

# STAR TREK ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.

## The Tower

By Stephen J Dutton



# STAR TREK: ASCENSION

## *The Tower*

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

Pursuing a Klingon vessel into a supposedly uninhabited system the crew of the USS Ascension discover a mysterious structure. Not wanting this, or the technology behind it falling into Klingon hands they have no choice but investigate it themselves...

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# 1.

Stardate 8701.4. *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 en-route to rendezvous with freighter *SS Durable*.

"I have a sensor lock on the *Durable* now captain." Lieutenant Commander Tan told Commander Ash, the acting commanding officer of the Miranda-class heavy destroyer *Ascension*.

"Tell me they're still in one piece." Ash replied.

"Yes captain, they are intact and have power." Tan told him, "Captain there are no other vessels within two million kilometres of their location." he added.

"Ensign Estevez can you open a channel to them?" Ash asked his communications officer.

"I'll try captain." she responded as she activated the *Ascension's* subspace communications system, "*SS Durable* this is the *USS Ascension*, do you read me?" she transmitted.

"Affirmative *Ascension*, we read you." a panic stricken voice responded.

"*Durable* what is your situation?" Estevez asked.

"Our warp drive is disabled *Ascension*. Auxiliary power is stable and we have life support. The *USS Oarsman* has also responded to our distress call. They are eight minutes away from rendezvous with us." the crewman of the *Durable* told her and she played this response over her console's speaker so that the other bridge officers could hear what was said.

"Captain that puts them closer than us." Lieutenant Commander Teela, the *Ascension's* Andorian helm officer commented as she glanced at her console to confirm the starship's exact speed.

"The *Oarsman* is an Oberth-class scout captain." Tan added.

"So ideally suited to a search and rescue mission." Ash said, "What about the raider?"

"*Durable* what happened to the vessel that attacked you?" Estevez signalled to the *Durable*.

"They went to warp just as the *Oarsman* entered sensor range." the crewman from the freighter answered, "Heading one-one-five mark six."

"That puts them on a course for the Klingon border captain." the officer at the navigation console, Lieutenant Etchemin, told Ash.

"Running for home." Ash muttered.

"Captain if we come to three-two-zero mark four-six then we should be able to cut them off." Etchemin added, checking his instruments.

"Commander Tan what can you tell me about the raider?" Ash asked.

"Not much from this range captain." Tan said, "The sensor readings taken by the *Durable* were limited to surface scans but we can tell from their visual recordings that it is an obsolete model of Bird of Prey. The type is no longer in Klingon military service but it is used widely in private hands."

"By pirates in other words." Teela said before Tan continued.

"It is currently travelling at warp five, the top speed of this class." he said.

"So we can outrun her and outgun her." Ash said, "Teela lay in an intercept course. Warp seven. Lieutenant Etchemin be ready on phasers. We'll disable her and then send over a boarding party to take control of the ship."

"Coming about to bearing three-two-zero mark four-six. Warp seven." Teela said.

"Estevez inform the *Durable* that we'll be leaving their rescue to the *Oarsman*. Then send the captain of the *Oarsman* and tell him that we'll be chasing down the pirates." Ash ordered and Estevez nodded.

"Yes captain." she said before she began transmitting to the two other Federation vessels.

"Captain I am detecting two more Klingon vessels on our long range sensors." Tan said suddenly.

"Three Klingon ships in Federation space?" Ash asked.

"No captain. These are holding position on the Klingon side of the neutral zone. Both are D-four class destroyers." Tan told him.

"Our opposite number." Ash said. Like the Bird of Prey that the *Ascension* was chasing the D-4 was an obsolete design but it had soldiered on in Klingon service, updated with more modern weapons but still relegated from the role of a cruiser to that of a destroyer and used for missions that did not warrant the deployment of a ship such as a K't'inga-class battlecruiser.

"Maybe this pirate is wanted by the Klingons as well." Estevez suggested.

"Ha!" Teela exclaimed.

"What Lieutenant Commander Teela is trying to say is that the Klingons have no interest in arresting pirates who prey on Federation shipping ensign." Tan said.

"Those two ships will be there to make sure we don't chase that Bird of Prey into the neutral zone. We go so much as a metre over the border and they'll attack." Ash explained.

"Well he's not going to make it that far if I have anything to say about it captain." Teela said with a smile,

"Intercept in eighteen minutes."

The *Ascension* sped towards the fleeing Klingon raider but the destroyer's change of course did not go unnoticed and the Bird of Prey dropped out of warp just long enough to alter course before accelerating to maximum speed once more.

"Captain the Klingon vessel is turning away from us. Now at bearing zero-eight mark three. Still travelling at warp five."

"Captain on that heading the Klingons won't go anywhere near the border. They'll just fly right past it." Etchemin said.

"So where are they heading to lieutenant?" Ash asked.

"Looks like a binary system less than a light year from their current position." Etchemin replied.

"Commander Tan what's your impression of the system?" Ash said.

"A blue giant that is losing mass to a class-K barium star partner. The system is uncharted but observations by probes have confirmed the presence of a system of planets, none of which show any signs of habitation, although one of them just about qualifies as class-L. The Klingons may be hoping that they can lose us in the interference between the stars that the mass transfer is creating." Tan told him.

"Can they?" Ash added.

"No captain. They would have to shut down all systems and run silent within the path of the mass transfer to remain hidden from our sensors and the energy wave itself would then push them into the barium star." Tan said.

"Teela take us to warp eight. The Klingons may know more about that system than we do so I want to give them as little chance to exploit that knowledge as possible." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain. Coming to warp eight." Teela replied.

The Bird of Prey *Mevak* had once been used by the Klingon Empire for raiding their neighbours, largely targeting vessels belonging to the species that would later form the United Federation of Planets. As Federation technology overtook that of the *Mevak* the ship was retired from active service, first used as a training vessel before being sold off. Now it was operated by a small group of Klingons that operated independently of either the high council or any of the great houses. These Klingons still raided the Federation before fleeing across the border before Starfleet could respond. Now though they found themselves in the situation they had long tried to avoid, trapped between two Starfleet vessels and cut off from the neutral zone that no Federation ship would dare cross, especially not with a pair of destroyers under the command of their benefactor waiting on the other side to respond to any intrusion.

"Enemy vessel at seven hundred million kellicams and closing." the ship's navigator told it's captain, a well scarred Klingon called Gren.

"Distance to the stellar transfer stream?" Gren responded.

"One point six billion kellicams captain." the navigator said.

"We cannot maintain this speed much longer captain. The warp core will fail." the helmsman added and Gren snarled.

"Captain the enemy vessel-" the navigator began.

"I heard you Koros!" Gren snapped, "The Starfleet vessel will catch us long before we reach the disruption of the stars' transfer of mass."

"Captain we may have another option open to us." the Klingon sat at the weapons console, the only female among the bridge officers said and Gren turned towards her.

"Speak K'Seyr." he said.

"My targeting sensors are picking up another disturbance, much closer than the stars. Just nine million kellicams." she replied.

"What is its source?" Gren asked.

"I can't tell captain. It is on the surface of one of the system's planets. The desert world." K'Seyr told him.

"Confirmed captain." Koros added, "There appears to be a structure of some kind at the centre."

"A structure? We have travelled through this system dozens of times to evade Starfleet's sensors. There have never been any signs of habitation before now." Gren pointed out.

"Yes captain. However, the planet appears to have undergone an orbital shift, perhaps as the result of some sort of collision. There is also a large dust cloud on the southern hemisphere that could be the impact site.

The effects of this could have caused a structure previously buried to be uncovered. If our readings are accurate then the structure is producing a disruptive energy field that extends more than sixty kellicams around it. Within that radius only the most basic of scans are possible." Koros said.

"How does this field help us?" Gren asked.

"Captain we have one distinct advantage over the Starfleet vessel pursuing us. We can land on the surface while they cannot." K'Seyr pointed out, "As long as we keep a reasonable distance our hull will likely protect our systems from the effects of the field. We can land and conceal the ship then wait for Starfleet to move on. They will believe us to be hiding between the stars."

Gren smiled. Although a veteran warrior he found his planning skills more suited to direct assaults than more subtle alternatives. However, this did not mean he could not recognise the benefit of such schemes when they were suggested to him.

"Helm prepare us for atmospheric entry." he said, "Take us down low and fly us into that disruption field from the outer edge. Get us as far in before you begin to see interference with our controls and land there. Make sure our thrusters kick up enough sand to conceal us from a long range visual scan."

"Yes captain." the helmsman replied.

Travelling at warp meant the *Mevak* could not be turned without risking the stress breaking the ship apart so the helmsman continued on the Bird of Prey's current course until it was taken into the shadow of the system's desert world, out of sight of the pursuing *Ascension* before dropping out of warp and turning sharply to take the ancient ship into the atmosphere. Descending to a lower level to try and avoid being detected by the *Ascension* the helmsman then flew the ship straight towards the previously undetected structure, descending even further the closer he got.

"Disruption field ten kellicams ahead." Koros said as the Bird of Prey neared the structure.

"Are there any signs of activity on the surface?" Gren asked.

"Negative captain. But our sensors can't penetrate more than a few kellicams inside the field." Koros answered.

"Entering the field now captain." the helmsman said shortly after when the Klingon ship reached the edge of the disruption field and immediately after the *Mevak* began to shudder.

"Captain artificial gravity and inertial dampeners are being thrown out of phase." another of the bridge officers said as the shaking intensified.

"Shut them down. Use the power for the structural integrity field." Gren ordered and the other Klingon nodded.

"Yes captain." he said as he followed the command to shut those systems down.

"Unidentified structure now two kellicams ahead. One point five." Koros announced.

"Helm response is slowing." the helmsman added.

"Then land here Turos." Gren ordered and the helmsman reduced the power to the ship's thrusters sharply, causing the crew to have to hold onto the chairs to avoid being thrown forwards against the ship's walls in the absence of the inertial dampening field that would normally protect them from such changes in speed. For a few moments Turos maintained the power to the *Mevak*'s downward thrusters, keeping the ship hovering in the air while the blast from the thrusters kicked up a massive cloud of sand. Then he reduced the power slightly so that the ship descended gently while still hurling sand into the air so that when the ship finally touched down and he shut off the thrusters much of this sand then settled back on top of its hull and wings.

"We're down. Range to tower is one point one kellicams." Turos said when the ship was down.

"Quickly shut down all systems. Turn off anything that Starfleet could use to detect us." Gren ordered and around him his bridge crew frantically worked to shut everything down.

"All systems shut down captain. What are your orders?" Koros said and a smile spread across Gren's face.

"This structure that went undetected. It creates a field that can disrupt our sensors so there must be technology inside it somewhere. I intend to find it and claim it for the empire. Our benefactor will reward us greatly for it." he said.

## 2.

"Captain the Klingon ship no longer appears on our sensors." Tan reported when the Bird of Prey passed behind the planet.

"They're using that L-class planet for cover while they head for the gap between the stars." Estevez commented.

"Then we'll see them any moment when we cross the horizon." Teela said.

"This could be an ambush." Ash said, "Teela drop us to impulse. I don't want to overshoot them. Etchemin what's the status of our shields and phasers?"

"Both operating at full efficiency captain." Etchemin replied.

"Good. Don't wait for my order if you spot them lieutenant. Target their warp drive and fire phasers." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain. I won't let you down." Etchemin responded. However, as the *Ascension* crossed the horizon so that the destroyer was between the planet and the binary stars at the centre of the system there was no sign of the Klingon vessel it had been chasing.

"They've gone." Teela said.

"Tactical analysis." Ash said, "Are they still circling the planet to try and keep it between us?"

"Negative captain. I am detecting no energy anomalies that would indicate another vessel on the other side of the planet." Tan said as he studied the *Ascension's* sensor readings closely, "Unless—"

"Unless what commander?" Ash asked when Tan stopped speaking part way through his response.

"Captain I am picking up an unusual energy reading from the surface." Tan told him.

"The Klingon ship?" Ash suggested.

"I don't think so captain. The readings are unlike anything I have seen before. Unfortunately they are also interfering with our scans and I cannot fully penetrate the energy field being created." Tan said.

"So what can you tell me about it?" Ash said.

"The energy field is a hemisphere with a diameter of approximately two hundred and fifty kilometres and there appears to be some sort of artificial structure at its centre." Tan said.

"Can you show me on the main screen?" Ash said and Tan looked up as he transferred the image he was able to capture of the structure to the bridge's main viewscreen. This showed a tall tower that tapered to a point at the top standing in an otherwise barren area of the desert but apart from that nothing could be made out.

"How big is that thing?" Estevez said in amazement.

"I calculate that it is between nine hundred and one thousand metres in height." Tan answered.

"How come none of our probes of this system ever noticed that?" Teela commented.

"I am picking up signs of a recent planetary impact, the seismic force of which may have displaced enough sand to uncover the structure." Tan explained.

"But the tower itself was able to survive?" Ash said.

"Yes captain. It could be that the energy field is some sort of defence system." Tan replied.

"Commander you say that the energy field is disrupting our scans of the surface. Could that be enough to hide a ship?" Ash asked.

"Possibly captain. Although additional means would be needed to hide it fully from a visual search." Tan told him.

"But they're probably down there somewhere which means we need to go down there after them." Ash said.

"Or we could just drop a few photon torpedoes down there and pick up the pieces afterwards." Teela added with a smile.

"There are two issues with that Teela. Firstly we have no idea of what the effect will be of attempting to fire anti-matter weapons through the disruption field and secondly the blast could destroy the tower before we can examine it more closely." Tan pointed out.

"Basically no torpedoes." Ash added, "I'll take an away team down there."

"Captain we won't be able to beam through the disruption field." Tan warned him.

"Okay so what about a shuttlecraft? Will one of them get through?" Ash asked.

"I think so captain. At least part of the way but the interference is likely to jam the controls of something as lightly protected as a shuttlecraft." Tan said.

"Well we can't take the *Ascension* in." Ash responded.

"No but a good pilot should be able to get a shuttle to within ten kilometres." Tan told him.

"That's one hell of a walk through a desert." Ash commented.

"Then I'll have to be a really good pilot won't I?" Teela added, smiling at Ash as she glanced at him.

"Very well lieutenant commander you're on the team. You too Lieutenant Commander Tan, I think investigating that tower falls under the remit of the science division. Ensign Estevez since its obviously an

alien structure then we may need the skills of a linguist." Ash said before he reached for the intercom, connecting to the Ascension's engineering section. However, before he could say anything the voice of Lieutenant Commander Forrester, the ship's chief engineer was heard.

"Engineering. Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" he said and Ash sighed.

"Adam can I tell you why I'm calling before you ask that?" he said.

"Okay captain. Who broke what?"

"Nothing's broken commander."

"If it's not broken then don't fix it."

"Lieutenant Commander Forrester I need you to take command of the ship. Tan and I are going down to the surface of the planet we're orbiting." Ash told him.

"The surface? What's going on?" Forrester asked.

"I think it's best if you come to the bridge and see for yourself. I'll bring Doctor Reese and Chief Duke up here as well. Both of them will be joining us on the surface." Ash replied.

"Okay I'm on my way. Engineering out." Forrester said.

"Michael you find us such romantic holiday destinations." Doctor Reese said as she looked at an image of the mysterious tower on the planet below. Ordinarily an image of a structure of this size would have been crystal clear and show access points large enough for a humanoid to enter through even when taken from orbit but the energy field that it appeared to be generating was causing enough interference to reduce the image to a far more grainy quality that made picking out a way in impossible.

"You say we can't beam in?" Senior Chief Petty Officer Duke, the Ascension's chief of security asked.

"That's right. The same disruption that is preventing us from getting a clear picture will block a transporter lock." Tan answered.

"Maybe it's Iconian." Forrester said and Eseyevz frowned.

"Iconian?" she said, "Who are the Iconians?"

"They don't exist." Tan told her and Forrester grinned.

"Not now maybe but they ruled an empire that spanned the galaxy a quarter of a million years ago. Then a revolt wiped them all out. The stories say that they could travel between star systems in the blink of an eye without anyone detecting them until they were already in orbit bombing cities." he said.

"Yet there is not one shred of scientific proof that they ever existed." Tan added.

"Because they erased it themselves to hide from the species that destroyed their empire." Forrester said, "Demons of air and darkness. That's what they were known as and their descendants are still out there somewhere. Maybe inside that tower."

"Ensign Estevez the story of the Iconians is just another of Adam Forrester's conspiracy theories." Tan told Estevez and she smiled.

"Yeah, I get that." she replied.

"Hey, everything I say is true. I've researched everything carefully." Forrester protested.

"If we could get back to the matter at hand we have an alien structure to investigate and perhaps more importantly a band of Klingon pirates to capture." Ash said and he looked at Duke, "Chief I take you'd recommend a strong security team?" he asked and Duke nodded.

