothing good trust me." Tan answered.

"Good news comes via subspace. Bad news is delivered in person." Teela added.

After beaming across to the *Lexington* Ash was escorted to Admiral Clarke's quarters and shown in.

"Take a seat." Clarke said.

"Admiral, I wasn't expecting to see your battle group to be here." Ash replied as he sat down opposite Clarke and the admiral smiled at him.

"Thanks to your actions we have a Klingon intelligence network that needs dismantling. I've been ordered to root out what you didn't have time to." he said.

"Why do I get the feeling that you didn't ask me here just to tell me about Klingon spies?" Ash said.

"Correct commander." Clarke said and Ash smiled.

"And there it is." he said.

"Starfleet isn't promoting you to captain, nor are you being confirmed as the commanding officer of the *Ascension*." Clarke said.

"May I ask why not?" Ash asked.

"The JAG investigation suggests that Captain Franklin was working for the Klingons for at least a year and this has posed questions about the judgement of you and the other senior officers of the *Ascension*.

Promoting you now would make it appear that Starfleet was rewarding your failure to discover not one but two Klingon spies aboard your ship." Clarke told him.

"I don't know if you've seen my latest report but Rachel Franklin didn't know she was working for the Klingons either. Keeler was manipulating her with stories about corporate interests." Ash pointed out.

"Her motives for selling Starfleet secrets aren't the issue here commander. The fact that Franklin and Keeler were able to operate undetected is. Although Commander Stoke's inquiries turned up nothing to suggest that there was anything more you could have done she did file a negative report with me about your attitude."

"Of course she did. I bet she called Judge Advocate General himself to complain as soon as I put her off my ship. Oops sorry, the *Ascension* isn't my ship after all is it? So when does the new captain arrive?" Ash said, not caring about maintaining a professional tone in front of the admiral.

"There won't be a new captain for now commander. Starfleet is still evaluating the situation while they decide on what to do."

"Whether to purge the entire command staff in other words. Meanwhile I'm in command of the *Ascension* but not its commanding officer. Just first officer. All the hassle with none of the glory. Right?" Ash said.

"Is that why you joined Starfleet commander? For the glory?"

"I joined to serve the Federation, something I've done loyally and without question for my entire career which is why I never expected Starfleet to suddenly turn round and question my loyalty." Ash answered, "Is there anything else you want to discuss or can I return to the *Ascension* to give the crew the news?"

"You may commander." Clarke said and Ash got to his feet, wasting no time in leaving the admiral's quarters.

"It's okay, I know the way back to the transporter room." he told the crewman who had shown him there and been waiting outside.

When he beamed back to the *Ascension* Ash was surprised to find Reese at the transporter control console instead of the crewman who had beamed him across to the *Lexington*.

"Deborah what are you doing here?" he asked as he stepped from the transporter pad.

"James told me that you'd been summoned to see Admiral Clarke and I thought you might want to have a friendly face greet you when you got back." Reese explained as she walked around the console to embrace Ash, "I notice that the admiral didn't present you with the rank insignia of a captain." she added, stroking her fingers over the commander's insignia on Ash's tunic.

"No, Starfleet isn't giving me command of the *Ascension*. Nor are they assigning another captain though, they're leaving us in limbo until they can figure out a way to deal with the embarrassment having one of their

own captains working for the enemy even inadvertently has caused them.” Ash explained.

“Well I’ll still call you captain Mike.” Reese said and she leant forwards to kiss him.

“Thanks Deborah.” Ash said.

“All this is Matt Keeler’s fault.” Reese added and Ash nodded slowly.

“No argument here.” he said, “I promise you that if we ever catch up with him I’ll make sure he’s held to account for his actions and wherever the Klingons took him after they beamed him away I hope that he’s not having a better day than we are.”

“Admiral Korda. It’s good to meet you in person at long last.” Keeler said as a pair of Klingons shoved him into the room where Korda sat.

“Is that all you have to say for yourself? You may have escaped but Starfleet is rounding up our agents on Archanis Four as we speak. Our entire network there may have been compromised. Can you give me a good reason why I should not have you killed right here and now?” Korda said and Keeler heard a ‘click’ as one of the guards behind him drew his dagger and unfolded the side blades before pressing it to his throat.

“Korda I can still help you.” he said, mindful of the blade’s proximity to the major blood vessels in his neck, “I know Starfleet, how it works, how its officers think. I can-” and then Korda signalled for the guard to remove his blade from Keeler’s throat.

“Yes you do Keeler and you’ll tell me everything I need to know about Starfleet’s operations. My plans are only just beginning and I’m going to need every resource I have to bring them to fruition. That includes you, or at least it does for as long as you are still useful to me.” he said before the intercom sounded, “What is it?” Korda asked.

“Admiral Rototh has just beamed aboard. He’s on his way to your chambers now.” Markon told him and Korda smiled.

“Just in time.” he said before the doors to his chamber slid open again and Rototh strode in with Markon and a pair of bodyguards behind him, “Ah Admiral Rototh, allow me to introduce you to Lieutenant Keeler.” Korda said to him.

“This is the petaQ that is the cause for our intelligence operation on Archanis Four being exposed to Starfleet?” Rototh snapped, “Why have you brought him here when he should have been skinned alive for his failure?”

“Admiral I I may-” Keeler began before Rototh whirled around and punched him in the face hard enough to knock him to the floor.

“Do not address me!” he yelled and Korda got up and walked around his desk, approaching Rototh.

“Admiral Rototh perhaps you should leave me to deal with Keeler. I still have use for him.” he said.

“You have use for him? You have no use for anything other than what I tell you you have.” Rototh said and Korda smiled at him, now standing barely a metre in front of him.

“Admiral Rototh I have no intention of abandoning my plans for the empire.” he said.

“The council have spoken Korda. I have spoken.” Rototh reminded him.

“Ah yes, you and the council. Well I have a message for the council.” Korda replied.

“I am not a messenger Korda.” Rototh said, snarling.

“Oh I don’t want you to relay a message to the high council. You are my message to the high council.” Korda told him and before Rototh could react Korda drew his knife and plunged it into Rototh while Markon and his bodyguards just looked on. Then as Rototh’s body fell to the floor Korda returned his dagger to his belt and looked at Markon.

“Qapla’.” Markon said, standing at attention and placing a fist over his heart.

“Qapla’.” the two bodyguards chosen by Markon added and Korda began to laugh.