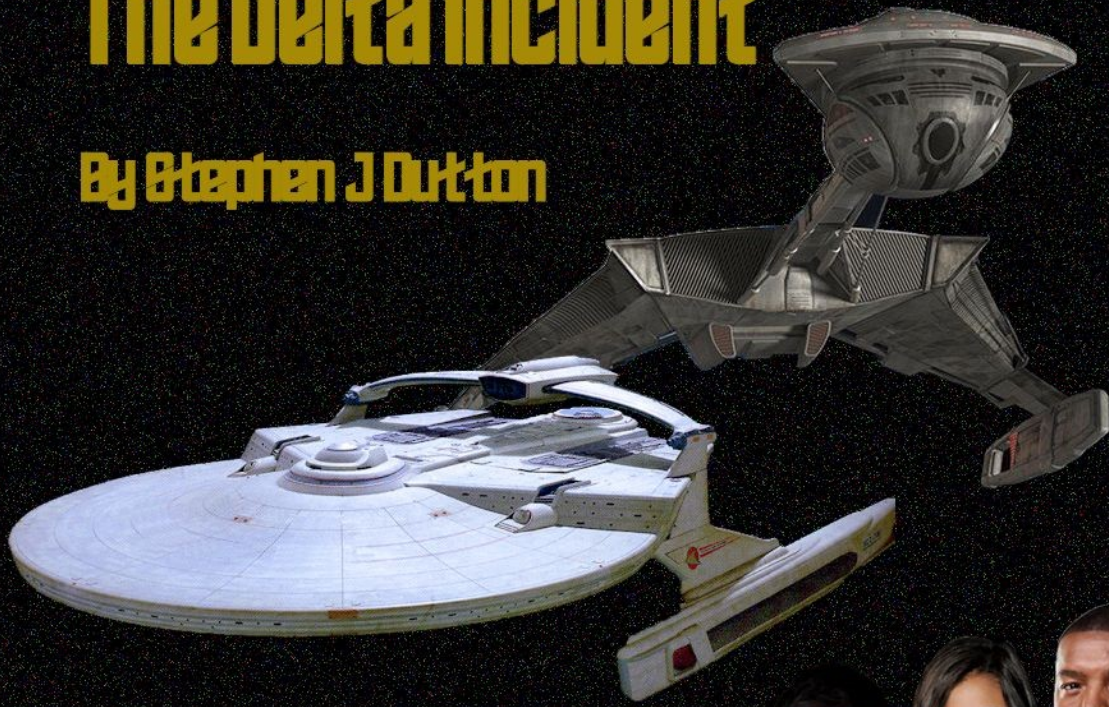# STAR TREK

ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.

The Delta Incident

By Stephen J Dutton

STAR TREK: ASCENSION
The Delta Incident

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

A Klingon attack on a Federation border post results in a hostage being taken and threatens to escalate into open conflict. The crew of the USS Ascension find themselves in a race against time to rescue the captive before he can be taken into the Klingon Empire and beyond reach. However, as the chase continues it emerges that there is more going on than a mere kidnapping...

1.

Stardate 8789.7 Klingon colony world Qu'Vat

Admiral Korda tore another chunk of meat from the roasted animal laid out on the table in front of him however, rather than take a bite of it himself he held it towards the Klingon woman seated right beside him and she smiled as she leant in to take a mouthful of it.

"Delicious. Most succulent and rare my love." she said, wiping a drip of blood from her chin as she spoke and Korda grinned before he too took a bite, "This new chef is talented."

"Yes, General Chang spoke highly of him Ah'ken. I hear that he was most disappointed that I was able to lure him here before the general could add him to his own staff." Korda said before the door to his chambers slid open and another Klingon strode into the room. Unlike Korda or his mate who both had the smooth human-like foreheads of Klingons infected with the DNA mutating virus that had swept through the Klingon Empire decades earlier the newcomer had the full ridged forehead that was natural to the species.

"Admiral." the officer said.

"Yes Captain Markon, what is it?" Korda asked.

"There is an emissary here from Qo'noS to see you. He claims to represent a number of officers." Markon answered.

"This is unexpected, does he have proof of his authenticity? Or are we supposed to just take his word for it?" Korda said.

"He came bearing these admiral." Markon said, setting a leather bag down on the table and Korda reached inside to find that it contained a number of d'k tagh, the traditional knives of the Klingon people. Each of these had the emblem of a Klingon house engraved at the hilt to identify the owners and Korda saw that each of them came from a prominent military officer.

"I see. Since no word has reached us that any of these Klingons is dead and no-one would be foolish enough to steal these from them we can only conclude that they gave them willingly. Show him in Markon." Korda said.

"Of course admiral." Markon replied before he left the room again.

"Should I leave?" Ah'ken asked.

"No, stay my love." Korda replied and he took Ah'ken's hand in his, lifting it above the table so that when Markon returned with another Klingon it was visible.

"Kras of the House of Korven." Markon announced."

Welcome to my humble chambers Kras of the House of Korven." Korda said, "Take a seat and join our meal."

"You honour me with such an invitation admiral." Kras said as he sat down at a vacant seat and reached for a jug of blood wine.

"I'm afraid the wine isn't up to much here. Something about the grain they feed to the animals taints it. The food on the other hand is much better." Korda told.

"It's still better than the blood wine aboard the ship that brought me here. It was stored in an outer hold without effective heating. They may as well have refrigerated it with dead meat. Yours at least is warm." Kras responded before he gulped down the beverage.

"I suspect you were not sent here discuss the quality of my food or wine Kras. What is so important that seven distinguished warriors would send you here to speak with me?" Korda said and Kras smiled as he poured himself another cup of blood wine.

"Your objections to the way that the high council is negotiating peace with the Federation has reached many ears Admiral Korda." he said.

"Is this supposed to be another plea for me to do as I am told like a good trained targ?" Korda said.

"No admiral it is an indication that you are not alone. The officers who sent me to speak with you have been watching you closely and while there are many of our warriors dissatisfied with the way the high council is approaching our relations with the Federation you have had more success than any other in showing us another way. It is known that you were able to snatch your master spy out from right under the noses of Starfleet and that you were able to cripple one of their battlecruisers. You have done this with nothing more than the ships of your squadron and a rabble of mercenaries and pirates. Who would have thought that the Kzinti could be made to be so useful?"

"So these warriors are willing to throw their weight behind me to put our case to the council?" Korda asked.

"No, not that." Kras answered.

"Then what?" Ah'ken added.

"General Gura is dead." Kras responded simply.

"I had not heard this." Korda replied.

"Of course not, the news is being kept secret while the cause of his death is investigated. It appears that he was killed while out hunting targ but some suspect he may have been poisoned by the Tal'Shiar." Kras explained.

"Yes, the Romulans were somewhat upset when he destroyed an entire squadron of their warbirds while they were in spacedock. Even if it was almost twenty years ago now." Korda commented.

""Indeed, Romulans have long memories." Kras said, "Of course with his death this leaves a vacancy on the high council and the officers I represent feel that that vacancy should be filled by you."

"An honour." Korda said.

"There is significant competition though admiral and General Gorkon is pushing for one of his allies to be installed instead. Gorkon is influential and if you are to emerge victorious then you will need something to make you stand out to more than just a handful of warriors. You need to be able to hand us an advantage that is both military and diplomatic. Can your network of spies and mercenaries do that?" Kras asked and Korda smiled at him.

Stardate 8790.1 Federation outpost *Delta XIV* located along the Federation-Klingon border.

Both sides of the Federation-Klingon border were well fortified with space stations and starships patrolling between them. The abortive conflict that had been halted by the intervention of the Organians had spurred both governments to reinforce their own sides of the border in anticipation that the truce imposed on them would eventually break down.

The defences on the Federation side were based around the Epsilon stations, large facilities manned by Starfleet personnel that were not only well armed but also equipped with sensors powerful enough to monitor ship movements deep into Klingon space. The resources needed to construct and operate these stations meant that fewer than a dozen had so far been constructed, one of which had been destroyed several years earlier by the V'Ger probe on its path towards Earth and so to provide additional coverage there were also dozens of smaller outposts spanning the gaps between the large Epsilon stations.

Outpost *Delta XIV* was one such outpost, a listening post positioned close to the border where the relative proximity of both Federation and Klingon colonies meant that a large portion of the limited commercial traffic between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. In addition to this there was also a great deal of more illicit traffic as contraband items were smuggled back and forth across the neutral zone and *Delta XIV* was also responsible for looking out for such outlaw traffic. Because of this and also owing to its role in defending the Federation against a Klingon invasion it was equipped with shields and weapons for its own protection that could be raised at a moment's notice. Therefore, it came as something of a surprise to the station's commanding officer when he was summoned to the operations centre because it sensors had just detected a Klingon warship approaching that was ignoring all efforts to communicate with it.

"Ensign can you tell me exactly what is going on here?" he asked.

"Sorry commander but this is normal. We've picked up a Klingon vessel on an intercept course. We've tried hailing her but she's ignoring us." the ensign responded and he pointed to a display that showed the course being taken by the Klingon ship. It was obvious that if it remained on this heading then it would reach *Delta XIV* very soon.

"Do we have a visual?" the commander said but the ensign shook his head.

"No, the ship is cloaked." he answered and the commander frowned.

"If it's cloaked then how can we detect it?" he said.

"The cloak is an older type commander. We can't identify the vessel precisely but we know it's there and given that it has a cloak it has to be Klingon." the ensign explained and the commander nodded his head.

"Okay go to red alert. We can deal with a single Klingon raider on our own. Shields up and arm all weapons." he said out loud.

"Aye commander, red alert." another of the command crew said and moments later a klaxon began to sound. However, it became immediately apparent that something was wrong.

"Commander shields aren't responding." another officer called out.

"Why not?" the outpost's commander demanded as he rushed to the tactical consoles.

"There's a problem with the power distribution network commander. We can't get power to the shields." the other officer told him.

"Phasers and photon torpedoes are non-operational as well commander." a second tactical officer added, "No power to any weapon system."

"Then we're defenceless." the commander said before he spun around, "What are the closest starships to our position?" he asked.

"Flight four-two is six hours away. The Cole-class frigates *Dawnstone* and *Relic* but at warp eight the *Ascension* can be here in under five." one of the operations officers told him.

"And the Klingons?" the commander said,

"At their current speed they'll be here in three hours." the operations officer said.

"So we have to try to hold out with no weapons and no shields for around two hours." the commander said to himself, "Okay make the call, summon all ships in the area to our position and signal Starfleet command. They need to know what's going on. After that get engineering working on those shields and weapons. Maybe we can still handle this ourselves."

2.

Stardate 8790.1 Miranda-class destroyer *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 patrolling the Federation-Klingon border.

Moving his belongings into his new quarters was not something that Captain Michael Ash had been looking forward to. Following the death of his predecessor Captain Rachel Franklin and the revelation that she may have been involved in passing classified information to the Klingons he had been under suspicion by Starfleet as well and it was only when he intervened to prevent a clone of Franklin from destroying the Constitution-class heavy cruiser *Lexington* that they had been satisfied about his loyalty, finally promoting him to captain and giving him command of the destroyer he had served on as first officer for several years. The loss of captain Franklin had been a major blow to the crew and it had been difficult for them to hear that she was a spy and a traitor to the Federation and taking over her quarters was not something that sat well with Ash. However, as captain of the *Ascension* he needed to demonstrate to the crew that it was possible to move on and that began with him moving his belongings into the captain's quarters.

Ash had been in this room many times prior to his promotion when he had come to them to discuss the *Ascension*'s operations with Captain Franklin but taking them over as his own was different. It was traditional for captains to record a message for their subordinates about what to do should the captain die and Franklin had been no exception to this. Despite the circumstances surrounding her death, Ash had still seen it to watch this and he was reviewing it again when the intercom to the door of his new quarters chimed.

"Come in." he said, pausing the playback of the video so that Franklin's face filled the screen and he turned around just as the door slid open to allow the *Ascension*'s science officer to enter the room.

"You asked to see me captain?" he asked and Ash nodded.

"Yes Tan, take a seat." he replied, indicating the chairs either side of the desk that currently had several boxes resting on it and Tan nodded before both men sat down facing one another, "As you know in light of my promotion to captain the Ascension needs a new first officer. Starfleet has sent me a list of candidates that they consider suitable to the task but I've decided that I'd rather promote from within" Ash continued, "Obviously there are three suitable candidates aboard, yourself, Lieutenant Commander Teela and Lieutenant Commander Forrester. Out of all of them your service record suggests that you are the most suitable of the three and I've asked you here to offer the position to you. So do you want the job?"

Tan looked at Ash across the table and smiled.

"Captain it would be my honour." he answered.

"Excellent. There is one more thing as well." Ash said as he opened a drawer in the desk and took out a small box before he stood up and looked at Tan, "Lieutenant Commander Jams Tan in recognition of your service aboard the *USS Ascension* as chief science officer and now upon your advancement to the position of first officer it is the decision of Starfleet Command that you are to be promoted to the rank of commander." and Ash opened the box to reveal the rank insignia of a full commander in Starfleet.

Tan got to his feet as well to take the gold coloured badges from Ash before the two men shook hands.

"Thank you captain." he said, "If you don't mind me asking who would you have approached next? Teela or Adam Forrester?"

"Frankly James it never occurred to me that you'd say 'no'." Ash replied, "Of course if you did then that would leave me trying to chose between an Andorian party girl and a man who thinks that the same government he works for is out to get him." It was then that the intercom sounded and Ash reached out to answer it, "Ash." he said.

"Captain we've just received a distress signal from the space station *Delta Fourteen*." the voice of the Ascension's communications officer said.

"Did they say what the problem is Estevez?" Ash asked.

"Yes sir, they say that they're under attack by Klingons." Estevez replied and Ash and Tan looked at one another.

"Tan and I are on our way to the bridge now. Ash out." Ash said before he shut off the intercom.

Ash and Tan hurried from Ash's quarters to the nearest turbolift that took them in a matter of seconds to the Ascension's bridge.

"Okay what's our status?" Ash asked as he sat down in the captain's seat at the centre of the bridge while Tan hurried to the science station at the side.

"Course laid in for space station *Delta Fourteen* captain." the *Ascension*'s navigator replied and Ash nodded.

"Thank you Mister Etchemin." he said before he looked at the Andorian woman sat beside Etchemin, "Teela how soon can we be there?"

"At warp eight a little under five hours captain." she said.

"Captain the *Dawnstone* and *Relic* are also responding. They're closer than us but we'll be there an hour ahead of them at the best speed of our respective vessels." Estevez added from the communication console. "Commander Teela engage at warp eight. Estevez let *Delta Fourteen* know that we're on our way and see if you can get a full tactical appraisal from them."

"Yes captain." Estevez said at the same time as Teela turned the *Ascension* to the heading provided to her by Etchemin and activated the Starfleet destroyer's warp drive at full power, propelling it to more than five hundred times the speed of light, "*Delta Fourteen* this is the *USS Ascension*. We are on an intercept course for your position. Our ETA is approximately five hours. Our captain would like a full tactical evaluation."

"Message received *Ascension*." a voice responded and Estevez played the reply over the bridge speakers so that everyone could hear it, "We have a single Klingon vessel of unknown configuration approaching us. It's using a cloak but it's an older type that our sensors can just about penetrate. That's why we can't identify the ship."

"Just one ship?" Ash said, frowning. Having served along the Federation's border with the Klingon Empire for most of his career he was well aware of the defensive capabilities of the Starfleet space stations deployed along it, "Can't you deal with one ship on your own?"

"Our defences have failed *Ascension*, both weapons and shields." the officer from *Delta XIV* answered.

"How?" Ash said.

"We don't know. All we know is that power isn't reaching them. We expect the Klingon ship to arrive in three hours and if they follow standard Klingon practice they'll want to board us. Hopefully they'll do that before opening fire. Our security detachment is deploying to protect key areas of the station. Hopefully we'll be able to hold them off until you can arrive." the officer from *Delta XIV* said.

"Understood Delta Fourteen. Good luck. Ascension out." Ash said and then he closed the channel from the controls on his chair.

"They have to hold out for two hours?" Etchemin said, "If the Klingons decide to open fire on the station instead of board her then it won't last two minutes."

"That rather depends on the class of vessel involved." Tan pointed out.

"At least with a Klingon boarding party aboard their ship won't be able to fire on the station without risking their own people." Estevez pointed out.

"That maybe ensign but if it's just a small raiding ship then the handful of Klingons that are aboard are unlikely to last long against the station's security detail. Commander Tan do we know how big that is?" Ash said and he looked towards his newly promoted first officer.

"According to Starfleet records there are thirty security officers and enlisted men aboard the station. Plus one hundred and sixty-five other Starfleet crew who could be armed." Tan told him, checking the numbers on his console.

"So almost two hundred people who could be used to defend against what might be a boarding party in single figures." Ash said, "They need to keep the Klingons pinned down without killing or worse still stunning them all. If the Klingon captain thinks that his men have been taken prisoner then he'll happily destroy the station to kill them."

"Chief Duke where are we up to?" Ash asked as he entered the *Ascension*'s security section to find the starship's entire security detail present. All of the men and women wore body armour that would protect them against not only the bladed weapons that Klingons were known to favour but also the disruptors they carried providing that they were not set to too high a level. At the moment that Ash entered the room Senior Chief Petty Officer Duke was in the process of handing out unit assignments to his staff while assault phasers and larger phaser rifles were being issued and signed for.