"I'd suggest taking as many security guards as you can fit into the shuttle captain." he said.

"Captain the larger the away team is the more equipment we'll be able to carry." Tan pointed out.

"We'll need to make sure everyone's carrying plenty of water." Reese added.

"Yes I know the guideline, one litre per person per hour in desert terrain." Ash said.

"So a five litre pack and a couple of canteens each should be enough providing Lieutenant Commander Teela can get us down within about five or six kilometres." Duke said.

"You're assuming that we'll have to walk back again?" Tan commented, "Captain if we can shut down the field emitter then we'll be able to beam back out."

"Agreed but we'll take the water anyway." Ash said, "That's seven kilograms per person already. Plus another three for an assault phaser, communicator, a couple of ration bars and an emergency first aid kit. Doctor Reese, Commander Tan, draw up a list of the other equipment you want us to take and distribute it on the basis of everyone carrying no more than twenty kilograms of kit. Any spare capacity will be taken up with more water."

### 3.

Satisfied that his ship was adequately concealed, Gren led his entire crew towards the alien tower. The fourteen Klingons were heavily armed, each of them carrying a pistol, rifle and a bladed weapon in preparation for facing opposition within. The Klingon captain paused periodically to use a set of magnifiers to examine the alien tower they were heading towards but as with scans carried out using starship sensors the electronics of the magnifiers suffered disruption and the image flickered. However, he was able to make out what looked like a shadow created by an opening at the base of the tower and he raised his hand to point towards it.

"Over there." he said, "I think there's a way in and if there isn't then we'll have to make one ourselves."

The Klingons ran the last hundred metres or so to the tower where they found that the shadow seen by Gren was indeed an entrance. However, it was blocked by a closed door, "Look for some sort of control mechanism. There has to be some way to open this." Gren ordered and the Klingons began to search both the door blocking their path and the wall surrounding it. These were all covered in carvings that looked like writing of some kind but its meaning was incomprehensible to the searching Klingons.

"Captain this pointless. We have explosives we should blast this door open." one of the other Klingons told Gren and he growled.

"Do it. Use a shaped charge though. I do not want to have to tell our benefactor that any of our prize was lost because of a collapse." he ordered and then he waved most of his crew back while two of them prepared an explosive charge to get through the door.

The Klingons carried with them a coiled shaped charge intended for use during boarding actions. The charge was powerful enough to blast through a starship bulkhead without harming anyone stood just a metre behind it. Once this was in place the Klingons setting it pulled back to join the others, all of them aiming their weapons towards the door. One of the two demolition experts then produced a wireless detonator and pressed the trigger switch. However, the disruptive energy field surrounding the tower blocked the signal and nothing happened.

"Captain our detonator-" the Klingon began.

"I see that fool!" Gren snapped, "I will take care of this." and he adjusted the setting of his disruptor to one of its lower levels where the effect would be thermal excitation rather than molecular disruption. Pointing this at the ring of explosive he then fired his weapon.

The sound of the explosion caused Gren to flinch and instinctively cover his face but just as the charge was designed to do the main force of the blast was directed straight into the door and it cut a large hole right the way through it into the interior of the tower. Gren waited for a few seconds to see whether there would be any sort of response from inside, taking the chance to set his disruptor back to a higher setting before he advanced towards the newly created opening and looked inside.

The interior of the tower appeared well lit but there was no apparent source for this illumination. Nevertheless it allowed Gren to see that the hallway he could see extended to either side as well as directly ahead and had archways at regular intervals that appeared to be covered in carved writing identical to that on the outside of the tower and its door.

"The way is clear." he called out to his crew, "Follow me." and then he stepped through the hole into the tower.

The shuttlecraft that was to take the away team down to the surface of the planet had seating inside for a dozen people so after Ash, Tan, Teela, Reese, Estevez and Duke had all taken their seats there was still enough room for five more of Duke's security guards and a medical orderly who could assist Reese or take her place in an emergency. Given the surface conditions the members of the away team had dispensed with their formal maroon coloured duty uniforms and traded them for tan coloured field uniforms and, in the case of the security guards, armoured vests. Every member of the team had with them a water pack designed to be worn on their backs and fitted with a tube they could drink from without having to remove it. They were not wearing this yet though to avoid crushing and bursting them when they sat down inside the shuttlecraft. In addition to this each member of the team also carried either two or three canteens on their belts, the number depending on what other equipment they had to carry.

"Commander Tan you sit up front with Teela." Ash told the Ascension's science officer, "I think giving you access to our sensors will do more good than having me sat up there just looking over her shoulder."

"Yeah, plus now you can sit back there with Doctor Reese." Teela commented, smiling as she continued with the shuttle's preflight checks.

"Oh I'm not saying that there aren't other advantages lieutenant commander." Ash replied, "How do you intend to get us down there?"



"I'll take us into the atmosphere about a hundred kilometres outside the disruption field and circle around it. That should give Tan the chance to run some close range scans and double check that there isn't an easy way through." Teela told him.

"That sounds good captain. There is the possibility that the disruption field may not extend all the way to the ground." Tan added as he took the seat beside the Andorian woman.

"Like an umbrella of some sort?" Estevez asked and Tan nodded.

"Exactly. The field itself creates enough interference to prevent us from detecting such a gap from orbit but from a lower altitude we may have better luck." he said.

"So if there is a way under the field then I'll follow Commander Tan's instructions. Otherwise I'll just fly straight towards the tower for as long as I still have full control of the shuttle and set us down then." Teela said.

"Okay that sounds like a plan. Take us out whenever you're ready Teela." Ash said and he then walked toward the seating in the rear of the shuttle and sat down between Reese and Duke. As soon as he did this Reese moved her hand towards his and they took hold of one another.

With the preflight checks complete Teela closed the ramp at the rear of the shuttlecraft and activated the communications.

"Shuttle *Spartan* to flight control we are set for launch." she transmitted.

"Copy that *Spartan*. Opening the doors now." the hangar controller responded from the control booth that overlooked the *Ascension's* shuttle bay responded and through the viewport in front of her Teela saw the large outer door opening, a low level forcefield activating to maintain the pressure inside the starship.

"Okay everyone, here we go." Teela announced as she fired the shuttle's thrusters and the craft rose up off the deck before she accelerated out into space. Once clear of the *Ascension's* shuttle bay Teela brought the shuttlecraft's impulse drive on line and directed it towards the atmosphere of the planet below, entering it at an angle that would make circling the disruptive energy field around the tower easy. She kept the impulse drive active just long enough to complete the process of atmospheric entry and then switched back to the shuttle's thrusters for propulsion as the craft continued to descend.

"Scanning the disruption field now. Range four hundred kilometres." Tan announced.

"Can you see a way in?" Teela asked.

"Not yet but our range means we could still just be reading the magnetic field that the field is producing around itself instead of its limits." Tan answered.

"Taking us down to one thousand metres. Steering two degrees to port." Teela responded and at her command the shuttle descended to a lower altitude from where Tan could scan the tower and the energy field that surrounded it from the side instead of from above. All that this angle showed though was that the field was indeed a dome that extended all the way down to the ground.

"I'm not seeing a way under the field." Tan said, "Its strength appears uniform at all angles and altitudes."

"Time to take us in then." Teela said before she smiled and in a clear voice added, "This is your pilot speaking we may shortly be experiencing some turbulence. Please make sure your seats are in the upright position and fasten your seatbelts."

"Seatbelts?" Reese commented, frowning, "We don't have any seatbelts."

The shuttlecraft entered the region covered by the energy field without any apparent effect on its controls and Tan paid close attention to its sensors.

"Field strength increasing." he said.

"I noticed that. The controls are getting heavier." Teela responded.

"How far to go to the tower?" Ash asked.

"Still more than thirty kilometres captain. Don't worry, I'll get us closer." Teela said, focusing on the tower that was visible even at this distance.

The shuttle lurched and Ash and Reese tightened their grips on one another. The shuttle remained airborne though and Teela kept it on course. She did take the precaution of increasing altitude though, giving her more reaction time if the controls fluctuated again.

"Ten kilometres." Tan announced as the shuttle closed in on the tower.

"How are the controls Teela?" Ash said.

"Slow captain." she responded, "The thrusters still respond as effectively but there's a delay. If I don't pull back I could easily over steer and send us right into the ground."

"Err, in that case how are you planning on landing commander?" Duke asked nervously as his men exchanged looks of concern with one another.

"Carefully chief. Very carefully" Teela replied and then she smiled and added, "Have I ever let you down before?"

"We're all going to die aren't we chief?" one of the security guards commented.

"Why else do you think you sign a waiver when you join Starfleet?" Duke responded.

"We're coming up on five kilometres now." Tan said, "Maybe you should think about-"

"Not yet." Teela interrupted, her eyes focused on the alien tower, "I can get us closer."

"At this rate she's going to crash right into the thing." Reese muttered.

"Four kilometres." Tan said a few moments later and Teela suddenly reduced power to the aft thrusters.

"Okay that's it. If we go any further we might not be able to take off again." she said as the shuttle began to decelerate until it was left hovering over the desert about four kilometres from the alien tower. Gradually she then reduced the power to the thrusters that were keeping the craft aloft so that it began to descend. The shuttle lurched again as it finally set down on the ground, the thrusters blasting sand in all directions and Teela quickly shut them off, "We're down." she announced, "Your pilot has turned off the no smoking sign and you may move about the cabin. We'd like to thank you for flying Teela Airlines."

"No offence commander but next time I'll go by boat." Duke said.

"Open up the hatch Teela. I want to take a look outside." Ash said, letting go of Reese's hand as he got to his feet. Picking up the water pack from the floor beside him he put this on his back, hooking the drinking tube to his shoulder before he made his way to the rear of the shuttle the ramp slowly lowered. Ash strode down this and stepped out onto the sand, first shielding his eyes against the strong blue light cast out by the system's primary sun before he put on a pair of tinted goggles. He then reached for the communicator on his belt and flicked it open.

"Ash to *Ascension*." he said into the device but all he could hear in response was the hiss of static, "Ash to *Ascension*, do you read me?" he transmitted again but the response was the same and it was obvious to him that the energy field being generated by the alien tower was also blocking communications with the orbiting starship.

"This sand appears unremarkable captain." Tan said from behind Ash and he looked around to see the *Ascension's* science officer crouched down also wearing a set of goggles as he scanned a handful of sand with his tricorder.

"What about the energy field?" he asked.

"The field is limiting the range of my tricorder to about five metres even for all but the most basic scans but I can't even tell you the nature of it. It could be electrical, magnetic or subspace based." Tan told him as the shuttle's other occupants began to emerge, those not already wearing sun goggles putting them on when they stepped into the brightness of the sun.

"Wow that's bright." Teela said as she disembarked from the shuttlecraft, looking down to avoid the sun as she put her goggles on.

"I thought Andorians would be used to the glare from all the ice on your home world." Duke commented.

"Andoria is a moon chief. We spend most of our time in eclipse one way or another." Teela replied as she rummaged through the pouches on her belt for a tube of sun cream that she began to spread over her face.

"That's a good idea." Estevez said when she saw this and she too began to rub protective cream into her face.

"With this field jamming your tricorder I don't suppose you can tell me anything more about that tower can you James?" Ash asked and Tan tossed the handful of sand away and turned towards the alien tower that rose up into the sky ahead of them.

"Nothing about its chemical structure captain but now we're on the ground I can tell you that it is nine hundred and forty-one point two metres tall." he said.

"That's a lot of stairs." Ash replied and he and Tan smiled at one another.

"Why would someone need to build something like that?" Reese said.

"Normally such tall structures are to compensate for a high density of buildings in the surrounding area doctor." Tan responded, "However, there are clearly no such other structures around and the odds of something having so totally destroyed them so as to leave no trace yet leave this one perfectly intact are slim in the extreme." Tan answered.

"Hey what's that on the horizon?" Estevez asked and she pointed away from the tower towards the skyline where what looked like a dark cloud was visible.

"I don't like the look of that." Duke said when he saw what she was looking at.

"Why, what is it?" Estevez said.

"It's a sandstorm isn't it?" Ash commented.

"I think so captain." Tan replied, nodding his head, "Remember I mentioned that the world seemed to have suffered a large impact event recently?"

"So that was created by the shock wave." Reese said, "How long until it gets here and how bad will it be?"

"It's too soon to say how long we have but it won't be grinding the flesh from your bones if that's what you're worried about. However, it will reduce visibility to nil. We should get moving as quickly as possible to try and stay ahead of it." Tan said and Ash nodded.

"Agreed commander. Chief Duke please place two of your men on point and let's get going. Everyone remember where we parked." he said.

## 4.

"These hallways are endless." Gren said in frustration as he and his crew continued to wander the hallways of the alien tower. Although these branched off and connected to one another in multiple places there seemed to be no point to any of them. There were no doorways set into any of the walls that could lead to chambers filled with alien treasure, nor were there any ways of ascending to any higher levels that the Klingons knew had to exist. Even if the rest of the tower was filled with machinery there had to be some way for construction workers to have reached it and for technicians to be able to maintain it. For the first time in his years spent raiding Federation shipping Gren wished that he had a proper science officer among his crew and resolved to find one when he returned to the Klingon Empire. The nearest that Gren had was his ship's doctor, a Klingon who could just about stitch up a wound so that injured crewmembers could survive long enough to reach a proper treatment facility. However, his attempts to use the device to scan for hidden doorways had met with total failure. Like those outside the tower, the walls of the hallways inside were covered in unintelligible writing, "No doubt the secret of how to explore this place is written right in front of our faces. It is as if the aliens who built this place long ago were mocking us even then." he added.

"Captain we know that there must be doors hidden somewhere. Perhaps we should cease looking for them though and instead look to locate the rooms they lead to." Koros suggested and he held up his disruptor.

"A good idea Koros." Gren replied and he pointed his sidearm towards the wall close by him and fired.

From point blank range the energy blast was enough to blow a fist sized chunk of stone out of the wall. This revealed only stone though and so he fired again and again, moving his disruptor sideways between each shot. However, none of them revealed anything other than solid stone behind the walls and Gren roared in anger.

"This cursed place makes no sense!" he snapped, "Spread out. Find me a door, any door. I'll give a thousand darseks to the first warrior who does."

The Klingon pirates grinned at one another as they all pictured what they would do with this reward. Bribing warriors to do what was already their job was not exactly an honourable practice but Gren was willing to use any means of inspiring his men at his disposal. The Klingons then split up and spread out through the hallways of the alien tower in search of a doorway to anywhere.

In a darkened chamber an ancient machine reactivated after its long period of dormancy and ran an immediate check on the tower it was designed to protect. It was clear that the external defences had been partially activated but his was not the cause of the machine's awakening. This had been triggered by a directed energy weapon that had been fired inside the tower itself and for the first time in many thousands of years the alien machine began to move, detaching itself from the mounting it had rested in since its creators had left it here and moving towards the shaft that would take it down the tower to where it could hunt down the intruders who had damaged the tower.

The Klingon crew tried a variety of means to search for the elusive doorways, some banging the butts of their weapons against the walls in the hope that a hidden door would produce a noticeably different sound to a more solid wall while others tried digging the tips of the bladed weapons they carried into the wall where it met the floor in an attempt to locate the smallest of gaps that could exist even under a well hidden door.

None of these methods produced any results though and the Klingons became steadily more disillusioned in their hopes of claiming the reward offered by their captain. This changed however, when one lone Klingon began searching the carvings on the wall, suspecting that they could be used to conceal a switch of some kind and he began to run his hand along the wall. Initially this had no effect but he came to a sudden halt when he heard a grinding sound behind him in the direction he had come along the hallway and he turned around to see that rectangular doorway large enough to allow him through had formed while his back had been turned.

Cautiously he raised his disruptor pistol, leaving both his rifle and bat'leth slung over his shoulder so that he could keep one hand free as he advanced towards the doorway. Peering through it he saw it led to a room that contained a number of raised plinths, each about a metre tall and projecting holograms of more of the alien writing just above them. Suspecting that this was either a control room or records library that could be accessed through the plinths the Klingon took a step into the room and as he did so he heard the same grinding sound that had alerted him to the doorway opening.

The sound of a blood curdling scream that was abruptly cut off attracted the attention of all of the Klingons inside the tower and they came running to find out what the cause was. All that they found though was the arm of their former comrade seemingly coming out of the bloodstained wall.

"Dackas! What did this Kuvan?" Gren said, turning to his medical officer.

"There must be an opening here." the Klingon medic said, holding his tricorder up to where the limb

gruesomely stuck out of the wall and blood ran down, following the pattern of the carved alien letters below, "Yes, I can detect organic material within the wall itself."

"So the wall opened and he stepped into the opening before it closed and crushed him." Gren said, a smile appearing on his face before he added, "Find the control that opened the door."

