

STAR TREK ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.



Stolen Goods

By Stephen J Dutton



STAR TREK: ASCENSION

Stolen Goods

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

The pursuit of a pirate vessel leads the *USS Ascension* to a pre-atomic world standing on the brink of war between its nations. When evidence is found of the inhabitants possessing technology that they should not be to create though it becomes obvious that there are other forces at work on the planet and the USS *Ascension* must act quickly to prevent the war....

Star Trek: Ascension available online at:
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

Copyright notice:
Star Trek is the intellectual property of CBS/Paramount. Star Trek: Ascension is unofficial and has not been authorised or endorsed by the copyright holders in any way.

1.

Stardate 8791.3 Miranda-class destroyer *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 on intercept course to Federation cargo vessel *SS Peru*.

"*SS Peru* this is the *USS Ascension*, please respond." Ensign Estevez, the chief communications officer of the *Ascension* transmitted as the heavy destroyer sped towards the last reported position of the cargo transport *Peru*. The young woman waited a few seconds to give the subspace signal enough time to reach the freighter and a reply to return to the *Ascension* before she spoke again, "*SS Peru* this is the *USS Ascension*, please respond."

"How close are they Mister Tan?" Captain Ash, the destroyer's commanding officer asked and he looked at the man sat at the science station.

"Approximately one point four billion kilometres captain." Tan told him.

"We'll be there in less than thirty second captain." the Andorian woman sat at the helm station added.

"Yeas thank you Mister Teela. I know how fast warp six is." Ash replied. Then he glanced at the young man sat beside the Andorian, "Lieutenant Etchemin, what's our tactical situation?"

"Deflector shields energised captain. Phaser banks are powered and torpedo bays loaded." Etchemin told him.

"Raise shields. Teela drop us out of warp at one hundred thousand kilometres range." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain." Teela said.

"Captain I can detect no other ships in the area." Tan reported as he studied the *Ascension's* sensor readings closely.

"We're not far from the Neutral Zone here commander." Ash pointed out.

"Do you think there could be cloaked Klingon ships lying in wait captain?" Estevez asked.

"It's a risk we can't ignore. The *Peru's* distress signal was cut off before they could tell us the exact reason for their emergency. Klingon raiders could be lying in wait for another civilian ship to come along and investigate. They'll think twice about firing on a Starfleet ship though." Ash said and Teela smiled.

"Too right. They'll probably take one look at us and high tail it back across the Neutral Zone." she said.

"Commander Tan," Ash continued, "if you can't detect any other vessels close by can you tell us what you can detect?"

"The *Peru* appears largely intact captain, there is a single object that appears to almost match the mass of a freighter of her class." Tan told him.

"Almost?" Ash said.

"Yes captain. The mass is somewhat under the dry weight for the class. This may be explained by what appears to be debris close by." Tan explained right as the *Ascension* dropped out of warp and almost immediately warnings flashed up on Etchemin's console at the same time as an image of the *Peru* appeared on the bridge's main view screen. As Tan had said the ship did look largely intact but one of its two warp nacelles had become detached and was slowly tumbling through space in the opposite direction from the *Ascension*.

"Registering multiple impacts on our shields captain. Nothing serious though." the navigator said.

"Analysis Commander Tan." Ash ordered.

"Debris consists of alloys used in starship construction captain. There is a hull breach registering on the freighter. I suspect that the debris comes from this." Tan said.

"Where's the breach?" Ash said.

"Just forward of the ship's engineering section captain. I'm not detecting an active warp field and there are areas of the ship that are open to space. However, the forward section is still sealed and I am reading an atmosphere. There is minimal power that likely comes from emergency battery reserves and both gravity and heat appear minimal." Tan said.

"Life signs?" Ash said, looking at the image on the screen.

"Yes captain. Twelve of them. Ten in the forward section and two near engineering." Tan replied and Ash looked at him.

"I thought you said the pressurised areas were in the forward section." he said.

"Yes captain. Two of the life signs are in an area that is in vacuum. I suspect they must be wearing spacesuits." Tan responded and Ash activated the intercom.

"Bridge to transporter room one." he said.

"Transporter room one. Chief Duke here captain." the voice of the *Ascension's* chief of security replied.

"Chief is Doctor Reece there with you?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. The away team is ready to beam aboard the freighter." Duke answered, "Do you want to speak to her?"

"Yes please chief." Ash said.

"Yes captain?" a woman's voice then said over the intercom.

"Doctor the freighter is badly damaged. There are life signs coming from a sealed area towards the front which is where the away team will be going but first there are two life forms towards the rear of the ship. The section is in vacuum so they must be in space suits. That means they could be running low on air so I want them beaming aboard first. We're lowering our shields now." Ash said.

In the transporter room Reese looked at the crewman standing behind the control console.

"Do you have a lock on the life forms at the rear of the freighter?" she asked.

"Yes doctor. They're weak but steady and I have a lock." he said.

"Beam them aboard." Reese ordered and the crewman activated the transporter.

Turning around to face the transporter pad Reese watched as a pair of glowing shapes that formed into a pair of figures wearing spacesuits that were both in sitting positions. These collapsed as soon as they fully formed and Reese and Duke rushed up onto the transporter pad along with some of the other security and medical personnel gathered in anticipation of beaming aboard the freighter. They crouched beside the fallen figures and lifted them both back into a sitting position. It was easy to see through the faceplates of their helmets that they were human but both were unconscious and Reese took her tricorder from her medical kit.

"How are they doctor?" Duke said.

"Alive for now but the oxygen levels inside these suits are low. We need to get these helmets off." she told him. The away team members quickly released the helmets from the spacesuits of the two unconscious men and Reese double checked their breathing before she added, "Okay get these two men to sickbay. We should get aboard that ship and rescue the rest of the crew."

The unconscious crewmen from the freighter were carried off the transporter pad and handed to a team of medical orderlies who had been waiting before the away team that consisted of Reese, Duke and two staff from each of their departments stood back on the pad.

"Ready doctor?" Duke said as he drew his phaser and checked it.

"Do you really think that will be necessary chief? This is a rescue mission." Reese replied when she saw this. "It depends on what we're rescuing them from doctor. You just check on the survivors and my team will make sure that the ship is secure." he said. Then he looked at the transporter operator and added, "Energise."

"Captain I'm getting some disturbing readings from the debris." Tan said as he continued to carry out sensor sweeps of the crippled freighter and the debris surrounding it.

"What have you found?" Ash asked in reply.

"Signs of high energy impacts against the hull of the freighter captain." Tan told him.

"Weapons fire?" Etchemin suggested.

"Klingon weapons?" Teela added.

"Definitely weapons fire and it does look like pulse fire rather than a particle weapon but I do not think that the damage was inflicted by Klingon disruptors." Tan said.

"So antique pulse cannons." Ash said.

"Yes captain." Tan replied.

"Those things are available everywhere." Teela commented, "Even if they can't be bought they're pretty easy to improvise from a fusion generator and a few spare parts for the magnetic field stabiliser. Even Klingons could put those together."

"And even if they couldn't get through our shields they're typically powerful enough to overwhelm the shields of a civilian transport ship." Etchemin said.

"So the ship was attacked." Ash said, "Are there any signs of where the attacking ship went?"

"There is a recent warp trail at one-one-four mark two-six." Tan replied.

"So not towards the Neutral zone." Estevez said.

"No. That probably rules out Klingons entirely." Ash said, "Lieutenant Etchemin are there any systems along that heading in this sector?"

"Checking now captain." Etchemin replied and he opened the *Ascension's* navigational database to check for any possible destinations along the heading Tan had detected the warp trail going in, "There are four systems captain. Orsis Minor, Enigma Ortez, Maram and Getes Six-one-one."

"Enigma Ortez?" Ash said, frowning.

"Yes captain." Etchemin replied.

"Something bothering you captain?" Tan asked.

"I'm pretty sure I've heard of that system before." Ash said.

"I can check in the Federation database captain." Tan suggested but Ash shook his head.

"No, I mean that I've heard it discussed aboard the *Ascension*. I need to go and check something." he said as he got out of his chair, "Mister Tan you have the conn. I'll be in my quarters." he added before he headed for the turbolift.

2.

As soon as the away team materialised aboard the *Peru* its members not only felt the cold they also saw its effects each time they exhaled and they saw the vapour in front of their faces. Reese immediately flipped open her communicator and raised it to her mouth.

"Reese to *Ascension*," she said, "we're safely aboard the *Peru* but you could at least have warned us about the cold."

"Copy that doctor. Commander Tan indicates that he is sorry." Estevez responded.

"Yeah well if you threw in a mug of hot soup I'd at least have something to keep me warm. Reese out."

Reese said before closing the communicator again and looking around, "Okay let's see if we can find the rest of the crew." she added.

"Hello, is anyone there?" Duke called out loudly and Reese flinched, "We're from the Starfleet vessel *Ascension*."

"You know I do have a tricorder chief. I can just scan for them." Reese commented as she reached for her tricorder.

"Sorry doctor." Duke replied.

"You're sorry. Tans sorry. Everyone's sorry but I'm still cold and deaf." Reese muttered before there was another shout.

"Hello?" a voice called out and the away team turned in that direction.

"Hello?" Reese responded and moments later a man with a thermal blanket draped over the overalls he wore stepped into view.

"Oh thank God." the man said, "We didn't know if anyone had heard our distress signal."

"The *Ascension* was on patrol less than a light year away. We came as soon as we picked it up. We detected multiple life signs. Where are the others?" Reese asked.

"This way. When the pirates boarded us we barricaded ourselves in the command section. All but Heller and Gaston, they were in engineering." the man told her.

"Don't worry, we already have them aboard the *Ascension*." Reese said.

"Then they're alive? But I thought that engineer lost atmospheric pressure." the man said.

"They made it into spacesuits in time." Duke explained.

"You don't know how happy I am to hear that. I thought I'd lost them. I'm Greg Donnerly by the way. I was the captain though I don't know if my employers will let me keep that position after this." the man said.

"We'll happily put in a good word for you Captain Donnerly." Reese said, "Now are any of your people injured? I'm a doctor."

"Just a few bumps and bruises thankfully. Come on, I'll take you to them." Donnerly replied and he beckoned for the away team to follow him. As he turned though Duke noticed that there was a phaser tucked into the freighter captain's belt and he rested his hand on his own sidearm.

"You're armed." he commented and Donnerly glanced down to his phaser.

"I opened the weapons locker as soon as we were boarded just in case the pirates tried to force their way into the command section. We only have three weapons though so I wasn't about to try and put up a fight." Donnerly said.

"All the same I'd like you to hand it over sir." Duke said, "Slowly."

Donnerly hesitated for a moment before he cautiously took the weapon from his belt and then held it out in the palm of his hand for Duke to take from him. Looking at the phaser Duke saw that it was a model of Type I phaser that had not been in Starfleet service for well over a decade.

"Thanks." he said and Donnerly nodded before he turned around again and led the away team towards the freighter's bridge.

"It's okay, it's Starfleet. Lower your weapons." he called out as they approached the compartment where the rest of the *Peru*'s crew were waiting. This room was obviously where the crew would gather for meals and included tables for them to sit at as well as food dispensers and a more traditional if compact galley area. Sat in here were the rest of the crew, all of them also with foil thermal blankets wrapped around them and on one of the tables were the other two weapons that Donnerly had mentioned. One of these was an old plasma rifle while the other was a hand laser. Given the age of all these weapons it was obvious that attempting to put up a fight against the pirates would have been a bad idea.

"I just need to make sure that everyone's okay and then we can beam you all over to the *Ascension*." Reese said and she set her medical kit down on the table beside the crew's weapons so she could take out her tricorder. While she began her scans of the crew Duke approached Donnerly.

"Could you tell me what happened here?" he asked.

"We were moving at warp when another ship pulled alongside and shot out one of our nacelles. We sent a

distress signal but our subspace antenna was shot out and we lost main power. Then before we could even offer to surrender they punched a hole in our hull that knocked out our auxiliary power as well and we saw a boarding party crossing over in spacesuits." Donnerly explained.

"They didn't beam over?" Duke said and Donnerly shook his head.

"No but we didn't see any of the cargo being moved back to their ship so I'm guessing that they did have a transporter that they used to beam it away." he said.

"Did you get a good look at their ship?" Duke said.

"Briefly. It looked like another freighter slightly smaller than us." Donnerly said.

"It was a Federation ship though, not Klingon or Kzinti?" Duke asked.

"Definitely. I know what Klingon ships look like and I saw some Kzinti up close in a bar a few years back on Regulus. The people in those suits weren't Kzinti." Donnerly answered just as Reese walked over to the two men.

"I've completed my scans." she said, "No serious injuries but at the rate the temperature's falling hypothermia could become an issue so I'd like to get them over to the *Ascension* as soon as I can. In fact I'd kind of like to get back into the warm myself."

"From the look of these scans I'd say that the warp core itself is intact." Lieutenant Commander Forrester, the *Ascension's* chief engineer said as he looked over Tan's shoulder at the sensor console as the science officer ran high resolution scans of the crippled freighter, "Losing that nacelle will have caused the system to go into a lock down so it'll need to be shut down properly before being restarted."

"Turn it off and back on again?" Estevez commented, glancing across the bridge.

"Don't mock key engineering principles ensign. At least not if you want help from my department the next time a software update crashes your console." Forrester responded and then he looked back at the sensor console.

"This hull breach looks serious though." Tan commented, pointing to the large hole that had been blown into the side of the *Peru*.

"You're right. For the hull to go there could mean that one of the primary struts is gone." Forrester agreed.

"Never mind getting warp drive back on line, just firing the impulse drive will snap that ship in half." Etchemin pointed out.

"I don't fancy trying to tractor the ship back to a port either." Teela added.

"No I think to be on the safe side the owners of that ship will have to send a repair tender out here to patch it up." Forrester said before the communication system activated.

"*Ascension* this is Reese." Reese's voice said.

"Go ahead doctor." Estevez replied.

"Ensign we're ready to beam back over with the crew. There are no serious injuries but this ship won't be able to sustain life for much longer." Reese said.

"Tell the transporter room to lock onto them and beam them over." Tan said.

"Is the captain not there?" Reese asked when she heard Tan give the order instead of Ash.

"No doctor. The captain went to check on something." Estevez told her.

"Okay thanks. Reese out."

Ash was sat at his desk in his quarters when the door intercom sounded.

"Come in." he said and the door opened to let Reese enter.

"I was told you were in here Mike." she said as she entered the room and then she paused and looked around.

"Still unsure about being in here Deborah?" Ash commented and Reese nodded.

"These were Captain Franklin's quarters for a long time and I spent a lot of time here with her and Teela." she said and then she walked across the room to sit beside Ash. As soon as she got within arms' reach Ash reached out to take her hand and he frowned.

"You're cold." he said.

"Sorry it was freezing aboard the *Peru*. We should have taken cold weather gear." Reese replied as she sat down in the chair next to Ash's and placed the PADD she had brought with her down on the desk, "So what are you doing here?"

"I'm checking some of Captain Franklin's personal logs." Ash said and he looked at the screen on his desk that currently showed a paused image of the *Ascension's* former captain. Rachel Franklin had been murdered by another former officer and the pair of them had subsequently been implicated in an espionage plot relating to the Klingon Empire. Despite her disgrace the crew of the *Ascension* had still mourned for the loss of their captain and her death was an open wound to those who had been closest to her.

"What's in her logs that you need?" Reese asked.

"A while ago I seem to remember James detecting anomalous subspace readings from a system not far from here called Enigma Ortez." Ash told her.

"That's what science officers are for." Reese commented.

"Well the system is home to a pre-warp industrial civilisation so there shouldn't be any subspace emissions coming from there but Matt Keeler said that there was no discernable pattern to them and that they were a natural phenomena." Ash said.

"And you think that that worm was lying?" Reese asked, frowning at the mention of the man who had killed Captain Franklin.

"It had occurred to me." Ash said, "Obviously all of the official records will have the signal listed as natural and not worth investigating but it occurred to me that maybe Captain Franklin may have asked him about it more in private and mentioned it in her personal logs. Since I have access to these now I thought I'd check it out."

"What makes the system so important now Mike?" Reese said.

"James picked up a warp trail belonging to the pirate ship and one of the systems is Enigma Ortez. What if those subspace signals that were picked up belonged to the pirates?" Ash said.

"A hidden base?" Reese commented, "It certainly makes sense. Starfleet won't be patrolling the system too heavily just in case our ships get noticed by the natives but the planet will make a useful source of basic supplies like food, water and air."

"That's exactly what I was thinking. I think I've found the approximate stardate for the log, are you okay watching this?" Ash said and Reese nodded without speaking. Ash then reached out to the screen on his desk and started the file playing.

"Personal log stardate eight-six-six-two point four." the image of Franklin said as she was pictured walking across her quarters and undoing the fastenings of her tunic, "Keeler told Tan that subspace signals he detected today were natural occurring. Tan's analysis showed otherwise and I was worried that he might press the matter. The last thing I need is my senior officers arguing, especially when it comes to Matthew." Franklin then paused as she took off her tunic and hung it up before starting to loosen her hair from its braided style to a more casual one. Then she sighed before she continued, "It's times like this that I worry about my relationship with Matt. The last thing I want is Starfleet questioning whether my behaviour is improper. I meant that's the reason Mike Ash and I didn't."

Ash suddenly reached out to pause the playback.

"What did you do that for?" Reese asked.

"Maybe you shouldn't watch this after all." Ash suggested.

"I know you slept together once Mike. Rachel told me how you ended up together when you went to get her when she was going through another bad break up just after you'd been promoted to first officer." Reese said and then she reached forwards to restart the playback of Captain Franklin's personal log.