"By using all our transporters we should be able to beam everyone aboard the station in under three minutes captain." Duke replied, "I assume that you'll be arming the rest of the crew just in case the Klingons decide to send anyone over here while our shields are down?"

Ash nodded.

"Yes, Commander Tan will be watching for any incoming transporter signatures although our intention is to disable the Klingon ship with our phasers first. Do you have a team picked out to raid their ship if possible chief?" he said.

"Of course captain. I've split my people into two waves. The first will go aboard Delta Fourteen and render whatever assistance is required. The second wave can either follow them or be used as a boarding party against the Klingons, but captain if we're up against one of their larger ships then we just don't have the manpower to overwhelm four hundred armed Klingons." Duke said.

"Chief I hate to say it but if it's one of their bigger ships then we're probably going to be too busy trying to avoid getting destroyed to worry about sending away teams anywhere. A K'tinga-class battlecruiser is more than we can handle on our own." Ash replied.

"So what will you do if it a battlecruiser captain?" Duke asked.

"Focus on avoiding getting shot until the *Dawnstone* and the *Relic* arrive an hour after us. With their support we should be able to handle even the best the Klingons can throw at us." Ash said, "Now I need to be on the bridge before we drop out of warp. If all goes to plan Doctor Reese and Commander Forrester will meet you in transporter room one to beam over to the station."

"Yes captain." Duke responded before Ash turned to leave.

After exiting the security section Ash returned to the bridge and took his seat again.

"Ensign Estevez is there any more word from *Delta Fourteen*?" he asked but Estevez shook her head.

"No captain, we haven't heard anything from them for almost two hours now." she said.

"About the time the Klingons arrived." Etchemin pointed out.

"Captain I am detecting the station on our sensors." Tan added, "However, there are no other vessels in the area."

"Unless they're cloaked." Teela suggested, "There could have been another ship that had a better cloaking device than the one the station's sensors were able to pick up."

"Let's not get into over thinking this commander." Ash said, "Lieutenant Etchemin what's our tactical status?"

"Shields are raised and operating at full power. All photon torpedo launchers are loaded and phasers are charged."

"Captain we're coming up on Delta Fourteen now. Thirty seconds until arrival." Teela announced and he nodded.

"Commander I want you to perform a sharp impulse turn as soon as we drop out of warp. If there are Klingons in the area then they may have seen us coming and left a surprise in our path." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain, Standing by for impulse turn in tee minus ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Now!" Teela said and at the word 'now' the *Ascension* dropped out of warp and the Andorian woman used the destroyer's impulse drive to make a sudden course correction as quickly as she could.

Delta XIV had the standard Federation design template of a large flared upper section to its structure with a narrower section extending downwards from this, giving the station the appearance of some gigantic mushroom floating in space. Just as Tan had said the space station was still right where it was supposed to be and its structure was largely intact although on even the most cursory of visual scans it was easy to see that the station had suffered damage from an attack. The hull had been breached in several places and pieces that had been blasted off the station now drifted close by, the gravitational pull of *Delta XIV* itself preventing them from drifting too far away.

"Captain if you'd like to direct your attention to the antenna array at the top of the station." Tan said and Ash looked closely at the image on the bridge's main viewscreen that was dominated by the space station, focusing on the spot where its subspace antenna would normally be located. However, instead of the precisely designed antenna array all that Ash saw was the mass of twisted metal.

"Disruptor damage?" Ash said and Tan nodded.

"I think so captain. In fact all of the damage I am detecting appears to have been inflicted by Klingon disruptors. However, I do not think that they are the latest models." he said.

"Just like the cloaking device." Ash said.

"Let me guess," Teela said, "the Klingon High Council will condemn the attack and deny any involvement, claiming that it was a raid carried out by outlaws using an obsolete and stolen starship."

"That is a typical practice." Tan commented.

"When in reality it was a fully authorised act of aggression." Etchemin added.

"Ensign Estevez are you picking up any Klingon transmissions?" Ash said, glancing towards the young woman at the communication console.

"Negative captain, it's quiet on all channels." she replied.

"Then I think we can assume that the Klingons aren't reporting success to their superiors. Commander Tan what about the raiding ship?" Ash said.

"There is a slight subspace distortion at bearing one zero four mark three two that could be a vessel using an inefficient cloaking device captain." Tan told him.

"And what about the station itself? What can you tell me?" Ash said and Tan turned back to his sensors.

"The station appears to be operating on auxiliary power. Life signs indicate that there are survivors throughout it but I can't get an accurate count for you captain." he said.

"Commander Tan you have the conn, I'm beaming over there with an away team." Ash said, jumping to his feet and heading for the turbolift.

Already carrying an assault phaser and communicator, Ash travelled directly to one of the *Ascension*'s transporter rooms where he found it crowded with members of the destroyer's security detail, including chief Duke. Also present though were the ship's medical officer Doctor Reese and also the chief engineer Lieutenant Commander Forrester and he made his way through the crowd to where these three stood together.

"Captain is something wrong?" Duke asked when he saw Ash.

"The Klingons have been and gone. The station is damaged and we haven't been able to make contact with it for about two hours now but sensor scans suggest that there are survivors. I want the three of you to beam over there with me and two more of chief Duke's men now. Have teams of your own people ready to follow us once we know exactly what the situation is." Ash replied and Duke looked towards the transporter pad where half a dozen security guard stood waiting to be beamed over to the space station.

"Harris, Oliver, you're beaming over to the station with us. Everyone else stand down." he told them and all but two of the security guards promptly stepped down from the transporter pads so that Ash, Reese, Forrester and Duke could take their place.

"Can you lock us onto their transporter crewman?" Ash asked the transporter operator on duty.

"Sorry captain, I'm not picking up a beacon. There isn't any interference though so transport will be as safe as usual."

"As long as we don't end up in a parallel universe where everyone is the opposite of what they are here." Forrester commented and Reese looked at him.

"Seriously?" she said and he nodded.

"Oh yeah, there's a parallel universe where the Federation is evil. It was only discovered after a transporter accident swapped people from the two universes who were beaming at the same time. Don't trust anyone with a goatee." Forrester said.

"Not now you two." Ash told them before he looked back at the transporter operator, "Just give your best guess crewman. Energise." he said and moments later he felt the familiar sensation of the beaming process starting.

3.

"So when are you going to tell us Tan?" Teela said when Ash had left the bridge and the other officers present all turned towards the science officer.

"Tell you what?" he replied.

"Oh come on James." Teela exclaimed, "The captain's been an official captain for weeks now and he needs to name a first officer. Did he offer you the position or do I need to start sucking up to try and beat Adam Forrester?"

"Maybe I'd be in with a shot. I got promoted to chief communications officer before I'd even left the transporter room on my first day after all." Estevez pointed out.

"Yeah because the only other commissioned officer in the department quit to get away before we found out he was a spy." Etchemin pointed out, "Captain Ash was a navigator so maybe he'd rather have someone who does the same job as his second in command."

Tan smiled and then produced the box Ash had given him.

"Well you can all stop daydreaming because it looks like I need some white shirts." he said in reference to the white coloured shirt that senior Starfleet officers wore in place of their divisional colours and he opened the box to reveal the commander's rank insignia.

"I guess I need to call you 'sir' now as well then." Teela said as she looked into the box.

"And don't you forget it lieutenant commander." Tan responded, stressing the word 'lieutenant' in her rank.

Instead of materialising on a transporter pad aboard *Delta XIV* the away team from the *Ascension* materialised in a corridor where the first thing they became aware of was the alarm that was sounding and looking at a nearby monitor they saw that the station was still at red alert. Although structurally intact there were some signs of damage to the station corridor, with scorch marks on the walls from energy weapon blasts,

"Don't move! Get your hands up!" Forrester suddenly yelled out and the rest of the team turned to see him aiming his phaser towards a man with a goatee beard who had just come around a corner to investigate the light and sound of the transporter operation.

"Forrester stand down, that's one of the crew." Ash told him.

"Sorry captain, the beard threw me for a moment." Forrester responded as he lowered his weapon.

"I'm Captain Ash from the *Ascension*." Ash told the startled crewman, "Who's in command here?"

"Lieutenant Commander Sorell is on the bridge now sir." the man replied and Ash nodded as he flipped open his communicator.

"Ash to *Ascension*, we're down and safe. We're heading for the operations centre now. Ash out." he said before he closed the device again and looked at the crewman before he added, "Can you take us there?"

"Yes captain, this way please." the man said, beckoning for the away team to follow him.

Normally getting to the operations centre would be a simple matter of locating the closest turbolift and letting it take the away team to their destination but Ash had correctly deduced that the damage to the station might mean that things would not be this simple. Instead of guiding the away team to a turbolift the crewman showed them to an access shaft and pointed to it.

"I'm afraid that this is the only way to move between decks right now." he said, "But at least operations is only six levels up."

"Six levels? Well I suppose the exercise will be good for us." Reese commented just after the crewman entered the shaft and began to climb the ladder inside.

"How many levels down if we fall?" Duke added, looking at Forrester.

"On a station like this about seventy." the engineer replied, "Of course you'll probably have hit the sides so many times that you'll have broken your neck well before you reach the bottom."

"That's not very reassuring commander." Duke replied before he followed the crewman into the shaft.

After climbing all the way to the station's operations centre the away team were helped out of the shaft by a pair of security guards stationed just outside it.

"Who are you?" one asked Duke when he realised that he did not recognise the man.

"Senior Chief Petty Officer Duke, *USS Ascension*." Duke replied and the two guards snapped to attention, "At ease." Duke told them, "Now help the officers from that shaft."

"I take it you're here to make sure that no-one who shouldn't be aboard uses the shaft to gain access to operations." Ash said as he followed Duke out of the shaft.

"Yes captain." one of the guards responded, noticing the rank insignia on Ash's uniform.

"Are there still Klingons aboard?" Ash asked.

"We don't think so sir but Lieutenant Commander Sorell decided it was a wise move." the guard said.

"Sorell?" Reese commented when she heard this as she too was helped from the shaft, "Did he say 'wise' or 'logical'?"

"Logical. All my decisions are based on logic." another voice said from close by and when the members of the away team turned around they saw a Vulcan in the uniform of a lieutenant commander approaching them.

"Lieutenant Commander Sorell, I'm Captain Ash of the-" Ash began.

"Of the *USS Ascension*, yes. You're arrival is quite prompt captain." Sorell interrupted.

"Can you tell us what's going on?" Ash asked.

"Of course captain." Sorell replied, "At stardate eight seven nine zero point one we detected a cloaked vessel on approach. We were able to detect it only thanks to the cloaking device it was using being of an obsolete type. Two hours later a D-four class destroyer decloaked and opened fire and due to an unknown malfunction with our tactical systems we were unable to raise our shields or return fire. The attack destroyed our communications and sensors, following which a force of Klingons beamed aboard.

"Was it just a random raid or did they seem to be after something?" Ash said.

"Initially they struck at what seemed to be random points on the station, however a pattern soon emerged as the various boarding parties moved to cut off access to our main computer core. We are currently operating using the auxiliary core." Sorell told him.

"They destroyed the core?" Forrester commented.

"No, they stole it." Sorell responded, "Once they had secured the section the Klingons brought in engineers to remove the main storage drives before returning to their ship. In the process they also abducted a member of the crew."

"They took someone with them?" Reese said in surprise, knowing that Klingons were not known for taking prisoners given their own negative views on being captured themselves.

"Yes. I suspect they were taken to act as a living shield against any action to prevent their escape." Sorell said.

"Who did they take?" Ash added.

"One of the stations civilian staff." Sorell answered and he used the PADD he carried to call up a photograph of the man before handing it to Ash.

"Tom Benson, medical systems technician." Ash commented.

"Correct." Sorell said, "The company that sent him here is providing upgrades to medical facilities on eight outposts along the neutral zone."

"A medic? A civilian one at that, not the sort of person to have important tactical information that the Klingons would be interested in." Reese said.

"The Klingons aren't fussy about targeting medical personnel doctor." Duke pointed out.

"I'm painfully aware of that chief." Reese replied.

"Unfortunately Mister Benson may have information of use to the Klingons. As part of his role in upgrading our medical systems he had significant access to our computer system." Sorell said and Ash winced.

"So he could potentially unlock encrypted sections of the core for the Klingons much faster than if they had to get their own technical people to do it."

"You are correct Captain Ash." Sorell said, "Mister Benson's abduction has considerable security implications if the Klingons realise his value."

"What about the rest of your crew?" Ash said.

"We have significant casualties but they could have been worse. The Klingons focused on their target rather than random wanton destruction. However, between the initial attack by their vessel and their boarding action we still have more than fifty dead including this station's commanding officer, Commander Keane and almost two hundred wounded. As the station's first officer I have been left in command. New casualties are still being discovered by search parties and taken to the infirmary." Sorell said.

"Are your medical facilities intact then?" Reese asked.

"Yes, although they have been put under considerable pressure. As your security officer pointed out the Klingons are willing to target medical staff and a number of them are among the dead and wounded." Sorell said, "That is how Mister Benson came to be abducted. He volunteered to join the parties attempting to evacuate wounded station personnel."

"I should go and see if I can help." Reese said and Ash nodded.

"Yes, request whatever help you need from the *Ascension*. Can someone show her to your sickbay Sorell?" he said and the Vulcan officer turned around.

"Ensign T'Mak please show the doctor to our infirmary." he said and another Vulcan officer nodded.

"Yes lieutenant commander. This way please doctor." she said, indicating for Reese to follow her.

"Captain Ash," Sorell said, turning back towards the *Ascension*'s commanding officer, "although logic indicates that your vessel should remain here while we continue to make repairs to the station there is the issue of Mister Benson and the computer core. The longer we delay the more difficult it will be to recover

either of them from the Klingons. With the information in that computer core the Klingons would gain a significant tactical advantage."

"Just one moment commander." Ash replied and he took out his communicator, flipping it open again," Ash to *Ascension*." he said.

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

"Commander Tan what's the status of that Klingon ship?" Ash asked.

"Heading for home captain, they're already inside the neutral zone. We can still see it through their cloak but that won't be true for much longer, the further away they get the harder it is to track them." Tan answered.

"How long until they get out of range?"

"About five hours as long as they continue at their current speed. If they slow down then their warp signature will be easier for their cloaking device to conceal." Tan said.

"Okay so if they continue at their current speed how long until they reach the other side of the neutral zone?"

"At warp five they will enter Klingon space in approximately sixty hours captain." Tan told him.

"Thank you commander. Ash out." Ash said before closing his communicator again and he looked back at Sorell, "Lieutenant Commander Sorell there are two Cole-class frigates en-route to this station that will get here in a little under an hour. The *Ascension* will remain here until they arrive, at which point we'll go after the Klingons. Assuming that warp five is their best speed we can move twice as fast as they can and we'll easily catch up with them before they can get to their side of the neutral zone."

"It'll still mean the *Ascension* crossing into the neutral zone captain." Forrester pointed out and Ash nodded.

"Yes, I'm aware of that but this will be a hot pursuit and the life of a Federation citizen may be at risk so it's a chance we're going to have to take." he replied.

Leaving Reese and Forrester aboard the *Delta XIV* outpost along with teams from each of their departments to assist the space station's crew in making repairs and treating the significant number of wounded, Ash returned to the *Ascension* with Duke and as soon as they were aboard Ash returned to the bridge.

"Captain, Starfleet has ordered the *USS Magellan* to redeploy to try to cover the gap in sensor coverage along the border while Delta Fourteen's sensors are out of action." Estevez told him as soon as he stepped from the turbolift.

"As if one Oberth-class ship could make up for an outpost." Teela commented.

"It's better than nothing. Now do we still have the Klingon vessel on our sensors?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. They are holding their speed so their warp signature is visible through their cloaking device." Tan responded from the science station where he had been monitoring the fleeing Klingon vessel closely.

"So are we really going after them captain?" Teela said and Ash nodded.

"Yes commander we are. Ensign Estevez has Starfleet Intelligence issued any specific warnings about Klingon activity in this sector?" he said.

"Nothing captain." Estevez replied, shaking her head, "No unusual activity and fleet deployments appear normal."

"So that will help them claim this attack wasn't authorised by their government." Etchemin commented.

"And by the same standard the Klingon High Council can hardly complain when we go into the neutral zone after them." Ash said, "The Klingons have taken the computer core from *Delta Fourteen* as well as a civilian hostage and I intend for us to recover both."

"At the pace they're going we can run them down as soon as you give the word captain." Teela said, smiling.

"Not just yet lieutenant commander. We can't leave the station defenceless so we're going to have to wait for the *Dawnstone* and *Relic* to get here. After than I want us to go to maximum warp." Ash said.

"I've already got an intercept course plotted captain. There are no star systems or spatial anomalies to get in the way so it should just be a straight run after them." Etchemin said.

"At warp eight we'll catch them in three hours." Teela added.

"What sort of ship are we dealing with captain?" Estevez asked.

"A D-Four destroyer, which if it's only going at warp five can't have been upgraded in a long time." Ash said. "Given that a D-Four only carries a hundred or so crew it also means that we should be able to send a boarding party over to get the hostage and the computer back."

"Exactly. Chief Duke is briefing his people now. Lieutenant Etchemin you're going to have to shoot straight. Very straight in fact considering that the Klingon ship is going to be cloaked." Ash said.