Kuvan then began to run his tricorder along the wall, moving the tricorder up and down as he went along. "What are you doing?" K'Seyr asked.

"If a door was opened then there must be a switch that Dackas must have touched. I am looking for where he touched. Ah, here." Kuvan replied as he detected traces of organic residue left behind when the dead Klingon had touched the wall and he reached out to run his own fingers along the carvings, monitoring the reaction of the alien structure on his tricorder.

"Kuvan this-" Gren began, becoming impatient but before he could finish there was a sudden grinding sound as a section of the wall seemed to simply open up, releasing the crushed remains of Dackas which promptly dropped to the floor, "Congratulations doctor." Gren said and he was about to step through the new opening when Kuvan stopped him.

"Wait captain." he said and Gren glared at him, "The opening may not be stable." the doctor added as continued to watch the wall and he saw the symbol that he had placed his fingers over to open the doorway glow yellow for a moment before the grinding sound was heard again and the wall appeared to regrow, filling in the opening without any part of it moving.

"A door that closes to crush whoever is standing in it? That seems a poor design." Koros said.

"This place is ancient. Perhaps it is a fault." another of the Klingons suggested.

"You are our engineer Krang." Gren said, "If the mechanism is damaged, fix it. Or at least find some way to jam it open."

"Yes captain." the engineer replied as he stepped towards the wall where the control to open the doorway was hidden and he pressed it. Once more there was a grinding sound as the wall opened, the stone appearing to simply dissolve into thin air. Then before it could close again Krang raised the disruptor rifle he held and fired it into the wall.

"Wait-" Kuvan exclaimed, flinching but the engineer paid no attention and the Klingon medical officer was showered with fragments of stone. However, the energy blast obviously destroyed whatever mechanism was used to open and close the doorway and this time it remained open.

Just in case the closing of the doorway was delayed instead of blocked the Klingons waited in the hallway and just looked through it into the room on the other side, seeing the pedestals with their holograms above them.

"Koros, investigate." Gren ordered eventually and he shoved the navigator through the doorway into the room on the other side, waiting to see if the structure would react in any way. However, the doorway remained open and Koros looked around.

"There is blood on the walls." he said and Kuvan then walked through the doorway and looked around as well. Sure enough there were stains with the colour of Klingon blood on all of the walls as well as some of the pedestals.

"What is this?" Gren asked as he strode through the open doorway behind the medical officer, not wanting to appear afraid before his crew. Looking around for himself he saw the bloodstains around the room that obviously came from a Klingon recently, the blood still wet.

"Captain I don't think that the doorway is the only thing that closed on Dackas." Krang said as he followed the captain into the room, "I think that this entire room only exists when the doorway is open. When Dackas was crushed he was crushed by the walls as well as the door. That would explain why your disruptor could not blast through the wall into a room on the other side. There was only solid stone there at that time." he explained and then he walked up to one of the pedestals to where he saw one of the alien symbols being projected was pulsing and he reached out to touch. As soon as he did an image appeared in the centre of the room that showed a group of figures walking across the desert. Most of these were human but one was clearly Andorian and all of them wore the tan coloured desert field uniforms of Starfleet.

"Starfleet!" Gren hissed when he saw this and then he spun to face K'Seyr, "You said they could not detect us here." he said, walking towards her and grabbing the weapons officer by her throat.

"Captain the direction of their approach suggests that they have not detected us." Krang said and Gren looked at him, still choking K'Syer.

"Explain." he said.

"If Starfleet knew where we had landed the *Mevak* then they would be advancing towards it. However, the position of the system suns in these images suggest that they are approaching from a different direction and heading directly for this tower rather than our ship." the engineer said.

"They may have guessed that we would also investigate the tower." Kuvan added.

"Then we must find out as much as possible as we can before they get here. Defeating this team is not enough. We need a way to destroy their ship in orbit before we can return to the empire with anything we can take with us." Gren ordered.

"Commander I still can't reach the captain or any of the away team." the enlisted crewman at the communication console said and Forrester moved to stand behind him.

"Have you checked to see if we're picking up transponders from their communicators?" he asked.

"Yes sir, there's nothing." the enlisted man answered.

"Commander I may have something." Etchemin said from the science station where he was temporarily filling in for Tan while he was on the surface below.

"What?" Forrester said.

"A visual of the surface sir." Etchemin told him.

"Put it on the main screen." Forrester ordered and he returned to the captain's chair at the centre of the bridge.

"Here you go commander. That's the shuttle." Etchemin said as the viewscreen changed to show an image of the surface of the planet below, the shuttle's upper hull clearly visible.

"Looks like she came down in one piece at any rate." Forrester said as he studied the image, noting that the shuttle looked intact, "What about our away team."

"Here I think commander." Etchemin replied and he zoomed in on another part of the image that showed a number of dark shadows on the surface, "I think that is our team but with all the interference from that alien tower I can't get a clearer picture than this."

"That's okay lieutenant. Even Lieutenant Commander Tan was having trouble with that field." Forrester responded.

"There is one other issue commander." Etchemin added.

"Yes lieutenant, what's that?" Forrester asked.

"This commander." Etchemin answered and he switched the image of the main viewscreen again to display a much larger area of the planet, showing a large dark patch, "It's the sandstorm and is moving towards the alien structure."

"Didn't Tan say that the energy field could be some sort of defensive mechanism against that?" Forrester commented.

"Yes sir but we won't know for certain until the storm hits the outer edge of the field. At the rate it's travelling it won't hit our team before they make it to the tower but they'll be trapped inside until it passes." Etchemin said.

"Keep an eye on it and keep monitoring the energy field as well. If there's any way to get through it and communicate with the away team I want it found." Forrester ordered.

"Here, another one captain." a Klingon called out and the rest of the crew rushed to see what he had found. They found him pointing to a particular carving on a wall that was identical to the one Dackas had pressed to open the first doorway discovered. Once Kuvan had identified this the Klingon crew had spread out again to search for more instances of the symbol and each time they found one they found that pressing it created another doorway to a previously hidden room. Unlike the first doorway discovered none of the subsequent ones closed automatically, suggesting that Dackas had indeed been killed due to a fault in the tower's technology. None of the other rooms that had been found held anything of interest to the Klingons though, most were completely empty while the only one to contain anything held only carved stone containers filled with clothing that only confirmed that the builders of the tower had likely been humanoid as well. The Klingon who had found the symbol pressed it as Gren approached and sure enough the wall nearby opened up but instead of a room this revealed a ramp that headed upwards.

"Finally, a way up through the tower. Now maybe we will be able to find out its secrets." Gren said, "K'Seyr return to the viewing room and watch the Starfleet team. I need to now when they come within half a kellicam. Everyone else with me."

"You need to keep moving commander." Duke said when Teela came to a halt.

"That's easy for you to say. Us Andorians aren't made for heat like this." she responded.

"Drink something." Reese told her and Teela reached for the drinking tube clipped to her shoulder.

"Fine but if I end up retaining so much water that you try classifying me as obese at my next medical then I'm going to remind you whose fault it is." she said.

"Come now Teela, where's that cheery attitude we all know and love?" Ash joked as he also took a drink from the water pack on his back.

"Still in the shuttle sitting in the shade." Teela replied, "How much further do we have to go?"

"I make it another four hundred metres." Tan told her as he held up his tricorder to run another scan. However, the strength of the energy field this close to the alien structure created severe interference with the device and he could still only gather the most basic of information.

"Is that storm getting closer?" Estevez asked, looking back the way they had come and seeing that the dark clouds of the sandstorm were no longer limited to just the horizon.

"Yes it's gaining on us. It's way too far away to catch up with us before we make it to the tower though." Duke replied before he glanced at Teela and added, "Assuming everyone can keep up the pace anyway."

With only four hundred metres left to go before they reached the base of the alien tower the members of the away team were able to move quickly without worrying about tiring themselves out. However, when they reached the structure they found themselves looking at a solid wall covered in alien carvings but without any indications of a way inside.

"Ensign Estevez does any of this look familiar to you?" Ash asked, looking at the carvings on the wall in front of him and then at the Ascension's communications officer.

Taking out a PADD with a built in camera Estevez took a photograph of the carvings of the wall and used the pattern recognition program she had installed on the device to try matching them to any of the tens of thousands of known languages in the database. Unfortunately although the program was able to come up with some possible matches a definitive answer proved impossible thanks once again to the energy field that was blocking all signals between the away team and the orbiting Ascension.

"Sorry captain." Estevez said, "My PADD indicates that these carvings could be variations on any one of more than a dozen languages but it wants to access the *Ascension's* database to try and get a definitive answer."

"Let me guess, which it can't do because of this energy field." Ash replied.

"Yes captain." Estevez said.

"In that case we'll have to carry on. That sandstorm means we need to get inside so let's look for a door. I don't see any Klingons about so I expect that they'll have already gone inside to see if there's anything they can steal."

"Which way do we go?" Reese asked and Ash looked from side to side as he tried to pick a direction for the away team to begin their search in. Seeing no difference in either direction he then suddenly pointed in one at random, "This way." he said.

## 5.

"Captain the Starfleet team has reached the base of the tower." K'Seyr signalled, her communicator just about able to overcome the disruption of the energy field at such a close range but her transmission was still distorted by static.

"Are they coming inside?" Gren asked.

"Inside? No they are still outside." K'Seyr responded and Gren snarled, knowing that she had not heard him properly.

"I said are they coming inside?" he repeated.

"Possibly. They have not found the entrance yet." K'Seyr told him.

"How may are there?" Gren said.

"I count a dozen captain. Half of whom are warriors." K'Seyr said, counting the number of members of the away team wearing armour.

"You can't hold that many alone. Come up to the third floor, we will lay an ambush for them here." Gren ordered.

"Yes captain." K'Seyr responded before she shut off her communicator and hurried from the room and then headed towards the ramp leading up to the second floor. At the top of this ramp she encountered another Klingon that had been left as a rearguard and he waved for her to follow him.

"Come. The next ramp is this way." he said and the pair began to dash towards the way further up the tower. However, as they ran something caught K'Seyr's attention, a movement in the corner of her eye.

"What was that?" she said, coming to a halt and pointing her disruptor down the side passageway she had seen the movement from.

"Starfleet." the Klingon said, bringing his disruptor rifle up to his shoulder and pointing it in the same direction as K'Seyr was pointing her own weapon.

"They may have been able to infiltrate a scout. Perhaps scaling the walls to bypass the lower level." K'Seyr suggested. The two Klingons then began to walk along the hallway, both holding their weapons ahead of them. Moving along the hallway seemed empty though and K'Seyr began to think that she had made a mistake, not noticing the angular figure that looked as if it was made of the same stone as the tower that seemed to lean out of one of the walls themselves after she and the other Klingon had gone past.

"There is nothing here." the second Klingon said suddenly when he tired of creeping along the seemingly empty hallway, "The captain ordered us to the third level. We should go there now. If Starfleet are here they will come to us there." and then the two Klingons turned around, only to come face to face with the sentry machine.

Before either of the startled Klingons could react the stone sentry lashed out with an angular limb and impaled the male Klingon through his chest and he died almost instantly with a look of shock on his face. Recovering her senses, K'Seyr brought her disruptor pistol to bear on the sentry and fired but the energy blast never made contact with the machine's stone body, being blocked by a previously invisible energy shield instead. As a Klingon K'Seyr was not put off by this initial failure though and she fired her weapon at the sentry again and again only for each shot to be absorbed by its shield.

"Today is a good day to die!" she yelled at the top of her voice at the machine that just stood in front of her as if it was studying her before all of a sudden it threw itself aside into one of the walls. Instead of just crashing into the wall though the machine was somehow absorbed by it.

There were the sounds of heavy footfalls from the end of the hallway then and K'Seyr turned her disruptor in that direction before she saw Gren and the other Klingons come charging towards her to see what the firing was all about.

"What happened?" Gren demanded when he saw the bloody corpse of the Klingon on the floor.

"Captain we are not alone in this place." K'Seyr told him, "Something that can come out of the walls is hunting us. It has a shield that blocked my disruptor but it ran just before you arrived."

"Then it is a coward! Afraid to face warriors head on." Gren replied, "Now come with us K'Seyr. We will deal with this thing later but first we will deal with Starfleet."

"Found it." Etchemin said as he continued to study the *Ascension's* sensor readings at the science station.

"Found what lieutenant?" Forrester asked, turning the captain's chair towards him.

"The Klingon ship I think." Etchemin answered and he transferred the sensor feed to the bridge's main viewscreen and Forrester could see that it showed an area of desert that at first glance looked empty. However, as he looked more closely at the contours of the sand dunes he noticed a familiar pattern to the lines. Two larger mounds were connected by a narrower one while the ground either side looked to be slightly raised with edges that were undeniably straight.

"Nature does not do straight lines." he said, "Try an infrared scan and overlay it."

"Commander won't the energy field-" Etchemin began before Forrester interrupted him.

"Just do it lieutenant. Amuse me." the engineer said.

"Yes commander." Etchemin said before he ran a thermal imaging scan of the area surrounding the strangely shaped sand dunes and overlaid the results of this on the image on the viewscreen.

Even with the energy field surrounding the mysterious alien tower the heat being reflected by the desert sands could be measured from space and the scan produced a false colour image of the area. Given that everything within the area of the scan was coated in sand its thermal reflectivity hardly varied and almost the entire image was a dull orange. However, there was a shape that could be made out that was paler in colour where a large metallic mass buried just under the surface of the sand was able to absorb far more heat than the ground around it and with its oval forward section and prominent wings it was obvious that this was the Klingon raiding ship that the *Ascension* had chased into the system.

"There she is." Forrester said.

"The Klingon ship is just under two kilometres from the alien structure commander." Etchemin said.

"So if we take it out with a phaser strike we risk the warp core going critical and taking out the tower and our away team as well." Forrester said, "Communications have you been able to raise Commander Ash yet?"

Forrester asked, using Ash's true rank instead of his position as the acting commanding officer of the *Ascension*.

"Not yet sir." the crewman at the communications console replied.

"Try turning the system off and back on again. Maybe a fresh reboot will cause it to acquire them." Forrester ordered and the crewman nodded.

"Yes commander. Restarting the system now." he said as he shut off his console and then waited a few seconds before powering it up again. However, as he watched the progress of the restart he saw no signs of the away team's communicators, "Sorry sir, I'm still not picking them up."

"Lieutenant Etchemin what can you tell me from a visual scan?" Forrester asked.

"Not much at this stage commander. The away team made it to the tower and they were too close for our visual scanners to be able to pick them out clearly the last time I checked. They may have gone inside but there's no way to tell for now." Etchemin answered.

"And what about the sandstorm?" Forrester added.

"It'll reach the edge of the energy field in about five minutes commander. Then the tower itself about ten more after that." Etchemin told him and Forrester activated the intercom built into the captain's chair.

"Bridge to engineering." he said.

"Engineering here. Have you tried-" a soft female voice responded.

"Don't even think about saying that to me M'Sarr." Forrester interrupted, "Petty officer I want an escape pod loading with emergency shelters. Enough for a dozen people. Then launch it towards the location of the alien structure on the planet below. Obviously don't hit it directly but I want it as close as possible. About two hundred metres should do it. You've got five minutes."

"Yes commander. I'll get right on it myself." M'Sarr, the Caitian junior engineer replied and then she shut off the channel.

"Emergency shelters?" Etchemin commented and Forrester nodded.

"If the captain and the away team haven't been able to get inside the tower then they should be able to get those shelters up in about five minutes." he replied. Then he smiled and added, "Alternately they can try and relive their academy days and see how many people they can cram into one escape pod. I think the all time record is about twenty-one or twenty-two so they should be fine."

"Why not just send more escape pods and let them take shelter inside them?" Etchemin suggested.

"Because if we need them later I don't want to be the one stuck aboard a crippled ship and wishing my escape pod wasn't buried in sand lieutenant. Do you?"

"Captain over here." Duke called out and he waved Ash towards him.

"What is it chief?" Ash asked as he and Reese ran towards the *Ascension's* security chief and Duke pointed.

"A way in I think captain." he answered and Ash looked at the door the Klingons had blown a hole in.

"Well I guess this settles the question of whether the Klingons are around." Reese commented.

"Can you pick them up on your tricorder Deborah?" Ash said and Reese took out her tricorder and began to scan the area.

"Useless." she said, sighing, "I can barely pick you up thanks to this energy field Mike."

"I'm not registering any life signs other than our own either captain." Tan added as he also tried to conduct a scan of the area with his tricorder. Then he walked closer to the hole in the tower's door and added,

"However, I am detecting the residue from a Klingon explosive."

"So the Klingons couldn't figure out away to open the door and just blew a big hole in it. Sounds about right." Ash said.

