

# STAR TREK

## ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.



## Claws Of The Tiger

By Stephen J Dutton

# STAR TREK: ASCENSION

## *Claws of the Tiger*

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

Entering a system along the Klingon border that is prone to high energy disruption, the crew of the *USS Ascension* find themselves cut off from the rest of Starfleet as they survey it. This means that when they find that they are not alone in the system they must face one of the Federation's most bloodthirsty enemies without help...

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# 1.

Qu'Vat, colony world of the Klingon Empire. Located near the Federation-Klingon Neutral Zone. Stardate 8668.3

Ah'ken immediately reached for her dagger when she was woken by the sound of the door to her bedchamber opening and she rolled over to see who had entered the room. Then she smiled and relaxed when she saw her mate Admiral Korda approaching. Like Ah'ken, Korda had been affected by the DNA altering augment virus that had stricken the Klingon species a century earlier and both of them lacked the cranial ridges that differentiated them from humans.

"How did your meeting with the admiral go my love?" she asked.

"About as well as can be expected when dealing with someone who would happily tear out your internal organs and feast on them Ah'ken." Korda answered, "However, they now have the weapons and we have the money to fund our operation."

"And you think the Kzinti can be trusted? They are savages. Cannibals." Ah'ken said.

"The Kzinti despise the humans for the terms it imposed on them in the Treaty of Sirius. We can trust them to direct their rage at them and in doing so expose the weakness of the Federation." Korda said, leaning over his mate to kiss her.

"And when the Federation our leaders favour negotiating with is shown to be weak-" she began.

"We will be shown to be right." Korda finished.

Starship *USS Ascension*. NCC-1984 approaching the Khasran binary star system near the Federation-Klingon border. Stardate 8675.2

"Entering the Khasran system now captain." Lieutenant Commander Teela, the *Ascension's* Andorian helmsman said as her instruments indicated that the Miranda-class heavy destroyer was crossing the threshold from interstellar space into the uninhabited system that sat on the border between the territories of the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire. Although she used the term 'captain' to refer to Ash, the man sat in the captain's chair behind her the human was in fact only a commander in rank and had not been officially appointed as the *Ascension's* captain following the death of Captain Rachel Franklin weeks earlier.

"Right on schedule." Ash said as he looked towards the young man sat at the navigation console, "Good work Lieutenant Etchemin." he added.

"Thank you captain." Etchemin replied and Ash then turned towards the *Ascension's* science officer.

"Lieutenant Commander Tan could I have your analysis please?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Tan responded, looking down at the sensor readouts on his console, "Khasran-A is a B-type blue super-giant with a companion Khasran-B that is a dwarf neutron star orbiting one another with a period of one-hundred and sixteen days. The gravitational pull of Khasran-A has caused a spin on the companion Khasran-B that has created a pulsar effect with a rotational period of thirty-four point two minutes. There are no major planets orbiting either star but there are numerous debris fields that may mark the positions of planets that broke up when Khasran-B was captured by Khasran-A's gravitational pull. Our initial scans indicate that this is still the case."

"What effect will that pulsar have on our systems?" the young woman sat at the communication station asked.

"A good question Ensign Estevez." Ash said, "Commander Tan would you care to enlighten us?"

"The X-ray emissions will disrupt our sensors and weaken the effect of our shields but not disable them entirely. Transporter operation is possible but should be kept to ranges of no more than one thousand kilometres. Subspace communication will be similarly affected and communication with Starfleet will not be possible at ranges of less than seven astronomical units from the stars. It is also inadvisable to carry out any extra-vehicular activity within six astronomical units of the stars' orbital pattern." Tan replied.

"So the radiation is strong enough to cook us through a suit that far out? Nice, I like it warm." Teela commented.

"That's why we're here. This system is a blind spot in our long range sensors and Starfleet needs to know that nothing's going on in it." Ash said.

"Captain it would assist greatly in surveying the system if we could launch a sensor drone into a close orbit of the stars, ideally so that it orbits in a figure eight pattern to pass around and between them. We could use this to pick out any specific points of interest in the stars." Tan added and Ash nodded.

"Very well. Although we are not here to sightsee commander. Starfleet has given us a specific job to do." he said.

"Of course captain." Tan replied.

"Mister Etchemin do we have a sensor drone ready?" Ash asked.

"Preparing one now captain. Drone will be loaded and ready to launch from our forward torpedo launchers in one minute." Etchemin told him. Then shortly after he added, "Sensor drone prepared captain."

"You may launch when ready lieutenant." Ash said.

"Launching sensor drone now captain." Etchemin said as he reached out for the control to launch the drone. As soon as he pressed this the two-metre long sensor drone shot out of one of the *Ascension's* forward torpedo launchers, located in the destroyer's roll bar mounted upper weapons pod and its impulse engine ignited moments later, taking it towards the two stars at the centre of the binary system.

Among the debris fields that littered the Khasran system another starship had used its tractor beams to cling to one of the larger lumps of rock and was using it as a shield against detection. Without the system's powerful natural background radiation the energy of the tractor beam itself would have given its presence away but here it was safe. The ship possessed a long cigar shaped hull with four wing like structures mounted in pairs at the front and rear of this. The smaller pair of wings at the front mounted weapon pods that bristled with torpedo launchers and disruptor banks, positioned away from the central hull where their field of fire was as wide as possible. On the other hand the pair at the rear were larger and used to mount the starship's two warp nacelles that extended behind the vessel and added to its length. Painted a dull reddish-brown, the colour of dried iron-based blood, the vessel featured the large single claw over a circle symbol that was the emblem of the Kzinti government. The ship itself was old, dating back to a time when the Kzinti had plundered planets and enslaved or consumed their populations. However, it had been brought up to date with modern systems and most significantly weapons banned under the terms of the Treaty of Sirius imposed on the Kzinti at the end of the fourth and final war they had fought against humanity before the Federation was founded that had been obtained illegally from the Klingons.

"Rigat-Captain they launch weapons against us!" the large feline at the starship's sensor console exclaimed when the *Ascension* launched its sensor drone, "We should retaliate."

"Not so fast First Sensor Operator." Rigat-Captain replied. Among the crew of his vessel Rigat-Captain was the only one who had earned himself even a partial name while all of the others were addressed purely by their function and relative seniority aboard the ship, the *Spectral Claw*. Thus First Sensor Operator was the most senior of the ship's sensor operators, the nearest equivalent of a Starfleet science officer that the Kzinti had, "What is the status of the Federation warship's shields?"

"Lowered Rigat-Captain." First Sensor Operator answered.

"Then they do not know we are here. If they did then they would have first raised their shields. They think more of preserving their own lives than taking those of their enemy." Rigat-Captain said, "They have launched a probe to expand their ability to search this system."

"What if they are searching for us Rigat-Captain?" First Helmsman asked.

"Then the Highest of Kzin's orders will be followed. We will ensure that if found the crew of the Federation vessel will not be given the chance to tell their government of our presence." Rigat-Captain said, "First Sensor Operator what can you tell me about the Federation ship?"

"It is what they call a Miranda-class destroyer Rigat-Captain. One of the Federation's most common warships but far from their most powerful. With our new weapons we can match their firepower easily." First Sensor Operator said as he studied the readings in front of him.

"Show me." Rigat-Captain ordered and First Sensor Operator transferred an image of the *Ascension* to the *Spectral Claw's* main bridge viewscreen, "What are they doing?" he added.

"They move into the system Rigat-Captain, following their probe towards the twin stars." First Sensor Operator replied and Rigat-Captain let out a low growl.

"Your orders Rigat-Captain?" First Helmsman asked.

"Monitor the Federation vessel as it gets closer. Inform First Officer and Marine-Sergeant that they are to put together a strike team aboard one of the plundered shuttlecraft that he will take to the Federation vessel when its sensors are blinded. I will lay the liver of the Federation captain at the feet of the Highest of Kzin when we return to Kzin with their vessel in tow." Rigat-Captain ordered and around him his officers growled in agreement.

## 2.

The immense energy output of the twin stars at the heart of the Khasran system bathed the *Ascension* in radiation as the starship flew closer, the levels peaked with each rotation of the neutron star.

"Captain the energy peaks from the neutron star are increasing as we get closer." Etchemin reported.

"What about our navigational deflectors?" Ash asked.

"Holding captain." Etchemin answered.

"Shall I back off captain?" Teela asked.

"Commander Tan, what's the status of the sensor drone?" Ash said, looking towards the science station.

"Still operating captain. The radiation isn't strong enough to damage it." Tan said, "The telemetry is also coming through strongly. We can afford to increase the range if you wish."

"Helm come to full stop. We'll wait here as long as the sensor drone's feed is still reaching us clearly." Ash ordered but before Teela could reply Estevez turned in her seat, one hand to the earpiece she wore.

"Captain I'm picking up a signal." she said.

"Where from?" Ash said.

"Local. It appears to be coming from somewhere between the two stars. It's very faint and difficult to make out, the solar emissions are swamping it but it sounds like a distress beacon."

"If someone's caught between those two stars I don't fancy their chances much." Teela commented.

"Neither do I." Ash agreed, "Does the ship appear on our sensors?"

"Scanning now captain." Tan said, turning his attention away from the sensor drone's feed while he directed the *Ascension's* own sensors towards the source of the distress call, "Affirmative captain. I have a Merchantman-class freighter at bearing zero-zero-seven mark fourteen. Range two hundred and sixteen million kilometres. It appears to be adrift and caught in the gravitational pull of Khasran-A."

"How long until it burns up?" Ash said, sighing.

"Approximately seven hours captain." Tan said.

"What about life signs?" Ash added.

"Indeterminate captain. There could be someone aboard but with all the interference I can't get an accurate reading." Tan said.

"Then we have to assume that someone is alive over there. Teela take us in closer, full impulse and position us five hundred kilometres astern of the freighter. Mister Etchemin I want a tractor beam locking onto it as soon as we're in position to buy us as much time to board and search the ship as possible." Ash ordered then he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering." he said.

"Engineering. Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" the voice of Lieutenant Commander Forrester, the *Ascension's* chief engineer responded.

"Could you at least wait for me to tell you what the issue is commander?" Ash commented.

"Go ahead captain." Forrester said.

"Commander we've picked up a distress call from a freighter that's caught in the gravitation pull of one of the stars. Solar radiation is interfering with our sensors so I'm leading an away team over there to establish whether or not there are any survivors. I want you to join us." Ash told him.

"Understood captain." Forrester replied.

"Good. Meet Doctor Reese and myself in transporter room one in fifteen minutes. Bridge out." Ash told him.

As soon as the freighter was in visual range an image was placed on the *Ascension's* main viewscreen and it became immediately apparent that the freighter was not merely a victim of some unfortunate accident.

"Are those phaser burns?" Estevez said when she saw the localised scorch marks on the freighter's hull.

"It doesn't look like solar radiation damage, that's for sure." Etchemin added.

"It looks like the ship's engines were specifically targeted to disable the ship. Most likely before boarding her." Ash said.

"Pirates. Do you think it was Klingons?" Teela said.

"We are here to watch for them." Etchemin commented.

"Let's not jump to conclusions just yet. We'll find out more when we beam aboard. In the meantime I'd like as much information about that ship as possible." Ash said, "Analysis Mister Tan?"

"Limited captain." Tan replied, studying the readings being given to him about the freighter closely, "The ship does not appear to be emitting any subspace signals and its base energy signature is too weak to be picked out against that of the stars' emissions at this range. I may be able to give you more information when we get closer though."

"I hope so commander. I'd at least like to know whether we were beaming aboard a ship that has air and gravity or not." Ash said.

"I will do my best captain." Tan responded.

"Your best will do this time commander." Ash said and the two men smiled at one another.

"Rigat-Captain the Starfleet vessel is moving towards the centre of the system again. Should we follow?" First Sensor Operator said as the *Ascension* began to accelerate towards the stricken freighter. "No remain hidden for now." Rigat-Captain ordered, "If they see us before the their sensors are blinded then they my have chance to warn Starfleet."  
"Rigat-Captain." another of the Kzinti officers said suddenly and the *Spectral Claw's* commanding officer turned in his direction.  
"What Third Gunner?" he hissed at the junior officer.  
"Rigat-Captain the Starfleet vessels is heading towards the remains of our last kill. If they go aboard they may discover what happened." Third Gunner responded.  
"Marine Sergeant assured me that no evidence of our presence was left aboard the prey vessel." Rigat-Captain responded after emitting a low growl while he thought, "If he lied then I will have his liver."

The away team that assembled in the transporter room consisted of six people. In addition to Ash and Forrester there was also Doctor Reese, the *Ascension's* chief medical officer along with one of her staff and also a pair of armoured security guards that included the chief of security, Senior Chief Petty Officer Duke. "Commander Tan what are your latest readings of the vessel?" Ash asked, leaning over the control console to reach the intercom.

"Still no definite life readings captain." Tan responded, "The damage to the hull definitely looks like it's the result of weapons fire but beyond telling you that it appears to have come from particle weapons of some kind the system's elevated radiation levels are preventing me from making a more detailed scan. I recommend that we tow the ship further away from the stars to conduct a more thorough scan."

"That will have to wait until we've searched for survivors commander. Can you at least tell me if we can breathe over there or if we'll be floating off the decks as soon as we arrive?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. Our scans do indicate that there is an active artificial gravity field and the interior is pressurised with a breathable atmosphere. It is not possible to tell what power reserves remain though. It may be that these systems will fail within a short time of your arrival." Tan told him.

"Thank you Commander Tan. The ship is yours until we return. Ash out." Ash said before deactivating the intercom and turning to the rest of the away team who were double checking their equipment, "Okay people, let's move." he told them.

"Are we expecting resistance?" Duke asked as they took their places on the transporter pads.

"Frankly chief we don't even know if anyone is alive over there." Ash replied, "Having said that, the ship was attacked and we don't know if any of the attackers stayed behind."

"Phasers ready then." Duke said and the other security guard nodded at him as the two men drew their weapons and released the safety locks to produce two short whining sounds.

"Stun setting for now. We still don't know exactly what happened to that ship." Ash ordered.

"Right now I'll settle for us beaming over there intact given all the radiation about." Reese commented.

"Don't worry doctor. This transporter is in full working order. All your fingers and toes will arrive intact."

Forrester reassured her.

"But will they be in the right places?" Reese said mockingly.

"Transporter lock achieved captain." the crewman behind the transporter control panel said, "They only have two transporter pads so I've locked onto their bridge instead. You should appear at the back of it."

"Very good crewman. Energise." Ash ordered and moments later he and the other members of the away team felt the tingling of the transporter field forming around them.

The room that the away team materialised in was still filled with an acrid smell that the air recycling system had not been able to clear although fortunately it had been successful in clearing out the smoke from the fires that had obviously occurred when the ship had come under attack. As soon as the transport sequence was complete Ash, Forrester, Duke and the second security guard all looked around with their phasers held ready while Reese activated her tricorder and began scan the ship.

"I'm picking up biological material but no signs of life." she said.

"Bodies?" Forrester suggested.

"I don't think so. The readings are distorted but widespread. Too widely spread for corpses." Reese replied.

"Unless they've been dismembered." Duke pointed out and Reese winced.

"Thank you Chief Cheerful." she responded.

"You say the readings are distorted. Is that because of radiation getting through the hull?" Ash asked and Reese nodded.

"The levels aren't high enough to inflict damage in the short term but I wouldn't recommend that we stay here any longer than about half an hour." she told him.

"In that case spread out and conduct a visual search. Call out if you find anything." Ash ordered.

"I'm picking up something from over here." Reese added as she walked across the bridge, approaching the forward flight control stations. Then she suddenly halted, "Mike come and take a look at this." she exclaimed

and Ash hurried to see what she had found.

"Is that blood?" he asked when he saw the stains covering the chairs as well as the spray pattern on the console itself and Reese nodded.

"I'd say someone was attacked using a bladed weapon." she said.

"Like a Klingon bat'leth?" Forrester asked.

"Maybe." Reese said, "But I'd need to see an actual body part to confirm the shape of the blade. All we have here is blood."

"Any idea how long ago this happened?" Ash asked.

"The rate of decay seems to suggest that this blood was spilled about four days ago." Reese replied, holding her tricorder close to one of the larger blood stains.

"That's not much to go on." Duke commented.

"Then let's hope that there's more evidence elsewhere on the ship." Ash said, "We'll search in teams of three. Doctor Reese and Chief Duke are with me. We'll search the operations areas and crew quarters.

Commander Forrester you take your team down to the hold and engineering but first I want you to set up a data transfer link with the *Ascension*. There could be vital information in the ship's log and maybe Ensign Estevez can find it."

"Yes captain." Forrester replied.

"*Ascension* this is Forrester." Forrester's voice said over the communication channel and Estevez smiled as she responded.

"This is the *Ascension*. Go ahead commander." she said.

"Ensign I'm sending you the freighter's flight recorder for the last week or so recorded. From the looks of this place I doubt it carried on recording for longer than that after being attacked. Go through it and see if you can find out what happened." Forrester told her.

"Yes commander. I take it you've found any survivors over there yet then?" Estevez said as she checked for the incoming file transfer, "Okay I've got the transfer channel. Downloading it and scanning for viruses now."

"Good. In answer to your question though, no we haven't found anyone alive. Or dead either for that matter. No bodies, just blood." Forrester replied.

"Were they vaporised?" Estevez said.

"Doctor Reese hasn't said anything about picking up any cellular damage to the blood that would indicate that that's what happened. Mind you some of this blood is in trails. I'd say that at least some of the crew were dragged off somewhere." Forrester said, "Maybe they've been turned into cyborg zombies."