"Don't worry captain, I can do it." Etchemin replied.

"Mister Tan we're going to have to bring that ship out of warp to disable it." Ash continued, turning to his new first officer.

"Yes captain, we should be able to use a photon torpedo to disrupt their warp field and collapse it. The uncontrolled collapse will also send an energy pulse back through their power system that will take their warp core offline temporarily. I estimate that it will take several minutes for the Klingons to be able to get it back on line." Tan said.

"A photon torpedo will blow an unshielded D-Four to pieces commander." Ash pointed out.

"Yes captain. The torpedo will have to have its yield reduced to about forty percent of normal. I should be able to modify several in the time we have available." Tan replied.

"But once the Klingon ship drops out of warp won't we lose track of it?" Estevez asked.

"No, the blast from the torpedo will irradiate the hull for a short time and these emissions will be visible even through the cloaking device. The difficulty will be for Lieutenant Etchemin to determine which part of the ship he is aiming at." Tan told her.

4.

Starfleet was not the only organisation to monitor events on the other side of the neutral zone closely, the Klingons also operated a vast array of listening posts and these had tracked the movements of the Ascension and the other Starfleet ships when outpost *Delta XIV* was attacked. To the Klingons there was nothing unusual about Starfleet patrol vessels rushing to the aide of a space station that was under attack and so they discounted it. However, there was more than just Klingons reviewing the data gathered by the sensors and when Matthew Keeler, the former communications officer of the *USS Ascension* saw it for himself he immediately reached for the intercom.

"I need to talk to the admiral immediately." he said.

"What is it now Keeler?" Markon asked in reply.

"I've been looking at this sensor data your people have been gathering and we may have a problem." Keeler told the Klingon.

"My people have been over that information as well and they haven't seen anything to be concerned about." Markon replied.

"Then let me make a fool of myself but I need to see Admiral Korda as soon as possible." Keeler said.

"Very well. I will send someone to collect you." Markon said before he abruptly closed the channel.

Despite having served Korda for a number of years before he finally defected entirely, Keeler was still not trusted by the Klingons to wander around their headquarters as he pleased. After all a man who had committed treason once could just as easily turn on his supposed new allies and whenever he left his suite of rooms he was escorted by at least two Klingon warriors who viewed him with suspicion.

It did not take long for an escort to arrive for him though and the pair of warriors led by Markon himself took the human to Korda's office where he was studying a plan for the invasion of the Federation.

"Keeler to see you admiral." Markon said as the door opened to the office opened.

"Ah Mister Keeler, impressive don't you think? More than a hundred battlecruisers striking in unison to overwhelm Starfleet's defences." Korda said without bothering to look around as Keeler was admitted into the room.

"Yes, very." Keeler replied, not wanting to risk angering Korda by bringing up the fact that he had nowhere near that many ships under his command.

"Now what is so urgent that you needed to interrupt my planning?" Korda asked, turning to face the human spy.

"This is admiral." Keeler answered and he handed Korda a PADD that showed the sensor data gathered by the Klingon listening posts.

"This has already been presented to me." Korda said, thrusting the PADD back towards Keeler.

"And did your intelligence officers point out the problem?" Keeler said and Korda scowled.

"Don't play games with me. You have something to say so say it." he said.

"Scans across the neutral zone picked up three Starfleet vessels heading towards the outpost Delta Fourteen." Keeler said.

"Yes, rushing to save the outpost. That is only to be expected." Korda said.

"Perhaps, but the captain was instructed to disable the outpost's communications as soon as he could." Keeler pointed out.

"They managed to send a distress signal. I will ask the captain why he was so slow in preventing them from doing that." Korda said.

"He may not have been admiral. I think the outpost already knew that an attack was coming and it called for help." Keeler told him.

"How could they have known? The ship has a cloaking device. It cannot be detected." Korda said.

"Look admiral, that technological edge the Klingon Empire used to have over Starfleet is long gone. Right now cloaking devices are the only advantage you have and every year Starfleet gets better at penetrating them. The ship you sent was old and the cloaking device fitted to it is one of the first that the Romulans provided to you Empire. On the other hand that outpost is equipped with state of the art sensors and I think that they saw right through your ship's cloaking device and immediately called for help." Keeler said.

"What is your proof Keeler?" Markon demanded.

"Simple, just look at the movements of the Starfleet ships that responded to the outpost's distress call, the information is all here. See?" Keeler said and he held up the PADD again and pointed to part of the screen.

"These two frigates suddenly increased their speed to maximum at the exact same time that the *Ascension* unexpectedly changed course towards the outpost, also at maximum warp. That was two hours before your ship arrived, dropped its cloak and opened fire. Face it admiral they saw you coming and if they saw that then they may still be tracking your ship." Keeler said.

"Then why aren't they pursuing the ship?" Markon asked, "Your old vessel is holding position at the outpost."

"Because going after your ship would mean leaving the outpost defenceless. We'll know for sure once those two frigates arrive as well. Then the Ascension will be able to come after your ship and given how slow yours is they shouldn't have trouble in catching them before they get across the neutral zone." Keeler replied.
"Captain Markon send a signal to the captain of that ship. Warn him that the Federation may have penetrated his cloak. He and his crew should prepare for battle." Korda ordered.

"The console is just frozen." one of the outpost's command crew said as he looked at the displays in front of him. It had not taken long for *Delta XIV*'s engineering staff to repair the damage to the sensor array but even now the console where the information was being displayed was not working.
"Have you tried turning it off and back on again?" Forrester asked.
"What? That's ridiculous. The processor must have overheated and-" the outpost's officer said before Forrester reached out to disconnect the power to the console for a moment before he turned it back on again. Immediately the console went into its start up routine before requesting an operator to log in.
"There's more than enough to be fixed around here without you using up my time on things you could have solved yourself lieutenant." Forrester said before he walked away from the console and up to Sorell, "If you're going to get this place up and running again then your people need to start trying the obvious."
"I shall speak with our chief engineer." Sorell responded. Then after a moment's hesitation he added," Lieutenant Commander Forrester, what is your assessment of the situation regarding the total failure of our tactical systems?"
"You mean was it caused deliberately or just through plain negligence?" Forrester asked.
"Exactly. Our engineering department reported no issues with our power distribution net prior to the detection of the Klingon vessel, yet we were left totally defenceless against it." Sorell answered, "Logically as an outsider, you are the best person to ask for an explanation of how this happened."
"I have to admit that I haven't looked into that yet but I'll take a look now." Forrester replied before he looked around and in a louder voice added, "As long as everyone here can be trusted to see the obvious instead of bothering me with trivial issues."
"Very good lieutenant commander. Please bring me the results of your investigation as soon as soon as they are available." Sorell said.
"Of course." Forrester responded and then his communicator sounded and he reached for it, "Forrester." he said simply.
"Lieutenant commander the *Dawnstone* and *Relic* just dropped out of warp." Estevez told him, "The *Ascension* is moving out now. Lieutenant Commander Teela estimates that we'll intercept the Klingons in three hours."
"Understood ensign, I won't plan on you being around for at least the next six. Tell Captain Ash I said good hunting. Forrester out." Forrester said. Closing the communicator and returning it to his belt he looked at Sorell again, "With luck you should have your computer and missing crewman back within twelve hours." he told the Vulcan.
"Mister Benson is not part of our crew. He is an outside contractor." Sorell pointed out.
"Whatever. Now I've got a power failure that was very fortunate for the Klingons to explain. I'll give you a call just as soon as I have any news." Forrester said.

Teela had kept the *Ascension* pointing towards the fleeing Klingon destroyer while the crew waited for the two lighter Starfleet frigates *Dawnstone* and *Relic* to arrive. Similar in layout to a Miranda-class destroyer, the Cole-class frigates were optimised for short ranged tactical missions. With a top speed much lower than most other Starfleet vessels they instead carried an impressive array of torpedo launchers which, combined with Starfleet's strategy of deploying them either in pairs or larger groups made them a threat to even the largest of hostile vessels. This made the two newly arrived frigates the perfect choice to remain and protect outpost *Delta XIV* while the *Ascension* quickly accelerated to warp eight as it began its pursuit of the Klingon ship now hurrying across the neutral zone.
"Intercept course confirmed captain." Tan said as he compared the *Ascension*'s heading with that of the Klingon ship. Turning a ship at warp speed was very difficult and most course corrections would require a vessel to drop to impulse speed before turning and when involved in a pursuit this could make all the difference between a ship being caught or escaping, "Estimated time until intercept one hundred and eighty-five minutes."
"How long will it take you to modify the torpedoes?" Ash asked.
"Not long captain, a little over an hour." Tan answered and Ash nodded.
"Then get to it." he said, "Etchemin, you can take over at the science station until Commander Tan returns. In the meantime I'm going to go and speak with Chief Duke. Lieutenant Commander Teela you have command, call me if anything crops up."
"Yes captain." Teela replied.

Ash and Tan both entered the turbolift together before speaking their different destinations.

"Security." Ash said.

"Photon control." Tan added and the turbolift began to move, "So what do you think our chances are of rescuing the hostage captain?" he added.

"Not good. Klingons aren't known for treating the few prisoners they take well, in fact he may already be dead." Ash answered.

"And if he is?" Tan asked.

"Then it will probably be best to simply destroy that ship outright. The computer core from *Delta Fourteen* can easily be replaced and it's more important to stop the Klingons getting it to their technical and intelligence people than it is to recover it intact. So don't go modifying all of our torpedoes for low yield operation, we may need some ship-busters yet." Ash told him and Tan smiled.

"I'll bear that in mind captain. But my time estimate was only for modifying a handful of torpedoes, not all eighty we're carrying." he said before the turbolift came to a halt and the doors slid open.

"This is security." Ash commented before stepping out of the turbolift and letting the doors slide shut behind him again.

Crossing the hallway to the entrance to the *Ascension*'s security section Ash went inside to find Duke and his security force at work preparing equipment.

"Spacesuits?" Ash said when he saw the equipment being prepared.

"Yes captain." Duke replied, turning to face his commanding officer, "A cloaking device may not block transporters from working but it will make getting a reliable lock impossible. If the Klingons keep their cloak active we're going to have to get aboard the old fashioned way."

"A spacewalk?" Ash asked and Duke nodded.

"Yes captain. We'll take shuttles to get as close as possible to the Klingon ship and then cut our way in through the hull with shaped charges. Assuming we can't locate an air lock that we can force of course." he replied.

"I don't like the sound of that. What if you blow a hole in the section that the hostage is being held in?" Ash said.

"Given what we know about the layout of a D-four we should be able to find the neck section of the hull relatively easily and we'll force our way in there. Any hostage is most likely to be towards the stern where the Klingons have cells for crewmembers who have to be confined. Plus going in through the neck will make it easier to cut the command staff off from the bulk of the crew and potentially giving us access to the bridge." Duke explained.

"This is an old ship chief, I doubt there's much in the way of intelligence we can gather from her. Just free the hostage, and either gab or destroy that computer core they took. After that I want us back out of the Neutral Zone and into Federation space as soon as possible." Ash told him.

"What about prisoners from the Klingon crew captain? I doubt they'll surrender but we could stun them." Duke pointed out and Ash considered this for a moment.

"How were you proposing to get the hostage back?" he asked.

"Transporter." Duke said, "Beaming out should be fine as long as we take a beacon along to let the *Ascension* get a lock. The same goes for my team, the shuttles will return to the *Ascension* as soon as they've dropped us off."

"In that case take long some extra beacons. Any members of the crew that you stun can be beamed back here and by the time they wake up they'll be in our brig. I'm sure that Starfleet Intelligence would appreciate being able to interrogate them." Ash said and Duke nodded.

"Yes captain. We'll get you your prisoners." he replied.

5.

"Long range sensor scans confirm that the *USS Ascension* has left outpost *Delta Fourteen* and entered he neutral zone." Korda told Keeler when the human was brought into the command centre, "The Bird of Prey *Jadashha* is in position to be able to respond but I want to know how Starfleet is able to track our destroyer."
"How the hell should I know?" Keeler responded, "Maybe they can only pick up its warp field at full power or maybe they can see through the cloak entirely. Starfleet has had plenty of time to upgrade its capabilities since I left the *Ascension*."
"If Starfleet can see through the cloak then they may be able to detect the *Jadashha*." Markon pointed out.
"I doubt that Starfleet can penetrate the latest models of cloaking devices. The one aboard the ship captured at Genesis can't have been fully reverse engineered yet." Keeler said.
"It makes little difference to the Jadashha." Korda said, "Order its captain to proceed into the neutral zone. Maximum warp."

When Reese had first arrived in *Delta XIV*'s infirmary she had been taken aback by the number of casualties. When the station's morgue was filled the bodies of the dead had been taken to a cargo hold that could be kept cool instead but even this failed to make enough room for the hundreds of injured. The Klingons had bombarded the station when their ship first arrived but only as much as was need to destroy its communications before beaming its boarding parties aboard. The casualties from this initial stage of the attack were largely blast injuries but following the start of the boarding action this had changed drastically. The Klingons had been armed with disruptors of course, but they had shown their usual preference for close combat and unless confronted by Starfleet crew members armed with phasers they had opted to use the bladed weapons that they carried in abundance. Ordinarily Klingons would have been very thorough in despatching their victims but their eagerness to reach the computer core had resulted in them leaving many crewmembers injured but still alive. Now these individuals, suffering from deep lacerations and broken bones.
"I don't think I've ever treated so many injuries of this type." Reese told the station's chief medical officer as they both took a brief break between treating patients.
"I know what you mean." he said, taking a sip from the cup of coffee he had just taken from a dispenser while Reese got a cup for herself as well, "As if treating combat casualties isn't bad enough we have to deal with wounds that could have been inflicted a thousand years ago. You'd think that a species as technologically advanced as the Klingons would have outgrown such barbarity."
"It's disheartening to think about how many of the species in our quadrant seem to be stuck in the Dark Ages from a behavioural point of view." Reese added before another member of the station's crew entered the room.
"Doctor we've just had another body brought in." he said, "We need a formal declaration of death before we can take him to the cargo hold."
The station's chief medical officer sighed and was about to get to his feet when Reese placed a hand on his shoulder.
"No." she told him, "You were already working when I arrived. I'll deal with this." and she put her drink down on the table before she stood up, "Okay crewman, lead the way." she said to the crewman who had brought them the news.
The crewman led Reese through the infirmary where because of a lack of biobeds many patients were still laid out on stretchers on the floor. Reese was guided past all of these to a side room where a body had been placed on a table, covered by a reflective blanket taken from an emergency survival kit.
Walking up to the covered body Reese lowered the sheet and was pleasantly surprised to find that it had not been badly mutilated by hacking injuries. Technically using a tricorder to confirm that there were no life signs was enough before the body could be placed in storage for a more thorough examination later but Reese was immediately struck by the difference between this body and most of the others she had seen so far. Strangely there were no injuries of any kind visible on the front of the body and Reese frowned before she began to inspect it more closely. Wounds from directed energy weapons such as phasers and disruptors were not always obvious but Reese soon determined that there were no injuries of any kind to the front of the body and so she rolled it over so that she could examine the back as well and it was here that she found what she was looking for.
The body had a single entry wound by the spine where something sharp and narrow had been inserted between the fourth and fifth ribs. Reese inspected this closely, cutting back the blood stained uniform around the wound so that she could see it better. The hole was small but obviously deep and Reese could not see the full extent of the wound without more specialist equipment. Fortunately although the medical instruments available in this room were limited, full medical facilities not being considered a priority for the dead, there

was a narrow probe included that Reese was able to gently insert into the wound. This probe connected wirelessly to Reese's medical tricorder and as she pushed it deeper she saw that, just as she had expected to find the injury extended into the dead man's heart. Also the deeper into the wound the probe went the wider it appeared to be. This suggested that whoever had killed the man had turned whatever weapon had been used from side to side, cutting through flesh inside the body but leaving the entry wound as small as possible.

Death from such an injury was likely to have been very quick but the amount of blood that would escape the wound would have been minimised by the weapon itself acting as a plug. Instead the bleeding had been internal and according to the readings taken by the probe there were signs of this throughout the chest cavity. Reese knew that striking a blow such as this would require significant skill as well as detailed knowledge of human anatomy in particular and nothing about the man's death suggested to her that it had been inflicted by a Klingon. She had already seen enough of the wounds they had inflicted with their blades, both fatal and non-fatal and none of them had been as precise as this. Most of the wounds had been from hacking rather than stabbing and none of the weapons carried by the Klingons were capable of inflicting such a precise injury, even if the alien warrior had known where to strike. This left only one worrying conclusion. The dead man on the table in front of Reese had been killed by another member of the crew.

Reese quickly reached for her communicator and flipped it open.

"Reese to Forrester." she said into it.

"Forrester here doctor. What can I do for you?" the *Ascension*'s chief engineer responded.

"I need to see you quickly." Reese told him, "I'm in compartment forty-two on deck seventeen. Oh and are there any of our security people still onboard or did they all beam back over to the *Ascension* with Chief Duke?"

"Security? What do you need security for doctor?" Forrester asked.

"Never mind that now, are there any left aboard *Delta Fourteen* or not?" Reese replied.

"No, Duke and the captain took them all back just in case they needed them against the Klingons." Forrester said and Reese sighed.

"I was afraid you'd say that. How soon can you get here?" she said.

"Give me ten minutes and I'll be with you. Is that okay?" Forrester said.