"Dobson, Trent, Hereford. With me." Duke ordered and with three of the security guards he climbed through the hole in the outer doorway to scout the interior ahead of the rest of the away team, "It's clear captain."



Duke called out, "The rest of the door is in here but that's about it. There's light as well but I can't figure out where it's coming from."

Ash and Tan stepped through the doorway behind the security guards and Tan held his tricorder to the wall nearby.

"As far as I can tell the stone inside is the same as that used outside captain but I'm still getting interference from the energy field." he said.

"Isn't there anywhere we can get away from that thing?" Reese commented as the rest of the away team entered the tower.

"I think it is more like a question of how do we shut it down doctor." Tan responded.

"And how do we shut it down?" Teela asked.

"The field must be being emitted from a point within this tower. An emitter at ground level would face interference from the terrain so a higher point of broadcast would be more suitable. The higher the better." Tan said.

"So right up at the top would be the most logical place then." Estevez said, looking upwards at the ceiling and Tan nodded.

"Yes. Our scans picked up no holes in the field so there is probably at least one emitter at the very top of the tower with more likely positioned around it directed outwards." he said.

"In that case let's get a move on. We need to find a way up to the top, ideally one that doesn't involve walking up nine hundred and something metres worth of stairs." Ash said and with Duke and his security team leading the way the away team advanced through the tower.

It did not take long for the *Ascension's* away team to come across the first of the rooms that the Klingons had discovered and left open and Duke quickly signalled to his men to take up positions either side of the entrance before they burst in.

"Clear." Duke announced, "Empty in fact."

"So whatever was in here was removed, but was it by the original builders or the Klingons?" Ash said as he and Tan entered the room and looked around.

"More of these freaking carvings on the walls." Duke commented and Ash nodded.

"Makes you think that the answers to everything you could ask about this tower are right in front of our eyes doesn't it chief?" he replied.

"The idea of recording the purpose of a structure on its walls is common." Tan pointed out, "From the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt on Earth to the dedication plaques we still fit aboard starships and space stations."

"All we need to do is figure out what these say." Ash replied. Then he looked back towards the doorway, "Ensign Estevez get in here and take a look at these walls." he called out and Estevez entered the room as well.

"They look the same captain." she said as she held her PADD up to one of the walls and began to scan the carvings, hoping that the more images she took the more likely it would be that the device would be able to isolate the exact language without needing to access the database aboard the *Ascension*.

While Estevez was scanning the carvings inside the room Teela was looking at the ones on the walls of the hallway outside and she noticed that one located about a metre from the doorway was glowing.

"Hey captain I think there's something here." she called out and Ash and Tan came rushing back out of the room while Reese also walked over to see what she had found.

"Why is that one glowing?" Reese said.

"That's exactly what I was thinking." Teela replied.

"What have you found?" Ash asked as he and Tan arrived by their sides.

"One of these carvings is glowing ominously." Teela said and she pointed to the glowing symbol.

"I'm not so sure I'd call that ominous." Ash said.

"Oh come on captain. One symbol carved into a wall among thousands in an ancient alien tower that could be older than life on any Federation planet? If that's not ominous then what is?" Teela responded.

"Wait Teela don't touch I." Tan said suddenly.

"I wasn't going to but way to go in adding to the drama there." Teela said.

"Is something wrong commander?" Ash asked.

"I think that some of these symbols could be controls of some kind." Tan said, "Given that that is right by an open doorway then it stands to reason that it's what opens and closes it."

"So what's wrong with pressing it if all it does is close the doorway?" Teela said.

"Because if anything goes wrong then we could have our people trapped in there." Ash pointed out, "Okay everyone back out here for a minute or two. We need to test something. Estevez leave that PADD of yours inside and recording though."

"Yes captain." Estevez said as she exited the room with Duke and security guards. Then when they were all clear of the room Ash looked at Teela again.

"Lieutenant Commander Teela, you found the switch so you get to press it." he said and she smiled before pressing the glowing symbol on the wall.

Instantly there was a grinding sound as the doorway simply filled itself in and was replaced more wall covered in the same carvings as that either side of where the opening had been.

"Incredible." Tan said as he walked over to inspect the wall, "There are no signs of breaks anywhere in the wall at all. It's as if the air simply turned to rock.

"Okay Teela now press that same symbol again." Ash said and Teela pressed down on the symbol that was no longer glowing. As soon as she did so there was another grinding sound as the doorway opened again to reveal the empty room beyond it.

"What happened to my PADD?" Estevez said when she looked through the doorway and saw the smashed remains of the device she had left inside the room to record the closing of the doorway.

"Looks like someone took an industrial press to it." Duke commented.

"Commander Tan do you have an explanation for this?" Ash asked, looking at the science officer.

"I'm not sure captain but I think that this room may not actually exist when the door is closed." Tan said, crouching by the doorway and holding up his tricorder, hoping that he could overcome the interference of the ever present energy field to determine exactly what had happened when the door was closed.

"How can a room not exist? Is that like that phony existential question about trees falling in forests when there's no one around to complain?" Duke asked.

"Hear chief. Does a tree falling in a forest still make a sound if there's no-one around to hear it?" Reese corrected him.

"If I was in a forest and tree fell on me I'd damn well complain." Duke muttered.

"Captain instead of a door of some kind moving to block it when Teela pressed the control we saw the doorway simply fill in with solid stone. I think that the same thing happened to the room itself." Tan said.

"You mean it filled with solid rock? What use is that? Anything left inside would be destroyed like Estevez's PADD." Ash pointed out.

"Perhaps captain, but there could also be some means of locking the contents so they wouldn't be. It could be a form of stasis. In which case anything inside a room that was closed would be perfectly preserved until it was opened again." Tan said.

"Mike if that's true then it's possible that the people who made this place could still be in here somewhere." Reese said.

"And they might not be too happy that someone blew open their front door." Ash responded, nodding his head, "Right no more sight seeing. We need to find a way up to the top of this tower and see if we can find the Klingons. Nobody steps foot in one of these rooms until we know how to stop them crushing people to death if they close though. Now let's move." he ordered.

## 3.

"The escape pod landed right on target commander." Etchemin said as he looked at the image of the Ascension's escape pod now open the surface of the planet a short distance from the alien tower.

"What about the away team" Forrester asked.

"I've not seen any sign of them sir. The storm will reach the tower in a couple of minutes as well." Etchemin replied.

"In that case they must have found a way-" Forrester began before he stopped mid sentence.

"Is something wrong commander?" Etchemin said.

"No lieutenant. Possibly just the opposite in fact. Tell me, when did you lose telemetry on the escape pod?" Forrester said.

"At about fifty-eight thousand metres altitude." Etchemin told him.

"So in other words you could still read its transmissions even when it entered the disruptive energy field?" Forrester pointed out.

"Yes commander. For about the first two thousand metres."

"Which means that our signals can get through it, just not very far. On the other hand visual scanning still works perfectly."

"Yes commander. That sand storm will block visual scanning until it passes but other than that we can see everything going on down there perfectly."

"So what if the away team had a communications relay that could convert the subspace signals from their communicators into an optical signal that we could detect from orbit and then we could send optical signals to that it would then convert to subspace ones that they could pick up?" Forrester said and Etchemin smiled.

"We could use one of the phaser banks as a transmitter." he said and Forrester nodded.

"And we'll deliver the system in a probe using the same pre-programmed flight pattern as the escape pod." he added.

"Commander that's brilliant." Etchemin said and Forrester grinned.

"Well I am an engineer. We're naturally brilliant and inventive." he said, "It'll take time to put the relay together and modify the phasers but with that sandstorm coming in we couldn't launch it now anyway. I guess we have as long as that storm persists to do our work."

"Captain I think you should take a look at this." Duke said when he and his men discovered the severed arm of a Klingon lying in one of the hallways not far from an open doorway and as the away team got closer they could not help but see the blood in the doorway as well.

"Doctor." Ash said simply and Reese crouched beside the severed arm.

"Well I can't give you a definitive cause of death but from what we've seen so far I'd say that this poor fellow was caught part way in and out of that room when someone closed it." she said.

"Where's the control?" Tan asked, searching the wall for a glowing symbol. However, all he found was the damage inflicted by to it by an energy blast, "Captain I think the Klingons did this." he said.

"You think?" Ash commented, "I'd say it was pretty much a given."

"Do you think anyone else was in here when it closed up?" Estevez said as she peered into the room and saw the blood inside as well.

"You mean 'splat'?" Teela said, pushing her hands towards one another to mimic a pair of walls closing in on one another and Estevez nodded.

"Not a pleasant way to go." Ash said.

"Even if they were pirates who would have happily slaughtered everyone aboard the *Durable* for profit." Duke added.

"We have to assume that there are at least some Klingons still left in here somewhere." Ash said, "We can worry more about how many of them died here later. For now I want to find a way up."

"Captain I-" Tan said while he looked at his tricorder before he stopped.

"Something wrong James?" Ash said.

"I'm not sure captain. For a moment I thought my tricorder was picking up an anomalous energy reading but then it suddenly vanished. It could have been more interference from the energy field that's been affecting everything else or-"

"Or maybe there's something else going on." Ash interrupted, "Keep scanning. I don't want to be taken by surprise by the Klingons or anything that they may have woken up."

The alien structure's internal sensors became aware of the Starfleet away team as soon as they entered and began to explore. Although they had interacted with the controls to some small degree this interaction had so far been non-destructive. However, their presence within the structure was still unauthorised and so the

sentry diverted away from the Klingons it had been circling in search of stragglers it could pick off or an unguarded approach from which it could attack to investigate these newcomers instead.

"This is taking too long." Gren said when his limited patience ran out.

"Are we going to go on the hunt for the Starfleet team captain?" Turos asked.

"No. I don't want to give them the chance to evade us and claim whatever it is that is in this tower that is worth protecting." Gren replied and then he turned to one of the clusters of Klingons lying in wait for the Ascension's away team, "Your four will remain here. Open fire on the Starfleet forces as soon as they appear."

"We will be outnumbered three to one captain." one of the four pointed out and Gren struck him with the back of his hand.

"Are you a Klingon or not?" the Klingon captain snapped, "You will fight and you will kill our enemies. If you are unable to hold them here then I expect you to be able to withdraw in an orderly manner and evade pursuit to find us. Then we will lay another trap for them and another and another until there are no more Starfleet officers left and this tower belongs to us."

"What about the stone guardian captain?" another of the Klingons ordered to remain behind asked.

"It is but one individual that is too afraid to attack us directly Workos." Gren told him, "If it attacks again we will destroy it. If not then we can ignore it. Now come on. I want to find something that we can present to our benefactor to justify his continued support of our ship."

"Captain I think this is our way up." Duke said as he and his men deployed at the bottom of the ramp leading up to the next floor.

"I don't like the look of this." Ash responded, noticing that just beside the ramp there was a glowing symbol set into the wall and he walked up to it and pressed it. As he expected a grinding sound was then accompanied by the sealing off of the ramp, "Think that ramp's still there?" he said, looking at Tan and the science officer held his tricorder up against the newly sealed wall.

"My readings are indeterminate captain." he said, "The stone has a density and refractive properties that are compounding the effects of the energy field."

"So if we go walking up that ramp someone at the other end could flip a switch like this one and close it on us?" Ash asked.

"That is a possibility, yes captain." Tan answered.

"In that case we'll have to go in pairs. Chief Duke you and I will go first. Then while we provide cover at the top of the ramp everyone else gets escorted up by a security guard as well until we're all in the clear." Ash said.

"And if someone pushing that button closes off the entire level at the top of the ramp?" Reese said.

"Then we all end up thinner. Much, much thinner." Ash responded and Reese sighed.

"That does not exactly fill me with confidence Mike." she said as Ash opened the way to the ramp again.

Then with their assault phasers in their hands he and Duke rushed up the ramp to the next level and crouched down, each of them covering a different approach to the ramp, "Clear! Next pair." Ash called out down the ramp and the rest of the away team to follow them up in pairs.

"Last woman." Teela said when she came up the ramp as part of the final pair.

"Good. Let's get moving." Ash said.

"Shouldn't we leave someone to watch the ramp captain? If closing it does collapse this floor-" Estevez suggested.

"This tower is over nine hundred metres tall ensign. That could be about two hundred floors. Right commander?" Ash said and he looked at Tan.

"The inertial sensor in my tricorder indicated that the ramp brought us up four point six metres so multiplying that up does give about that number of levels, yes captain." he responded.

"And we can't leave someone behind on every floor or we'll run out of people before we run out of floors.

Besides we could be facing almost an entire crew of Klingons yet and I'd rather have all the manpower I can muster for it." Ash replied as he got to his feet and he waved for the rest of the away team to advance.

The away team now repeated the process of exploring the level for a way to continue ascending and as they made their way at random through the level's hallways they found yet more open rooms, all of them with identical glowing symbols in the wall close beside them. Estevez paid close attention to these, despite no longer having her PADD to be able to try and translate any of the carvings and she paused suddenly when she found one of that particular type of symbol that was not glowing.

"Captain over here." she called out and Ash turned towards her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think I've found another doorway." Estevez replied.

"Everyone back away." Ash ordered as he made his way towards where Estevez stood and she pointed to the symbol.

"Here. This is what's carved beside all the doorways only it's not glowing." she said.

"Okay ensign press that switch when I say so and we'll keep an eye out for the doorway." Ash told her and Estevez pressed the carved symbol.

Once again pressing this triggered a grinding sound as a doorway opened beside Ash and Estevez and the away team all turned to face it, pointing their phasers into the room beyond.

Unlike the other rooms that they had seen so far this one was not brightly lit from some unseen point. Instead it appeared largely dark from the outside with just tiny pinpricks of light floating inside it.

"What's this supposed to be? Do you think the lights have malfunctioned?" Ash asked Tan as they both looked inside.

"I don't think so captain." Tan replied, holding up his tricorder and doing his best to scan the room, "I think that this is some sort of star chart. I need to get a closer look."

"Careful James." Reese said as without waiting for a response from Ash, Tan walked into the darkened room and stood among the lights he thought could be representations of stars, capturing their positions relative to one another with his tricorder.

"It's okay. Just don't go closing that door, okay?" Tan said and then he smiled and added, "Captain I think I've found the system that is supposed to be this one. It's this one over here." and he walked across the room, passing through a number of the lights to the far end of the room where he found a small blue light with a white one joined to it.

"Hold on, shouldn't a map have this system at the centre?" Duke commented.

"That depends on what it represents." Teela replied, also looking through the doorway with interest at the star chart, "If it is what can be seen from here then yes. On the other hand it could be a map of the territory controlled by the species that built this place and we could be on the outer edge of what used to be their territory."

"I think that's a valid suggestion Teela." Tan said and then he looked at Ash, "Captain with any luck we should be able to use this information to locate other worlds that the aliens visited. There could be more structures left behind on them as well."

"Fine but for now I want to find those Klingons and then get us back to the *Ascension*." Ash said before there was a sudden scream followed by the whine of a phaser.

Spinning around Ash and the rest of the away team saw one of Duke's security guards now lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood while another, Hereford, stood over him and pointing his phaser at the wall.

"The wall, it came out of the wall." Hereford said.

"What did crewman?" Ash said as Reese and her assistant rushed to see to the man on the floor.

"He's dead Mike." Reese said as soon as she saw the severity of the wound and immediately knew that after whatever had killed him had punched through his armoured vest it had entered his chest cavity and probably cut his heart in two.

"Crewman, what did this?" Ash demanded, shocking Hereford back to his senses.

"I don't know captain, I just saw something out of the corner of my eye. A figure that stepped out of the wall and then after it struck it stepped back into it. I fired my phaser but I don't know if I got it or not. It looked like it was made of this stone that the walls are." he explained.

Meanwhile Tan hurried out of the star chart room and to the wall Hereford was still staring at and he held his tricorder up to it.

"Careful commander. What if something does come out of there?" Duke said.

"Then you and your men will have to be quick on the trigger chief." Tan responded as he scanned the wall, "Captain discounting the molecular disruption that seems to have been caused at the point where Crewman Hereford's phaser struck it I can't find anything different about the structure of this wall to any of the others I've scanned." he added.

"So can any of the walls in this place attack us?" Teela asked, looking round nervously and trying to stand as far from any of the walls either side of the hallway as she could.

"Why wait until now though?" Estevez added.

"What about that room? Could it be restricted?" Reese suggested, looking towards the room that held the star chart.

"I doubt it. If it was then why would it open so easily?" Ash pointed out, "Plus Bowden was the furthest one from it. If whatever killed him was protecting the room then it would make far more sense for it to have attacked Lieutenant Commander Tan instead."

"Thanks." Tan muttered.

"We need to press on." Ash said, "Whatever made that thing attack us it could come back and the quicker we can find our way to somewhere where we can shut it down the better."

