

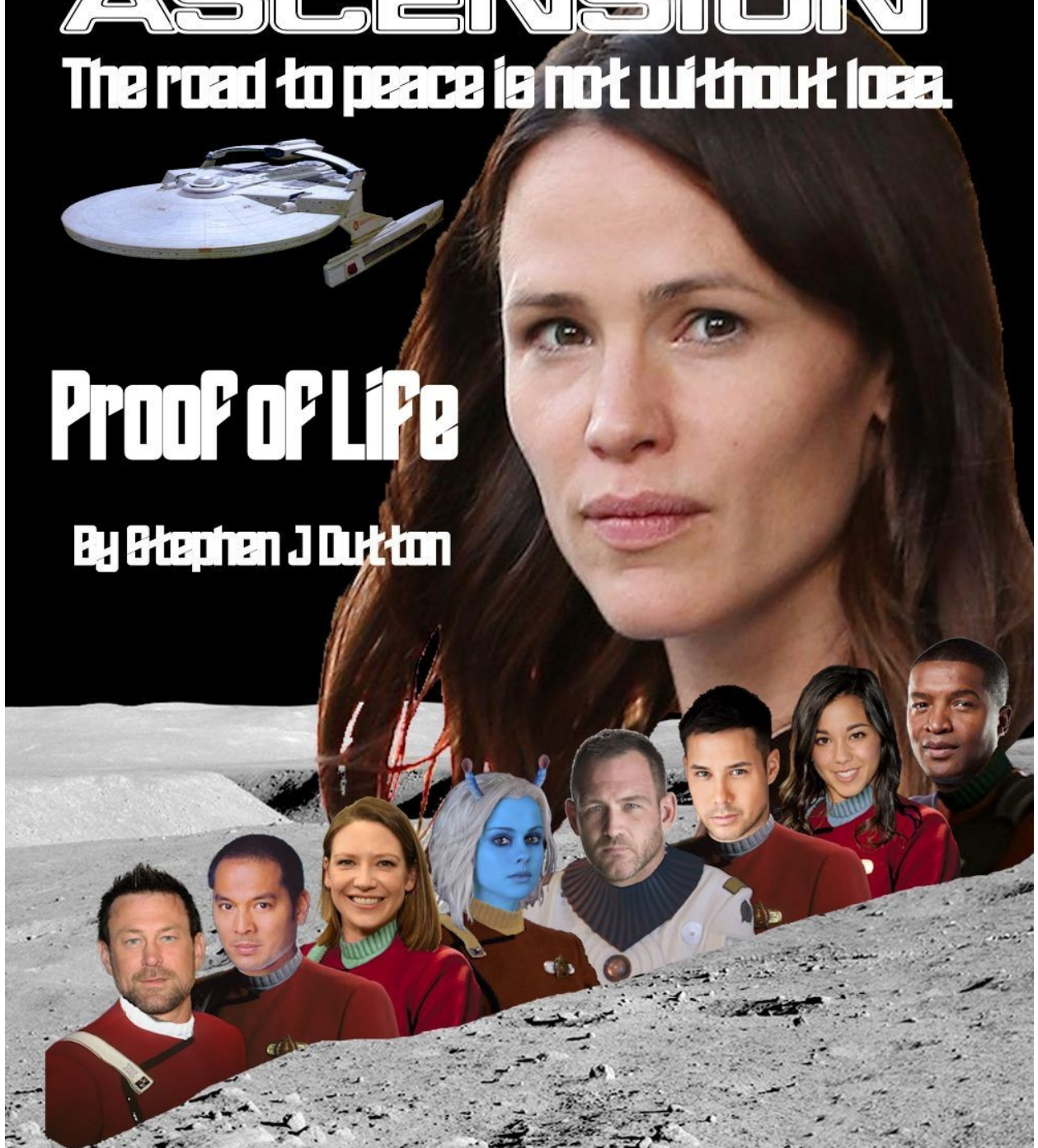
# STAR TREK ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.



## Proof of Life

By Stephen J Dutton



# STAR TREK: ASCENSION *Proof of Life*

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

Could Captain Franklin be alive?

Despite having discovered the body of their previous commanding officer the crew of the USS Ascension receive word that she is in fact still alive and being held prisoner in the Klingon Empire. This prompts a desperate race to rescue her...

Star Trek: Ascension available online at:  
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# 1.

Stardate 8722.3 Miranda-class destroyer *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 in orbit around Archanis IV.

"Jack! Hold the turbolift!" a female voice called out just as Lieutenant Etchemin was about to close the turbolift door and he inside used his hand to keep it open for her to catch up with him.

"Hi Sonia." he said as Ensign Estevez, the *Ascension's* communications officer rushed into the turbolift with him, "Bridge?" he added and Estevez nodded.

"Of course," she replied and Etchemin let the doors close. However, just as the turbolift began to move Estevez reached out to pause it, "I just wanted to say thanks." she said and Etchemin frowned.

"You're welcome but what for? Holding the door?" he said and she smiled.

"No. Thanks for not making me look like a fool last night on your date with Monique." she said, "She called me right after and told me what a great time she had. She said you were really nice without being boring."

"I should be thanking you." Etchemin replied, "Monique wasn't the only one who had a good time last night and if she seems happy about it I'll call her when we're on our way back to port after this patrol."

"Oh she's happy." Estevez said, "She's very happy." and she took her hand away from the control panel, allowing the turbolift to start moving again.

When the turbolift door opened again Etchemin and Estevez stepped out onto the *Ascension's* bridge where Lieutenant Commander Tan, the ship's science officer and the Andorian helmswoman Lieutenant Commander Teela were already at their posts.

"Where's the captain? Shouldn't he be here by now?" Etchemin asked.

"The *Lexington* group entered orbit about half an hour ago and Admiral Clarke asked the captain to beam over and report to him." Tan said.

"Specifically he asked for *Commander* Ash to beam over." Teela added, emphasising the word 'commander' and Etchemin winced.

"Starfleet has to make him captain formally." Estevez said as she took the place of the enlisted crewmember who had been manning the communication station.

"Never underestimate the power of bureaucracy to get in the way of what's right." Etchemin said as he also took his seat at the navigation console.

"We're due to ship out in ten minutes." Estevez pointed out.

"Ensign I'm sure that Starfleet will understand if we are delayed owing to the orders of an admiral." Tan responded before the intercom activated.

"Transporter room to bridge." the voice of the transporter operator said.

"Bridge here. Go ahead transporter room." Estevez responded.

"Bridge the captain just beamed back aboard."

"Understood transporter room. Did he seem like he as in a good mood?" Estevez asked.

"Negative bridge. The captain seemed like he was in a very bad mood. Transporter room out." the transporter operator answered before he shut off the intercom and Estevez sighed.

"I guess the meeting didn't go so well then." she said before the turbolift door opened for Ash, the acting commanding officer of the *Ascension* to enter the bridge.

"What's our status?" he asked as he walked to the captain's seat in the centre of the bridge, directing the question towards the entire bridge crew rather than a specific officer.

"Our patrol course is laid in captain." Etchemin replied first.

"Impulse and warp drives ready captain." Teela added, "We can set out as soon as you give the word."

"Okay let's get on with this. Ensign Estevez inform traffic control that we are breaking orbit. Lieutenant Commander Teela take us out at one quarter impulse before we are clear for warp and engage at warp six." Ash said, sitting down in the captain's chair.

"Captain we have been given clearance to depart." Estevez announced.

"Engaging impulse power." Teela added and on the viewscreen at the front of the bridge the surface of Archanis IV began to rapidly recede.

"We should be clear to go to warp in four minutes captain." Teela said.

"And then our ETA at the Klingon border will be eight hours." Etchemin added.

"Anything on sensor Commander Tan?" Ash asked.

"Negative captain. Just regular commercial traffic. The only other Starfleet vessel along our patrol route should be the Oberth-class scout *USS Splendid*. She's monitoring traffic on the other side of the border." Tan answered and Ash nodded.

"Very good. Ensign Estevez I want you to hail the *Splendid* as soon as they are in range. If there are any Klingon patrols about then I want as much notice as possible." he ordered.

"Yes captain." Estevez responded.

"In the meantime Commander Tan has the conn. I'm heading down to sick bay to carry out a spot inspection." Ash added before he got up and headed back towards the turbolift and left the bridge again. "A spot inspection?" Teela commented, "I think we all know that the captain isn't heading there to make sure the medical tricorders are neat rows. Right?"

"He's gone to see Doctor Reese." Tan said.

"I guess the meeting with Admiral Clarke really didn't go well at all then." Estevez commented.

There were several of the *Ascension's* junior medical staff present when Ash entered the starship's sickbay as well as a pair of engineers being treated for what looked like minor injuries. Ash was not interested in this though and he instead walked straight towards the office that was labelled 'Doctor Reese – Chief Medical Officer.'

"Hey Deborah how's it going down here?" he asked as he walked in to find Doctor Reese sat behind her desk at her computer. Then before she could reply he kissed her and sat down.

"Mike didn't we just break orbit? I felt the impulse engines go." Reese said.

"We should be going to warp and heading for the Klingon border." Ash replied.

"Then shouldn't you be on the bridge Mike?" Reese said.

"Tan can handle the conn. I'll be there when we reach the border." Ash said and Reese leant back in her chair.

"Okay I'll bite. What's bothering you Mike?" she said.

"Admiral Clarke summoned me to the *Lexington* before we left orbit." Ash told her.

"I take it that Starfleet hasn't seen fit to make your promotion to captain formal." Reese said and Ash smiled.

"Spot on." he said, "According to the admiral Starfleet is still uncertain about our performance."

"And our loyalty?" Reese added.

"He didn't say that openly but I put it to him that Starfleet doesn't trust us because we didn't know that Captain Franklin was feeding secrets to the Klingons." Ash said.

"It wasn't Rachel." Reese said of the *Ascension's* late commanding officer, "Matt Keeler was the real spy. He used his relationship with Rachel Franklin to manipulate her."

"Regardless Starfleet has labelled her as a spy and a traitor and they think that one or more of us could also have been in on it." Ash explained.

"If they were so certain then they could have put us all in front of a court martial board." Reese pointed out and then she smiled, "I tell you what Mike, come to my quarters tonight. I'll help take your mind off the admiralty and their imaginary conspiracies that would give Adam Forrester a run for his money."

"Commander I'm picking up an object ahead of us." Etchemin said as he studied his console.

"An asteroid?" Tan asked.

"It's moving too fast. Looks like low warp." Etchemin replied and Tan got up from the captain's seat and returned to the science station.

"What's the bearing?" he said.

"Zero zero seven mark four. Range two light years. Almost right in our path." Etchemin said.

"I see it." Tan said as he double checked the *Ascension's* sensors, "All I'm picking up though is a warp field and a transponder. Ensign Estevez?"

"Yes commander?" Estevez replied.

"Run this transponder through the database. See if you can get a match." Tan told her and she nodded.

"Yes commander." she said as she compared the transponder Tan had detected with the *Ascension's* onboard database of such codes, "Commander it's coming back as a merchantman, the *SS Blizzard* out of Andoria."

"She's a long way from home." Teela commented.

"And heading even further away." Tan added, "She's heading directly for the Klingon border."

"There aren't any cross border transfer points in this region." Teela said, frowning.

"Do you think she's been hijacked?" Etchemin suggested.

"It's a possibility. Estevez try hailing them. Let's see if we can get an explanation from their captain." Tan said and Estevez nodded.

"*SS Blizzard* this is the *USS Ascension*, respond please." she said as she activated the *Ascension's* subspace communication system, "*SS Blizzard* respond please." she repeated when there was no initial response but after this second attempt she received a reply, "I'm getting a response commander." she said and Tan nodded.

"Let's here it." he said and Estevez fed the incoming signal through the bridge speakers so that everyone present could hear.

"This is the freighter *SS Blizzard* responding." the voice from the other ship said.

"*Blizzard* what is your cargo and destination?" Estevez asked.

"We're hauling machine parts to Sherman's Planet but we have a mail drop first." the crewman from the *Blizzard* answered.

"Is that going through the translator?" Teela said, glancing over her shoulder at the communication station.

"No. Why?" Estevez replied.

"Because that doesn't sound like any Andorian accent I've ever heard." Teela replied.

"It does have something of that central European sound to it." Tan commented, "I think it's pretty common around the Antares Sector."

"Which is light years away from Andoria." Teela pointed out, "Commander may I try something?"

"Be my guest." Tan said, nodding and Teela smiled.

"I need access to the channel." she told Estevez.

"Patching you through now commander." she replied and when Teela saw on her console that she was connected to the *Blizzard* via the subspace link she spoke again.

"Hi there." she said, but rather than speaking in English she opted for her native Andorian instead. Then in the same language she continued, "Captain of the *Blizzard* have you ever been to the Northern Wastes and visited the Aenar?"

Teela then smiled as she waited to hear how the crew of the supposed Andorian transport ship would respond to being addressed in their own language.

"Hello *Ascension* this is the *Blizzard*, could you repeat that? Your signal was distorted." the same voice as previously said after a short delay. However, once again it was in English rather than Andorian.

"Okay they're faking it." Teela said.

"I think so, yes." Tan added and he looked at Estevez, "Ensign send them on their way." he told her.

"We aren't going to detain them?" Estevez responded.

"If the captain orders it, yes. But for now let's let them think we don't suspect anything." Tan said.

"*Blizzard* this is *Ascension*, you may proceed. *Ascension* out." Estevez transmitted and at the same time Tan activated the intercom.

"Captain Ash please report to the bridge." he said into it and then he waited for Ash to arrive.

"Something wrong?" Ash asked and he took his seat in the centre of the bridge.

"Possibly, yes captain." Tan answered, "We've picked up a transport ship heading for the Klingon border. We've contacted them and they claim to be heading for Sherman's Planet."

"You suspect they aren't telling the truth?" Ash said and Tan glanced towards Teela.

"The ship is registered on Andoria but Lieutenant Commander Teela was able to demonstrate that the crew aren't Andorian." he said.

"Captain according to the Federation commercial shipping database the ship is called the *Blizzard*, but it's named in Andorian as well." Estevez added.

"Well there's no need to be a citizen of the planet you register your ship on but it's certainly worth a closer look. Lieutenant Etchemin I want an intercept course. Lieutenant Commander Teela take us to warp eight."

Ash ordered and then he activated the intercom built into his chair, "Bridge to engineering." he said.

"Engineering. Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" the *Ascension's* chief engineer said.

"Commander Forrester we're taking the *Ascension* to warp eight. Is the core ready for that?" Ash asked him.

"Yes captain. We can maintain warp eight for at least twelve hours." Forrester said.

"That will be long enough for us to intercept the transport captain." Tan said when he heard this.

"Course plotted captain." Etchemin added and Ash nodded.

"Engage." he said.

## 2.

"They just changed course." one of the trio of Orions sat in the compact bridge of the merchantman *Blizzard* said to the others.

"Heading?" the leader of the three responded.

"Towards us. Warp eight." the first Orion told him.

"We can't outrun them." the other added.

"Of course not. That's a destroyer out there, not some short ranged frigate." the leader said.

"What are your orders?" the third Orion asked.

"Stay on this course and maintain speed. They'll order us to stop when they catch up with us so they can board us. We'll deal with them then as long as no-one does anything stupid." their leader told them.

"Shouldn't we double check that-" the first Orion began.

"No. No tampering with the cargo. It needs to look natural or Starfleet will get suspicious. Admiral Korda is paying us well for this and I don't want any stupid mistakes giving us away. I can handle Starfleet." the leader interrupted.

As soon as the *Blizzard* came within range Tan carried out a visual scan to confirm that the vessel was what its transponder said it was, a civilian transport and not a raiding vessel operating under a false transponder.

"Visual scan confirms that the ship is a freighter captain." he said.

"On screen." Ash responded and Tan put an image of the ship the *Ascension* was pursuing on the bridge's main viewscreen, "What are our sensors telling us?" Ash added.

"All scans indicate that the ship is an ordinary freighter captain. Mass and speed match a fully laden vessel and the power output is unremarkable." Tan told him.

"Are there any signs of weapons?" Ash said,

"Affirmative captain, I'm picking up what looks like a single phase cannon mounted on the dorsal hull.

Useless against our shields." Tan said.

"Still capable of burning through our hull if our shields are down. Although there's nothing unremarkable about that either." Ash commented, "Teela try to bring us in beneath them though. We'll need to lower our shields to beam over and I don't want to get taken by surprise."

"Yes captain." Teela said although until the *Ascension* dropped out of warp she could only continue along the starship's current course.

"Okay Ensign Estevez I think the time has come to order the *Blizzard* to stop. Inform them that we intend to carry out a health and safety inspection." Ash said.

"Health and safety captain?" Tan commented.

"It's the best I can think of. According to them they've moved across several sectors and are heading for a largely agricultural planet. Who knows what damage they could cause if there was some pest or blight aboard that ship? The inhabitants of Sherman's Planet could lose their entire crop yield." Ash replied and Tan smiled.

"Health and safety it is then." he said.

"*Blizzard* this is the *USS Ascension*. You are ordered to halt and prepare to be boarded. This is an official health and safety inspection." Estevez told the crew of the *Blizzard* and the leader of the Orions let out a brief laugh.

"Health and safety. I don't believe that for a moment." he said, looking at the image of the Starfleet destroyer fast approaching his ship from astern.

"Shall we refuse to stop?" the crewman at the helm asked.

"Are you crazy? A Miranda-class ship like that could blast us to pieces without pausing to think. Tell them that we're stopping and I'll welcome them aboard." the leader said as he got out of his seat and while he left the flight deck the helmsman responded to the *Ascension's* message.

"*USS Ascension* this is the *SS Blizzard*, we are dropping out of warp." he said and then he shut off the transport's warp drive, slowing the ship to sublight speed and then using the impulse drive to bring it to a complete halt just as the *Ascension* came out of warp behind it.

"Don't forget to keep us underneath lieutenant commander." Ash said when Teela brought the *Ascension* out of warp just a few thousand kilometres away from the freighter.

"I know captain. Phase cannons are obsolete but still dangerous." the Andorian responded as she guided the starship into the freighter's lower arc where the dorsally mounted particle weapon could not fire at it. On the other hand the *Ascension* could easily target the freighter with both phasers and photon torpedoes.

