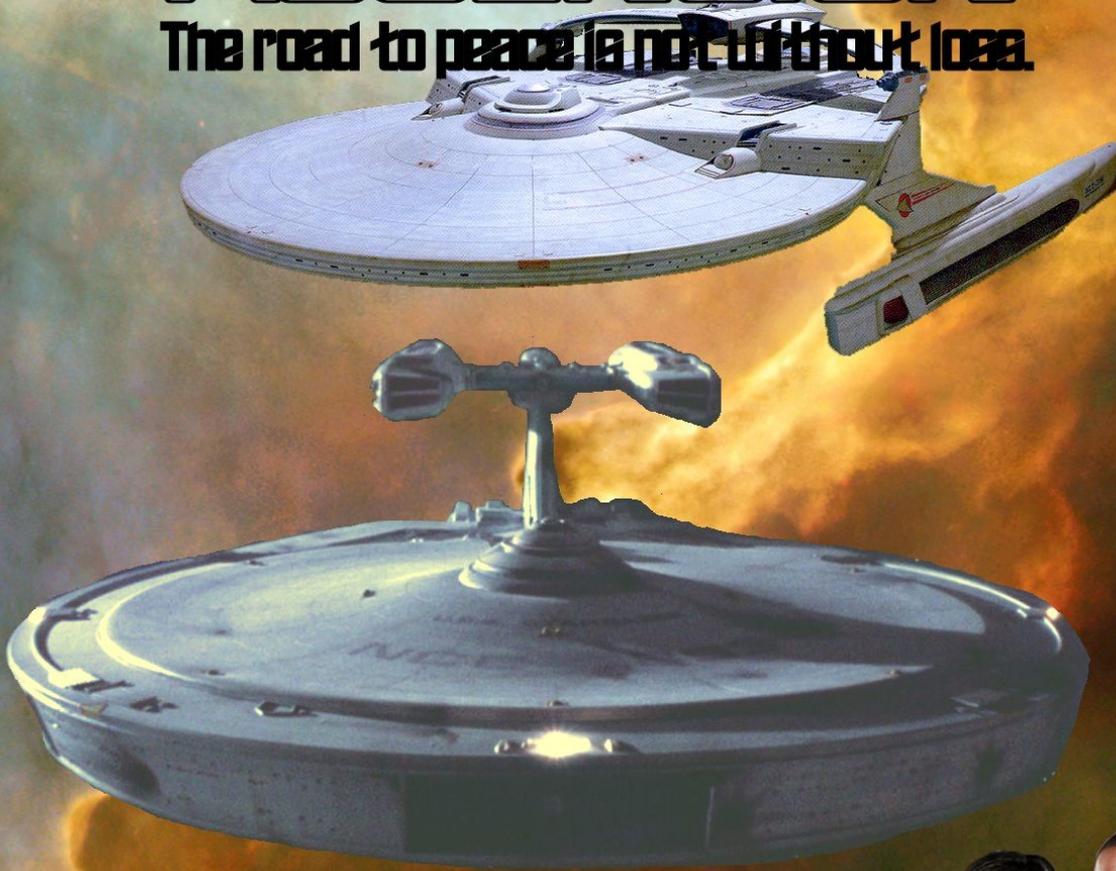


# STAR TREK ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.



**No Win Scenario**  
By Stephen J Dutton

# STAR TREK: ASCENSION

## *No Win Scenario*

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

When a state of the art prototype Starfleet vessel is attacked and disabled the crew of the *USS Ascension* rush to help. However, although its attackers were driven off there are other parties waiting to take advantage of its helplessness and the *Ascension* must protect the stricken vessel from an enemy that grows ever stronger.

Star Trek: Ascension available online at:  
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# 1.

Stardate 8802.1 Miranda-class destroyer *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 on patrol along the Federation-Klingon border.

"Here you go Deborah." Captain Michael Ash said to the woman sat on the couch along the side of his quarters. Like him she wore a Starfleet uniform but where his shirt and shoulder tab were command white, hers were the pale green of the medical branch. Reese was the *Ascension's* chief medical officer and the pair of them had been romantically involved with one another since before he was promoted to command the destroyer.

"Thanks Mike." Reese responded as she took the mug of coffee he offered to her and she sipped at it while he sat down beside her. However, before he could speak again the intercom sounded and he sighed.

"It never fails." he said, reaching to activate the intercom, "Ash." he added.

"Captain we're picking up a distress signal." the voice of Ensign Estevez, the ship's chief communications officer told him.

"Does the signal say who it's from ensign?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain, it's one of ours." Estevez answered and then a moment later she added, "It's the *USS Canis Major*." and Ash frowned.

"*Canis Major*?" he said, "Are you certain ensign?"

"Yes captain. The name of the ship is given in the distress call and is encoded in the accompanying data stream." Estevez told him.

"I'm not familiar with the *Canis Major*." Reese commented.

"No I don't suppose you would be." Ash replied, "She's one of the new Constellation-class ships. She hasn't even been formally commissioned yet, like the rest of the class she's still undergoing trials. I know that the warp drives of the class are proving an issue. She's probably broken down." Ash explained before he turned back to the intercom, "Ensign Estevez does the distress signal detail the nature of their emergency?"

"Yes captain. They've been attacked." she said and Ash's eyes widened.