"Yes, I'll be fine for that long." Reese said, reaching down and resting her hand on the assault phaser that had been holstered on her thigh since she beamed aboard *Delta XIV*.

Reese was waiting right inside the doorway when Forrester arrived a short time later and she grabbed him to pull him inside the room before manually closing and locking the door behind him.

"Woah doc!" What's got into you?" Forrester exclaimed.

"Adam you've been looking into why the station's defences failed right when they were needed, yes?" Reese replied and Forrester nodded.

"That's right." he said.

"So have you found anything?" Reese added.

"Not really, no. All I can tell you is that power failed in the tactical systems at some point but it wasn't picked up by the monitoring systems. It could have failed right at the moment the crew tried to activate their defences or it could have been down for days. As for the cause, that's another matter." Forrester said.

"Well come and take a look at this. It might offer you a hint." Reese told him and she beckoned for him to follow her to the table where the dead body was still lying face down so that the fatal wound the man had suffered was visible, "Here, what do you make of this Adam?" she added, pointing out the entry wound by the spine.

"A stab wound? Pretty small for a Klingon blade." Forrester commented as he looked at it and Reese nodded.

"Exactly." she said, "There's no way that this was inflicted by a Klingon weapon and I doubt that a Klingon could have inflicted it anyway, the wound is far too precise. It goes all the way into the heart and the blade was obviously moved around inside to maximise the damage without allowing massive amounts of blood to escape the body."

"Somebody didn't want to be covered in blood?" Forrester said.

"That's what I was thinking, yes. Adam, everything here points towards this man being killed by one of the station's crew." Reese said.

"So that's why you wanted to know if any of our security guards were still aboard. You're not sure whether it was one of *Delta Fourteen*'s security staff." Forrester said.

"That's right. If we call them in we could be alerting whoever did this that we know this man wasn't killed by a Klingon. Now maybe it's unrelated to the attack, someone aboard could have had a grudge against him but he could also have been killed to hide the sabotage of the system's defences long enough for the Klingons to launch their attack." Reese said.

"We're going to need to know who this man was and where he was killed." Forrester said looking down at the corpse on the table again.

"I've already got a positive ID for you. This man was Petty Officer First Class Hughes, a medical orderly." Reese told him.

"Well I think we should start by finding out where Petty Officer Hughes' body was found." Forrester replied.

8.

Captain Voroth, commanding officer of the *IKS 'Iw HIq*, Klingon for *Bold Raider*, knew that to be granted command of any warship was an honour, as was being given a key role in a covert operation against the Federation. However, he also knew that his vessel was obsolete and lacked the firepower of more modern designs. This meant that the ship would most likely be relegated to secondary duties rather than front line combat. So although he had the honour of commanding the *'Iw HIq* he had little chance of finding honour in battle and even this mission had provided little chance for such honour. The defences of the Federation space station had been disabled in advance by a traitor among the crew, leaving his men only the task of retrieving the computer core and delivering it back to his superiors. The only reason his ship had been chosen for the task was because it was considered too trivial for a more valuable vessel.

However, Voroth saw the chance for greater honour when his operations officer brought him word of a message from home.

"Captain we have received a broadcast from the admiral's office." the junior officer said.

"What is it lieutenant?" Voroth asked.

"There is a Starfleet vessel following us. It has left Federation space and is closing on us." the lieutenant replied.

"Sensors, why have you not detected this vessel?" Voroth demanded before the lieutenant could finish telling him the full contents of the message.

"Our cloak interferes with our long range scans captain. The energy is absorbed and-" Voroth's sensor operator began.

"Enough!" Voroth snapped, clearly angered that he had had to be told about their pursuer by admiral Korda's staff instead of his own crew.

"Captain the admiral has despatched the Bird of Prey *Jadashha* to intercept. We are ordered to maintain course and speed while remaining cloaked.

"So the *Jadashha* will get the honour of the kill? If Starfleet is following us then they must be able to track us even through our cloak." Voroth said, "Helm as soon as the Starfleet ship approaches to within half a million kellicams you are to drop us to impulse. Tactical, disengage the cloak and raise our shields the moment this happens. Then transfer power to weapons. Starfleet may be expecting an easy kill but by the time the *Jadashha* arrives I want nothing left of their ship but debris."

Estevez frowned when her communication console picked up what seemed to be a fragment of a subspace signal and she rechecked the data. Sure enough the *Ascension*'s subspace communications antenna had detected a modulated signal that was obviously artificial in origin and from the way the modulation changed it suggested that it was a communication signal instead of a sensor pulse.

"Captain I think I may have something here." she said and Ash turned his chair to face towards her.

"What is it ensign?" he asked.

"It looks like a subspace pulse broadcast." Estevez answered, "The encoding pattern seems to be of a Klingon format."

"Captain a pulse broadcast could indicate that the Klingon high command is sending a message to a ship that they can't be certain of the location of." Tan pointed out.

"You mean like a cloaked ship trying to slip across the neutral zone?" Ash said and Tan smiled.

"Exactly captain." he said.

"Okay ensign, how about you try and tell us what's being said?" Ash said, looking back towards Estevez.

"I'll try captain but the encoding looks like a type that Starfleet Intelligence hasn't been able to break yet." Estevez said.

"Just do your best ensign." Ash said and Estevez nodded before turning back to her console.

Starfleet maintained a database of known methods of encryption used by foreign governments and as chief communications officer aboard the *Ascension*, Estevez had full access to this. Taking the brief message that had just been captured by the *Ascension*'s systems Estevez began to run a pattern matching algorithm on it, looking for any data patterns that had been linked to specific meanings from observations of activity following previous occasions when such patterns had been detected in intercepted Klingon signals.

As Estevez had pointed out, Starfleet did not have a full decryption of this cypher pattern but this did not mean that no progress had been made and as each part of the message was run through the algorithm the database began to make a list of suggested meanings. Most of these had so many possibilities that no specific meaning could be gleaned without further information, however there was one part of the message that could have only one meaning.

Bird of Prey.

The message definitely made mention of a Klingon Bird of Prey type vessel and since the *Ascension* was in pursuit of a D-4 class destroyer this suggested that there was a second Klingon vessel in the area, one that was faster than the D-4 and equipped with a far superior cloaking device that the *Ascension*'s sensors would be unlikely to be able to penetrate.

"Captain we may have a problem here." Estevez said as soon as she saw the mention of the Bird of Prey appear on the screen in front of her.

"What is it ensign?" Ash asked, looking towards her again.

"Captain the Klingons seem to be talking about a Bird of Prey." Estevez said.

"Instructions for a rendezvous?" Etchemin suggested.

"Unlikely lieutenant." Tan responded as he checked the *Ascension*'s sensors again, "The Klingon ship is maintaining its course and speed. Communication regarding a rendezvous would likely involve an instruction to change this to match new parameters. It's far more likely that the Klingon ship we are chasing has been warned about us and told to expect reinforcements."

"You think the D-Four's crew haven't seen us then?" Teela asked.

"Their own cloaking device will disrupt their ability to run sensor scans. They will be limited to passive scans only and the combination of the cloak and their warp field will make our own warp field difficult to detect until we are within a few million kilometres." Tan explained.

"By which time we'll be able to fire on them." Etchemin added.

Reese and Forrester headed for Delta XIV's operations centre. With the main computer core missing access to the station's remaining computing power was limited and the operations centre had priority for what there was.

"Over there. I think casualty reports are being run through that crewman." Reese said, pointing across the room to where an enlisted crewman was sat at a console. The two officers from the Ascension walked towards the crewman and he looked up when he heard their approach.

"May I help you?" he asked and Reese nodded.

"Yes crewman, do you have a list of the casualties suffered in the attack?" she replied.

"Yes commander, all casualty information is being brought to me to be recorded." the crewman answered.

"Good. We need to take a look at it so you can take a break. We'll let you know when we're done." Forrester told the man who frowned in return.

"But commander-" he began.

"No buts but yours out of that chair crewman." Forrester interrupted and he pointed to the lieutenant commander's rank insignia on his own sleeve.

"Yes commander." the crewman said, getting out of his chair and walking away.

"Okay doctor, let's see what you can find." Forrester said and Reese sat down in the chair and looked at the various displays on the console.

"Okay here are the casualty lists." she said when she found the database she was looking for, "I'm going to run a search by name. Hughes." Reese added and she entered the name into the database's search function.

The search yielded on a single result and when it brought up a photograph of the dead man taken from the station's personnel records Reese and Forrester immediately saw that it was the man whose body they had just left in the examination room.

"That's him alright." Forrester commented, "Does it say where he was found?"

"Hold on, I'm checking." Reese said, "Yes, here it is. Deck six, section twelve. What's there?"

"For one thing it's where the main computer used to be. The Klingons surrounded that section and hacked their way through anyone that got in their way."

"So the traitor was waiting for them. Hughes must have seen them and whoever they are they killed him to cover their tracks." Reese said.

"And since the Klingons stole the computer core there's no way of knowing who gave them access to it." Forrester said before he saw the crewman who had been on duty at the console coming back towards them in the company of Sorell, "Clear the search doctor." he told her quietly.

"What?" Reese said and when she looked up from the console she too saw Sorell and the crewman. Then she quickly returned the console to the state it had been in when she sat down.

"Lieutenant Commander Forrester, Doctor Reese, why did you order this crewman away from his post?" Sorell asked when he arrived in front of the two officers from the *Ascension*.

"A security issue." Forrester replied.

"A security issue should have been reported to Lieutenant Ossam, this station's chief of security." the Vulcan officer said.

"Not when the chief of security could be a suspect lieutenant commander." Forrester replied sternly.

"A suspect in what?" Sorell responded.

"Treason and murder." Reese said.

"You have evidence of these crimes?" Sorell said and Reese nodded.

"Of the murder, yes. From the timing it stands to reason that it could have been committed to cover up the act of sabotaging *Delta Fourteen*'s defensive systems." she said.

"There is logic to your suggestion." he said, "Although it is by no means certain. Regardless of the motive for murder a boarding action by Klingons would be the ideal time to try to conceal it. I assume that I too must be on your list of suspects?"

"For now." Forrester replied.

"Very well, please continue with your investigation. I shall await your report." Sorell said. Then he turned to the crewman and added, "You may return to your duty. Do not discuss any of this with anyone."

"Doesn't it bother you that we just called you a suspect?" Reese asked as she stood up from the console again.

"I know that I am innocent doctor and I have no doubt that you will come to the same conclusion. There is no logical reason to attempt to obstruct your investigation. To do so would only cast suspicion upon me." Sorell answered.

"Of course encouraging us to investigate could also be a clever ruse to try and divert that suspicion away from you." Forrester pointed out.

"Not now Adam." Reese told him as she shoved him gently away from the console and the pair began to walk towards the exit from the operations centre.

"So do you believe that he's innocent doctor?" Forrester said softly when he thought they were far enough away from Sorell that the Vulcan's heightened sense of hearing would not be able to hear what he said.

"Maybe." Reese replied, "But it's like you said, he could just be trying to look supportive to make us think he's not the killer."

"Enemy vessel now on our sensors captain. Range one hundred million kellicams and closing." the *'Iw Hlq*'s sensor operator said when the warp signature of the Ascension finally became strong enough that it overcame the combined interference of the Klingon vessel's own warp field and its cloaking device.

"Can you give me a visual scan of our enemy?" Voroth responded.

"Yes captain." the sensor operator said and the main bridge view screen changed to show an image of the Ascension from the front as it headed straight for the *'Iw Hlq*.

"Starfleet heavy destroyer. Miranda-class." Voroth said. Although far from the fastest or most powerful vessels in Starfleet, the multiple variations on the Miranda-class were known as the workhorse of the Federation and Voroth knew that the heavy destroyer variant with its weapon mounting roll bar was more than capable of taking on his out of date ship, "What is our weapon status?"

"Torpedo launcher loaded and ready captain. Disruptor banks show operational but with the cloak active we-" the Klingon tactical officer began.

"I know what being cloaked does!" Voroth snapped, "Helm stand by to drop out of warp and someone bring me the human, I have a use for him."

7.

"Enemy vessel in range now captain. Firing torpedo." Etchemin said as soon as his console told him that the Klingon ship was in effective range of the Ascension's photon torpedoes and without waiting for a specific order he launched one of the weapons.

Erupting from the *Ascension*'s roll bar mounted launcher, the photon torpedo sped towards the Klingon destroyer, able to maintain a lock on the vessel despite the cloaking device it was fitted with. Rather than exploding on impact with the Klingon ship as torpedoes were normally configured to do this one exploded as soon as it was within its target's warp field. This release of energy was enough to destabilise the Klingon destroyer's warp field, causing it to collapse almost instantly. The effect of this was to force the Klingon ship out of warp speed uncontrollably, causing it to tumble as it came crashing to sublight speed.

Reacting to this quickly, Teela cut the power to the *Ascension*'s warp drive at the same time as the Klingon ship was being forced out of warp and the Starfleet ship also dropped to sublight speed only in a far more controlled manner.

"Did the torpedo work? Do we still have a lock on the Klingon?" Ash asked, hoping that Tan's modifications to the photon torpedo had worked as intended.

"Confirmed captain. The Klingon ship has been forced out of warp and its hull has been irradiated by the torpedo. Our sensors are still tracking it." Tan responded.

"Teela keep after him. Mister Etchemin fire phasers at will." Ash ordered.

Alarms sounded throughout the *'lw Hlq* as the unshielded ship was caught in the blast of the photon torpedo and forced to drop out of warp. The lag in the ship's inertial dampening field meant that any members of the crew who were unable to find something to hold onto were instead thrown against bulkheads and even on the bridge there were injuries caused by this.

"Damage report!" Voroth yelled just as the ship's helmsman was able to regain control and the violent lurching motion came to a stop.

"Engineering reports our warp core shut down to prevent an overload captain. At least ten tup to get it restarted." one of the bridge officers responded, using the Klingon equivalent of minutes.

"What about structural damage?" Voroth asked, knowing how powerful Starfleet photon torpedoes were.

"None captain." another of his officers replied, "The enemy torpedo appears to have been adjusted for a minimal yield. That attack was meant to disable us, not destroy us."

"Enemy vessel has dropped out of warp." another of the command crew added.

"Can they see us?" Voroth asked.

"Captain it appears that our hull has absorbed significant radiation from the torpedo detonation. We are emitting an energy signature that our cloaking device will not conceal." the same officer who had told Voroth that the torpedo had done no structural damage added.

"Tactical drop the cloak. Get those shields up now. And someone bring me that worthless human petaQ!" Voroth ordered.

Using the *Ascension*'s sensors to guide her, Teela turned the starship sharply to follow the out of control Klingon ship but before Etchemin could fire the destroyer's main roll bar mounted phasers the Klingon ship suddenly disengaged its cloaking device, appearing as if from nowhere on a visual scan.

"They're decloaking. Quick, fire phasers." Ash ordered, knowing that there would be only a short time before the Klingons were able to raise their shields.

Etchemin fired the *Ascension*'s main phasers as soon as he was ordered to but he had not had enough time to acquire a lock on the Klingon ship and the bright red stream of energy passed close by without hitting the target. He followed this up with a second shot from the *Ascension*'s phasers and this time the attack hit the Klingon destroyer directly astern. However, by this point the Klingons had already raised their shields and instead of blasting a hole in the hull close to the engineering section of the antiquated D-4 the phaser blast was absorbed by its shields.

"Return fire! Return fire!" Voroth ordered as his ship shuddered again when it came under fire and even though its shields held the force of the impact on them passed into its structure.

With the focus being on raising the *'lw Hlq*'s shields, its tactical systems had not had the chance to divert enough power to the ship's disruptor banks for them to be fired with any reasonable chance of damaging the already shielded *Ascension* but the torpedo loaded into the Klingon destroyer's forward launcher was prepared to fire and the ship's gunner launched it as soon as his console indicated that a lock had been achieved on the Federation starship.

Although the launcher was not pointing towards the *Ascension* the torpedo was still able to turn towards the Starfleet vessel in a wide arc, circling round for the kill. However, this prevented the guided weapon from reaching its maximum speed as rapidly as it was capable of and in turn this delayed the impact considerably, giving Etchemin the chance to lock onto it with the phaser banks mounted on the Ascension's saucer section and he fired a quick blast from one of these that struck the torpedo and detonated it in mid flight.

"Good shooting Mister Etchemin." Ash said when he saw the torpedo explode far short of hitting the *Ascension*.
"Captain the Klingon vessel is coming around for another attack." Tan added as the Klingon destroyer turned ominously towards the *Ascension*.
"I've got him." Etchemin responded, switching the *Ascension*'s phaser lock back towards the D-4, "I just need a good run at their port side."
"On it." Teela replied, steering the *Ascension* towards the Klingon vessel's port side and accelerating so that the two vessels passed by one another at a relatively short distance.
Although he specifically wanted to target the Klingon's port side warp nacelle Etchemin fired the *Ascension*'s phasers as soon as the two ships drew level and maintained the stream of energy pulses from the roll bar mounted phaser. Slamming into the Klingon ship's port side deflector shield these weakened it enough that by the time the *Ascension* drew level with the Klingon warp nacelle the phaser blasts were able to penetrate and there was an explosion as part of it lost containment of the high energy plasma it was filled with.
"Analysis Commander Tan, did that do enough damage to disable the Klingons' warp drive?" Ash asked, hoping that the glowing stream of plasma now trailing behind the Klingon ship was an indication that it was now effectively stranded, unable to flee at warp speed even once their core had been reset.
"Scanning captain. It's difficult to tell with their warp core off line still." Tan replied before he suddenly looked up and added, "They are locking weapons again captain."
"Evasive action." Ash ordered and Teela turned the *Ascension* sharply so that the disruptor blast that followed missed the ship by a narrow margin.
"Hold on. Etchemin get ready with those phasers I'm going to drop us right in behind them." the Andorian woman said, continuing the turn so that the *Ascension* ended up directly astern of the Klingon vessel. Etchemin had no time for another phaser lock and he fired on instinct instead. This time his aim was good despite the lack of computer assistance and the phaser blasts hit the rear of the Klingon destroyer close to the ship's impulse drive.