"Lieutenant what's our weapon status?" Ash said.

"Phasers locked on target captain. I'm ready to knock out their engines if they decide to make a sudden run for it." Etchemin replied.

"Hopefully that won't be necessary but keep that lock active." Ash said.

"Captain I'm reading three lifeforms aboard the *Blizzard*." Tan said as he studied the sensors.

"Andorian?" Ash asked but Tan shook his head.

"Negative captain. The body temperature is too high. I believe that they are Orions." he said.

"Women?" Etchemin said, knowing the effect that the pheromones released by Orion females could have on human men.

"Looking for a new girlfriend?" Teela commented and she smiled at Etchemin.

"He better not be." Estevez added.

"Bridge to transporter room." Ash said into the intercom, ignoring the chatter around him.

"Transporter room." the transporter operator replied.

"Is the away team ready?" Ash asked.

"Just waiting on you captain." Reese's voice answered and Ash smiled.

"I'll be there in five minutes." he said before shutting off the intercom, "Commander Tan, you have the conn. Lower our shields so I can beam over there but other than that keep them up just in case." he added as he got to his feet and dashed to the turbolift.

When Ash entered the transporter room he found Doctor Reese waiting along with Senior Chief Petty Officer Duke, the *Ascension's* chief of security and a second security guard. All three had phasers holstered on their hips and carried tricorders while both security guards wore armoured vests that covered their torsos.

"Got one of those for me chief?" Ash asked, pointing at Duke's phaser.

"Right here captain." the dark skinned man responded and he handed Ash an assault phaser in a holster of its own and a separate power pack. Taking the weapon from his security chief Ash loaded it and then fitted it to his waist.

"Captain we're receiving the transporter beacon from the transport ship." the transporter operator announced and Ash nodded.

"Okay everyone onto the pads." he said as he stepped onto the transporter pad, accompanied by the other three members of the away team. Then he looked at Reese and added, "By the way the crew are Orions. If you notice any of us men acting strange then get us pulled out of there as quickly as possible."

"Don't worry captain. I won't let them take you alive." Reese replied with a smile and she patted the phaser she carried despite being a doctor.

"Why doesn't that fill me with confidence?" Duke commented.

"Ready for transport. Target co-ordinates locked." the transporter chief said and Ash nodded.

"Energise." he told the man and he felt the familiar sensation of the transporter field forming around him. Moments later the away team materialised aboard the *Blizzard* and in front of them stood a large male Orion with his arms folded.

"I am Denas-Vel, captain of the freighter *Blizzard*." he told the away team.

"Commander Ash, *USS Ascension*." Ash replied as he stepped from the transporter pad, "This is my medical officer Doctor Reese, security chief Duke and Crewman Olsen."

"Is there a reason why Starfleet has decided to delay me commander?" Denas-Vel asked.

"This is simply a health-" Ash began.

"Yes I heard. A health and safety check. What I have not been told is why my ship has been stopped." the Orion captain interrupted.

"I need to make sure that your ship isn't carrying anything to Sherman's Planet that could pose a threat to the crops there." Reese said and Denas-Vel snorted.

"May I ask if you are the owner of this ship as well as its captain?" Ash then asked, "According to our database this ship is registered on Andoria."

"I bought it on Andoria, yes." Denas-Vel said, "And then I registered the change of ownership within thirty days in my home port on Orion."

"Your transponder still has you registered as a Federation vessel." Ash said.

"Unfortunately the authorities on Orion have been slower in issuing a change of registration code than I was in complying with the law on notifying the change of ownership." Denas-Vel told him and then his communicator sounded.

"*Ascension* to Captain Ash." Estevez' voice said as Ash took his communicator from his pocket and opened the device.

"Ash here ensign. Go ahead." he said into it.

"Just checking in captain." Estevez said.

"Understood ensign. We're all safe over here. Ash out." Ash said and then he closed the communicator again.

"Captain Ash?" Denas-Vel commented.

"Yes, I'm in command of the Ascension. Now could you please have your crew ready for scanning? We need to make sure that none of you are carrying any communicable diseases." Ash said and Denas-Vel snarled for a moment before he reached for the communicator mounted on his arm.

"Okkis, Travs, lock all systems on automatic and report to the lounge. Starfleet wants to scan us." he said.

"Understood captain." one of the other Orions replied.

"Excellent. Now while Doctor Reese and I are making sure your crew don't pose a danger Chief Duke and Crewman Olsen will inspect your cargo." Ash said.

"The hold is right through there." Denas-Vel said, pointing to one of the doors leading out of the transporter room, "Now if you come with me Commander Ash, I'll show you and your doctor to the lounge."

The other two members of the Orion crew were already in the lounge when Ash and Reese were led into the room. Although the architecture of the freighter was typical of Federation vessels the decoration was clearly Orion and Ash and Reese exchanged looks, smiling at one another when they saw the numerous pieces of lewd artwork.

"These are my crew, Okkis and Travs." Denas-Vel told Ash and Reese.

"I just need to run a medical scan of each of you." Reese said as she opened the case of her medical kit and took out her tricorder. While she was doing this the Orions formed a line in front of her and she made her way along it, scanning each of the three men in turn.

"So does your scan satisfy you that we are not carrying any diseases?" Denas-Vel asked, glaring at Ash.

"Well?" Ash said, looking at Reese in turn and she nodded.

"Yes, they're all in relatively good health. I'd recommend a slight change of diet perhaps but there are no signs of contagion." she told him.

"You see? There was no reason for you to delay my journey." Denas-Vel said to Ash, glaring at him sternly.

"Ah yes, your trip to Sherman's Planet. Although the heading you were on when we stopped you doesn't take you within ten light years of Sherman's Planet." Ash replied.

"I already told your ship. We have mail drops to make. Mining ships and stations along the border." Denas-Vel said.

"Then you should be able to produce the Federal mail packets." Ash said and the large Orion frowned.

"We're picking up, not dropping off." he said and Ash smiled back at him.

"How convenient." he said.

"If you have evidence that I'm lying commander then-" Denas-Vel began.

"I'm not making any accusations captain." Ash interrupted, "Now Doctor Reese has confirmed that your crew is healthy so as long as Chief Duke gives your cargo the all clear you can be on your way."

The cargo hold of the *Blizzard* was filled with crates that were all labelled as containing machine parts along with serial numbers to differentiate the near visually identical crates from one another. Duke knew that this was a generic term meant for customs sorting purposes rather than meant as a detailed description of the contents.

"Okay let's check these crates." Duke said as he started to scan the crates immediately in front of him and Olsen nodded as he opened the case of his own tricorder and also began to scan the freighter's cargo.

"Chief I'm picking up something organic." Olsen said after a few seconds and Duke nodded.

"Yeah, I'm seeing it too." he replied, "It's coming from that direction." and he waved his arm across the hold.

The two security guards began to make their way through the stacks of crates, following the trail of the organic readings. Just in case the source was a living being the two men also drew their phasers, ready to defend themselves if it was an ambush.

"I don't think it's an actual life form." Duke commented, "More like a chemical compound."

"You think they're smuggling drugs?" Olsen asked.

"They're definitely hiding something and I think it's right in here." Duke replied, looking at a large crate that had an identical label to the others fixed to the side.

"So do we open it?" Olsen asked and Duke smiled.

"Oh yes. We open it." he said.



### 3.

"Captain I think you should get down here." Duke told Ash using his communicator.

"Is there a problem chief?" Ash asked in response.

"You could say that captain. We've found a crate that let's just say is mislabelled." Duke told him and Ash looked at Denas-Vel.

"Captain I think that you and your crew should come with us as well. If my security chief has found something then I'm going to need an explanation." he told the Orion and the green skinned man snarled at him as Ash drew his phaser.

Ash and Reese escorted the three Orion crewmen to the hold where Duke was waiting for them.

"It's this way captain." Duke said and Ash nodded.

"Lead the way chief." he said before he looked at the Orions and added, "Or maybe it would be better if you went first. I'm sure you know the way."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Denas-Vel said as he and the other two Orions began to walk in the direction that Duke had pointed.

"Go left here." Duke commented as the Orions reached the end of a row of crates and they promptly turned to walk along the row.

As soon as this corner was turned Olsen came into view standing beside the crate that he and Duke had opened, the side panel now lying flat on the deck of the cargo hold and as they got closer Ash saw what was inside.

"Is that Andorian ale?" he said, recognising the labels on the stacked pallets of bottles containing pale blue liquid inside and Duke nodded.

"It looks like it captain. We're a bit far from Romulan space for it to be theirs." he said.

"Let me check." Reese said as she activated her tricorder again, "Sometimes people try to pedal other substances in place of Andorian ale. They get the money and their customers get severe chemical burns from the cheap solvent they just bought." then she proceeded to scan the contents of the crate, taking careful note of the chemical structure of the liquid inside the bottles, "That's Andorian ale alright. I'll bet it didn't come with the ship either." she said when her scan was complete.

"I'm guessing that the appropriate tax on this isn't going to be paid when it's delivered?" Ash said, "No wait, don't bother to answer, that might let you claim that I tried to violate your Seventh Guarantee right against self-incrimination. I think it's better if we just beam you across to the Ascension and you can sit in a cell in our brig while I have a full security team tear this ship apart. Who knows what else we'll find in here?"

"So captain do you have a plan for making sure that all that Andorian ale is exactly what it says on the labels?" Teela asked when Ash returned to the Ascension's bridge.

"Lieutenant commander I hope you're not suggesting that you should be allowed to take some of that suspected contraband cargo." he said as he sat down in the captain's chair.

"I'd share." Teela said.

"I've never tried Andorian ale." Estevez commented.

"And you're going to have to wait at least until we get back to port on Archanis Four. I'll give you the name of a bar that serves it. Unless our chief helm officer has any stashed away that actually belongs to her." Ash said.

"Can't blame a girl for trying." Teela said.

"I bet the Judge Advocate General's office would." Tan pointed out. Then he looked at Ash and added, "Captain something doesn't seem right about that ale."

"Doctor Reese scanned it and she's confirmed that it's genuine." Ash said and then he glanced at Teela, "Without even needing to open a single bottle." he added and Teela frowned, "So what's the problem commander?" he asked, looking back at the *Ascension's* science officer.

"It's the amount captain. The tax avoided smuggling a crate the size of the one that the ale was found in would be worth less than the equivalent volume of the machine parts the Blizzard's manifest says was in it." Tan explained.

"Haven't you heard commander? Crime doesn't pay." Etchemin joked.

"What if it was stolen? Good Andorian is expensive." Teela pointed out.

"That is a possibility." Tan admitted and Ash turned to Estevez.

"Ensign ask Chief Duke for any serial numbers on those pallets and then forward them to the Andorian government. See if they've been reported as stolen." he ordered and she nodded.

"Yes captain." she replied.

"What about the Orions captain?" Tan said.

"Safely locked in the brig and under guard." Ash answered, "We'll put a team aboard the *Blizzard* to take the ship back to port while the crew and their contraband remain here until our patrol. Then we'll hand them over to the Feds for prosecution. Oh and I expect every last bottle of that Andorian ale that gets brought aboard to still be aboard when we make it back to Archanis Four. Is that understood by everyone?"

Aboard the *Blizzard*, Duke and a team of his men had removed the pallets of Andorian ale from the crate and lined them up so that the exact quantity could be recorded and this meant that when the *Ascension's* chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Forrester, arrived to assist in the search of the freighter he had to step over it carefully.

"Chief Duke." he called out and Duke turned towards him.

"Lieutenant commander." he responded.

"The captain said you wanted a hand over here." Forrester said and Duke nodded.

"I was hoping you could go over some of the other crates." he said, "Basic tricorder scans show that they all contain something that pretty much matches what the crates say is in them but I can't tell if the machinery is meant for farming or producing illegal weapons."

Forrester looked around.

"You know there must be at least a couple of thousand crates in here, right chief?" he pointed out and Duke smiled nervously.

"Sorry commander but-"

"Don't apologise chief." Forrester interrupted, "I'll bring a team over here and have them get right on it. I'm going to take a look at their computer and see if there's anything in there to indicate who these Orions might be doing business with, as well as whether or not they really do own this ship legitimately. They wouldn't be the first pirates to take a ship as well as its cargo." then he turned around and carefully stepped back over the pallets of Andorian ale before making his way back out of the cargo hold.

After leaving the hold he contacted the *Ascension* to send over a full team of engineers to carry out the search of the cargo, Forrester made his way to the freighter's flight deck, located at the top of the vessel and he sat at one of the consoles. The *Blizzard's* systems had been left active when the ship had been boarded and its crew taken into custody so all of the consoles were still usable without any need for breaking through encrypted access codes. Forrester's first act when he confirmed that he had full access to the *Blizzard's* flight controls, including the navigation system and as soon as he called up the navigational history he found something that caught his attention and he quickly took out his communicator.

"Forrester to *Ascension*." he said.

"*Ascension* here commander." Estevez responded.

"Ensign I need to talk to the captain." Forrester told her

"Hold on, putting you through now." Estevez said.

"Go ahead commander." Ash's voice added a moment later.

"Captain I've just logged into the *Blizzard's* navigation system and I've been able to pull their destination data." Forrester said.

"Presumably it's one of the colonies along the Klingon border." Ash said and even though Ash could not see him Forrester smiled.

"Sort of captain, but the system isn't on this side of the neutral zone." he said.

"They were heading into Klingon space?"

"Yes captain. The system doesn't actually contain a true colony but there are several outposts there."

Forrester said.

"Keep searching their computer. If they're acting as spies I want to know what they're telling the Klingons about us." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain. I'll let you know if I find anything." Forrester replied before he closed his communicator and put it away again.

On the bridge of the *Ascension* Ash frowned.

"Something wrong captain?" Tan asked and Ash looked towards the science officer.

"Commander, correct me if I'm wrong but it's possible to store information in a chemical form isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Tan answered, "I take it you're thinking about the Andorian ale?"

"If smuggling it doesn't make economic sense then there must be some other reason to have it aboard." Ash said.

"The penalty for smuggling low level contraband is much less than for espionage." Etchemin pointed out.

"So they plead guilty to smuggling and avoid being charged as spies." Ash added, nodding in agreement.

"Doctor Reese ought to be able to determine if the chemical structure of the ale has been altered captain."

Tan said, "Of course there could be any number of other chemical substances aboard the ship that could be used for the same purpose while the ale is used as a distraction."

"Possibly but for now I think checking the ale should be our first move and while Reese is doing that I'm going to see if our prisoners are feeling talkative. Mister Tan you have the conn." Ash said.

The three Orion smugglers had been placed in a cell together in the *Ascension's* brig, watched through the forcefield that blocked their exit by an armoured security guard.

"I thought this was supposed to be an easy run." Okkis said, looking at Denas-Vel as the Orion captain paced up and down.

"Don't worry. I'll get us out of this." he said.

"How?" Travs asked.

"Just you wait and see. All I need is to be able to speak to their captain and I'll make him an offer." Denas-Vel answered.

"You're going to try bribing a Starfleet captain? Even those that can be bought don't come cheap." Okkis commented.

"Every man has his price and I know that I have something of value to Starfleet. The sort of thing that credits can't buy." Denas-Vel replied before he saw Ash approaching the cell from outside, "A-ha. Just as expected."

"Captain Denas-Vel." Ash said, looking through the forcefield.

"Commander Ash?" the Orion responded, smiling as he used Ash's true rank.

"Dena-Vel I currently have teams of security and engineering officers going over your ship in the greatest possible detail. Now you aren't required to say a thing to me without a lawyer present but by the time we can get you in the same room as one I'll already know more about the *Blizzard* than you do, so how about you do yourself a favour and talk to me?" Ash said and Denas-Vel looked at his men.

"See? I'll handle this." he said before turning back towards Ash, "I assume you have somewhere private we can talk commander?" he asked.

"Crewwoman open the cell and bring the captain to the interview room." Ash ordered one of the nearby security guards.

"Yes captain." the woman responded and as Ash walked away she drew her phaser before deactivating the forcefield that sealed the cell, "Come on, this way." she told Denas-Vel and he walked calmly out of the cell and turned to follow Ash.

The interview room was sparsely decorated, with a table fixed to the floor in the middle of the room and anchor points on it for restraining a prisoner who may become violent. These were not used when Denas-Vel was brought into the room though and he and Ash sat on opposite sides of the table while the security guard stood behind and returned her phaser to its holster.

"So tell me about the services you're providing to the Klingons." Ash said and Denas-Vel grinned.

"Ah, straight to the point. I like your attitude commander. Is that why Starfleet hasn't made you a captain yet? Did you tell your superiors something too painful for them to hear?"

"If you don't have anything relevant to say then you can go back to your cell." Ash said and he started to get back to his feet to leave.

"Commander I apologise. I can assure you that my only interest here is finding a way to resolve this little misunderstanding in a way that benefits us both." Denas-Vel said.

"That's better. Now save my crew some time searching your ship and I'll put in a recommendation that the judge save you some time on your sentence." Ash replied and the Orion smuggler captain smiled at him.

"Ah now I had something a little more beneficial to me in mind. Let me, my crew and our ship go." Denas-Vel said and Ash laughed.

"You've got to be joking." he said, "I have concrete proof that you're smuggling contraband and before long I expect to have proof of much more. There's no way you're walking away from this totally free."

"Then you aren't interested in the information I have for you commander?"

"What could you possibly know that would be worth setting you free?" Ash responded.

"It concerns my customer captain." Denas-Vel told him.

"Your customer is a Klingon. My engineer has already checked your navigational computer." Ash said.

"Yes a very influential Klingon in fact. An admiral." Denas-Vel said, "And this admiral has developed a taste for Andorian ale. I never asked how so don't bother asking me, but what I can tell you is that he pays handsomely for a shipment every few weeks. Not often enough to attract attention but often enough that he can maintain a supply without needing a massive stockpile that someone might report."

"So a Klingon admiral is evading Klingon import duties. That's hardly anything to trouble Starfleet." Ash said,

"No but if this admiral happened to be holding a Starfleet officer captive then perhaps that might, wouldn't you agree commander?" Denas-Vel responded.