"Cyborg zombies?" Estevez said disbelievingly and the other officers on the bridge looked at her, not having heard Forrester's voice in her earpiece.

"Oh they're real ensign." Forrester replied, "They take people's bodies and graft machines into them to make more of themselves. The Federation knows all about them but is just covering it up so as not to scare people until we have a way of killing them. They just march at you in groups and overwhelm any defences. Phasers have no effect on them at all. Zefram Cochrane tried to warn people about them but no-one listened."

"Then I'll keep my eye open for a cyborg that wants to eat my brains. *Ascension* out." Estevez said before she ended the conversation and then sighed.

"Another of Adam's crackpot conspiracy theories?" Tan commented and Estevez smiled.

"Cyborg zombies that can't be killed by phaser fire. Apparently the Federation is covering up their existence but Zefram Cochrane tried to warn us." she said.

"He wasn't drunk at the time was he?" Etchemin asked.

"Cochrane or Forrester?" Teela commented.

"I take it that Lieutenant Commander Forrester called to discuss more than just cyborg zombies." Tan said.

"Yes commander. Commander Forrester is transferring the freighter's log to us. He want me to search through it for any information about what happened to the ship." Estevez replied and she double checked the state of the download, "Got it." she added.

"Is it safe?" Tan asked.

"Yes, it doesn't look like anyone's tampered with it. I'll run it on an isolated terminal if that's okay though commander." Estevez said and Tan nodded.

"I'll have Petty Officer Tomlin take over from you." Tan said and Estevez copied the downloaded file to a data card before signing herself out of the communication console and exiting the bridge.

Estevez took the data card back to her quarters where there was a computer terminal that she could disconnect from the *Ascension*'s main network without affecting the ship's operations as would happen if the main communication console was disconnected. As soon as she had made sure that there was no way that any malicious code contained in the freighter's log file could infect the *Ascension*, Estevez opened it on her private terminal and checked the time frame that it covered. The time stamp indicated that just as Forrester had promised her the log covered a week's worth of data, both system events and also the bridge audio recorder that would tell her what the flight crew had said to one another. Rather than event logs though.

Estevez's first focus was the basic vessel information that accompanied them. This told her that the freighter was called the *Permanence* and had been carrying a cargo of impulse drive parts to a civilian shipyard close to the Klingon border. It also told her that the ship had had a crew of thirteen officers and men.

After this Estevez moved on to the log files themselves, starting with the system data file in preference to the audio recordings. This could be more easily searched for key events and she ran a quick check for the point at which the freighter had dropped out of warp.

When she found it Estevez saw that this event was accompanied by several others at the same time, indicating that the drop to sublight speed had been unplanned and she checked the audio recorded for that moment.

"We're hit! We're out of warp!" a man's voice yelled.

"Is the hull breached?" a second asked.

"No but warp drive is off line." the first replied.

"What about our shields? Can you raise them?"

"I'm trying but the mains are shot. They may not hold for more than a few more hits. If they fire any more torpedoes then we're done for."

"If they wanted to destroy us then they could have done it with that torpedo instead of just using it to knock us out of warp. They want to board us. I'll try and get the impulse engines started. We're in the Khasran system. That place is a mass of solar flares and radiation clouds. Maybe we can dodge them long enough for them to give up or maybe even a Starfleet patrol to show up."

"What are the odds of that do you think?"

"Better than if we try surrendering. You know what the-" and then there was the sound of an explosion before the voices turned into barely audible screams accompanied by the crackling sound of a fire.

"Come on," Estevez said to herself, "tell me who did this to you." and she began to search back through the system event log file, hoping that there would be something that would identify the freighter's attackers.

Unfortunately the freighter's flight log system was one of the more basic models available, intended as a means to diagnose technological faults rather than identify hostile combatants. This meant that not all of the data from the ship's sensors went into the log, with visual scans left out entirely and although Estevez was able to correlate a sensor contact behind the freighter with the time at which it came under attack, there was no transponder being broadcast to identify the contact and no visual image either. However, the time stamp, about an hour before the freighter was dropped out of warp did give Estevez another point at which to listen to the audio recorder to see whether the crew identified their attackers.

"We've got a contact to stern. She's closing on us." one of the two voices she had already heard said.

"Can you identify it?" the second asked.

"No, there's no ID signal being broadcast."

"I don't like the sound of that. How fast are they closing?"

"Warp five, no they're accelerating. At warp six now."

"Damn, that's almost four times our speed. It must be a warship. No transport travels that fast."

"Not loaded anyway. Could it be a Starfleet patrol?"

"Running without a transponder ID broadcasting? I doubt it. It's a raider. It must be. We'll never make it to port before they catch us."

Estevez sighed, a simple blip on a sensor log was not enough to identify the attacking ship from and it was clear that the flight crew did not know who was attacking them at that point. However, from their last words they had obviously identified them at some point and so she paused the playback and got up to get a mug of coffee from the food dispenser in her quarters before sitting back down and taking a sip before she restarted the playback, listening to every word the crew said to one another.



### 3.

"That doesn't look like a phaser hit to me. These are disruptor burns." Duke said when he saw a large area of a wall near the freighter's sickbay that was badly discoloured in a roughly circular pattern, indicating the exact point at which it had been struck by a directed energy weapon of some kind.

"Klingon?" Ash asked.

"Klingon. Orion. Suliban. Rigelian. Maybe even Gorn or Romulan although we are a bit far from where they tend to prowl. It's too common a technology to pin down without a close examination of the bulkhead." Duke answered.

"If we don't find any other answers we'll have to cut out a section and take it back to the Ascension. Maybe Forrester can tell us what sort of weapon hit it then." Ash said.

"There's blood on the floor as well." Reese added, looking down at the deck plates where there was a trail of blood that either came from or led under the door to the sickbay.

"Disruptor blasts can cause serious bleeding if they just glance you." Duke pointed out.

"So maybe someone got clipped and the rest of the blast hit the wall." Ash said and he pointed towards the door to sickbay, "In which case it looks like they went in there. So let's see what's behind the door."

The door mechanism had been damaged during the attack and Ash and Duke had to drag it open with their bare hands. This required them to holster their phasers and as he took hold of one side of the door Ash looked at Reese.

"Deborah you'll have to cover us." he told her and she sighed.

"I'm a doctor, not a soldier." she commented.

"You still have a phaser doctor." Duke pointed out and Reese lowered her tricorder, letting the strap across her body support it while she drew her phaser from its holster on her leg and activated it before taking aim at the doorway.

"It's set on 'stun'." she said.

"That'll do fine I hope." Ash replied and then he looked at Duke and added, "On three. One. Two. Three!"

Ash and Duke pulled the doors apart simultaneously before quickly drawing their phasers.

"It's clear." Reese told them, "But a mess."

Duke entered the sickbay first and looked around. A number of the ceiling mounted lighting panels had been smashed and the biobeds had all been upturned. All of the cupboards and drawers in the room had been opened and their contents had been scattered around the room. Many of these contents appeared as if they had been crushed underfoot and fragments of them were spread over wide areas.

"It looks like someone tried to hold out in here." he said.

"But hold out against who?" Ash said as he and Reese followed Duke into the room.

"Well I think that this answers the question of which way the blood trail was running." Duke added, peering over the improvised barrier to where he saw the beginnings of the blood trails, indicating that bodies had been dragged from the room.

"Look at this." Reese said when she peered over the barrier and saw a handheld device lying on the floor. Climbing over the barrier Reese picked up the device and held it out towards the two men, "It's a bone-knitting laser. Someone's cranked this up to full power."

"How effective would that be as a weapon?" Ash asked.

"Not very. The range would be a couple of metres at most." Reese said.

"It would be better than nothing though." Duke pointed out.

"Only just." Reese replied.

"Not that it did them any good." Ash said as he looked around, "Does anything here look out of place to you doctor?"

Reese stared at him.

"Are you kidding?" she replied, "It would take weeks to figure out where everything in here was supposed to be."

"Then we'll move on to the crew quarters. Maybe there will be clues there." Ash said.

The security guard who had accompanied the away team darted into the hold narrowly ahead of Forrester and the medical orderly and the trio found themselves in a large chamber that had been almost completely emptied. All the blood trails that the team had seen appeared to lead here and they had expected to see a pile of corpses when they opened the door. However, while the blood trails did end in the cargo hold there were no signs of the bodies that had left them. In fact there was very little at all in the large compartment.

"Looks like they took almost everything commander." the medical orderly said.

"Beamed out." Forrester replied, nodding his head as he looked around, "Look, the only things left are in the corners." and he pointed to the few remaining cargo containers, some of which had been broken open to spill

their contents onto the floor, "Whoever did this just set the centre of the room as the target point and grabbed everything within a specific horizontal radius."

"Is that what broke open these containers?" the security guard asked as he walked closer to one of the damaged cargo containers.

"Careful." Forrester warned him, stepping forwards so that he could reach out and grab the security guard, "Until we know exactly what's in those crates we need to treat them as hazardous. Let's head on to engineering. We'll go back out the way we came in and then go around" he told the other two men before they all retreated back through the door they had entered the cargo hold through.

Familiar with the general specifications of the freighter, Forrester was able to easily find his team a route that took them around the looted cargo to the engineering section located amidships towards the rear of the freighter where its bulky impulse drive could easily be accessed. The freighter's impulse engines occupied all four decks of the vessel and so the engineering section also needed to span all four and when Forrester entered the compartment on the lowest level he looked upwards to get a quick feel for the state of its drives. "I do not want to be the one who has to fix this." he said as he stared at the ruined engineering section. In order to immobilise the freighter, its engineering section had been specifically targeted by its attackers and as such had borne the brunt of the damage. The attackers had fired on the impulse engines with directed energy weapons rather than torpedoes and so the damage done to the engineering section had come from secondary explosions in the drives rather than the weapon hits themselves. This also meant that the chamber was not opened to space. Emergency barriers had sealed themselves as soon as the impulse drives were hit, sealing engineering off from the destroyed drives. This kept the atmosphere inside the freighter but did nothing to extinguish the fires that then spread inside the engineering section. The damage that these had caused was extensive, Forrester could not see a single piece of equipment that had been left untouched by the now burned out flames and a section of the walkways that permitted movement between different levels of the compartment had collapsed.

"We've got a body over here." the medical orderly suddenly called out when he noticed an arm lying under a pile of wreckage and all three men ran towards it.

The arm was burned black and any clothing that had once covered it had been consumed by the fire.

"Give me a hand lifting this." Forrester told the security guard and between them they lifted up the wreckage so that the medical orderly could carefully slide the body out from beneath it.

The body was sufficiently intact that the orderly was able to do this without any parts of it breaking off but the remains were so badly charred that it was impossible to identify the species beyond it being humanoid in form. However, the size and general shape did indicate that it had been a man.

"So what killed him?" Forrester asked, "Did he burn to death or was he already dead when he was set on fire?"

"Scanning now commander." the medical orderly replied, taking out his tricorder and running the probe over the body, "The lungs are still intact," he said, "and I'm picking up residue from smoke particles. He was definitely alive when the fire started because he breathed in the smoke. That may have been enough to kill him before he actually burned."

"Keep us covered." Forrester told the security guard as he holstered his phaser and opened his own tricorder before beginning to scan the compartment. However, rather than biological data, Forrester was searching for active energy signatures and he found these somewhere above him on the opposite side of the engineering section. "Something's still running up there."

"Can we get up to it without having to go all the way around?" the security guard asked, looking up in the hope that he would see some sign of activity.

"I think the walkway over there looks sound enough. It's mainly sections right by the impulse drives that have collapsed." Forrester responded and he began to walk across the engineering compartment, still scanning with his tricorder.

The flight of steps that Forrester led his team to had suffered some damage from the shrapnel from an internal explosion and so he slowly applied pressure with his foot on the first step to make sure that it would take his weight.

"You two wait here for now. There's a chance that this structure won't take the weight of all of us." Forrester said before he began to slowly climb the damaged stairs, monitoring the growing strength of the energy reading he was detecting behind the elevated background radiation level leaking through the freighter's hull. The readings steadily increased as Forrester climbed the stairs to the second level and he paused as he felt the walkway shift slightly under his weight. Then when it remained stable he held out his tricorder closer to the wall where the power source seemed to be located.

"Commander Forrester, are you okay up there?" the medical orderly called out from below.

"Fine." Forrester responded, "You can come up if you want, this walkway is stable enough."

"What have you found commander?" the security guard said as he began to climb the stairs as well.

"The ship's emergency batteries." Forrester said as he continued to study his tricorder, "And I don't like the look of these readings." he added as he reached for his communicator, "Forrester to Captain Ash." he said

into the device.

"Ash here. Go ahead Forrester." Ash responded.

"Captain I've found the freighter's emergency batteries. They're the only source of power this ship has right now and even without most of the major systems running they're being depleted." Forrester told him.

"How long have we got?" Ash asked, sighing.

"At the current rate of energy expenditure I'd say that we'll lose gravity in about six hours and the air recycling and what's left of the lighting will pack up about ten minutes after that. We could try remote charging from the *Ascension* but I've not had chance to look at the antenna yet. The coil could have been fried in the attack and we'd just be dumping power into a dead circuit. The other alternative is physically plugging new batteries into the system from the *Ascension* but that could leave us short if we need the power for anything." Forrester explained.

"Okay commander. We'll limit our stay here to make sure that we don't float off the decks or suffocate before we can beam back to the *Ascension*. Do you have anything else to report?" Ash replied.

"The cargo hold had been emptied by a rapid transport. It looked quick and dirty, all whoever hit this ship did was specify a central point around which everything on that level was to be taken. Anything just partially in the area got sliced through." Forrester said.

"I hope that didn't include any of the crew." Ash commented.

"I don't think so captain, although we didn't hang around too long in the hold just in case the freighter was shipping anything toxic that had got spilled when half its container just vanished." Forrester said.

"In that case we'll avoid the hold as well." Ash said.

"We did find a body here in engineering though." Forrester continued.

"One of the crew?"

"Yes captain. Badly burned by the fire that had broken out in here. Ensign Mayer says that the dead man definitely inhaled some smoke but can't give an exact cause of death." Forrester said.

"Okay, have the body beamed back to the *Ascension* right away. It can be put in storage until Doctor Reese can take a look at it." Ash ordered.

The scene in the crew quarters was the same as in other areas of the ship, with furniture upturned and smashed and blood but no bodies. What remained of the furniture suggested that it had been old and battered before the freighter was attacked but now there was little left of any use. However, it did reveal something about the attack.

"Captain take a look at this." Duke said, crouching down beside the remains of what had been a cushioned plastic seat. Now the frame had been snapped and the cushioning torn open.

"What is it chief?" Ash responded as he walked over and looked down at the chair.

"See how this covering is torn?" Duke said and Ash just nodded, "That was done by a blade. You can tell from the way it's so smooth. If it had been ripped open then edges would be more jagged."

"So our mystery attackers were using blades here as well as on the bridge." Reese commented from behind the two men, "Any chance you can tell what sort of weapon did that?"

"Sorry doctor, all I can tell you is that it was sharp." Duke said.

"Which doesn't get us terribly far." Ash said, "Pirates are generally a pretty bloodthirsty lot and any of them could carry a good sharp knife regardless of species."

"Someone's been through the galley." Reese said, standing by a nearby doorway and looking into an adjoining room, "I don't know if anything was taken though. There are ration packs all over the place."

"So our pirates obviously aren't that hungry." Ash said, "Odd for pirates. Why go to the effort of dragging off the crew but leave rations behind that they could use or sell?"

"Maybe they don't eat our food doc. Know any species like that?" Duke pointed out.

"Plenty. Tholians for example, but since when did the Tholians turn to regular piracy? They take entire ships if they enter territory they claim but you don't see them travelling outside their borders much." Reese replied.

"I think we've seen enough here." Ash said as he reached for his communicator, "Ash to *Ascension*." he said into it.

"*Ascension* here captain." the voice of the communication technician filling in for Estevez responded.

"Tomlin we've completed our sweep. We're ready to beam back now." Ash told him.

"Affirmative sir. Commander Forrester and his team have already returned with the body to be examined." Tomlin told him.

"Good. Have the transporter room lock onto us and beam us back." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain. Be advised that the transporter room is reporting up to a thirty second lock time due to excessive background radiation." Tomlin replied.

"Understood. We'll be patient petty officer. Ash out." Ash said before folding up his communicator and returning it to his belt.

The three members of the away team then waited as the *Ascension's* transporter system locked onto them before they dematerialised from the freighter and appeared back on the *Ascension's* transporter pads to find

Forrester himself at the controls.

"Welcome back captain." the ship's chief engineer said, "I thought I'd better operate the controls myself given the current conditions."

"It's much appreciated Adam." Ash replied, stepping down off the transporter pad.

"Likewise." Reese added before ejecting the power cell from her phaser and handing both of them to Duke,

"Chief could I ask you to return these to the armoury?"

"Certainly doctor." Duke replied as he took the weapon and its power pack from her.

"The body has been delivered to sickbay for you doctor. I should warn you it's in a pretty bad state." Forrester added and Reese nodded.

"Okay. Unfortunately I'm used to that sort of thing." she replied.

"Report to me as soon as soon as you've finished your examination. I'll call a staff meeting then." Ash told her, "That goes for you as well Forrester." he added as Reese left the transporter room, "There's a damaged bulkhead aboard the freighter that needs bringing back for you to examine. It looks like it was hit by a disruptor blast and I want to know what sort of weapon inflicted the damage. Chief Duke can tell you where it is."

"Yes captain. Using the transporter might affect the analysis so I'll send an engineering team over in a shuttle to recover it as soon as possible." Forrester responded.