"Captain it may not be something that we can shut down." Tan said.

"What do you mean Tan?" Ash asked.

"There are examples of silicon based lifeforms. They are rare but they do exist. They are also somewhat resistant to phaser fire." Tan said.

“Are you saying that thing could be alive?” Reese said,  
“Life yes, but not as we know it doctor.” Tan responded.  
“I take it that a stun setting isn’t going to have any affect on a creature like that then.” Ash said and Tan shook his head.  
“I can’t be certain but it is unlikely captain.” he said.  
“In that case everyone make sure your phaser is set to kill. I don’t want to lose anyone else if I can help it.” Ash ordered as he adjusted the setting on his own assault phaser.

The sentry returned to its housing located near the top of the tower. It had been hit by the phaser blast and this had inflicted damage to some of its secondary systems. This had not been enough to cripple the sentry but it was enough to trigger the machine’s withdrawal protocol and it had retreated for repairs. Standing in the alcove it had stood dormant in for many centuries the sentry was bathed a pale blue light and the section of its torso had suffered damage began to glow brightly as the material was regenerated, filling in the gap where the phaser had bored through it. As the repair was taking place the sentry accessed the tower’s security system and saw that the intruders were now in three groups. One of these, the one it had most recently encountered, was still located on the second level and appeared to be moving at random through the hallways. The second group was the smallest and this was the only one of the three that was stationary. Made up of members of the original force of intruders it had taken up a position at the top of the ramp connecting the second and third levels and seemed to be lying in wait for something. This then left the third group that was made up of the rest of the initial force that had triggered the sentry’s reactivation. This had now made it as far as the fourth level, having apparently determined how identify the tower’s doorways and how they functioned. Their movement was as random as that of the group on the second level though, so their knowledge of the tower remained incomplete or they would have been able to progress more quickly in their apparent path towards the uppermost levels.

The sentry then checked the tower’s external sensors. The effectiveness of these was currently impaired by the sandstorm outside the tower but they were still able to pick up three metallic objects within a short distance. Two of them were relatively small but the third was much larger and a quick check of the tower’s recent logs showed that it had arrived first, bringing with it the first force of intruders. Expanding the range of the scan further revealed another contact, this one in orbit around the planet and another check of the logs showed that this was the source of the smaller objects and the second force of intruders. The sentry rapidly concluded that the two forces of intruders were at least rivals and possibly openly hostile towards one another. Although this offered the possibility of turning them against one another the effectiveness of their weapons showed that the collateral damage of such a strategy could prove counter productive in the long run. Therefore, the most prudent course of action seemed to continue trying to pick them off wherever they were weakest.

In splitting up the intruders had made the sentry’s job more complicated. It could only target one group at a time but at the same time the numbers of two groups were now reduced and that made them more vulnerable, especially the group that was not only the smallest but also stationary. This made them the most promising target and the sentry focused its attention on them. A move that was rapidly rewarded.

“This is pointless!” Workos hissed, “The humans do not know we are here. We could wait a lifetime and not have them approach us.”

“Then what do you suggest Workos?” a second Klingon asked, “Captain Gren’s orders were that we were to remain here and guard this ramp.”

“And you three should.” Workos responded, “I will go down there alone and try to find the humans. Then I will attack and fall back, leading them here where we can kill as many as possible. Who knows, perhaps I may even manage to make a kill or two myself before they know I’m there.” then he stood up and cautiously walked down the ramp, keeping his disruptor rifle pointing ahead of him as he began his hunt.

## 7.

"I don't like the look of this." Ash said as the away team turned a corner and found the body of a Klingon lying a pool of its own blood on the floor.

"I'm guessing that great big hole through his chest is what killed him." Teela commented.

"Is it the same thing that killed Bowden?" Duke asked as Reese began to inspect the body.

"The wound looks similar." she said, "Only larger."

"So it could have been the same thing or something similar to it." Ash said.

"Do you think there's another doorway around here that it could be guarding?" Duke suggested as he looked at the walls.

"Over here." Tan said suddenly and he pointed to where the symbol that triggered doors to open was carved on the wall close by the away team.

"Okay commander give it a press and let's see what happens. Everyone watch out for a killer statue." Ash said and Tan pressed the symbol.

Once again this triggered a doorway to open, accompanied by a grinding sound. However, the room that this opened to was hardly worthy of the name. Instead it was a tiny space barely larger than a single humanoid individual that had walls covered in the same style of carvings as all the others inside the tower.

"A closet?" Reese said as she got up to take a closer look without actually stepping through the doorway.

"Or maybe something went wrong. If Tan's theory about the rooms not existing when the doors are shut then maybe this one hasn't opened properly." Ash responded as he stepped towards Reese and as he did so he noticed a figure appear at the end of the hallway, "Klingon!" he yelled and Reese spun around in surprise to see Workos taking aim at her with his disruptor rifle, "Deborah down!" he added and before the Klingon could fire he dived at Reese to push her out of the line of fire. In doing so though he pushed her through the open doorway before stumbling through after her and the pair of them slammed into the rear wall. This triggered a grinding sound as the doorway sealed itself again and both Ash and Reese found themselves consumed by a brilliant light.

In the hallway outside Workos fired a disruptor blast from his rifle just as the doorway sealed itself again and the blast instead struck the wall close to where Tan was standing, showering him with fragments of stone that caused him to turn aside and shield his face.

The Starfleet away team returned fire immediately and Workos retreated around the corner as multiple phaser beams passed through the air where he had been standing before striking the wall behind him. Workos continued to withdraw but with Ash and Reese having vanished the away team held their ground and the Klingon pirate came to a rapid halt before turning around again. As he considered repeating his attack to try and lure the away team into chasing him back to the ramp where the other three Klingons lay in wait he heard a heavy footstep right behind him and he spun around again, raising his disruptor rifle.

With a single swing of one arm the sentry knocked the weapon from Workos' grip and it flew across the hallway before hitting the wall and clattering to the floor. Then as Workos was reaching for his D'k tahg blade the sentry thrust its other arm forwards with enough force to impale the Klingon with a single blow. Then letting Workos' body fall to the floor the sentry retreated back into the wall it had just emerged from.

While the sentry was killing Workos the members of the away team were desperately trying to reopen the door to the tiny compartment.

"Where's the switch?" Teela called out.

"It was right here." Tan responded, looking at the wall where the disruptor blast had blown a hole in it, destroying the carved symbol that opened the door.

"So how do we get it open now?" Duke asked.

"Maybe there's another carving. Quick, check the walls." Tan ordered and the away team began to search for another of the same symbol carved into the wall. Only Estevez stood back.

"What if the room collapsed and crushed them?" she said and the others in the away team stopped.

"You can't say that. They can't be dead. Not after Captain Franklin." Teela said.

"But they might be. That Klingon was-" Estevez began.

"Quiet!" Tan snapped and he reached for his communicator, flicking it open, "I'm going to settle this." he added.

"Commander those things don't work inside the field, remember?" Duke pointed out.

"Captain Ash couldn't contact the *Ascension*, no. But the *Ascension* is in orbit. Maybe I'll still be able to get through to him if he's closer." Tan replied before lifting the communicator to his mouth, "Tan to Ash, do you read me captain?" he said into it.

Pressed together face to face Ash and Reese found themselves surrounded on all sides by alien carvings in a tiny space that was lit by the same strange light that seemed to have no specific source.

"Mike can you move?" Reese asked.

"No. What about you Deborah?" Ash replied.

"Stuck. Completely stuck." she told him.

"Then I guess we'll have to wait for James to get the door open from the other side. At least this room didn't seem to collapse and crush us like the others seem to do." Ash said before he heard Tan's voice.

"Tan to Ash, do you read me captain?"

"My communicator. Deborah can you reach it?" Ash said as he tried unsuccessfully to get his hand to the communicator he carried.

"Maybe. I'll try." Reese replied as she slid her hand to Ash's waist where his communicator was clipped to his belt and she managed to grab hold of the device. Then she opened it but as he did so she caught her hand on the wall and winced as she grazed it, the stinging pain causing her to drop the communicator to the floor, "Oops." she said, smiling at Ash.

"Tan can you hear me?" Ash said loudly.

"Yes captain. Are you okay?" Tan responded and Ash breathed a sigh of relief.

"Commander is everyone okay?" he asked.

"Yes captain. The Klingon retreated immediately after firing on you. We returned fire but didn't pursue while we try to figure out a way to get you out." tan told him.

"I take it that you can't just press that little symbol again then?" Ash said.

"No captain. It was destroyed when the Klingon's shot hit the wall where it was located." Tan replied.

"Then I guess you're just going to have to cut us out then." Ash said.

"Captain are you sure? One slip with a phaser and-"

"And it'll be a quicker way to go than suffocating." Ash interrupted.

"Very well captain. We'll start work now." Tan said.

"Chief what do you think?" Tan asked, looking at Duke.

"I'd say start by aiming about here and burrow a hole right through. That'll give the captain and Doctor Reese air if nothing else." Duke suggested, pointing to a spot on the wall that had been close to the top of the doorway when it had opened.

"Do it." Tan said, nodding as he lifted his communicator, "Captain, Chief Duke is about to make the first hole. Tell us when the beam breaks through."

"Understood. Go ahead commander." Ash replied as Duke stood back from the wall, adjusting his phaser to a setting suited to burning through rock quickly without harming Ash or Reese. Aiming at a point high up on the wall Duke squeezed the trigger of the assault phaser and held it down as the pale blue beam began to burrow into the wall.

The rest of the away team watched as the beam dug deeper without any word from Ash or Reese to say that it had reached the space they were trapped in and Teela frowned.

"Do you have that thing on stun chief?" she said.

"No, the beam's cutting." Duke replied.

"Hold it there chief." Tan ordered and while Duke ceased fire he lifted his communicator back to his mouth,

"Captain have you seen the beam yet?" he asked.

"I'd have said if I could, trust me." Ash responded.

"How deep is the hole?" Estevez said and Duke stepped up to the wall where he had fired his phaser into it.

Although the phaser beam was less than a centimetre wide the hole it had burned was larger as a result of the energy being partially absorbed and conducted by the stone and this allowed Duke to slowly insert his hand into it without touching the sides. He was able to get his arm into the hole almost up to his elbow before he felt the stone at the back and withdrew the arm before anything unexpected could happen.

"That should have burned right through to them." he said and Tan stepped forward to join him, "Hold my communicator a moment." he said, handing the device to Duke. Then he lifted his tricorder to the hole and began to scan the stone, attempting to determine how thick it was.

"Is it close?" Teela asked when he lowered the tricorder and looked at the results of his scan but Tan shook his head.

"Solid." he answered, "Plus I'm not picking up any life signs other than those of us out here."

"So if the captain and Doctor Reese aren't back there then where are they?" Duke said, returning Tan's communicator to the science officer.

"Captain we've got a problem. Wherever you are it isn't right behind the wall." Tan said into the communicator, "We're going to have to try and figure out what's happened. You may be stuck there some time."

"Okay commander." Ash said with a sigh.

"Just remember that there doesn't seem to be anywhere for air to get into here." Reese added.

"Understood. We'll work as fast as we can doctor." Tan reassured her and then she and Ash looked at one



another.

"So what do we do while we wait?" Reese said, "And don't you dare suggest playing I spy. If nothing else it would use up the oxygen faster."

"Well what else do you suggest Deborah?" Ash asked.

"I suppose we could just make out." Reese answered with a smile.

"Now that sounds good to me." Ash said.

"Captain your communicator is still switched on." Tan's voice said from the device on the floor and Ash winced as he heard the sound of laughter coming over his communicator.

"Let's see if we can reach it." he said, trying to reach down to the communicator but finding that there was too little room inside the space they were trapped in and he soon gave up, "Deborah can you-" he began as he lifted his arms again but before he could finish his sentence he felt the back of his hand press against the wall and there was a sudden grinding sound as it opened, releasing him and Reese from their prison.

"Mike you-" Reese said as she leapt out of the tiny space only to find herself standing in a room that was not the hallway the rest of the away team were in.

"Commander Tan something interesting just happened." Ash said into his communicator when he scooped it up and followed Reese into the room outside.

"What is it captain?" Tan asked.

"The door just opened again and Doctor Reese and I are – well we're somewhere else. I think that little room was some sort of transporter. I didn't feel any motion so I doubt it's a turbolift." Ash explained as he and Reese looked around their new surroundings.

The room they had stepped into was not an empty space like most of the ones they had seen before had been, instead its walls were covered in display screens instead of stone carvings and in the middle of the room were three circular consoles. Two of these appeared dormant but the third had a hologram hovering above it that was clearly a representation of the alien tower itself.

"Well isn't this interesting?" Reese commented as she and Ash approached the hologram.

The projection consisted of a simple wireframe of the exterior shape of the tower while within it there were a number of points of light. Most of these were in the lower portion of the tower but there were two located close to the very top.

"Tan I think we've stumbled across some kind of control room." Ash said into his communicator, "There's what looks like some kind of representation of the tower with lights inside that look like they could represent life signs."

"Can you tell from it where you are captain?" Tan asked.

"Right near the top if this hologram is anything to go by." Ash told him.

"Those must be the Klingons." Reese said, pointing to one of the other sets of lights show in the hologram, "It looks like they've split up into two groups." her finger then touched the hologram close to where the small group of Klingons was lying in wait for the *Ascension's* away team and all of a sudden the hologram zoomed in to focus on this section, showing the layout of the hallways around them as well as the ramp leading down to the level the away team was on.

"Commander it looks like you've got a small force of Klingons planning to launch an ambush. I wouldn't be surprised if that Klingon that fired on us was trying to lure us into it." Ash warned Tan, "They're located at the top of the ramp that leads up to the next level. There are only three of them though so you should be able to deal with them. If you head down the passageway that Klingon appeared from and take the second right that will bring you to the ramp."

"Understood captain. We'll let you know as soon as we've dealt with them. Tan out." Tan responded before the channel went dead.

"Mike do you think that any of these will turn off that energy field?" Reese asked and Ash looked around the room again.

"I suppose we can take a look around and see if we can find anything that looks like its showing the area of the field. That would be a clue." he answered and Reese stepped away from the hologram of the tower. As she did so the floating image returned to the state that showed the entire tower and now she and Ash noticed that one of the lights indicating a life form was now moving far more rapidly up the tower.

"I don't think that's a Klingon." Reese said.

"I agree." Ash said, "I think our silicon based life form is on its way here and at the rate its moving it will be here pretty soon."

There were intruders in the command centre.

The sentry was alerted as soon as two of the intruders had transported themselves from the second level directly to the command centre. The transporter was only intended to move a single individual at a time but obviously two of them had managed to squeeze into it and now they needed to be dealt with before they could cause too much damage to the tower. Quite how they had managed to manipulate the transporter's controls to get to the command centre was a mystery. Before that none of the intruders had shown more than

a basic ability to open and close doors so for them to suddenly be able to access one of the more advanced internal systems represented a significant increase in the threat they posed, especially given that the group these two intruders came from had suddenly shown themselves to be just as willing to damage the tower as the first group to have arrived. Combining this with the power of the weaponry they possessed the sentry knew that these two intruders in particular needed to be eliminated.

### 8.

"What is this?" Turos said as the Klingon group under Gren's direct command reached a circular chamber that was connected to several hallways leading away from it. No doors blocked access to this chamber from any of the hallways but it was clearly meant for something other than being a junction between them. Although it was about ten metres across the chamber had only a ledge about two metres wide running around the edge while in the centre was a gaping hole that led down and through this similar chambers could be seen on the levels below. Similarly when the Klingons looked upwards they saw an identical hole in the ceiling of the chamber that led up to yet more of them for as far as their eyes could see.

"It could be a ventilation shaft." Krang suggested. Then he smiled and added, "Or maybe a turbolift."

"There has to be a faster way up this tower than climbing one ramp at a time." K'Seyr commented.

"If it is a turbolift then there will be a way to summon the car." Gren pointed out, "Find it."

Given that pressing the carvings on the wall seemed to be the way to operate the systems of the tower the Klingons spread out in both directions and began pressed the in the hope that one of the carvings would trigger a response of some kind.

Sure enough when one of them pressed his hand down on one of the carvings there was a sound like a distant bell and then a few moments later a stone disc rose up from below to fill the hole in the middle of the chamber and Gren grinned.

"Our turbolift car." he said, "Everyone get on."

The Klingons all stepped onto the stone disc in rapid succession, not concerning themselves with whether or not it would be able to support the weight of them all. The disc did not move under the weight of the Klingons though and Gren himself made his way to its centre where there was a stone pedestal that came up to his waist. Around a metre in diameter this was marked on top with yet more of the alien carvings in a spiral pattern and one of these was glowing noticeably.

"An indicator of the floors this will reach?" he said, looking at Krang and the engineer nodded.