"A Starfleet officer being held captive? And you'd know about this how exactly?" Ash asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Because on my last run I saw her. The admiral doesn't know this but on one of my first runs I was able to upload a worm into his communication system, you see he made the mistake of providing me with a secure communicator that I was able to hack. Now when he thinks he's broken the link I can still see and hear

everything until I break it from my end. Each time I make a delivery I let him know in advance so he can arrange to be in the system and rendezvous with my ship. One of the outposts there is a supply depot for his squadron you see." Denas-Vel explained.

"Get to the part where you saw a Starfleet officer being held prisoner by this Klingon admiral." Ash said.

"Patience commander. I'm getting to that part." the Orion said, "You see when I last spoke with the admiral I knew he had someone else there with him, I could hear an odd whimpering sound. I didn't mention it to him of course since I knew he'd only tell me to mind my own business but after he thought that our conversation was over he had the prisoner brought right up to him and thrown to his feet. She'd been stripped so there was nothing to tell me that she was a Starfleet officer at first but she was obviously human. Good looking as well. Anyway the admiral referred to her as 'captain' and reminded her that since Starfleet wasn't even aware that she was missing there was no-one coming to look for her. He then went on to describe a few of the unwholesome tortures he had in store for her but I won't bother you with the details of those. What matters is that he told her that she was going to be transferred from his ship to another location in the system I make my deliveries to where she would spend the rest of her life. Now isn't the location of this prison worth the freedom of me and my crew Commander Ash?"

"You expect me to believe any of that nonsense? Look, just because I come from Australia doesn't mean I've got the brains of a koala. Starfleet captains don't just disappear without their absence being noticed." Ash said and he got back to his feet, "Take him back to his cell crewwoman."

"Yes captain." the security guard responded.

"Such a shame commander. I hope if you ever find yourself at the mercy of the Klingons someone is more willing to help you than you are to help the unfortunate Captain Franklin." Denas-Vel said as the security guard placed a hand on his shoulder.

"What did you say" Ash said, suddenly coming to a halt and spinning around to look the Orion in the face.

"Captain Franklin, that's the name of the officer the Klingons are holding." Denas-Vel responded.

"Then you really don't know a damned thing because Captain Franklin is dead. I saw her body. I found her body." Ash snapped before he strode out of the interview room, leaving the security guard to return Denas-Vel to his cell.

"I take it we're not getting out of here anytime soon." Travs said when Denas-Vel was taken back to the brig and the forcefield was reactivated behind him. In response the Orion captain smiled at his two subordinates though.

"Give it time." he said, "Give it time."

## 4.

After speaking with Denas-Vel, Ash returned to the *Ascension's* bridge.

"That didn't take long captain." Tan commented as he got out of the captain's chair, "I take it that the prisoner didn't have much to say."

"Oh he was willing to talk but it was all-" Ash said before suddenly stopping.

"All what captain?" Teela asked but Ash did not respond to her. Instead he walked over to the communication console and stood behind Estevez.

"Ensign has Lieutenant Commander Forrester sent over the exact destination that was programmed into the *Blizzard's* navigation system?" he asked.

"Yes captain. I have it right here." she replied and Ash nodded.

"Good." he said before he turned around to face the console where Teela and Etchemin sat, "Lieutenant Etchemin I want to know everything we have on the system the *Blizzard* was heading for." he ordered.

"Yes captain." Etchemin responded.

"Captain are we going into Klingon space? If a starship enters or crosses the neutral zone then-" Tan said.

"I understand the implications commander. I'm going to need you to take the conn again. I have an urgent matter to discuss with Doctor Reese." Ash interrupted and then he returned to the turbolift.

"Wow that was weird." Estevez said when Ash was gone and then she looked at the other officers present on the bridge, "Am I the only one who thinks that was weird?"

"No, that was weird. Really weird." Teela responded and she shook her head slowly.

Reese was seeing to a patient from the *Ascension's* engineering department who had suffered a burn to his arm when Ash entered sickbay and he walked over to her.

"I need to speak to you urgently." he whispered into her ear, "In private." and Reese nodded.

"Sure, I'll be right with you. Wait in my office." she said and Ash went into her office and sat down to wait.

"Close the door Deborah." he said when she appeared a short time later and she did as he said.

"Okay Mike so what's going on? If this is about checking that ale aboard the *Blizzard* then I should be able to get started on it in about an hour." she asked as she then walked around her desk and also sat down.

"Deborah is there any way that Rachel Franklin could still be alive?" Ash responded and Reese's eyes widened.

"Mike you can't be serious." she said.

"That Orion smuggler captain we have down in the brig admitted to running contraband across the border into Klingon space. He wants to cut a deal, his crew's freedom in exchange for information about a Starfleet officer being held prisoner by the Klingon admiral he's been selling Andorian ale to. He said her name is Captain Franklin."

"Mike we saw her body. You and I both tried to save her and failed. She was dead. I performed the post mortem." Reese said.

"I know and I told that Orion I didn't believe him but I can't help but shake the feeling that at least part of what he was saying was true." Ash said.

"Well unless he has pictures of-" Reese began and a smile suddenly appeared on Ash's face, "What?" Reese asked.

"The Orion said that he saw her in a communication link that the Klingons didn't know was still open because he'd set it up to monitor them secretly. Now if you were going to spy on someone like that wouldn't you keep a record of it?" Ash said.

"Which would be in the *Blizzard's* computer." Reese responded.

"Let's go, Adam's checking it now." Ash said and both of them got to their feet and ran from sickbay, heading to the nearby transporter room where both took communicators from a rack.

"I wasn't informed you'd be beaming over to the freighter captain." the transporter operator on duty said.

"It just kind of cropped up. Now beam us over there." Ash told the crewman.

"Yes captain." he replied and since the *Ascension's* transporters were already locked onto those aboard the *Blizzard* he was able to activate it immediately, beaming Ash and Reese over to the freighter.

As soon as they materialised aboard the *Blizzard*, Ash and Reese rushed from the transporter room without pausing to explain their presence to the security guard on duty there the reason for their presence.

"Come on, the flight deck is this way." Ash said as they both hurried through the corridors of the freighter until they reached its bridge and found Forrester still sat at one of the control consoles, "Commander what have you found so far?"

"It looks like these guys have been back and forth across the neutral zone for several months. Always to the same system on the Klingon side but they've been to a number of places on our side. They've even made it into the core a few times." Forrester told him.

"What about the communications logs?" Reese asked him.

"I've not been into them so far." Forrester answered.

"Look." Ash said.

"Captain I-" Forrester began.

"Just take a look at the communications log Adam." Ash interrupted.

"Okay, if you say so." Forrester said, shrugging his shoulders and he stopped studying the *Blizzard's* navigational logs and instead turned his attention to the freighter's communications system, "It doesn't look like there's a lot here captain. I think the system is scrubbed pretty regularly."

"So how far back do the logs go?" Ash asked.

"It's not a matter of how far captain. It looks like just a few specific files have been left while the bulk of the logs were deliberately deleted." Forrester answered.

"Sounds like Denas-Vel deleted anything that could incriminate him but kept anything useful for blackmailing others." Ash commented.

"Like his Klingon customer?" Reese suggested.

"Let's hope so." Ash said, "Forrester, check and see if there is a file relating to the most recent time the Orions crossed the border into Klingon space.

Forrester quickly checked the time and date stamps of the remaining communication log files and he found one that matched the time period that Ash had requested.

"Yes, here's one." he said and Ash nodded.

"Let's take a look. Play it back." he said.

Forrester immediately began to play the file and the console showed an image of a room decorated in a typical Klingon fashion although it was not possible to tell from the camera angle whether it was on the surface of a planet or aboard a starship or space station. Only one figure was visible in the shot and then only partially, this individual was sat in a chair that had been turned away from the camera recording the footage and so only the back of their head and one of their arms could be seen.

"That's not a regular Klingon." Reese pointed out, "Look at the shape of the head."

"One of those smooth headed Klingons." Ash added, nodding.

"You don't see many of them around nowadays." Forrester commented.

"Let's see what happens." Reese said and the three officers turned their attention back to the log file.

As the video continued the figure in the chair waved someone towards him and another Klingon appeared from the side of the frame. This Klingon had the ridged forehead that was common to his species and he held a chain in one hand that led back out of the shot.

"On your knees pahtak!" this second Klingon snapped as he pulled on the chain and behind him a naked human woman who had the other end of the chain attached to a collar staggered into view and dropped to her hands and knees. Quivering either from fright or cold the woman looked up towards the figure sat in the chair and although much of her face was hidden behind a muzzle there was still enough of it visible for all three of the officers watching the video to recognise who it was and Reese gasped.

"Oh my God Mike, it's Rachel!" she exclaimed.

"Ah Captain Franklin," the seated figure said to the helpless captive, "I'm afraid that this will have to be the last of our regular chats. I'm transferring you to-"

All of a sudden the video feed ended and the screen went blank.

"Is that it?" Reese asked.

"I'm afraid so." Forrester answered.

"But why cut it off there?" Reese added.

"Because it makes sure that we have to go to Denas-Vel to get the exact location at which Rachel is being held." Ash said, "Assuming this is genuine of course."

"If this is a joke then it's in very poor taste." Reese said.

"I doubt that would concern someone like Denas-Vel." Ash said and then he looked at Forrester, "Can you go over this and find out if it's real or whether it's some sort of fake?"

"Sure captain." Forrester replied, nodding, "I'll have to download a copy and examine it back on the *Ascension* though."

"Whatever it takes. Give this top priority but don't let anyone else know what you're doing." Ash said before there was the sound of footsteps from behind them and they all looked around to see Duke walking along the passageway leading to the *Blizzard's* flight deck, "Yes chief?"

"I was just coming to find out if there was anything you needed captain." Duke responded, "Crewman Braun told me you'd beamed aboard."

"No we're fine thanks chief." Ash said and Duke nodded.

"Okay captain. So does this have anything to do with what the Orion said to you?" he said.

"What would you know about that chief? No wait, let me guess. Crewwoman Hayes told you." Ash replied and Duke nodded again.

"She contacted me as soon you'd left security." he said.

"And does anyone else know?" Ash asked.

"I've not told a soul. I told Hayes to keep quiet about it as well." Duke told him.

"Good. Until Lieutenant Commander Forrester can determine whether the footage we have is genuine or not I don't want to risk getting anyone's hopes up or upsetting them." Ash said.

"So there is proof to back up what the Orion said." Duke commented and Ash and Reese glanced at one another.

"There's a short video clip that could show Captain Franklin as a prisoner of the Klingons." Reese said.

"The Klingons don't have a good reputation for taking prisoners." Duke pointed out.

"No, they prefer to just kill their enemies outright. I've heard it has something to do with giving them an honourable death. They only keep prisoners that they think could be of use to them." Forrester agreed.

"Let's just find out whether or not this is genuine. We can worry about the Klingons' treatment of prisoners after that." Ash said.

"What if it is real Mike?" Reese said and Ash sighed.

"Then I don't see that we have much choice other than to give Denas-Vel the deal he's after." he said.

"Captain, here's that report you asked for." Etchemin said when Ash returned to the bridge of the *Ascension* and he handed Ash a PADD.

"Let me see." Ash said as he took the PADD and quickly checked the data on it.

"If you could tell me exactly what you were looking for then-" Etchemin began.

"No this will do lieutenant. You may return to your post." Ash said. Then he glanced at Estevez, "Ensign have you been able to contact the *Splendid* yet?"

"No captain. They're still too far away for real time communications." Estevez replied.

"Send a request for the data anyway. I want to make sure we're not lacking vital information." Ash said.

"Captain I know I'm not formally the *Ascension's* first officer but as the next in the chain of command behind you I think I ought to know what you're planning. Especially if it involves violating a treaty the Federation signed with the Klingons in good faith." Tan said.

"Good faith." Teela muttered with a snort, "The Iconians forced it on us and the Klingons have ignored it whenever they felt like it."

"Commander Tan I agree with you entirely." Ash said, "However, right now I'm not planning anything so there's nothing to tell. Lieutenant Commander Forrester has the logs from the *Blizzard* and when he's finished analysing them I'll be able to tell you what we're going to do next."

While Ash returned to the bridge, Forrester and Duke headed for the *Ascension's* engineering section with a copy of the video file supposedly showing the starship's former captain downloaded from the *Blizzard's* computer on a data card and both men went into Forrester's office. As well as racks of tools and other equipment this office also contained a number of old fashioned printed books about engineering. Some bizarrely including the word 'modern' in their title despite being many decades or even centuries out of date.

"Take a chair chief." Forrester said as he closed the door behind them and then sat behind his desk and Duke nodded as he sat down, "Now let's see what we have here." Forrester added as he started playing the downloaded and Duke watched it closely.

"It is Captain Franklin." he said, dumbfounded, "But how can she be a prisoner of the Klingons? We saw her body."

"First I need to verify that this clip is genuine. There are all sorts of technologies that can be used to create deep fakes of this kind." Forrester replied.

"And if it is real? Then what?" Duke added.

"Then we look further into how someone could produce a fake Rachel Franklin. The Klingons could have surgically altered someone to look like her or used genetic engineering to grow a clone of her. Remember the Klingons have excellent genetic engineering technology, easily on a par with ours. Perhaps even better. You know they have a secret army of augments ready if war breaks out between them and us?" Forrester said and Duke stared at him for a few moments before replying.

"Klingon augments?" he commented and Forrester nodded.

"Yes, they stole the genetic template from us about fifty or sixty years ago." he said and Duke sighed, knowing the *Ascension's* chief engineer's firm belief in conspiracy theories no matter how ridiculous they were. Ignoring the sigh, Forrester then turned his attention back to the video, "Okay so for starters I can tell you that this scene wasn't computer generated. All of the objects exist physically somewhere and in the same place. This table really is in this room, it wasn't superimposed over it or anything. The time stamp looks

good as well. This isn't from a year ago or anything. This footage was originally recorded about four weeks ago. Well after Captain Franklin died."

"So what about the Captain Franklin in this footage? Is she real as well or a fake added to a real background?" Duke asked and Forrester nodded.

"I think so. There are none of the tells of digital manipulation. It's not her face overlaid on someone else's body." he said.

"And since I don't see the captain ever having been filmed crawling around naked I'm guessing that she isn't superimposed on the background either." Duke added.

"Correct. Absolutely everything we are looking at is genuine in physical terms." Forrester said, "So now the only question is whether that person being dragged around in chains is Captain Franklin or just someone made to look identical to her."

"Can you tell that from this video?" Duke said and Forrester leant back in his chair.

"Sadly no." he said, "Even if there was scar tissue from cosmetic surgery it wouldn't be possible to tell it from scarring that may be the result of assault by the Klingons and if she's a clone then she's bound to be physically identical."

"So what now?" Duke asked.

"Now I suppose we tell the captain." Forrester replied.



## 5.

"Engineering to bridge. Captain Ash are you there?" Forrester's voice said over the intercom and Ash activated the intercom system built into his chair while still studying the information Etchemin had given him. "Yes commander?" he asked.

"Captain I've finished my analysis of the data you requested." he said, "I think that you and Doctor Reese should come to engineering as soon as possible."

"Understood. I'm coming down now. I'll let Reese know on my way." Ash said before he shut off the intercom and stood up, "Commander Tan-

"I have the conn?" Tan interrupted and Ash nodded.

"Yes commander." he said and he hurried to the turbolift.

After collecting Reese from sickbay, Ash made his way with her to the *Ascension's* engineering section where Forrester was nowhere to be seen.

"Ensign, where's Lieutenant Commander Forrester?" he asked one of the nearby engineering staff and the man pointed towards the closed door of Forrester's office.

"In his office sir. He came back from the freighter with Chief Duke and they both went straight inside." the other man said and Ash beckoned for Reese to follow him.

"Okay, thanks ensign." he said as they both headed for the door to Forrester's office and he knocked, "Commander it's me. I have Doctor Reese with me." Ash said.

"Open up." Reese added and moments after the door slid open.

"Captain come on in." Duke said from just inside the office and he stepped out of the way to let Ash and Reese through. Then as soon as they were inside he closed the door behind them to prevent the *Ascension's* other engineers from overhearing what was said between those in the office.

"I take it from the secrecy that you think the footage is genuine." Ash said as he and Reese sat down beside one another and Forrester nodded.

"I checked each component in the file, the background, foreground objects and people. None of them show any signs of digital manipulation. Of course I can't say for certain that the woman shown is Captain Franklin but-" he started to explain.

"But the Klingons could be holding her prisoner right now. They could have been holding her for months." Reese interrupted.

"So you don't think that the post mortem you performed was on her then?" Ash said.

"I don't know. Mike I was certain at the time that it was Rachel but now we've got this," Reese responded and she pointed towards the frozen image on the screen of Forrester's desktop computer, "and I don't know who I'm looking at if it's not her."

"Hey look Deborah, we'll figure this out I promise." Ash said and he reached out to place his arm around her in support.

"There isn't enough information here to confirm the identity of this woman we're looking at. She could have been surgically altered to look this way or she could be a clone. The only way to find out though would be to-" Forrester said.

"To go to the system where she's being held and find her for ourselves." Ash said.

"Yes captain, I'm afraid so." Forrester replied.

"I'm with you whatever you decide captain." Duke commented and Ash sighed.

"My own personal *Kobayashi Maru*." he said and Duke frowned.

"*Kobayashi Maru*?" he said, "Isn't that one of the tests at the academy for officers?" and Ash nodded.

"Yes. Often given to those with particularly high scores or following the command path." he replied.

"It's designed to bring them down a peg or two. Realise that there are always going to be times when there isn't a right answer." Forrester added.

"And now I have to make a choice that could well fit into that category." Ash said, "If I take the *Ascension* into Klingon space to find and rescue this woman then I put the lives of more than three hundred people at risk and the Klingons could try to portray our presence as an invasion. On the other hand if I ignore this I could be leaving Captain Franklin in the hands of the Klingons."

"Maybe if we went to Starfleet they could confront the Klingons openly and demand her release." Forrester suggested but Ash shook his head.