"Good. Now if anyone needs anything else I'll be on the bridge." Ash said and then he too exited the room.

## 4.

Returning to the *Ascension's* bridge, Ash found that the captain's chair was vacant. Despite having been left in command of the ship Tan had remained at the science station.

"Didn't fancy keeping my seat warm for me then commander?" Ash asked as he sat down, smiling at the science officer.

"I thought manning the science station was more efficient captain." Tan replied.

"Very well commander. You are forgiven this time. Now what does everyone have to report?" Ash said.

"Our navigational deflectors are still holding and our tractor beam is stable captain. That freighter's not moved so much as a metre since you went aboard it." Etchemin told him.

"Very good. Commander Tan, have you found anything in the system?" Ash said.

"Nothing yet captain. On the basis that this system could be being used by pirates as a regular hunting ground I have tried running scans of the stars' to see if there were any signs of other derelict vessels falling into them but the level of interference is too great for accurate readings at this range. There are also no active warp signatures other than our own within scanning range." Tan answered.

"And you Teela?" Ash added.

"Nothing captain. As Lieutenant Etchemin so accurately stated the freighter hasn't moved a metre so we've been holding position as well, leaving nothing for me to do but pine for your return so we can go somewhere." Teela said before suddenly adding, "That's 'we' as in the *Ascension* and all of her crew, not just you and me you understand. I wouldn't want you or Doctor Reese to think I was trying to-

"Lieutenant Commander Teela." Ash interrupted.

"Yes captain?"

"You're babbling. Please stop." Ash told her.

"Yes captain." Teela replied before looking down at her console intently again, despite there being little to see at that time while Etchemin grinned at her.

"Communications?" Ash said, glancing towards the communication station currently occupied by Petty Officer Tomlin.

"Quiet captain. We're too close to the stars to get clear signals from outside the system and there's no-one inside it broadcasting anything." he answered.

Aboard the *Spectral Claw*, Rigat-Captain entered the warship's hangar. When the vessel had first been constructed this chamber had been intended for the deployment of assault shuttles and atmospheric attack flyers. However, with the assault shuttles replaced by transporter technology and only a handful of attack flyers left in the service of the Kzinti Empire given the stringent conditions of the Treaty of Sirius it was now used purely for utility craft and since the number of these needed was much smaller most of the available space was empty.

Rigat-Captain and his crew had put this extra space to use by taking the shuttles from some of the vessels they had attacked and storing them here for return to the empire for its use and now one of these was being prepared for launch.

"First Officer." he called out to where his immediate subordinate stood with Marine Sergeant as they oversaw the preparations to attack the *Ascension*. Both Kzinti had led the raids on the Federation cargo ships in this sector and the ears of some of the crew they had killed or captured hung around their necks as trophies.

"Rigat-Captain." First Officer responded, turning to face the ship's commanding officer.

"How near to being ready to launch are you?" Rigat-Captain asked.

"We are within claw's reach Rigat-Captain. Marine Sergeant and I have selected two-eights of heroes to board the enemy vessel. An engineering crewman will pilot our craft." First Officer told him. The Kzinti used a base eight numbering system so the 'two-eights', or sixteen, that he referred to was the Kzinti equivalent of the number twenty to a human. Rigat-Captain turned to look at the shuttlecraft that had been chosen for the raid. The vessel was a large example of its type for the Federation but to the Kzinti who stood well over two metres tall it would obviously be cramped to fit a boarding party of eighteen plus their equipment and a pilot inside, "Third Engineer has modified the Federation craft for our use." First Officer continued, "The seating was too small and has been ripped out to provide more space. Only Engineering Crewman will sit, the pilot's seat has been replaced with one more suitable to our stature."

Rigat-Captain had gone over the information available for the Federation's Miranda-class destroyers briefly and he knew that there were several different variants in service. The vessel here in the Khasran system was one of the most powerful of the class and its crew would likely consist of more than two hundred officers and enlisted men.

"You will be outnumbered more than ten to one. Are your warriors prepared for this?" he said and First Officer growled.

"They are Rigat-Captain." he answered, "The majority of the enemy will be unarmed when we first arrive, speed and surprise will be our advantage. Few of the crew will be true fighters as is the case aboard one of our own vessels so the odds will not be as against us as the simple numbers would suggest. Federation doctrine calls for them to use gas to contain boarding parties and revolt but the chemical they used must be inhaled to be effective so I have issued gas masks to protect us from this. We will strike at key areas of their ship, such as engineering and the bridge, to prevent them from co-ordinating their defence before we hunt the rest of crew."

"They may try to hide in confined spaces where we cannot follow." Marine Sergeant added, "We will use gas of our own to flush out any who try. Eight and four portable cylinders have been loaded aboard the shuttle."

"Once we have control of their engineering section we will also cut the power and life support to sections we have no use for." First Officer said.

"I want prisoners First Officer." Rigat-Captain told him, "For interrogation, not just for feasting on. A Starfleet captain will know much of their defences in this sector and could reveal much before I personally rip out their liver for the Highest of Kzin. Rather than just pick at their shipping we could strike at their colonies and outposts and be away before Starfleet could arrive. I am certain that Nargat-Sirit-Admiral himself would find use for the vessel in his fleet as well so keep that in mind before causing too much damage to it. Bring me that ship and its captain and you will have earned yourself a partial name First Officer."

"Yes Rigat-Captain." First Officer responded, the sides of his mouth lifting in a smile. He did not expose his teeth as a human might while smiling though, such an action among Kzinti was a challenge to combat rather than an indication of happiness.

"Get aboard the shuttle and prepare for departure First Officer. The human vessel will not stay close enough to the stars in this system to keep them isolated for long. You must have seized it before they can warn others of our presence here." Rigat-Captain ordered.

When Reese, Forrester and Estevez had all had time to carry out their analyses Ash called his senior officers together in the *Ascension's* briefing room.

"Ensign Estevez we'll start with you I think. What did you learn from the freighter's flight recorder?" he said, leaning back in his chair as he looked at her.

"The freighter is called the *Permanence* and is registered in the Tellar system." Estevez replied, reading from her PADD, "It was carrying a cargo of impulse drive parts when it was attacked about five days ago."

"Did the log identify the attackers?" Ash asked but Estevez shook her head.

"No captain I'm afraid it didn't. The attacking ship was running without a transponder and made no effort to establish or respond to any communications. The audio recordings do show that the crew recognised the attacking ship and they were obviously concerned about being captured by them, but they never spoke this identity out loud." she answered.

"So it could have been a species they recognised or a criminal faction." Etchemin commented.

"The Orion Syndicate is pretty active in the border regions." Teela pointed out.

"Let's not jump to any conclusion just yet lieutenant commander." Ash said before he turned to Reese,

"Doctor did your examination reveal anything?" but she too shook her head.

"Nothing that would identify his killers captain." she said, "He died from smoke inhalation before his body was burned. The only other injuries appear to be a result of being struck by wreckage."

"Interesting that his body was left behind though." Tan commented, "Why leave that one alone when all of the others were removed?"

"It could as simple as it got overlooked." Forrester commented.

"Perhaps. Now what about the hull plate you examined?" Ash said and Forrester consulted his PADD.

"As Chief Duke suggested the damage was caused by a disruptor blast. Unfortunately the damage was mainly cosmetic. Whoever fired the blast only sustained it long enough to scorch the surface layer. If it had penetrated even a centimetre then I could have told you far more from the way it affected the molecular structure. I know there's plenty of blast damage to the hull but given the radiation in this system I doubt that I could get a clean reading from any of them after the ship has been drifting her for five days." he said.

"So to sum up we have a flight log that talks about the attackers' vessel and shows them on sensors without ever naming them. A body that the attackers may not have even come into contact with and a bulkhead plate that isn't badly damaged enough to provide any answers. Am I missing anything?" Ash said, looking around the table at the other officers gathered in the room.

"That sounds like an adequate description of the situation. Although I wouldn't apportion blame to anyone here captain." Tan said.

"Oh I'm not. It's just annoying that we have these clues but each of them is missing key information. I don't like having to take this to Starfleet with so little to show for it." Ash replied.

"Captain even though my scans so far have shown no further indication of wreckage in the system there could still be the remains of other vessels in the area. Perhaps if we could locate one of them then it would offer us the answers we need." Tan suggested.

"We've still got plenty of sensor drones left. We could cover a pretty wide area with them captain." Etchemin added and Ash nodded.

"That's what we'll do then." Ash said, "Lieutenant Commander Tan, I want you, Lieutenant Commander Teela and Lieutenant Etchemin to work together to plot the most efficient search pattern possible with our available sensor drones."

"How many are we allowed to use?" Etchemin asked.

"All of them. Starfleet can replace them easily enough." Ash said and then he looked at Teela and added, "I'm sorry Teela but this will delay the private getaway you requested for the pair of us." and Reese stared at Teela as well.

"Oh really?" she said.

"Oh come on that's not what I said." Teela protested.

"Hands up everyone who heard her say it." Tan said and then he, Ash, Etchemin and Forrester all raised their hands.

"You weren't even on the bridge." Teela said to Forrester.

"Not on the bridge for what?" Estevez asked.

"I give up." Teela said, throwing her arms upwards.

"I think that's a good point to bring this meeting to a close." Ash said, "I want a search pattern in an hour." The officers then all got up to return to their duties and Reese leant towards Tan who had been sat beside her during the meeting.

"Looks like you get to spend more time sight seeing after all James." she said to him quietly.

"First Sensor Operator, what is the Starfleet vessel doing now?" Rigat-Captain asked when he saw new sensor contacts appear on the *Spectral Claw's* monitors.

"They do not fly towards us Rigat-Captain. They are not torpedoes." the other Kzinti answered.

"I did not ask what was not happening. Tell me what is or summon Second Sensor Operator to take your place." Rigat-Captain hissed.

"They look like sensor drones Rigat-Captain." First Sensor Operator replied, "They appear to be spreading out around the system's stars."

"Then the Starfleet vessel intends to conduct a full search of the system." Rigat-Captain said as he reached for the intercom, "Hangar this is the bridge. First Officer, you are to launch now." he said.

The *Spectral Claw's* hangar decompressed rapidly, adding a forcefield across the opening had not been on the list of upgrades for the warship so the air inside the hangar had to be removed first to avoid it being lost into space. Once this was done, however the stolen shuttlecraft now crammed with heavily armed Kzinti was able to fire its thrusters and exit the vessel without resistance.

Engineering Crewman fired the shuttle's thrusters again at full power as soon as it was clear of the *Spectral Claw*, propelling it away without risking using the impulse drive that could potentially be detected even with the elevated levels of radiation in the system.

"First Officer we are clear and under way." Engineering Crewman said.

"When will you fire the thrusters again?" First Officer asked in response. The shuttle was now travelling in a straight line that would take it away from the *Ascension* and so it was obvious that its course would need to be changed.

"Soon First Officer. Once we are far enough from the asteroid field to be able to disguise it being our point of origin." Engineering Crewman answered.

"The Starfleet vessel could see us." Marine Sergeant pointed out.

"That is necessary." First Officer told him, "On thrusters alone it will take eights of hours or days to reach them. On the other hand if they detect us they will assume that we require their assistance and will come and pick us up. They will take us right into their ship." First Officer then turned around to face the Kzinti troops crammed into the back of the shuttlecraft. With no room to sit down the massive felines were stood shoulder to shoulder, steadying themselves on straps fixed to the ceiling, "We will divide ourselves into four units." he told them, "I will lead the first unit to the enemy bridge to seize their command and control centre. Marine Sergeant will lead another unit to their engineering section to take control of the humans' power plants and prevent them from destroying their own ship. The third unit will seek out their armoury to cut off their supply of arms. The final unit will be our rear guard, they will protect the hangar where we will relocate any prisoners we take. We will deploy police webs to contain them. Rigat-Captain's orders are clear, he wants senior officers from the target taken alive for interrogation before death and the collateral damage to the ship itself is to be kept to a minimum. Rigat-Captain intends to present it to Nargat-Sirit-Admiral to be used in his fleet."

## 5.

"All sensor drones deployed captain." Etchemin reported when the last of the *Ascension's* remote probes had been launched from the destroyer's torpedo module.

"How does the spread pattern look commander?" Ash asked, looking towards the science station.

"Good captain. All of the drones are following their assigned flight paths. We should make preparations to follow them before the stars' interference blocks their data feeds." Tan replied and Ash nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Teela stand by on thrusters, back us away from the stars. Mister Etchemin, as soon as we reach a thousand kilometres per hour I want you to release the *Permanence* from our tractor beam." he ordered.

"Yes captain." Etchemin responded.

"Teela, fire thrusters." Ash ordered.

"Firing thrusters now captain." Teela said as she triggered the *Ascension's* forward thrusters. The low powered drive took a moment to overcome the combined inertia of the Starfleet destroyer as well as the freighter still tethered to it by the tractors beam but after that the two vessels began to gently accelerate away from the system's stars, "One hundred kilometres per hour." she added as the ships' joint velocity increased, "Two hundred. Five hundred." she continued before smiling and added, "One thousand kilometres per hour."

"Now Mister Etchemin if you wouldn't mind." Ash said.

"Releasing tractor beam." Etchemin announced as he shut off the beam connecting the two starships together.

Teela fired the *Ascension's* thrusters again, this time taking the ship downwards relative to its alignment and also slowing its existing velocity so that the *Permanence* drifted over it as it continued on its course towards the outer system. Of course at a velocity of just one thousand kilometres per hour it would take many decades for the freighter to drift beyond the system entirely but it was no longer at risk of being pulled into either of the Khasran system's twin stars.

"Permanence is drifting freely captain. On course." Tan reported, watching the motion of the freighter carefully.

"Good. Teela stand by on impulse drive, we'll follow those sensor drones now." Ash said.

"Yes captain. Impulse power ready at your command." Teela responded.

"Helm engage impulse-" Ash began before Tan suddenly interrupted him.

"Captain wait." he said, looking up from his console.

"Something wrong commander?" Ash asked, turning his chair to face towards Tan.

"Captain I just detected a brief energy pulse from further outwards in the system than our current location. It looks like a small craft firing its thrusters. Bearing one seven four mark zero three. Range two hundred and thirty-two million kilometres." Tan replied.

"The pirates trying to sneak up on us?" Etchemin suggested.

"Unlikely lieutenant." Tan said, "The thruster was fired in open space. They must have known that we would detect it. Assuming that they are even aware of our presence." Tan said.

"You think they might not have seen us?" Ash responded.

"The energy level was low captain. Too low to affect the motion of a vessel as large as a starship. I believe we are dealing with a shuttlecraft." Tan explained.

"Survivors from the freighter?" Teela said.

"The *Permanence's* manifest didn't list a shuttle as part of the equipment." Estevez told her.

"This could be the proof we have been looking for that there have been other victims of piracy in this system." Tan suggested.

"Ensign Estevez, see if you can open a hailing frequency." Ash said and Estevez immediately reached for her console.

"This is the Federation starship *USS Ascension* calling unidentified shuttle. We have you on our sensors, do you require assistance?" she signalled then after a few seconds during which there was no response she added, "This is the *USS Ascension* calling shuttlecraft. Identify yourself." but again there was no reply from the other craft, "They aren't answering captain. Shall I keep trying?" Estevez asked.

"The use of a thruster indicates that there is someone alive aboard the shuttle." Tan said, "Their communication system may be damaged."

"In which case they could have received our signal but not be able to reply or not have a clue that we're here." Ash said, "Ensign Estevez, keep trying to open a hailing frequency. Let them know that we're on our way to them. Lieutenant Commander Teela, I want a course laid in to rendezvous with that shuttlecraft. Full impulse."

"Aye captain. Steering one seven four mark zero two. Full impulse." Teela responded as she turned the



*Ascension* towards the distant shuttlecraft and engaged the ship's sub-light engines at full power.

"Shuttlecraft this is the *USS Ascension*. Do you read me?" Estevez's voice said as the Kzinti listened carefully, "We are on approach. Our ETA is approximately one and a half hours. Please respond if you are able. We will bring you aboard our vessel."

"It worked. They've seen us." Marine Sergeant said.

"And more importantly they think us helpless victims." First Officer responded before he looked down at Engineering Crewman, "Are you certain they will not be able to detect our presence in here?" he asked.

"Positive First Officer." the junior Kzinti answered, "The impulse drive has been rigged to produce an interference field that will disrupt detailed scans. The humans will be able to detect the presence of life forms inside this craft but they will be unable to determine our numbers or species."

"So they'll take us to be survivors of a lost ship and take us aboard theirs to rescue us." Marine Sergeant commented.

"Yes Marine Sergeant." Engineering Crewman replied, "Superior to blanket jamming that could make them think the shuttle was empty."

"Take no further action." First Officer ordered, "Monitor their signals but do not respond and do not use our thrusters again. They are coming to us."

Reese looked around as the doors to sickbay slid open, expecting to see a patient enter but instead she smiled as she saw Ash walking through the doorway.

"Mike." she said.

"Deborah." Ash responded, "We've detected what could be a shuttle from another ship that was attacked."

"Where? Is anyone aboard it still alive?" Reese asked.

"It's further out in the system than we are, more than two hundred million kilometres away and Tan only spotted it because someone aboard used a thruster. It'll take us more than an hour and a half to reach them. Estevez has tried to establish contact but so far without success. Now it may be just a damaged antenna that's stopping them from receiving our signal or responding with one of their own." Ash told her.

"But they could also be hurt." Reese replied, "I'll make sure that we're ready here and I'll have a team on standby for when we rendezvous with them. I don't suppose you've any idea how many people we could be talking about do you?"