"I expect so captain." he responded and he looked at the carvings as well, "The illuminated symbol is close to the end here." he said, pointing to the glowing symbol, "I expect that the further around the spiral we go the higher the level we will reach."

"Then let us see what is right at the top." Gren said and he reached out and pressed the symbol at the far end of the spiral pattern. This triggered the stone disc into motion, ascending up the shaft towards the top of the tower. Although the disc accelerated to what seemed like a considerable speed the transit was not instantaneous like a transporter though and the Klingons found themselves having to wait, watching the intermediate floors go past them in rapid succession.

The bloody remains of Workos confirmed to the away team that they were on the right track and Duke and his security guards took the lead as they approached the ramp leading up to the next floor, their phasers held at the ready. Duke signalled for them to pause to listen but he could not hear the Klingons he expected to be lying in wait and so he waved his men toward the ramp again. The security guards spread out to try and conceal their numbers from the Klingons.

Having waited for a long time, the trio of Klingons at the top of the ramp had run out of patience and as soon as they saw the first of the Starfleet security guards they opened fire without hesitation.

"Bah!" one of them yelled, giving the order to fire in their own language and a volley of bright green energy blasts flew down the ramp. Fortunately they had reacted too soon and the Starfleet security guards were able to hurl themselves out of the way before they could be hit.

In response Duke lent around a corner and returned fire, the bright blue beam blasting a chunk from the wall at the top of the ramp and showering one of the Klingons with fragments of stone. This forced the Klingon to pull back and this created a gap in the Klingons' fire that the Starfleet troops were quick to exploit. Trent and Dobson darted forwards through this gap while Duke and the others laid down more covering fire for them.

The pair ran to the base of the ramp before dropping into a kneeling position and firing up it. From their position they had a clear line of sight to one of the other two Klingons and their blasts both hit him. Killed instantly, the Klingon fell forwards and as his rifle clattered to the floor his body proceeded to roll down the ramp.

The Klingon who had been forced back then braved the phaser blasts heading towards him to fire again and a rapidly aimed shot from his rifle clipped Trent on his shoulder. The energy blast blew open the water pack the crewman carried on his back and this sudden explosion of water proved life saving, dissipating enough of the energy in turning to steam so that what remained could not fully penetrate the armour he wore. The effect was still enough to cause Trent to cry out in pain though and when he fell to the floor Dobson reached down to grab hold of him, pulling him back down the ramp while continuing to fire his assault phaser up it.

Seeing an opportunity one of the Klingons suddenly threw his disruptor rifle aside and let out a roar as he drew his knife and charged down the ramp towards the retreating guards. Dobson turned his phaser towards the alien warrior but the Klingon kicked the weapon from his hand before he could fire. Raising his knife above his head, the Klingon bared his teeth as he was about to strike but at that moment there was another flash of blue as Duke shot him in the side, the beam from his assault phaser burning right through him. Alone and heavily outnumbered the final Klingon began to retreat, continuing to fire his disruptor rifle as he backed away. In his enthusiasm to keep firing though he failed to monitor the amount of energy that remained in the weapon's power pack and all of a sudden it stopped firing as its reserves were depleted. Cursing, the Klingon threw his rifle aside and instead reached for his sidearm. However, before he could draw this from its holster Hereford leapt out of cover and shot him with his phaser.

"Target down." he called out as Duke rushed to his side.

"Okay that's all three." Duke said, reaching for his communicator, "Duke to Commander Tan. All threats eliminated, the way is clear for you now."

"Understood chief. We're on our way." Tan responded.

Ash and Reeves watched as the trio of lights representing the three Klingons lying in wait to ambush the away team blinked out one by one, relieved that all of the lights representing the away team themselves remained lit.

"At least they're safe." Reese said and Ash smiled.

"Yes though I'm not so confident about us. Look at this." he replied and he pointed to the cluster of lights indicating the remaining group of Klingons. As with the strange sentry that was continuing to climb the tower towards them rapidly the Klingons also seemed to have found a way to move faster.

"At that rate they could get here about the same as that thing." Reese commented.

"And I don't like the idea of just the two of us having to fight them all at once." Ash added and Reese looked towards the transporter.

"Think we can use that to get away?" she suggested.

"Perhaps but I'm not entirely sure about where we'd end up." Ash pointed out and he looked around the room. Other than the transporter there were no other visible exits but having seen walls simply melt away to create entrances to other rooms Ash was not so certain that they were trapped in the command centre, "I think we should look for another way out. You try over there and I'll try this way." he added, pointing to two sections of wall where the display screens gave way to the carved stone that was near universal everywhere else in the tower and it did not take long for either of them to find carved symbols of the same style that had opened doorways elsewhere.

"Found one." Reese called out.

"Another one here." Ash added.

"So do we open them together or one at a time?" Reese asked.

"One at a time I think. Just in case there's something nasty behind one of them that doesn't show up on that hologram." Ash answered, crossing the room to join Reese and then he nodded as he pointed his phaser at the stone section of wall, "Do it." he said and Reese pressed the carved symbol.

As expected the wall opened to reveal another chamber beyond it but once again this was different to what they had seen before. This time they found themselves looking at a circular room with a large hole in the centre of the floor.

"I don't like the look of this Mike." Reese said, "Would it have killed whoever built this place to have put in a safety rail?"

"I think that would have got in the way." Ash responded as he stepped through the doorway and peered over the side of the ledge that ran around the outside of the chamber. The went down as far as Ash could see and he could make out more of the tower's levels through it. Although he could not see far enough down to make out the source he could also hear voices coming from within it.

Klingon voices.

"I think its a turbolift of some kind and this is how the Klingons are coming up towards us." he said.

"Nixon see to Trent." Tan ordered the away team's second medic when they caught up with Duke and his security team at the top of the ramp leading to the next level.

"Yes commander." he replied as he went to check on the injured man. Meanwhile Tan approached Duke along with Teela and Estevez.

"Chief did you get them all?" he asked.

"All three commander. Two right here and the third just down that corridor there." Duke answered.

"Good. Then we can look for a way to get to the captain." Tan said, lifting his tricorder and smiling as he looked at the display.

"Found something interesting?" Teela said.

"Something potentially very useful." Tan said and he showed her his tricorder.

"Inertial sensor?" Teela said.

"You've been tracking our movements." Estevez added.

"Yes, I thought it might be useful to have a record of our route if we have to leave in a hurry." Tan said,

"According to these readings this ramp is directly above the one on the floor below us."

"A regular location on each level? Makes sense I suppose." Duke commented.

"Exactly. I suspect that if we circle around to the other side of this wall here then we'll find another ramp leading up to a point right above our heads. Also by that logic the transporter that took the captain and Doctor Reese to the command centre should be duplicated in the same place on each floor as well." Tan said and he turned around, "Which means it should be that way." and he pointed along a nearby hallway.

"What about Trent?" Estevez asked, looking at where he was being treated by Nixon.

"Lieutenant Nixon, what is his condition?" Tan said.

"It doesn't look life threatening but he needs proper treatment back on the *Ascension* to avoid permanent nerve damage." Nixon replied.

"Can he walk?" Tan said.

"Supported, yes."

"Good. I want you to take him back to the main entrance and wait there. Stay alert for the thing that attacked us and check in every ten minutes. Other than that just wait for us to join you." Tan ordered.

"Yes commander." Nixon said before he began to help the injured Trent to his feet.

"Everyone else with me." Tan said and he looked down at his tricorder again as he began to walk, using the device to guide him to a point that was aligned with the transporter on the level below, "Here." he said when the away team reached the location, "There should be a doorway around here somewhere." he added.

"Here." Estevez said when she saw the symbol used to open doorways caved into the wall and she walked up to it and pressed it. Immediately there was a grinding sound and a doorway opened right in front of Tan to reveal another tiny chamber like the one Ash and Reese had entered. Tan then took out his communicator and opened it.

"Tan to Ash." he said.

"Go ahead Tan." Ash's voice responded.

"Captain we've found what looks like another of the transporters you used. Can you tell me how it functions?" Tan asked.

"I don't know. We just got stuck inside and then we ended up here. A place we need to be getting away from pretty quick it seems." Ash said.

"Captain what's wrong?" Tan asked.

"That hologram that told us where you are also shows both the Klingons and that silicon based life form heading for us pretty quickly." Ash told him.

"Captain this could be important." Tan said as he looked inside the transporter and studied the carvings on the wall. Then he noticed that one of them was illuminated, "Captain can you tell me if any of the carvings in the transporter there are lit up and describe them to me? A symbol that looks like a triangle with three small dots over it is glowing in this one." he said.

"Err sure." Ash replied, dashing across the command centre to the transporter again. However, before he made it there was a grinding sound as a doorway on the other side of the room suddenly opened to reveal the sentry.

"Mike lookout!" Reese exclaimed and Ash leapt backwards as the sentry charged towards him.

"Out now." Ash called out as he ran back towards Reese and she exited the command centre into the lift shaft, followed moments later by Ash. Reese quickly located the door control carving in the shaft and pressed it, sealing the doorway as the sentry was still striding towards it.

"Think that crushed it?" she said, remembering the effect of closing the door to a room on its contents.

"Somehow I doubt it. Now lets find somewhere else to hide before those Klingons get here." Ash replied before lifting his communicator back to his mouth and adding, "Sorry Tan but we've got find somewhere to lay low for a while. Do your best to get up here as quickly as you can. There's a turbolift of sorts running up the middle of the tower but the Klingons are using it right now. Ash out."

Ash then returned his communicator to his belt and took Reese by the hand as they circled around the chamber until they found another symbol used for opening doorways and pressed it.

Without waiting to see what was inside the room on the other side of the doorway the two Starfleet officers leapt through before taking a look at their surroundings. As with the command centre this room was filled with alien technology but instead of recognisable consoles and displays it held a number of pulsing cones that extended down from the ceiling. In the centre of the room was the largest of the cones, hanging down about half way to the floor while around it were eight others arranged in a ring at regular intervals. Unlike the sand coloured stone that the rest of the tower was made of these were a pulsing red and lighting arced between them.

"What do you suppose these are?" Reese asked.

"I don't have a clue. Maybe Tan will be able to figure it out." Ash said, "In the mean time we need to close this door." he added, looking back towards the doorway they had just come through.

"Mike are you sure that's a good idea? What if this place just collapses when the door closes" Reese pointed out.

"I'm guessing that if there's a way to open and close the door on the inside then the room must stay as it is.

Otherwise why have the control?" Ash responded as he searched the wall either side of the doorway, "Ah, here we go." he said when he found the carved symbol he was looking for and he pressed it.

Reese flinched when she heard the grinding sound but then breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the doorway seal but the room itself remained as it had been before.

"See Deborah? I told you so." Ash said and Reese frowned.

"Lucky guess Mike." she replied.



"Commander the sandstorm has subsided around the tower." Etchemin reported as he checked the *Ascension's* sensors again.

"Is the probe ready?" Forrester asked and Etchemin nodded.

"Locked and loaded in the torpedo launcher sir." he replied.

"Stand by to launch probe." Forrester ordered and the ensign filling in for Etchemin at navigation while he acted as science officer checked his console.

"Targeting data set commander. Launch safety released." he said.

"Launch probe." Forrester ordered and the ensign reached for the torpedo controls.

On the main the viewscreen there was a pulse of light as the probe was fired from the *Ascension's* roll bar mounted photon torpedo launcher and sped towards the planet below, the light turning from white to red as the probe entered the atmosphere.

"Receiving telemetry from probe." Etchemin said, "Altitude one hundred kilometres. Eighty kilometres. Seventy. Sixty. Probe has entered the energy field commander."

"Let me know as soon as you lose telemetry. I want to know the limits of our penetration of that field." Forrester said.

"Yes commander. Probe is slowing. Altitude now fifty-five kilometres. Fifty-two. Commander we've lost telemetry at fifty-one thousand four hundred metres." Etchemin said.

"Do we still have a visual lock on the probe?" Forrester asked.

"Yes commander. Probe appears on course. Impact in twenty seconds." Etchemin said, continuing to watch the burning of thrusters on the *Ascension's* visual sensors that marked the probe's location as it descended through the atmosphere for a soft landing.

The flames disappeared less than a second before the probe made its landing on the surface and Etchemin had to increase the sensors' magnification to see the probe on the surface close to the tower. This was also close to the landing spot of the escape pod sent earlier but after the sandstorm had passed by this was no longer visible from space, being buried in a thick layer of sand. The probe had deployed a number of solar panels when it landed but instead of supplying additional power to the machine these had been modified to only respond to certain patterns of light.

"Probe landing confirmed. Solar panels have deployed as intended." Etchemin said and Forrester smiled.

"Okay now what about the phasers?" he said.

"Ventral port phaser bank is online and configured for optical data transfer commander." the crewman at the communications station told him.

"Then get me a line to the captain." Forrester ordered.

With no cover available in the room Ash and Reese simply crouched down and pointed their assault phasers towards the door leading back to the turbolift shaft. If the sentry was able to follow them or if the Klingons happened to find this room when they reached the floor then they were prepared to open fire as soon as the doorway opened. Before this happened though Ash's communicator sounded and he flipped it open.

"Go ahead Tan." he said.

"It's not Commander Tan captain." Forrester's voice said and Ash smiled.

"Commander Forrester it's good to hear your voice. How did you penetrate the energy field around the tower? Can you get a transporter lock on us now?" he asked.

"Actually we haven't found a way to do that yet captain. We haven't so much as penetrated the energy field as found a way to get around it for communications."

"How?"

"We modified one of our phaser banks to emit coded light pulses then landed a probe that has been adapted to detect them and act as a relay. That's how we're able to communicate. To get in touch with us all you need to do is use your communicator normally. The probe will do the rest." Forrester explained.

"Very clever commander. Although I was hoping that you'd be able to get Doctor Reese and I out of here. We've been separated from the rest of the away team and we have a bunch of Klingons as well as some sort of guardian for the tower heading towards us."

"Do you want me to send reinforcements captain?" Forrester asked.

"No, they'd never get to us in time anyway. Contact Commander Tan and make sure he knows how to use the relay as well. Ash out." Ash said before he closed his communicator again.

"We could just get in and start pushing buttons." Estevez said, looking at the open transporter.

"Who knows where we'd end up then?" Teela pointed out.

"Plus it will barely fit two people at a time. I'd hate to appear right next to the Klingons or that stone thing with only one other person for back up." Duke added.

"Agreed." Tan said, nodding, "However, there may be a way to gain some further insight. We have seen inside this transporter and we know which of the control symbols is lit. I suspect that if we find another and press that symbol it will bring us back here. If that is true then we may be able to establish a pattern."

"How will you know if you're back here?" Teela asked.

"Either we leave a marker or someone will have to stay." Tan answered.

"What sort of marker?" Estevez said.

"This should do." Tan replied, adjusting his phaser to the same setting Duke had used to try and cut his way into the transporter Ash and Reese had accidentally entered. Then he pointed the weapon at the floor and fired, burning an obvious line into it, "There. Now we'll head up to the next level."

When the two intruders fled from the command centre the sentry did not immediately pursue them. Although its connection to the tower's internal sensors indicated that no damage had been inflicted in the command centre the sentry wanted to make sure that nothing had been tampered with and so it began to check the various consoles, satisfied that it could track the intruders exact position at any time it wanted to.

It did not take long to verify that everything was as it should be, although the tower's external sensors had detected another object make planet fall not far away. This object did not appear to be damaging to the tower though and so the sentry ignored it for the time being, instead checking on the status of the intruders again before deciding which group represented the greatest threat.

The two individuals who had been inside the command centre were now located in the nearby field projection room, a room from which they could inflict catastrophic damage if they were reckless but for now they did not seem to be tampering with any of the tower's systems. On the other hand the rest of the group they had started as part of had just inflicted more damage to the tower with one of their weapons. This was superficial but it still indicated a willingness to cause damage that would need repairing by the tower's maintenance drones after the intruders had been dealt with. As the most recent group to have caused damage the sentry would normally have focused its efforts on them. However, the final group of intruders, made up of the first group to gain entry to the tower and so far the most destructive overall was still ascending via the central turbolift, their destination this level.

Protecting the command centre had to be a priority for the sentry and so it opted to remain in this room. Therefore, after shutting off the holographic display to prevent its use by the intruders as a means of gathering intelligence the sentry walked over to the sealed doorway that led to the turbolift shaft and embedded itself in the wall, ready to strike.



## 10.

Gren was becoming impatient again, waiting for the stone disc to reach the top of the shaft and so it came as a relief when Turos pointed upwards.

"I think I can see the top." he said and Gren also looked upwards to see the ceiling at the very top of the shaft.