"That could take weeks even if the Klingons do agree to let her go. In the mean time she's being held like that." he said, looking at the screen that appeared to show a naked Rachel Franklin being forced to crawl on her hands and knees, "Plus as far as Starfleet is concerned she was passing Federation secrets to the Klingons. They could decide just to leave her there regardless of how she's being treated."

"That sounds like you've already decided to go after her." Duke said.

"Not yet." Ash replied and he held up the PADD that Etchemin had given him, "I've got the Starfleet intelligence report on the system where the prisoner who told me about this. There are a number of Klingon facilities located there and Captain Franklin or whoever this woman is could be being held at any one of them. I'm going to go back and find out which one she's being held at before making a final decision. I also need to find out how the Klingon fleet is deployed along the border. I've already asked Ensign Estevez to get the latest details of that from the *USS Splendid*."

"So you're going to let the Orions go then?" Reese asked.

"I don't see that I have a choice. Although I won't be letting them take the Andorian ale with them." Ash answered then he looked at Forrester and Duke, "Have your men found anything else aboard the *Blizzard* that shouldn't be there?"

"Nothing captain." Duke replied, shaking his head, "The only thing we found hidden in the hold was that ale. The Klingons must be paying a high price for it to be worth the Orions' time shipping it to them."

"My engineering team confirmed that the machine parts were exactly what the manifest said they were. Mainly parts for fusion generators and construction equipment." Forrester added.

"Then all we're really dealing with here are a few low level smugglers and now that we know what they're up to Starfleet can monitor their ship's movements carefully in future. Letting them go is a small price to pay for the chance to get Captain Franklin back." Ash said.

Denas-Vel smiled when he was brought back into the interview room by Duke and Hayes and he saw Ash already sat on the other side of the table.

"Take a seat." Ash told him and the Orion sat down opposite Ash, "Now take a look at this." Ash added and he slid the PADD holding the intelligence reports about the Klingon system where the woman who appeared to be Captain Rachel Franklin was being held according to Denas-Vel.

"Ah so you have accepted that I was telling you the truth commander." the Orion smuggler said as he looked at the PADD's screen, "A list of Klingon bases and outposts. Specifically the bases and outposts in the Chev system, the system I was heading to. The system where Captain Rachel Franklin is being held prisoner. I'm guessing that by now you have checked the communication log aboard my ship and seen the proof of what I told you."

"Yes I've seen it. Now why don't you tell me which of those facilities she's being held at?" Ash replied.

"All in good time commander." Denas-Vel said and he slid the PADD back across the table towards Ash,

"First though I'd like to discuss the terms of our deal."

"You and your crew will be allowed to leave aboard your ship. We've already searched it and confirmed that there's no further contraband aboard." Ash told him.

"And my cargo?" Denas-Vel responded.

"That is intact. The legitimate portion of it anyway. The Andorian ale will be impounded of course. It's not like you'll be needing it again anyway." ash told him.

"I could still find another buyer." Denas-Vel commented.

"Forget the ale. It's already gone." Ash said sternly and Denas-Vel sighed.

"A shame. That was a good vintage I've been told." he said.

"Now where is Rachel Franklin being held? Tell me now and you and your crew can return to your ship." Ash replied.

"Oh very well. Hand me that PADD again." the Orion said and Ash pushed the PADD towards him again.

"Now let me see, a yes here we are." Denas-Vel said as he looked at it, "Your survey has correctly identified six asteroids on which the Klingons have constructed listening posts. These are intended for monitoring their border with you which is why they're spaced out around the system in identical orbits. Each of these takes about twenty years to complete an orbit around the star so the Klingons only operate three of them at once while the others have just a skeleton crew there to maintain and refit the systems with the latest technology. Starfleet Captain Rachel Franklin is being held on one of these."

"Which one?" Ash asked and Denas-Vel shrugged.

"I'm sorry commander but that's as close as I can get you. She was transferred to one of the out of use listening posts so that she could be held in secret. It seems that the admiral doesn't entirely trust his underlings not to inform the Klingon High Council that he's holding hostages that he shouldn't be." he said and then he got to his feet, "Now if you don't mind I'd like to get my crew and return to my ship."

Denas-Vel started to walk towards the door. However, Duke promptly stepped into his path.

"You leave when the captain says you leave." he said.

"Chief Duke I think we're done here." Ash told him, "Take Captain Denas-Vel to the brig and collect his men. Then take them to the transporter room so they can return to their ship."

"Yes captain." Duke replied, nodding and then he stepped aside, "This way sir." he said to Denas-Vel as the door slid open.

Ash waited while Duke and Hayes both escorted the Orion from the interview room before he got up to leave. Upon leaving the interview himself, Ash walked over to an intercom panel and activated it.

"Ash to bridge. Commander Tan are you there?" he said.

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

"Commander our guests are returning to their ship. Have our teams finished their work?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. The last of Forrester's teams beamed back about five minutes ago." Tan answered.

"Good. In that case I'd like you to meet me in engineering. I have an issue that I'd like to discuss with you and Lieutenant Commander Forrester." Ash told him.

"Yes captain. I'll be right there." Tan replied.

Ash reached engineering before Tan and he and Forrester were waiting in the engineer's office when the science officer arrived.

"You wanted to see me captain?" Tan said.

"Yes I did. Please come in and close the door." Ash replied.

"Of course captain." Tan said and then as he was sitting down he added, "I presume this has something to do with why you, Commander Forrester, Doctor Reese and Chief Duke have been acting so secretly."

"Commander Tan what would you say if I told you that Captain Franklin could still be alive and was being held captive by the Klingons?" Ash said and Tan stared at him for a moment before he responded.

"Then I'd say that it sounded like one of Adam's conspiracy theories." he said and Forrester smiled.

"And it's every bit as true as them all." he said and then he tapped his computer to bring up an image of Franklin as a Klingon captive.

"That has to be fake." Tan said in surprise but Forrester shook his head.

"I've checked the file. It's genuine." he said.

"The only thing we can't be certain of is that the person in that footage is the real Rachel Franklin. The only way to find that out is to go to where she's being held and retrieve her." Ash said.

"The Chev system. The system you asked Lieutenant Etchemin for details of." Tan said.

"Correct. The Orions were heading that way to make a regular delivery. It was their captain that recorded the footage you're seeing here. In exchange for their release Captain Denas-Vel has narrowed down the number of facilities where she could be being held to one of three asteroid bases. What I need from you is a way to identify the exact one." Ash explained.

"That's going to be difficult captain. We'd need to get pretty close for me to use the *Ascension's* sensors to pick out a human among Klingons. Say ten thousand kilometres." Tan said.

"Ten thousand kilometres. That's going to put us in visual range of their sensors." Ash commented.

"They'd spot us long before that anyway." Forrester pointed out.

"Actually that's why I wanted you in this meeting as well." Ash said, "Do you think you can adjust our warp signature so that it matches the *Blizzard's*?"

"That should be possible, yes. We've got some good scans of their ship at warp and my people noted down all of the drive settings when they were aboard. Of course it will take some time." Forrester said.

"How much time?" Ash asked.

"Four, maybe five hours and we'll have to take the warp drive off line for about an hour of that to make the switch over." Forrester told him and Ash nodded.

"Okay do it." Ash said.

"Captain there might be another way of determining which of those asteroid bases is being used to hold Captain Franklin, or whoever that woman is. We could launch probes ahead of the *Ascension* and program them to do a flyby of the system, each one passing close to one of the asteroids. We and the Klingons launch hundreds of probes across the border per year so it wouldn't appear suspicious." Tan suggested.

"That's a good idea commander. Get started on it as soon as possible. Lieutenant Commander Forrester, you get started with the warp drive. I want to get underway as soon as possible and I think the time has come to tell the crew what's happening. There is just one thing though, are we sure that Denas-Vel and his crew won't be able to warn the Klingons that we're coming?"

"Oh don't worry captain, they won't be telling anyone about us until we're done." Forrester responded with a smile.

Standing in the engineering section of the *Blizzard*, Denas-Vel and his crew looked around at the components scattered around the compartment.

"Is anything missing?" he asked.

"I don't think so but the warp core and subspace antenna have been taken apart. We're stuck here and we can't send any signals until we can put all this back together." Okkis said.

"How long?" Denas-Vel said.

"Six days? Maybe eight." Okkis told him.

## 6.

Sitting down in the captain's chair Ash switched his intercom to make a general announcement rather than communicate with a specific place aboard the ship.

"Attention all crew this is the captain." he said, "I have received credible information that indicates a Federation citizen is being held prisoner on a Klingon outpost. Therefore, I have decided that despite the risk to the ship involved the *Ascension* will cross the border and attempt to rescue this individual." Ash then paused as he decided exactly how he was going to tell the crew the rest of what he had to say, "Furthermore I think it only fair to inform you that the information we have indicates that the individual being held by the Klingons is Captain Rachel Franklin, the former commanding officer of this ship."

This news caused the rest of the crew on the bridge to suddenly turn from their consoles and stare at Ash.

"Captain are you serious?" Teela exclaimed.

"The captain knows what he's talking about lieutenant commander." Tan told her.

"I understand that this may be hard for some of you to believe but you can rest assured that every step necessary to ensure that the information we have is genuine has been taken. Given the risk we are taking the *Ascension* will come to yellow alert immediately and go to red alert when we cross into the neutral zone. I trust that everyone aboard will perform their duties to the best of their abilities and we will soon know for certain whether or not Captain Franklin is still alive. Ash out."

"How can Captain Franklin be alive?" Etchemin said as soon as Ash shut off the intercom.

"That's a question we'll only be able to answer when we secure her release from the Klingons." Ash replied, "In the meantime we're going to need a course plotting to the Chev system. Ensign Estevez do we have the Klingon deployment information from the *USS Splendid*?"

"Yes captain. The *Splendid* reports no Klingon vessels between us and the Chev system." she said.

"That's not to say that there won't be any cloaked vessels lurking just over the border." Etchemin pointed out.

"Yes but their ability to use their sensors while they are cloaked will be limited. Unless we pass very close to one we should be able to slip past." Tan said.

"Perhaps the Klingon admiral who's been buying the Andorian ale off the Orions doesn't want his shipment being observed and has cleared a path we can follow." Ash suggested, "Commander Tan what's the status on our probes?"

"I've just finished programming them captain. I've prepared six in total so we have two per target asteroid. They're also networked so if the Klingons do shoot any down the others will reassign their own targets to give us the best possible chance of scanning all three for human life signs." Tan told him.

"Very good. Mister Etchemin kindly launch the probes." Ash ordered and Etchemin nodded.

"Yes captain. Loading probes now." he said as he loaded the six probes Tan had prepared into the torpedo launchers contained in the *Ascension's* roll bar mounted weapons pod, "Probes loaded. Launching." he added as he triggered the launchers and in rapid succession the six probes shot from them and followed their programming to turn towards the Chev system before accelerating to warp speed.

"Lieutenant Etchemin plot that course to the Chev system. Lieutenant Commander Teela take us to maximum warp as soon as you have it. We'll need to drop out of warp for an hour or so along the way and after that our speed will be limited so we need to make up as much time as possible beforehand." Ash said and Teela smiled.

"My pleasure captain." she said.

"Come in." Reese said when the intercom to the door of her quarters sounded and the door slid open to reveal Teela standing outside.

"Well I guess I know what you and the captain were hiding now." the Andorian woman said as she entered Reese's quarters and saw Reese checking a phaser, "What's with that?" she asked.

"Teela I'm sorry I couldn't tell you earlier. Mike wanted to be certain before briefing the crew. When we get to the Chev system I'll be going in with him and Duke's security team to carry out the rescue. Rachel might need medical attention and I don't want to leave it to anyone else." Reese answered.

"I should go with you as well." Teela said.

"I know that Captain Franklin meant a lot to you as well Teela-" Reese began.

"We were all best friends, the three of us. I want to be there." Teela interrupted.

"Don't forget that we're going to be in Klingon space Teela. We're going to need you at the helm to get us back out of there again." Reese said and Teela sighed.

"I know but I feel like I ought to be there for Captain Franklin." she said and Reese walked up to her and embraced her.

"We'll all be there for her Teela. Trust me." she said.

Forrester used a tricorder to monitor the energy flowing through the *Ascension's* plasma conduits. The pattern of this flow contributed to a starship's warp signature, the energy field that it emitted and could be used not only to track but also to identify it. Under normal circumstances the warp field generated by a Miranda-class destroyer such as the *USS Ascension* was radically different to that of a merchantman like the *Blizzard* but there were methods by which it could be altered to resemble it. This was not an easy process, especially considering that the energy output of the Starfleet vessel was much higher than that of the civilian freighter, however by making adjustments to the *Ascension's* warp drive it could be done.

"Okay we need to cut the flow by another ten percent." he called out to the engineering team that was outside the Jefferies tube the chief engineer was inside.

"That's going to limit our speed." one of the engineers responded.

"Yes I know that but the captain wants us to look like the ship the Klingons are expecting so we don't get shot down. Of course if one of you has a cloaking device in your pocket then feel free to tell me now. Otherwise get to work on reducing this plasma flow." Forrester ordered and then as the other engineers were getting to work Forrester took out a communicator, "Forrester to bridge." he said into it.

"Bridge here commander." Estevez responded.

"Ensign is Captain Ash there?" Forrester said.

"I'm here lieutenant commander." Ash said, "How far are you with adjusting our warp signature?"

"Almost there captain. Another hour and we should be ready." Forrester told him.

"Good. We'll almost be at the border of the neutral zone by then so we'll swap to the modified drive system then. Bridge out." Ash replied and after shutting off the intercom he turned towards the science station, "Any information from the probes yet commander?" he asked.

"Yes captain, it's just starting to come through now. All six probes have reached the Chev system and are heading for their assigned targets. We're already getting telemetry about the supply depot though. Probe four has detected the presence of three Klingon ships." Tan answered.

"Can you put them on screen?" Ash said and Tan nodded before looking towards the bridge's main viewscreen just as the image changed to show a large Klingon space station that had three starships docked with it.

"Two D-four destroyers and one D-five captain." Tan said. "From the look of the containers on the underside of the hull that D-five is configured as a transport ship rather than a light cruiser but even without out it they still have two destroyers that could be used to intercept us."

"They'll have to know we're there first." Ash said, "What about the listening posts? Do you think that it'll be possible to jam their communications without anyone knowing about it?"

"It should captain, yes. By using the main deflector we can direct a stream of subspace energy directly at the outpost that will stop it from sending or receiving transmissions in real time. Unless they have an old fashioned radio or laser communication system as a back up they won't be able to send for help. Even then it will take at least two hours for the signal to reach another Klingon outpost." Tan explained.

"This won't prevent us from beaming in or out will it?" Ash asked.

"No captain. However, in order for you to maintain communication with the *Ascension* we will have to leave a single channel open. I suggest programming the communicators to switch frequencies every ten seconds and our jamming can be set up to match this pattern. That will reduce the chance of the Klingons finding the free channel." Tan said.

"Ten seconds is still more than enough to send a distress signal but I suppose it will just have to do." Ash replied before an alert sounded from Tan's console, "What's that?" Ash said.

"I set up my system to alert me if the probes detected any human life signs among the Klingons aboard the listening posts captain," Tan said, "and it seems they have. There are sixteen Klingons and one human on asteroid designated as number three."

"Is it Captain Franklin?" Etchemin asked.

"Inconclusive. Whoever it is they are deep within the asteroid. Too deep for a transporter lock." Tan said.

"Well beaming them straight out wasn't plan 'A' anyway. We always thought there would be something to prevent it." Ash added, "Okay Mister Etchemin we're going to need an approach pattern to that asteroid that keeps us as far as possible from any other Klingon outposts and those three starships as possible. Have an exit route planned as well. That should be the most direct route possible at maximum warp. As soon as Teela is back on duty she'll need to follow it precisely."

"Yes captain." Etchemin responded, nodding his head.

As expected the *Ascension* reached the edge of the neutral zone that separated the United Federation of Planets from the Klingon Empire about an hour later and the ship came to a halt for Forrester and his engineers to complete the work on disguising the ship's warp signature.

"Everything's in place captain. As long as we stick to warp five we should appear to be the *Blizzard*." Forrester said over the intercom.

"And if we exceed warp five?" Ash asked.

"Then the simple fact that we're going that fast will expose us as not being what we're pretending to be. Also the modifications will break down and our real warp signature will show through. If the Klingons have been monitoring Starfleet operations along the border as closely as we've been monitoring theirs then they probably have our warp signature on record and they'll know exactly who we are." Forrester said.

"Commander we'll only be exceeding warp five after we have Captain Franklin back onboard anyway. By that time the Klingons will already know that we aren't who we're pretending to be. Thanks for the warning though." Ash said.

"Captain the warp drive is reading as online again." Teela said from the helm station and Ash nodded.

"Very well lieutenant commander. Engage at warp five. Course for the Chev system. Bring us to red alert." he said, "Ensign Estevez?"

"Yes captain?" Estevez said.

"Monitor all Klingon subspace channels, if there are any cloaked sentry ships out there I want to know." Ash told her as the *Ascension* began to move off again, accelerating to warp five as it headed into the neutral zone separating the two galactic powers.

"Yes captain." she replied.

"Captain we are now in violation of the border treaty." Tan announced as the starship crossed the theoretical line in space.

"Weapons?" Ash said.

"All weapons readied captain. Our shields are energised but still down though." Etchemin said.

"Good. I don't want them giving us away. As soon as there's the first sign of a Klingon warship in the area raise them though."

"Captain we're being hailed." Estevez announced.

"From where?" Ash asked.

"It looks like the Chev system captain." Estevez told him.

"It's probably one of the active listening posts. They will have noticed us as soon as we crossed the border into the neutral zone." Tan said.

"What language are they speaking ensign?" Ash said.

"Klingon sir. The universal translator is translating it just as it should." Estevez said.

"Then reply in English and let their translator do its job as well." Ash said.

"Yes captain. What should I tell them?" Estevez replied.

"Tell them that we're the *Blizzard* and that we have the admiral's special delivery." Ash told her and she turned back to her console.

"This is the *SS Blizzard*. We are bringing the admiral his special delivery." she said and there was a pause before the Klingons replied.

"Good journey *Blizzard*. The admiral will be here in three days to collect and pay you." the Klingon controller said before the channel went dead.