"Sorry but we haven't been able to ID the shuttle, even its class yet. It could just be a single pilot or it could be a personnel transport with forty people inside." Ash said and Reese nodded.

"Okay, okay, I'll work on a worst case basis and prepare for a major influx of patients." she said.

"Have your people assemble in the hangar. Given all the interference in the system we'll tractor the shuttle aboard instead of risking the transporter on casualties." Ash said before he leant in and quickly kissed Reese on the cheek.

"A peck on the cheek in exchange for a mass casualty evacuation?" Reese called out as he walked back towards the exit from sickbay, "I expect a lot more than that tonight Mike."

"Captain we're close enough for a visual scan now." Tan announced as the *Ascension* closed in on the unidentified shuttlecraft.

"Main screen please commander." Ash said and an image of the shuttle appeared on the main view screen at the front of the bridge.

The shuttle was clearly an older model with a block shaped hull that sloped at the front and possessed a pair of cylindrical warp nacelles that doubled as landing struts. A single side mounted hatch provided access while two narrow rectangular viewports were visible on the front face of the hull. These viewports were constructed of a material that could be darkened to protect the occupants from sudden bursts of light and it was easy to see that for some reason these had been set to their maximum darkness, rendering them impossible to see through on the visual scan.

"The shuttle is a Class-F vessel captain." Tan said, "I am detecting no signs of activity within its warp or impulse system."

"Was it attacked?" Ash asked.

"I do not think so captain. The hull is undamaged." Tan answered, "A vessel such as this would not escape damage if it was hit by any starship mounted weapon."

"Okay. What about life readings?" Ash added.

"Affirmative captain. There are life readings from inside the craft. However, I cannot tell how many there are or if any of them are injured." Tan said as he studied the results of the scan.

"How long until we get within tractor beam range?" Ash said.

"Five more minutes captain." Teela responded.

"Good. Position us with the shuttle to aft lieutenant commander. Mister Etchemin lock a tractor beam onto it and bring it into the hangar as soon you can. Ensign Estevez please inform the hangar to stand by." Ash

ordered.

"Yes captain." Teela replied as Estevez contacted the hangar, telling the engineering and medical teams assembled there that the shuttle would be arriving within the next few minutes.

Teela slowed the *Ascension* as the starship closed in on the now drifting shuttle and matched the course and speed at which it was drifting.

"Still no response from the shuttle to our hails captain." Estevez said.

"Given the lack of damage, the occupants may have shut down their communications to conserve power for life support." Tan said.

"But that would shut down the transponder that would guide rescuers to them." Etchemin pointed out.

"They may not be sufficiently knowledgeable to realise that." Tan suggested.

"We can ask them once they're aboard." Ash said as Teela was realigning the *Ascension* to put the shuttle behind it from where a tractor beam could easily drag it into one of the ship's two aft shuttle bays.

"In position now captain." Teela announced when she had done this.

"Tractor beam locked on target." Etchemin added, "Engaging now."

The *Ascension's* tractor beam latched onto the shuttle and Etchemin used this to reorientate the tiny craft so that it matched that of the larger destroyer before pulling it closer. The door to one of the *Ascension's* hangars slid openly slowly, a forcefield maintaining the pressure inside the ship unlike on the Kzinti vessel and the shuttle continued to be drawn closer.

Inside the *Ascension's* hangar two teams of crewmen waited, watching the shuttle as it was pulled inside.

One of these consisted of members of the starship's engineering staff, ready to conduct any emergency damage control that may be needed while the other team were medical staff there to assess any injuries that the shuttle's occupants may have suffered.

The tractor beam caused a slight tremor in the shuttle when it locked on and the Kzinti crowded inside the tiny vessel all growled as they were pushed back and forth against one another.

"Prepare yourselves." First Officer told them, "The human have this craft in their tractor beam. We will be inside their ship in just a short time. Marine Sergeant you will have the honour of the first claw strike."

"Thank you First Officer." Marine Sergeant responded and he made his way to just inside the hatch at the side of the shuttlecraft, waiting for the right time to open it.

"You know your tasks." First Officer said as the Kzinti drew their weapons, "Secure the hangar as quickly as possible but avoid using your disruptors where possible. Starfleet vessels have sensors that will detect high energy weapons fire automatically and the longer it takes for the human captain to know he is under attack the better for us."

The shuttle suddenly lurched again as the tractor beam set it down rather heavily and the Kzinti rocked back and forth again. Following this the Kzinti stood in silence, facing the inside of the hatch and bearing their teeth in challenge to anyone who opened it. What followed though was a sudden knocking on the hatch accompanied by muffled shouts from the outside for it to be opened. Then when the Kzinti did not respond there was another knock and a different call.

"We're coming in. Stand clear of the hatch." a human voice said.

"Now Marine Sergeant. For the Fanged God!" First Officer hissed and Marine Sergeant reached out for the emergency release control beside the hatch.

When pulled this triggered the explosive bolts built into the hatch and it flew off outwards across the hangar. A pair of engineers who had been in the process of preparing to trigger the same bolts from the outside were struck by the flying hatch and both knocked easily aside by its weight while the other crewmen present all recoiled as the sound of the blast echoed around the hangar. Before the hatch even landed on the hangar deck Marine Sergeant let out a loud roar as he leapt from the shuttle and landed beside a startled engineer who looked up in a mixture of terror and surprise at the feline alien now towering over him. With one swift swing of his arm Marine Sergeant clawed open the engineer's chest and produced a massive spray of blood. Behind Marine Sergeant the other Kzinti warriors led by First Officer also burst out of the shuttle as rapidly as the single hatch would allow them to do so and they began firing their weapons at the gathered *Ascension* crewmen.

When they regained their senses the *Ascension's* crew present inside the hangar opted to either flee or find somewhere to hide. None of them were armed and so trying to fight even a single Kzinti would be suicidal and they knew it. For all their size and bulk the Kzinti moved quickly in an open area like the *Ascension's* hangar though and as the Starfleet crew attempted to escape they were swiftly run down. Those who the Kzinti did not kill out of hand were grabbed by the muscular felines rather than clawed and dragged kicking and screaming back towards the shuttle where Engineering Crewman had tossed a number of police webs from the craft and was now in the process of unrolling the hexagonal floor mats and connecting them together so they covered a single large area of the hangar deck.

"Hold them just a while longer." Engineering Crewman told the Kzinti troops bringing their prisoners towards him and he bounded back to the shuttle where he opened a panel that gave him access to the craft's power

supply, using this to activate the police web. As soon as it was connected the air above the police web began to sparkle and Engineering Crewman turned to the Kzinti holding prisoners, "Now. Push them in." he called out and the other Kzinti pushed their prisoners onto the area covered by the interconnected police webs. Once on top of these the captive crewmen were free to wander within the extents of the net but to attempt to step over the boundary or separate any of the individual nets would result in a sudden and agonising electrical shock.

The hangar was overlooked by a control booth manned by two of the *Ascension's* crew and as soon as he had emerged from the shuttle First Officer sprinted towards the ladder that led up to it before pulling himself up the ladder and bursting into the control booth before either of the crew could react to the sudden assault. With the back of his hand First Officer knocked the closest of the booth's operators to the floor before noticing that this individual was obviously female. Kzinti females were little more than animals that were the property of their mates and to the Kzinti mindset the females of other species were often seen in exactly the same way. Therefore, First Officer quickly shifted his attention to the second crewman in the booth and lunged at him, clawing at his chest and throat. This gave the woman he had struck the chance to regain her senses though and she dived for the console, slamming her hand down on the intercom.

"Hangar to bridge, we're under attack! It's the Kzinti!" she screamed as loudly as she could.

Upon hearing this First Officer let go of the crewman he had just mauled and spun back around to face the woman. Then he lunged at her, roaring as he did so and the force of the impact of his fast moving body hurled her away from the console so hard that she flew out of the control booth and plummeted screaming to the floor below where she landed with a 'crunch' and lay still.

"The human was able to alert the rest of the crew, they know we are here." First Officer called out as he swiftly climbed back down the ladders from the control booth, "You may use your disruptors from now on, it will make no difference but be aware of their females. Remember that the human ones are as equally cunning to the males."

## 6.

The officers on the *Ascension's* bridge looked at one another in horrified surprise when they heard the warning message from the hangar followed by the sudden roar and scream but Ash reacted quickly.

"Intruder alert!" he snapped, "Send security teams to the hangar as quickly as possible. All crew should arm themselves." and he leapt up from his chair and rushed across the bridge to a compact locker, lifting the cover to reveal the four assault phaser and power packs that it contained.

Tan, Teela and Etchemin all dashed to join Ash as he removed the phasers from the emergency arms locker and handed one to each of them along with a power pack.

"Stun settings may have little effect on a Kzinti." Tan said as he loaded the phaser he had just been given, "Especially if they are wearing any type of modern body armour."

"Is that likely?" Etchemin asked.

"The chances are indeterminate. The Kzinti encountered over the last century have been a mix of renegades and units operating covertly. Their equipment does not follow any fixed pattern. Hopefully someone will survive long enough to tell us." Tan replied.

"So kill it is then." Teela commented as she inserted the power pack into her phaser and adjusted the setting.

"Captain Chief Duke reports that he has reached the security office and opened the armoury. He is issuing phaser rifles and armour to all his men.

"Good. We need to seal off the hangar from the rest of the ship." Ash responded.

"I enabled a security lock out on the hangar as soon as we received the warning." Tan told him, "However, it would be unwise to believe that the Kzinti do not have the means to physically break them down."

"Okay. Mister Etchemin I think its time we engaged full anti-intruder protocols." Ash said.

"Anaesthesia gas? Will that work on Kzinti if a phaser stun won't?" Etchemin said as he returned to his station and began to activate the controls necessary to pump an anaesthetic gas into sections of the ship.

"It should if they breathe enough of it in." Tan said.

"Start with the hangar. Engage anaesthesia gas injection." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain. Injecting gas now." Etchemin replied as he activated the security system.

There was a soft hissing sound that was lost against the background growls and the bangs as the Kzinti hammered at the internal door of the hangar but the felines' keen sense of smell quickly alerted them to the gas being pumped into the room and when First Officer looked around he saw the cloud of disabling vapour emerging from all of the air vents.

"Gas! Gas! Gas!" he yelled and all at once the Kzinti stopped their efforts to escape from the hangar and reached for the gas masks they all carried. The fur that covered their bodies made wearing respirators of any kind difficult and in order to establish a proper seal the Kzinti first had to smear a form of rubbery gel around the edges that would bind with their fur, all of which added to the amount of time it took for them to put their masks on. First Officer knew that if he could smell the gas then he and his men were already breathing it in. However, the concentration was still low and not one of the Kzinti collapsed before his mask was securely in place. On the other hand the Starfleet crew members that had been taken prisoner lacked any form of protection from the gas and they collapsed unconscious onto the police webs that held them captive.

"All heroes still active First Officer." Marine Sergeant said, his mask muffling the sound of his voice somewhat but not to the point that it was unintelligible, "We will return to forcing a way out."

"No." First Officer replied suddenly.

"First Officer?" Marine Sergeant said, confused.

"Have all heroes remain quiet. The Starfleet captain will assume that his gas has done its work and sent his forces to investigate. When they do we shall overpower them and escape." First Officer explained.

"Yes First Officer." Marine Sergeant responded.

As it happened the Kzinti did not have to wait long. The first security unit to arrive was a group of four guards who had been on patrol nearby and as soon as they were told that a Kzinti boarding party had entered through the hangar they all rendezvoused at a point where they could cover the exit with their phasers.

Therefore, when the Kzinti stopped trying to break down the door they heard the banging noises cease.

"Okay now's our chance." the leader of the four said.

"What about the gas? It won't have cleared." another pointed out.

"We'll use the masks from that damage control station. We'll have twenty minutes of air." the unit's leader said, pointing to a nearby emergency locker and he rushed towards it, holstering his phaser as he opened it. Inside were first aid packs, fire extinguishers and most importantly several full face respirators each with their own oxygen supply. He handed these around to his men and they quickly donned them before heading for the entrance to the hangar where the leader took out his communicator and opened it.

"Keller to security. My team is at the hangar and there's no sign of activity. We're going in." he said. Then

without waiting for a reply he closed the communicator again and returned it to his belt before reaching out for the controls to override the door lock out and entering his clearance code. His communicator sounded as Duke called to warn him not to attempt to enter the hangar without more backup but it was too late and he opened the door.

The moment that the door began to open there was a sudden blast of energy from inside that hit the security unit leader in his chest where his armour was thickest and he staggered backwards before a second more powerful shot struck him and he was momentarily enveloped in a strong red light before he was vaporised. The other guards raised their phasers and pointed them at the door but the thick cloud of gas that came billowing out obscured their line of fire before the Kzinti came bounding out of the hangar.

"Damn it!" Duke exclaimed when the alarm sounded in the security office to alert the *Ascension's* security staff to the use of a directed energy weapon on a lethal setting aboard the ship and he activated the intercom again, "Security to bridge. The Kzinti are out of the hangar."

"Yes chief we heard the alarm. Obviously they must some form of protection against the gas and have been able to force the door." Ash responded.

"Sorry captain but I don't think they did." Duke said.

"What do you mean chief?" Ash asked.

"I mean that one of my men opened it. The Kzinti went quiet and he and his team went in to investigate." Duke explained.

"What the hell did he think he was doing?" Ash said.

"He had four men in his team and they're all armed captain." Duke said.

"Well he's left us with one hell of a mess to clear up Duke. Deploy your men to cut off the hangar. Remind them not to challenge the Kzinti in small groups. Bridge out." Ash said before closing the channel.

"Okay let's go." Duke told his men, grabbing hold of the phaser rifle he had already taken from a rack for himself.

A dozen security guards were assembled in the *Ascension's* security office in addition to the two duty staff who remained behind as Duke led the others from the room, all of them armed with phaser rifles in addition to their holstered assault phasers. The larger weapons offered no greater hitting power than the pistol sized assault phasers and the increased range was of no use in the confines of the *Ascension's* rooms and corridors. However, the rifles had larger power packs and this offered the advantage of being allowing the security guards to keep firing for longer, especially useful when there was a Kzinti charging towards someone.

"Etchemin shut off the gas. It obviously isn't going to help. Estevez warn everyone to take shelter. Under no circumstances should anyone challenge them alone and not at all if they don't have a phaser. A Kzinti can rip a person apart in seconds." Ash said before turning to Tan, "Can you tell where they are?" he asked.

"Internal sensors indicate weapons fire in multiple areas captain, the Kzinti are splitting up." Tan responded.

"At least one group be heading for us. Another for engineering." Ash said.

"Captain if we lock down the turbolifts then it will make it harder for the Kzinti to reach us." Teela suggested and Ash nodded just as the door to one of the turbolifts at rear of the bridge slid open and the armed bridge officers all quickly raised their phasers.

"Friendlies!" one of the two security guards that stepped out and quickly raised their hands, holding out the phaser rifles they carried, "Chief Duke ordered us to reinforce you."

"In that case hand out your sidearms. The more armed bodies we have the better." Ash replied before he turned back towards Tan, "Commander have the turbolift system shut down. All cars to halt when they reach their current destinations." he ordered, "Ensign Estevez make sure that everyone knows not to use the turbolifts."

"Yes captain. The galley reports that a number of crew have gathered there and the chief has opened the arms locker to distribute weapons." Estevez replied.

"Good." Ash said, "Now hopefully we find those Kzinti before they find what they're looking for."

"In here quickly!" Forrester called out, waving when he saw a pair of security guards come around a corner supporting an obviously injured crewman between them., "Someone get a first aid kit over here now."

"We've got rat cats behind us. Four, maybe five." one of the guards said, using the slang term for Kzinti that was based off their feline heritage combined with their more rat-like ears and bare tails as they brought the injured man inside engineering and set him down. Moments later a pair of engineers arrived with a first aid kit and began to inspect his injuries. It was obvious that the wounded crewman had encountered the Kzinti, his uniform was sliced open in a set of parallel lines that had been made by the aliens' claws.

"He outran five Kzinti? Impressive." Forrester said, looking down at the man.

"Actually commander he just outran the rest of his duty shift." the other guard commented and Forrester's face fell at the implication of this.

"What weapons do you have commander?" the first security guard asked.

"Including those two phasers of yours?" Forrester responded, "Those two phasers of yours. Since firing off particle weapons near a warp core is seen as a bad idea we don't have an arms locker in here." then after a moment's hesitation he added, "But we do still have phasers of a sort." and he beckoned for the security guards to follow him over to a sealed locker that he entered code into a keypad beside the door to release. Inside the locker were a number of pistol sized cutting torches with separate, bulky power packs.

"Carver get over here and hand these phaser torches out." he called out, "Remember that these only have a range of a couple of metres. Use them as a last resort only. They'll slice through an armoured Kzinti but he'll be close enough to slice through you with his claws as well. Don't go hunting with them. Kim, Deak, come and help me with these phaser bores." and then he removed one of the three heavier cutting tools from the locker. A phaser bore was the size of a bulky rifle that lacked proper sights. Requiring a two-handed grip to operate a phaser bore could cut through more than twenty metres of rock in a minute and although both its range and ammunition capacity were limited the destructive power they possessed was too great to ignore. Under normal circumstances using one aboard a starship would be considered reckless but when the alternative was being overrun by aliens known for eating their prisoners Forrester would use every means at his disposal to defend the engineering section.

"Where should we set up commander?" one of the engineers Forrester had summoned asked and Forrester looked around.

"Up there on the walkway." he replied, pointing to the upper level of engineering, "That gives us a clear field of fire down to this door but steers clear of the warp core." then he turned to the two security guards and added, "You two get over there in that corner. Make sure the Kzinti don't get anywhere near the ladders."