"Aft shields absorbed most of the hit captain." one of the Klingon bridge officers said as he assessed the damage inflicted by the phaser hit, "No primary system damage."
"Helm bring us around. Tactical fire all weapons as they come to bear." Voroth ordered and the helmsman immediately fired the destroyer's impulse drive to turn the ship as sharply as possible so that the Ascension was in its forward firing arc once more.
As the ship turned the tactical officer fired one of the secondary disruptors, one mounted with a firing arc wide enough to be able to shoot at targets beside the vessel. The disruptor beam hit the *Ascension*'s dorsal hull close to where the roll bar connected and if not for its shields the Starfleet vessel would have lost power to the phaser on that side of the bar. However, as the Klingon destroyer continued to turn the Ascension came back into its forward arc and the Klingon tactical officer followed up his disruptor shot with a second photon torpedo.
Fired directly towards the *Ascension* this time, the torpedo was able to gain speed far more rapidly and before the Starfleet crew could react it slammed into their ship from behind, punching through its shields and blasting a hole in the hull.

"Damage report." Ash said as the Ascension shook violently.
"Shuttle bay hit and decompressing captain. Damage control teams are already on their way. No word on casualties yet." Estevez responded as she began to receive reports from close to the shuttle bay almost instantly.
"Mister Etchemin I think disabling their weapons might be a good idea." Ash said and Etchemin nodded.
"I'll see what I can do captain." he replied.
With the Klingon destroyer currently heading straight for the *Ascension* the most obvious target among its weapon systems was the torpedo launcher mounted right at the very front of its command module and Etchemin aimed for this as he fired both of the *Ascension*'s roll bar mounted phasers at the same time. The combined energy of these was easily enough to overwhelm the underpowered Klingon ship and there was a flash of light as the torpedo launcher was struck. Fortunately for the Klingons there was no torpedo loaded that could explode, taking the entire command module with it, but the launcher itself was put out of action.

"Captain we've lost torpedoes." the Klingon tactical officer said as his console suddenly showed the torpedo launcher to have been destroyed.

Voroth frowned and let out an annoyed growl but before he could speak the door to the bridge slid open and a pair of his crewmen brought the human Benson as Voroth had ordered and the Klingon captain smiled.

"Ah human." he said, "Your Starfleet has arrived to try and save you. I want you to tell them to stop."

"Captain we're picking up a transmission from the Klingon ship." Estevez said.

"Calling for that Bird of Prey to come and help them?" Teela suggested.

"No commander, the signal is being sent to us." Estevez replied.

"Us?" Ash said, frowning.

"Yes captain. The Klingons are definitely hailing us." Estevez said.

"Don't tell me they're offering to surrender." Teela said.

"Pigs might make warp speed." Etchemin commented when she said this.

"Put them through ensign." Ash ordered and the image on the *Ascension*'s view screen changed to show the video signal being transmitted from the opposing Klingon starship. However, instead of focusing on the captain of the D-4 the image focused on a human male.

"Tom Benson I presume." Ash said and the man nodded.

"Yes captain. The captain of the *lw Hlq*, the vessel you are currently engaged in battle with has ordered me to warn you that unless you cease your attack he refuses to guarantee my safety." Benson said.

"What an eloquent way of threatening to kill him if we don't back off." Teela commented.

"Mister Benson I understand your plight and my crew and I are intending to rescue you but the security of the Federation is currently at risk. Please inform the Klingon captain that in crossing the neutral zone, attacking the outpost Delta Fourteen, abducting you and stealing the computer core he has committed multiple acts of war against the United Federation of Planets. I am ordering him to lower his shields and surrender. He and his crew are to be taken into custody before being taken back to the Federation where they will be held pending-" Ash began but before he could finish Voroth suddenly shoved Benson aside and looked directly into the camera that was recording the footage on the bridge of the Klingon ship.

"I am Voroth!" he yelled, "I am a Klingon warrior and I do not surrender."

At that point the ascension's viewscreen switched back to a view of the exterior of the Klingon vessel and Ash looked at Etchemin.

"Transmission cut off at source captain." she said before there was a flash of green from the Klingon ship as it fired its disruptors at the *Ascension*. The Starfleet destroyer shuddered from the hit to its shields but even at close range the shot was insufficient to penetrate the *Ascension*'s shields while at full strength.

"I guess they aren't going to surrender after all." Ash said, "Mister Etchemin we know that the hostage is in the command module. Lock torpedoes onto-"

Before ash could finish though the *Ascension* was rocked once more by a weapon impact against its shields only this time the motion was far more violent as a second Klingon vessel suddenly decloaked nearby and fired a photon torpedo at the Starfleet vessel.

"Klingon Bird of Prey bearing one five seven mark six eight captain." Tan exclaimed.

"Helm bring us around. Etchemin fire at will on the Bird of Prey." Ash ordered and Teela turned the Ascension as sharply as she could towards the new arrival.

Although significantly smaller than a D-4, the Bird of Prey was a far more modern vessel and its weapons posed a greater threat to the *Ascension* than those aboard the antiquated destroyer and so despite the older vessel being the primary reason for the Ascension being in the neutral zone the Bird of Prey took priority for its crew.

Etchemin wasted no time in firing the *Ascension*'s phasers, the saucer mounted phaser banks in addition to the more powerful roll bar mounted weapons. In response the Bird of Prey fired a rapid volley from its wing mounted disruptors before peeling off, preventing the Ascension's weapons from striking the same section of shielding enough times to penetrate them.

"The Jadashha has distracted them captain." Voroth's first officer said and Voroth snarled.

"I can see that." he said, "Now what is our own status?"

"Our torpedo launcher has been destroyed captain and we have lost one of our disruptors. Those we have are unable to penetrate the Federation vessel's shields." the ship's tactical officer responded.

"What about shields and our cloaking device?" Voroth asked.

"Shields are holding but with the damage inflicted on our port side warp nacelle makes using the cloak impractical. Until engineering can effect repairs there is no way to block the emissions." the tactical officer answered.

"Helm is our warp drive back on line yet?" Voroth said, turning away from the tactical officer and towards the helmsman.

"Yes captain, engineering reports that our warp core has been successfully restarted. However, the damage to our nacelle means that we will have a maximum speed of just over warp two." the helmsman responded and Voroth snarled. His ship was impotent against the Starfleet heavy destroyer and even by focusing on his mission to return the stolen computer core and human Benson to Klingon territory would mean having to limp across the neutral zone at a painfully slow pace while other Klingon warriors fought honourably. However, leaving the crew of the Bird of Prey to distract the Starfleet ship could well be the only way that Voroth would succeed in his mission and there was always honour to be had in success.

"Helm engage warp drive. Best possible speed for home." he ordered.

8.

"Captain the D-Four has just gone to warp." Tan announced when the Klingon destroyer vanished in a flash of light.

"Can we track it?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. The Klingon ship is still leaking plasma from its nacelle. Its cloaking device will not function." Tan told him, "The damage we have inflicted is also limiting their speed to warp two point two."

"Okay so they aren't going to be outrunning us anytime soon but the longer we wait the more of a head start they'll get on us. Mister Etchemin I want this Bird of Prey dealt with quickly." Ash said.

"Aye captain. Torpedoes reloaded and ready to fire." Etchemin responded.

"Fire at will Mister Etchemin." Ash ordered.

Reloaded with photon torpedoes set to have their full explosive yield, Etchemin fired the *Ascension*'s roll bar mounted forward launchers. Both of the torpedoes sped towards the Klingon Bird of Prey as its helmsman was bringing the ship around for another attack run on the Starfleet vessel. With a clear shot and a good sensor lock, the two torpedoes slammed into the Klingon ship's shields one after another. The first produced only a flash of light from the interaction between the shield of gravitons and the antimatter released by the torpedo's warhead. The result was just enough to disrupt the integrity of the deflector shield long enough that when the second torpedo struck a point very close by it was able to punch right through. The angle of the hit meant that the torpedo tore through the Bird of Prey's wing rather than the main fuselage and this saved the small attack ship from certain destruction. However, the explosion was still enough rip the wing away from the vessel entirely, taking with it one of the disruptor cannons mounted on the tip of each and stripping the vessel of a significant portion of its firepower.

The Bird of Prey was still far from defenceless though and as its helmsman brought the ship to bear on the Ascension again the prow torpedo launcher glowed for a moment before a photon torpedo burst from the muzzle. With the *Ascension*'s shields still at full strength the impact of this weapon against them did no damage to the starship itself but the Bird of Prey's gunner was able to quickly follow this up with a volley from the ship's remaining wing tip mounted disruptor that penetrated the locally weakened shield and struck the Ascension's hull close to its engineering section.

"Damage report!" Ash snapped as the ship shook under the hit.

"Engineering reports warp drive off line captain." Estevez responded.

"Do we still have phaser power?" Ash asked.

"I can get you a single blast with each of the saucer mounted banks, they're already charged but the main cannons are off line." Etchemin answered, "We still have torpedoes though."

"So do the Klingons." Teela pointed out.

"Continue firing Mister Etchemin." Ash ordered and as the two opposing vessels sped past one another the younger man fired the phaser banks on the side of the saucer section facing the Bird of Prey. Although this depleted their stored energy the two blasts failed to penetrate the Klingon vessel's shields. Unlike the Klingon ship that was optimised for firing on targets directly ahead of it though, the *Ascension* had considerable firepower to cover its aft arc in the form of another pair of torpedo launchers mounted in the same weapons pod at the top of the roll bar as the forward launchers and the moment the Bird of Prey and the *Ascension* had passed one another by Etchemin fired one of these.

The Klingon crew barely had the time to register that they had just been fired upon again and they had no chance to take any evasive action before the torpedo hit the stern of their ship. With the Klingon shields already weakened by successive hits from the *Ascension*'s weapons the torpedo easily penetrated them, striking the Bird of Prey on the dorsal hull close to the impulse drive. Lightning seemed to arc across the hull of the Bird of Prey as it started to spin out of control, the torpedo hit having destroyed its main control systems and the bright light of the impulse drive began to flicker and fade.

"Enemy vessel has severe damage to its power grid captain." Tan said as he used the *Ascension*'s sensors to evaluate the damage inflicted on the Klingon Bird of Prey.

"What about shields?" Ash asked, watching the stricken vessel continue to tumble on the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge.

"Inoperative captain. The Klingon ship is unshielded." Tan replied and Ash smiled.

"Lieutenant Commander Teela bring us around. Lieutenant Etchemin fire phasers, let's finish this off." he said.

"You're not going to see if they'll surrender captain?" Estevez asked but Ash shook his head.

"Not this time ensign." he replied, "Klingons don't tend to give up even in the face of death and we don't have the time to be attempting to rescue them anyway."

"Coming about now captain." Teela said, lifting the *Ascension*'s nose so that the ship moved in a vertical circle relative to its own initial facing so that from the crew's point of view they came swooping down on the crippled Bird of Prey from above.

As soon as the Klingon vessel was directly in front of the *Ascension* Etchemin fired the starship's forward saucer mounted phaser banks, staring with those on the ventral side of the ship and following up with the dorsal set. The first shot burned deep into the Bird of Prey's command module, effectively decapitating the ship before the second shot hit the aft hull where it triggered a warp core breach that almost instantly consumed the already wrecked vessel in a brilliant light.

"Target destroyed captain. No evidence of survivors." Tan reported.

"Can we go after that D-Four?" Ash asked and Teela shook her head.

"Sorry captain. Warp drive is still off line." she replied and Ash sighed.

"Of all the times for Forrester to not be aboard." he said.

"We could always try just turning it off and back on again." Teela suggested before Ash glared at her.

"The *Jadashha* has been destroyed admiral." Markon said in making his report to Korda.

"How?" the Klingon admiral asked.

"Long range scans of the neutral zone indicate that the ship suffered a warp core breach admiral." Markon told him.

"And the *lw Hlq*?" Korda added.

"We have detected the *lw Hlq*'s warp field admiral, the ship has gone back to warp after dropping to impulse for a short time and engaging the Starfleet vessel. However, the strength of the warp field is lower than expected and the ship does not have its cloaking device engaged. It appears that the *lw Hlq* has suffered significant damage." Markon told him.

"What of the Starfleet ship?" Korda said.

"Not known. We haven't detected its warp field so it isn't pursuing the *lw Hlq* but as far as we can tell it hasn't been destroyed." Maron said.

"Then the *Jadashha* at least damaged their warp drive. The question now is how long it will take them to make repairs. Prepare the *Gjor'etlh* for departure I will meet the *lw Hlq* when it returns myself." Korda said as he got to his feet.

The turbolift came to a halt before the level that Reese and Forrester wanted to reach and Forrester sighed.

"I told them to get these fixed." he muttered, stepping towards the control panel and taking out a tool that allowed him to open it up, "Okay doc, the lights will go out for just a moment." he added.

"The lights? What have the lights got to do with this?" Reese asked before the inside of the turbolift was plunged into blackness.

"Nothing really but they run off the same power grid as everything else in here." Forrester replied before the lights suddenly came back on and he slammed the panel shut again, "Deck six, section twelve." he said and the turbolift then began to move once more.

"You turned it off and back on again?" Reese said, frowning and Forrester smiled at her.

"Like I tell everyone, it fixes most problems." he replied, "The operating system probably glitched during the attack. The engineering team fixed the hardware damage but didn't make sure that there was not data corruption that needed a full reset to fix."

The turbolift soon came to another halt but this time the door opened to reveal the part of the station that the two officers from the *Ascension* wanted to reach and they exited the car.

Although this part of the station had been attacked by the Klingons there had been little structural damage to it. By the time they got this far most of them had already switched from disruptors to bladed weapons and they had been under strict orders to avoid damaging the nearby computer core. The initial attack by the Klingon destroyer had caused some damage though and with the computer core being removed there had been difficulties in managing the operation of support systems throughout the station and this meant that a number of the computer terminals they walked past were out of order. However, Forrester was less interested in the station's computer network than he was in some of the other systems installed on this floor.

"There's one." he said, pointing up at where a security camera covered the corridor they were walking along.

"And you're sure that it will have the data we need?" Reese asked.

"Well maybe not this one in particular but this may give us a clue about where to look for a specific camera." Forrester replied as they approached the camera and he reached up towards the device with a cable that he used to establish a direct link from it to his PADD with.

"Anything?" Reese said but Forrester shook his head.

"No. The local memory has been destroyed. We'll have to find another." he said, disconnecting the PADD before looking around for another camera.

"There's another over here but it looks smashed." Reese said when she spotted the remains of another security camera.

"Typical." Forrester commented when he approached the damaged device, "The only thing that gets damaged and it's the thing we're looking for."

"I'm sure there are more around here. Two camera's aren't enough to cover an entire section." Reese said.

"Let's not be too hasty doc." Forrester replied, walking up to the ruined camera and looking for the direct interface, "The local drive may still be intact and if it is then I can pull the footage I want off that."

It did not take the engineer long to located the connection point that he was looking for and he used this to link the camera to his PADD just as he had done with the previous camera. However, when what he found on the camera's internal hard drive did not look like he expected it to he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Reese asked.

"This drive isn't formatted correctly. It's obviously not the original but any replacement should have been reformatted to take into account the requirements of storage and data transfer. This disk is optimised for long term storage. More like something to be used at a local terminal." Forrester explained.

"Okay that went right over my head Adam." Reese replied and she swiped her hand above her head to reinforce her point.

"Think of it like short and long term memory. Your short term memory is used to process everything that you experience but all that information is transferred to your long term memory. That's what this drive is supposed to be for, it provides somewhere for the camera to process the data it records, compressing it to make it more efficient to transfer over a data network before it gets sent to the core. The data can then be deleted from the camera's own drive. It isn't deleted right away of course, the camera keeps it until the disk space is needed and it gets overwritten. That's why I want to check the cameras here. They ought to still have the information they recorded during the Klingon attack on them." Forrester told her.

"Okay that's better. So if the camera's recorded the attack then they should show us who stabbed Hughes." Reese said, smiling.

"Exactly. Only the drive from this camera has been swapped and unless the maintenance crews around here are really careless then I think that it was done by our killer and he didn't have the knowledge to reformat the drive." Forrester said before he reached up to the damaged camera and after disconnecting it from his PADD he ripped open the already broken casing to expose the electronics inside.

"What are you doing now?" Reese asked.

"Taking the drive. It's evidence. If it was swapped by the killer then it could have their fingerprints on it and more importantly every computer hard drive has a unique serial number set in its primary duotronic processor that can't be changed. Using that we may just be able to track where it came from in the station's manifest and that could lead us to the killer." Forrester answered.

8.