"Hopefully we will stop before we hit it." Krang commented and Gren snarled. Falling in battle was one thing, but to be flattened against a ceiling by a runaway turbolift was not a warrior's death. Fortunately though the stone disc began to slow down and it came to a stop on what appeared to be the uppermost level of the tower by the fact that the ceiling was solid. Unlike every other level that the alien turbolift had passed through though there were no hallways leading away from the circular chamber that the Klingons now found themselves standing in. Instead there was what looked like a solid wall running all the way around it. However, Gren knew that this was deceptive and he looked carefully at the wall as he and his crew stepped from the disc to the ledge surrounding it.

"Find me doorways." he said sternly, "Whatever secrets this tower holds must be here."

The Klingons immediately began to search the carvings on the wall for the symbol that would open a doorway and Koros smiled when he found one. However, as he drew in breath to tell Gren and the others the sentry suddenly leant out of the wall right in front of him and speared Koros through his stomach. Koros screamed in agony but his cries were cut short when the sentry used its other arm to break his neck before hurling his corpse directly away from the wall. His body landed on the pedestal in the centre of the turbolift and the force of the impact triggered it into motion, sending it down towards the level represented by the symbol that Koros' body had struck first.

The Klingons all turned and fired at the wall but the sentry was able to retreat back inside it before any of the energy blasts struck it and instead they blasted holes in the wall itself.

"Cease fire!" Gren bellowed when he realised what was happening and the consequences if it continued, "If you hit the controls to a door we have no way of opening it. Fire only if you can see your target."

The surviving Klingon crew did as their captain ordered and ceased fire immediately but they kept their disruptors held at the ready just in case the sentry reappeared.

"Captain over here!" one of the Klingons called out when he found a carving to open a doorway and without waiting for Gren to respond he pressed it.

There was the usual grinding sound as the door began to open but before it could do so fully there was a flash of blue from the room on the other side and the Klingon roared in pain as the phaser beam clipped his arm and he staggered back. This took him to the very edge of the ledge around the hole that was open once again now that the turbolift disc had descended and the Klingon roared again as he lost his footing and plummeted to his death somewhere below.

"Starfleet phasers!" Krang yelled, recognising the energy of the phaser beams before there was a second shot from within the room and another Klingon crumpled and fell through the hole.

The Klingons returned fire, sending a volley of disruptor blasts through the now fully opened doorway into the room and Ash and Reese both pressed themselves up against the wall either side of the doorway.

"Mike I don't like the look of what those things are doing." Reese said, glancing towards the cones that hung from the ceiling and noticing that as the blasts from the Klingons' disruptors passed between them they were suddenly drawn into them so that they appeared to turn sharply in mid air.

"I don't know but I know what will happen if any of those blasts hit either of us." Ash replied, firing his phaser through the doorway before ducking back again.

In the central chamber the Klingons were closing in on the doorway from both sides. Initially the shape of the room left them exposed and when Ash fired again he hit Kuvan and the Klingon medic collapsed before his body rolled off the ledge. As they got closer though the Klingons were concealed by the curvature of the room and Reese leant forwards to try and get a better angle of fire. As she did so though Gren suddenly reached his arm through the doorway and grabbed her by the wrist. They she cried out as he dragged her into the central chamber and used the butt of his disruptor pistol to knock her phaser from her hand before he kicked one of her legs out from beneath her and she stumbled, prevented from falling over the edge of the ledge only because the Klingon was holding onto her.

"Surrender human." Gren called out as he pressed the muzzle of his disruptor pistol to the side of Reese's head.

"Okay." Ash responded immediately, ceasing fire and lowering his assault phaser as he stepped back and exposed his position to the Klingons.

"Throw your weapon into the hole human. Quickly before I lose my grip on you female." Gren ordered.

"Don't do it Mike. He'll just drop me anyway." Reese exclaimed.

"How do I know you'll keep your word not to drop her?" Ash asked and Gren laughed. This laughter spread to the other surviving Klingons as he looked at them.

"My word? I wouldn't give my word to a petaQ like you but if you don't so as I say or you try to kill me then I guarantee that you will hear the female scream as she falls." Gren responded.

"Okay, okay. I'll do it." Ash said and then he tossed his phaser through the doorway and over the ledge. When he saw the weapon fall into the hole and watched it vanish Gren then pulled Reese back from the edge and shoved her through the open doorway before following her while Ash backed away.

"Now humans, you may consider yourselves prisoners of the Klingon Empire." Gren said and Ash smiled.

"You know a dozen or so Klingons wandering around in a ship that was out of date before my grandfather was old enough to ride a kangaroo hardly strikes me as an imperial strike force." he said.

"Mind your tongue human or I'll rip it out." Gren said as the rest of his crew were following him into the room, "Now tell what this place is and how you got here ahead of us."

"It was an accident," Reese replied, "and we don't know what this place is."

"You expect me to believe that?" Gren asked.

"It doesn't really matter now does it?" Ash answered, "We found an anti gravity shaft of some kind that hurled us all the way up here before it sealed again and we couldn't even find it, let alone open it again. We know that there's something protecting this place and we heard it coming so we hid in a closet until we thought it had gone. Luckily the rooms on this floor don't collapse when you shut the door. It turned out it hadn't though and it chased us in here."

Reese kept silent while Ash spoke, not wanting to reveal that he was lying from her response and when he stopped speaking the Klingon captain paused to consider what Ash had said.

"Show me where this anti-gravity shaft is." he said and Ash shrugged.

"Okay but like I said it's vanished since it closed. It's in a room just that way. The door is about five metres from this one." he told Gren and he pointed in the direction of the control room.

"Take their communicators and any other equipment. Then bring them." Gren ordered before he turned around again and walked out of the room.

A pair of Klingons then stepped forwards and while K'Seyr kept watch they searched Ash and Reese, confiscating all of their remaining equipment including their water supplies. They kept the communicators but the supplies and Reese's medical kit were all just tossed aside before the two Starfleet officers were dragged from the room and taken back to the neighbouring command centre where Gren and the other Klingons were looking around. Ash was relieved to see though that none of them seemed to be paying any attention to the transporter at the side of the room. More significantly both he and Reese saw that the holographic display that showed them the position of everyone inside the tower was now shut down. Whether this had been done by the Klingons or the tower's guardian though they could not tell.

"Now show me this anti-gravity shaft." Gren said to Ash and the Starfleet officer was shoved forwards.

"It was around here somewhere." he lied, walking across the room to a relatively empty space before coming to a stop and jumping up and down, "But it's obviously not here now."

"We will find it." Gren responded and then he looked at his crew and added, "Secure them and search."

"Where captain?" Krang asked and Gren looked towards the transporter.

"In there." he said, thinking that this was the closet Ash had spoken about and the two Starfleet officers were pushed back inside where they had to squeeze together. Then the Klingon immediately outside the transporter located the carved symbol that would close the door and pressed it.

Reese immediately leant forwards and kissed Ash.

"How did you know they'd fall for that Mike?" she asked.

"I didn't exactly but it seemed like our best shot. Now lets see if we can activate this thing. Tan said something about a triangle with three small dots." Ash answered as he gently ran his hand along the wall to try and find a symbol like the one Tan had described and when he found it he smiled, "Energise." he said before he pressed it.

Instantaneously there was the same flash of light that they had experienced when the transporter activated to bring them to the command centre and Ash and Reese both hesitated.

"Think it worked?" Reese said.

"Let's find out." Ash replied, running his other hand along the opposite wall until he found the symbol to open the door and there was the usual grinding sound as the opening appeared.

Stepping out of the transporter Ash and Reese found themselves in an empty corridor. However, on the floor in front of them was the slot that Tan had cut with his phaser to mark the level and Ash pointed to this as soon as he saw it.

"Tan must have left this as a marker." he said, "My guess is if we just wait for him then he'll turn up sooner or later."

"Hopefully sooner. Especially with that killer rock monster on the prow and us without a phaser between us." Reese added.

"Here." Tan said when the inertial tracking system of his tricorder informed him that the away team had finally reached the equivalent position to the location of the transporter on the level below. Although key features such as ramps and transporters seemed to be in common locations on each level the layouts remained different and it had taken longer than Tan had hoped to find this spot.

"Here's a door control I think." Teela announced and Tan nodded.

"Try it." he told her and she pressed the symbol. As Tan had hoped the doorway that revealed itself as it opened led only to a tiny room in which one of the symbols carved on the back wall was glowing, "Right next to the symbol shown on the transporter downstairs." he said.

"So they probably run in order then." Estevez commented.

"That seems logical ensign, yes." Tan replied and he stepped towards the doorway only to feel a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait a moment commander." Duke told him, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Trying an experiment." Tan replied.

"Until we find the captain again you're in command sir. I think it's better if I try." Duke said.

"Very well." Tan responded, agreeing with Duke's reasoning but disappointed at not being able to be the one to try out the transporter, "Just press that symbol next to the one that's lit up."

"The triangle right?" Duke asked as he stepped into the transporter and Tan nodded.

"That's the one." he said.

Duke did not bother with closing the door to the transporter. Instead he just pressed the carved symbol he had been told to and the door then sealed itself automatically before there was a flash of light.

"Well that was an anti-climax." Duke said to himself when he found his surroundings completely unchanged. However, he still looked down at the front wall of the transporter and searched for the control to open the door before pushing it. If the transporter had worked as intended then Duke expected to see the mark burned into the floor by Tan but when the door opened the first thing to catch his attention were Ash and Reese waiting in the hallway opposite the transporter.

"Chief." Ash said simply as Duke smiled at him.

"Captain." he replied. Then he looked at Reese and added, "Doctor. What are you both doing here?"

"Escaping from the Klingons. They now have control of the tower's operations centre, or at least what I think is the operations centre." Ash told him.

"Can they track us?" Duke asked.

"Not from what we saw. The display that let us see where everyone was had been turned off. Or maybe it was damaged. I don't know." Reese answered.

"Chief the Klingons took all our gear. Do you have an extra phaser?" Ash said and Duke reached behind him to produce the assault phaser he had tucked into a pouch.

"It's Bowden's phaser captain. I kept hold of it just in case. I'm afraid that's our only spare though doctor.

Commander Tan sent Nixon and Trent back to the main entrance but they took their phasers with them." he said.

"That's fine. Hopefully we won't get so desperate that we'll need a doctor laying down fire." Reese said.

"I'll need to borrow your communicator as well chief." Ash added and Duke handed him the communicator from his belt.

"Ash to Tan, do you read me?" Ash said into the device.

"Tan here captain." Tan's voice responded.

"Commander, Reese and I are with Chief Duke." Ash told him.

"Duke? He was supposed to be beaming down to the floor below us." Tan said.

"Yes, the one marked by the triangle and the three dots. Doctor Reese and I were captured by the Klingons."

"Captured? You're lucky they didn't kill you out of hand. The Klingons aren't known for taking prisoners." Tan commented.

"No, not unless they think they can get information from you and I was able to trick them into believing that there's an anti-gravity shaft somewhere in the command centre. With any luck they're still looking for that now and thinking that Reese and I are locked in the closet." Ash replied.

"The closet being the transporter I take it." tan said and Ash smiled.

"Quite correct commander. Unfortunately we lost our equipment in the process but at least we got out alive and well. Now has Lieutenant Commander Forrester been in touch with you?" ash said.

"Yes captain. He's told us about the probe relay." Tan said.

"Good. I think we should join you now."

"Of course captain. We're on the level right above you. Chief Duke can identify the symbol to use in the transporter to get to us."

"Then we'll see you soon commander. Ash out." Ash said before he closed the communicator and handed it back to Duke, "Okay chief, show us what to push." he added.

The sentry monitored the intruders' movements with concern. The two that it had driven from the command centre had briefly split off from the others and presented a vulnerable target before they joined up with the rest of their group once more but the sentry had ignored their vulnerability while it kept a closer eye on the more destructive group of intruders. Although the number of these had been reduced by more than half they still represented the most destructive grouping and there was no telling how much damage they could do. Already they had risked a catastrophic explosion by firing their weapons into the field projection room where the energy field surrounding the tower was generated. If the machinery there was damaged then the energy could be released in a blast that would level the tower. Any damage that had already been caused to the system needed to be investigated and so while continuing to monitor the positions of all of the intruders the sentry went to the field projection room to evaluate it.

Visually the field projection cones appeared intact but the sentry's other sensors indicated that there was unseen damage that although not serious yet would require attention from the maintenance drones.

Obviously the presence of the intruders needed to be brought to a rapid end and with this in mind the sentry walked over to the nearest wall and extended an arm into it before entering it entirely.

## 11.

"We need to find the centre of the tower." Ash told the rest of the *Ascension's* away team, "That's where the turbolift is located. That's the only way for us to reach the top without climbing up these ramps."

"Can you remember where it was located in relation to the transporter captain?" Tan asked in response, "So far details such as that and the ramps has been constant."

This caused both Ash and Reese to look around as they tried to get their bearings.

"I think it was that way but that would put it back the way we came and we definitely didn't walk past it." Reese said.

"Yeah, a gaping hole in the floor is easy to spot." Ash added

"Perhaps the facing of the transporters is not constant." Tan suggested.

"In that case I'd say it was about ten metres away. If that holds true down here then it can't be too hard to find." Ash said, "We'll split into three groups of three and spread out. Try not to go more than twenty metres from here and see if you can find the turbolift chamber. Duke you're with me and Doctor Reese. Tan take Hereford and Dobson. Teela you've got Estevez and Fox. Oh and we need to change the channels on our communicators. The Klingons have mine and Reese's and I don't want them hearing what we're up to."

"A sound precaution captain." Tan replied as he took out his communicator.

"I suggest switching them all by seven frequency bands captain." Estevez added as she did the same.

"Why seven?" Teela asked.

"The Klingons might try just moving the ones they took by a single band. One up and one down. After a while they'll figure out they've not got the right one and move on to the next. Seven bands gives us more time and also protects us against them getting angry and going right to the extremes of the range." Estevez explained. "Okay seven bands up it is then. Ensign Estevez please inform the *Ascension* of what we're doing and why. Hopefully the relay probe can be adjusted to match." Ash said, "Then get into your assigned groups and spread out."

Once their communicators were reset to prevent the Klingons listening in on their communications The away team then divided up as Ash had instructed and spread out. Ash hoped that the group size he had specified would allow them to cover the most ground without making themselves too vulnerable to the sentry that had shown it could strike at any moment from anywhere. Each team headed in a different direction until Tan's came across a circular chamber that matched the description given by Ash as containing a large hole that extended between levels.

"Tan to all units." he said into his communicator, setting it to broadcast to the entire away team, "I think we've found it. From our starting point take the second left and then the first right."

"Understood commander. We're on our way." Ash responded, using Bowden's communicator now as well as his phaser.

The away team gathered in the circular chamber and Ash smiled.

"Yes this looks like it." he said.

"Captain there's a symbol over here on the wall that matches the one that was illuminated in the transporter on this level." Tan told him.

"You think it will summon the turbolift?" Reese asked.

"It's worth a shot I suppose." Ash said and Tan pressed the symbol.

"Okay so now what?" Teela said.

"I guess we wait commander." Duke replied.

"Does anyone hear something?" Estevez said and she leant over the hole.

"Ensign get back!" Reese exclaimed and Teela pulled Estevez back from the hole before the stone disc of the turbolift suddenly descended from above, a dead Klingon still lying beside the pedestal in the centre.

"I take it you didn't kill him captain?" Teela said and Reese shook her head.

"I'd say that he was killed by that silicon based life form." she said.

"I don't recall him from when we were captured. The Klingons must have fought it before they found us." Ash said as he and Tan walked to the control pedestal in the centre of the disk

"Captain these carvings match those on the transporter wall. Look, here is the one for this level and the one for the one below us is right next to it." Tan said, pointing towards the outer edge of the pedestal.

"Yes and this one here in the centre is the one I saw glowing in the transporter in the operations centre." Ash added.

"So are we going to ride this all the way up to the top?" Teela asked as the rest of the away team joined Ash and Tan on the disc. Seeing that the dead Klingon had a disruptor holstered on his belt Duke drew the alien weapon and handed it to Reese.

"Here you go doctor. Just in case." he told her.

"Going right to the top is too risky." Ash said in response to Teela's question, "If the Klingons have stationed a lookout then they'll be able to fire on us. I think it's best if we go up to about four or five floors below and then climb the ramps for the rest of the way."

"Oh great. More ramps." Teela muttered.

"Captain if we work on the basis that these symbols are in the same order as the floors they lead to then this should be the one for the floor five levels below the tower's operations centre." Tan said, pointing to one of the symbols close to the centre of the spiral and Ash smiled.

"Engage Commander Tan." Ash said and Tan pressed the symbol.

"Captain this is pointless." Turos said, "The human must have lied."