"Yes commander." one of the guards replied as Forrester pointed out where he wanted them to set up. Then as a final point he turned towards one of his engineers, an enlisted woman from the Caitian species. The Caitians were an offshoot of the Kzinti species that was more human in size, retained full sentience of their females but had lost the savage instincts of their ancestors, "M'Sarr keep back. I don't want anyone mistaking you for the enemy." he warned her.

Moving quickly the security guards and engineers took their places and were just about ready when the doorway through which the security guards had entered was hit by a powerful disruptor blast from the outside and exploded inwards.

"Here they come." Forrester called out right before the first Kzinti bounded into engineering with a roar. The alien held a large disruptor rifle that was obviously the weapon used to destroy the door and he swung this around in search of a target. Forrester was ready for him though and he activated the phaser bore he was resting on the safety rail in front of him. Despite the inadequate sights of the cutting tool, the bright blue beam it projected struck the charging Kzinti head on and his roar suddenly became a short lived scream as he was incinerated in under a second.

Behind the first Kzinti, Marine Sergeant halted in the doorway and fired his disruptor up at where Forrester was positioned, forcing the engineer to duck back out of his line of fire. It was then that one of the security guards opened fire and now Marine Sergeant was forced to take cover to avoid being hit by the beam.

"They are well prepared." he told the other three Kzinti warriors accompanying him.

"Could we find another way in Marine Sergeant?" one of them asked.

"No Marine. That would take too much time." Marine Sergeant added. Then he looked at another of his unit and added, "But we can create a screen using that." he said and he pointed to the canister of gas that the other Kzinti carried on his back.

"Yes Marine Sergeant." the Kzinti replied as he unslung the compact cylinder.

There was a 'hiss' as the Kzinti released the valve on the cylinder and then rolled it forwards through the doorway as the gas began to escape. Like the anaesthetic gas used to try and contain intruders aboard Starfleet ships the gas formed a cloud that obscured vision and it was obvious to the engineering section's defenders what was happening.

"That's gas." Forrester called out, "Use respirators, quickly."

The white protective suits that Starfleet engineers wore included an emergency oxygen system and there were masks located all around engineering so they would be easy to reach if there was an emergency. They were intended to allow the ship's engineers to keep working if there was a fire or other contamination of the air due to damage to the ship but they could also be used against some gases and the engineers hurried to distribute these. Not all of the engineers wore the protective suits though, neither did the two security guards and instead they were forced to rush to a standard damage control locker to obtain respirators. While distracted by having to obtain this protective equipment, the Kzinti took advantage of the opportunity to charge through the doorway using the expanding cloud of gas as cover.

Marine Sergeant leapt up and grabbed hold of one of the safety rails around the upper level and dragged himself up before any of the engineers could stop him and behind his gas mask he let out another roar as he charged along it. With the *Ascension's* warp core ahead of him Marine Sergeant did not risk using his disruptor and instead slashed at the engineers too slow to get of his way with his claws, hurling one of them

from the walkway.

Another Kzinti charged out of the gas cloud in a different direction and he fired his disruptor as he ran, shooting several engineers while they were desperately fitting their respirators. Seeing this one of the security guards turned and aimed his phaser at the alien warrior. He had not reached the emergency equipment locker yet though and the gas was starting to affect him. He coughed as he tried to take aim, finding his eyes watering from its effects and when he fired the bright blue beam passed by the Kzinti harmlessly. Alerted to the presence of an enemy, the Kzinti turned to face the guard but was just in time to see him collapse unconscious from the gas.

With his respirator in place Forrester picked up his phaser bore again just as he heard the sound of a phaser torch that was followed by a scream and he turned around to see one of his engineers being stabbed by a Kzinti, the cutting tool falling from his hand. Forrester was about to raise his phaser bore when all of a sudden he saw a blur of movement that for a moment he took to be a second Kzinti warrior. However, he saw the Starfleet uniform just in time as M'Sarr lunged at the Kzinti with another phaser torch in her grip. Although she was no where near as large or strong as the Kzinti, M'Sarr was extremely agile and she was able to leap onto the larger alien's back and press the emitter of the phaser torch to the back of his neck before engaging it. The Kzinti let out a sudden high pitch yowl as it fell before lying silently and motionless on the floor as M'Sarr rolled clear.

The second security guard finished fixing his gas mask in place and drew his phaser just in time to see another Kzinti rushing towards him and he took cover moments before a rapid burst of disruptor blasts flew over his head. Rather than risk rising up from the behind the console that was now absorbing the energy blasts he instead leant around it and fired his phaser at the Kzinti, aiming it low and the beam struck the alien just below the knee. This produced a loud howl of pain as the alien collapsed, rolling forwards until he struck the console the security guard was hiding behind. Acting quickly the security guard now leapt up and fired over the console, finishing off the already wounded alien with a single shot to the chest.

Forrester saw another Kzinti sprinting across the room and was about to fire his phaser bore when all of a sudden he realised that the Kzinti was between him and the *Ascension's* warp core. If he missed then the beam would most likely hit the core and destroy it, potentially taking the entire *Ascension* with it in one giant matter/antimatter explosion. Instead he ran along the walkway to the small elevator that led down to the lower level and jumped in. The descent was painfully slow though and Forrester jumper the last metre.

However, he landed badly and the phaser bore fell from his hand as he rolled. This caught the attention of Marine Sergeant and the senior Kzinti turned towards him and then jumped from the walkway above.

Forrester scabbled away from Marine Sergeant as he landed, backing away as quickly as possible but the Kzinti began to advance. Marine Sergeant raised his disruptor and was about to fire when he noticed the lieutenant commander's bars on Forrester's uniform and he guessed that he was the ship's chief engineer. Knowing that First Officer expected the ship's command staff to be taken alive Marine Sergeant lower his disruptor again and rush forwards, intending to present Forrester to First Officer as a prisoner.

Forrester continued to back up as he saw this and he kept going until he suddenly put his hand down on something familiar, it was the phaser dropped by the unconscious security guard and he grabbed hold of the weapon. Marine Sergeant ground to a sudden halt when he saw Forrester raise the assault phaser and aim it directly at him and he began to bring up his own weapon but he was too slow, Forrester fired the phaser and the bright blue beam burned right through the faceplate of the Kzinti's gas mask before burning through the head of Marine Sergeant himself.

Seeing that he was alone and surrounded by his enemies, the final Kzinti in engineering brought up his disruptor and began firing continuously as he backed towards the warp core, knowing that none of the *Ascension's* crew would dare fire at him if it meant risking hitting the core.

"Everyone stay down." Forrester ordered as the engineers took cover. Then he looked towards the Kzinti and called out to the alien, "You're surrounded. Drop your weapon and surrender." he said but the only response from the Kzinti was another blast from his disruptor that passed above Forrester's head. A phaser set to stun would not damage the warp core, its beam lacking the power to disrupt the magnetic field surrounding it, but it also would not easily bring down a Kzinti. However, the alien warrior was providing an opportunity to overcome this problem himself and Forrester adjusted his phaser to the heaviest 'stun' setting it possessed. Ideally he would have wanted to let the other security guard know what he was doing so that the other man could copy him, doubling their chances of bringing down the Kzinti but to do so would risk alerting the alien to what Forrester was planning so he waited on his own for the large feline to run out of ammunition.

Modern energy weapons held enough charge for a considerable number of shots but only the largest were intended to be fired continuously as the Kzinti was doing with his disruptor and so he inevitably drained it in a relatively short period of time. Ejecting the spent power pack from his weapon, the Kzinti reached for another but it was then that Forrester struck, firing his phaser at the alien and keeping the trigger held down to sustain the beam. This too meant depleting the power pack relatively quickly and Forrester had no spares but the impact of the beam disorientated the Kzinti and he dropped his replacement power pack as he staggered.

"Maximum stun! Hit him now and keep firing!" Forrester yelled and moments later a second beam of blue hit the Kzinti as the security guard followed the order.

Even a Kzinti could not withstand the energy of two assault phasers set to maximum stun and the final alien collapsed beside the warp core.

"Someone activate the air filtration system." Forrester said as he looked around and saw clouds of gas still hanging in the air as well as dozens of smashed consoles, "If it's still working then we need to get rid of this gas to make repairs."

Just then the intercom sounded.

"Bridge to engineering, what's going on down there?" Ash's voice asked.

"Tell the captain we're busy." Forrester told his men, "If something's broken they should just try turning it off and back on again."



## 7.

Reese had prepared herself for a never ending stream of casualties to be brought into sickbay as the Kzinti spread through the ship. However, with the *Ascension's* crew being ordered to avoid engaging the aliens this number was turning out to be far lower. However, this did not mean that there were no injuries at all and Reese rushed towards the entrance to sickbay as the doors opened so that a stretcher party could enter. One of the *Ascension's* officers was lying on the stretcher, unconscious either due to his injuries or due to the pain relief that Reese hoped he had been given as a response to the claw injure that ran most of the way down his right arm. This was deep enough in places that despite the spray on medical sealant it was possible to see the bones in his arm. Both the crewmen carrying the stretcher were staff from the ship's galley, as was the woman accompanying them with an assault phaser to provide cover if they were unlucky enough to run into any more Kzinti wandering the corridor.

"Bring his over here." Reese said, hurrying to the nearest vacant biobed, "What happened?"

"The lieutenant got in the way when the Kzinti stormed the galley." the woman with the phaser replied.

"Then right after they'd almost torn his arm off they just withdrew." one of the men added as they lifted the injured officer onto the biobed.

"They withdrew? Why?" Reese asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine doctor." the first man said.

"Maybe they were looking for something specific and didn't have time to just kill us all." the woman suggested. She was still stood beside the open door, peering out into the corridor on watch for approaching Kzinti and all of a sudden she jumped all the way into sick bay and closed the door behind her, "Rat cats, heading this way." she said.

Reese looked around, sickbay offered few hiding places and the only two exits opened into the same area of corridor outside so leaving through the other would still attract attention. However, if the Kzinti really were in a hurry to reach only certain parts of the *Ascension* then the occupants of sickbay had a chance.

"Get all patients ready to move." Reese ordered. "No stretchers though, we'll just have to carry and drag them by hand."

"Why doctor? Where are we going?" one of the nursing staff asked and Reese pointed to a grill set into the wall at floor level.

"Into the access tubes." she said, "A two and a half metre Kzinti will never be able to follow us." then she ran into her office where she had a communicator on her desk and opened it up, "Reese to bridge." she said into it.

"Bridge here doctor." Estevez responded but before Reese could speak she suddenly heard Ash's voice.

"Deborah, are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine for now but we've got Kzinti heading for sickbay. I'm getting everyone into the access tubes but it would be appreciated if Duke could send some of his men here to help us. Be advised though, the Kzinti aren't interested in all sections of the ship just yet. They abandoned their attack on the galley and moved on."

"That's not surprising. They are probably wanting to seize key areas." Ash replied, "Take care down there. I'll pass the word to Chief Duke and see if he can divert some men. Right now he's exchanging fire with the Kzinti rear guard in the hangar."

"Understood. Reese out." Reese said, folding the communicator again and clipping it to her belt. Then she exited the office to find that an orderly had already opened up the access tube and her staff was in the process of helping the patients in sickbay into the access tube. This included the galley staff who were now carrying the unconscious officer towards the hatchway and they had just reached it when all of a sudden there was a loud 'bang' from one of sickbay's entrances as the Kzinti attempted to get inside.

"Everyone into the access tube." the woman armed with the phaser said, backing away from the door while keeping her assault phaser trained on it and when there was a grinding sound as the doors were forced apart she fired the weapon towards the gap.

The beam narrowly missed the gap between the two doors, striking one of them instead but it still caused the Kzinti outside to cease their effort to force them open at least temporarily. Instead one of them pushed the muzzle of a disruptor through the gap and fired several blasts in rapid succession. One of them hit the woman and she fell backwards, her phaser sliding across the floor. The hammering at the doors then started again and Reese saw them begin to move further apart. Knowing that the door would not hold for long, Reese quickly picked up the phaser and hurried to the hatchway that her staff were still helping patients to get through.

"Keep going." she said, pointing the phaser at the doorway, "I'll be right behind you." and then there was a banging sound from the second entrance to sickbay as the Kzinti split their efforts to break in from two different directions at once.

"I still need my kit." one of the nurses replied and she pointed across sickbay to a portable medical kit on a

biobed close to the door that the Kzinti were now trying to force open.

"I'll get it." Reese said and she rushed across the room, hoping to get to the medical kit before the Kzinti got through the door. However, as she reached the kit and slung it over her shoulder the first door that the Kzinti had attacked opened wide enough for one of them to squeeze through and he fired his disruptor towards Reese who responded by returning fire with her phaser as she ducked behind the biobed.

"Just go!" she shouted towards the entrance to the access tube before another volley of disruptor fire forced her to duck again.

All of a sudden there was a grinding sound and a roar as the second door was forced open beside Reese and another Kzinti burst into sickbay. Reese tried to bring her phaser to bear but the alien moved too quickly and he lashed out at her with a clawed hand. Striking her in her jaw, the impact threw Reese backwards and sent the phaser flying from her hand. Dazed and tasting blood in her mouth Reese looked up as the Kzinti loomed over her and produced a muffled growl behind its gas mask. Before the Kzinti warrior could strike again though it suddenly screamed and a blue glow appeared on its body that spread out to consume the entire alien as it was vaporised by a phaser blast and looking towards the open doorway behind it Reese saw a pair of security guards, one of them pointing a phaser rifle at where the Kzinti had been stood.

"Doctor are you okay?" he asked as the other security guard fired at the first Kzinti to have broken into sickbay.

"I think I lost a tooth." Reese replied, holding a hand to her face and looking around herself at the floor.

The loss of both Marine Sergeant's unit heading for engineering and the unit that had been attempting to locate the *Ascension's* armoury was a severe blow. This meant that First Officer now had only half his force remaining to him and of those half were needed to guard the prisoners in the hangar. However, if First Officer and his unit could take control of the bridge then there was still a chance that the Starfleet vessel could be taken. The bridge on Starfleet vessels was easy to locate and First Officer and his unit would have been able to reach it quickly had they been able to make use of the ship's turbolift system but these had been shut down too rapidly and now First Officer and his team were having to make their way through the unfamiliar corridors as they looked for a means to reach the bridge.

Occasionally they encountered members of the ship's crew but they all fled rather than stand and fight. Initially First Officer allowed the Starfleet crew to escape unmolested but when the bridge could not be reached First Officer had his troops chase after a lone crewman they discovered and capture him. The terrified crewman's shoulders were held tight by two of the Kzinti and forced to his knees while First Officer pulled off his gas mask so that, leaving a ring of the sealing gel matted into the fur around his face and he leant in close to the human, snarling and bearing his teeth in challenge.

"The bridge." he growled, "Where is the bridge?" but the man did not reply so First Officer looked at one of his men and added, "Break his arm."

Without a word the Kzinti twisted the crewman's arm and there was a quick snapping sound that caused the man to scream in pain.

"Now tell me where the bridge is or your spine will be next." First Officer told him.

"I'm not telling you anything." the prisoner replied and First Officer stood up straight as he growled. Then all of a sudden he lunged forwards again, opening his mouth wide to tear a large chunk of flesh from the man's throat with his teeth. He chewed this as he stood back up and then swallowed it before looking back down at the corpse.

"Drop that." he told the Kzinti still holding the dead man, "We will find another way to the bridge."

"First Officer." one of the other Kzinti said.

"Yes Marine?" First Officer replied.

"If the humans have shut down their turbolifts we could use the empty shafts and climb. We have a breaching charge for gaining access the bridge." the Kzinti replied.

First Officer turned and looked at a nearby turbolift entrance. The door was shut but it could be forced open without using any of the limited number of breaching charges available to his unit and he let out a growl of approval.

"Get that door open." he said.

"They're still firing at us from the hangar but they still aren't making any attempt to break out." Duke reported and Ash nodded.

"Very good chief. Forrester reports that the attack on engineering was repulsed and the team you sent to sickbay dealt with the Kzinti who had found their way there. If our information is accurate then that leaves just one more group to locate. For now concentrate on keeping the Kzinti in the hangar contained rather than rushing them. We'll deploy more forces for an attack on the hangar once the rest of the ship is secure." he said.

"Understood captain. Duke out." Duke said before the line went dead.

"Captain." Estevez said and Ash turned towards her.

"Yes ensign?" he asked.

"Captain security have reported that the Kzinti who attacked sickbay were equipped with breaching charges and more of the same gas used in engineering." Estevez told him.

"So why did they force the doors instead of just blowing them open?" Teela said, "That's what I'd have done."

"Sickbay is unlikely to have been their primary target." Tan pointed out, "If the number of charges they had were limited they could have been saving them for when they got to that. The group at engineering used a heavy disruptor to get through the door. It seems likely that any of them that try to get in here would also have the means to get through a door quickly."

"So they've got breaching equipment and gas." Ash said, "If they do manage to get this far before Duke's people stop them we might not get a lot of warning before they break open the doors and fumigate us. Break open the emergency equipment and distribute masks to as many people as possible."

"As long as the gas they use is the same non-lethal type again we should be fine." Tan said.

"Is there anything we can do to rig up some extra masks?" Estevez suggested.

"Well it is possible to produce improvised masks by tying a strip of fabric over your nose and mouth that has been suitably treated. The sleeve from your uniform for example." Tan said.

"Treated how?" Estevez said.

"Urine ensign. Urine can help neutralise the chemicals in the gas." Ash said. Then he smiled and looked at Teela who was heading for the emergency equipment locker before adding, "Human urine at least. I'm not sure what effect Andorian urine would have."