The *Gjor'etlh* was a K't'inga-class battlecruiser, considered state of the art in the Klingon fleet and, apart from the experimental Excelsior-class, a match for anything that the Federation had to offer. Thus it was unsurprising that Admiral Korda used this vessel, the only one of its class currently under his direct control, as his flagship.

"All systems ready admiral." Markon told Korda as soon as the smooth headed admiral entered the battlecruiser's bridge. All of the other bridge officers present possessed the ridges that were natural to their species but every one of them knew better than to call attention to the admiral's lack of them, "We can depart immediately."

"Good." Korda responded, taking his seat at the centre of the bridge, "Is our course set?"

"Yes admiral." the battlecruiser's helmsman said from the long, curved console immediately in front of Korda where most of his most senior officers were sat beside one another, "Depart now. Accelerate to maximum warp. I want weapons and shields ready when we arrive."

"Yes admiral. Activating main drive now." the helmsman responded as he engaged the *Gjor'etlh*'s impulse drive and the powerful warship rapidly accelerated away from Qu'Vat and its orbital plane. Only once the ship was clear of any other objects potentially in its path could it accelerate to warp speed, until then only the impulse drive could be used safely. Impatient to reach the neutral zone, Korda was tempted to take the risk of engaging the warp drive within the solar system but reason overruled his haste.

"Admiral we are receiving a transmission for you." the *Gjor'etlh*'s communications officer said unexpectedly and Korda turned his chair towards the man.

"Who from?" he asked.

"There is no identification provided admiral but it is on a priority coded channel and marked for your eyes only." the communications officer said.

"Perhaps Kras or one of the officers he represents." Markon suggested quietly so that the other officers on the bridge would not overhear the name. Both Korda and Markon trusted the command crew as much as it was possible to do so but they both knew that some information was best kept to themselves.

"I'll take it in my quarters." Korda said, getting back to his feet, "Captain Markon the bridge is yours." he added as he headed for the exit.

Korda's quarters were located close to the bridge and he soon reached them. The moment the door slid open he could hear the communication terminal chiming and he walked over to it.

"Voice print required." the stern sounding voice of the computer said when Korda activated the terminal.

"Korda, Admiral." Korda said simply.

"Voice print positive. Channel open." the computer said but instead of showing an image of the person attempting to communicate with Korda the screen remained blank except for the symbol of the Klingon Empire. In addition to the lack of a video signal that could identify the caller the voice that then spoke was heavily distorted to disguise the identity of the person speaking.

"There has been news from our competitors." the voice told Korda without using his name, "M'Gath and his sons have raided a Romulan convoy and in the process discovered a covert surveillance ship among them. The Romulans managed to destroy their equipment before it could be captured but there was enough left to identify how they are monitoring our forces in the sector surrounding Khitomer. The chancellor is rumoured to be considering awarding M'Gath the vacant seat on the high council. You need to move quickly."

"I have everything in hand." Korda replied, "Soon we will have a full breakdown of Starfleet's operations along the border. What is one remote sector compared to an advantage like that?"

"Time is the factor now. We are trying to stall the chancellor but he is impatient. The Federation is pressing him to begin a new round of talks and he does not want to be distracted by competing houses vying for the position." the anonymous caller said.

"A few hours, that's all I need." Korda said.

"That may be fas enough. In the meantime we're trying to confirm exactly what M'Gath's house has. Even if it doesn't do us any good right now it might show up something we can use against one of the others. I will contact you again when I know more." the voice said before the channel was abruptly shut off.

Rather than return to the bridge Korda sat down at his desk and called up the computer records regarding Khitomer and the surrounding area of space. Despite being on the fringes of the Klingon Empire, the Khitomer system held promise as a possible colony location. For the time being though it had not been developed beyond a few basic structures owing to its proximity not only to the Romulan Star Empire but also the Federation Full scale colonisation would require either large scale fortification or the removal one or the other foreign power as a threat to it and M'Gath's discovery of the Romulan surveillance operation had the potential to do just that. This made M'Gath's achievement far more valuable, although it was still of lesser strategic value than detailed information about the Federation's defences. With that dozens of systems,

including Khitomer could be made more secure while the Federation's strategic position along the border would be weakened significantly.

In Forrester's absence Tan had gone to engineering to oversee the repair operation on the *Ascension*'s warp drive and he was leant over a console when Ash entered the room.

"How's it going commander?" the *Ascension*'s captain asked but Tan sighed.

"That Bird of Prey inflicted serious damage captain." he replied, "We've managed to get the core itself back on line and we have full main power but the nacelles aren't properly balanced and so far no-one can find where the fault is."

"What about powering up the warp drive to see where the problem is?" Ash suggested.

"That would work captain but even at minimum power there's the chance that something could blow and put us right back where we started." Tan replied.

"And that's worse than our current situation how exactly?" Ash said, "The longer we delay the more of a head start the Klingon ship gets on us. How long will it take the engineering and science departments to totally dismantle and rebuild the warp drive?"

"About three days captain." Tan told him.

"So any damage you can fix in less than that is better than the alternative." Ash said.

It was then that the intercom sounded and Tan reached out to the panel beside him.

"Engineering." he said.

"Commander Tan, is captain Ash there?" Estevez's voice asked.

"Yes, I'm right here ensign." Ash said before Tan could reply.

"Captain we've just heard from the *Magellan*." Estevez said.

"Have they been delayed taking up position near *Delta Fourteen*?" Ash said.

"No captain, they've reported that they are on station and conducting scans of the neutral zone. They say they've picked up a warp signature that doesn't match any of the expected patrols." Estevez told him.

"More Klingon reinforcements?" Tan commented.

"That's what it looks like sir. The strength of the reading suggests that it' something big this time. Either a D-Seven or a K't'inga. Given the speed they say it's probably a K't'inga." Estevez said and Ash and Tan looked at one another.

"We can't take on a battlecruiser single handed captain." Tan pointed out.

"I know. You'd better get that warp drive fixed quickly, we need to catch up to that D-Four before it can get to its friends." Ash replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Forrester!" a female voice called out when Forrester and Reese entered the engineering section of Delta XIV. Forrester recognised this as coming from Petty Officer M'Ress, one of the engineering team he had brought with him from the *Ascension* and he turned towards her, seeing that the Caitian was standing on a walkway close by.

"Yes petty officer?" he asked the feline looking alien.

Before answering Forrester, M'Ress leapt down from the walkway with all the grace of a Terran cat to land right in front of the two officers from the *Ascension*.

"We've got the new sensor antenna patched into the network and we're ready to try powering it up." she said and Forrester nodded.

"Okay M'Ress. You'd better let Sorell know. Someone in operations is going to have to be monitoring the system if you're going to be able to calibrate it." he said then he held up the computer drive he was holding, "I need to trace where this came from. Is the equipment manifest on line?" he asked.

"Yes commander, one of the station's engineering teams was able to load the backup from the auxiliary core." M'Ress answered.

"Thank you petty officer. If you need me I'll be over there looking this up." Forrester said before he and Reese walked across the room to a computer terminal where he sat down and placed the drive on the desk beside him, "Now let's see what we can find out about this."

"Will this take long?" Reese asked while Forrester was reading the serial number from the casing of the drive and entering it into the outpost's manifest.

"It shouldn't." Forrester said just as he was finishing entering the serial number and he began the search of the manifest database, "See? We've already got an answer." he added smiling a moment later.

"So where did it come from?" Reese asked.

"According to the database this drive was issued as a replacement for one fitted to a biobed in sickbay about eight months ago. The exact bed isn't identified though." Forrester told her.

"Okay, but if a drive was removed from a biobed then it would just stop working. I've seen beds with faulty drives and the displays don't make it difficult to see, there are warnings all over them." Reese pointed out, "No-one said anything about any of the biobeds being offline when I was in sickbay earlier."

"It must have been replaced." Forrester said.

"But why take a drive from a biobed just to replace it with another?" Reese said.

"It could have been to hide its origin." Forrester suggested, "Since this is eight months old there's no way we can link it directly to a particular person. Whoever logged this out back then may not even be aboard now."

"What, so someone logged out another drive and swapped it for this one so we wouldn't know who they were?" Reese said and Forrester nodded.

"And to make matters worse they could have logged out a drive under the pretence that it was going to be used almost anywhere on the station. Whoever did this really didn't want to be identified. I suspect they were hoping that they'd get a drive that was fitted to the biobed when it was manufactured, that way its serial number wouldn't be in the manifest at all." he said.

"I guess checking all the biobeds would give us a list of drive serial numbers we could try but right now they're all in use." Reese said.

"I can at least make a start and maybe narrow things down for us." Forrester said as he began to enter the terms for another search of the database.

"What are you doing?" Reese asked.

"Checking to see who logged any drive at all out of stores recently. I'll download the list to my PADD so when we do find the one that was swapped for this one we'll be able to look up who put it there." Forrester answered.

10.

On his way back to the *Ascension*'s bridge, Ash encountered Chief Duke.

"Captain I was just looking for you." he said, turning to walk alongside Ash.

"Yes chief?" he replied.

"I hear that the Klingons are running uncloaked." Duke said.

"Yes, the damage we inflicted has rendered it useless." Ash said, nodding, "I take that that means you want to change your plan of attack to rescue the hostage and recover the computer core?"

"Yes captain." Duke said, stepping inside a turbolift with Ash.

"Bridge." Ash told the turbolift's control system and the car started into motion.

"Without the cloak active we'll be able to get a lock on specific parts of the Klingon ship. That means beaming over will be a viable option." Duke said before the turbolift car came to a halt again and the door slid open to reveal the bridge and the two men exited it. Most of the bridge's stations were manned but with Tan in engineering the science station was instead manned by Etchemin.

"What about beaming the hostage out? I get that we probably won't be able to get a lock on the computer core among all the other equipment on the Klingon ship but a human's bio-signs are different to a Klingon's." Ash said, "Think you could lock onto a human on a Klingon ship lieutenant?" he added, looking towards Etchemin.

"Without a doubt captain." he responded.

"See?" Ash said, looking back towards Duke.

"That would work if the hostage is alone captain but if there are any Klingons close by then there's a significant risk that they'll be able to shoot him before the transporter sequence is complete. By beaming a team over ourselves we can secure the hostage before calling for a transporter extraction." the *Ascension*'s chief of security explained.

"Mister Etchemin, how do you rate our chances of being able to disable that destroyer's shields so Chief Duke and his boarding party can beam across?" Ash said, turning towards Etchemin again as he sat down in his chair at the centre of the bridge.

"From the effectiveness of our weapons in the initial engagement I'd say pretty good captain. A full yield torpedo would crack that ship wide open and our phasers are enough to overwhelm their shields. I'd estimate that I could knock out their shield generator in under a minute." Etchemin said.

"Then it's a question of how fast we can lower our shields, beam Chief Duke's men over and get our shields back up. All while we're a sitting duck for the Klingons without shields." Teela added.

"We destroyed their torpedo launcher though. That limits them to their disruptor banks at least." Estevez pointed out.

"Those disruptors can do a lot of damage to an unshielded starship ensign." Ash commented, "Lieutenant Etchemin, what about the Klingons' weapons?"

"Tricky captain. It'll be easier to knock out their engines. A D-four still runs its disruptors through its impulse drive like our ships used to do. Take that out and we disable the power to what weapons they have left and limit their ability to manoeuvre." Etchemin said.

"They'd be dead in space." Teela added.

"That sounds like a plan." Ash said, "Chief Duke, prepare your men."

"Yes captain." Duke replied before he turned around and exited the bridge via the same turbolift car he and Ash had arrived in.

Just as he left there was a chirping sound from Teela's console and the Andorian helmswoman looked down to see what was happening

"Captain an energy pulse just got pushed through our warp drive." she said.

"I take nothing exploded lieutenant commander?" Ash asked.

"No captain." Teela answered, shaking her head.

"Captain I have Commander Tan calling from engineering." Estevez announced.

"Put him through please ensign." Ash said and Estevez nodded.

"Captain this is Commander Tan, we've put a pulse through the warp drive as you requested." Tan's voice then said over the intercom.

"I take that you've found something?" Ash replied.

"Yes captain, one of the plasma injectors on the port side had fused. Forcing the pulse through the system blew it out completely. Fortunately none of the surrounding components were touched so all we have to do is clean out what's left of the injector and fit a new one." Tan told him.

"How long do you envision that taking commander?" Ash said.

"Forrester's team are efficient captain, they're already making good progress on cleaning out the system ready for the replacement. I'd say we'll be ready to go in about one to two hours." Tan answered.

"How fast will be able to go commander?" Ash said.

"Captain, you'll have full warp power available. We'll be able to go to warp eight right away." Tan responded.

"That's excellent news commander. As soon as you're done in engineering I want you back here on the bridge. We have a ship to catch."

As Forrester and Reese left the engineering section aboard *Delta XIV*, Forrester was already checking the list he had downloaded from the outpost's database. Having been on the station for only a few hours the names of the crewmen who had drawn drives matching the one discovered in the security camera from the outpost's supplies meant nothing to him although he did notice the same few names appearing repeatedly in the list. However, when he got to a name that he did recognise he came to a sudden halt.

"What's wrong?" Reese asked as she too came to a stop and looked at him.

"We need to speak to Sorell." Forrester replied.

"Sorell? You mean it was him?" Reese said in surprise but Forrester shook his head.

"No, but he might be able to give us more information about the man I think sold this station out to the Klingons." Forrester said.

The two officers hurried to the nearest repaired turbolift and let it take them all the way to Delta XIV's operations centre. However, when they entered and looked around they could not see Lieutenant Commander Sorell anywhere. However, there was another Vulcan officer present that they recognised and Forrester called out to her.

"Lieutenanrt T'Mak." he said and the woman turned towards him.

"Yes lieutenant commander?" she asked in response.

"Is Lieutenant Commander Sorell around?" Forrester said.

"He is in his office sir." T'Mak told him.

"That one?" Reese said, pointing across the operations centre to the door of the office marked as for the station's commanding officer.

"Thanks." Forrester said and while he and Reese started to walk across the room T'Mak activated the intercom to inform Sorell that they were coming, thus as the officers from the *Ascension* neared the door o the office it slid open and the Vulcan officer appeared.

"You wished to speak with me?" he said.

"Yes, we've found some interesting information. Perhaps it would be better to discuss it in private." Forrester said.

"Of course Lieutenant Commander Forrester. Please join me in my office." Sorell responded and he stepped back through the doorway to let the other officers inside.

Once they were all inside the office Sorell closed the door and then went to sit down behind the desk that still carried the name of *Delta XIV*'s previous commanding officer on the nameplate that the Vulcan had not bothered to remove yet.

"Have you uncovered the identity of the Klingon agent?" Sorell asked.

"Maybe, I've found some interesting evidence so far." Forrester said and he looked at the screen of his PADD again, "I've got a list of members of the crew that have drawn out computer drives from your stores over the last few months. All of these are of the same type used the biobeds in sickbay." he continued.

"I fail to see how the equipment is sickbay relates to the attack on this outpost by the Klingons." Sorell said.

"I don't think you're supposed to. You're supposed to be concentrating on the tactical systems." Reese pointed out and Forrester nodded.

"Yes and with the computer core missing there's no way of telling how they were compromised. On the other hand the localised security systems should have backups that show people coming and going and meeting with other members of the crew. Or even meeting with the Klingon boarding party." Forrester said.

"Then I assume that you have been checking the security cameras surrounding the location of the computer core." Sorell said.

"Yes and one of them had a drive inside it that was taken from a biobed." Reese told him.

"That was about eight months ago so I don't think that it was taken specifically to swap out with the drive that should have been in the camera." Forrester added.

"So you believe that someone withdrew a drive from stores to swap with one in a biobed so that they could then use that to replace the drive in the security camera? What would be the point in that?" Sorell asked.

"I think that the Klingon spy was worried that when local copies of security footage was checked they'd be identified so they replaced the drive from the camera that caught them meeting with the Klingon boarding party with one they'd taken from a biobed. That meant that neither of those two drives could be linked directly to them." Forrester explained.

"I take it that you have managed to find way of identifying the guilty party though." Sorell said.

"I think so. Tell me commander, just how well did people aboard this station know Tom Benson?" Forrester said.

"Benson" Reese said when she heard this, "The guy who was kidnapped?"

"That's the one. Only I don't think he was kidnapped at all. I think that he went with them willingly. "Forrester replied, "He had access to the station's computer network. He could open up equipment in sickbay without anyone noticing since that was why he was aboard in the first place."

"There is a flaw in your logic Lieutenant Commander Forrester. If Mister Benson was defecting to the Klingon Empire then it would not matter if he was identified later." Sorell said.

"I don't think he intended to stay in the empire. Would you want to spend the rest of your life eating Klingon food?" Forrester said, "I think that the plan was to take him back to Klingon space just long enough for him to be able to unlock the computer core's restricted data before coming back to Federation space. The Klingons must have known that by kidnapping a Federation citizen there would be diplomatic protests and demands for his release. By quickly giving in to those demands they could be hoping to limit the fallout from the actual attack."

"Especially if Benson came back with a story about how Klingon government forces rescued him from a ship of renegades." Reese commented.

"If you look at the list of computer drives that people drew out from your stores you'll see that Benson is among the people who drew out a drive." Forrester said.

"Hardly conclusive evidence since as you pointed out he was assigned to *Delta Fourteen* to upgrade our medical systems." Sorell said.