"-decide to try and have a relationship after that one night." Franklin continued, "Anyway where was I? Maybe I should delete that last bit. For now though I'm willing to let Matthew and James Tan sort things out between them. There's an industrial level civilisation in the Enigma Ortez system that have telescopes advanced enough to spot a starship in close proximity to their planet so the Prime Directive limits the circumstances under which we can enter the system so Tan isn't going to push the matter at least." It was at that point that the intercom of Franklin's door sounded and she stopped the recording of the log entry.

"That's not much to go on Mike." Reese said, "Did you think that she'd record something about Keeler being a spy and that she knew he was covering for the Klingons?"

"I thought maybe she'd have recorded something about Keeler talking about the system in private." Ash answered and he leant forwards to check the information his search of Franklin's personal log files had produced, "According to the transcript search though none of her other log entries mention the Enigma Ortez system."

"I suppose searching for anything to do with subspace emissions would be a waste of time." Reese commented and Ash smiled and nodded.

"Yes, I suspect that term would be rather common." he said, "Now what about the crew of the *Peru*?"

"All still alive thankfully. The pirates just took the cargo and ran. Captain Donnerly told Chief Duke that it looked like they were using a modified freighter so they had room for the cargo aboard their own ship."

"Do you know what they got?" Ash said and Reese picked up the PADD from the desk and handed it to him.

"Captain Donnerly gave us a copy of his manifest. It's not terribly exciting though." she said as Ash took the device and began to read through the document it contained, "See what I mean?" Reese added and Ash frowned.

"I don't get it." he said, "Have you read this cargo manifest? There's nothing here that's worth stealing. A few machine tools but most of the cargo was scrap duranium for recycling. Until that stuff is put through a processing facility it's practically worthless."

"Taking the ship would have been more profitable" Reese commented.

"Hard to sell an entire ship though. They'd need a workshop to break it down for parts." Ash pointed out and then he got to his feet.

"Decided what to do then?" Reese asked and Ash nodded.
"We're going to go and take a look at Enigma Ortez." he told her.

When Ash and Reese returned to the bridge Tan and Forrester were still studying scans of the Peru.
"What's the condition of the freighter?" Ash asked as he and Reese joined them by the science station.
"Crippled captain." Forrester answered, "I doubt we could repair her out here and if we try to tow her she'll come apart."

"Well at least that explains why the pirates left her behind." Ash commented. Then he looked down at Tan,
"Commander do you remember a while ago you detected subspace emissions from the Enigma Ortez system?" he said.

"Yes captain. Keeler said they were a natural phenomena if I recall correctly." Tan replied.

"And the pair of you almost came to blows over it in the mess later if I recall correctly." Teela commented.

"We did not almost come to blows." Tan responded.

"Regardless I'd like you to take another look." Ash said.

"If you say so captain." Tan replied and he turned back to his console, "Scanning now."

The officers gathered around the science station all watched the results of the scan closely.

"There, that looks like a subspace signal. Low energy but still a subspace signal." Forrester said when he saw the waveform detected by the *Ascension's* long range sensors.

"Is that the same as what you detected last time?" Reese asked Tan.

"Hold on, I'll run a comparison." Tan replied but when he tried to locate the signal he had detected from the system previously he frowned, "That's strange. The signal is gone from our records."

"Keeler could have wiped it." Forrester suggested and Ash nodded.

"That wouldn't surprise me." he said, "Commander Tan run a fresh analysis on this signal."

"Yes captain." Tan said and he began to run the signal waveform through a set of filter programs designed to search for specific properties. This ran for several seconds before Tan glanced back up at Ash and added,
"There you are captain, a continuous modulated subspace signal. In my opinion as science officer that is artificial in origin."

"Ensign Estevez see what you can make of it." Ash ordered, looking across the bridge to the communications console.

"Yes captain." she said and she began to analyse the signal using the *Ascension's* communications system. Again this took just a few seconds before she turned around and added, "It's definitely a modulated square wave signal captain and from the timings I'd say that it was some sort of digital communications protocol."

"Definitely not natural then?" Ash asked and Estevez shook her head.

"No captain. Some neutron stars might put out regular subspace signals but the patterns aren't this clean and there are no stars large enough to create subspace signals within a hundred light years anyway." she told him.

"So there's no way that any communications officer could mistake them for a natural phenomena then?" Tan said.

"No commander, it's obvious that this signal is artificial in origin." Estevez answered.

"So Keeler did lie. There must be something in the Enigma Ortez system that he knew about." Reese said.

"Can you tell what they're saying?" Ash asked Estevez.

"No captain. I suspect that it isn't even an audio signal. There seems to be a lot of data here so it could be video but I think it's a data stream rather than someone having a conversation." she said.

"An attempt to contact alien life?" Forrester suggested.

"I don't think so. The native civilisation shouldn't have that level of technology. I think the pirates may be using the system as a base." Ash replied, "Lieutenant Etchemin lay in a course for the Enigma Ortez signal. Teela engage at warp five and take us to the edge of the system, I don't want the natives spotting us if we can help it. The inhabitants of the system aren't aware of the existence of life beyond their planet so the Prime Directive applies. There will be no direct contact with them."

"Do you want me to pull the anthropological file captain?" Tan asked.

"Yes, if we're going to look for something out of the ordinary then we need to know what counts as ordinary for the planet to begin with." Ash said.

"What about the *Peru's* crew?" Reese said.

"For now they'll have to come along with us. It's not as if we're in a position to fix their ship anyway. You and Forrester ought to fill them in on the situation though." Ash told her.

"Course plotted captain." Etchemin announced.

"At warp five we should get there in about fifteen hours." Teela added, "Are you sure you don't want to push to warp six captain?"

"No, warp five will be enough. If the pirates are looking for pursuit I'd rather limit the size of our warp signature. Warp six will make us stand out too much." Ash explained, "Commander Tan keep scanning the area. I want to know immediately if you pick up any ships that belong to the pirates."

“And if we do captain?” Tan said.

“Then we go to red alert. I’m not going to let the pirates get the drop on us so we’ll treat any ship we encounter as potentially hostile until we can confirm their identity.” Ash replied.

“That’s a warp signature.” one of the crew of the pirate vessel said.

“Heading?” the figure in the captain’s chair asked.

“Coming this way.” the other pirate answered.

“They could have picked up our warp trail.” another pirate commented.

“We can’t outrun them.” a fourth added.

“Or fight them.” another said.

“Obviously.” the captain replied, “Helm stand by to drop out of warp.”

3.

Although the crew of the *Peru* were not prisoners they could not be permitted to wander the corridors of the Ascension at will so there was a security guard present in the mess hall where they were sat when Ash entered to speak to them. Some were just eating and drinking while one was reading and Captain Donnerly was playing a game of three-dimensional chess with another of his crew.

"Giving you any trouble crewman?" Ash asked the security guard quietly.

"No sir." the man replied and Ash smiled at him.

"Very good." he said before he walked across the room to where the freighter crew sat, "Captain Donnerly, I'm Captain Ash." he told Donnerly.

"Ah captain," Donnerly responded, "I'd like to thank you for rescuing my crew. If you hadn't come along when you did who knows whether we'd have survived? Especially Heller and Gaston."

"Don't mention it captain." Ash replied as he sat down at the table with the crew.

"I notice we've gone to warp. I take it that you have the *Peru* under tow?"

"I'm afraid not captain. The damage to the *Peru* makes towing it impossible, the ship would just break apart. A specialised repair tender will be needed to recover the ship." Ash told him.

"Then where are we going?" Donnerly asked.

"My science officer detected a warp trail that we think was left by the pirate ship and we're heading in that direction. We've also detected subspace signals from a system that shouldn't be emitting them along that heading so that's our destination for now. I'm sorry about having to drag you and your crew along with us." Ash answered.

"I can't say I'm happy about having to abandon my ship Captain Ash, but it's preferable to sitting in the cold and dark wondering whether anyone will arrive before my entire crew suffocates." Donnerly said.

"I'm glad you understand captain. I do have some questions for you though." Ash said.

"Ask away." Donnerly told him.

"I'd like you to tell me about the attack itself. My chief of security tells me that you said the ship that attacked you looked like another freighter." Ash said and Donnerly nodded.

"That's right captain. I was on the bridge when she first appeared out of nowhere and opened fire." he said and Ash frowned.

"Appeared out of nowhere?" he said.

"Yes, one moment our sensors were clear and the next there was a ship right behind us. My guess is that the pirates were jamming our sensors but had to stop the jamming to use their weapons. I did a tour as a Starfleet engineer myself so I know that jamming is a double edged sword." Donnerly explained and Ash smiled.

"You served in Starfleet? What ship?" he said.

"Oh nothing fancy, it was the *Vancouver*. A Saladin-class destroyer under Captain T'Kol. We patrolled the old Regula to Tellar run. That's how I got into cargo hauling. I met enough of the crews to get to know them and when my tour was up I got offered a job with one of them. The rest as they say, is history. Have you ever met Captain T'Kol?" Donnerly said.

"Not personally, no. Although I do know that she retired from Starfleet a few years ago. Starfleet retired *Vancouver* at the same time although I have heard that there'll be another ship bearing that name in the next round of fleet construction contracts. Rumour is that she'll be one of the new Constellation-class cruisers."

"Pretty fancy." Donnerly commented.

"Assuming the design engineers can get the engine configuration to work. It may turn out that they get the Excelsiors rolled out first and those things will give us the biggest and badest ships in the quadrant." Ash said before the intercom activated.

"Captain Ash." Tan's voice said from it and Ash got up and walked over to the panel.

"Ash here commander." he said.

"Captain I thought you ought to know, we've lost track of the pirates' warp trail." Tan told him.

"Lost track commander?" Ash said and he briefly glanced back towards Donnerly.

"Yes captain. The trail was clear but then suddenly stops in interstellar space." Tan added.

"The captain of the *Peru* says that the pirate ship appeared out of nowhere before it attacked. Is there anything to suggest the use of any sort of subspace jamming?"

"It's hard to tell while we're at warp as well captain. Our own subspace field could be concealing any broad spectrum jamming." Tan said.

"Try looking anyway and run a mass sweep as well. That pirate ship must be running pretty heavy after stealing the *Peru*'s load. Hopefully heavy enough to influence particles around it. I'm going to get some sleep before we reach Enigma Ortez but let me know if you find anything." Ash ordered and then he shut off the intercom.

"Hold the lift!" Estevez called out just as Ash stepped into the turbolift to return to the bridge and he placed his hand in the door to prevent it from closing while she rushed to enter it as well. Unusually instead of wearing her uniform boots she was carrying them and as soon as she entered the lift she put one of them down on the floor, "Thanks captain." she said as she started to put the other boot on her foot. "Oversleep ensign?" Ash commented, removing his hand from the door so that it closed immediately and the turbolift began to move.

"I thought I hit snooze. I actually turned the alarm off." she replied.

"It happens to us all every now and again ensign. Just try not to make a habit of it." Ash said.

Estevez was still fastening her second boot when the turbolift door opened again and Ash stepped onto the bridge before turning around and holding the door open again to make sure the turbolift could not be summoned while Estevez was still inside.

"Thank you captain." she said as she hurried from the turbolift and she walked over to the communications console, "You're relieved." she told the enlisted crewman on duty there.

While Estevez was taking her position and logging into the console Ash headed for his own chair in the centre of the bridge. With his and Estevez's arrival all of the senior bridge officers were now present and the main screen showed that the *Ascension* was close to the Enigma Ortez system.

"I have the anthropological data for you captain." Tan said and Ash turned his chair towards him.

"Go ahead commander." he said.

"The inhabitants of the second planet are humanoid and have achieved a basic level of industry including the ability to produce internal combustion engines and short ranged powered aircraft. In terms of their society they are still divided into multiple competing states. These have a mix of government styles with most being variations on monarchies but there are also some republics and theocracies. There are six major political powers and each of them are competing for influence over the smaller nations." Tan said.

"How old is the survey?" Ash asked.

"It was originally compiled thirty years ago by the *USS Exeter*, at which point the inhabitants had not yet achieved powered flight. However, a follow up survey by the *USS Hawk* six years ago updated it." Tan said.

"Captain we're picking up radio signals from the planet." Estevez announced.

"They can't have seen us from this distance." Etchemin commented as he double checked the *Ascension's* position and saw that the ship was still some way outside the system.

"They aren't trying to contact us." Estevez said, "This sounds like general chatter. I'm picking up amplitude modulated signals across a wide range of frequencies.

"What about the subspace signals?" Ash asked, looking at Tan again.

"There appear to be two sources captain. The second planet itself and another in the region of the sixth planet, one of the system's gas giants." Tan told him.

"Dropping out of warp now captain." Teela announced right before she slowed the *Ascension* to sublight speed.

"Are there any signs of the pirate ship?" Ash said.

"Negative captain. I'm not picking up any warp signatures." Tan said.

"Orders captain? Do we proceed?" Teela asked and Ash considered this and before he could respond Tan looked up from the science station console.

"Captain the secondary subspace emission source is definitely a spacecraft of some kind." he said.

"Can you identify it?" Ash asked but Tan shook his head.

"No captain. The configuration does not match anything in the Starfleet database. However, I can tell that it is small and definitely sub-warp." he said.

"What's it using for a power source?" Ash added.

"Unknown captain. There is only limited information available from this range." Tan said.

"In that case that's our first target. It can't be native to the system so it must be something the pirates brought here. Possibly a security probe." Ash said and then he looked at Teela and added, "Lieutenant commander proceed at full impulse."

"Yes captain, going to full impulse." Teela responded and the *Ascension* began to accelerate again.

"Lieutenant Etchemin if this is something the pirates are using to give early warning then we need to be able to neutralise it quickly." Ash said.

"Aye captain. Phasers are armed." Etchemin replied.

"Captain there may also be some benefit to being able to study the craft." Tan suggested and Ash nodded.

"Mister Etchemin stand by with the tractor beam as well. Assuming there's no risk we'll bring the object aboard. Ensign Estevez that will mean that we'll need to block its transmissions. Can you do that?" he said.

"Yes captain. The signal isn't particularly powerful. I can easily jam it but won't that tip the pirates off to our presence?" Estevez asked.

"So will destroying it with our phasers ensign but if they think their probe has been destroyed then they won't be concerned about us studying it." Ash replied.

Teela flew the *Ascension* into the shadow of the system's sixth planet to make it less likely that the unidentified craft would detect the Starfleet vessel before circling around until the probe came into view over the horizon.

"What the hell is that?" Teela said when the shape of the craft became clearly visible on the main viewscreen.

The compact craft had a squat, cylindrical core with a pair of large wing-like panels stretching out from opposite points along the sides. One end mounted what was obviously an engine assembly while the other had a cluster of sensor receptors that included a large dish-shaped receiver at its core.

"Are those solar panels?" Etchemin said as he looked at the wing structures.

"That's what they look like to me." Teela replied.

"Solar panels? Who'd use solar panels if they had the technology to produce subspace communication systems? The two just don't match, there are far better power sources for use this far away from a system's star." Estevez said.

"Captain perhaps we should ask Lieutenant Commander Forrester up here to take a look at the object. An engineer's point of view could prove enlightening." Tan suggested and Ash nodded as he activated the intercom.

"Bridge to engineering." he said.

"Engineering here. Have you tried turning it off and back on?" Forrester's voice responded.

"Commander we require your professional assessment of something. Could you come up here and take a look at it?" Ash said.

"I'm on my way captain." Forrester said before he turned off the intercom at his end.

It took only a short time before the door to the turbolift slid open and Forrester entered the bridge, still wearing the white protective suit used by Starfleet's engineering division. He was about to ask Ash the reason for being summoned to the bridge when he saw the probe on the viewscreen and he frowned.

"Now that is interesting." he said.

"You're familiar with craft like this commander?" Ash asked, looking at the engineer.

"Every engineer is captain. That's what early space faring civilisations use to explore their solar systems. It's a very primitive equivalent to our probes." Forrester replied.

"It's emitting a subspace signal." Ash told him.

"Are you serious captain? Subspace comms and sensors should be way beyond the level of technology needed for a craft like that." Forrester said.

"Take a look for yourself Adam, there's a two way subspace stream between that craft and the second planet." Tan told him.

Forrester considered this for a moment.

"Maybe it's an artefact of the temporal cold war." he said.

"The what?" Etchemin asked.

"Oh God, here we go again." Ash muttered, knowing that Forrester was about to reveal another of the conspiracy theories that he subscribed to.

"The temporal cold war." Forrester said again, "In a few hundred years time when time travel becomes common different factions will realise that they have the ability to go back in time and destroy their enemies before they even exist. Maybe the civilisation in this system will be one of those factions and they sent this back in time to make sure that no-one else was time travelling into their system."

"And the solar panels? Pretty primitive means of powering a space probe don't you think?" Ash pointed out, "As Estevez said those things aren't very effective this far out in a system."

"No but they are dependable and durable." Forrester answered, "We still use solar panels for long term power supplies where high output isn't needed."

"Would they also be using an Andorian thruster assembly that was made some time during the early decades of this century?" Tan added as he ran another scan of the probe.

"What do you mean commander?" Ash said.

"The main propulsion unit of the probe is a thruster that is of Andorian design that was fitted to both Imperial Guard and some Starfleet vessels during the twenty-two tens to thirties. It was also widely used on commercial starships." Tan told him.

"A single thruster unit of that vintage would give a craft that big a pretty good thrust to mass ratio captain." Forrester commented, "Better than anything that a civilisation that had yet to master warp drive could manage."

"The civilisations in this system shouldn't even be capable of orbital space flight, let alone interplanetary probes and subspace communications." Ash said.

"Captain I'd like to take a look at that probe. A proper look, not just using sensors or looking at it on a viewscreen." Forrester said.

"I agree captain." Tan added, "My readings indicate that the materials used in the construction of this craft

are beyond the ability of the inhabitants of this system to have produced on their own. I am reading alloys of duranium and tritanium.”