"If it's okay I'll stick with a proper gas mask captain." Teela replied as she took one of the oxygen masks from the locker and checked the air cylinders were in place.

"Very wise lieutenant commander." Ash said before one of the security guards stood by the open turbolifts suddenly turned towards him.

"Captain I hear something." he said and Ash dashed towards him.

"Let me hear." he said, crouching down to listen and he heard a banging from beneath the floor, "Sounds like someone climbing up the shaft." he said, looking up at the guard and the other man nodded in response, "Ensign Estevez are any of our people in the turbolift shafts?"

"No captain. Some of our security teams are using access tubes to move between decks but not the turbolift shafts." she replied.

"Then the Kzinti must be coming up." Ash said and he turned to Tan, "Commander, do you have your tricorder handy?"

"Yes captain." Tan answered as he took a tricorder from where he had one stored beneath his console and came over to the doorway, holding the device near the floor, "I am reading multiple lifeforms closing captain. They appear to be splitting up."

"Check the other turbolift." Ash told him and Tan moved to the second turbolift and repeated his scan.

"Captain one of the groups is heading here." he said.

"Then they're planning to try and rush us from both directions at once." Ash said.

"Your orders captain?" the security guard beside Ash asked.

"Everyone without a phaser or mask needs to get out of here." Ash ordered, "Use the emergency access shaft. Everyone else take cover and be ready to open fire when I give the order. Now get back from the turbolifts. We'll seal the doors. It won't keep them out long but it'll give us a few extra seconds."

The Starfleet crew pulled back from the turbolifts, closing the doors to put another barrier between them and the Kzinti. The senior bridge officers and the two security guards present took cover behind the various consoles, ready to defend the Ascension's bridge while the more junior staff instead headed for an emergency exit that led to a narrow ladder shaft they could use to escape without running into the approaching Kzinti boarding party.

"Captain there are Kzinti directly below both turbolifts now." Tan said, studying his tricorder, "I can't tell the exact numbers but there are no more than half a dozen in total."

"Okay they're probably going to enter the lifts through the emergency hatches in the floor then use charges to get through the door. Masks down everyone, they might use gas." Ash said and the bridge's defenders all lowered their oxygen masks, pulling them tight to establish a seal around their faces.

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First Officer had to squeeze through the hatch in the floor of the turbolift before helping one of the other two Kzinti in the shaft beneath him up after him. This Kzinti was equipped with the breaching charge and he immediately began to study the door to the bridge. This was of double thickness, a second door being immediately outside the turbolift to seal off the shaft when the car was not in place.

"What do you think Marine?" First Officer asked.

"The charge will be enough First Officer." the other Kzinti said.

"Apply it." First Officer told him and the Kzinti marine began to squeeze a thick chemical gel from a tube out onto the inside of the door, forming a closed loop around the edge while First Officer took out his communicator, "Section two, Marine can you read me?" he transmitted.

"Yes First Officer. We are in position and the charge has been deployed." the Kzinti leading the pair in the other turbolift responded.

"Very good. I will trigger the charge remotely from here. We will attack the humans from both directions at once." First Officer said. He then shut off the communicator and reached down again to help the last of his team up into the now very crowded lift.

"The charge is set First Officer." the Kzinti explosives expert said and First Officer switched his communicator to the channel that the detonators for both this charge and the one in the other turbolift worked from. The three Kzinti squeezed into the turbolift moved as far back as they could before First Officer triggered both charges at the same time.

Instantly a chemical reaction began within the explosives, heating up the metal of the doors beneath the charge to the point where it became soft and unable to support the weight of the doors. The thermal reaction spread, widening the area of the melting metal and also spreading to the outer door and it was at that point that First Officer roared loudly and dived forwards. The force of his impact against the damaged doors caused the pieces to fly outwards onto the bridge and at the same time one of the two Kzinti in the other turbolift did the same thing, both of them storming the bridge at the same time.

"Fire!" Ash yelled as the Kzinti made their appearance and the defending bridge crew opened fire in unison. The beams from their phasers passed by First Officer and the Kzinti to have dived through the other door, instead hitting the next pair of Kzinti to try following them and killing them both instantly. There was one more Kzinti in the turbolifts though and instead of trying to follow the others through the hole in the door he fired his disruptor through it instead. A blast from this hit one of the security guard and the man fell backwards, clutching at the hole burned in his armour.

"Estevez, see to him." Ash called out and Estevez reached out to pull the nearby security guard out of the Kzinti's line of fire.

Tan fired again as First Officer was getting back to his feet and his shot hit the Kzinti in the thigh, causing him to collapse. Meanwhile the Kzinti still inside the turbolift continued to fire, his disruptor shots hitting a secondary console at the side of the bridge and triggering a small explosion before Teela leant around her console and shot him with her phaser. The dead Kzinti fell forwards through the hole in the turbolift door and landed on the floor of the bridge, his weapon flying from his grasp as he fell.

Only one Kzinti remained uninjured now and he bounded across the bridge towards the helm and navigation console in the centre but as he did so he came under fire from all sides and before he reached the console he tumbled and rolled into it before lying still. This now just left the injured First Officer and Ash got to his feet and turned to face the Kzinti who was now reaching out to retrieve his dropped disruptor.

"Give it up. You're all alone." Ash said loudly from behind his mask but the Kzinti just looked up and bared his teeth before making one last lunge for his weapon at which point Ash shot him dead, "Clear." he said as he lowered his phaser and reached up to remove his mask.

"How's Crewman Jarre?" Tan asked, looking towards Estevez.

"The blast penetrated his armour. We'll need to get him to sick bay." Estevez replied.

"Okay let's get him down there then." Ash said, "Tan, Estevez I want a full status report. Are there any more Kzinti outside the hangar?"

"Checking now captain." Estevez said as the other security came to help his comrade from the bridge and after she sat down at her console she added, "No reports of sightings on any decks captain."

"Internal sensors are reading weapons fire around the hangar only captain." Tan added.

"At least the flight controls look intact as well." Teela added as she too retook her position at the helm, placing her phaser on the console in front of her.

"Estevez get someone up here to clear away these bodies." Ash said, sitting back down in the captain's chair, "Then tell Chief Duke to have all his forces converge on the hangar. I want this ship back under my control as soon as possible."

"Marine, I cannot raise First Officer." Engineering Crewman told the leader of the Kzinti rearguard, "His unit assaulted the bridge and now he does not respond. None of the other groups respond."

"Then they are dead. They would not intentionally ignore us." the Kzinti soldier replied.

"Then what do we do?" Engineering Crewman asked.

"Five of us cannot take this ship alone and there is no sense in dying for nothing. We must withdraw." the other Kzinti said and then he turned to the other three aliens under his control and called out, "Fall back to the shuttle. We must evacuate immediately."

The Kzinti in the hangar began to retreat back towards the shuttle that had brought them to the *Ascension* and quickly clambered aboard. Suspecting another trap, Duke and his security team outside the hangar did not immediately rush the hangar doorway entrance when the Kzinti ceased fire and it was only when they heard the sound of the shuttle's thrusters firing that they realised what was happening.

"Duke to bridge the Kzinti are pulling out." Duke said into his communicator as he and his men rushed towards the doorway and looked into the hangar just in time to see the shuttle rise up off the deck. The power line connecting the shuttle to the police web was still in place and as the shuttle backed towards the still open external hangar doorway this pulled tight before breaking and in an instant the police web shut down, freeing the captive crewmen.

Duke and his men fired on the shuttle as it backed out of the hangar, passing unobstructed through the forcefield that was still active across the open external doorway. However, even their phaser rifles lacked the firepower needed to disable the craft before it passed through the forcefield, at which point the blue energy beams were blocked before they could reach their target.

"Is everyone here? Did the Kzinti take anyone?" Duke called out to the now freed prisoners.

"No, we're all here but we need a medic." one of them replied and Duke took out his communicator, "Duke to bridge, the remaining Kzinti are fleeing in their shuttle. There were prisoners being held in the hangar but they're all accounted for, send a medical team immediately. There are no friendlies aboard the shuttle. I say again there are no friendlies aboard the shuttle. Duke out."

"Etchemin did you hear that?" Ash asked when Duke had finished his warning about the shuttle.

"Yes captain, locking tractor beam now." Etchemin replied.

"No. I'm not risking any more lives on dealing with a shuttle full of angry Kzinti. Lock phasers." Ash said and Teela smiled.

"Now we're talking." she said and she fired the *Ascension's* thrusters to bring the shuttle further into the destroyer's phaser firing arc.

"Phasers locked captain." Etchemin said.

"Captain technically we are engaging a defenceless enemy." Tan said.

"They're only defenceless right now commander. If we let them escape then their next target is likely to be defenceless as well. Lieutenant Etchemin you may fire at will." Ash replied.

"Aye captain. Firing phasers." Etchemin said as he fired the main starboard side phaser bank located on the *Ascension's* primary hull rather than the phaser cannons mounted on the roll bar. The twin beams of energy struck the rear of the shuttle and easily overwhelmed its limited shielding, destroying the craft instantly in a flash of light, "Target destroyed captain." Etchemin said.

"Good shooting lieutenant. Now I'm going down to sickbay to see how bad the casualties are." Ash said as he stood and looked around. The damage to the bridge was thankfully minimal but some of the secondary consoles had been struck by disruptor blasts. One of these had also hit the main viewscreen and one corer was totally black where it was now unable to show any data, "Would someone please ask Commander Forrester to send someone up here to fix these consoles and the main screen?" he added.

"Of course captain." Tan replied, "Although we will try turning them all off and back on again first."

Ash then began to walk towards the nearest turbolift before remembering that they were not operational and he turned towards the access tube instead, using that to descend to the level that sickbay was on. From there it was just a short walk to sickbay itself and he walked in expecting to see Reese hard at work.

However, when he walked in he saw only the nursing staff and orderlies treating injuries.

"Where's doctor Reese?" he asked the first orderly he came to.

"In her office. Haven't you heard captain-" the orderly began and fearing the worst Ash ran towards Reese's office, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw her sitting in her chair with her back to him.

"Deborah, how come you're not out there?" he asked then he frowned when Reese turned her chair and he saw that she had a hand held to her face and gauze in her mouth, "What happened?" he said. Rather than speak to him in reply though, Reese instead picked up a nearby PADD and began to type on it before handing the device to him so that he could see what she had written.

A KZINTI KNOCKED MY TOOTH OUT. I'M TRYING TO SET IT BACK IN PLACE.

Ash smiled when he saw this.

"Thank God for that. When I saw you weren't out there I was worried you'd been hurt. Badly I mean." he said, "Look contact me as soon as you're able to speak again, okay? We need to decide what we're going to do

next.”

It was then that the intercom sounded and Ash leant over Reese's desk to answer it.

“Sickbay, Ash here. Doctor Reese can't talk right now.” he said.

“Captain it's you I wanted to speak to anyway.” Estevez's voice said.

“Go ahead Ensign.” Ash responded.

“Captain, Lieutenant Commander Forrester has asked me to let you know that the prisoner has been handed over to security and is being taken to the brig now.” Estevez told him and he frowned again.

“Prisoner? What prisoner?” he said.

“It seems that one of the Kzinti who attacked engineering was taken alive captain.” Estevez answered.

“Okay. Tell security that I'm on my way. Ash out.” Ash said before shutting off the intercom. Then he began to type on the PADD, “I need to go now.” he told Reese, “But remember this.” and he handed her the PADD on which he had written.

I LOVE YOU. PS. ARE WE STILL ON FOR TONIGHT?



"Rigat-Captain the human vessel has just fired its weapons!" First Sensor Operator exclaimed when he saw the sudden burst of energy from the Ascension's phasers being fired at the shuttle, "They have destroyed the shuttle."

"The shuttle?" Rigat-Captain responded, "First Officer signalled us from inside their hangar. His team of heroes was already aboard."

"Yes Rigat-Captain. The shuttle emerged from the hangar again. That is when the humans destroyed it." First Sensor Operator told him.

"Our heroes fled from females?" another of the Kzinti exclaimed in disbelief and Rigat-Captain let out a low growl of annoyance.

"First Officer must have underestimated them." Rigat-Captain said, "That is not a mistake I intend to repeat. Maintain silent running and monitor that Starfleet vessel. Its crew may think that they have won and move on."

The captured Kzinti was still unconscious when it was placed in a cell and the forcefield activated and Duke then stood watching the alien.

"Chief I heard you have a guest." Ash said as he walked into the brig.

"Yes captain. Sleeping like a kitten." Duke replied, still focusing on the Kzinti, "Lieutenant Commander Forrester and one of my men brought him down with a combined phaser attack."

"I'm impressed." Ash said, "Normally trying to take one of them alive is a suicide mission."

"Yes, handing him over to Starfleet Security is going to need some special planning." Duke said.

"I'm more worried about his friends still in the system." Ash replied.

"You think there are more of them captain?" Duke asked and Ash nodded.

"There have to be. That shuttle was unarmed. It couldn't have attacked the *Permanence* even at impulse, let alone force it out of warp. The crew of that freighter recognised their attackers. The crew knew they were in danger as well which they wouldn't if they only saw a shuttle. Plus think about how many Kzinti were crammed into it. They must have been shoulder to shoulder in there. They couldn't tolerate that for more than a few hours. All that means that somewhere out there is a Kzinti ship." Ash told him.

"So how was the prisoner captain?" Tan asked when Ash emerged from the access tube, finding an engineering team already working at replacing the turbolift doors.

"Thankfully still out cold." Ash answered.

"If you ask me we should throw it out of an air lock before it gets the chance to wake up and try to eat us." Teela commented.

"Thankfully lieutenant commander there are rules that prevent us from doing that. Chief Duke has the prisoner secure and I don't think we'll be having any trouble with him." Ash replied, "In the meantime there has to be a mother ship out there somewhere that that shuttle came from. We need to find it."

"Perhaps the prisoner can tell us where it is." Estevez suggested.

"How do you question a Kzinti?" Etchemin added.

"Actually normal intelligence techniques of sensory deprivation have proven effective." Tan said, "With their heightened senses the Kzinti react poorly when they are cut off."

"That's something we'll leave to Starfleet Intelligence." Ash said, "I don't want to take the chance on putting anyone in the same room with a Kzinti even if they've been restrained. Commander Tan where might a starship hide in this system? I'm thinking about within just a few million kilometres of our current location. That shuttle had to get here without using its impulse or warp drives."

"There is a debris field at bearing two six one mark four nine captain. It is spread across a volume of space four hundred million cubic kilometres in volume."

"That's a lot of space to search." Teela said.

"Captain if the Kzinti want to remain hidden inside the debris field then it will be very easy for them to do so. It is incredibly dense with a mean distance between objects of less than ten kilometres. That will make a visual search extremely time consuming while the background radiation will make running silent a highly effective means of avoiding detection by our sensors." Tan added.

"So how do we locate them?" Ash said.

"Unless they engage their primary systems, their impulse or warp drives, I do not think we can captain." Tan said.

"So we need to get them to do just that." Ash said.

"What would make a Kzinti mad enough to reveal themselves though?" Estevez asked and Ash smiled at her.

"You would Ensign. You would." he replied. Then he turned to Tan and added, "Commander how easy would it be for you to carry out a little digital magic on a communications broadcast?"

"Taken from our own records of previous crew members captain?" Tan responded.

"Exactly." Ash said.

"It would help if whoever you picked for the central role was a close physical match captain." Tan told him.

"Don't worry commander, I have the perfect person in mind. Providing her DIY dentistry is up to scratch anyway. Oh and tell Forrester than we're going to need the help of Petty Officer M'Sarr as well." Ash replied.

Reese looked at herself in the mirror, adjusting her tunic. Instead of the green of the medical division her tunic markings and under shirt were in the white of the command division while the rank badges suggested her to be a captain instead of a lieutenant commander.

"I hate to ask you this Deborah. I know it hasn't been long but James says that this will work far better if the person at the heart of it is physically similar to Captain Franklin and there were only a couple of centimetres difference in your heights."

"Rachel was my friend Mike and she died in disgrace." Reese replied.

"Which means that Starfleet hasn't broadcast her death across the galaxy." Ash said, "The Kzinti may have some knowledge about command assignments but I'm hoping that they won't know about Captain Franklin's death or the circumstances around it."

"So now I get to play her just to make them angry." Reese said.

"That's right. The Kzinti have a habit of rushing into things. Just like when we first encountered them back in the twenty-first century. They came rushing to attack our ships and we beat them because they didn't bother to plan their assault. Now I'm hoping that when they think their attack was beaten off by a woman they'll be so keen to erase that loss than they'll just come right at us. Then we'll have them." Ash explained and Reese sighed.

"Okay let's just get on with this then." she said.

The first thing that Reese noticed when she entered the bridge in her borrowed uniform was that out of the normal command crew only Teela and Estevez were present and Estevez was currently sat at the navigation and tactical station instead of her usual seat at communications. All of the other positions had been filled in by junior personnel brought in specifically because they were female. One of Tan's subordinates now occupied the science station while Petty Officer M'Sarr had been drafted in from engineering to now sit at the communications console.

"Petty officer M'Sarr." Reese said and the female Caitian turned around and smiled at her.

"Doctor Reese." she replied, "Captain Ash believes that if being taunted by a human female will anger the Kzinti, seeing me on the bridge will truly enrage them."

"Let's see." Reese said as she walked over to the captain's seat and hesitated before she sat down. Then she activated the intercom, "Auxiliary control this is the bridge. Is everything set?" she asked.