"Exactly, upgrade. So why did he need to take an old pattern drive from your stores? He should have brought all the equipment he needed." Forrester said.

"I shall contact Lieutenant Ossam. Perhaps he can shed some light on this." Sorell said and he reached for the intercom mounted on his desk, "Operations to security. Lieutenant Ossam, come in."

"Ossam here." a voice responded.

"Lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander Forrester and Doctor Reese from the *Ascension* have been investigating the circumstances surrounding the failure of our tactical systems and they have uncovered some information that you should be made aware of." Sorell said.

"Commander if there was a security investigation going on then I should have been informed of it. To have officers from other vessels just wandering around the station-"

"I was made aware of the investigation by the officers from the *Ascension* lieutenant. They explained the reason for wanting to keep our crew out of it and I accepted this. However, their investigation has progressed to a point where our co-operation is required. Please report to my office immediately."

"Yes commander, I'm on my way." Ossam replied and Sorell shut off the intercom.

Ossam arrived at Sorell's office soon after. With the station still at a heightened state of security Ossam was wearing body armour instead of the formal duty tunic normal worn by officers and he had an assault phaser holstered on his belt.

"Lieutenant please take a seat." Sorell told the station's chief of security when he arrived and Ossam sat down in a vacnat seat.

"So what's this information you have for me?" he asked, looking at Forrester and Reese.

"I was asked to perform an examination to confirm death on one of the casualties suffered during the attack." Reese began, "I found that the man died from a stab wound to the heart."

"Nothing unusual there I'm sorry to say. The Klingons do like their iron age weaponry." Ossam commented.

"Perhaps, but this was a precise strike with a narrow blade. Narrow enough to be slipped between the ribs right here lieutenant." Reese responded and she leant forwards, twisting around so that she could point to the spot on her own back equivalent to where Hughes had been fatally stabbed.

"Now that is strange. Not the sort of injury I saw inflicted by the Klingons." Ossam said.

"That led us to suspect that the station's defences had been sabotaged by someone on the inside and that somehow Chief Petty Officer Hughes had either discovered that person's identity or was close to doing so, forcing the spy to kill him." Forrester said, "We checked where he was deployed during the attack and that led us to the area of the station around the computer core that the Klingons took. That's where we found that a security camera had been tampered with to make sure there was no footage for at least part of the attack. From what we can tell it was Benson that made the swap."

"Benson?" Ossam said, frowning, "Lieutenant Commander Forrester, if you and Doctor Reese had just have come to me at the start of this then I could have told you that when the station was attacked Benson was paired with Chief Hughes for casualty evacuation. When Hughes' body was found we thought that the pair of them had been attacked by one of the Klingon boarding parties, killing Hughes and resulting in Benson surrendering to them."

"Logic certainly points towards Mister Benson being an agent in the employ of the Klingons, although why has not yet been explained." Sorell said.

"We need to contact Starfleet Security. I'm sure they can run a check on Benson's background and find something." Ossam said.

"Didn't they run a check before he was hired? They obviously didn't find anything then." Reese commented.

"Mister Benson is an employee of an independent contracting company. Starfleet did not carry out the background check on him directly." Sorell pointed out.

"Sounds like everyone at that company needs checking out then. If they can't spot a spy then who knows what else they've missed." Forrester said.

"Our subspace communications are not yet online." Sorell said, "We will need to relay a message to Starfleet Security via the *Relic* or the Dawnstone. Please compile all the information you have regarding Mister Benson and I will see that it is sent immediately."

Korda made sure to be on the bridge when the *Gjor'etlh* dropped out of warp at the edge of the neutral zone right at the point where the *Iw Hlq* was supposed to arrive. However, the image on the bridge's main view screen showed that Admiral Korda's battlecruiser was the only vessel in the area.

"Sensors, where is the *'Iw Hlq*?" he demanded.

"Long range scans show the *'Iw Hlq* at a distance of one half light year admiral. Its speed is fluctuating but holding at just over warp two." the warship's sensor operator responded, "There is also a second contact."

"Identify it." Korda ordered.

"Warp signature is Starfleet, Miranda-class." the sensor operator replied and Korda frowned.

"The Ascension. Keeler should have sabotaged that ship before he left." he muttered to himself.

"Haw fast are they moving?" Markon asked, walking over to the sensor console.

"Warp eight captain." the sensor operator answered.

"Admiral they have obviously repaired their warp drive fully." Markon said.

"Obviously." Korda repeated, frowning at his subordinate stating such an obvious point.

"Admiral at that speed they will overtake the *'Iw Hlq* before they reach us. Should we go into the neutral zone after them? The *'Iw Hlq* is about the same distance to us as it is to the Starfleet ship. We may be able to get to them first. We outgun the Starfleet ship two to one." Markon suggested.

Korda considered this for a moment. The Klingon Defence Force regularly sent vessels into the neutral zone and the operation to acquire the Starfleet computer core had already required two vessels to enter or cross it and each violation would result in further protests from the Federation. Korda himself cared nothing for such things though and he had sufficient rank and authority to rebuff any criticism from the high council. However, he would still not take unnecessary risks.

"Tactical, activate cloaking device. Helm take us into the neutral zone, set an intercept course for the *'Iw Hlq*." he ordered.

11.

"Captain we've lost contact with the Klingon battlecruiser. It looks like they cloaked." Tan announced when the Gjor'elth activated its cloaking device and disappeared.

"They're entering the neutral zone. There's no other explanation." Etchemin said.

"I suspect you're right lieutenant. Ensign Estevez, did you detect any communications to or from the Klingon ship before she cloaked?" Ash responded.

"No captain." Estevez said, shaking her head, "It looks like the Klingons didn't need special permission to enter the neutral zone."

"Then they either had standing orders to do so or whoever's commanding that battlecruiser has enough authority to write his own orders." Ash said, "Lieutenant Commander Teela, how long until we intercept the D-Four?"

"If we both maintain our current speeds then we should intercept in just under two hours." Teela replied.

"That's ahead of schedule isn't it?" Estevez commented.

"The Klingon's warp field is fluctuating." Tan said, "Their speed has dropped six percent since they escaped our previous encounter. If they continue to lose speed at this rate then we will reach the D-Four ahead of the battlecruiser, however if they are able to stabilise their warp drive then the two Klingon ships will be able to rendezvous with one another before we can intercept them."

"Looks like you inflicted more damage than we first realised lieutenant. Let's hope that they are unable to fix it." Ash said to Etchemin, "Are our weapons ready for round two?"

"Aye captain." Etchemin replied, smiling, "Phasers are powered and our torpedo launchers are loaded with the reduced yield loads to bring them out of warp."

"Very good lieutenant. We'll do this the same as last time. Fire as soon the Klingon ship is within effective torpedo range, don't wait for my order." Ash said and then he activated the intercom built into the arm of his chair, "Ash to security." he said.

"Security here captain." Duke's voice responded.

"Chief it looks like we'll be intercepting the Klingons sooner than expected. Are your men ready to beam over?" Ash said.

"Locked and loaded captain. We can deploy any time you want." Duke said.

"Very good chief. We'll let you know when we're about to engage the target. Bridge out." Ash replied and he turned off the intercom.

"Captain, our speed is dropping again." the *'Iw Hlq*'s helmsman told Voroth.

"I thought engineering said that they had managed to stabilise the warp core!" he snapped. Then he turned to his first officer and added, "Go to engineering and find out what is going on. Tell them that I won't give Starfleet the pleasure of killing them if they are able to catch up with us before we rendezvous with the admiral's flagship."

"Yes captain." the fist officer responded and he rushed from the bridge.

Meanwhile Voroth stared at the tactical display on a nearby screen that showed the known position of the *USS Ascension* and the predicted position of the *Gjor'elth* based on the battlecruiser last known position before it cloaked and its maximum speed. Additional data on the display showed the *Gjor'elth* reaching the *'Iw Hlq* ahead of the Starfleet vessel, but it also showed that the margin of error was very small and every drop in speed brought the Starfleet ship closer to being able to catch them.

"Target speed reducing to warp one point nine captain." Tan said. With the *Ascension*'s sensors focused on the fleeing Klingon vessel he was able to detect every change in its warp field and this as obviously unstable, "Its warp field is becoming increasingly unstable. At its current rate I suspect that the vessel will be unable to sustain warp speed for more than half an hour."

"How does that compare to our estimated intercept time?" Ash asked.

"The Klingon vessel will still be at warp when we intercept them captain." Tan answered, "It will also be able to maintain warp speed long enough to reach the battlecruiser we observed."

"So much for just waiting for their warp drive to fail then." Ash said, "Mister Etchemin, keep your eyes on that targeting system."

"Aye captain, just give me one clear shot and I'll bring them out of warp even earlier." Etchemin replied.

Apart from Tan, who kept his attention on the *Ascension*'s sensors, the Starfleet destroyer's bridge crew watched the main view screen intently as the image of the Klingon ship grew in size.

"Five minutes to firing range captain." Etchemin said when his instruments showed that the *Ascension* was almost close enough to fire its torpedoes with a reasonable chance of hitting the Klingon vessel and Ash activated his intercom.

"Bridge to security, five minutes to intercept. Chief Duke you should get your men to transporters now." he said.

"Copy that captain, we're on our way. Security out." Duke responded before he closed the channel.

"Captain the Starfleet vessel is almost upon us." the *'Iw Hlq*'s sensor operator said. The Klingons were familiar enough with the combat capabilities of Starfleet vessels that they knew the distances at which they could engage targets and the destroyer's sensors clearly showed that the *Ascension* would soon reach this point.

"Communications, has Admiral Korda's ship hailed us yet?" Voroth said, already guessing the answer.

"No captain. The *Gjor'elth* is still running silent." the other officer responded.

"Where is the human?" Vororth said.

"He is being brought to the bridge now captain." another Klingon said and moments later the door to the bridge slid open to allow Benson and his Klingon warrior escort to enter.

"The human as you ordered captain." one of the warriors said, shoving Benson towards Voroth.

"Hey! Careful." Benson exclaimed, "We're all on the same side here."

"Starfleet does not know that though human." Voroth snapped at him and he pointed at the image of the *Ascension* visible on the viewscreen at the front of the bridge, "Now tell that Starfleet vessel chasing us that if they don't back off then we will kill you."

"Okay, just give me a channel." Benson said and Voroth signalled to the ship's communications officer.

"Captain the Klingons are hailing us." Estevez said when she saw the notification of an incoming signal on her communications console.

"Somehow I doubt they're calling to surrender but I suppose we should hear them out." Ash said, "On screen please ensign."

The image on the main viewscreen immediately changed from an exterior view of the Klingon vessel to one of its bridge where Benson stood among the Klingon command crew.

"Captain break off your attack." Benson said.

"I'm sorry Mister Benson but we can't do that. Put the Klingon commander on." Ash responded and Voroth stepped forwards.

"I should listen to him if I were you captain. Unless you'd like his blood on your hands" he said.

"Klingon captain you are ordered to drop out of warp and surrender. You have committed an act of war against the Federation and we will not allow you to escape." Ash said, ignoring the Klingon's threat to murder Benson.

"Klingon warriors do not surrender human." Voroth said, snarling and baring his teeth to the camera.

"They don't tend to take prisoners either, which means that Mister Benson must have value to you alive. For example, right now he's the only thing stopping me from destroying your ship entirely." Ash said.

Voroth turned to his side and snapped out an order to his subordinates. Although he spoke in Klingon the universal translator function in the Ascension's communication system was able to provide a translation into English in real time.

"Off!" he said and the Ascension's main viewscreen switched back to the external shot of the D-4.

"Well that was rude." Teela commented.

"In torpedo range now captain. Firing." Etchemin said suddenly and just as Ash had ordered him to do he launched one of the *Ascension*'s modified torpedoes.

"Admiral the Starfleet vessel has fired on the *'Iw Hlq*." Markon told Korda, "The ship is dropping out of warp."

"How long until we get within firing range of the Starfleet vessel?" Korda asked.

"We are still six tup away admiral." the battlecruiser's helmsman told him.

"In six tup they could destroy the *'Iw Hlq*." Markon said.

"If they intended to destroy the *'Iw Hlq* then they would have done so at their first encounter. Starfleet are too sentimental to destroy a ship with one of their own citizens aboard, even to prevent us from getting our hands on their computer. They will disable and then board our ship. All we need to do is prevent that. Tactical disengage the cloaking device and raise our shields." Korda ordered.

"Decloak admiral?" Markon asked.

"Yes, decloak now. Let them see us coming. To board the *'Iw Hlq* will require them to lower their shields and they won't do that when it means that we will be able to destroy them. Now carry out my orders, disengage the cloaking device and raise our shields." Korda replied.

"The target's warp field is collapsing captain." Tan said when the photon torpedo fired by the *Ascension* detonated and disrupted the D-4's warp field just as had happened in their first encounter.

"Teela take us to impulse." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain." Teela responded as she shut down the *Ascension*'s warp drive, dropping the ship to sublight

speed in a controlled fashion instead of the uncontrolled tumble of the *'Iw HIq*. However, before Teela could turn the *Ascension* to give Etchemin the best possible firing angle Tan looked up from his console.

"Captain we have a Klingon battlecruiser decloaking at zero-two-four mark zero-six. Range eighty-five million kilometres" he announced.

"On screen." Ash said and as the *Ascension*'s command crew watched they saw the ominous shape of a Klingon battlecruiser fade into existence as if from nowhere.

"Sensors indicate that the vessel is a K't'inga-class vessel. They are raising shields." Tan added.

"Top of the line." Ash commented.

"Eighty-five million kilometres is too far for them to attack." Etchemin pointed out.

"It's not to attack, it's to keep us from boarding the D-Four." Ash replied.

"Orders captain?" Teela asked, glancing over her shoulder towards Ash.

"Continue the attack. Ensign Estevez hail the Klingon battlecruiser and inform them that we are engaged in a rescue operation concerning a kidnapped Federation citizen and advise them to return to their side of the border. Then inform Starfleet of our situation." Ash said.

"Aye captain." Estevez said before she turned back towards her console and as she attempted to make contact with the *Gjor'elth*, Etchemin fired the *Ascension*'s phasers at the *'Iw HIq*.

"Admiral the Starfleet vessel is hailing us. They claim to be on a rescue mission and instruct us to leave the neutral zone." the *Gjor'elth*'s communications officer said when he heard Estevez's message.

"Do we respond admiral?" Markon asked.

"Our refusal to carry out their worthless demands is all the response they need." Korda said, "Helm continue on course. Tactical lock weapons on the Starfleet vessel and prepare to fire on my command."

"The Klingon vessel is continuing on course captain." Tan said, "I am picking up targeting scans although they are still too far away for a lock."

"Time to firing range?" Ash asked.

"They could attempt a torpedo attack in ninety seconds captain but it would unlikely to succeed. I estimate four minutes until they are in effective firing range if they hold their current speed and heading." Tan answered before a disruptor blast from the *'Iw HIq* struck the *Ascension*'s shields, "No damage captain. Enemy weapon power appears depleted." Tan added.

"Depleted or not, they could still damage us if we drop our shields to board them." Ash said.

"Impossible with their shields still up captain." Tan pointed out.

"Yes, I realise that commander. Lieutenant Etchemin you said this would be easy." Ash responded.

"Almost there captain. This would be easier if we could get in behind them though." Etchemin said.

"You only have to ask. Hold on." Teela said and all of a sudden the *Ascension* seemed to lurch as she used the ship's main impulse engine to adjust their heading instead of relying purely on its thrusters. This forced the bridge crew to grab hold of anything they could avoid being thrown from their seats but just as Teela had intended it left the Ascension positioned in the Klingon destroyer's rear arc, giving Etchemin a clear line of fire at the ship's impulse engines.

Etchemin did not waste the opportunity that Teela had given him and he fired one of the *Ascension*'s main phaser cannons directly at the Klingons' glowing impulse drive. The stream of bright red energy pulses found their target and there was an explosion from the Klingon ship before the glow of the impulse drive rapidly dwindled away.

"Direct hit on their impulse drive captain. The Klingons have lost both main and auxiliary power. They are dead in space." Tan said.

"What's the position of that battlecruiser?" Ash asked.

"Now three minutes to optimum firing position." Tan told him and Ash activated the intercom.

"Ash to transporter room one, Chief Duke are you there?" he said.

"Yes captain. Who's steering this ship? We almost got thrown right across the room there." Duke responded.

"I'll ask Teela to give us all more warning next time chief. For now though I need to know how long you need to get Benson off that ship. We have a Klingon battlecruiser three minutes away, can you do it in that time?" Ash asked his security chief.

"That's not enough time captain. I don't see us getting this done in any less than eight." Duke said.

"Very well chief. Stand by, we'll see what we can do about buying you that time." Ash said before he shut off the intercom, "Mister Etchemin load all torpedo bays with full yield torpedoes and lock weapons onto that battlecruiser." he said.

"We're not going toe to toe with a battlecruiser are we?" Estevez asked nervously, knowing that the Klingon vessel was vastly superior to the *Ascension*.

"We don't need to destroy them ensign." Ash reassured her, "We just need to stop them from dropping their shields to beam Benson or the computer core across from the destroyer long enough for Starfleet to send

help. Teela stand by to take evasive action. Etchemin you may fire if you get a shot but don't waste ammunition. Just staying alive is good enough here."

"Admiral the *'Iw Hlq* has been disabled. The Starfleet vessel is holding station with its shields still raised." Markon reported.