“Well I can’t really argue with both my chief science officer and my chief engineer now can I?” Ash said and then he looked at Estevez, “Ensign are you prepared to jam the probe’s subspace communications link?”

“I’ve isolated the frequency being used captain. I can initiate focused jamming at any time.” Estevez replied and Ash nodded.

“Do it ensign.” he ordered and as Estevez initiated the subspace jamming signal Ash turned to Etchemin.

“Lieutenant Etchemin do you have a lock on the probe?” he asked.

“Yes captain, all tactical systems are on line.” Etchemin answered.

“Just the tractor beam thank you Mister Etchemin.” Ash said, “Lower our shields and bring that probe into our shuttle bay.”

“Captain we’ll need a dampening field around the shuttle bay to contain the subspace signal before we can shut it off.” Tan said.

“See to it commander. Lieutenant Etchemin, as soon as the dampening field is established use the tractor beam to bring the probe aboard.”

“They went straight to Enigma Ortez.” one of the pirate bridge crew said when the raiding vessel’s sensors showed the *Ascension* dropping out of warp on the outskirts of the Enigma Ortez system.

“That can’t be a coincidence. They must have figured out what’s going on there. They’ll shut down the operation.” another said.

“Not with their precious prime directive in place.” the first said.

“The prime directive won’t stop them doing anything.” the captain replied, “We’ve already been there so Starfleet will do whatever they can to try and remove our influence.”

“Then we have to go to the customer.” one of the bridge crew suggested.

“No.” the captain replied simply.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” the other pirate asked, “That’s not a freighter out there it’s a heavy destroyer. Its shields are strong enough to barely even notice fire from our plasma turrets and its phasers and photon torpedoes will crack this ship wide open. The client can-”

“The client isn’t going to lift a finger to help us!” the captain snapped, “If you think begging him for favours is a good idea then feel free to contact him yourself.”

“So what are your orders captain?” the helmsman said, “If we go in the opposite direction we could make it to the Rigel system.”

“With a cargo of scrap.” the captain said, “No, we need to deal with this Starfleet ship ourselves. The locals in Enigma Ortez can’t and our client won’t. That only leaves us. Helm set a course for Enigma Ortez and take us in. Keep our speed to warp three though. I don’t want them to see us.”

4.

The probe detected the approach of the *Ascension* and the thruster unit fired to adjust its facing, bringing all of its sensors to bear on the Starfleet vessel. At the same time it tried communicating with its home base on the second planet but the *Ascension's* jamming signal blocked all subspace communications. Without other orders the probe attempted to back away from the *Ascension* but although the thruster unit was more than adequate for propelling the probe through space at the low rate of such a primitive craft it could not hope to outrun a Miranda-class starship's impulse drive and the probe was soon within range of the destroyer's tractor beam.

"Tractor beam engaged captain." Etchemin said as he used the beam to grab hold of the probe. Then when he saw the readings on his console he added, "Captain the probe is attempting to break free using its thrusters."

"Surely it can't break the tractor beam with just a single thruster unit." Ash said and he looked at Tan.

"Negative captain, the thruster has insufficient energy to overcome our tractor beam. However, the stress of continual use of the thruster may cause damage to the probe." the science officer told him.

"Captain we could use our phasers to disable the thruster. With the probe held in the tractor beam-"

Etchemin began to suggest.

"Without knowing exactly how the interior of the craft is laid out any damage from a particle beam risks triggering a catastrophic chain reaction." Tan interrupted.

"So letting it keep on running its thruster could destroy it and using our phasers could have the same result?" Ash said.

"Yes captain." Tan replied.

"So do you have any suggestions?" Ash asked.

"For starters I recommend releasing our tractor beam captain."

"Etchemin let it go." Ash ordered and Etchemin released the probe from the tractor beam. For a moment it lurched suddenly before its onboard computer realised that it was now able to manoeuvre again and adjusted the power output of the thruster unit to return to trying to outrun the *Ascension*, "Okay Mister Tan, what now?" Ash added.

"We will have to disable the thruster manually captain." Tan said, "I recommend allowing the craft to move to the distance its desires. Then when it comes to a halt we beam an engineering team to it to disable the thruster."

"So who gets to tell Commander Forrester than he's going for a stroll?" Teela said, smiling.

Forrester and Duke materialised several metres away from the probe. Both men wore spacesuits that were fitted with independent propulsion units but to begin with they just looked at the nearby probe. The *Ascension* itself was more than a thousand kilometres away on the opposite side of the probe and without magnification the ship was barely visible to the two men.

"Are you sure it doesn't know we're here?" Duke asked as the pair floated in space.

"According to Tan's analysis this thing's sensors are primarily aimed in the other direction. It's focused on the *Ascension*." Forrester told him, "I get the feeling that if it knew we were here then it would already be flying away." Then he placed a hand on the controls to his propulsion unit and added, "Follow me chief. Nice and slow."

With short bursts from their propulsion packs Forrester and Duke approached the probe and in accordance with the idea that its sensors were aimed away from them the machine remained in place as they approached. As a precaution the pair kept clear of the thruster exhausts though, just in case they fired. The probe remained inactive as the two men approached it and they turned right at the moment they got to it so that they could stand on the casing and attach themselves to it using their magnetic boots.

"So far so good." Duke said and Forrester nodded.

"Now let's shut down this thruster." he said, looking down at the thruster unit. Luckily this still had the standard Federation pattern fastenings for its access panels and Forrester crouched down to remove one of them, handing the panel to Duke once it was free, "Hold this would you?" he said.

"Sure, that's why I'm here commander." Duke replied as he took hold of the panel while Forrester looked inside the probe.

As expected the interior of the thruster was laid out as it had been when it was constructed on Andoria and Forrester quickly located the deuterium fuel feed. This had a basic latch to prevent it coming loose but this did not prevent him from deliberately disconnecting the feed line.

"That should do it." Forrester said and Duke looked at him.

"That's it?" he said.

"Well what did you expect? It's just a thruster. Now hand me that panel back, I'll get it fitted again and then we can push off. There's still some fuel in this thruster and I don't want to be standing on this thing when it triggers. Even a second's worth of firing could turn us to jelly." Forrester told him and Duke handed the panel back to the engineer. Forrester quickly replaced this, fixing it back in place and then he stood up, "Okay let's get out of here." he said and both he and Duke then deactivated their magnetic boots before pushing away from the probe again, "Forrester to *Ascension*." Forrester then signalled.

"This is *Ascension*, reading you loud and clear commander." Estevez responded.

"Tell the captain that the fuel line to the thruster has been disconnected. It should have about a second or two of fuel inside the thruster itself but then it'll be dry. You can try the tractor beam any time you want." Forrester said.

"Understood commander. Stand by." Estevez said.

The *Ascension* began to move towards the alien probe again and there was a sudden burst of energy from the probe itself as the onboard computer attempted to outrun the starship once again. However, with the fuel line to the thruster unit disconnected the probe's propulsion system rapidly ran out of fuel and the engine flare spluttered and died after barely a second.

"Forrester to *Ascension*, the probe just flamed out." Forrester signalled when he saw this.

Moments later there was another flash of light, this time from the *Ascension* as the starship activated its tractor beam again to seize the probe. This time the probe was unable to try breaking free of the tractor beam and instead it was pulled steadily towards the Federation starship, moving beneath the vessel while one of the large shuttle bay doors at the rear slid open. As soon as the probe was behind the *Ascension* it was released from the beam and a second one took over. This second tractor beam emitter was located within the shuttle bay itself and was normally used to assist with shuttle landings, bringing shuttlecraft into the bay automatically without the pilots needing to do anything and reducing the risk of collisions.

The tractor beam pulled the disabled probe into the shuttle bay before lowering it to the deck gently. With the docking procedure complete the shuttle bay door slid shut again and the forcefield that had been maintaining the atmosphere inside it was deactivated.

"Docking procedure complete captain." Etchemin said, looking around from the navigation console, "The probe is aboard and the shuttle bay is sealed."

"Commander Tan, what is your analysis?" Ash asked, looking at the science station in turn.

"My scans have detected no anomalous energy readings from the craft captain." Tan replied, "There are no indications that it is preparing to self destruct although there is a low level of radiation from its exposure to space."

"Then you're ready to begin your physical analysis?" Ash said.

"Almost captain." Tan answered and Ash frowned.

"What else is there that you require commander?" he said and Tan smiled at him.

"It might help us if we beamed Lieutenant Commander Forrester and Chief Duke back aboard first." he said. Ash smiled back at Tan for a moment and then he turned to look in the other direction, towards the communications console.

"Ensign Estevez please tell the transporter room to bring our chiefs of engineering and security back aboard the ship." he said.

"With pleasure captain." Estevez replied.

With Forrester returned to the *Ascension* both he and Tan changed into the protective clothing worn by engineers before they entered the shuttle bay where the alien probe had been brought aboard. This was as a precaution against the radiation being given off by the probe after spending a prolonged period of time in the vacuum of space where it was unprotected from the energy emissions of the system's star or the gas giant it had been heading towards when the *Ascension* had discovered it.

"Ready?" Forrester asked as the two men stood by the door leading to the shuttle bay and Tan nodded.

"Ready." he replied and the two men paused only to put on their helmets before opening the door.

Each man carried a case of equipment to use in the examination of the probe and they carried these across the shuttle bay.

"It looks like something out of a history book Adam." Tan commented as he got his first personal look at the probe.

"Take it from me James, what I saw inside the propulsion unit isn't much different to the thrusters I service here on the *Ascension*." Forrester responded.

"Wait here a moment." Tan said suddenly.

"What for?" Forrester asked.

"I just want to run another scan to make sure that bringing this probe aboard hasn't triggered anything." Tan answered and he set his equipment case down before lifting the tricorder he had slung at his side, "I'm

picking up the same elevated level of radiation but nothing out of the ordinary for a craft like this that has been drifting in space.”

“Can you tell how long it’s been out there?” Forrester asked.

“I’d say about three years from the level of radioactivity I’m seeing here.” Tan told him.

“Then that thruster can’t have been burning the whole time. It would have sent the probe flying right out of the system if it had been.” Forrester said and Tan nodded in agreement.

“Yes, I suspect that it was intended to operate like the early probes launched by humans and other Federation species.” he said.

“So a rocket took it into orbit and then the thruster set it going out here. After that it only fired the thruster again if it wanted to change course or facing.” Forrester added.”

“Exactly.” Tan said, lowering the tricorder once more, “Of course this begs the question of how the inhabitants of this system not only managed to discover space flight less than a decade after their first powered atmospheric flight and how the thruster ended up here in the first place.”

Finishing walking across the shuttle bay, both of the Ascension’s officers set down their equipment cases and opened them up.

“I’ll set up the recorder.” Forrester said, “The thruster unit is accessed with a standard tool if you want to take a look inside.”

“I’m more interested in the control mechanism and structural design.” Tan replied as he opened his communicator, “Tan to bridge we’re about to open the probe. I’ll leave my communicator open so we can stay in contact.”

“Understood commander, everyone’s listening.” Estevez replied and Tan placed his communicator on top of one of the probe’s long solar panels. He then began to inspect the casing of the probe, searching for any means of opening it up.

“Okay we’re recording.” Forrester said once he had finished setting up a recording unit on a lightweight tripod and he walked towards Tan.

“I’ve found an access point.” Tan told him, “The fastening isn’t a Federation standard though. I need a universal driver.”

“Here you go James.” Forrester said as he took the tool Tan wanted from his equipment case and handed it to the science officer.

“Thanks.” Tan said as he took the tool and he began to loosen the fastenings he had found.

While Tan was attempting to access the control systems of the probe Forrester returned to the thruster unit that it used for propulsion and opened this up again. However, this time he went further than just disconnecting the fuel line and he began to dismantle the thruster completely, checking each component in turn before he laid them out on the deck nearby.

As soon as Tan was able to remove the casing from the main body of the probe he shone a light inside and saw that the electronics it held were a strange mix of ancient and modern. Several duotronic modules were plugged into a cluster of connectors that in turn had multiple coloured wire looms running to the other parts of the probe. The number of these present was far more than would be used on an equivalent Federation probe though, suggesting that the manner in which they had been used was far from the most efficient.

“Incredible.” he said.

“What was that commander?” Ash’s voice asked from the open communicator.

“Captain it appears that this probe was constructed largely using Federation technology. Duotronic modules have been used to provide a control mechanism. The quantity appears to be excessive and I suspect that these have been recovered from sources that used each one for a similar application to how it is used in this probe.” Tan explained.

“This thruster looks like it was bought off the shelf captain.” Forrester added as he continued to dismantle the probe’s propulsion system, “In fact I think I just found a serial number. Do you want me to run it through the manufacturer’s database to see if I can trace it?”

“That sounds like a good idea commander.” Ash responded to Forrester’s suggestion and then Estevez turned to face him.

“Captain you may want to see this.” she told him.

“What is it ensign?” Ash asked and he got up from his chair and walked over to the communications console.

“I’ve been monitoring the radio broadcasts from the second planet and things don’t look too good down there.” Estevez told him.

“In what way?” Ash said, frowning.

“Well I’ve found what look like a number of news broadcasts from several of the nations on the planet and if the universal translator has the context right then it looks like war could break out down there at any time.”

“Commander Tan did mention that there was competition for influence over the smaller nations.” Ash pointed out, remembering the brief that Tan had given him from Starfleet’s anthropological file on the system’s inhabited planet.

"Yes captain but this looks different to proxy conflicts in developing nations." Estevez said.

"How?" Ash said.

"I'm getting reports that the major nations themselves are preparing for conflict. It looks like one of them has suddenly acquired a technological edge that it is exploiting to improve it's influence over the rest of the planet." Estevez told him.

"And I suppose that this includes the inexplicable ability to launch spacecraft?" Ash commented and Estevez nodded.

"Yes captain. There is mention of something called the 'Department of Astronomical Development.'" she said, "The nation has launched a handful of satellites but there are also reports of other advances in technology that just shouldn't be possible with what else we know about their society. It appears that they have made developments in robotics that have seen them increase their industrial output in certain sectors for example. The reports indicate that this has allowed them to expand their armed forces considerably. Now it looks like the other nations are realising that they are on the verge of being left behind and are preparing to act while they still have a chance. One of the reports I've seen is of a conference that has the aim of creating an alliance." Estevez continued.

"So these other nations will try to use sheer weight of numbers to overwhelm them?" Teela said.

"That's what it looks like commander, yes." Estevez replied.

"I think it's obvious that this nation is getting this technology from these pirates." Ash said, looking around the bridge at his command staff, "Ensign Estevez inform Starfleet command of our situation and let them know that we are proceeding to Enigma Ortez Two to assess the level of cultural contamination that there's been and that we will do our best to undo it."

"Captain the locals may have been given the ability to detect our approach by the pirates." Teela pointed out and Ash nodded.

"Lieutenant Etchemin plot us a course that limits their ability to spot us. Ideally I'd like us to be able to sit in orbit without anyone ever knowing that we're there. Lieutenant Commander Teela when you have the course take us in at one half impulse." he ordered.

"One half impulse aye captain."

5.

The *Ascension* was already underway when Tan returned to the bridge in the company of Forrester, both men having changed back to their formal duty uniforms with their maroon tunics.

"Gentlemen, I take it that you have the results of your analysis?" Ash asked, turning his chair to face them as they stepped out of the turbolift.

"Yes captain. If you'd like to come and take a look at the science console." Tan replied and he pointed to his duty station.

Ash joined his science officer and engineer at the science console and Tan brought up an image of the alien probe on a display.

"Commander Forrester was right when he said that the propulsion system had been lifted entirely from the Andorian thruster unit captain." Tan said, pointing to the aft section of the probe.

"I was right about being able to pull serial numbers too." Forrester added, "They were right where they were supposed to be. No-one even attempted to hide them."

"I doubt that anyone in this system thought that they needed to. It's not like they bought a stolen skimmer that the local police have a record of." Ash commented and then he looked at Estevez, "Ensign transmit the serial numbers to Starfleet and see what they can come up with."

"Yes captain." Estevez replied and Ash turned back towards the science console to see what else had been discovered about the probe.

"The control mechanisms are much the same captain." Tan told him, "Duotronic modules interfaced to the probe's hardware using simple copper wire."

"Yes, you mentioned something about there being too many of them." Ash said.

"One duotronic module ought to have been enough to run that probe. None of ours have more than three." Forrester replied.

"How many are in the alien probe?" Ash asked.

"Eight captain." Tan answered.

"Eight? What could it possibly need that many for?" Ash said.

"My guess is that each one was selected because it had been used in something that required a specific function to be programmed into the module." Tan told him, "For example one of them controls the thruster unit, another handles the communications link with its ground station on the second planet and a third was responsible for the way it tried to evade us when we approached. I can't tell you exactly what all of the others do but I'm guessing that some will be just for data storage. Either the data gathered by the sensors or updated orders sent from the planet."

"Captain there's just no way that the civilisation of this system could have built this probe without outside help. The quality of the interfaces between different parts is very basic. The hull is lined with duranium and that's the only thing keeping the wiring from acting like an antenna for any stray energy emissions. Even with the protected duotronic modules nothing inside would work without that. The people who built this probe may have known what they wanted it to do but they had no idea how to actually build it." Forrester said.

"So that's why the pirates took what seemed like a worthless cargo." Ash commented.

"Captain?" Tan said.

"The Captain of the *Peru* said that his cargo included scrap alloys. Of minimal value to anyone who could fabricate them." Ash told him.

"But priceless to a pre-warp civilisation that could shape the alloy but not produce it themselves." Forrester said.

"Captain if one of the local nations is able to apply duranium to their military industry then they could produce armoured vehicles that would be nearly impervious to the ballistic weapons societies of this level are generally capable of producing." Teela pointed out.

"Then no amount of superior numbers would be good enough." Etchemin added, "They may well try to shoot down the *Ascension* by throwing rocks at us."