"All set doctor." Tan responded from the *Ascension's* auxiliary control room where he, Ash and Forrester were gathered to monitor the digital processing of the signal Reese was about to send, an image of the bridge appearing on the auxiliary control room's main view screen, "Initialising program now." he added and all of a sudden the image changed slightly. It still showed the bridge of the *Ascension* with crew in the same places but where in reality Reese currently sat in the captain's chair the image that would be broadcast instead showed a lifelike recreation of the late Captain Rachel Franklin.

"I feel like I've seen a ghost." Ash said before adding, "Okay doctor, you're all set."

"Thank you. Bridge out." Reese said and as she shut of the intercom she looked at M'Sarr, "Petty officer can you open a channel?"

"Aye captain, hailing frequencies now open. You're on." the Caitian replied.

Reese hesitated again as she looked towards the front of the bridge but then she took a deep breath and began to speak.

"Attention Kzinti vessel. This is the Starfleet destroyer *USS Ascension* and I am her commanding officer, Captain Rachel Franklin. Your activity here in the Khasran system is a violation of the border control and demilitarisation articles Treaty of Sirius. Your assault on this vessel failed miserably, the women of my crew fought them off with ease and I am now informing you that one of your men was captured by us during this operation and under questioning has given us your location. I am sending you an image of the prisoner now." the image of Captain Franklin said and then an image of the now conscious Kzinti pacing up and down in the *Ascension's* brig guarded by a pair of female crewmen appeared on the screen for a few seconds before the signal cut back to the bridge again, "Under the terms of the Treaty of Sirius I am ordering you to stand down and surrender your vessel. You will be taken into custody and the Highest of Kzin will be given the opportunity to negotiate for your repatriation. Be wise captain, do not under estimate this threat or our resolve, any resistance will be met with deadly force."



Rigat-Captain snarled, bearing his teeth as he watched the broadcast from the *Ascension*. The video signal had shown the entire Starfleet bridge crew and it was clear that every one of them was a female, including one that had the feline appearance of a Kzinti, albeit of a noticeably smaller size.

"Caitian!" First Navigator hissed.

"Yes and a female as well." Second Gunner added.

"These females mock us Rigat-Captain." First Helmsman said, "Heroes would not be defeated by mere females."

"First Officer may have underestimated this Franklin-Captain and her crew of females but I shall not. Tell Chief Engineer to bring our engines on line. Helmsman detach us from this asteroid and take us out of the debris field. First Gunner bring our weapons on line. The time has come to be heroes. We will face this Franklin-Captain and destroy her in the Fanged God's name."

## 10.

The turbolift door to the bridge slid open so that Ash, Tan and Etchemin could return to their duty stations.

"Do you think that did the trick?" Reese asked as she stepped away from the captain's chair.

"You were perfect regardless." Ash said, briefly taking Reese's hand, "I hope that wasn't too hard for you. I know you could see the feed as well."

"I'll be fine. Just don't make a habit of it okay Mike?" Reese responded.

"I won't. I promise." Ash said as he then sat down and looked around, "Status?" he asked.

"Captain I am picking up an energy source inside the debris field. Too strong to just be energy absorbed from the system's stars. It looks like a subspace field." Tan told him.

"Yellow alert. Mister Etchemin raise our shields if you don't mind." Ash said.

"Aye captain. Raising shields." Etchemin replied at the same time as he adjusted his chair back from how Estevez had set it while she occupied his station. Then he glanced at Teela sat next to him and noticed that she looked unhappy, "Teela are you okay?" he asked her.

"I'll be fine she said. Having Doctor Reese impersonate Rachel just brought back bad memories. Now let's get on with this."

"Captain I have a vessel coming into visual range." Tan announced.

"On screen." Ash replied.

"Yes captain. On main screen now." Tan said and all of a sudden an image of the *Spectral Claw* appeared on the *Ascension's* main bridge view screen.

"What the hell?" Ash said when he saw the ancient Kzinti warship, "That's an antique."

In the early decades of human warp travel the Kzinti had made numerous attempts to enslave the newcomers to the interstellar stage but the felines' impulsiveness had seen every attack fail in the face of human ingenuity and their rapidly advancing technology. The Kzinti had been forbidden from maintaining a military or paramilitary force other than a handful of police vessels since then but the appearance of their warships was still something known to species across the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.

"Sensors indicate that the vessel has been upgraded. I am reading a superior warp drive, defensive shields and high energy weapons. All features not found on this class of vessel when it was originally in service." Tan said.

"A thousand year old dagger can still have a sharp point," Teela muttered.

"So it's not just something they still had lying around then." Estevez added.

"Red alert. Mister Etchemin, lock phasers on target." Ash ordered.

The *Ascension* and the *Spectral Claw* sped towards one another at impulse power and they opened fire almost simultaneously. Using one of the roll bar mounted phaser cannons Etchemin was able to maintain fire on the Kzinti vessel for longer than using the main phaser banks mounted on the destroyer's saucer section. However, he was not able to keep the steady stream of energy blast concentrated on a single point of the *Spectral Claw's* shields and instead the blasts struck in a line along the side of the ancient Kzinti warship. In response the *Spectral Claw* fired rapid volleys from the disruptors mounted in its forward weapon pods and these slammed into the *Ascension's* forward shield, causing the starship to rock.

"Forward shields down to seventy percent captain." Etchemin said as the two vessels flew past one another at high speed.

"What about the enemy ship Tan?" Ash asked.

"No damage captain. Minor disruption to their starboard shield but our phasers did not penetrate." Tan replied.

"Arm photon torpedoes." Ash ordered.

"Captain I have analysed the Kzinti attack and there is something you should know about." Tan said suddenly.

"What is it commander?" Ash responded.

"Captain the energy of the weapons mounted on their ship is Klingon in nature." Tan said.

"The Klingons guard their armaments closely Commander Tan. I doubt they were stolen." Ash commented.

"No captain. It looks like the Klingons have provided the weapons as well as the shields on this vessel. They too match the harmonics of Klingon systems." Tan said.

"Aft torpedoes locked captain." Etchemin said.

"Enemy vessel is turning. Coming around for another run." Tan added.

"Aft torpedoes fire." Ash said and Etchemin fired a photon torpedo from each of the *Ascension's* aft launchers.

The two torpedoes accelerated towards the Kzinti warship but in addition to their primary tactical systems the Kzinti had also upgraded the ship's electronic defences and these fooled the guidance of one of the torpedoes, causing it to shoot right past the vessel harmlessly. The second torpedo did hit its target though

and there was an explosion as it detonated against the *Spectral Claw's* shields.

"Port shields at fifty percent Rigat-Captain." Second Weapons Officer reported.

"Human vessel in firing arc Rigat-Captain." First Weapons Officer added.

"Return fire. Launch torpedoes." Rigat-Captain ordered and First Officer immediately launched a pair of photon torpedoes, one from each weapons pod.

"Incoming!" Tan exclaimed.

"Evasive action!" Ash snapped and Teela reached for the impulse drive power controls.

"Hold on everyone." she said as she turned the *Ascension* sharply enough that the ship's inertial dampening field could not quite keep up and the crew found themselves being pushed to one side as Teela steered towards the debris field up ahead. Moving at full impulse power meant that the *Ascension* was able to reach the edge of this field before the torpedoes hit it and Teela performed another sharp turn that took the destroyer around a large piece of rock that was just over a kilometre across and as the torpedoes turned to track the starship they both slammed into this in rapid succession.

The detonation of the two warheads was enough to crack the asteroid in half and Teela had to steer again to avoid the resulting debris that moved into what had been the *Ascension's* path. However, the starship came out this unscathed and once again it faced the *Spectral Claw* head on.

Both ships fired at one another with phasers and disruptors, the brightly coloured energy blasts playing across their opponent's shields. The *Spectral Claw's* shields failed first under the barrage of phaser fire from the *Ascension* but the blast that got through the Kzinti vessel's defences struck the heavily armoured hull, designed at a time when deflector shields were not available to the species in a location that was not vital and the *Spectral Claw* carried on coming towards the *Ascension*.

On the other hand the *Ascension's* shields held out longer but this meant that when they finally failed the two vessels were much closer and the Starfleet destroyer fell the full brunt of the attack that struck its secondary hull where the roll bar and one of its warp nacelles joined it.

"Captain they've hit one of our nacelles." Forrester reported from engineering, "The whole system is going into imbalance. I've got to take warp power off line while I try to restart it."

"He's actually turning it off and back on again?" Estevez exclaimed when she heard this.

"What about power for phasers commander?" Ash responded.

"You'll have what's in the capacitors until I can get the mains back on line captain. A few shots at most. You'll still have torpedoes though." Forrester told him.

"Etchemin. Torpedoes, now." Ash ordered.

"Firing now captain." Etchemin said as he fired another torpedo from close range. This struck the *Spectral Claw* head on and punched through its shields to strike at one of the wings that mounted the warship's main weapons, damaging the connection between the pod and the main hull. Seeing this damage, Teela steered towards that side to take the *Ascension* out of the Kzinti's field of fire and both ships rushed past one another without further shooting.

"Damage report." Ash said.

"Mains off line captain. Injuries reported on decks four through seven." Estevez replied.

"Shields holding at thirty percent for now but we won't be able to recharge them without mains power." Etchemin added.

"Captain we need time to make repairs. We can't sustain combat operations without mains power." Tan said

"Agreed. Lieutenant Commander Teela get us into that debris field. Full auxiliary power until we're inside then go to thrusters. Lieutenant Etchemin stand by to drop shields." Ash said.

"Captain did you just say 'drop shields'?" Etchemin asked.

"Yes lieutenant, drop shields when I give the order. The Kzinti hid in that debris field and we're going to do the same thing. With our shields raised they may be able to track the energy signature though so we'll have to drop them." Ash explained.

"Rigat-Captain the Starfleet vessel turns once again." First Sensor Operator reported.

"Back towards us?" Rigat-Captain asked.

"No Rigat-Captain, away from us." First Sensor Operator answered. Then a moment later he added, "They are heading for the debris field."

"They are wounded." Rigat-Captain said, the sides of his mouth rising, "They seek to hide while they tend to their wounds. First Helmsman take us in after them."

"Rigat-Captain our own weapons are damaged." First Gunnery pointed out.

"The human Franklin-Captain will know this but she still runs. Her ship must be more badly damaged and we will press our advantage. First Helmsman turn now." Rigat-Captain responded and the *Spectral Claw* began to turn after the *Ascension*, dropping in behind the Starfleet vessel.

With the Kzinti warship directly behind, Etchemin fired another torpedo from the *Ascension's* aft launcher and

the weapon shot straight at the *Spectral Claw* and First Helmsman immediately turned the ship aside so that the torpedo struck its ventral shield instead of the still weakened forward one. In doing this though he set the ship on a course towards an asteroid and First Helmsman had to continue turning further to prevent it from crashing into it.

Taking advantage of this respite Teela shut off the *Ascension's* impulse drive and fired the ship's thrusters as it continued to drift forwards, weaving between the asteroids so that they were between the *Ascension* and the *Spectral Claw*.

"Where are the Kzinti?" Ash said.

"Difficult to say captain. However, I am detecting energy reflections that appear to be a Klingon type shield signature from just beyond the debris field." Tan told him.

"Then they haven't followed us yet." Ash said, "Lieutenant Etchemin lower shields."

"Lowering shields captain." Etchemin replied.

"Deactivating all active sensors captain." Tan added.

"Should I bring us to a stop captain?" Teela asked.

"No." Ash answered, "Stick with thrusters only but keep us moving." then he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering." he said.

"Engineering, we're all kind of busy down here. Lieutenant Commander Forrester asks if you can just try turning it off and back on before I send someone to you?" an engineer responded.

"Can you just ask Lieutenant Commander Forrester to give me a status update as soon as possible?" Ash said.

"Forrester here captain." Forrester said.

"Forrester we're in the debris field and running silent." Ash told him, "How long until we can have mains power back?"

"I estimate about fifteen to twenty minutes captain. If we aren't using impulse power though I can use that to recharge our phasers and deflector shields. It won't be as effective as the mains but it'll be better than nothing." Forrester answered.

"Very good commander. Every little helps. Bridge out." Ash replied before he shut off the intercom and leant back in his chair, "Now we wait." he said.

"Rigat-Captain the human vessel no longer appears on our scopes." First Sensor Operator said and Rigat-Captain turned his head towards him.

"Did it crash?" he asked.

"No Rigat-Captain. There was no explosion. It just disappeared." First Sensor Operator answered.

"No Federation vessel has a cloaking device. They must be running silent." Rigat-Captain said.

"Your orders Rigat-Captain?" First Helmsman said and Rigat-Captain growled softly.

"Lower our shields and take us into the debris field. Thrusters only. We will stalk our prey and strike when we find them." he ordered.

"Captain I am no longer reading the Kzinti vessel." Tan said when the energy signature produced by the *Spectral Claw's* deflectors shields suddenly vanished from the *Ascension's* sensors.

"Did they go to warp?" Ash asked.

"I don't think so captain. I detected no warp signature. More likely they are running silent again." Tan said.

"Which they'd only do if they were coming in here after us." Ash said, "Everyone stand by for contact. Mister Etchemin don't hesitate to open fire if you see them. Don't wait for my order."

"Aye captain. Though I should warn you that our phaser banks only show one quarter charged." Etchemin replied.

"Any particular heading captain?" Teela said.

"Your discretion commander. Just keep us inside the debris field and listen to Commander Tan for information about the Kzinti's location." Ash told her.

"Aye captain. Turning to starboard now, taking us around this lump of rock." Teela said.

"Good. Ensign Estevez please impress on engineering my impatience to get main power restored. If necessary remind Lieutenant Commander Forrester that he has turned it off so it's his responsibility to turn it back on again." Ash added.

"My pleasure captain." Estevez replied.

## 11.

In one of the *Ascension's* cargo holds the bodies of the Kzinti boarding party who had been killed aboard the ship were all lined up on the floor, each of them covered in plastic and Reese was making her way along this line. Since they had died aboard the *Ascension*, Starfleet regulations still required formal death certificates for them all to be completed despite them having been part of an invading force and as chief medical officer this duty fell to Reese.

"Your people made a real mess of some of these you know chief." she said to Duke who was stood behind her, watching as she inspected the injuries on each body in turn.

"With Kzinti you can never be too sure doctor." he replied.

"That wasn't a criticism chief. I was just pointing out that it makes my job harder to tell which phaser burn was the fatal one when there are half a dozen or more in places that would have killed them." Reese commented as she moved on to the next body and pulled back the cover, "So this was their leader then." she added and Duke nodded.

"That's what his uniform suggests. According to our database he's the equivalent of a Starfleet commander." he said, "Or at least he was before Ash shot him."

"More than once as well." Reese said, "I wonder if he had a name?"

"A name?" Duke said.

"Well Kzinti aren't given names at birth. They have to earn them and until then they're just known by their rank and position. It makes filling in these forms difficult even if we do know what they did. So far I've just listed all of them as 'Soldier.'" Reese said. Then she noticed a device clipped to First Officer's belt, "Chief Duke have you checked these bodies yourself?" she asked.

"Not thoroughly yet doctor. Just a basic check for explosives and lethal toxins as well given their use of gas. Why?" Duke said.

"Because to me this looks like a communicator. What about you chief?" Reese said as she unclipped the communicator from First Officer's belt and held it up.

"I think you could be right there doctor." Duke replied.

"But it's different to the ones carried by the other Kzinti. It's bigger." Reese said.

"Sounds like a command level device." Duke said.

"One that could be used for long range communication?" Reese suggested and Duke smiled.

"So what we have here is a transmitter that the Kzinti can pick up." he said.

"Sounds kind of useful doesn't it?" Reese added.

Reese and Duke stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge as soon as the door slid open.

"Doctor. Chief Duke. Is there a problem?" Ash asked, turning his chair to face the rear of the bridge.

"An opportunity perhaps." Reese replied as she held out the Kzinti communicator, "I came across this on the body of their leader. It looks like a communicator but it's different to the ones carried by the others." and she handed the device to Ash.

"Commander Tan what do you make of that?" Ash asked, looking towards the science station and holding up the communicator.

"It likely has enhanced range and the ability to cut through interference captain." Tan said.

"Interference such as the heightened level of background radiation in this system?" Ash said.

"It is possible captain." Tan replied.

"We were thinking we could use it to lure the Kzinti into a trap." Duke said and Ash nodded.

"Just what I was thinking." he said.

"By beaming the device into space we would have a fixed point to which the Kzinti would make their way." Tan suggested.

"Actually commander I was thinking of getting it outside in a different way." Ash replied, "Do you think that we could get a photon torpedo to detonate by remote control reliably in this system?"

"A mine?" Teela said.

"Exactly lieutenant commander. A mine." Ash replied.

"So we stick that to a torpedo and then cold launch it, wait for the Kzinti to come along and then 'boom'?" Estevez asked.

"That's pretty much it, yes." Ash said.

"And if they don't have their shields up when they move in they'll be a sitting duck." Etchemin said.

"Chief Duke take this down to engineering. He'll have to to prepare the torpedo." Ash said, holding out the communicator.

"Right away captain." Duke said and he took the communicator from Ash before leaving the bridge again.

Duke and Forrester took the Kzinti communicator to the weapons pod where the *Ascension's* torpedoes were stored in a single magazine that could load the weapons into any of the four launchers the pod held. Walking up the next torpedo in the feed system, Forrester produced a key that unlocked the casing.

"We need to remove the propellant and reprogram the detonator circuit so it will only explode when we tell it to." Forrester said.

"I can take care of the propellant." Duke replied.

"And I'll handle the detonator." Forrester said.