"Captain," Estevez said, smiling as she turned towards Ash again, "I think they bought it."

No ships were launched from the Chev system to intercept the *Ascension* and a few hours later the starship entered the system, apparently still believed by the Klingons to be the freighter *Blizzard*.

"Okay let's hope there's no special flight path they're supposed to follow." Ash said.

"Target asteroid dead ahead captain." Teela said.

"Bring us out of warp at a range of two light minutes Teela." Ash ordered, "Commander Tan as soon as we exit warp I want you to start jamming their communications."

"Yes captain." Tan said.

"And take over the conn. I'm heading for the transporter room now." Ash said as he got up and headed towards the turbolift.

When Ash arrived at the transporter room he once again found that Duke and Reese were already there. However, this time Reese was also wearing an armoured vest and instead of just one extra security guard there were seven of them, all armed with phaser rifles as well as their assault phasers holstered on their belts that also had a number of stun grenades clipped to them. Additional equipment such as flares and electronic lock picking equipment was spread between the members of the team so that each member carried no more than they could manage.

Ash's own equipment was waiting for him and in addition to the usual assault phaser and communicator this also included an armoured vest of the type being worn by the rest of the assault team.

"We should be at the target in about ten minutes." Ash told the members of the assault team, "Overall we can expect to be outnumbered two-to-one but we have the advantage that they don't know we're coming. We know that Captain Franklin is being held in a chamber somewhere near the centre of the asteroid so we'll be heading down as soon as we arrive. One fire team will remain behind to hold the transport site though. We can't afford to be cut off."

"What are your orders concerning the use of force?" Reese asked.

"I doubt the Klingons will just hand Captain Franklin over to us when they see us doctor." Duke commented. "I meant are we to keep our phasers set to stun to avoid casualties?" Reese added and Ash paused to consider this.

"No." he said eventually, "The Klingons are unlikely to be setting their weapons to stun and quite frankly whether we kill or stun them isn't going to make much difference to their diplomatic response. You can use a non-lethal setting if you want but I'm authorising the use of lethal force." and as he finished speaking all of the gathered security guards began to adjust the setting on their phasers, both rifles and holstered assault phasers.

"We just came out of warp." Duke said as he felt the Ascension shudder slightly.

"Then we're at two light minutes from the target." Ash said, "Everyone on the transporter pad. We go in five minutes."

Standing on the transporter pad the assault team formed a circle centred on Ash and Reese with Duke and his security guards facing away from them with their phaser rifles raised, ready to fire in any direction the moment they materialised on the asteroid.

## 7.

The Klingon duty officer belched as he lowered the bottle of blood wine from his mouth and looked again at his console. With the listening post officially in standby until its orbit around Chev's star brought it into a more favourable position again there was little to keep him occupied but the approach of a starship caught his attention. According to the transponder the approaching vessel was the freighter that all outposts in the system had been instructed to provide with free passage into and back out of the system. However, that did not stop the otherwise unoccupied Klingon duty officer checking the listening posts other sensors and running a visual scan. What he saw on the screen snapped him into a state of alertness as in place of the merchantman he saw the unmistakable shape of a Starfleet Miranda-class heavy destroyer approaching the listening post.

"This is listening post-" he began as he activated the communication system but he stopped speaking when he realised that the channel was blocked by subspace static and instead he turned to the intercom, "All warriors to your stations, we are under attack!" he yelled into it.

"Murrek what are you ranting about?" the voice of the duty officer's superior responded.

"Commander Daras there is a Federation warship approaching under a false transponder." Murrek told him.

"Then alert system command." Daras ordered.

"I have tried commander but they have jammed our communications." Murek said.

"They must be here for the prisoner. Ensure her guards are alerted and watch for transported activity. I swear that we will make them pay for every step they take here in blood." Daras replied.

None of the Klingons manning the listening post were ever completely unarmed but at the word of a Federation attack they moved to gather all the weapons they could and a group of them who had been off duty rushed to a rack of disruptor rifles mounted on the wall of their barracks. They were in the process of handing these out and readying them for use when all of a sudden there was another announcement over the intercom.

"Transporter signature in section four. We are being boarded!" Murrek warned them.

The assault team from the *Ascension* materialised the same formation they had been in on the transporter pad and this enabled them to rapidly survey their surroundings. They had arrived in a large chamber inside the asteroid where the electronics behind the listening post's various sensor arrays were located and there were a number of walkways moving between these. This made checking that there were no Klingons present more difficult and Duke and his security guards rushed to the edges of the platform they had materialised on to look over for signs of any Klingons below them.

"Clear." Duke announced.

"Okay let's move. We head down." Ash said as he rushed to the nearest set of stairs leading down from the platform.

"Team four stay put. Keep this chamber clear of Klingons." Duke ordered as he followed Ash but right as he began to descend the stairs there was a flash of red from across the chamber as a Klingon technician appeared and fired his disruptor pistol towards the assault team.

The Klingon had fired too quickly to take aim properly and the blast flew past the team from the *Ascension* before putting a hole in the rock wall of the chamber. Thankfully though this wall was thick enough that the hole did not reach the surface and cause the atmosphere inside to escape into space. In response Ash crouched and steadied his aim on the safety rail at the side of the stairs before he returned fire and the bright blue beam hit the Klingon just beneath his ribs. Although Ash's phaser was set to kill this hit was not enough to be instantly fatal to the Klingon and instead he topped forwards from the platform he was standing on, falling over the safety rail and he screamed as he plummeted to his death below.

"Keep going, there'll be more of them on their way." Ash said as he got back to his feet and continued to descend the stairs.

The stairs took the assault team all the way to the base of the chamber but there were no signs to indicate which of the passageways leading out would take them to where they wanted to go.

"Which way now?" Duke asked as he looked around, seeing exits in all directions.

"Deborah can you give us a clue?" Ash added and Reese took her tricorder from her medical kit.

"I don't have the range to detect Rachel but I am detecting a number of life signs in that direction." she said and she pointed towards one of the exits from the chamber.

"Then that's the way we go. Even if that's not the right way then at least maybe we can thin out the Klingons." Ash responded and then he began to run towards the exit.

Unlike the chamber the assault team had materialised in that appeared to be carved directly out of the rock of the asteroid, the passageway leading from it bore more resemblance to a corridor aboard a starship.



"Captain you shouldn't be in the lead." Duke warned him, placing a hand on Ash's shoulder to hold him back before he could rush down the passageway, "Let us handle this." and then a pair of the security guards Duke had brought with them stepped forwards to take the lead as the assault team began to advance.

"Deborah keep scanning." Ash said, "If the entire outpost is like this then there's plenty of scope for an ambush and I want as much warning as possible."

When the assault team reached a junction the two security guards in the lead paused to cover the side approach while another pair moved up to cover the front.

"I've got life signs closing from-" Reese began before all of a sudden a pair of Klingons appeared directly ahead of the team and before they could fire Duke fired his phaser rifle. The beam hit one of the aliens in his chest and he was momentarily enveloped in a bright blue light before this vanished along with the Klingon himself. The second Klingon leapt back around the corner, firing his disruptor randomly and forcing the Starfleet team to duck.

"I think we need to go that way." Reese added as the security guards were returning fire, their phaser beams preventing the Klingon from stepping into the open to get a clear shot.

"I'll handle this. Close your eyes and cover your ears." Duke said as he unhooked a stun grenade from his belt. Pulling the pin from this he then hurled it along the passageway towards the corner the Klingon was using for cover, "Fire in the hole!" he yelled moments before the grenade went off.

Designed to produce a loud noise and bright flash, the grenade produced very little in the way of shrapnel and the Klingon was uninjured despite his proximity to the centre of the explosion. However, the blast did exactly what it was supposed to do and disorientated him the extent that he dropped his disruptor and staggered backwards before he collapsed. This brought him into the line of fire of the security guards and two of them fired rapid blasts into the Klingon to ensure he would not get back up again.

"What is our status Murrek?" Daras demanded as he stormed into the control room and looked down at the duty officer.

"I have detected weapons fire in this section here." Murrek replied, pointing to a schematic of the listening post shown on one of the screens in front of him, "I've tried contacting the men in that section but can't through to them."

"Jammed?" Daras said.

"No, I can make the connection to the communicators of two but they aren't answering. I suspect that the Starfleet intruders have killed them." Murrek said, "Commander Daras I would like permission to join the hunt for-"

"No." Daras interrupted, "I need you here to alert me to the intruders' progress. I have doubled the guard on the prisoner just in case they get that far but I intend to destroy them before that happens. They may be using a tricorder to scan for our positions. I want you to set up projections of false life signs to confuse them." then he turned and exited the control room again, joining up with the group of heavily armed Klingons standing outside, "Follow me. The intruders are making their way towards section nine. We will cut them off there."

"Damn it!" Reese hissed and she slapped the side of her tricorder in frustration as the assault team was making its way through a machine shop.

"What's wrong?" Ash asked her.

"Either your intelligence on the crew of this place was wrong or the Klingons are projecting false life signs to confuse my scans. According to this there are two hundred of them right around that bend." she answered.

"Okay so forget the scans. Chief Duke tell your men to-" Ash began before there was a sudden flash of disruptor fire as a group of Klingons burst into the chamber and opened fire. One of the disruptor blasts hit a security guard and he was instantly vaporised while the rest of the team took cover behind the machinery. The Klingons also took cover and the two sides began trading shots across the room while Reese continued to scan anyway, hoping to find a way to tell the fake life signs from the real ones and after about a minute she suddenly smiled.

"Mike I've found her." she said, "I'm picking up human life signs from in there." and she pointed to the grating of a ventilation shaft.

"That must connect to wherever Captain Franklin's being held." Ash said, "Duke cover us." he added and Duke nodded as he fired another burst from his phaser rifle.

"Go!" he snapped and Ash grabbed hold of Reese to pull her towards the vent where they both came to a halt and Reese put her tricorder right up to the grating.

"Yes, these are human life signs." she said, "But I can't tell if there's an entire company of Klingon shock troops down there or if they've left Rachel completely unguarded."

"Then I'll go first." Ash said, adjusting his phaser to a level suited for cutting rather than molecular disruption and he fired it at the corners of the grating where it was fixed in place. When the forth fixing was burned off the grating fell free and clattered to the floor, leaving a gaping hole into the shaft and Ash leant in to look

down it, "I'd say it's about twenty metres down. We'll need a line." he said then he looked over to Duke, "Chief we need a line." he called out and Duke nodded.

"Fletch, go help the captain." he said and the security guard darted across the room, keeping low to avoid the continuing barrage of disruptor fire. The guard had a length of synthetic rope wrapped around him and he lifted this over his head when he reached the shaft before starting to tie one end to a nearby piece of machinery. At the same time Ash began to lower the other end of the line down the shaft. Then with the line secured Ash holstered his assault phaser and climbed into the shaft.

"I'll go down to the bottom and clear the grating. Then you can follow me after I'm out of the shaft." he told Reese and she nodded.

"Take care Mike." she said and she leant forwards to kiss him before he began to descend.

Although he was keen to reach the bottom of the shaft Ash took his time to avoid making noise that would attract the attention of any nearby Klingons. When he finally reached the bottom of the shaft Ash looked out through the grating, trusting that the darkness inside would prevent any Klingons outside from seeing him. Sure enough as he looked through the grating Ash saw that there were four Klingons in the corridor, all positioned to cover the approach towards a closed door. It was obvious that there was something on the other side of that door and from the readings Reese had taken Ash guessed that he had found where Franklin was being held.

Ash knew that if he used his phaser to cut his way out of the shaft the Klingons on watch would realise that he was there well before he could finish. On the other hand he currently had the advantage of knowing where the Klingons were while they were unaware of him and he decided to use that to his advantage. Speed would be essential if Ash was going to succeed so despite having cleared the use of lethal force he readjusted his weapon to a maximum strength stun instead and at the same time he adjusted the spread pattern to perform a wide angled sweep rather than fire a concentrated beam. This had two benefits for Ash, firstly aiming would take less effort and secondly the area effect would permit him to target all four Klingons at once rather than having to take them out one at a time while still not risking depleting his phaser's power pack as a sweep on a higher setting was likely to do. Ash then pressed the muzzle of his assault phaser up against the grating, making sure that it pointed through one of the holes so that none of the energy would be reflected back into the shaft and incapacitated him along with the Klingons.

Then he squeezed the trigger.

The corridor outside the shaft was suddenly filled with a pale blue light from Ash's phaser and in an instant all four of the Klingons collapsed where they stood. Seeing this Ash ceased fire and waited to see if any more guards would appear, ready to fire again if they did. When no such reinforcements did appear Ash returned the phaser to its previous energy level and concentrated beam setting before shooting the retaining bolts from the grating in quick succession.

A quick kick knocked the grating free and Ash slid out of the shaft into the corridor, checking for Klingons once again before he sprinted down the hallway and leapt over the unconscious guards to get to the door they had been guarding. Surprisingly this did not appear to be locked, meaning that if it was being used as a cell then there must be some alternative method of preventing the captive inside from escaping. Ash pressed himself up against the wall beside the controls to the door and then struck them with the palm of his hand, causing the door to immediately slide open.

No sudden flurry of disruptor blasts came through the door as it opened and so Ash dived through it, making sure not to linger in the doorway itself where he would present an easy target to any guards inside. This proved not to be necessary though as Ash quickly found that there were no more Klingons inside the cell. However, even in the dimness that was caused by the only light inside the room being that which came in from the corridor outside Ash could still make out the single occupant of the cell. This was clearly a human, or at least humanoid, female who had been stripped and suspended from the ceiling of the cell by chains connected to manacles around her wrists. Rather than being left to hang loose the woman's legs were also chained to the floor to prevent her moving them far. Although Ash was positive that he had found Captain Franklin he could not be certain because of the hood that had been pulled over her head and he rushed up to her to remove it. Sure enough he found himself looking into the face of Rachel Franklin and she stared back at him with wide eyes before letting out a muffled sound as she tried to speak despite the muzzle that covered the entirety of her face below her nose.

"Captain hold on I'll get you down." Ash said before he used his phaser to cut through the chains that held her, firing first at the ones binding her legs and then those that suspended her by her wrists.

As soon as the chains around her wrists were burned through Franklin dropped towards the floor and Ash reacted quickly to catch her before removing the muzzle that prevented her from speaking.

"Michael?" she said, looking at him and he smiled and nodded.

"Yes captain." he replied and all of a sudden Franklin went limp and began to weep.

Ash lowered her gently to the floor and then took a foil blanket from his belt that he wrapped around her before he heard footsteps from the corridor outside and he quickly aimed his phaser towards the doorway.

“Mike it’s me!” Reese called out when she appeared in the doorway and saw him pointing his phaser at her. Then when she looked down and saw Franklin she exclaimed, “Rachel!” and ran towards them. Crouching beside Ash and Franklin, Reese took out her tricorder again and scanned Franklin. “Well?” Ash asked, “Is it her?” “I think so.” Reese answered, nodding, “We should get her back to the *Ascension* as quickly as we can though.” “Check the corridor.” Ash told her and as Reese dashed to the doorway and looked out into the corridor again he lifted Franklin to her feet, “Come on captain, it’s time to go home.”

### 8.

"Ash to *Ascension*." Ash's voice said and Estevez smiled.

"This is the *Ascension*. Go ahead captain." she responded.

"Ensign we have her. Captain Franklin is alive and we're on our way back to the beam out point now." Ash told her.

"Understood captain we'll be standing by." Estevez said.

"Excellent. Ash out." Ash said and when he shut off his communicator Estevez turned around.

"Captain Ash reports that they have Captain Franklin." she announced and the command crew smiled.

"Teela are you ready to get us out of here?" Tan asked and the Andorian woman nodded.

"I can have us at warp in five seconds commander." she replied.

"What about shields and weapons?" Tan added.

"Deflector shields are energised and ready to go up as soon as the rescue team is back aboard. Phasers are powered and all torpedo tubes are loaded commander. If the Klingons try to get in our way we'll give them a bloody nose on the way out." Etchemin said with a grin.

"Hopefully that won't be necessary lieutenant." Tan said.

"Commander Daras I've lost contact with the guards outside the prisoner's cell." Murrek told the listening post's commanding officer over his communicator while he was making his way to the chamber where the assault team from the *Ascension* had beamed in, reasoning that there would not only be enemies to face them there in the form of a rear guard but he could also deny the intruders the ability to escape.

"I thought Starfleet were pinned down in the workshop area." Daras responded.

"According to the reports I have they are but the cell guards failed to check in and I can't raise them." Murrek said.

"Wait, there is a shaft that connects the workshop to the section we used to construct the cell in. The humans must have used it to bypass our warriors. Tell Grotok to send half his men around the workshop to try and catch them in a crossfire when they withdraw. I will join them as soon as I have dealt with their rearguard."

Daras said and then he shut off the communicator and returned it to his belt just as his team of Klingon warriors reached the chamber they were heading for.

Rather than simply have all his men rush headlong into what could be an ambush Daras signalled for one of the Klingons accompanying him to advance ahead of the rest and the warrior sprinted from the passageway and across the chamber floor towards one of the staircases leading up into the network of walkways. The four Starfleet security guards left behind to protect the chamber and ensure that the assault team would be able to beam out again saw this from their vantage point and they allowed the Klingon to reach the bottom of the stairs before one of them fired his phaser rifle and the Klingon let out a brief scream before he was vaporised.

The other security guards then fired their rifles towards the passageway that the Klingon had emerged from, knowing that there were more of them lurking inside and Daras waved his men back.

"Take cover!" he yelled as the bright blue beams shot down from overhead. As it turned out these were not aimed at the opening of the passageway though, instead they were aimed at the rock face above it and as the energy beams burned through it the rock became unstable and there was a low rumbling sound.

"Back! Get back!" Daras yelled but it was too late and moments later the ceiling of the passageway caved in, the layer of metal plating proving insufficient to hold back the tonnes of rock that were no longer supported. The Klingons inside the passageway did their best to retreat but they were too slow and as the ceiling fell in they were caught underneath and buried alive.

"This is Louis to Chief Duke," one of the security guards said into his communicator as he looked down at the cloud of dust that now obscured the collapsed tunnel entrance, "the Klingons just tried to storm the cavern. We've beaten them back for now but they could try again soon."