"Captain there is a more worrying issue at hand." Tan added and he changed the image on the screen to one that showed only the mechanism of the fuel feed to the thruster unit, "This is the fuel tank captain." he said, "As is normal for a thruster unit it holds deuterium that is then used for a fusion reaction."

"And what's the problem? If the natives didn't have a supply of deuterium then that probe just wouldn't worked." Ash said and Tan and Forrester looked at one another nervously, "What?" Ash asked when he saw this.

"Captain the deuterium was produced locally." Forrester said, "There were impurities in it that would not appear in anything from a Federation source."

"You mean someone has given the locals the ability to refine deuterium themselves?" Ash said sternly.

"Yes captain. Most likely from seawater." Tan replied.

"Never mind coating their vehicles with superior armour, successfully refining deuterium gives them the ability to produce plasma weapons and to power particle beams." Teela said and Tan sighed.

"It is also a precursor to the industrial production of anti-matter." he said.

"Commander Tan I want every part of the second planet subjected to full resolution scans." Ash said, "We need to know exactly what they've got down there because I don't want to leave so much as a single duotronic fuse or gram of deuterium in this system for anyone to take advantage of."

"That should be doable captain but what about the knowledge that the natives will have gained?" Tan asked and Ash looked at Estevez again.

"Ensign Estevez continue your monitoring of surface signals. Look for anything that looks like it is related to the new materials and technologies that the pirates have been supplying or the central government that is controlling them. We're going to have to go and pay them a visit." he said.

"Yes captain." Estevez responded.

"I wonder why only one of these nations has been given access to this technology by the pirates." Etchemin commented.

"What do you mean lieutenant?" Ash asked.

"Well surely if they can make a profit selling to one of them then they could make six times the profit selling to all six of the major nations. Especially if one of them thought that they others had something that would give them a military advantage that they need to match." Etchemin said.

"Lieutenant Etchemin does have a point captain. There has to be something more at play here than just providing advanced technology to a pre-warp society." Tan agreed.

"The only explanation I can think of is if that one nation has something that the pirates can't obtain from the others. Something valuable enough for them to agree to an exclusive trading relationship." Forrester added and Ash nodded.

"Commander Tan start your scans. Look for anything that is present only within the borders of the nation that the pirates are supplying with advanced technology." he said.

"And what about the probe in the hangar captain?" Forrester asked.

"Put the parts into storage. If we can figure out who they really belong to then they can have them back when we're done here." Ash replied.

"Deborah?" Ash called out as he entered sickbay.

"In here Mike." Reese responded from the office that adjoined the main treatment ward and Ash made his way over to the doorway and leant on the frame. Reese was sat behind her desk and looking at the monitor in front of her.

"Watching anything interesting?" he asked.

"I'm checking out the anthropological report on Enigma Ortez Two, or Karana as the locals call it in their most dominant language." Reese told him, "If we're going down there then we may need to blend in." Reese told him and she turned the monitor around so that he could see the close up image of one of the natives of the planet. This focused on the head and shoulders of the alien and showed the distinctive flattened appearance of their faces caused by their noses being set into their skulls rather than protruding from it.

"I was hoping to avoid having to use surgery or prosthetics to blend in." Ash said, "With any luck all of the material we need to collect will be in isolated areas."

"Surely you don't think that it will all be abandoned." Reese said.

"No of course not, but I'd expect anyone to near it to have some idea of its origin. These people obviously know that there are other civilisations in the galaxy than their own if they've been buying from the pirates. A uniformed tactical team won't cause any more problems than the pirates already have." Ash told her.

"Then you've already decided on using force?" Reese said.

"Phasers will be set on stun if that's what you're worried about Deborah. I don't plan on slaughtering the locals. Of course we'll probably have to use the ship's phasers to soften the targets up first. Incapacitating everyone in a hundred metre radius before I send in the troops." Ash said.

"The troops? Mike we've got less than forty security personnel aboard, not an assault marine brigade." Reese said.

"I know. I'm hoping that there will only be a limited number of targets to deal with so I don't need to break them down into units that are too small. Commander Forrester will be assigning some of his people to the strike teams as well. Plus I'll be going in." Ash said.

"You?"

"I'm the captain, I need to be there to make on the spot decisions." Ash said.

"In that case I need to go as well." Reese said.

"Deborah I-" Ash began.

"No Mike," Reese interrupted, "You're talking about sending in a tactical team, maybe more than one. That means that there could be casualties and if you're needed there for on the spot command decisions then you need medical support as well. As the *Ascension's* chief medical officer I'm assigning myself to that role."

"Okay then, you can join the away team." Ash replied and then he looked at the image of the alien on the desk mounted monitor, "Now if we do need to send a more covert unit in what's going to be involved in making us look like that?"

Before Reese could answer though the intercom activated.

"Bridge to sickbay." Tan's voice said.

"Sickbay here commander." Reese responded.

"Is Captain Ash with you doctor?" Tan asked.

"Right here commander." Ash said, stepping closer to the intercom.

"Captain I've been running the scans of the second planet you asked for and there's something that I think you ought to see." Tan told him.

"What is it commander?" Ash said.

"I think it's easier if you come to the bridge and see for yourself captain. This could explain why the pirates are dealing with just one of the planet's nations." Tan said even though the science officer could not see him Ash nodded.

"Okay commander, I'm on my way." he said.

"Thank you captain. Bridge out." Tan said and then the intercom was shut off.

"I better get going and see what James has found. I'll catch up with you later." Ash told Reese and then he briefly leant across the desk to kiss her before he turned to leave sickbay.

3.

When Ash returned to the bridge he found that the main view screen was dominated by an image of the system's second planet and beside it were a list of the elements that had been found in its atmosphere.

"An atmospheric scan?" he said.

"Yes captain." Tan replied, "We have the results of the previous surveys on file and I wanted to run a comparison to see if there were any differences."

"Let me guess, you found something that shouldn't be there." Ash said as he sat down in his chair.

"Correct captain." Tan replied, "A reading of point two one parts per million of dilithium."

"Point to one? That's pretty high. Where the hell is that coming from?" Ash said in surprise, "Even if the pirates were dumping millions of tonnes of un-scrubbed warp cores here you couldn't get a reading that high from the residue."

"No captain. The only alternative is a dilithium mining operation. Most likely open cast strip mining." Tan said.

"So you think that the pirates are trading what they steal for dilithium?" Ash said.

"Yes captain, that is the logical conclusion. The dilithium deposits are likely concentrated within the territory of one of the major nations. That would answer Lieutenant Etchemin's point about why the pirates are dealing with just one nation."

"Find it." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain." Tan replied as he turned back towards his console.

"Captain we've also received a reply about the thruster serial number." Estevez said.

"Go ahead ensign." Ash said.

"According to the records on Andoria that thruster unit was installed in a deuterium fuel tanker that was constructed thirty-five years ago and was reported lost seven years ago in this sector." Estevez said.

"Well I think we know what happened to it now." Teela commented.

"Makes you wonder how many of them the locals have got and what use they've put them to though." Etchemin added.

"If that probe represented the pinnacle of their technology then I don't think we have much to worry about lieutenant." Ash told him.

"You may want to take a look at the satellites orbiting the planet before you make that assessment captain."

Tan added as the *Ascension's* sensors detected the first of the artificial satellites orbiting Enigma Ortez 2.

"How big is the network?" Ash asked.

"So far I'm only detecting two satellites captain. Correction, three satellites. A third has just come over the horizon. Their construction suggests that they are meant for orbital intelligence gathering." Tan answered.

"Are they capable of detecting us?" Ash said.

"I don't think so captain. It appears that their sensors are directed exclusively towards the surface of the planet. I cannot rule out the possibility that they could be retasked towards us though." Tan said.

"Teela place us in a high orbit." Ash ordered. Then he looked at Tan and added, "I take that will keep us outside of their detection range?"

"Probably captain." Tan replied.

"Probably?" Ash commented.

"Our sensors are detecting limited radio wave emissions that look like a primitive ground based radar system. Given the presence of orbiting satellites it is reasonable to believe that these systems would be capable of tracking orbital objects, at least those in a low orbit. However, the attenuation of the radio waves suggests that they are unlikely to have the range to reach a higher altitude." Tan explained.

"Forty thousand kilometres?" Ash asked.

"That should be enough to avoid detection by the natives' radar captain. Of course we would still be vulnerable to visual detection by telescope." Tan said.

"Should I try to keep us over the ocean captain? That might help keep us hidden." Teela suggested.

"If you can lieutenant commander." Ash replied.

Teela brought the *Ascension* into orbit around Enigma Ortez 2 cautiously, knowing that the more power she used with the impulse drive the more likely it was that someone on the surface would notice the engine flare even without the need for a telescope. Apart from the probe encountered near the system's sixth planet, all of the spacecraft launched by the Karanans were low orbital and this kept the *Ascension* tens of thousands of kilometres above them.

"Entering orbit now captain." Teela announced as she levelled the *Ascension* off.

"Very good commander. How much of our orbit will we spend over water?" Ash replied.

"About fifty percent captain. That's the best I can do without us having to continuously use our thrusters to maintain our orbit." Teela replied.

"It will have to do then." Ash said.

"Captain I believe that I have located the dilithium mining facility." Tan announced suddenly and he looked up from his console.

"On screen commander." Ash ordered and the image on the bridge's main viewscreen changed again. This time it changed to show orbital footage of what was obviously a mining facility located somewhere in a wilderness area. Here the vegetation had been cleared and open shafts dug down into the ground. The image was clear enough for the *Ascension's* command crew to make out not only the various structures that had been built around the mine but also a number of vehicles moving around it as well as the single road and rail track that connected it to the outside world. In addition to the mine though there was a pair of large buildings that had been constructed adjacent to it while a large area of ground beside one of these had not only been cleared of vegetation but also covered in concrete.

"That doesn't look like a road or a runway for atmospheric craft." Etchemin commented.

"No, it looks more like a launch pad for an atmosphere capable starship." Teela added. Then she looked over her shoulder at Ash, "Captain one photon torpedo would take out that entire facility." she added.

"I realise that lieutenant commander. However, that would also kill everyone down there." Ash pointed out.

"Captain the atmospheric dilithium reading around the facility is three point one parts per million." Tan said.

"They're strip mining." Estevez said when she heard this.

"It looks that way, yes. I'm not reading any filtration systems." Tan said, "My scans also indicate that the secondary structures are for refining and storage of the crystals."

"How much is down there?" Ash said.

"Sensors indicate almost four hundred tonnes captain." Tan said.

"Four hundred tonnes? That's worth a fortune." Etchemin said in surprise.

"What can they be doing with all that dilithium?" Estevez asked, "Surely Starfleet would notice if someone suddenly started releasing tonnes of it onto the market."

"Yes they would. Which means they can't have released much into the official Federation market yet. I want to know what's happening to it and the answer to that is probably down there somewhere." Ash said.

"A covert away team?" Tan asked and Ash smiled.

"An away team, yes. But I'm thinking of being somewhat more direct about it." he said, "Ensign Estevez, do you have any more information?"

"I think so captain." Estevez replied, "I've managed to locate the headquarters of the organisation that is responsible for the natives' space program. I've also monitored communications that appear to be related to the construction of the new armoured vehicle force."

"What about research and development?" Tan asked.

"I've found some references to it but I can't isolate a location yet." Estevez said.

"Commander Tan can you help with that? We are talking about the use of materials that shouldn't be found on this planet after all." Ash said, looking at Tan.

"Scanning." the science officer said, turning back to his console. Then moments later he added, "I am detecting a large concentration of duranium in what looks like an industrial area."

"Sounds like where they're building those vehicles." Teela suggested.

"That would make sense captain." Estevez added, "From what I've found the new armoured force isn't in active service yet."

"Can you put it on screen?" Ash said and Estevez nodded.

"I think so captain." she said as she input the location of the suspected armoured vehicle factory into her console and the main viewscreen changed again.

The new location was also shown from above and as was the case with the dilithium mine it was outside any of the major settlements in an area surrounded by wilderness. However, whereas there had been limited transport links to the mine there were far more leading to this facility. Roads headed off in several directions and the dedicated rail siding was connected to a set of tracks that ran past before joining the main rail network.

"The facility is located close to the coast captain and there appears to be a significant naval presence in the dockyards there. The thermal readings of the buildings match the expected profile for a facility that is smelting duranium." Tan said as he studied the sensor readings of the area further out from the facility shown on the viewscreen.

The production facility consisted of several large structures, most of them interconnected by long sheds that were wide enough to fit a bulky vehicle down. What confirmed the purpose of this place though was the oval shaped dirt track located adjacent to it that was obviously meant for testing the performance of the tanks being built there and the image was clear enough to show three such vehicles lined up close to it.

"Can we get a better view of one of those tanks?" Ash said.

"One moment captain." Tan replied and he adjusted the viewscreen to magnify the image shown on it, focusing on the trio of armoured vehicles so that they filled the screen.

Even viewed from orbit and with only the upper surfaces of the vehicles visible it was easy to see the crudeness of the design. Although the vehicles had tracked chassis and turrets mounting long barrelled guns

the proportions of these along with the general outlines indicated a lack of practical experience with armoured warfare. Of course the use of duranium armour would more than offset any of the drawbacks imposed by the design, making the vehicles almost impervious to the weapons available to the inhabitants of the planet.

"That doesn't look like a plasma cannon." Teela commented when she saw the barrel of the weapon mounted in the turret. This was a simple tube that lacked any indications of the magnetic containment required for the projection of highly charged and superheated matter.

"I suppose that's something we can be grateful for." Ash responded, "If they can't mount plasma weapons on a vehicle then I doubt that they'll have been able to miniaturise the technology enough to create handheld versions."

"That gives us three targets so far captain. How do you wish to proceed?" Tan asked.

"We need to deploy away teams to all three at the same time." Ash answered, "We'll need information on their military uniforms for one of them."

"The space program headquarters?" Tan said and Ash nodded.

"Yes, I expect there'll be some kind of military presence there. Ensign Estevez and Chief Duke will beam down in disguise and attempt to discover where the locals are carrying out their research." he said.

"Me?" Estevez exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes ensign, you." Ash replied, looking towards her, "You're the one who has the best chance of translating any records you find while Duke can assess the installation's security with a view to bringing in an assault team to take out their ability to manufacture spacecraft."

"Your first away mission command. Congratulations." Teela said and she smiled at the obviously astonished Estevez.

"Commander Tan I want you to lead an away team to the dilithium mining facility." Ash continued.

"The high level of particulate matter in the atmosphere will make transport difficult captain. We'll have to beam down-" Tan began.

"Take a shuttle. It can set you down on their landing pad before taking off to provide you with cover. I expect that the locals will see you coming and launch fighter aircraft to intercept. Lieutenant Etchemin you'll pilot the shuttle for Commander Tan's away team." Ash interrupted.

"Captain if the shuttle is going to go into combat then Lieutenant Commander Teela is a superior pilot." Etchemin said, glancing at the Andorian sat beside him.

"Yes but I need Lieutenant Commander Teela here to take the conn." Ash told him, "Commander Tan your mission will be to evaluate the mining operation and secure the available stock of dilithium. With any luck there'll be information on how much has been shipped out already and maybe even where it's going to. In the meantime I'll be leading the third away team down to that tank factory. I'll take Doctor Reese and Commander Forrester with me. We'll do what we can to take out their ability to produce these new tanks."

"How large a team will go in with each group captain?" Tan said.

"You and I will take ten security guards armed with phaser rifles and grenades. Estevez and Duke will be alone initially but another team of ten will be on standby to support them. That still leaves us with another unit to act as a reserve and if the worst comes to the worst then the Ascension's phasers can be used for orbital support though I'm not willing to sanction the use of photon torpedoes just yet. Tactical strikes only, we're not here to level entire cities." Ash said.

"If you say so captain." Teela commented.

"Yes I do. Now I'm going to have engineering prepare an armed shuttle for Commander Tan's team while Ensign Estevez and Chief Duke report to sickbay for their disguises." Ash said.

"The Starfleet ship is in a high orbit around Enigma Ortez Two captain." one of the pirate bridge officers said.

"Are there any signs that the locals have spotted them yet?" the captain asked in response.

"No, it looks like they're keeping out of range." the officer answered.

"Have they seen us?" another of the bridge crew added.

"If they had do you think that they'd still be sitting there in orbit watching a bunch of primitives?" the captain said, "We'll have to get a lot closer to them before they spot us. Of course the problem is that that's exactly what we need to do. We need to get close enough to them that we're in position to attack when they send people down to the surface. They'll have to lower their shields in order to use their transporter or launch a shuttle so that will be our window of opportunity. Tactical do you think you can get this right?"

"Warp drive and photon control. I think so captain." the tactical officer replied.

"Good. After you've taken them out hit their shield generators as quickly as you can as well. There's not much point in disarming them if they can just get their shields up and make repairs." the captain said.

"Then what captain?" another pirate said and a smile spread across the captain's face.

"Then we deliver our ultimatum to the crew, abandon ship or we'll destroy it. Think what we could get for a Miranda-class destroyer, even one that's been shot up. Never mind the dilithium our client wants, when he

hears that we've captured a Starfleet vessel he'll give us anything we ask for." he said, staring at the image of the *Ascension* in orbit around Enigma Ortiz 2.

7.

"Will this hurt?" Estevez asked as she lay back on the biobed while Reese double checked the surgical instruments laid out in a row.

"It shouldn't, no." Reese replied, "All I'm going to do is make a couple of small incisions so I can insert the prosthetics under your skin. I'll use a local anaesthetic so you won't feel a thing."

"Here are the prosthetics doctor." one of Reese's staff said as he brought her a tray. Estevez looked at what was on this but all she could see were two rows of rubbery looking objects. These were identical in shape but had slightly different colours and Estevez could not help but notice that the smaller set had a colour that matched her own skin tone while the other set was significantly darker and was obviously meant for Chief Duke.