Gren snarled and let out a growl. He and his crew had searched the command centre for the entrance to the anti-gravity shaft without success. The only discovery they had made was another exit that led to a hallway and the idea that humans could uncover one of the tower's secrets when he could not anger Gren.

"Bring them. I will loosen the male's tongue." he said and the Klingon standing beside the entrance to the transporter turned to open the door, the Klingons expecting to find Ash and Reese still squeezed together inside. Therefore, to find the compartment empty came as a total surprise to them.

"Where are they?" Gren demanded as he stormed across the room.

"Captain look at the wall." Krang said, pointing to the back of the transporter where the symbol representing the level they were on was glowing, "That is the same symbol from the turbolift that brought us here."

"Then this must be the anti-gravity shaft the human spoke of. They tricked us into helping them escape.

Krang, open it. Now." Gren ordered.

"Captain I don't know how." Krang replied and Gren snarled again as he drew his disruptor pistol and set it to its highest setting. Then he pointed his weapon at the floor of the transporter and began to fire a sustained beam into it, intending to blast his way through to the level below.

The material that the floor was made of proved to be far more durable than ordinary stone though. That would have given way in just a few seconds but the floor of the transporter remained stubbornly intact, only slowly vaporising under the beam.

Gren maintained this, watched by his crew until there was a sudden shriek from behind him and he spun around to see the sentry hanging partially out of an exposed section of wall with its arm thrust through K'Seyr. Rather than retreat back into the wall as it had done previously though the sentry emerged fully and advanced towards the other Klingons, holding up the convulsing K'Seyr in front of it as a shield against their disruptors.

Seeing that he could not get a clear shot another Klingon tossed aside his disruptor rifle and drew his bat'leth from his back. Then holding the large curved blade above his head he roared as he charged towards the sentry. The sentry itself simply held out its free arm to block the swing of the bat'leth and when the blade struck the limb sparks flew but the sentry was not harmed. In response it swung its arm at the Klingon and struck him with enough force to send him flying across the command centre.

Ignoring the fact that K'Seyr was still alive Gren fired his disruptor towards the sentry and the beam hit the female Klingon in her back, vaporising her without appearing to harm the sentry at all. In firing the beam Gren caused his own remaining men to flinch, ducking away from the heat of the beam and that gave the sentry all the opportunity it needed to charge at the other Klingons before they could bring their weapons to bear again and it was soon able to take hold of Turos by his head and twisted it with such force that the sound of his neck snapping was heard around the room.

Krang then fired his disruptor and the blast hit the sentry in the hip. This was enough to damage and slow down the sentry but not enough to incapacitate it and before Krang could fire again the sentry hurled Turos' corpse at him. The impact of the body knocked Krang to the floor and while he struggled to get out from beneath it the sentry limped towards him and as Krang looked up the sentry punched downwards with enough force to smash his skull wide open.

The last of Gren's crew roared as he charged at the sentry, giving into his bloodlust despite how ineffectual the last attempt to challenge the sentry in close combat had been. All his cry did though was alert the sentry to this threat and it turned and thrust out its arm, the fist still covered in Klingon blood. The move was timed just right so that the charging Klingon impaled himself on the limb.

Gren laughed as he looked across the room at the sentry and he aimed his disruptor pistol at the machine before pulling the trigger. However, his prolonged use of the weapon at its highest setting had depleted the power pack and the beam that struck the sentry faded before it could do any damage. This now left the Klingon captain in a vulnerable position. If he attempted to swap the power pack then the sentry would undoubtedly kill him before he completed the task. On the other hand it was obvious that he was no match for the machine in hand to hand combat. Therefore, unwilling to die honourably he was left with only one other choice and after dropping his useless disruptor to the floor he turned and ran through the open doorway to the passage outside.

The *Ascension's* away team had disembarked from the turbolift five levels below the command centre and from there they made their way up to the top level, advancing with their assault phasers held at the ready. All of a sudden Gren appeared from around a corner and the Starfleet away team all took aim at him.

"Hold your fire. He's unarmed." Ash said, noticing that Gren held nothing in his hands. Then he called out to the Klingon captain himself, "Get down on the floor. You are under arrest." he said.

Gren paused for a moment, now caught between two foes he could not defeat. He feared capture more than death though and so he ignored the warning from Ash and drew his knife, the side blades flicking out into position as he did so.

"Don't do it." Ash warned him but Gren just roared and charged with his knife held high. In response the away team opened fire and multiple phaser beams hit him in rapid succession. Killed by the first hit, Gren dropped his weapon and fell forwards to land several metres in front of the away team.

The sentry had followed Gren from the command centre, slowed by the damage to its leg and moments after the Klingon fell dead it appeared around the corner as well, sanding right in front of the away team.

"Open fire!" Ash snapped and the away team now turned their weapons on the sentry.

The sentry itself reacted by leaping towards the safety of the nearest wall. However, it was not quite fast enough and several shots hit it before it vanished into the wall.

"What now captain?" Duke asked after the sentry disappeared yet again.

"We keep moving. The operations centre can't be too far away now." Ash responded.

The sentry emerged from the tower's walls again inside the command centre. Its own system diagnostics told it that the damage it had suffered was critical and a full shut down was inevitable. This would of course leave the tower itself totally unprotected and vulnerable to being seized by the remaining group of intruders. Preventing this took precedence even over preventing damage to the tower and there was only one way that the sentry could ensure that it did not happen.

Moving awkwardly to the nearest console the sentry activated it and a diagram of one of the tower systems appeared. One at a time the sentry reached out and touched parts of this, causing them to blank out as they were shut down. The sentry did this four times in total and after the fourth time a klaxon began to sound.

Upon hearing this the sentry turned off the display to hide what it had done and followed this by shutting itself down as well for the last time.

## 12.

"I don't like the sound of that." Estevez said when the klaxon sounded.

"Captain," Tan added as he checked his tricorder, "I am detecting a large build up of energy from beneath us."

"Oh no. That can only be one thing." Reese said.

"It's a self destruct, isn't it?" Duke added.

"That is a logical assumption." Tan replied.

"Then we need to get out of here." Estevez said.

Ash took out his communicator and flipped it open.

"Ash to Ascension, tell me you've found a way to get a transporter lock on us." he said into it.

"Sorry captain." Forrester's voice responded after a few moments, "We still can't break through that energy field."

"How long do we have?" Reese asked, looking at Tan.

"I can't say doctor. But I doubt more than an hour at most." he answered.

"An hour? We'll never make it back to the shuttle in time." Estevez said.

"Captain what's wrong?" Forrester asked.

"We think the tower is about to self destruct. We don't exactly how long we've got but Lieutenant Commander Tan estimates that we have no more than an hour."

"What about the Klingon ship captain?" Forrester suggested, "It's less than two thousand metres from the tower. Bearing one-one-eight degrees."

"Okay we might make that. If we don't then let Starfleet know what happened. Don't hang about. Ash out."

Ash responded before he put his communicator away again and looked at the rest of the away team, "Okay let's get moving. We'll use the turbolift to get down to the bottom of the tower and then run like hell." he told them.

The away team turned and began to run back the way they had come, hurrying down the five levels to where they had left the turbolift rather than trying to find their way to it on this level and possibly coming face to face with the sentry again. As soon as they reached the stone disc Tan examined the symbols on the pedestal again, locating the symbol that represented the bottom floor and pressing it.

All the away team could do as the turbolift descended was wait, but Ash used the opportunity to call ahead and warn Nixon and Trent that the tower was likely going to explode and that the Klingon ship may offer them shelter. This would then give the medic more chance to escort the injured man to the ship before time ran out and the tower was destroyed.

As soon as the turbolift reached the bottom of the tower the away team disembarked and began to run once more, Tan guiding them back to the entrance where Nixon and Trent had already left, their footprints clearly visible in the sand.

"How long do we have now?" Ash asked, looking at Tan and the science officer consulted his tricorder again.

"Perhaps forty to forty-five minutes captain." he replied.

"Then we'd better hurry." Ash said and the away team began to run across the desert sand towards the location of the Klingon ship.

Even with the significant head start they had had, the away team caught up with Nixon and Trent about half way to the ship and Duke called out to them.

"Nixon I'll take him. Dobson help me." he said and the two security guards took over the task of supporting their injured comrade, enabling them to move faster than with just Nixon holding him up, "Don't wait for us. Go." Duke added, knowing that they would ebb moving slower than the rest of the away team.

Understanding this, Ash and the others then continued to run and pulled ahead of Duke and his two men until they came to the Klingon ship right where Forrester had said it would be.

Only to find it completely buried in sand.

"How do we get in?" Teela asked.

"There'll be a hatch on the underside we can use." Tan said.

"Great. But it's buried." Reese pointed out.

"Then we have to dig it out." Ash said, drawing his phaser and setting it to its maximum level. Then he fired the weapon into the ground, aiming for the base of the mound of sand that covered the Klingon bird of prey. The beam vaporised the sand easily but all that happened at first was that the sand above fell down to fill in the gap. This brought it into the path of the beam though and it too was vaporised. This process continued until the beam from Ash's phaser faltered and then failed as the weapon's power pack was exhausted. When the beam cut off though a hole was left in the sand, leading beneath the Klingon vessel and Ash waved the rest of his team into it.



The hole led beneath one of the bird of prey's wings and it was impossible to see more than a few metres from it until Tan followed Ash through the hole and produced a palm beacon from his belt and turned on the powerful light source.

"Over there captain," he said, pointing to a ramp that the Klingons had left open when they left their ship. "Pass me that palm beacon. Everyone get aboard and see if you can get this ship running or at least get its shields up." Ash ordered and Tan passed him his palm beacon. Then guided by the palm beacons that Teela and Estevez carried the other members of the away team ran towards the ramp and boarded the Klingon ship. Meanwhile Ash exited the hole again and looked back towards the tower, watching for Duke's party to appear.

"Come on!" he called out when he saw the three security guards come into view and he waved them towards him, "Get aboard we don't have much time left."

When Duke's group arrived at the hole Ash led them into it and beneath the Klingon vessel. Then using Tan's palm beacon he was able to guide them all to the ramp giving access to the ship and led them up it.

Reese and Nixon were waiting at the top of the ramp and they rushed to help Trent.

"Set him down." Reese said. Then as the injured Trent was being gently lowered to the deck she looked at Ash, "Tan and the others are all on the bridge. That way," she added, pointing towards the front of the ship.

"Okay. Duke get that ramp sealed." Ash responded as he began to run towards the bridge and when he entered the room he found Tan, Teela and Estevez inspecting the main console, "What's our status?" he asked.

"Estevez has pointed me to the flight controls but we're still looking for the main energiser controls captain." Teela answered.

"So no shields then?" Ash said.

"Not yet captain, no. We have lights and enough power for the doors but all that's coming from the batteries." Tan replied.

"How long do we have?" Ash added.

"The tower could explode at any time." Tan responded and Ash nodded.

"Okay just pick some likely buttons and start pressing them." he said.

"I suppose it's not like we can do any harm without main power." Teela commented and Estevez looked at the console again.

"It's probably one of these," she said, pointing to a row of buttons along the top of the console and she reached out and began pushing them one after another in rapid succession. All of a sudden the consoles in the bridge lit up and Klingon script appeared on the various displays and Estevez looked around again, "Where's the tactical console?" she said.

"Here." Tan replied and they both darted across the bridge to the weapons console, "Can you see the shield controls?" he added.

"Here. Deflector power." Estevez told him, pointing to a set of controls beside a diagram of the Klingon ship and she quickly pressed one of them.

As soon as the ship's deflector shields activated the sand covering the vessel was blasted away by the energy field expanding out from the hull. This enabled the ship's sensors to display an image of the alien tower on the main view screen but moments later there was a brilliant flash of light that filled the screen as the tower's self destruct was finally triggered.

The alien tower was destroyed in an instant and a shock wave spread out from it. This created a massive expanding cloud of debris that bombarded the bird of prey's shields and the vessel rocked violently. Luckily the ship's shields held and it was not overturned by the powerful winds rushing over it and when the debris and winds had passed the ship was intact.

All that remained where the tower had been though was a deep crater a kilometre across.

"Orders captain?" Teela asked.

"See if you can get this rust bucket off the ground lieutenant commander. We'll let Forrester play with it for a while and then tell Starfleet that they can send a recovery team to come and get it." Ash replied.

The door to Admiral Korda's office in the fleet command building on the Klingon colony world Qu'Vat slid open to permit the two Klingon destroyer captains to enter behind Markon, Korda's aide. Unusually for a Klingon of such high rank Korda bore the effects of the augment virus of the previous century that had heavily mutated many members of the species, giving the admiral a far more human appearance. The virus had since been overcome but there were still some in the Empire who retained the visible effects and discrimination against them was common.

"I have the captains to see you admiral." Markon said as the three Klingons approached the admiral who waved away the female Klingon who had been attending him. Like Korda her forehead was smooth as a result of the augment virus and one of the destroyer captains snarled at her as she walked past them, smiling.

"Where is the captain of the *Mevak*?" Korda demanded.

"His ship did not make it to the rendezvous point. Starfleet must have-" one of the destroyer captains began. "I do not want to hear about Starfleet!" Korda snapped, "I supplied the *Mevak*'s captain with weapons in exchange for a share of his spoils. I did this on your assurance that his men could be relied upon to evade Starfleet patrols Kroanon."

"My brother-" Kroanon said before he was interrupted again.

"Your brother is not here to answer for his failure. That burden now falls upon you." Korda said and realising that he was about to be killed Kroanon reached for his disruptor, hoping that he would be able to fire first. However, before he had even drawn his sidearm there was a whining sound and beam energy came from the shadows at the side of the room. This beam was not the usual red of Klingon disruptor fire though, instead it was the bright blue of a Federation phaser and it struck Kroanon before he even realised he was under attack. The energy spread out to cover the surface of his body and he had just enough time to scream in pain before he was vaporised, leaving no trace of the Klingon at all. The second Klingon captain recognised this as a blast from a Starfleet phaser and his hand also went towards his own weapon as he turned to face the source of the attack.

"Think carefully about your next move Captain Tarrok." Markon warned him, stepping back out of the line of fire of the figure that now stepped out of the shadows. Unsurprisingly the man that appeared was not Klingon but human and he wore the maroon tunic of a lieutenant commander in Starfleet. Rather than worn closed in formal fashion though this tunic was open and he had clearly not shaved for a number of days, giving him a scruffy appearance that was unusual for someone of his rank.

"The spy." Tarrok hissed, snarling as he made his contempt for the human obvious.

"Captain Tarrok meet Lieutenant Commander Matthew Keeler, former chief communications officer of the *USS Ascension* and the man who supplied me with information about Starfleet operations for a number of years. He may not have the same access to current intelligence as he once had but he still has his uses." Korda explained.

"With Kroanon gone you are the senior captain of your strike group Tarrok." Markon said before he looked towards Korda and added, "Unless you wish to assign another officer to the squadron admiral."

Tarrok relaxed, his hand moving away from his disruptor.

"I await your orders Admiral Korda." he said.

Korda then looked at Keeler.

"Put your weapon away Keeler." he said and Keeler returned his assault phaser to the holster on his leg,

"Good. Now is she ready?" Korda added.

"The doctors have confirmed that she is healthy my lord." the human defector replied, "Do you wish to view her?"

"Yes, I think that if Captain Tarrok is going to command a squadron then he needs to be aware of our plans to disrupt Starfleet operations." Korda said as he got up from his chair, "Come with us Captain Tarrok, there is someone you need to meet."

When they exited Korda's office the four men made their way by turbolift down to the lower levels of the building where Korda had to present a coded key to get the doors to open. Exiting the turbolift they walked past the warriors who stood guard and then on past a number of doors marked only by numbers rather than anything to indicate what lay on the other side. Korda stopped at one that had another security panel beside it and presented the same key that had opened the doors to the turbolift.

"These are our guest's quarters." he told Tarrok as the door opened they went inside.

The room on the other side of the door was unlit, with only the light coming through the open doorway providing any illumination. This was enough though for Tarrok to see that the otherwise featureless room had a single occupant, a woman whose head was covered by a hood from beneath which there was a muffled whimpering sound. This woman had been stripped and was now suspended from the ceiling by a chain that was connected to the thick mittens that covered her hands to deny her the use of her fingers even if she was unchained while a chain leading from cuffs around her ankles to the floor bound her legs together as well as preventing her from attempting to kick out at any of her captors.

Korda strode up to the naked captive and reached up to pull the hood from her head to expose her face. This revealed the woman to be human, the lower part of her face still covered by a muzzle that prevented her from speaking. Instead all she could do was look at the four men now standing in her cell while she hung naked and helpless from the ceiling with a look of terror on what could be seen of her face.

"Captain Tarrok," Korda said, "allow me to introduce you to Starfleet Captain Rachel Franklin. Commanding officer of the *USS Ascension*."