Working as quickly as they could, the two men began to modify the torpedo. Duke released the tank that held the deuterium fuel for the torpedo's drive system. Although the weapon could be used at warp speed it depended on the *Ascension* itself for faster than light propulsion, using its internal drive to sustain but not create a warp field. This meant that all of the antimatter loaded into the torpedo inside the launcher could be used for the warhead and the internal fuel supply could be safely removed simply by disconnecting the tank. Meanwhile Forrester connected his PADD to the torpedo's control system that included both the guidance and detonation circuitry. A torpedo could detonate for a number of reasons. The primary trigger was impact with the assigned target, although it could also be set to detonate as soon as it got within a pre-specified distance of it. However, for safety a torpedo would also self destruct if it missed its target either after a specified amount of time or travelling far enough that it determined that it was out of the combat zone or if told to by the launching vessel. Forrester wanted to limit this to a direct command only. The torpedo would drift after leaving the *Ascension* and without fuel it would not be able to steer. In all likelihood it would be caught in the gravitational pull of an asteroid and crash land on the surface. Therefore, Forrester disabled all of the automatic detonation triggers so that the weapon would be able to drift indefinitely and even survive a crash landing while retaining the capability to detonate it remotely.

"Set." he said as he finished making the changes to the torpedo's detonation system and he and Duke both stood back, "Now hand me that communicator."

"Here you go commander." Duke said, passing Forrester the Kzinti communicator.

With this in one hand Forrester hurried over to the nearest intercom panel and activated it.

"Forrester to bridge." he said.

"Go ahead commander." Ash said after a brief delay as Estevez told him of the incoming communication.

"Captain I'm about to activate the Kzinti communicator. If they are monitoring the frequency then they'll pick it up pretty quickly. Are you ready?"

"Lieutenant Etchemin can eject the torpedo as soon as you give the word." Ash told him.

"Understood captain. I'm leaving this channel open." Forrester told him and then he returned to the still open torpedo, leaving the intercom switched on.

With the deuterium fuel tank removed from inside the torpedo there was more than enough room for Forrester to insert the Kzinti communicator, using a plastic cable tie to fix it in place.

"Chief get over by that intercom. Turning this on is going to be like sending up a flare to the Kzinti." he said and Duke nodded.

"Got it commander." he replied, hurrying to the intercom panel and waiting.

Forrester activated the Kzinti communicator inside the torpedo then closed the cover as quickly as he could, using his key to seal it again. Leaping away from the torpedo he turned and looked towards Duke.

"Now!" he exclaimed.

"Torpedo set." Duke said into the intercom and on the bridge Etchemin activated one of the *Ascension's* forward torpedo launchers without waiting for a command from Ash. Immediately the mechanism took the modified torpedo from the magazine feed and loaded it into the launcher. Then when Etchemin fired the launcher a magnetic pulse propelled it forwards out into space. This was normally the point at which the torpedo's own drive unit would take over but without fuel it could not and so it just drifted onwards in a straight line instead, broadcasting its signal into space in all directions.

"Rigat-Captain a signal!" Communications Officer exclaimed as the *Spectral Claw* continued to move slowly through the debris field, hunting for the elusive *USS Ascension*.

"Starfleet?" Rigat-Captain asked.

"No Rigat-Captain, one of ours." Communications Officer answered.

"What does it say?" Rigat-Captain said.

"There is no message Rigat-Captain but the signal is constant." Communications Officer told him. Then a moment later he looked up from his console and added, "Rigat-Captain I believe the signal comes from First-Officer's communicator."

"Could First Officer still be alive?" another of the bridge crew asked.

"No!" Rigat-Captain exclaimed, "First-Officer may have underestimated the humans' Franklin-Captain but he did not allow himself to be taken alive by them. If he had then Franklin-Captain would have shown him to us in her transmission."

"Then it is a trick. A ruse to lure us into a trap." First Helmsman said.

"Perhaps. But that signal must be coming from the Starfleet vessel. It may be that they have activated First Officer's communicator by accident and don't realise that it is leading us right to them." Rigat-Captain pointed out, "First Helmsman, take us in carefully. First Gunner what is the status of our weapons?"

"Port array is fully operational Rigat-Captain. The starboard one is still under repair but partially functional." First Gunner reported.

"Stand by on disruptors. If the humans are hiding their shields will be down to avoid giving their position away." Rigat-Captain ordered.

First Helmsman fired the *Spectral Claw's* thrusters again, guiding the warship deeper into the debris field using just its thrusters to try and avoid detection as well as the asteroids. As the ship continued Communications Officer continuously monitored the signal coming from First Officer's communicator. This was being reflected off numerous asteroids so the signal strength was variable and the Kzinti could not use this to determine the exact distance from the *Spectral Claw* to the device but even multiple reflections could be used to provide a bearing for the ship to follow.

"Receiving communicator signal loud and clear captain." Estevez reported as the photon torpedo continued to drift away from the *Ascension*.

"Are you picking up any other signals ensign?" Ash asked in response.

"No captain. Just the one from our beacon." Estevez replied.

"That's a shame. I was hoping they might just be impulsive enough to try responding to the signal." Ash commented.

"Captain the torpedo is shifting course." Tan reported, "One degree. Two degrees. Five."

"Have the Kzinti caught it in a tractor beam?" Estevez suggested.

"No. No excess energy readings." Tan responded, "I believe that the torpedo is caught in the gravitational pull of a large asteroid. I can't tell if it will crash or if it has enough forward momentum to get past yet."

"Helm, keep us with it but not too close. I don't want the Kzinti seeing us before they get close to the torpedo warhead." Ash said.

"Aye captain. Firing thrusters." Teela said as she sent the *Ascension* after the drifting photon torpedo. The influence of the competing gravitational forces in the debris field pulled the torpedo out of sight and as the *Ascension* rounded the same asteroid after it Etchemin was ready to fire the destroyer's weapons if it turned out that the Kzinti warship was already there. There was only the torpedo though, still sending out its silent signal as it drifted onwards.

"Torpedo now accelerating captain." Tan said.

"Looks like the gravity of that big asteroid up ahead has caught it in its pull." Etchemin commented.

"It's going to crash." Teela added.

"Confirmed captain. Torpedo will impact in ten seconds." Tan agreed as the *Ascension's* passive sensors showed the torpedo picking up more and more speed as it accelerated towards an irregularly shaped asteroid that was more than twice the length of the *Ascension* across in its widest dimension. Then a few seconds later the torpedo crashed in it. As intended there was no massive explosion from the mixing of matter and antimatter, instead just a small plume of debris coming from the impact point and Ash turned towards Estevez.

"Ensign Estevez did the communicator survive the impact? Are we still picking up its signal?" he asked.

"Affirmative captain. No change to signal transmission." she replied.

"Captain we should be cautious." Tan said, "If the torpedo detonates on the surface of the asteroid then it will create a significant amount of debris. Much like shrapnel from an explosive shell. Given the thickness of armour on a Kzinti vessel of the class we are facing this will increase the damage inflicted on them by a moderate amount. However, our hull is not as well protected as theirs is."

"I get the point Commander Tan." Ash said, "Teela back us away a bit. Find us somewhere we can stay out of sight and ideally out of the path of any shrapnel but still trigger the torpedo by remote control."

"There is another large asteroid at bearing one two seven mark six four." Tan suggested, "We could position ourselves behind it."

"How would we know when to trigger the torpedo?" Ash asked.

"The large metallic mass of the Kzinti warship in close proximity ought to disrupt the signal strength. Now that it is stationary we should be able to get a consistent reading via reflection until the target moves into the path of the signal." Tan explained and Ash nodded.

"Helm take us behind that asteroid. There's nothing to do now but wait for the Kzinti to show up. Although it would be nice to know whether we will have main power back any time soon." he said.

## 12.

As the *Spectral Claw* drew closer to the continuously broadcasting communicator signal it became easier to filter out reflections and Communications Officer began plotting the likely location of the source of the signal. "We are very close now Rigat-Captain." he said, "No more than two thousand kilometres." "First Sensor Operator, can you see the human vessel yet? Where is Franklin-Captain and her crew of females?" Rigat-Captain asked, studying the *Spectral Claw's* sensor readouts closely on the main screen but as far as he could tell the *Ascension* was nowhere to be seen. "No Rigat-Captain. The humans cower from us." First Sensor Operator replied. "Perhaps behind the asteroid directly ahead Rigat-Captain." Communications Officer added, "I am certain that the source of the transmission is just beyond it." Rigat-Captain snarled, bearing his teeth as he looked at an image of the asteroid. "First Helmsman, bring impulse engines back on line at one quarter power and take us around the asteroid. First Gunner open fire as soon as you see the prey." he ordered.

"Captain, impulse drive flare detected." Tan said suddenly when the heat of the *Spectral Claw's* impulse drive coming on line was detected by the *Ascension's* passive sensors, "Range sixteen hundred kilometres and closing fast." "Bridge to engineering." Ash said into the intercom, "The Kzinti are here. Can you give me mains power yet?" "Just bringing it back on line now captain." Forrester responded, "Ready to start it up on your order." "Good because we may need it." Ash said. "Captain the signal from the Kzinti communicator is weakening." Tan added, "The enemy vessel is close." "Lieutenant Etchemin trigger the mine." Ash said and Etchemin reach for the torpedo's self destruct control.

"Where are they?" Rigat-Captain demanded as the *Spectral Claw* rounded the asteroid to find only empty space. Then he spun to face Communications Officer and hissed at him, "You said they were hiding here." "But Rigat-Captain this is where the signal was coming from." Communications Officer protested. "Rigat-Captain perhaps I may have an answer." First Sensor Operator added and Rigat-Captain turned towards him, "The signal appears to be coming from the surface of the asteroid. Perhaps the humans ejected First Officer's communicator into space and the landing activated it. There appears to be more equipment at the same location with it." "What sort of equipment?" Rigat-Captain asked. "I cannot tell from this distance with passive sensors only Rigat-Captain." First Sensor Operator replied. "First Helmsman take us closer." Rigat-Captain said.

"Captain the Kzinti vessel is within five hundred metres of the torpedo." Tan said. "Now Etchemin, detonate the torpedo!" Ash snapped and Etchemin pressed the self destruct trigger. The photon torpedo resting on the surface of the asteroid immediately detonated, the antimatter of its warhead reacting with the matter of its casing and resulting in a massive release of energy that shot out into space towards the Kzinti warship. In addition to this the blast tore numerous large pieces of rock from the surface of the asteroid and hurled them out into space as well, bombarding the unshielded Kzinti vessel with molten debris. "Forrester give me mains power now." Ash ordered over the intercom.

Aboard the *Spectral Claw* alarms sounded as the warship was hit by the dual effects of the energy wave from the exploding torpedo and then the shrapnel from the asteroid that followed it. "Damage report." Rigat-Captain exclaimed. "Multiple hull breaches. Main power off line. Casualty reports coming in from the lower decks." Communications Officer responded. "Rigat-Captain!" First Sensor operator called out, "The Starfleet vessel approaches from behind us!"

"Shields up captain. Phasers charged. Torpedo bays loaded." Etchemin reported as full power was restored to the *Ascension*. "Lieutenant Commander Teela one quarter impulse power." Ash said. "Aye captain. Proceeding at one quarter impulse." Teela replied and the *Ascension* began to move forwards, circling around the asteroid it was using for cover towards the damaged Kzinti warship. Thanks to its heavily armoured hull the *Spectral Claw* had survived the explosion although it was clearly in bad shape. Plumes of gas could be seen escaping from hole in its hull and its engines flickered as its crew struggled to maintain power.



"Ensign Estevez can you get me a direct channel to them?" Ash asked.  
"I think so captain but don't the Kzinti think that Captain Franklin is in command?" Estevez replied.  
"I think we can drop the ruse now it's done its job." Ash said and Estevez nodded.  
"Putting you through now sir." she said.

"Attention Kzinti captain," Ash said when an image of the *Ascension's* bridge appeared on the main screen of the *Spectral Claw*, "My name is Commander Ash of the *USS Ascension*."  
"Commander?" Rigat-Captain exclaimed, "Where is Franklin-Captain?"  
"I'm afraid that Captain Franklin has not been in command of this vessel for several weeks captain. The message you thought she sent was a deception on my part to lure you into a trap. Now I'm going to give you one last chance to guarantee the survival of your men. Surrender your ship and prepare to be boarded." Ash said and Rigat-Captain bared his teeth.  
"Never! Communications Officer end this transmission. First Weapons Officer, open fire!" he bellowed as the connection to the *Ascension* was cut off.

"I don't think that worked." Ash commented when the Kzinti severed the communications link.  
"Enemy vessel is turning captain." Tan said as the *Spectral Claw* began to slowly turn towards the *Ascension*.  
"Well I tried to give them a chance. Mister Etchemin you may fire at will." Ash said.  
"Firing phasers captain." Etchemin announced and he fired the *Ascension's* main forward phaser bank, the twin beams of energy pounding the unshielded Kzinti warship as it turned.  
The *Spectral Claw* was not totally defenceless though and it responded with a pair of photon torpedoes from its starboard weapons pod. Thanks to the damage inflicted to the *Spectral Claw* one of these failed to lock onto the *Ascension* and it sped past before striking a small asteroid and blasting it to pieces while the second hit the destroyer's now fully charged shields head on.  
"Forward shields at eighty percent but holding captain." Etchemin reported before the *Ascension* rocked again under the impact of a disruptor blast, "No damage." Etchemin added.  
"Return fire lieutenant. Photon torpedoes." Ash ordered.  
"Yes captain. Firing torpedoes." Etchemin said and he fired a pair of torpedoes from the *Ascension's* forward launchers. These both sped towards the damaged Kzinti vessel and exploded on impact. The first struck one of the aft wings that mounted the *Spectral Claw's* warp nacelles and the entire wing assembly exploded. The second hit the upper hull of the warship roughly half way along and the ship was torn open, venting atmosphere and debris into space.

The torpedo impacts triggered a string of secondary explosions through out the *Spectral Claw* and Rigat-Captain watched as his command staff died at their posts while he was thrown from his chair before a beam fell from the ceiling and landed on his leg, shattering the bone. Ignoring the pain he saw that he had landed close to the weapons console and despite being covered in First Gunner's blood it appeared functional so Rigat-Captain dragged himself out from beneath the beam and crawled across the bridge towards it. Reaching the weapons console Rigat-Captain saw that although it was functional the weapons it controlled were not. There was no power from the warp drive for the disruptor banks and the photon control that channelled antimatter to the torpedoes had been destroyed. However, Rigat-Captain knew that he still had one other weapon at his disposal and he began to crawl towards the helm.

"Analysis Commander Tan." Ash said as he watched the *Spectral Claw* burn.  
"The Kzinti vessel's weapons and shields are off line but I am still detecting strong energy readings from their impulse drive." Tan replied.  
"Captain she's starting to move." Teela said as the Kzinti ship started to pick up speed again.  
"Power is still building up in their impulse drive." Tan added.  
"They're going to ram. Teela get us out of the way." Ash said and Teela fired the *Ascension's* impulse drive at the same moment Rigat-Captain fired that of the *Spectral Claw*.  
The two ships both accelerated, the *Spectral Claw* aiming for the *Ascension* while the Starfleet destroyer turned aside as rapidly as Teela could turn it. Despite the normally rapid reflexes of the Kzinti, in his wounded state Rigat-Captain could not react to this in time and instead of ramming the *Spectral Claw* into the *Ascension* as he had planned the two ships passed close by one another. The *Spectral Claw* was deflected off the *Ascension's* shields and the impact destroyed its impulse drive, crippling it completely.  
"Any damage from the collision?" Ash asked.  
"No captain. However, the Kzinti vessel appears to be on a collision course with the asteroid we hid behind." Tan responded and the bridge crew all watched as the burning *Spectral Claw* ploughed onwards through space, caught in the gravitational pull of the asteroid and unable to turn aside.  
"Lieutenant Commander Teela get us out of here." Ash ordered, not wanting the *Ascension* to be caught in

the inevitable blast.

"Aye captain." Teela responded, steering the ship between asteroids as she sought to put as much distance between the *Ascension* and the *Spectral claw* before the Kzinti vessel finally ploughed right into the asteroid it was heading for and there was a brilliant flash of light as the ship's warp core was breached and a massive explosion consumed it in a moment.

"Do you think anyone survived that?" Estevez said.

"I'm not reading any signs of escape pods. We can only assume that the entire crew were killed." Tan replied.

"Your orders captain?" Etchemin asked and Ash leant back in his chair.

"Let's get out of these asteroids first. Then lay in a course for Starbase Twenty-four. Starfleet needs to know that the Kzinti are being supplied with illegal weapons by the Klingons." he said.

The door to Korda's office opened and a Klingon whose uniform marked him out as an advisor to the High Council itself stormed in. Unlike Korda this Klingon possessed the ridged forehead that most of his species now once again had.

"Korda what are you playing at?" he demanded.

"You will have to be more specific than that brigadier." Korda replied, smiling at the other officer.

"This." the brigadier said and he slammed a PADD down on Korda's desk, "A formal diplomatic protest from the Federation. The Kzinti have been supplied with arms."

"And no doubt they have put them to use." Korda commented as he casually studied the text on the PADD,

"So the Federation is threatening to suspend the talks. Interesting. Whatever will we do if that happens?"

"The council knows it was you Korda and they are ordering you to stop. As well as the Federation we are also expecting protests from the Romulans and the Gorn. Are you so desperate for war that you would have us fight them all at once?" the brigadier yelled and Korda handed then PADD back to him.

"Brigadier you my assure the High Council that any action I take will only be to strengthen the Empire against its enemies. No matter where they are." he replied and he smiled.