"Thank you, just set them down there would you?" Reese told the crewman and he put the tray of prosthetic implants down while Reese picked up a hypospray, "Now hold still." she said to Estevez before she pressed the hypospray to her cheek and injected the contents into her head. Almost immediately Estevez felt her face go numb and she reached up to try and touch it, "Don't. I need to work." Reese said when she saw this and she pushed Estevez's hands back down beside her.

"By bace is um." Estevez mumbled, her words slurred by the anaesthetic.

"And so it should be. Now hold still unless you want these cheek inserts under your ears." Reese said and she picked up a laser scalpel and activated the device.

"None of our shuttles are armed captain." Forrester told Ash as they both stood in the shuttle bay and looked at the row of shuttles kept there, "It'll take about two hours to check the phasers, get them installed and configure the targeting system."

"That should be okay. I doubt a war will break out down there in two hours and it gives the other teams chance to get ready." Ash replied.

"I heard you've given Estevez command of a team." Forrester commented and Ash smiled.

"Yes, I think she's ready. Besides all she really has to do is find a records office and take a look through what's there. Chief Duke will be going along with her to keep an eye on her and make sure she's okay." he said.

It was then that Etchemin entered the hangar and walked towards the two senior officers.

"Lieutenant, think you can handle this baby?" Forrester asked.

"I did the simulations at the academy as part of my flight training but that was a different class of shuttle and I've never actually flown any model in combat." Etchemin answered but Forrester smiled and placed a supportive hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, you'll do fine. It's not like you'll be going up against modern interceptors with particle weapons, just keep your speed above about five hundred kilometres per hour and you'll leave the native aircraft standing." he said.

"If you come under fire then you can use altitude to your advantage as well." Ash added, "The Karanans don't have pressurised aircraft that we know of and even if they do they won't be able to climb into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. You can go as high as you like to keep out of range and attack from above."

"You mean be the hun in the sun?" Etchemin asked and Ash grinned.

"What?" Forrester said, frowning in confusion.

"It's an old saying from the earliest days of aerial combat on Earth." Ash told him, "It was a warning to pilots that their enemies would try to attack from a sunward direction to blind their victims to their approach."

"It's still occasionally mentioned in training at the academy." Etchemin said and Ash nodded.

"Yes, I remember it from when I was in training to be a navigator." he said, "So what brings you here now lieutenant?"

"I thought it would be a good idea to familiarise myself with the weapons." Etchemin said and Forrester nodded.

"Good idea. Come with me and I'll show you the modifications." he said. Then he turned to Ash and added, "I'll catch up with you later captain."

"Transporter room one." Ash told him, "Remember this is a tactical mission so draw a set of armour as well as a phaser."

Members of both teams to be beamed down to the surface gathered in one of the *Ascension's* transporter rooms

"Stop picking at it." Reese said when she saw Estevez prodding her own cheeks where the prosthetic implants had brought them forwards to give the young woman's face a much flatter appearance. In addition to her usual duty uniform Reese was also wearing one of the armoured vests normally reserved for security

staff aboard a starship and on most away teams. Only when combat was considered highly likely did members of other branches wear them.

"It feels funny." Estevez replied, "Does it look natural?"

"Of course it does." Reese said, "Are you questioning my surgical skill?"

"No of course not doctor but-" Estevez began.

"Then stop picking at it." Reese interrupted, "You don't see Chief Duke picking at his face do you?" and then she looked at where Chief Duke was standing close behind Estevez.

"That's because I'm too distracted by this uniform." he said, "It's itchy."

Both Estevez and Duke had been dressed in reproductions of the uniforms worn by members of the military in the nation that the pirates were supplying with advanced materials and technology.

"It is a bit." Estevez agreed.

"A bit? It's like sandpaper." Duke said and Reese smiled.

"You must just have very sensitive skin chief." she said and he glared at her.

"Sensitive?" he said as Reese continued to smile.

"I suspect that the natives have a higher tolerance for the irritation." Reese commented.

"Yeah, or maybe they're all just masochists." Duke muttered as the door to the transporter room slid open and both Ash and Forrester entered the room together. Just like Reese the two men also wore armoured vests over their tunics and they both walked over to where Reese stood with Estevez and Duke.

"Are you two ready to beam down?" he asked and Estevez nodded.

"Yes captain. The sooner I can get this over with and get these prosthetics removed the better." she said.

"And the sooner I can get out of this itchy uniform the better." Duke added.

"Crewman do you have the co-ordinates Commander Tan provided?" Ash said, looking at the transporter operator and the crewman nodded.

"Yes captain. Beam down co-ordinates are locked in." he said.

"Good." Ash replied before turning back towards the two disguised members of his crew, "Down you go then. Remember that there'll be a tactical team available if you need extraction."

"Yes captain." Estevez said before both she and Duke made their way onto the transporter pads. Then when they were in position she looked at the operator and added, "Energise."

At Estevez's command the transporter operator activated the device and both she and Duke were surrounded by pulsing lights as they dematerialised.

When Estevez and Duke materialised they found themselves in total darkness and Duke quickly took a compact flash light from his pocket and turned it on. This revealed that the pair were standing in a small storeroom that was filled with various bottles and small boxes on shelves.

"Think this is a light switch?" he said when he noticed a cord hanging from the ceiling close to the door.

"Could it be an alarm?" Estevez suggested.

"Why put an alarm in here? What's all this stuff?" Duke asked and he looked at the shelves, shining the flash light across the contents.

Estevez reached into the bag she had over her shoulder and took out a flash light of her own along with a PADD that had a built in camera and as she shone the flash light onto the label on one of the bottles she held up the PADD as well so that the lettering was picked up by its camera and promptly translated.

"Liquid soap." she said, "I think these are cleaning supplies. We should get going."

Duke nodded before walking over to the door and then he put his flash light away. After waiting for Estevez to put her own flash light and PADD away he pulled the door open just enough to be able to see out of the storeroom.

"What's out there?" Estevez whispered.

"A hallway. Come on, it's empty." Duke replied and the pair of them quickly exited the storeroom, "Okay so which way now?" he added, looking in both directions.

"Well I've memorised the words for 'records office' and 'archive.' So hopefully there will be signs. It'll attract less attention than trying to ask someone." Estevez replied.

"Yeah, I've seen universal translators screw up accents and I suspect that would be very bad around here." Duke said.

"I think we should try this way." Estevez added, pointing and she started to walk away.

"Don't get too far ahead ensign." Duke said as he began to follow her and he started to itch his sides as he walked.

After Estevez and Duke beamed down to the planet's surface, it was the turn of the team that Ash was leading personally to beam down. Given the number of members of the team they were split between two different transporter rooms that synchronised their operation so that the team materialised together in the woods close to the test track for the tanks.

The first action of the away team was to take a look around and assess their surroundings. The woods were dense and even though they had beamed down during the early hours of daylight it was still fairly dark where they had materialised.

"I'm not detecting any humanoid life forms close by." Reese said as she used her tricorder to scan the area, "The closest are about two hundred metres in that direction. Four of them."

"Sounds like a security patrol. We should get moving before they come this way." Ash said and he waved for the away team to follow him towards the test track.

Rather than emerging from the cover of the woods the away team circled around the test track until they were as close as possible to the row of parked tanks. From ground level the tanks were an imposing presence even though their design was primitive when compared to the designs fielded by Federation forces. "I'd hate to have one of those charging towards me." Reese commented.

"I'm not sure I'd describe anything they could do as 'charging'." Forrester commented as he scanned the vehicles with his tricorder, "The engine in these vehicles is a crude combustion motor that probably can't move a vehicle as heavy as these more than about ten or fifteen kilometres per hour across country and that's given good firm ground."

"That would explain the need for rail sidings. Driving these anywhere would take forever. I expect they get loaded onto trains. What about the advanced features?" Ash asked.

"It looks like it's just the armour captain." Forrester told him, "There's an outer layer of duranium about two centimetres thick on average and then an inner core of steel about six centimetres thick."

"Is that it?" Reese said when she heard this, knowing that the armoured ground vehicles built in the Federation tended to have armour thicknesses of up a metre of composite alloys at their most heavily protected points.

"Even without the added duranium the steel would be pretty effective against the main guns these things are armed with." Forrester told her, "It scans as a standard ballistic cannon with a calibre of thirty-three millimetres. Unless the locals have some sort of ammunition more advanced than solid armour piercing that we're not aware of that amount of armour would work pretty well."

"I suppose that there are more than just these." Ash said and Forrester turned his tricorder towards the nearby buildings.

"I'm picking up large quantities of duranium inside these structures captain." he said, "Although from this range I can't tell whether it has already been turned into tank armour. There is also a regulated energy source coming from inside that building there." Forrester added and he pointed towards the nearest building, "I think that there are duotronic devices inside."

"What are they doing with duotronics here?" Reese said.

"It looks like the locals are operating a plasma furnace, presumably to smelt the duranium into usable sheets of armour." Forrester said and Ash nodded in agreement.

"They'd certainly have trouble forming it using only wood or fossil fuelled furnaces." he commented.

"Take that out and all they'd have left is a pile of very advanced scrap metal." Forrester pointed out and Ash smiled.

"Let's go take a look." he said.

"What about those tanks?" Reese asked and she pointed to the row of armoured vehicles nearby.

Ash turned towards the security guards that he included in the away team and looked at one who was carrying a backpack.

"Cooke." he said.

"Yes captain?" the security guard responded.

"I want one spatial charge placed under each of those vehicles, set to go off on remote command." Ash ordered and then he glanced at Forrester and added, "Do you think that will be enough?"

"Easily captain. The armour underneath is thinnest, a spatial charge will easily penetrate it. I recommend placing the charge beneath the engine housing at the rear. That'll ignite the fuel stores. My scans indicate that the fuel used for these vehicles is exceptionally volatile."

"You heard Commander Forrester. Catch up to us when you've set the charges." Ash told the security guard.

"Yes captain." the guard replied and while the rest of the away team started to head for the nearby buildings the guard instead dashed towards the row of tanks. Once there he took spatial charges one at a time from his backpack and clamped them to the underside of the tanks, placing under each engine compartment.

3.

While Ash and Estevez reached the surface of Enigma Ortez 2 in mere moments by using the *Ascension's* transporters, the shuttle that Tan and his assault team needed to take to get through the atmospheric pollution around the dilithium mine would take much longer.

"I have a lock on the mining facility commander." Etchemin said when the shuttle was clear of the Starfleet destroyer.

"Take a direct course lieutenant. The Karanans' sensor may be primitive but they will detect our approach so getting us on the ground as quickly as possible should be our aim." Tan told him and he nodded.

"Yes commander." Etchemin replied and he put the shuttle into a dive, heading towards the planet below.

The shuttle entered the atmosphere without incident and as soon as the entry process was complete Etchemin was able to steer towards the mining facility. As the shuttle continued to descend though an alarm suddenly sounded.

"Is something wrong?" one of the security guards asked.

"That's the tracking warning." Etchemin replied, "Someone just bounced a radar pulse off our hull. They know we're coming now." then he glanced at Tan and added, "Should I power the phasers?"

"By all means lieutenant." Tan said and Etchemin reached for the newly added weapons console to bring the shuttle's pair of phasers on line. As he did so Tan monitored the shuttle's sensors and these soon picked up a pair of contacts heading towards the shuttle from below, "We have two craft on an intercept course.

Currently at seven thousand metres altitude and travelling at four hundred and sixteen kilometres per hour."

"Local fighters. We may have to fight our way to the surface." Etchemin said.

"Their weapons appear primitive but they could theoretically cause damage to us. You may open fire if they attack." Tan told him.

Etchemin continued to fly towards the dilithium mining facility and Tan watched the two local fighters continue to close. He noticed that they did not gain any altitude though, suggesting that they were already at their maximum flight ceiling. However, given that the shuttle had to deliver the away team to the ground it could not remain out of reach forever and all of a sudden there was the sound of several small objects striking the exterior of the shuttle's hull at high speed.

"We're hit!" a security guard exclaimed.

"Multiple projectile impacts but no damage." Tan said, checking the damage report on the flight control console.

"They're in our flight path commander. I'm going in." Etchemin said.

More projectiles were fired at the shuttle as Etchemin turned to engage but these missed by a wide margin when he made the sharp manoeuvre. Although the projectile weapons carried by the two propeller driven fighters needed to be aimed ahead of a moving target the phasers mounted on the Starfleet shuttle functioned at the speed of light and Etchemin also had an advanced targeting system at his disposal instead of having to make do with a simple iron sight and as soon as this showed the phasers were locked onto one of the fighters he fired them.

The twin beams of energy struck the alien fighter plane in one of its wings and sliced all the way through it in an instant. As was the case with the similar craft once used on Earth the fighter's wings housed its fuel tanks and the energy of the phaser beams ignited this, turning the fighter into a burning torch as it plummeted towards the ground and spinning now that it had lost the lift from the destroyed wing. The main fuselage of the fighter still remained intact though and as the stricken aircraft fell the pilot was able to climb out of his cockpit and leap clear. Seconds later he deployed his parachute, the large dome of fabric slowing his descent to a survivable speed.

The second fighter continued to close on the shuttle and its pilot fired another brief burst that missed the fast moving craft as Etchemin turned towards it. He then fired his phasers again and this time the beams hit the engine mounted in the nose of the craft causing it to explode instantly in a ball of fire.

"Targets destroyed commander." Etchemin said when he saw the explosion of the second fighter.

"There are no more contacts but I did detect a brief radio transmission from the second craft." Tan said,

"There will likely be more on their way."

"The mine isn't far, just a couple of hundred kilometres. We'll be there in a few minutes." Etchemin told the science officer and Tan nodded as he got to his feet.

"Stand by to deploy." he told the security guards sat in the rear of the shuttle and they all began to make final checks on their phaser rifles. Given that reinforcements would be harder to deploy to the mine it had been decided that the away team deploying here would be given the added firepower of these larger weapons while ordinary assault phasers were considered adequate for Ash's team and the covert nature of Estevez and Duke's limited the size of any equipment they could take with them.

Although the shuttle's inertial dampeners meant that the members of the away team did not feel the rapid deceleration as Etchemin brought the craft into land on the mine's own shuttle pad they did notice the change in the pitch of its engines. Then as soon as the shuttle touched down Etchemin released the large ramp at the back of the craft.

"Go! Go! Go!" the most senior security guard barked and in two columns the away team rushed down the ramp with Tan positioning himself between them.

The away team spread out and dropped into a crouch a short distance while Tan conducted a scan with his tricorder. At the same time the shuttle's ramp began to close again and the moment it was sealed the sound of its engines grew louder before it took off again, rising into the air and starting to circle the area to provide the away team with cover.

"See? They sent a shuttle towards the mining facility." the pirate captain said as he and his bridge crew watched the *Ascension's* shuttle enter the atmosphere of Enigma Ortez 2, "Helm if we use the planet to shield our approach how close can we get to that starship?" he then asked.

"A standard orbit ought to allow us to get within two thousand kilometres captain. We'll have to coast from here until we're over the horizon but if we go to one quarter impulse while we're out of the detection arc of their sensors we should be able to be in a firing position in under an hour." the helmsman replied.

"Tactical I want firing solutions ready as soon as we can get a lock. Co-ordinate with helm as necessary. Helm, take us in." the captain ordered.

The helmsman promptly fired the pirate ship's thrusters, pushing the vessel from its current position standing off from the planet so that it had a clear view of the *Ascension* to drift towards the horizon of Enigma Ortez 2. Although the pirates could simply have charged their vessel straight at the Starfleet heavy destroyer the chance of them being detected was too high and all of the pirates knew that if the *Ascension* was able to raise its shields then they had no chance of defeating them in a direct frontal assault. However, if they could get close enough to strike before the *Ascension's* crew could react to their appearance then the outcome could be radically different.

After just a few seconds of thruster use the helmsman shut them off again and the raiding ship began to drift. The helmsman had set the ship on a course that would take it over the horizon of the planet, hopefully without being detected by the *Ascension's* sensors but the pirate watched the readouts on his console carefully. He trusted his initial calculations fully but it would take only one slight shift in the gravitational pull or an accidental collision with an object that the pirate ship's limited sensors had failed to detect to knock it off course just enough to push it close enough to the planet's atmosphere that it would be pulled out of orbit. Firing the thrusters again would of course put the ship back on the correct heading but each use of them would also make it easier for the *Ascension* to detect it and the helmsman knew that he had to be careful.

"Any response from the Starfleet vessel?" the captain asked.

"No captain, she's still at anchor in a high orbit." another of the bridge crew responded, "Her shields are down but her weapons are powered."

"Probably at yellow alert because of the shuttle they've just launched. Let's hope it stays that way." the captain commented.

"What are your orders if they do detect us captain?" the helmsman asked.

"Go to warp immediately. I'm not getting into a broadside to broadside engagement with a destroyer." the captain answered.

"What about the client captain? If we leave all that dilithium down there he's not going to be happy." another of the bridge crew pointed out.

"Then the client can go to that hell of his, whatever it is he calls it." the captain said.

"Gre'thor captain. The Klingons call their version of hell Gre'thor." the other officer told him.

"Commander I-" the lieutenant sat at the science station said and when he abruptly stopped before finishing his sentence Teela turned around in the captain's chair to face him.

"What is it lieutenant?" she asked.

"I'm not sure commander. For a moment I thought our sensors were picking up an energy source. Possibly fusion based but there was subspace distortion to it." the junior science officer told her.

"Did you get a location?" Teela said, resisting the temptation to go and take a look at the science console for herself. Although she had more experience aboard a starship than the lieutenant he specialised in the operation of the sensors and there was nothing she could tell him that he did not already know.

"It appeared to be moving commander." the lieutenant answered.

"Moving where?" Teela added.