"Understood Louis. Standby, Captain Franklin had been located and we'll be on our way back soon. Expect us in ten to fifteen minutes. Duke out." Duke responded.

Reese climbed back up the shaft first and then Ash stood at the bottom with Franklin squeezed in beside him and began to tie the line around Franklin's waist.

"We'll go up together. You can do this, okay?" he said and Franklin nodded at him. Then he looked up and with his arms around Franklin's waist he called out, "Okay bring us up."

At the top of the shaft Duke and Fletch began to pull on the line, dragging Ash and Franklin upwards. Their progress was slow but it still took less than two minutes for the two officers to appear through the shaft

opening and Reese reached in to help Franklin out.

"Rachel take my hand." she said, pulling her former commanding officer out into the workshop.

"How about giving me a hand as well?" Ash asked as he struggled to climb out of the shaft behind Franklin and Reese sighed as she pulled him out as well.

"Big baby." she said and he frowned.

"Chief Duke?" Franklin said when she saw Duke and he saluted quickly.

"Yes captain, now if you don't mind my men and I need to lay down some covering fire so we can get you safely back to the beam out point. The Klingons have already identified it so we need to move quickly." he told her.

"Okay let's go." Ash said, "Deborah help me with her."

"Okay Rachel, we've got you." Reese responded as they both took hold of Franklin and Ash looked at Duke and nodded.

"Now." he ordered.

In unison the security guards all fired their phaser rifles towards the Klingon positions, using multiple short bursts to keep them pinned down as Ash and Reese helped Franklin back towards the chamber from where they could beam to the *Ascension*. They paused when they reached the doorway the assault team had entered the workshop through and crouched down while Duke led one of the security fire teams ahead of them to make sure that the path back to the beam out point was clear. As they pressed on ahead there was a sudden blast of disruptor fire that struck one of the team and the man fell. Luckily for him though the energy blast hit his armoured vest at an angle that deflected it rather than enabling it to penetrate.

"Deborah check on him." Ash said and Reese dashed towards the injured man while Duke and the other security guards returned fire on the Klingons sent to try and surround them.

"Grenade!" Duke yelled as he took another stun grenade from his belt and hurled it towards the attacking Klingons before taking cover.

The blast disorientated the Klingons long enough for Duke and his security guards to move to a better firing position from where they returned fire, cutting down the Klingons they could see. Then there was a sudden yell as another Klingon leapt around a corner ahead of Duke and charged towards him with a traditional sword held high above his head. The distance that the Klingon had to cover though was too great for him to reach any of the Starfleet team before Duke was able to aim and fire his phaser rifle again from near point blank range and the bright blue beam burned a hole right through the Klingon before he collapsed, his sword clattering to the floor.

"How is he?" Ash said, looking at Reese as she examined the security guard.

"He'll be fine. His vest caught the blast just like it's supposed to." she replied and she helped the guard back to his feet.

"We need to move. This lot could just be the first wave." Duke said as he looked around, checking each possible line of approach for signs of more Klingons.

"Okay let's go." Ash replied and the assault team set off once more.

Keeping the clearly weakened Franklin in the centre as the team advanced the individual fire teams of security guards continuously swapped places to alternate between leading the return to the beam out point and covering the rear.

Duke's group had returned to the front of the assault team when they reached the entrance to the chamber they had arrived in and he signalled for everyone to halt as he took out his communicator and flicked it open.

"This is Duke to Louis, we're just at the entrance. What's your status?" he transmitted.

"Position secure chief. We've not seen any more Klingons." Louis responded and Duke looked over his shoulder at Ash.

"We're clear." he said, closing his communicator again and Ash nodded.

"Go. I'll call for extraction." he replied and as the assault team hurried into the chamber he took out his own communicator and activated it, "Ash to Ascension, we're ready for extraction. Energise now."

Ash then heard an alien shout from behind him and he looked back down the passageway the team had just exited to see another group of Klingons coming after them. However, just as the aliens opened fire the team from the *Ascension* were surrounded by the glow of a transporter and they vanished, leaving the disruptor blast with just empty space to fly through.

"Commander Tan, the transport room states that they have the team and Captain Franklin." Estevez said when the transporter room contacted her.

"Then let's go." Tan said, "Teela engage at maximum warp. Etchemin get those shields up."

Both officers immediately followed their orders and the *Ascension* accelerated rapidly away from the asteroid listening post. The massive output of energy from the starship's warp drive overwhelmed the modifications that Forrester and his engineers had made and in the destroyer's engineering sections there were several small explosions as components added to the warp drive to alter its identifying signature were overloaded and failed in seconds. This did nothing to slow down the *Ascension* but it did reveal the vessel's true identity

to the Klingons and seconds later the two D-4 destroyers docked at the supply depot cast off their moorings. However, by this point the *Ascension* had already left the system.

"Are we really back aboard the *Ascension*?" Franklin asked as she was helped down off the transporter pad by a pair of medical staff waiting with a stretcher.

"Yes and we'll be back across the border into Federation space in under an hour." Ash told her.

"Come on now Rachel, you can worry about that later. I want to get you to sickbay." Reese said.

"And I need to get to the bridge. I'll speak to you both later." Ash added and as Reese was helping Franklin onto the stretcher he ran from the transporter room, not even bothering to remove his armoured vest and he was still wearing it when he exited the turbolift and stepped into the bridge.

"Report." he said, walking towards the captain's chair while Tan got up.

"We've got company captain." Tan told him, "On screen."

The main viewscreen then changed from showing the star field ahead of the *Ascension*, blurred while the ship remained at warp to instead show the view behind it and this time instead of empty space Ash found himself looking at the unmistakable shape of a Klingon warship.

"A D-five light cruiser." he said as he sat down.

"She decloaked about two minutes ago, right as we were entering the neutral zone." Tan said.

"Range?" Ash asked.

"Four hundred thousand kilometres and closing at warp eight point two." Tan answered.

"That's faster than a regular D-five." Ash commented, knowing that a Klingon light cruiser had a roughly equivalent top speed to the *Ascension*.

"Yes captain." Tan said, leaning over his console's sensor viewer to run a detailed scan of the pursuing vessel, "From the fluctuations of their warp field it looks like they are pushing their engines past the usual limit."

"Do you want me to try and get a little bit more out of our engines captain?" Teela asked.

"No, we can't risk burning them out while we're still in the neutral zone." Ash answered.

"Captain the Klingons are locking weapons." Tan announced.

"They'll probably try to use torpedoes to force us out of warp so they can engage with disruptors." Ash said before there was a sudden flash of red from the prow of the Klingon light cruiser as it launched a photon torpedo at the *Ascension*.

"Incoming!" Etchemin exclaimed before the torpedo slammed into the *Ascension*'s aft shields and the ship rocked from the blast.

"Shields holding captain." Tan reported.

"Are our aft torpedoes ready?" Ash said and Etchemin smiled.

"Locked and loaded captain." he said.

"Fire." Ash ordered and Etchemin fired both of the *Ascension*'s aft facing torpedo launchers together.

The two photon torpedoes both shot towards the following D-5 light cruiser and struck it one after another in rapid succession. The first torpedo produced a flare of light as it impacted on the light cruiser's shields. This weakened the shield enough that when the second torpedo hit the vessel it was able to penetrate and slammed into one of its warp nacelles.

The explosion shattered the nacelle, producing a massive explosion. The Klingons' warp field immediately collapsed as the D-5 tumbled and dropped to sublight speed while the *Ascension* continued onwards at hundreds of times the speed of light.

"Captain the Klingon ship is no longer in pursuit. However, it remains largely intact and I suspect casualties are minimal." Tan said.

"How long until we reach Federation territory?" Ash said.

"About ten minutes now captain." Etchemin told him and Ash stood up and walked forwards.

"Lieutenant Commander Teela you are relieved." he said and she frowned.

"Captain?" she said.

"I think you should be in sick bay." Ash told her, "Go, I can handle the helm."

Teela smiled as she got up.

"Thank you captain." she said before she ran for the turbolift and Ash took her place at the helm.

"Do you remember how to fly a starship captain?" Tan commented from the science station, smiling.

"It's like riding a bike. You never forget how." Ash replied. Then he smiled and added, "Of course the last time I rode a bike I was knocked off by a kangaroo."

Admiral Korda was among what were now the minority of Klingons who lacked a ridged forehead and with just makeup could pass for human. Beside him stood an actual human who still wore a Starfleet uniform despite having deserted from the organisation when his role as a spy for the Klingons was exposed. The two men were studying a display of Starfleet deployments along the Klingon border when the door opened and a junior ranked Klingon officer entered.

"You have news?" Korda asked, turning to face the newly arrived officer.

"Admiral we have received a signal from the Chev system." he told him.

"The *Blizzard*?" Korda said.

"A Starfleet vessel infiltrated the system using a false warp signature designed to mimic the *Blizzard* admiral. It deployed an assault team to the asteroid where the prisoner was being held and escaped with her. The *Lo'lah* attempted to intercept them but the Starfleet ship fired on it in the neutral zone." the junior officer explained.

"Was the *Lo'lah* destroyed?" Korda asked.

"No admiral. The vessel was forced to break off their pursuit though and they are making their way to the Chev system now for repairs at the depot." the junior officer answered.

"Send a signal to Captain Denas-Vel aboard the *Blizzard*. Tell him I want to see him here in person as soon as possible." Korda ordered.



"Captain!" Teela exclaimed as she burst into the *Ascension's* sickbay and she ran to where Franklin was sat on a biobed. After being brought here she had been given a gown to wear while Reese scanned her. A security guard stood just inside the entrance but he did not attempt to block Teela's path.

"Teela." Franklin responded as the Andorian rushed up to her and took her hand.

"We all thought you were dead." Teela said, "What happened?"

"I'm not sure." Franklin answered, "I just remember being held in the dark and-"

"Rachel you should just try to relax." Reese interrupted and she held up a hypospray.

"What's that?" Franklin asked and Reese smiled at her.

"Don't worry it's just something to help you sleep. I want to keep you here overnight but I think you should be able to go back to your own quarters first thing after you've woken up and I've had the chance to run another scan." she said.

"They're still your quarters as well." Teela added, "Captain Ash didn't take them."

"Captain Ash? I thought he was wearing a commander's bars on his uniform." Franklin said.

"Starfleet have been dragging their heels about promoting Mike." Reese said as she pressed the hypospray to Franklin's arm and injected her with the sedative. This did not render Franklin unconscious immediately though and she still had chance to asked another question.

"Why?" she said and Reese and Teela exchanged nervous looks.

"Rachel it's because of you and the Klingons." Reese said eventually and Franklin frowned.

"Starfleet thinks you're a spy. It's not true though is it?" Teela said.

"I-" Franklin began but then she began to feel the effects of the sedative and she stopped speaking.

"Easy now." Reese said as she helped Franklin lower herself onto the biobed where she promptly fell asleep.

"Can I stay?" Teela said, looking at Reese and she nodded.

"Sure. She should sleep for about seven or eight hours from what I've given her. It'll give me time to do something about those marks her chains left." Reese replied, looking at the ugly marks left on Franklin's wrists and ankles were the manacles she had been forced to wear had dug into her flesh. Then she looked at the security guard by the door and added, "And you can tell Chief Duke she won't be running around the ship being a security risk."

Ash did not allow himself to relax even when the *Ascension* exited the neutral zone and returned to Federation space.

"Commander Tan are we alone?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Tan answered as he checked the *Ascension's* sensors, "There are no Klingon ships in sensor range."

"Okay stand down to yellow alert." Ash ordered as he brought the *Ascension* out of warp, "Ensign Estevez I need to speak with Starfleet. Get me a channel to Admiral Clarke aboard the *Lexington*. I'll take it in the briefing room. In the mean time keep an eye out and let me know if there are any signs of Klingon pursuit." Ash then got up from the helm, allowing a junior officer to take over from him before he left the bridge and made his way to the *Ascension's* briefing room where he finally removed the armoured vest he had still been wearing and tossed it onto the table. As he sat down Estevez appeared on the screen of one of the monitors mounted around the table.

"I have Admiral Clarke for you captain." she said and Ash nodded.

"Put him through please ensign." he told her and the image switched to that of Admiral Clarke.

"Commander Ash, what's so important that you're calling me?" he asked.

"Admiral I need to report that I received intelligence from a smuggler that the Klingons were holding a Federation citizen hostage." Ash replied and Clarke frowned.

"The Klingons holding hostages?" he said and Ash nodded.

"Yes sir. The smuggler provided me with a video log as proof." he said.

"I'll need this video. I'll send it to Starfleet command and the Federation can act to secure their release." Clarke said.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me properly admiral. I said the Klingons were holding a hostage. My crew and I have already secured her release." Ash said.

"What are you talking about commander?"

"Admiral I must report that I took the *Ascension* across the neutral zone to the Chev system and carried out a rescue operation to release the hostage." Ash told him.

"You did what?" Clarke yelled, "Damn it Ash, the Chev system is in Klingon space. Who the hell authorised you to cross the border?"



"The United Earth Space Probe Agency when it first drafted the Starfleet charter and made the safety of Earth and later Federation citizens the responsibility of Starfleet. I had credible evidence that a Federation citizen was being held against their will and acted to release her." Ash said.

"And do you have any idea how the Klingons could react to that?" Clarke said.

"Yes admiral. In fact they sent a light cruiser after us. After being fired on I gave the order to return fire and the Klingon vessel was disabled with minimal casualties." Ash told him.

"You fired on a damned Klingon cruiser?" Clarke snapped, "You've gone too far Ash. You'll lose your commission for this."

"As I said admiral the Klingons fired first." Ash pointed out and Clarke sighed.

"So who is this hostage and why were the Klingons holding them?" he asked and Ash smiled.

"Ah, now that's where things get a bit complicated admiral." he said.

"Just get on with it and tell me commander." Clarke said sternly.

"Admiral the individual being held hostage by the Klingons was Captain Rachel Franklin." Ash answered.

"Ash this isn't the time for jokes." Clarke commented.

"I'm not joking admiral. I didn't believe the source at first either but then my chief engineer found the communication log that had footage of her in it and was able to confirm its authenticity." Ash explained.

"But Captain Franklin is dead." Clarke said.

"Yes admiral, I was the one who found her body but our scans confirmed that the woman we rescued is human and she's currently in sickbay where my medical officer ought to be able to confirm her identity. It's possible that the body we found was merely a ruse to prevent us from realising that Captain Franklin was missing."

"In that case I shall remind you that the former Captain Rachel Franklin was a spy for the Klingons and a traitor to the Federation. She is to be placed under arrest and confined. Do you understand me commander?"

"Admiral, Captain Franklin was a prisoner of the Klingons, not their honoured guest. She was kept stripped, shackled and in solitary confinement in conditions that would violate Federation laws regarding torture. I doubt that the Klingons would treat an ally like that, it would look bad when trying to recruit others to their service if word got out." Ash pointed out, "Besides, Captain Franklin hasn't been convicted of anything by a court martial board."

"Oh very well commander you don't have to throw her in your brig but she isn't to be allowed to resume command of the *Ascension* and she is to be monitored at all times. Do you understand me?" Clarke said sternly and Ash nodded.

"Yes admiral. My chief of security has already assigned guards to monitor her and I'm quite sure that some of my officers will be keeping a close eye on her." Ash said and Clarke nodded.

"Very well commander. Where are you now?" he responded.

"In the Archanis sector on our side of the border admiral." Ash told him.

"Good. Hold your position there and watch the neutral zone for any signs of the Klingons responding in kind to your little intrusion into their territory. I'll alert the *Splendid* to be on alert as well. I want Rachel Franklin transferred to the *Lexington* as soon as possible. Starfleet Command will have a lot of questions for her regardless of what she has or has not done. You are to wait for further orders, is that clear commander?" Clarke ordered.

"Yes admiral. We'll be waiting." Ash replied.

"Good. Clarke out." Clarke said and the screen went blank as the admiral turned off his communicator.

Ash then leant back in his chair and paused to think before he leant forwards again to activate the intercom.

"Chief Duke could you join me in the briefing room?" he said.

"Yes captain, I'm on my way now." Duke responded and Ash shut off the intercom again.

It only took a few minutes for the *Ascension's* chief of security to arrive in the briefing room and he stood to attention.

"At ease chief." Ash said and Duke relaxed, "Chief I've just spoken with Admiral Clarke. He wants Captain Franklin transferring to the *Lexington*. In the meantime she will be confined to her quarters and we need to maintain a round the clock watch on her."

"Yes sir. I've assigned her a guard for each shift. I'm not sure what Lieutenant Commander Teela or Doctor Reese will think of this though." Duke said.

"Don't worry, I'll deal with them chief. I'm going to head down to sickbay and see how the captain's coming along. I expect Deborah and Teela will both be there. First though I need to speak to Commander Forrester."

Forrester and his engineers were working frantically to remove the modifications made to the *Ascension's* warp drive when Ash entered the engineering section. Having already burned out these modifications would have no further effect on the warp drive's performance as long as the warp drive remained fully operational but each one represented a potential point of failure if the system was damaged.

"How's it going commander?" Ash asked as he walked over to Forrester.

"We should have everything back to normal in about a quarter of an hour, thirty minutes tops captain. Then it's just a matter of turning it all off and back on again to do a clean reboot of the system." Forrester replied.

"Good. It turns out we have some breathing room in that regard. Admiral Clarke has ordered us to hold position while he arranges for Captain Franklin to be transferred to the *Lexington*. You'll have until then to get us back to normal operating condition." Ash told him.

"Is Admiral Clarke bringing the *Lexington* here?" Forrester responded.

"I doubt it. Moving a heavy cruiser to the border unannounced could be seen as provocative by the Klingons, especially after our little field trip into their space. My guess is that he'll either order us back to port on Archanis Four or send a courier to collect her." Ash said.

"Very good captain. Is that all?" Forrester said.

"No Adam. There's something else I want you to do." Ash said and he looked around to make sure that no-one was close enough to hear before he added, "This is going to be a rather sensitive matter."

## 10.

Teela continued to hold Franklin by the hand as she slept.