"They know they can't put a boarding party aboard the *'Iw Hlq* and carry out their mission quickly enough to be away by the time we arrive." Korda said and a smile spread across his face.

"What are your orders admiral? They are not withdrawing." Markon said.

"Sensors, what are the nearest Starfleet vessels that could help them?" Korda asked.

"There are two Cole-class frigates at the outpost the *'Iw Hlq* attacked admiral but they are holding position." the ship's sensor operator responded.

"They are needed to protect the outpost. Obviously Voroth's crew achieved something if it still helpless." Korda commented.

"There are two Starfleet vessels approaching though. One is an Oberth-class scout while the other is Titan-class." the sensor operator continued.

"The scout is irrelevant but the light cruiser may pose a problem." Korda said, knowing that a Titan-class ship was both fast and carried an array of weapons slightly greater than the Miranda-class heavy destroyer his battlecruiser was currently facing.

"Do we break off admiral?" the ship's navigator asked and Korda glared at him.

"Are you a coward?" he yelled, "No, we do not retreat from a destroyer. We attack."

12.

When the results of the background check on Benson arrived at *Delta XIV* from Starfleet Security both Reese and Forrester had left the operations centre, going back to helping the outpost's crew with repairing damage and treating casualties. When the transmission arrived though they were summoned back to Sorell's office along with Lieutenant Ossam.

"So what did Starfleet Security have to say?" Forrester asked as he sat down.

"I have not reviewed the file yet Lieutenant Commander Forrester." Sorell answered and the Vulcan turned the screen on his desk so that the other three officers present could all see it clearly, "I shall play it for us all now." he added.

As soon as Sorell began the playback of the message a man in a Starfleet uniform that had the green collar and shoulder strap of the security division appeared though despite the division colour he wore his rank insignia still showed that he was a captain.

"I'm Captain Oliver of Starfleet Security and your request for a background check into a Tim Benson was passed along to me. Using the data provided by you I was able to confirm this man's identity and the veracity of every part of the personal history he provided to his employer." the man said.

"Then Benson isn't a spy." Reese commented but the message continued to play, indicating that Captain Oliver was not finished with his report yet.

"However," he said, "it seems that there is a second individual with the same name from the same planet who has a background that is far more suspicious. The personal information regarding this Tim Benson is almost identical to ours with the exception of his date of birth which is out by exactly a year. This Tim Benson has done very well for himself it appears, listing his occupation as a business consultant. This is a job that has allowed him to build up a significant number of assets despite being listed as a sole trader and having no advertising presence that we can find. He has a small number of clients, all of whom are based on worlds outside Federation control. Thanks to a traffic stop two years ago we also have access to this Tim Benson's fingerprints on file and they happen to be an exact match for the set the Tim Benson attached to *Delta Fourteen* that his employer submitted to Starfleet at the start of his contract. Nothing would have shown up to the police at the time because both versions of his identity had no criminal record. My conclusion is that Tim Benson poses a significant security risk and should not have clearance to be aboard any Starfleet vessel or facility. He is to be detained and confined at the soonest opportunity while we figure out exactly who he's working for. Your request doesn't say what made you suspicious but this was a good catch Commander Sorell. Let us know when you have him in custody and we'll arrange to have him brought to our nearest office for questioning, Oliver out."

"Yes, good catch there Sorell. I don't know how you did it." Forrester said sarcastically.

"My name was included simply as the sender. I claimed no credit for making the report." Sorell responded.

"Sure." Forrester said.

"I think the important question is how we are going to arrest Benson when he is aboard the Klingon ship." Ossam said.

"Obviously waiting for him to come back to Federation space is out of the question. We may be able to arrest him easily but by that time he'll already have given the Klingons access to your station's computer core and the damage will be done." Forrester said.

"Logically he can be taken into custody when the *Ascension* returns with him." Sorell pointed out.

"Not if he finds a way to sabotage the ship before it gets here." Reese added, "We have to warn them not to trust him."

"We'll have to relay a signal via the *Dawnstone* or the *Relic* again. Your subspace transmitter still isn't working." Forrester said.

"I'll do it." Reese said suddenly.

"Doctor there is no reason why it should be you." Sorell said, "As the ranking officer here the responsibility is mine."

"It's our crew Sorell and Reese is closer to Captain Ash than anyone else." Forrester said.

"I see no reason why your emotional attachment should require you to send the message but I see no reason to object either." Sorell said and he reached for the intercom.

"Open a channel to the *Dawnstone*." he said, "We need them to relay another subspace message. To the *Ascension* this time."

"Now Teela, turn!" Ash exclaimed when he saw the prow mounted torpedo launcher aboard the *Gjor'elth* began to glow as the Klingons prepared to fire and Teela performed another sharp turn. Rather than fire their torpedo and leave the weapon's onboard tracking to turn it after the *Ascension* the Klingons instead turned their entire ship and there was a brief flash of disruptor fire that missed the nimble Starfleet vessel by a

narrow margin. For the time being at least though they held their torpedoes, apparently wanting to get the *Ascension* directly in their line of fire to maximise their chance of hitting the ship.

"Return fire Mister Etchemin. Aft torpedoes." Ash ordered and Etchemin responded rapidly by launching a photon torpedo from one of the *Ascension*'s aft facing launch tubes. With the Klingons turning towards the ship the torpedo would not have to use much fuel in turning towards its target but the Klingons responded by performing a sharp turn of their own even though their shields were strong enough to resist at least one direct hit.

The Klingons' turn was sharp enough that the photon torpedo was unable to match it quick enough to strike the battlecruiser before a blast from the warship's disruptors destroyed it far short of its target. However, although the torpedo had failed to hit its target it had distracted the Klingons long enough that Teela was able swing the *Ascension* around to face them directly.

"Phasers locked on their command module captain." Etchemin said as Teela flew the destroyer towards the battlecruiser and Ash nodded.

"Fire at will lieutenant." he said and Etchemin fired both of the *Ascension*'s main phaser cannons together in a barrage that peppered the Klingons' forward shields.

"Forward shields down to sixty percent but holding admiral." Markon reported, monitoring the effect of the Ascension's phaser attack before there was another blast from one of the destroyer's saucer mounted phaser banks, "Now fifty-five percent. If they fire another torpedo at this angle it could penetrate our shields and-"

"Helm bear to starboard. Weapons fire as we pass." Korda ordered without letting Markon finish and the Gjor'elth's helmsman turned the battlecruiser aside so that the two opposing starships raced past one another at significant speed and as they passed by each other the battlecruiser's gunner unleashed a volley from the ship's port side mounted disruptors that struck the Ascension from near point blank range.

"Are we damaged?" Ash asked when the *Ascension* shook under the impact of the Klingon disruptor blast.

"Negative captain. Port side shields are down to forty percent but there is no damage." Tan replied.

"Captain I have a subspace signal coming in. It looks like it's from the *Dawnstone*." Estevez said suddenly.

"One of the ships we left at *Delta Fourteen*." Teela commented.

"This had better be important." Ash muttered before he added, "Okay ensign, put it on the screen."

Ash expected to see an image of the *Dawnstone*'s captain on the bridge of his frigate appear on the main viewscreen but instead of this he saw Reese standing in the operations centre of *Delta XIV*.

"Mike, thank God you're okay." she said when she saw Ash.

"Yes I'm fine but we're kind of busy here Deborah." he replied, "We're engaged with a Klingon battlecruiser. All we need to do is keep them from dropping their shields long enough to be able to transfer Benson and the computer core from the D-Four."

"That's what I needed to tell you about." Reese said, "Mike, Benson is a spy for the Klingons. He murdered a crewman to cover it up before leaving with the Klingons voluntarily. He's going to give them access to the computer core."

"Are you certain about this?" Ash asked and Reese nodded.

"Absolutely certain. Starfleet Security have found evidence of a false identity that he uses to cover up the payments he's been getting. If you bring him aboard the *Ascension* then you need to confine him to the brig, don't trust him under any circumstances." she told him.

"Okay I think you've just given us the solution we needed to this problem. I've have to go now but I'll see you soon. *Ascension* out." Ash said and then he ended the communication before looking at Etchemin, "Mister Etchemin lock torpedoes onto the D-Four."

"The D-Four captain?" Etchemin said, "With its shields down a full yield torpedo will-"

"I know how effective our weapons can be lieutenant." Ash interrupted, "But you heard what Doctor Reese said, Benson isn't a hostage, he's a traitor. Now our only priority is to stop him from giving the Klingons access to that computer core and blowing it up will achieve that nicely. Now lock torpedoes."

"Aye captain, torpedoes locked on target." Etchemin said.

"Fire." Ash ordered.

"Admiral the Starfleet vessel has fired another torpedo." Markon said.

"Helm, evasive manoeuvres. Weapons shoot down that torpedo if you can." Korda said.

"Admiral we aren't the target. The torpedo is heading away from us." Markon told him.

"Then where-" Korda began before he looked at a nearby tactical display and saw the *Ascension*'s photon torpedo streaking towards the *'Iw Hlq*. With his battlecruiser too far away to intervene, Korda could only watch as the torpedo slammed into the already crippled D-4 destroyer. The subsequent matter/anti-matter explosion consumed the *'Iw Hlq* in an instant and when the brilliant light subsided there was nothing left of the vessel or its contents.

"Good shooting Mister Etchemin." Ash said after he witnessed the destruction of the Klingon destroyer, "Analysis Commander Tan."

"The Klingon destroyer has been completely destroyed captain. No sign of any survivors and no debris large enough to be the computer core from Delta Fourteen." Tan responded, focusing the *Ascension*'s sensors onto the cloud of debris that was all that was left of the D-4.

"Then we're done here. Teela get us back across our side of the border. Maximum warp." Ash said.

"Yes captain, engaging at warp eight." Teela replied, turning the *Ascension* towards Federation territory before she activated the starship's faster than light drive and it sped away.

Korda and his command crew watched as the *Ascension* vanished in a flash of light as the destroyer went to warp, heading out of the neutral zone as fast as it could.

"Do we go after them admiral?" the helmsman asked but Korda just glared at the viewscreen that now showed only empty space.

"Admiral what-" Markon began.

"No." Korda interrupted, "The *'Iw Hlq* is gone and with it everything we came here for. We are done. Set a course for Qu'Vat and engage the cloaking device. It is time to leave."

With no reason to remain in the neutral zone the *Gjor'elth* also turned to leave, starting to head back towards the Klingon empire and vanishing as its cloaking device was activated before its warp drive was engaged and it too sped away.

"Admiral Clarke is on the line for you now captain." Estevez said just as the *Ascension* was approaching *Delta XIV* to collect Reese, Forrester and their teams from the outpost.

"On screen please ensign." Ash responded and the face of Admiral Clarke appeared on the main viewscreen at the front of the *Ascension*'s bridge. Even though the vessel was currently in spacedock undergoing extensive repairs Admiral Clarke was obviously aboard his flagship, the Constitution-class *USS Lexington*.

"Captain Ash, you have a report for me?" the Starfleet admiral asked.

"Yes admiral. I've submitted a written version to you and copied it to Starfleet Command of course but I thought I should brief you in person." Ash replied.

"Thank you captain. I have seen the summary of your report but I've not had time to go through it fully. You say that the kidnapping of a Federation citizen was in fact just a ploy?"

"That's correct admiral. Following an investigation by my officers aboard outpost *Delta Fourteen* I believe Benson went with the Klingons willingly so he could give them access to the computer core. As soon as that information was relayed to the Ascension I changed our mission parameters from rescue to simply preventing either the core or Benson from reaching Klingon space and I authorised the destruction of the Klingon vessel." Ash replied and Clarke nodded.

"You made a good call captain. The consequences of the Klingons getting their hands on that core could have been disastrous. We're still trying to figure out the extent of the intelligence Keeler and Franklin were able to give them." Clarke said, "As I'm sure you can understand the Federation Council is furious. The odd brief skirmish in neutral space or even a covert operation is one thing, but this time the Klingons openly attacked a Starfleet outpost without any provocation. A formal diplomatic protest is being drafted and the next round of talks may be cancelled. Frankly I don't think that we've been closer to going to war since the Organians had to step in to stop us." he said.

"Hopefully the diplomats will be able to sort something out admiral but the Ascension and her crew will play their part whatever happens." Ash replied.

"Very good captain. For now your orders are to continue with your regular patrol and remain on our side of the neutral zone but be ready for orders to come in at any moment." Clarke told him.

"Understood admiral. Ascension out." Ash said before he closed the channel.

After ending the call with Captain Ash aboard the *Ascension*, Admiral Clarke turned back to his computer terminal and called a blank document template before he began to type.

OPERATION RETRIEVE – A PROPOSAL TO STARFLEET COMMAND

Alone in the captain's quarters, Ash and Reese were locked in a passionate embrace when the intercom sounded and Ash frowned and sighed as he pulled back, letting go of the zip on the front of Reese's dress that he had just begun to pull open.

"Unbelievable." he said, reaching out for the communication panel, "Ash." he added.

"Sorry for interrupting you captain," Estevez said, "but we've just heard from Starfleet."

"More border trouble" Reese commented when she heard this.

"Possibly." Ash replied before turning back to the intercom and adding, "What is it ensign?"

"The Federation has received an official response to its protest about the attack on *Delta Fourteen* captain." Estevez said.

"I wonder what the Klingon for get-" Reese back.

"Let's hear it ensign." Ash said before Reese could finish her sentence and Estevez began to read the statement from the screen on her console.

"The High Council of the Klingon Empire wholly rejects the accusation by the United Federation of Planets that a vessel of the Klingon Defence Force intruded on the sovereign territory of the Federation with the intent in engaging in an attack of aggression." she began.

"Who do they think they are kidding? We saw what they did to *Delta Fourteen*." Reese said, frowning while Estevez continued to read the official Klingon statement.

"The D-Four-class destroyer identified as the *'lw Hlq* was decommission by the Klingon Defence Force on stardate six three one four point seven and subsequently stolen from the depot at Muq'han on or about stardate seven four two three. The renegades who used the ship to cross the neutral zone between the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets were wanted fugitives within the empire and their acts were theirs alone. The Klingon Empire disavows and refuses to accept responsibility for them." she said.

"What a pile of porkies. Do they think we're just a bunch of drongos?" Ash exclaimed.

"I'm sorry captain, I don't think I caught that." Estevez said, failing to understand his Australian slang.

"Don't worry ensign, it wasn't important." Reese said out loud, leaning towards the intercom panel as well and wrapping her arms around Ash as she did so.

"Okay doctor. I'm sorry I didn't realise you were there as well." Estevez said, realising that she had just interrupted their romantic activities, "The statement goes on though and it's about us, at least part of it is." she added.

"I suppose I'd better hear it then." Ash said.

"Furthermore in respect to the destruction of the Bird of Prey *Jadashha*, the Klingon Empire holds the United Federation of Planets responsible for this act and the deaths of the ship's crew. The *Jadashha* had been ordered to apprehend the *'lw Hlq* and fired on the Starfleet vessel only as a warning to withdraw from the neutral zone. The battlecruiser *Gjor'elth* was deployed to the border only in response to the destruction of the *Jadashha* and remained within the borders of the Klingon Empire in accordance with the treaty with the United Federation of Planets." Estevez read, "It then goes on to say that although they are insulted by the Federation's accusations against them they will agree to meet as arranged for the next round of talks aimed at improving relations between us." she added.

"Thank you ensign. Let me know if anything else important happens." Ash said before he turned off the intercom and leant back on the sofa he and Reese were sat on, "Utterly ridiculous. It just so happened that the Klingons knew who the spy was aboard *Delta Fourteen* and he went with them willingly. Plus that Bird of Prey could have hailed us at any time, or maybe even fired at the other Klingon ship if they really were trying to capture it as well."

"Shush Mike, there's nothing you can do about it now." Reese said and she kissed him, "You stopped the Klingons getting their hands on that computer core and you heard Estevez say that the talks are still on after all. Peace gets another chance. That's a win in my book. Now how about we celebrate your success?" and she reached for the zip on her dress and smiled as she began to pull it open.

"Well you know what they say, make love not war." Ash replied.

"It is official, M'Gath has been appointed to the high council of the empire." Kras told Korda when he was shown into the admiral's office on Qu'Vat, where Korda sat with Ah'Ken standing right behind him, "Some of those who previously supported you are reconsidering their position. You failed admiral."

"Support from those who are weak and fickle is support I can do without." Korda said, "What stomach would they have for the fight to come if they are unable to see the bigger picture?"

"It is not wise to speak of such powerful people in such a way Admiral Korda." Kras said.

"I have no fear of cowards who retreat at the first sign of difficulty. Now go and tell them that today was not the failure that you claim it was. Believe me the roots of conflict between the empire and the Federation grow deeper with every passing day." Korda told him and Kras snarled for a moment before he turned around and strode out of the room, followed by the guards who had brought him there from the transporter room.

"Was today really a victory my love?" Ah'Ken asked and he smiled at her.

"Of course it was. We may have failed to acquire the Starfleet computer core but the chancellor and the high council have been forced to issue an official denial and to avoid looking weak they have had to deny any connection between the empire and the *'lw Hlq*, something that the Federation will not believe. Talks may continue but they will do so under a cloud of suspicion from the Federation. Their ambassadors will require proof of every claim ours make and in doing so offer public insult to us. Trust me Ah'Ken my beloved, war with the Federation is inevitable." he replied.