"Towards the planet." the lieutenant said and Teela considered this, remembering how the *Ascension* had abruptly lost track of the pirate vessel.

"Watch for it reappearing." she ordered, "If it does I want our shields raising immediately."

"Should I raise shields now?" the ensign sat at the navigation and tactical console suggested but Teela shook her head.

"No, it may be nothing and if any of our teams on the surface need extraction or reinforcement I don't want to have to delay while we lower our shields." she said before she looked towards the communications console, "Petty officer, you'd better inform Captain Ash that we may not be alone up here. Just in case." she added.

"That room at the end of the corridor." Estevez whispered, "That's the records office."

"Think we'll just be able to walk right in there?" Duke asked and he looked at the various members of the facility staff who were also present in the hallway. Although most of the Karanans they had encountered so far were civilian scientists, engineers and administrators there were also a number of military personnel present and Duke could see two of them at the far end of the hallway, both of them clearly armed with pistols holstered on their belts. These appeared to be simple projectile weapons but without the armour he usually wore he knew that a hit from a bullet fired by them could be as deadly as a phaser beam.

"I don't see why not." Estevez replied as she did her best to point her PADD at the entrance to the records office while still keeping the device hidden behind the bag she carried, "I don't see any notices about it being restricted."

Hearing a chime from along the hallway, Duke looked towards its source and he saw the two armed soldiers step out of sight. Realising that they had probably entered an elevator he knew that this gave Estevez and himself the opportunity to approach the records office without risking being challenged by anyone who was armed.

"Then let's go." he said and the pair of them started to walk down the hallway.

As they walked they past by a Karanan man in a suit heading in the opposite direction and Duke thought he saw the man staring at them before he carried on walking. When they reached the door Estevez tried the handle and found it unlocked.

"We're in luck." she said before opening the door.

When the pair entered the records office they found that the room was large and filled with shelves that in turn were filled with old fashioned printed books and boxes. There were also two Karanans present, one a civilian worker and the other an armed guard.

"Can I help you?" the civilian asked as she walked towards the two disguised Starfleet personnel.

"We're here to check the stock records." Estevez responded, hoping that the term was general enough to mean something.

"I'm going to need to see your pass." she said and Estevez and Duke looked at one another.

"Do you have it?" Estevez asked and Duke noticed that the guard's hand was moving towards his sidearm.

"Right here." he said, reaching into his jacket. However, in the absence of a pass to access the records office he instead produced the assault phaser he had concealed. Although neither Karanan had ever seen a phaser before they both realised immediately that it was a weapon and the guard began to draw his own pistol.

Duke fired immediately and when the beam hit the guard he collapsed in an instant. Duke's phaser had only been set to stun so the guard was not permanently harmed but he was rendered unconscious and Duke turned towards the Karanan woman who gasped when she saw the phaser fired. At the same time Estevez reached into her bag and quickly produced her own phaser that she pointed at the woman.

"Stay quiet and-" she began but then the woman began to scream and Duke immediately fired his phaser again, stunning her and rendering her unconscious as well.

"Think anyone heard that?" Estevez asked, looking at Duke and he looked towards the door they had just come through.

"If they did then they'll all be coming through that door any moment now." he said.

"Give me a hand then chief and we'll hide these two in there." Estevez said and she pointed to a nearby adjoining room.

Duke nodded and tucked his phaser back inside his jacket before grabbing the guard by his arms before pulling him towards the other room. Estevez did the same with the woman and they lay the two unconscious Karanans side by side.

"That door locks, we can lock them in while you search for the information we need." Duke said and Estevez nodded.

"I just hope that the universal translator can handle whatever these people use instead of the Dewey Decimal system." Estevez said. Then a moment later she added, "Maybe you shouldn't have stunned this woman after all."

"Start looking. I'll be with you in a few moments." Duke told her and he crouched down beside the unconscious guard to removed his pistol belt.

Returning to the records office itself Estevez hurried to the shelves, taking out her PADD as she moved. By holding this up to the books and boxes she was able to get a translation of the titles as she searched for any

records of where the advanced technology provided by the pirates was being studied. When Duke emerged from the side room after her he was wearing the guard's pistol belt and after closing the door behind him he locked it to trap the two unconscious Karanans inside. He then walked over to where the guard had dropped his pistol and picked it up.

"Do you know how to use that thing?" Estevez asked when she saw him inspecting the weapon.

"There are only so many ways a gun like this can work ensign." Duke replied, "But I'm more interested in making sure that it's safe than figuring out what the controls do. If it comes to a shooting match then I'll be using my phaser. I can hold off an entire platoon of the locals with that. This is just for show" he added before he slid the pistol into the holster on the belt he now wore. He then sat down at the desk that the guard had been sat at when he and Estevez had entered the room.



As Ash and his away team neared the building they believed housed the plasma furnace used for smelting duranium armour they started to hear the sounds of metalworking coming from inside.

"Someone is definitely making something inside there." Forrest commented and Ash nodded.

"Not for much longer." he replied.

"I'm picking up bio signs closing on us." Reese announced as she glanced repeatedly at her tricorder while the away team moved.

"Direction?" Ash asked and she pointed.

"Over there." she said, pointing through the woods and just as Ash turned to look in that direction a small group of Karanan soldiers appeared and shouted something.

"Cover!" Ash yelled when he saw the native soldiers raise their weapons and there was the sharp sounds of projectile weapons firing, "Phasers on stun." he added as he then aimed his assault phaser towards the soldiers and fired, the bright blue beam striking a tree trunk close beside one of them.

The sight of an energy weapon being fired startled the Karanan soldiers and they began to retreat while still shooting their weapons at the Starfleet away team but there was a flurry of additional phaser blasts and about half of them were stunned and collapsed. Of the four that remained two promptly took cover and continued to fire their weapons, providing cover while the other two ceased fire and ran.

Ash fired his phaser again and one of the soldiers failed to duck out of the way in time, slumping over the log he had been using for protection. This left most of the rest of the away team concentrating on the second soldier providing covering fire for his escaping comrades. On the other hand Forrester searched the woods for where the two fleeing soldiers were and when he saw that they were heading towards a trail he adjusted his phaser to a higher setting and fired. Forrester was not aiming for either of the soldier though, instead he fired his phaser at a tree that was in their path, sustaining the beam long enough to burn through its trunk at an angle so that it fell in front of them. This caused the fleeing soldiers to halt briefly and one turned to fire his weapon again. Before he could do this though another blast from a phaser stunned him and he dropped the projectile rifle as he fell. The other soldier was able to climb over the fallen tree trunk though and he immediately ducked down out of sight.

"After him." the most senior of the security guards in the away team ordered but as he and his men began to get to their feet Ash held up a hand for them to stop.

"No, we can't get distracted." he said, "We need to take this facility and put it and any other tanks that have been completed permanently out of action."

The away team now hurried towards the tank construction facility and Ash led them towards a door that was obviously intended for people rather than vehicles. This was made of wood and did not appear very strong so Ash simply kicked at the lock he could see from the outside. Sure enough this splintered the wood around the lock and the door flew open.

Rushing through the now open doorway Ash found that it opened into a corridor that had several doors along each side and one at the far end. One of the side doors opened as a Karanan worked came to investigate the crashing sound in the corridor but Ash stunned him as soon as he appeared and before he could raise the alarm.

"Secure these other rooms." he said softly and while the security guards began to check the side doors he, Forrester and Reese headed for the door at the far end of the corridor.

Ash opened this door just a crack to try and see out but it was obvious immediately that the away team had found the plasma furnace from the heat he felt through the gap.

"We're here. Forrester with me." Ash said.

"What about me?" Reese asked and Ash considered this for a moment.

"You too. A want tricorder scans of the furnace equipment and the environment." he said before he opened the door wider and through it he saw row after row of partially built armoured vehicles, each row in a different stage of construction. There were numerous Karanans at work in the large chamber as well, split into group that were each carrying out one specific task on a vehicle and then moving on to the next one to carry out the same task on it. Most of these tasks involved the use of tools that were making considerable amounts of noise that meant they had not heard the exchange of fire outside between the away team and the Karanan soldiers.

The three Starfleet officers then moved quickly and quietly from the doorway to the nearest row of incomplete tanks and took cover behind one of them. This vehicle was one of the ones in the later stages of construction with the track and hull armour fitted to the chassis and only the turret missing and the mounting for a smaller support weapon at the front of the hull vacant. Before taking cover behind it Forrester peered through the open turret ring and inspected the inside.

"This one looks ready to run." he said, "Not much good in battle without the turret or bow weapon but the engine and running gear is all here."

"We'll have to take out all the tanks that have their armour fitted." Ash said and Forrester nodded in agreement before looking at his tricorder.

"About half of these vehicles have at least some of their armour fitted captain. There is also a large stockpile of duranium approximately forty metres that way." he said and he pointed towards where his tricorder indicated that the stockpile was located. Ash looked in the direction Forrester was pointing but the stockpile was not in sight, a wall being in the way.

"What about the furnace?" he asked.

"That way captain." Forrester told him, pointing in another direction, "Thermal readings indicate the presence of the furnaces and I'm picking up the duotronic signature of the controller as well."

"I'm picking up significant levels of duranium particles in the air." Reese added as she scanning with her own tricorder.

"What sort of level?" Ash asked.

"Not enough to require breathing apparatus but it will be unpleasant." Reese answered.

"Okay we'll secure the furnaces first." Ash said. Then he looked at Forrester and added, "Then it'll be your job to shut it down safely while I take a unit of men to secure the stockpile and see how much of it has been processed into armour."

"We'll need to find the finished tanks as well." Reese pointed out.

"I think they're in the other major structure captain." Forrester said and Ash nodded.

"Then once the duranium is secure I'll move on to secure the tanks themselves." he said and then he took out his communicator and opened it, "Ash to Petty Officer Stone." he said into it.

"Yes captain." the voice of the senior security guard in the team responded.

"Petty officer are those rooms secure yet?" Ash said.

"Yes captain. They were offices of some kind. We have four prisoners including the man you stunned."

"Leave one man to watch them but I want the rest of the team in here now. We're going to secure the furnace. Ash out." Ash told the petty officer and then he closed his communicator again.

When the three officers were joined by the supporting security guards the away team spread out so that they could advance along the rows of partially completed tanks. The further they advanced the closer the away team got to the Karanan workers and it was only a matter of time before one of the workers turned and saw the red armoured uniform of a security guard. Immediately he called out a warning but this was cut short when the security guard fired his phaser and shot the man.

Despite the noise and other distractions this still attracted the attention of the other workers and when they realised that they were under attack they dropped their tools and began to run.

"Don't let them escape." Ash called out to the away team and he fired his phaser at one of the fleeing workers, shooting him in the back.

The panicking workers headed for the exits from the assembly plant and these proved to be points where they became especially vulnerable. Ash adjusted his phaser to emit on a wide angle when he saw a group of the workers clustering around a door that one of them was in the process of unlocking. Then when he fired the phaser the energy blast enveloped the entire group and all of them fell to the floor unconscious.

The fleeing workers had not had the opportunity to check on their fallen comrades and none of them realised that the Starfleet away team were only incapacitating rather than killing them so seeing so many fall in one go prompted some of them to try something other than just fleeing and they turned and dropped to their hands and knees.

"I think they're surrendering." Reese said when she saw this.

"Petty officer don't let your men shoot the ones who are kneeling." Ash told the nearby Petty Officer Stone.

"Yes sir." Stone responded and he directed the other security guards to take the kneeling workers into custody instead of stunning them.

When they saw that the co-workers were not being executed out of hand the other workers reconsidered their options as well and more of them surrendered. Some still chose to try to escape though and more still needed to be stunned.

Advancing past the assembly area the away team reach the foundry section where they found a row of furnaces. Each of these was dedicated to producing a particular piece of armour and when the scrap duranium loaded into a furnace was reduced to a liquid state it would then be poured into a mould that was located beneath it. Significantly at the end of this row of furnaces there was a control panel that was obviously out of place for a society as advanced as the Karanans were.

"There's the furnace control system." Forrester said.

The workers whose job it had been to operate the furnaces had already fled and Ash was annoyed to see that only two of them appeared to have been prevented from doing so, the heavy insulated clothing they wore making them easy to pick out among the other workers in their nondescript overalls.

"Let's go take a look shall we then?" Ash commented.

The shuttlecraft landing at the mining facility did not go unnoticed by the workers there and the alarm was raised almost immediately. Not realising the massive tactical advantage given to them by their advanced technology weapons and armour, a unit of soldiers stationed at the mine rushed to engage the Starfleet away team and when the first shot rang out one of the security guards was hit by a bullet. The shot knocked the man to the ground but he was immediately helped back up by another of the security guards with only a dent in his armoured vest to indicate that he had been hit at all.

On the other hand when the *Ascension's* security guards returned fire with their phaser rifles the effect was devastating. Their weapons had a better rate of fire and thanks to the optical sights built into each one were significantly more accurate. This meant that the initial unit of soldiers to confront the away team was rapidly incapacitated and the team pressed on to the large building beside the landing pad. The door to this was big enough to permit a small vehicle to enter but did not look particularly strong. In particular the lock that held it shut was a simple external padlock and the first security guard to reach it just smashed this off with a single blow with the butt of his rifle.

Tan then entered the building with a pair of the security guards and he looked around at the wooden crates that filled most of it. Taking out his tricorder he immediately began to scan the crates and this confirmed what he already suspected.

"Tan to *Ascension*." he said when he opened up his communicator, "We've found the warehouse being used to store the mined dilithium. It looks like the locals are shipping it out as raw ore, the purity is very low and I suspect that the amount of refined crystals that could be produced from what is here is only around two-hundred and fifty tonnes instead of the four hundred I initially estimated was present."

"That still sounds like a lot to me commander." Teela responded, "If we can't use the transporter to beam it up how many shuttle trips do you think it would take to get it all up here to the *Ascension*?"

"At least twenty. The shuttles can carry forty tonnes but the ore is too bulky and the crates will fill the cargo space available before the weight limit is reached."

"Copy that commander. I'll have the shuttle bay standing by to launch when you give the all clear." Teela told him.

"I'll let you know when. Tan out." Tan said before he closed his communicator again and returned it to his belt.

Exiting the dilithium warehouse Tan led the away team around it and this allowed them to get their first good look at the mine itself. Instead of sinking shafts and digging tunnels into the veins of crystal ore the Karanans had opted for an open cast mine and this appeared as a single massive hole in the ground. There were few signs of activity in the pit though, the warning klaxon having triggered an evacuation of the mine workers, a handful of whom could be seen hurrying in the opposite direction. It was then that there was the sound of multiple gunshot in rapid succession and the away team threw themselves to the ground. Looking towards the source of the shooting Tan saw that it was not another unit of Karanan infantry though, instead there was a single machine gun team feeding ammunition into a bulky weapon mounted on a tripod. The weapon team were several hundred metres away on the far side of the mine and this put them too far away for a wide dispersal phaser blast to incapacitate them all in one fell swoop and Tan considered calling in Etchemin to take out the machine gun crew from the air. However, this would require the shuttle's phasers to be adjusted to a stun setting and briefly leave the away team without anti-air cover. This was a risk that Tan was not willing to take and instead he ordered the away team to engage the machine gunners individually despite the long range.

"I want that weapon neutralised." he said and this was followed by several high pitched whines as the security guards fired their phaser rifles again, making full use of the magnification offered by their optical sights.

Although their fire was accurate it took time for the security guards to acquire their targets and rather than the machine gun team being incapacitated in rapid succession they had to be picked off one at a time. This continued until the gunner himself was hit and the machine gun ceased firing when he slumped forwards over it. The next Karanan to try to take control of the weapon then made the mistake of standing up as he tried to pull the unconscious gunner from the weapon and he too was stunned by a phaser blast. This left only two more members of the original six strong gun team and rather than try to stand their ground they opted to retreat instead, abandoning the machine gun in the process.

10.

Still circling overhead Etchemin had a good view of a large area around the mining facility and when the shuttle's sensor alerted him to a number of approaching ground vehicles he was able to quickly locate them through the viewport in front of him.. These were organised into a column moving along the sole road that led to the mine and from the drab colour scheme that blended into the terrain made it easy to identify them as being military in origin.

"Shuttlecraft *Faraday* to commander Tan." Etchemin transmitted.

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

"Commander there is a convoy of vehicles approaching the mine, from the looks of them they are bringing reinforcements. Do I have permission to engage?" Etchemin asked.

"Affirmative lieutenant. Try to limit casualties to a minimum but you are cleared to engage the enemy." Tan told him and Etchemin smiled.

"Understood. Engaging now commander. Etchemin out." he said and he turned the shuttle towards the approaching military convoy.

None of the vehicles in the convoy were armoured, instead being a mix of trucks and light utility vehicles that were suitable for moving troops more quickly than it was possible to do on foot. The phasers fitted to Etchemin's shuttle would have made short work of these even though the winding road meant that they were not in a straight line. However, the desire to limit Karanan casualties caused Etchemin to look for an alternative strategy.

Fortunately the nature of the vehicles in the convoy offered an obvious solution to this problem though. All of the trucks and utility vehicles were wheeled and therefore, they required a reasonably flat surface to travel on. Etchemin brought the shuttle in low over the road, passing above the convoy but moving too quickly for any of the soldiers to be able to attempt to shoot their weapons at him. Once he had passed over the convoy he fired the shuttle's phasers, aimed at the road. The twin energy beam easily ripped up the surface of the road and reduced it to an uneven stretch of rubble surrounding a pair of deep parallel trenches, the combination of which made the road completely impassable to the wheeled vehicles being used to transport the Karanan soldiers.