"You don't have to stay here you know Teela. I can call you as soon as Rachel wakes up." Reese told her.

"No I'll stay. I thought I'd never see her again. I don't want to risk something happening while I'm not around."

Teela replied and she shook her head. Then she turned to look across sickbay towards Reese and added, "I suppose this means that Ash will be back to being first officer again."

"I don't know about that. We still don't know how Starfleet will react to having her back. They think she's a traitor." Reese commented as she walked towards Teela and the sleeping Franklin.

"That wasn't Rachel, not our Rachel. It was that other woman." Teela said.

"What other woman?" Reese replied, pulling up a chair to sit beside Teela.

"The dead one. The imposter the Klingons must have replaced Rachel with. I can't believe I was taken in by it." Teela said.

"Starfleet will still want to question her. There'll have to be an investigation into how the Klingons were able to abduct a Starfleet captain without anyone noticing and hold her prisoner for-" Reese began before she suddenly stopped speaking.

"What?" Teela said.

"I just realised that we have no idea how long Rachel was being held prisoner by the Klingons. It's been months since we thought she was dead and she could have been their prisoner for that long again or even longer before that if they replaced her with an imposter." Reese said.

"Well I just want things to get back to how they used to be, or at least almost how they used to be." Teela said.

"Almost?" Reese said, frowning and Teela smiled back at her.

"Of course. We can't leave Sonia out of our girls' nights out just because the captain's back now can we?" she said and Reese smiled.

"No we can't do that." she responded before the door to sickbay opened and she looked to see if another patient had arrived. However, instead of someone in need of medical attention she saw Ash entering the room, "Mike." she said.

"Hi Deborah, I came to check up on you patient. Shall we speak in your office?" Ash said and Reese nodded as she stood up.

"Sure." she said and the pair of them went into her office.

"So what can you tell me about her?" Ash asked before either of them could even sit down.

"Her? You mean Rachel Franklin?" Reese replied.

"I take it that you've confirmed her identity then." Ash commented.

"Her DNA and fingerprints match our records. I'm running an RNA sequence now." Reese answered.

"And what will that tell you?" Ash said.

"Whether anyone has tampered with her genetic structure to alter her DNA to match that of Rachel Franklin. If they have then there would be stray RNA strands present to carry the DNA altering proteins." Reese explained.

"That all sounds a bit far-fetched to me." Ash said.

"I've never seen it done in practice but the theory has existed for a few decades now." Reese told him, "So is that all you came here to ask about? Whether or not she's really our Rachel?"

"No, I also need to warn you that Admiral Clarke wants her moved to the *Lexington*." Ash said.

"Let me guess, she's going to be interrogated about the accusations of espionage against her." Reese said.

"I expect so. If Starfleet Security doesn't know that we've got her back then they will soon." Ash responded, "Is she fit to travel?"

"She's not in perfect health by any means. The Klingons fed her enough to keep her alive but not enough to keep her healthy and she's not been able to exercise. On the other hand there are no signs of physical abuse or injuries other than the marks left by the restraints they used on her." Reese told him and he snorted.

"Maybe there is something to that Klingon honour they like to talk about. They won't abuse a helpless victim." he said.

"We know that they have other methods of extracting information." Reese pointed out.

"Do you think that she was subjected a mind probe?" Ash asked.

"No, no not the mind probe. There are none of the tell-tale changes it makes to the brain afterwards but I think she was interrogated using more conventional means. The sort of methods Starfleet Security might use only she was subjected to them for an extended period instead of just a few days. There are certain things

about her that are different.” Reese said and Ash frowned.

“Different? How different?” he asked.

“Things that she doesn’t remember. Small details, nothing major but it’s a sign of psychological abuse.” Reese answered.

“Will she recover?” Ash said.

“Probably, given enough time. Although dragging her off and sticking her in a Starfleet interrogation suite isn’t going to help much. What she really needs is time to get used to being human. Ideally with people who are friendly faces around her.” Reese said.

“Which would mean here on the *Ascension*.” Ash said.

“Maybe. She does have family that she could stay with though. Hopefully someone at Starfleet security will be smart enough to realise that as well and have her shipped back to Earth. She can stay with her family there but Starfleet can still interview her easily.” Reese said.

“Make sure you put that in your report. We’ll provide it to the ship that comes to collect Captain Franklin and take her to the *Lexington*.” Ash said.

“The admiral won’t be coming here himself?”

“No, I don’t think so. That’s why we need to make sure everything is written down properly. You won’t be able to speak to the *Lexington*’s medical officer directly.” Ash told her.

“Any signs of activity in the neutral zone?” Ash asked when he returned to the *Ascension*’s bridge.

“Not in it captain but several Klingon vessels have started to gather on the far side.” Tan replied.

“Put it on the screen commander.” Ash ordered as he sat down in the captain’s chair and he looked at the main viewscreen just as the image on it changed to show the gathering Klingon warships. There were four vessels in all, two of them were D-4 destroyers that looked as if they could have been the ones seen earlier in the Chev system but more menacing were the two battlecruisers that had joined them, “Are those-” Ash began.

“K’tinga-class captain.” Tan said.

“If they decide to cross the neutral zone there’s no way we can hold them all off.” Etchemin commented and Ash reached for the intercom.

“Bridge to engineering.” he said.

“We’re kind of busy down here. Can you try just turning it off and back on?” Forrester’s voice responded.

“I was about ask how soon it will be before you’re doing that commander.” Ash said, “We have company across the neutral zone and we may need to withdraw rather quickly. When can you give us maximum warp?”

“About twenty minutes to be safe captain. Ten if you don’t mind a fifty-chance of a warp core breach when you hit the gas pedal.” Forrester said.

“Take the extra ten minutes commander. There’s no sense in doing the Klingon’s work for them.” Ash told him.

“Understood captain. Engineering out.”

“Captain I’m picking up two more vessels approaching on long range scans.” Tan announced.

“More Klingons?” Estevez asked and she looked at the four warships shown on the main viewscreen.

“Not unless they’ve already crossed the border.” Tan replied, “I’m picking up a pair of Cole-class frigates closing at warp four.”

“Can you identify them?” Ash said.

“Transponders indicate that they are the *USS Detroit* and the *USS Thorn*. Both those ships are attached to the *Lexington* group.” Tan told him.

“They must be coming to collect Captain Franklin. Admiral Clarke wants her transferring to the *Lexington*. What’s their ETA?”

“At warp four it will be another twelve hours before they get here.” Tan said.

“And the Klingons could be across the neutral zone in under an hour.” Ash commented.

“Ensign Estevez I want you to alert Starfleet to our situation. Let the *Splendid* know as well. There could be more Klingons outside our scanning range that they can pick up on.”

“Yes captain.” Estevez replied.

“And in the meantime we just sit here and wait until we can hand Captain Franklin over to those two frigates.” Ash commented, looking again at the image of the Klingon warships and focusing on the two powerful K’tinga-class battlecruisers, either one of which was a match for one of Starfleet’s Constitution-class heavy cruisers.

“Deborah she’s awake!” Teela called out when Franklin opened her eyes and Reese came rushing towards them.

"Hold still Rachel." she said, "Let the biobed do its work." and then she looked up at the readouts above the biobed that showed her all of Franklin's vital signs.

"What time is it?" Franklin asked.

"Just after oh-six hundred. You slept right through the night." Reese told her and then Franklin looked at Teela.

"You're still here?" she asked and Teela smiled.

"She stayed here all night." Reese said.

"We both did." Teela added, "You didn't think we'd leave you alone did you?"

"I thought you'd maybe go and get some sleep at some point." Franklin said.

"There's not much of that going on with a Klingon task force staring at us across the neutral zone." Reese said and then she smiled, "Well I think you're fit enough to discharge. You need to take things easy though. Teela could you make sure she gets to her quarters? I'm going to let Captain Ash know that she's awake and been discharged from sickbay."

"Sure." Teela said.

"Wait, I better get you a robe first." Reese said as Teela helped Franklin off the biobed.

"I'll be fine, honest doctor." Franklin replied.

"I really think I should. That gown doesn't fasten properly at the back." Reese commented and Franklin smiled.

"In that case a robe would appreciated." she said.

When Teela and Franklin left sickbay the security guard assigned to monitor Franklin followed at a distance and Teela glared at him.

"Try to ignore the guy following us around." she said to Franklin.

"He's just doing his job." Franklin responded before they reached the door to her quarters and she hesitated.

"Is something wrong?" Teela asked nervously.

"I don't even remember the code to get in." Franklin said, staring at the panel beside the door.

"It's not locked." Teela told her reaching out to open the door.

Franklin looked around as she entered her quarters and she saw that every personal belonging had been removed, leaving only the furniture.

"What happened here?" she asked.

"Most of your things were sent to your family on Earth. They said we could keep any of your clothes we wanted though so Deborah and I have most of those." Teela told her as they both sat down. Before they could continue talking though they were interrupted by the door intercom sounding, "I'll get rid of them." Teela said and she got up to answer the door. However, when the door opened she found Ash standing outside, "Captain." she said.

"Lieutenant commander." he replied, "I need to speak to Captain Franklin in private. Could you give us the room?"

Teela looked around at Franklin.

"Go on Teela. You should get some sleep as well." Franklin told her and she nodded before she slipped past Ash, the door closing behind her to leave him alone with Franklin.

"Rachel I need to talk to you about what happened between you and the Klingons." Ash said as he approached Franklin.

"Take a seat, I'll try to put it into words." she replied and she patted the couch beside her.

"How about you start with how they were able to abduct you?" Ash suggested a he sat down and Franklin took a deep breath.

"It was Matthew." she said, "Our first shore leave together we went to the Eternity Falls on Archanis Four. I thought it was going to be so romantic and instead I went to sleep next to him and when I woke up I couldn't see, speak or move. When I realised that I'd been kidnapped I thought maybe Matthew had been grabbed as well but then I heard voices and one of them was him. Michael he handed me over to the Klingons!"

"That shore leave was a year ago captain." Ash said.

"I was gone for a year? I didn't know, it seemed like an eternity to me but when you came and rescued me I expected to find that it hadn't been so long at all. Why haven't Starfleet promoted you in a year?" Franklin asked.

"Captain you came back from that shore leave with Keeler. You were with him for months before you had an argument and split up. That's when we thought you'd been killed. We found a body in the house you own down on Archanis Four and recovered a recording that sounded like you were challenging him over your involvement in his spying for the Klingons." Ash answered.

"My involvement? Michael I knew nothing about it. Teela mentioned something about accusations that I was a spy but I didn't understand what she was talking about. The Klingons chained me up in a dungeon for pity's sake. I spent every moment terrified of what they might do to me." Franklin exclaimed.

"Starfleet is still going to want to talk to you about it though. Admiral Clarke has sent a pair of ships to take you to the *Lexington*. They'll be here in a few hours." Ash told her and she looked back at him, stunned.

"How can they think I was helping him?" she said eventually.

"You didn't hear the recording captain. It was basically a confession to treason. Although it did indicate that you were about to turn both Matt Keeler and yourself in. Starfleet Security and the JAG Office have been investigating since then. They're suspicious that more of us aboard the *Ascension* could be involved and that's the reason they've given for not formally appointing me as your replacement." Ash said.

"Is that why you're here? To find out what I'll say to them about you Michael? Are you that desperate to made a captain?" Franklin responded.

"No captain. I may be in temporary command of the *Ascension* but this is your ship and I'd rather have you back in command than have to take over because something happened to you." Ash told her and she looked down for a moment.

"I'm sorry. I should have known. You wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of rescuing me if you didn't want me back after all. I can't tell you how good it felt to see your face looking down at me when you pulled off that hood." Franklin said and then she leant towards Ash and embraced him for a few seconds. Then when she pulled away she added, "Look Michael despite having had the first decent night's sleep I can remember I'm still kind of tired. Is there any chance I could get some rest until my ride to the *Lexington* arrives?"

"Sure." Ash replied, nodding as he got to his feet, "I'll make sure you're not disturbed." and then he made his way to the door and left Franklin's quarters. On his way out he paused to talk to the security guard on duty in the corridor outside, "Captain Franklin wants to rest. See that she isn't disturbed will you?"

"Yes sir." the guard replied, nodding his head.

Meanwhile inside her quarters Franklin went to her desk and sat down before activating the computer terminal on top of it.

When the *Detroit* and *Thorn* arrived at the *Ascension*'s location it was the *Thorn* that signalled for Franklin to be beamed over and she was escorted to the transporter room by Duke and another security guard where Reese and Teela were both waiting for her.

"Come see off the condemned?" Franklin asked.

"You shouldn't talk like that. I'm sure that this will all be sorted out soon." Reese replied.

"I wish I was as confident as you were Deborah." Franklin said before Teela suddenly leapt forwards and embraced her tightly.

"Just promise you'll come back to us captain." she said.

"If I do will you let me breathe again?" Franklin replied and Teela let go of her.

"The *Thorn* is signalling ready for transport." the transporter operator announced.

"Then I suppose I ought to get going." Franklin said and she stepped onto the transporter pad.

"Good luck captain." Duke said to her and she smiled.

"Thank you chief and thank you for coming to save me. Regardless of how this goes I'll remember that." she said before she looked at the transporter operator and added, "Energise." and then she vanished in a cloud of glowing lights.

## 11.

"The *USS Thorn* has confirmed that Captain Franklin has arrived safely captain." Estevez said.

"They are powering their warp drive. The *Detroit* as well." Tan added.

"Taking Rachel to the *Lexington*." Ash commented as he watched the two Cole-class frigates vanish in flashes of light as they went to warp.

"Departing at warp six captain." Tan said.

"Their maximum." Etchemin said, "We could have made it to the *Lexington* just as fast while still at cruising speed."

"I get the feeling Admiral Clarke would rather not have her and us too close together." Ash said before he glanced at Estevez and added, "With the odd exception of course."

"So what do we do now captain?" Etchemin asked.

"Resume our scheduled patrol. Ensign Estevez inform the *Lexington* that we are moving off." Ash responded and Estevez nodded.

"Yes captain." she said but then she frowned as she worked at her console.

"Is there a problem ensign?" Tan said when he noticed this.

"Err, I'm having trouble establishing an outward channel." she replied and Ash turned his chair towards her.

"Weren't you just talking to the *Thorn* a few minutes ago?" he said

"Yes captain and there was nothing wrong then. Now though the system is dead. I'll try restarting it." Estevez said and she turned off her console entirely before powering it back up again. However, once again she found that she was unable to establish an outgoing subspace channel, "It's still not working." she said.

"Then I suggest you let Lieutenant Commander Forrester know. Assuming the intercom still works of course." Ash said.

"Bridge to engineering." Estevez said into the intercom.

"Engineering here. Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" Forrester replied.

"At least the intercom works." Ash muttered.

"Yes commander, I've reset the communication system but I still can't get a line out." Estevez told him.

"Okay I'm on my way." Forrester replied before he turned off the intercom.

"Captain do you still want to continue with the patrol?" Etchemin asked and Ash nodded.

"Yes, plot a course along the border but we'll hold position for now. I don't want to be changing position without the ability to let Starfleet know where we are." he said.

The turbolift then opened to allow Forrester to enter the bridge and he immediately walked over to the communications station.

"Still having trouble ensign?" he asked and she nodded.

"Subspace comms are just out." she told him and he plugged his PADD into the console.

"Looks like something has restricted our bandwidth." he said, "We can get basic data out but no audio or video."

"What's the point in that?" Etchemin said.

"It means our transponder is still broadcasting. Starfleet can see our position but we can't talk to them or them to us." Tan told him.

"So what could cause that?" Estevez said.

"You're the communications officer." Ash commented.

"But I've never learned anything about doing anything like that." she responded.

"I think the problem's in the antenna array." Forrester said.

"Can you fix it?" Ash asked.

"I can't tell from here." Forrester answered, "I'm going to have to go and check locally."

"Get right on it." Ash told him, "Oh and I want that data I asked you for earlier."

"Yes captain, I've had it transferred to you already." Forrester told him.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" Teela asked as she and Reese returned to sickbay and sat down in Reese's office.

"Rachel can take care of herself." Reese replied, "You need to relax Teela. Worrying isn't going to do you any good. Rachel survived months in Klingon captivity and even if Admiral Clarke does toss her in the *Lexington's* brig it will be far more comfortable than what she's already endured. Just be glad that she's alive and well."

"So they didn't hurt her? Are you sure?" Teela asked and Reese smiled,

"I'm certain Teela." she said and she picked up a PADD that held the results of the tests she had run on Franklin. However, when she looked at the screen her eyes widened, "This can't be right." she said. "Deborah what's wrong?" Teela said when she saw this. "I need to speak to the captain." Reese said.

Ash returned to his quarters to review the data file he had asked Forrester to compile for him and was sipping coffee while he studied it when the intercom on his door sounded.

"Mike I need to talk to you." Reese's voice said.

"Come in." Ash said, looking towards the door as it opened and Reese rushed in with her PADD.

"Mike you need to see this." she said, holding out the device towards him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The scan results from the tissue samples I took from that woman." Reese answered.

"That woman"? You mean Captain Franklin?" Ash said.

"Mike she's not Captain Franklin, not the real one anyway. She's a clone grown in a vat with her growth accelerated." Reese told him.

"Let me see." Ash said and he took the PADD from her, "Okay, what am I looking at here?"

"It's the RNA analysis I ran to see if anyone had manipulated her genetic structure. Her DNA is a perfect match for Rachel Franklin but that RNA is artificial. It's called temporal RNA and is used to speed up the development of laboratory samples. Or in this case accelerate the ageing of a clone. The Klingons will have added an extra enzyme when she reached the correct age to inhibit this process but when I extracted the RNA it was separated from the enzyme and became active again. That sample you're looking at now is about ten years older than it was when I took it." Reese explained.

"So how did she know how to act like Rachel Franklin? She knew all of us." Ash pointed out.

"Some sort of mental conditioning I suppose. Hypnosis could be used to implant the knowledge that Matt Keeler could have provided to the Klingons." Reese said and Ash turned the monitor he had been looking at so that she could see it.

"I asked Forrester to monitor her use of the computer in her quarters and she spent most of her time looking at this." he said.

"Technical readouts?" Reese commented and Ash nodded.