Circling back around Etchemin surveyed the damage he had inflicted on the road just as the Karanans were coming to a halt and the soldiers bailing out of their vehicles as fast as they could, fearing that on his next pass he would target them. Etchemin was satisfied that the damage inflicted was too severe for the soldiers to easily get around in a short space of time. The road was totally ruined and there were no indications that the convoy included any of the bridging or lifting equipment that they would need to get their vehicles across. They still had the option of going around the damaged section of road of course but the ground either side of it was too uneven and filled with natural obstructions so this would only be possible on foot and it would take several hours for them to reach the mining facility that way.

It was then that he heard the sound of more impacts on the hull of the shuttle, only this time they were more faint than when it had come under fire from the native fighter craft. Etchemin quickly realised that the soldiers on the ground below were firing their weapons at him in the vain hope of shooting him down. Rather than waste any further time fighting the soldiers though Etchemin simply lifted the shuttle's nose and accelerated upwards out of range of their personal weapons.

"*Faraday* to Commander Tan, enemy reinforcements neutralised. You should be free to continue now." he transmitted.

A telephone in the records office began to ring and both Estevez and Duke turned to look at it.

"Think we should answer?" Duke asked.

"And say what? I can tell you the common ways the locals answer phones but whoever's on the other end is probably going to want information we don't have." Estevez pointed out.

"Yeah you're probably right." Duke responded.

"Leave it to ring off and then take it off the hook." Estevez told him and he nodded. Then as she returned to searching the shelves Duke let the phone continue to ring until it fell silent, "I think I've got it." Estevez then said and as Duke was lifting the phone handset to block the line he looked at her again.

"You've found the location of their R and D?" he said and she nodded. Before Estevez could say anything though the door to the records office was thrown open and a pair of soldiers with pistols in their hands burst in, "Get down!" Duke yelled as he dived for cover and reached for his assault phaser.

Several rapid shots then rang out as the soldiers opened fire at both Estevez and Duke and behind them another pair of soldiers entered the room with bulkier carbines. From underneath the desk he had been sat at Duke returned fire with his phaser. His line of fire was limited from beneath the desk but he was still able to

hit one of the soldiers in his thigh, causing him to collapse as his leg gave way. Duke was then able to follow this up with a second shot that hit the fallen man in the chest and rendered him unconscious. Estevez retreated when she came under fire, stuffing her PADD and the folder she had taken from a shelf into her bag before she took out her own phaser. By moving out of sight of the Karanan soldiers she was able to dart around some of the shelves and then fire on them from an unexpected direction, stunning another of them. This attack drew the attention of both remaining men and while they were distracted Duke suddenly leant over the desk he was hiding behind and shot them both in rapid succession. Leaping over the desk he rushed to the open doorway and looked into the corridor outside. Waiting just outside the records office he saw another pair of soldiers with carbines and he leapt back just before one of them fired his weapon and put a bullet into the wall behind where Duke had been. Duke then leant around the door frame again and fired his phaser at the soldiers, stunning the man who had just fired at him. Witnessing the use of the energy weapon startled the other soldier and instead of using his carbine he froze and stared at Duke. Knowing that it was only a matter of time before the soldier recovered his senses Duke fired again and incapacitated him before he had the chance to fire his carbine. It was as this second soldier fell unconscious that Duke realised that there had been another man in civilian clothing with the two soldiers and he recognised him as the man who had stared at the two Starfleet infiltrators on their way here. The civilian stared back at Duke for a moment before all of a sudden he dived for one of the weapons that had been dropped by the incapacitated soldiers. Before he could reach the carbine though Duke fired his phaser again. The beam hit the man just as he was about to take hold of the carbine and he tumbled across the floor for a short distance before he landed in a heap at the side of the hallway. "Okay ensign it's all clear for now." Duke called out and Estevez rushed to his side. "Not answering that phone must have given us away." she said. "I don't think so ensign. I think that was just a coincidence, or maybe a way to locate us." Duke replied. "What do you mean chief?" Estevez asked and Duke pointed to the unconscious civilian. "Recognise him? He was staring at us earlier. He must have noticed something about us that doesn't fit right and raised the alarm." Duke said, "Now if you know where all the research is taking place how about we contact the *Ascension* and beam out?" "Because we don't need to." Estevez replied and she took her PADD out of her bag again. The screen of the PADD still showed the most recent translation it had carried out. As far as Duke could tell the text shown was a cargo manifest of some kind, listing various pieces of advanced equipment. "What am I looking at?" he asked. "That's a log of the advanced technology the pirates have supplied to the locals. According to it one or two pieces have been transferred to the tank manufacturing plant and some put into their probe and satellites but the rest is right here in this building." Estevez answered. "So all we have to do is find it and we can destroy it." Duke said and Estevez nodded. "Exactly." she said. "Okay so where do we find it?" Duke said. "If this is right then there's a lab and a main store. We need to find them both." Estevez told him. "And we better do it quickly. I don't think it's going to take long for someone to find these guys." Duke responded and he looked at the stunned soldiers lying on the floor around them. "What about all of this? There could be enough information in here for the natives to rebuild their technology even without what the pirates have given them." Estevez pointed out, grabbing Duke by the arm. Duke turned and looked at the shelves packed with their paper files and boxes. Then he held up his phaser and adjusted its setting. "Phasers to maximum." he said and Estevez promptly copied him. The pair then raised their weapons and pointed them at the shelves before firing together. At their maximum setting assault phasers were easily capable of disintegrating a humanoid being or even metallic objects and this meant that the paper, card and wood that made up the shelves and their contents were easily destroyed by the beams of energy. So rapid was the disintegration of the shelves that there was no opportunity for the heat of the phaser beams to ignite any of the material before it too was utterly destroyed. Both Estevez and Duke continued firing their phasers, sweeping the beams around the room until every last shelf and all traces of their contents were gone. By the time they were finished the once packed records office was almost empty, with just a few pieces of furniture left intact. "We should reload." Duke said, ejecting the power pack from his assault phaser and taking another from inside his jacket pocket, "We may need to do something like that again and I don't want to suddenly run out of ammunition."

With the plasma furnaces secured Forrester rushed towards the control panel and began to inspect it, with Ash and Reese following him.

"So what do you think commander?" Ash asked.

"I think that eventually this thing could explode of its own accord captain." Forrester responded.

"Are we in danger here?" Reese added and she looked at the row of furnaces nervously.

"Don't worry doctor, we're fine for now but the longer these furnaces are run the more chance there is of an overload." Forrester said.

"Why?" Ash said.

"This panel comes from an old warp drive monitor." Forrester told him and he pointed at the panel that the locals had installed as the control interface for their furnaces, "I think that it and the duotronic module behind it have been adapted from controlling warp plasma injectors. Compared to the amount of energy needed to run a warp drive, what's being put into these furnaces is trivial. The code has been hacked to lower the thresholds but it's a rough fix at best. Sooner or later something is going to happen that will trigger a factory reset and then-

"Then the system will think it's running a warp drive again," Reese interrupted, "and this entire place will be consumed in a fusion explosion."

"Pretty much, yes." Forrester said, nodding his head.

"Shut it down." Ash ordered, "I want the control mechanism either destroyed beyond repair or transported back aboard the Ascension."

"That could take some time captain. I can't just pull the plug on a fusion reactor." Forrester pointed out.

"Just do it as quickly as you can. I'm going to find out what else is here." Ash told him, "Deborah stay here and make sure all those workers are okay." he then added to Reese before he waved towards another small group of security guards, "You three with me, we're going to check on the duranium and the finished tanks."

Taking the small group of security guards with him Ash left Forrester and Reese behind while he made his way through the doors that led towards the duranium stocks that Forrester had detected. This took them into the small structure that connected the two large primary ones. This was made largely of wood and had only a single storey with a solid stone floor that bore the marks of heavy vehicles driving over it. These marks, along with the absence of any other contents suggested that this was nothing more than a connecting corridor between the two halves of the production plant and Ash simply ran towards the far end.

The doors at the other end of the connecting corridor were also wood and lacked any windows that would enable Ash to see what was on the other side. Therefore, as the security guards he had brought with him stood at the ready he slowly opened the door just far enough to see through the gap while hopefully avoiding anyone who happened to be on the other side noticing him.

Ash did not see or hear any signs of movement but from the angle he looked through the gap at he was able to make out a large pile of scrap metal. Although many of the pieces were twisted and damaged there was no sign of the corrosion that he would have expected from iron or iron-based alloys and he knew immediately that he had found a stockpile of the duranium that the Karanans were using to build their tanks.

"It looks clear." he said before he pulled the door open and moved through.

Now able to see the entire room he saw that there were multiple piles of scrap duranium as well as several hand carts that could be used to move the metal from here to the plasma furnaces where it would be melted down and turned in armour plates for the tanks being made at the facility.

"What do we do about this captain?" one of the security guards accompanying Ash asked.

"Nothing crewman." Ash responded, "Once Commander Forrester has taken out those furnaces this stuff will be useless. The natives won't be able to form it with their own technology, at least not easily. They'd need a furnace the size of this entire building to create the heat just to melt a piece the size of your fist. Now let's see if there's anything more interesting through there." and he pointed to another large door that the marks on the floor from passing vehicles led to.

Ash was not surprised when he opened this door to find that he was looking into a massive chamber that was filled with rows of completed tanks and he smiled.

"Do you think that this is all of them sir?" one of the security guards said and Ash carried out some quick mental arithmetic, counting the number of rows of tanks and judging how many were in each row.

"It looks like it to me." he answered, "Ensign Estevez gave us the production figures that she'd intercepted and I'd say that this lot matches that. If there are one or two missing then I think we can live with that. A couple of tanks on their own won't change the course of a war given this planet's current level of development. Now pass out the spatial charges and let's get ready to turn these into more of that scrap."

While Forrester worked at the control panel to establish a safe way of shutting down the plasma furnace Reese checked the stunned workers that the security guards carried to her, laying them out on the floor opposite the furnaces. As she was working though she heard the sound of approaching vehicles. Forrester also heard the engine sounds and the pair looked at one another.

"I'll go and check. Keep working on those furnaces." Reese said and she darted towards the nearby external door, drawing her phaser before she peered outside.

Driving towards the tank construction plant Reese saw a number of military vehicles. Many of these looked like trucks loaded with soldiers but more worryingly there were also several armoured vehicles with them as well.

"Tanks." she said as she ducked back inside and Forrester turned towards her again.

"Like the ones made here?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm a doctor not an armoured warfare expert." Reese replied and Forrester hurried towards her. Looking out through the doorway he saw the vehicles for himself and his attention was drawn towards the armoured ones.

"Armoured cars." he said when he saw that these had wheels in place of tracks, "That's good."

"Why?" Reese said, frowning while Forrester drew his phaser again and adjusted it away from the stun setting.

"Because armoured cars have thinner armour. Watch this." Forrester said and then he quickly pointed his phaser out of the doorway and fired it at the closest armoured car. The beam struck the front wheel on one side and this was instantly shredded, sending the vehicle out of control. The driver struggled to try and regain control and he braked sharply. However, this failed and when the armoured car struck a rock it rolled over. Forrester quickly pointed his phaser at a second armoured car and fired again. This time he hit the engine compartment and there was a flash as a fuel line was sliced open, igniting the fuel within. The driver of the armoured car brought it to a halt as fast as he could and the crew quickly climbed out, abandoning their burning vehicle.

"Hold them back. I just need a few more minutes to shut down these furnaces." Forrester told the security guards, retreating from the doorway and returning to the control panel.

Outside the approaching vehicles now all came to a stop and the soldiers they carried began to deploy, spreading out as much as possible. The Starfleet security guards took up positions in windows and doorways from where they could fire on the Karanans. In response the native troops returned fire, at first just with rifles but it did not take long for them to deploy machine guns and there was the rattle of automatic fire. There were still two armoured cars left operational as well and these joined the infantry in opening fire. This force obviously did not want to risk major damage to the tank production plant, however and although the armoured car crews opened fire with their turret mounted machine guns they did not fire the larger cannons they were armed with that would have blasted holes right through the structure's wall.

11.

The sound of projectile weapons firing reached Ash while he was fitting a spatial charge to the engine housing of a duranium armoured tank and he opened his communicator.

"This is Ash. What's going on out there?" he asked.

"The locals just got reinforcements." Reese's voice responded, "There must be a hundred or more and they have armoured vehicles. The security team is holding them off for now but Commander Forrester says he still needs a few minutes to shut down the plasma furnaces."

"We're almost done here. Can the security guards with you hold them off?" Ash said.

"I think so, they're doing pretty well so far but there are only a few of us. If even one person is hit then we're going to lose a significant portion of our firepower." Reese answered.

"Do the best you can. As soon as we're finished in here we'll come and joined you. Ash out." Ash said and then as he was closing his communicator he added, "Okay let's get a move on. We've got company though so if you hear anyone coming in here make sure you know who they are."

Ash quickly moved on to the next tank and began fitting another spatial charge to the engine housing, all the while listening to the sounds of gunfire.

"Commander we've secured the dilithium ore. It was unguarded." a security guard told Tan, cradling his phaser rifle in his arms while the science officer scanned the vast open mine with his tricorder.

"What about the rest of the area?" Tan replied.

"Evacuated commander. It looks like the workers all ran and we've moved the soldiers we had to stun." the security guard answered.

"Very good petty officer. Now if it wasn't for all the particulate matter in the air we could just beam that dilithium up but this is going to take somewhat longer than that." Tan said as he took out his communicator, "Tan to *Ascension*." he said into the device.

"*Ascension* here, go ahead commander." Teela responded from the orbiting starship.

"The warehouse is secure lieutenant commander, you can launch the cargo shuttles now." Tan told her.

"Copy that commander, they're on their way. What about the mine itself?" Teela said.

"It's pretty much what we were expecting, the dilithium is concentrated in several veins but the locals are ripping everything out of the ground to get at it as quickly as possible, Fortunately that has brought more of it close enough to the surface that a concentrated phaser barrage should cause total de-crystallisation." Tan said.

"Understood commander. We'll start making the calculations now. *Ascension* out." Teela said before she shut off the channel.

"What are your orders commander?" the security guard standing close to Tan then asked.

"If you can get any of the ore out of the warehouse then do it. Whatever we can do to speed up the process of loading it aboard the shuttles the better. Anything we have to leave behind will be destroyed by the phaser strike along with this mine."

Estevez and Duke moved briskly through the headquarters building, pausing only when they encountered a sign indicating the direction to various sections.

"This is it." Estevez whispered when her PADD indicated that the sign they were standing in front of had an arrow that pointed in the direction of the storage area.

"Which way?" Duke asked, looking around to check that no-one had noticed her use of the device but the Karanans in the corridor were all focused on other things. Before Estevez could answer though a bell began to ring and the Karanans started to move rapidly, "I get the feeling that someone just found all those soldiers we stunned. We need to go."

"At least no-one will notice us running now." Estevez replied and she beckoned for Duke to follow her as she started to move.

They encountered more Karanans as they ran through the building's hallways but they were also rushing to somewhere and they paid no attention to the disguised humans.

"Is it much further? Sooner or later someone is going to start asking for IDs." Duke commented when he noticed a pair of armed soldiers rush past.

"The storeroom is right here." Estevez said and she pointed to a nearby door. However, when she tried the handle she found it locked.

"I guess they don't want just anyone wandering in there." Duke commented before a voice called out.

"That room is restricted. Who are you?" someone shouted and when Estevez and Duke looked around they saw a military officer accompanied by a pair of soldiers armed with carbines that they were now pointing at the two humans.

"I have a pass." Duke told the officer and he reached into his jacket. However, instead of a security pass he quickly pulled out his assault phaser and fired it. Although he had reset the weapon to stun it was still set to fire a concentrated beam rather than a wide area blast and he could only shoot one of the soldiers at a time. Fortunately he had still been wearing the pistol belt he had taken from the guard in the records office and this meant that the soldiers now facing him had been focused on that and by the time the second soldier realised what was happening Duke had already brought his phaser to bear on him. Firing a second shot he stunned this soldier as well before turning it on the officer. The officer was in the process of drawing his own sidearm but while he had been concentrating on Duke, Estevez produced her assault phaser from her bag and shot him before he could even get his weapon out of its holster.

"Do you think one of them has a key to this door?" Estevez asked as she looked along the corridor to see if anyone appeared to have witnessed the brief battle.

"Maybe but this will be faster." Duke replied as he adjusted his phaser and then he fired it at the lock, burning a fist sized hole all the way through the door. Then a good hard shove pushed it open.

Inside the room was filled with shelves similar to those that had been in the records office before they had been destroyed but unlike those shelves these were used to hold row after row of wooden boxes. Walking up to the nearest of these Duke lifted the lid and peered inside. There he saw several duotronic modules all lined up and well packed to avoid damage. The markings on these suggested that they had come from a variety of sources but all of them appeared to be intact.

"They must have thousands of these things here." he said, looking around.

"Phasers on maximum again?" Estevez suggested.

"Level six ought to do the trick ensign." Duke responded, "The disruption will fry the cores of the modules even if they aren't hit directly." and he adjusted his phaser again to the more powerful setting. Then he stood back from the shelf and took aim before firing. As he had done in the records office he swept the phaser along the shelves, ceasing fire only when he reached the end so that he could move on to the next one. Although his phaser was not set to vaporise matter the damage it inflicted was considerable and sections of shelving collapsed before even being struck directly by the beam. The wooden cases used to store the duotronic modules were incapable of withstanding the phaser beam and they burst open as soon as they were struck, causing the contents to spill out. Some of these were caught directly in the beam themselves and they either shattered or briefly burst into flames.

Estevez copied Duke in adjusting her phaser and joined him in firing at the shelves, cutting through them until all that remained in the room were several piles of debris.

"I guess that just leaves the research centre itself." she said.

"Do you know where it is?" Duke asked and Estevez nodded.

"I spotted it on the same sign that led us here. Follow me." she told him.

"All set captain." a security guard called out as he slid back out from beneath a tank after placing a spatial charge there.

"Then that's the last of them." Ash said, "Time to see how Commander Forrester is doing."

The sound of gunfire grew louder as Ash led his team back towards the plasma furnaces where Forrester was still standing by the control panel. Meanwhile most of the security guards who had remained with him were still firing their phasers from the nearby doorway and windows. One of them had obviously been hit though and he was sat against a wall while Reese treated his wound.

"How are we doing?" Ash asked.

"His injury isn't serious." Reese answered, "Luckily his vest caught the one that would have killed him. This just grazed his arm."

"Good." Ash said, nodding and then he turned towards Forrester, "What about you commander?" he added.

"I've purged the fusion reactor and started the shutdown process. The furnaces are already cooling down. There's just one more thing I need to do." Forrester responded and as he stepped away from the control console he drew his phaser and checked the setting. Then he pointed the weapon at the control panel and fired, vaporising it in an instant, "There you go captain. There's no way anyone can restart these furnaces without a brand new control system. In all likelihood even then there'll be fractures in the furnaces themselves because of the cool down and they'll need to be rebuilt."

"Which hopefully Ensign Estevez and Chief Duke will be able to prevent." Ash said as he took out his communicator, "Ash to *Ascension*." he said into it.

"Ascension here captain." Teela said.

"We're done down here. Tell the transporter room to give us thirty seconds and then beam us back up. Ash out." Ash told her before closing the channel again without waiting for a response. However, he left the communicator itself active, merely changing the channel it was set to, "Time to finish this." he added, pressing a button to broadcast a trigger signal, "One minute and counting." he said.

Reese helped the injured security guard to his feet and the other men withdrew from their firing positions to gather around the away team's senior officers.

No longer coming under fire, the Karanan soldiers outside the building began to advance under the cover of several machine guns including those mounted on the surviving armoured cars. However, when the first of them reached the entrance to the tank factory they were just in time to witness the members of the away team being surrounded by glowing lights as they dematerialised.

The soldiers rushed into the building to make sure that none of the away team had remained behind but when the first of them crouched and peered under a partially built tank he saw the spatial charge attached to it and called out a warning, prompting the soldiers to turn and run.

Seconds later the charges all detonated in unison, ripping apart all of the tanks and formed duranium armour sections. The combined blasts tore apart every tank in the facility whether complete or not, filled it with flames and blew out all of the doors and windows. The completed tanks at the test track also exploded, sending plumes of smoke and flame skywards while fragments of them were hurled in all directions.

"Report lieutenant commander." Ash said as he walked from the turbolift. He had come straight from the transporter room and was still wearing his armoured vest and had his phaser holstered on his belt.

"Commander Tan's forces have secured the mining facility and our shuttles are on their way to pick up the dilithium ore. Sensors also indicate massive explosions at the tank factory." Teela replied, getting out of the captain's chair and turning towards him.

"What about Estevez and Duke?" Ash asked.

"Not yet captain but there is something else I think you should see." Teela answered and she led him to the science console where the lieutenant on duty called up the sensor log showing the unusual energy readings that he had detected.

"Now that is interesting." Ash said, "A subspace distortion like that suggests a ship."

"Yes captain but there's no warp signature." Teela pointed out.

"There wouldn't be lieutenant commander. Tan would probably be more certain but I think we're looking at a cloaked ship, one using an obsolete cloaking device that our sensors can pick up just as long as we aren't emitting a strong subspace field ourselves." Ash explained.

"Such as when we're at warp?" Teela said and Ash nodded.

"Yes, I suspect that that's why the pirate ship just disappeared." he said.

"The trace looks like it went around the planet." Teela commented.

"Orbiting the planet." Ash said, "My guess is that they've noted our orbital position and are getting ready to attack when they come around the horizon again."

"Should we raise shields captain?" Teela suggested and Ash considered this for a moment.

"No." he replied, "If we do that then we won't be able to beam Estevez and Duke aboard if they call for an extraction."

"Then what are your orders captain?" Teela asked.

"Load aft torpedo bays. They won't be able to fire until they drop their cloak and that will give us time to get a lock. Teela I want you to take over the weapons." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain." Teela responded and after she took her place at the helm station she transferred control of the *Ascension's* weapons away from the navigation console next to her.

"There are guards. Two of them." Estevez said as she retreated back around the corner she had looked around to see what waited for them outside the laboratory area.

"One each. Nice." Duke commented as he drew his assault phaser.

"In that case I'll take the one on the left." Estevez replied, taking her own phaser from her bag. Then after a moment's hesitation she added, "Someone inside the lab might hear us though."

"This is the last place, right?" Duke asked and Estevez nodded.

"From what I can tell the research area is also where the computer core that controls their entire space program is. Destroy that and they can make rockets but they can't control them." she said.

"Then there's no point in being subtle. After we've dealt with the guards we can just force our way inside and destroy everything we need to. Then we'll call for an extraction and the *Ascension* can beam us out.

Assuming that plan meets with your approval ensign." Duke said and Estevez smiled.

"It does chief." she said, "Now let's get on with this."

The pair then calmly walked around the corner with their phasers held behind them out of sight.

"Stop there. Who are you?" one of the guards called out and both men began to turn their weapons towards Estevez and Duke. In response the two disguised humans brought their phasers out from behind their backs and fired, stunning both guards.

Estevez and Duke then charged towards the laboratory doors. These were large double doors but they did not appear to be particularly armoured and when Estevez tried the handle they opened easily. Duke then burst into the research area while Estevez held the door for him and he immediately fired his phaser into the ceiling.

The laboratory was the largest room that Duke had seen while inside the headquarters building. It was split over two floors and Duke was stood on a balcony running around three of the four walls that overlooked the main area below. The fourth wall was obviously an external one and had a single massive door in the centre that was large enough for a transport vehicle to be driven through. Here there were numerous work benches where various pieces of technology were being taken apart and studied to see how they worked. In addition to this there were three large assemblies along one side of the chamber that were obviously more satellites or probes that were under construction. The most significant feature of the room though was the computer core that the Karanans had assembled. This had numerous banks of duotronic modules all chained together in a central core.

"Nobody move!" he yelled as the Karanan scientists in the room all looked around towards him. One of them began to reach for a phone on a nearby desk and Duke promptly stunned him just as Estevez entered the room behind him. Seeing their colleague get shot with the phaser was all it took to convince the other researchers that they should do as Duke told them and they all remained still, looking at him and waiting to see what happened next.

"How long do you think it will take to destroy all of this with our phasers?" Estevez asked.

"Probably long enough that someone will notice that something's wrong in here and send a force to investigate." Duke commented. Then a smile spread across his face, "Although I think there's another way we can do it." he added as he stared at the row of partially built satellites, "We need to get all these people out though, this is going to be big."

"Everybody out!" Estevez shouted and she waved towards the doorway she and Duke had just entered through but the laboratory staff remained where they were.

"She said move. Now! And someone pick him up and take him with you." Duke yelled and the Karanans began to approach the various sets of stairs that led up the balcony. The two of them who were closest to the man Duke had stunned paused to pick him up and between them they carried him up the stairs to the balcony.

Estevez and Duke waved the Karanans past them and out into the corridor before closing the doors behind them, at which point Duke reset his phaser and melted the lock.

"Okay so now what? Estevez asked him.

"Now we take a look at those satellites. Quickly as well, we've probably only got a couple of minutes before someone tries breaking down that door." Duke answered and he ran towards the nearest set of stairs, descending them as quickly as could.

With Estevez following close behind him Duke then ran across the room to the row of satellites and looked closely at the propulsion system.

"What are you looking for?" Estevez said.

"This looks like a fusion thruster unit ensign." Duke told her, "That means it's powered by a hydrogen fusion reaction."

"And hydrogen is highly flammable." Estevez said, smiling.

"Exactly. All we need to do is ignite it and the fireball will take out everything in here. Assuming it's got fuel of course." Duke replied, "A-ha, yes. The tank is full, this will do."

"Just one thing chief, how do you intend to stop us being burned up along with everything else in here?" Estevez said.

"By overloading my phaser." Duke answered, "We'll have a minute to beam out of here before-" he continued but he was interrupted by the sound of someone hammering at the door, "That was quick. Sounds like reinforcements just arrived. Either that or those lab boys have taken the guns from the guards outside and feel brave enough to take us on with them."

"Either way I think we need to leave." Estevez said and Duke nodded.

"Make the call ensign. I'll take care of this." he said as he started to adjust his phaser again, setting the weapon to feed the stored energy of its power cell back on itself in a way that would cause a large explosion.

"Estevez to *Ascension*. We need an extraction on my mark." Estevez said into her communicator.

"Understood ensign. Just say the word and we'll have you out of there." Ash's voice responded and Estevez nodded to Duke.

"Got it." Duke said as his phaser began to emit a whining sound and then he pushed it into the inner workings of the satellite, wedging it as close to the hydrogen fuel tank as he could, "Okay we're all set, let's get out of here." he added.

"*Ascension*, beam us up." Estevez said into her communicator and moments later they were both surrounded by the glowing lights of a transporter as they dematerialised.

The sound from Duke's phaser grew in volume as the weapon continued its build up to overload. At the same time the Karanans outside the laboratory were hammering at the door in their effort to get in. Although the doors were not heavily armoured they were solidly built and the doors remained closed even when the phaser reached its overload and exploded.

The blast ripped the satellite's fuel tank open and as the hydrogen escaped it was instantly ignited, creating a massive fireball that spread out to fill the entire chamber. The flames consumed all of the working notes and records that the researchers had made but had yet to be moved to the already destroyed records office. They also enveloped the other incomplete satellites and as shrapnel from the first pierced the fuel tanks of these others the hydrogen fuel contained within them added to the flames. The advanced devices being studied as well as the computer core that the Karanans had been able to construct were all consumed by the flames as well and even though they had been designed to be as resistant as possible to fire they could not withstand the extreme heat produced by the flames.

The combined forces of the blasts was enough to blow the doors off their hinges and the Karanan troops outside were flung back. Those able to avoid the blast directly grabbed hold of their injured comrades and immediately began to drag them away from the burning laboratory as more alarms began to sound.

12.

"Ensign you'll be glad to know that your sabotage of the laboratory appears to have been successful." Ash said when Estevez returned to the bridge. Like Ash she had gone there as soon as she was beamed back aboard so she was still wearing her Karanan military uniform as well as the prosthetics that made her appear to be one of the humanoid aliens, "Our sensors detected an explosion and communication intercepts suggest that the entire headquarters is being evacuated."

"What's the status of the other operations captain?" Estevez asked in response.

"The tank production facility and all of the advanced tanks have been destroyed. Right now we're just waiting on the last of the dilithium ore being-" Ash began before the officer at the science console interrupted him.

"Captain I'm picking up that subspace disturbance again, just coming over the horizon." he said.

"On screen." Ash ordered, "Ensign take your station."

"Yes captain." Estevez replied and as Ash turned towards the main viewscreen she took over from the enlisted man at the communications console.

The image on the main viewscreen, that had been focused on the surface of the planet, now changed to show the horizon and the science officer zoomed in on one particular section where the image appeared distorted.

"It's there sir." he said and Ash smiled.

"Lieutenant Commander Teela stand by on torpedoes." he said.

"There she is." the pirate captain said, watching the image of the *Ascension* on his ship's bridge view screen, "Totally unsuspecting. What's her status?" he added.

"Her shields are still down captain. I'm picking up multiple shuttlecraft in the area of the dilithium mine." one of the bridge officers answered.

"Weapons, stand by to drop cloak and open fire. You know where to aim." the captain ordered.

"Target acquired captain." Teela said, "I've plotted their orbit and configured the torpedo to go active immediately after launch. They won't detect a lock before that."

"Fire." Ash replied simply and Teela launched a single torpedo.

"Deactivating cloaking device now." the pirate weapons officer said but before he could even reach for the controls of the cloaking device there was a flash of red from the weapons pod mounted on the *Ascension's* upper roll bar structure.

"They can see us. That torpedo just locked itself onto us." one of the bridge crew exclaimed.

"Shields!" the captain snapped.

"The cloak is still up. It'll take eight seconds to get the shields up." the weapons officer responded in a panic.

"Helm take evasive action. Get us out of the path of that torpedo." the captain ordered, "Get us to warp."

"Yes captain. Firing thrusters." the helmsman replied and he started to turn the freighter aside. However, the torpedo's guidance system was able to turn much faster than the lumbering freighter could and even before the cloaking device was fully shut down it slammed into the midsection of the pirate craft and exploded.

Despite the modifications that the pirates had made to their ship they had not been able to improve its structure to the point where it could withstand a direct hit from a photon torpedo and the explosion ripped open the ship's hull, triggering alarms as large parts of it were suddenly decompressed.

"Do we still have weapons?" the captain asked.

"On line now captain but-" the weapons officer replied.

"Then use them!" the captain yelled at him.

"But captain-" the weapons officer began before the captain leapt out of his chair and pulled the man from his seat to take over the freighter's weapons. However, when he fired the two plasma turrets the packets of energy flew past the *Ascension* instead of hitting the Starfleet vessel.

"What happened? The pirate captain said in confusion.

"That's what I was trying to tell you captain, the targeting sensors have been disrupted. We need to reset and recalibrate them." the weapons officer said, looking up at the captain from the floor.

"Shields up." Ash ordered, "Ensign Estevez order our shuttles to stay at low altitude, "I don't want any luck shots taking them out."

"Shields up captain. Phasers are locked on target." Teela announced as the *Ascension* turned to bring more of its weapons to bare on the pirate vessel.

"Fire phasers. Target the warp nacelles then lock a tractor beam on it." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain. Firing phasers." Teela said before she fired a volley from one of the *Ascension's* phaser banks. This struck one of the pirate freighter's warp nacelle and it exploded. Teela followed this up with a second volley of phaser fire and the freighter's other nacelle was similarly destroyed. With the freighter now unable to go warp Teela activated a tractor beam and held the vessel in place.

The pirates felt a shudder as the *Ascension's* tractor beam locked onto their ship.

"Captain they've locked a tractor beam onto us." one of the bridge officers said.

"I know that!" the captain snapped back at him. Then he turned to the helmsman and added, "Get us free."

"But captain if-" the helmsman began and the captain drew his sidearm.

"Do I need to start shooting people to get anyone to follow a simple order?" he said.

"No captain." the helmsman said and he tried to fire the freighter's thrusters.

"Captain the Starfleet ship is hailing us." another bridge officer said.

"Let's hear it." the captain said.

"Attention pirate vessel, this is the *USS Ascension*." Estevez's voice said, "Surrender your vessel and prepare to be boarded."

"Helm full impulse." the captain said when he heard this but the helmsman hesitated, "Now!" the captain yelled, pointing his weapon at the helmsman.

Fearing for his life the helmsman then fired the freighter's impulse drive and the ship began to shudder.

"Impulse drive at fifty percent captain. The tractor beam is still holding us." he said.

"I ordered full impulse. Now!" the captain snapped and the helmsman continued to increase the power to the freighter's impulse drive.

"Captain the freighter is trying to break free of the tractor beam." the ensign sat at the navigation console reported.

"They can't." Teela added, smiling, "That beam is locked on strong."

"Captain the enemy vessel's structure is seriously compromised." the science officer pointed out.

"Lieutenant Commander Teela can you do anything about their impulse drive?" Ash asked.

"Not from this angle captain. The cargo modules are blocking our line of sight to the impulse drive and control lines." Teela replied.

"Captain the freighter is approaching structural failure." the science officer said.

"We're breaking apart!" one of the pirate bridge crew exclaimed as alarms continued to sound, "We have to power down."

"No, keep going. They won't let us break up. All we need to do is get loose and we can abandon ship. Once we're on the surface we can hide among the natives." the captain ordered.

"No! I'm powering down." the helmsman responded and he reached to shut down the freighter's impulse drive. However, before he could reach them the captain fired his weapon and the pulse of energy struck him right between his shoulders. Then while the rest of the bridge crew looked on in horror the captain rushed to the helm station and dragged the body of the helmsman from his chair. Then he slammed his hand down on the console to increase the power output of the freighter's impulse drive to the maximum level he had demanded.

This prompted another shudder in the freighter, followed almost immediately by a crashing sound and yet another alarm as the freighter's structure failed, breaking the ship almost in two.

"Captain the pirate ship is breaking up." the science officer announced as he studied the scans of the freighter, "A warp core breach is imminent."

"Release the tractor beam. Full impulse." Ash ordered and Teela both released the tractor beam and engaged the *Ascension's* impulse drive at full power.

Seconds later the magnetic field surrounding the freighter's warp core failed and there was a brilliant flash of light as the antimatter it contained was released. The blast wave expanded and struck the *Ascension* but the destroyer had its shields raised and the energy did nothing more than make the vessel rock violently.

"Any sign of survivors?" Ash asked, looking at the science officer but the man just shook his head.

"Orders captain?" Teela asked.

"Recover Commander Tan's team from the surface. Then we'll destroy the mine and satellites. After that all we need to do is deliver the dilithium ore to Starfleet. I'm sure they'll find a use for it." Ash replied then he looked at Estevez and added, "And I think you should report to sickbay ensign."

"Sickbay captain? I wasn't injured." Estevez said.

"No ensign, but somehow I don't think you want to spend the rest of your life looking like a Karanan." Ash pointed out and Estevez raised a hand to her forehead.

Stardate 8791.8 Klingon colony world Qu'Vat

Admiral Korda had the smooth forehead and almost human features of a Klingon infected with the augment virus that had affected so many of the species until recent decades when a way to reverse the physical effects had been found. Unlike the admiral, the figure who entered his office was genuinely human though. "You have something to say Mister Keeler?" Korda said.

"We've received word from one of our listening posts. Starfleet tracked our privateers to the Enigma Ortez system and destroyed the mine." Keeler replied, "It was the *Ascension*."

"The resources of that planet would have served our forces well." Korda said, "Your former ship is becoming a problem, one that is going to need dealing with."