"She studied the layout and systems of Miranda-class ships like us and Constitution-class ships like the *Lexington*. In particular she was studying the layout of a Constitution-class ship's engineering section." he said, "Now she's on her way to the *Lexington* and we can't send any subspace messages to warn them. Forrester is checking our subspace antenna now but I suspect that he'll find out that she sabotaged it."

"Forrester to Captain Ash." Forrester's voice then said over the intercom and Ash activated it.

"Ash here." he said.

"Captain I've checked the antenna and we've been locked out by a command override." Forrester told him.

"Is it Captain Franklin's?" Ash asked.

"No captain. I erased that when she was declared dead. This belongs to a Captain Fellows." Forrester said.

"Fellows? I've never heard of Captain Fellows." Ash said.

"No captain, neither have I. I suspect that someone created themselves a fake identity in the Starfleet database." Forrester said.

"Keeler?" Reese suggested and Ash nodded.

"He'd have the skill and access to the database." he said, "Commander Forrester how long will it take to get our subspace communications back on line?"

"About six to eight hours captain. I need to take the antenna off line totally and then purge the system of this command before reinstalling a clean copy of the operating code." Forrester told him.

"In six to eight hours that fake Franklin could have sabotaged the *Lexington*'s warp drive." Ash said.

"What do we do?" Reese asked.

"We go there ourselves." Ash answered, "Forrester ignore the subspace antenna for now and get back to engineering. We'll be going to maximum warp. With any luck we'll be able to catch the *Thorn* before she gets to the *Lexington*." then he adjusted the intercom to connect him to the bridge, "Ash to bridge we need to go yellow alert. I need an intercept course laying in for the *Thorn* at maximum warp. I'm on my way now and I'll explain when I get there."

Ash burst out of the turbolift onto the bridge with Reese close behind him.

"Status?" he said.

"Course laid in captain." Etchemin replied.

"At maximum warp we should be able to intercept the *Thorn* in about six hours." Teela added.

"Captain I estimate that the *Thorn* will have rendezvoused with the *Lexington* in just under six hours." Tan pointed out and Ash nodded.

"Then we need to hope we can still get there in time to stop her from carrying out her plan." Ash said.



"Who?" Teela asked.

"Captain Franklin, or rather the woman pretending to be her. Teela, She's a clone." Reese told her and Teela's jaw dropped.

"No, that can't be true." she said, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry, it is. The Klingons created a clone of Rachel." Reese said.

"Then used their Orion smuggler friend to deliberately leak word of her to us, knowing that we'd rush off to rescue her. Now she's sabotaged our ship and I think she's going to try and destroy the *Lexington* unless we can stop her first. Teela, engage at maximum warp."

"Yes captain." Teela responded, turning to face forwards again and activating the *Ascension's* warp drive.

"Captain without communications we can't warn the *Lexington* though and when we don't make contact they'll raise their shields." Etchemin pointed out.

"Yes lieutenant I realise that." Ash responded and he looked towards the science station, "Commander Tan I'm going to need the *Lexington's* command codes."

"The *Lexington's* command codes?" Estevez exclaimed and Ash nodded.

"Yes. We may not be able to talk to the *Lexington* but we can get her to drop her shields using the limited communication bandwidth the clone left us with. Then with any luck we'll be able to beam aboard before they can override us." He said.

"It will take precise timing captain." Tan pointed out and Ash nodded again.

"Yes so I'll join Chief Duke and Doctor Reese in the transporter room ten minutes before rendezvous. I'll be leaving it up to you to transmit the command code to lower the *Lexington's* shields and then Forrester should be able to beam us aboard right away. Under no circumstances should our shields be raised or our weapons powered though. We'll look enough like a threat just by racing towards them without communicating. I don't want Admiral Clarke ordering us shot down before we get into transporter range." he said.

The *Lexington* group consisted of the Constitution-class *USS Lexington* along with a second heavy cruiser. These were then supported by a number of smaller vessels. Six of these were Miranda-class destroyers similar to the *Ascension* but two were the lighter version that lacked the roll bar and its additional weaponry. At this time the group had also been joined by the *USS Detroit* and the *USS Thorn*, these frigates were much slower than the other vessels so they would not normally accompany the main group in formation but they had only just transferred the woman claiming to be Rachel Franklin aboard when Admiral Clarke was summoned to the bridge of the *Lexington*.

"What's going on captain?" he asked as he exited the turbolift.

"We've detected a ship closing in from the direction of the Klingon border at high warp admiral." the *Lexington's* captain replied.

"Have you got an ID on it?" Clarke said.

"Yes admiral. It's the *Ascension*, but she's not responding to our hails." the captain said.

"What's the status of Franklin?" Clarke said.

"She was placed under arrest as soon as she was beamed aboard and taken to sickbay for an examination."

"Keep trying to contact the *Ascension*. In the meantime put our ships on yellow alert. Raise shields." Clarke ordered.

In the *Lexington's* sickbay the clone of Franklin sat on a biobed as the cruiser's medical officer scanned her and she looked around at the other people present. Aside from the medical officer there was a female orderly behind him, a security guard standing beside the clone and a second guard by the door.

"Everything looks fine." the chief medical officer said as he shut off his tricorder, "You can take her to the brig now crewman."

The clone unexpectedly fell forwards as if she was fainting and the medical officer and security guard both leapt forwards to catch her. As they did so she suddenly lashed out with a fist and struck the guard in his throat between his armoured vest and close fitting helmet. The startled guard clutched his neck as he tried to get his breath back and in this moment the clone reached for the assault phaser he had holstered on his belt. Drawing the weapon she released the safety and fired at the medical officer, hitting him from point blank range. Then she spun around and fired at the guard by the door just as he was reaching for his own phaser. Initially the phaser beam struck the guard's armoured vest and, being set to 'stun' failed to harm him. However, the clone kept her finger on the trigger and dragged the beam towards the arm he was using to draw his weapon. This immediately disabled his arm and his phaser fell to the floor before the guard himself collapsed as well.

This left only the medical orderly who looked on in horror as the clone then turned her weapon towards the woman and fired again. The clone then dashed across sickbay towards the unconscious orderly and crouched down beside her, quickly starting to remove the woman's uniform.

When the *Ascension* came out of warp just a few thousand kilometres from the *Lexington* and the other starships of its group Ash, Reese and Duke were already in the transporter room checking their phasers while Forrester stood by the control console.

"Bridge to transporter room. We're out of warp." Tan's voice said over the intercom.

"What's the status of the *Lexington*?" Ash asked.

"She's been trying to hail us. Her shields are up and her weapons are powered. She hasn't targeted us yet though, neither have any of the other ships in her group." Tan replied.

"Are we in transporter range?" Ash said to Forrester.

"Yes captain." the engineer responded.

"Good. Get us a lock. Commander Tan we're going to need you to shut down the *Lexington's* shields." Ash said before he, Reese and Duke made their way onto the transporter pad.

"The *Ascension* has dropped to impulse. Range six thousand kilometres." the *Lexington's* science officer said.

"Still no response to our hails admiral." the communications officer added.

"Warn them that-" Clarke began before the *Lexington's* navigator suddenly called out.

"Admiral our shields are dropping!"

"I've got a lock on a cargo transporter near the *Lexington's* engineering section and her shields just went down." Forrester said.

"Energise." Ash ordered and the engineer activated the transporter.

Less than a second later they materialised just as Forrester had told them on the pad of a cargo transporter aboard the *Lexington* and they looked around with their phasers held ready.

"Clear." Duke said and Ash nodded.

"Engineering is this way." he said as he stepped off the transporter pad and made his way towards the exit from the hold.

"Admiral we've been boarded. Transporter activated in cargo hold four." the *Lexington's* communications officer announced.

"Alert security. Lock down the turbolifts and get guards to all key areas. I want them taken alive." Clarke ordered ten a moment later he added, "Contact sickbay. The intruders are probably here for Franklin."

Wearing the orderly's uniform as a disguise the clone of Franklin walked calmly through the corridors of the *Lexington* towards the engineering section. She was almost to her destination when an alarm sounded and she considered the possibility that her actions in sickbay had been discovered. Expecting security to now be hunting her she hurried down the corridor towards engineering and opened the door.

Inside she found the engineering staff at work keeping the heavy cruiser running. One of them was walking towards her and rather than have him ask her why she was here she simply produced her phaser and fired. The sound of the beam attracted attention from all around the room and the engineers dived for cover as the clone advanced towards the warp core, firing at any target that presented itself.

"This is engineering, we're under attack!" she heard a voice saying and looking around she saw an engineer beside an intercom panel and she quickly shot the woman where she stood.

Reaching the warp core she looked at it and then up at the conduits carrying the plasma to the starship's nacelles. Destroying these would cause a catastrophic chain reaction that would in turn destroy the *Lexington* itself and with this in mind the clone adjusted her phaser to its maximum setting.

All of a sudden there was the sound of running footsteps and the clone looked around, expecting to see a unit of security guards rushing into engineering but instead she saw the familiar faces of Ash, Reese and Duke. Taking cover behind a nearby console she pointed her phaser towards them and fired.

"Down!" Duke yelled and the three crew from the *Ascension* dived aside as the beam from the clone's phaser passed overhead, burning a hole in a wall panel behind them.

"Watch for the core. Make sure your weapons are on 'stun.'" Ash said, aware of the potential for destruction from a stray shot in this part of the *Lexington*.

The crew from the *Ascension* fired at the clone forcing her to retreat behind the console she was using for cover but while set to stun their beams could not penetrate it. On the other hand when the clone leant around the console to fire back at them her weapon burned into whatever they were hiding behind, forcing them to keep moving and Ash kept looking for a path to get closer.

"Cover me." he called out and both Reese and Duke fired together in short bursts, forcing the clone to cease fire and take cover. Ash took advantage of this to charge forwards. The clone heard him approaching and realised what he was doing. Turning around she took aim at the warp core with her phaser and fired. The beam struck the core but it could not penetrate the containment field right away and she held the beam on target, hoping to overwhelm the shield before Ash could reach her. However, before this happened Ash

lunged towards the clone, knocking her aside and the beam moved away from the warp core towards a power conduit leading to one of the *Lexington's* warp nacelles. This lacked the shielding of the warp core or plasma conduits and the phaser beam burned right through it, cutting off the flow of power to the nacelle. Without this power the nacelle's shielding collapsed and the plasma flowing through it was released uncontrollably. This release of plasma blew the entire nacelle apart in a violent explosion that rocked the heavy cruiser and triggered alarms throughout it.

Ash was still able to maintain his grip on the clone though and to ensure she could not direct her phaser back towards either the warp core or himself he dropped his own weapon and used both hands to grab it. The pair of them wrestled for the weapon.

Duke broke from cover and ran forwards to help but when he was only half way there he heard the sound of a phaser discharging and Ash fell backwards. He had not been hit by the beam though, instead he was getting clear of the effect as the clone of Franklin was consumed and she screamed before she was vaporised.

All of a sudden a unit of security guards burst into the engineering section and pointed their weapons towards the crew from the *Ascension*.

"Drop your weapons! You are under arrest!" the leader of the security detail yelled and Ash raised his hands. "Isn't it nice to be made to feel welcome?" he said.

## 12.

Denas-Vel mentally prepared his excuses for why it had taken him so long to respond to Admiral Korda's summons to his headquarters on the Klingon colony world of Qu'Vat. He knew that the admiral was not a patient man and he did not relish the thought of having to face him here. The Orion smuggler was escorted from the transporter room by a pair of Klingon warriors towards a set of doors that led to a room Denas-Vel as unfamiliar with despite having visited the building several times before. Any fears about what might be behind this door were alleviated when it opened though to reveal a dining room suitable for a small number of people to eat in. Right now the table that dominated the room had just four seats positioned around it while various Klingon dishes were laid out on it for the diners to chose from. Three of the four seats around the table were occupied when Denas-Vel was shown into this private dining room. As well as Admiral Korda himself one of his aides, Captain Markon and Keeler sat at the table, leaving a single seat vacant.

"Ah Denas-Vel, join us. The chef has outdone himself." Korda called out and he pointed to the empty seat.

"Thank you admiral." the Orion smuggler responded as he sat down at the table as well before reaching for some of the food that was laid out in front of him.

"You took your time in getting here." Korda's aide said to Denas-Vel.

"Starfleet took apart the communications and warp drive of my ship." Denas-Vel told him.

"Sounds like they wanted to keep you out of the loop." Keeler commented, "You know that they impersonated your ship to infiltrate the Chev system?"

"As they were always expected to do Keeler." Korda pointed out, "Remember it was always our plan to let your former comrades take our little saboteur back to the Federation."

"Perhaps Keeler would rather we'd kept her for him to keep in his bed chamber." Korda's aide added.

"Is that the case Mister Keeler?" Korda asked, smiling at the human.

"Let's just say that I have some fond memories of the original." Keeler replied.

"Then perhaps we could produce an ideal mate for you. We have plenty of source material after all and we can easily program a clone to be suitably submissive towards your desires." Markon said.

"Was your plan successful?" Denas-Vel asked.

"No." Markon answered.

"Unfortunately Mister Keeler's old crew mates were able to intervene in time to prevent that. The *Lexington* was damaged but not destroyed and Admiral Clarke survived." Korda added, "Do try the blood wine Denas-Vel."

"That means that Starfleet will be coming for us." Denas-Vel said nervously as he poured himself a drink.

"Us? No, they won't be coming for us." Korda responded, "Oh they know that Mister Keeler is involved but he is beyond Starfleet's reach. As for myself, even if you gave Starfleet my name the high council is not going to hand me over to them. You on the other hand, they know about you and they could use you to get to other assets I have in the Federation."

Denas-Vel lowered his cup to look at Korda as the admiral stared at him.

"Admiral I would never-" he began before he coughed.

"Something wrong Denas-Vel?" Korda asked as the Orion continued to cough. The Orion smuggler dropped his cup and got to his feet, clutching as his throat as he struggled to breathe, "This is very good blood wine isn't it?"

"A fine vintage." Markon said.

"And you Mister Keeler? Is the blood wine to your liking?" Korda said.

"It is agreeable, though I lack the palette to truly appreciate it." Keeler said.

"A pity. Though I think it's not having quite the reaction with you as it is with Captain Denas-Vel." Korda replied.

"Poison." the Orion gasped before he dropped to his knees, steadying himself on the edge of the table.

"Yes poison. One tailored specifically to be used against Orions." Korda told him as he poured himself another drink of the blood wine and then gulped a mouthful down while Denas-Vel continued to choke,

"Against humans and Klingons on the other hand, there are no effects unless a vast quantity is consumed. Far more than has been put into this wine. Thankfully it is also completely tasteless so we don't need to worry about the effect it will have on the flavour."

Denas-Vel then fell to the floor and shook for a moment before he let out one last gasp and died. At that point Keeler held up his cup.

"Cheers admiral." he said.

"Admiral Clarke." Ash said when he was shown into the admiral's office aboard the *USS Lexington*. Despite the damage inflicted to the Constitution-class heavy cruiser, the starship still retained enough structural integrity for the crew to remain aboard while repairs were being carried out.

"Take a seat." Clarke told Ash, pointing to a chair and Ash did as he was instructed, "So tell me how you became aware that the woman brought aboard this ship was going to try and destroy it by sabotaging our warp core." Clarke added after Ash had sat down.

"I had my engineer monitoring her computer usage and we saw that she was accessing Starfleet technical files. Specifically the technical specifications of Constitution-class heavy cruisers like the *Lexington* as well as Miranda-class destroyers like the *Ascension* so she could shut down our communications." Ash began, "Of course that could have been innocent. A Starfleet captain has every right to access those details and Rachel Franklin could have just been trying to refresh herself after a long period in captivity, but when he reviewed the information more closely he noticed that when she accessed our communication system she did so using a false security code that was added to the *Ascension's* system by Matthew Keeler."

"Captain Franklin's co-conspirator." Clarke commented.

"The Klingons must have known that both Franklin's and Keeler's own security clearances would have been revoked. Starfleet Intelligence might want to review the security database to make sure that there aren't any other fake clearances in there that people may be using." Ash told him.

"I'll pass on your suggestion." Clarke responded.

"We also know that the woman wasn't the real Rachel Franklin from the RNA analysis that Doctor Reese carried out. As with the monitoring of her computer usage, everything looked fine at first but then the samples began to demonstrate accelerated ageing. Basically she was a clone designed to rapidly advance to adulthood using modified temporal RNA inserted into the base genome. In the clone herself this had been deactivated but when separated from her body the temporal RNA strands continued to age rapidly." Ash continued.

"A clone doesn't have the memories or knowledge of the original donor though." Clarke pointed out.

"No. Doctor Reese believes that some sort of hypnotherapy would have been used to build up a basic level of knowledge that Matthew Keeler could have provided thanks to his intimate relationship with the captain. Recordings of her voice could have been used to create the correct accent and speech patterns and any gaps in her knowledge could be put down to the stress caused by having spent such an amount of time in captivity. A similar type of hypnotherapy could have been used to condition her into trying to destroy the *Lexington*." Ash responded.

"Luckily you and your crew didn't just accept her at face value and checked her out. The loss of a heavy cruiser would have been a serious blow to Starfleet in this sector." Clarke said, "Well I think that brings this conversation to a close. Thank you for saving my ship and her crew Ash. If you hadn't been on the ball we'd all have been reduced to nothing but subatomic particles drifting through space right now."

"You're welcome admiral and now if it's alright with you I'll be getting back to the *Ascension*." Ash replied and he got to his feet. However, Clarke also stood up before he could leave.

"There is one more thing." he said.

"Yes admiral?" Ash asked and he saw Clarke stand up straight as he picked up a small black box off his desk.

"Michael Ash, it is my duty to inform you that Starfleet Command has determined that there is no evidence to suggest that any current member of the crew of the *USS Ascension* was a party to the criminal acts of its former commanding officer, Captain Rachel Franklin or its former communications officer Lieutenant Commander Matthew Keeler. This combined with your recent actions have demonstrated that you are fit to hold both the rank and position of captain of the *USS Ascension*." Clarke said and he opened the box to reveal the two captain's rank insignia inside, "Congratulations Captain Ash." he added as he handed the box to Ash.