"I'm on my way. Sound yellow alert immediately. Ash out." he said before shutting off the intercom.

"I'd better go and get sickbay ready, they may have casualties." Reese said as the pair of them got to their feet.

Hurrying from Ash's quarters, he and Reese split up so that she could make her way to sickbay while he turned towards the bridge and ran to the nearby turbolift.

"Captain hold the lift!" a voice called out from down the corridor and Ash saw Teela, the *Ascension's* Andorian helm officer rushing towards him.

"Hurry up lieutenant commander." he said, holding the door open until she reached the turbolift as well, at which point he removed his hand and let the doors slid shut, "Bridge." he said and the turbolift began to move. It was then that he noticed the way in which Teela's hair was clinging to her head, "Teela is your hair wet?" he asked.

"Yes captain. I'd just got into the bath when yellow alert sounded. My water allowance lets me take one proper cold bath a week and it seems that every time I sit down in one there's an alert of some kind." she answered.

"I know how you feel." Ash responded before the turbolift came to a halt and the door opened to reveal the *Ascension's* bridge.

"Captain on the bridge." Commander Tan, the ship's first officer and chief science officer announced as he stood up from the captain's chair to allow Ash to sit down. At the same time the junior officer sat at the helm station vacated it to permit Teela to take over.

"Report." Ash said as he sat down in his seat and from the science station Tan called up a diagram on the bridge's main viewscreen that showed a map of the surrounding region of space.

"We are here, half a million kilometres from the edge of the Neutral Zone captain." Tan said and he added a symbol to the diagram on the screen to represent the *Ascension*, "The *Canis Major* is located here in the Veruvus system." he continued, adding a second symbol to the map.

"That's outside Federation space." Ash commented, seeing immediately that the symbol representing the *USS Canis Major* was located on the opposite side of the line on the map representing the limit of Federation controlled space.

"Yes captain. Veruvus is an unclaimed system that is on our side of the area designated by the Treaty of Organia as the official Neutral Zone between the Federation and the Klingon Empire but the Federation has never bothered to claim it. Multiple surveys have revealed nothing of interest there. It contains no life bearing planets and is resource poor." Tan agreed.

"It's six hours away at maximum warp captain." Junior Lieutenant Etchemin, the *Ascension's* navigator added from his station located beside Teela.

"Did the *Canis Major's* transmission say who attacked them?" Ash asked.

"They just mention raiders captain." Estevez replied.

"Pirates would need a lot of firepower to take on a starship." Etchemin pointed out.

"Yes they would and that worries me." Ash replied, "Ensign Estevez what other Starfleet vessels are in the area?"

"The *USS Gatchaman* and *USS Taipei* are the next closest vessels, three light years away captain." she said.

"They are both Cole-class frigates captain. They won't be able to reach the Veruvus system for four days." Tan commented and Ash nodded.

"Request that they join us anyway Ensign Estevez. Then inform Starfleet that we are responding to the *Canis Major's* distress signal. Helm, engage at maximum warp." he ordered.

Admiral Korda was sat at his dinner table opposite his mate Ah'ken when the intercom indicated that someone was outside.

"Enter." he called out and the large doors to his private dining chamber opened to permit two men to enter. One of them was a Klingon in the uniform of the Klingon Defence Force. His head featured the prominent ridges of the Klingon species unlike Korda or Ah'ken, both of whom suffered from the disfigurement caused by the disease that had spread across the Empire in the previous century. This was Captain Markon, Korda's personal aide and walking beside him was a human.

"Mister Keeler, you have news?" Korda said to the human and the human smiled back at him.

"I do." he said.

"We have received word from our proxies operating near Federation space." Markon added and Keeler's smile vanished, the human hoping to be the one to deliver the good news to the admiral.

Admiral Korda believed that the Klingon Empire was destined to rule the galaxy and the continued existence of the United Federation of Planets was if not a threat then an impediment to that. However, the Klingon High Council was currently following a policy of negotiation rather than conquest that the admiral was trying to change. As part of these efforts he maintained numerous bands of proxies he could use to conduct strikes into Federation territory and keep tensions high without violating the council's orders prohibiting direct military confrontation with Starfleet.

"And what do they have to tell us this time?" Korda said.

"A clan of Nausicaan raiders ambushed a Federation starship." Keeler said before Markon could speak, "They were driven off but they were able to disable it. We intercepted a distress signal the crew sent, it's currently stranded in the Veruvus system."

"Veruvus is far from here." Ah'ken commented.

"Perhaps, but it can be reached without violating Federation territory." Markon pointed out.

"And what makes it worth risking our ships by sending them all that way?" Korda asked.

"The ship is Constellation-class admiral." Keeler said and the hint of a smile appeared on his face.

"Starfleet's latest." he said.

"Yes admiral." Keeler agreed.

"If you could present that ship to the High Council they could not deny you a seat." Ah'ken said.

"Even just getting an engineering team aboard could reveal a great deal of useful information. Plus there wouldn't be the problem of towing the ship back to Klingon space."

"How can you still know so little about us Keeler?" Korda said, staring at the human, "Unlike you humans who are addicted to your luxuries we Klingons are willing to accept hardship to achieve our aims. Captain Markon contact our allies and tell them to prevent that ship from escaping the Veruvus system before we can arrive. Make this clear to them though, the ship must not be destroyed. If that happens then whoever is responsible will answer to me personally."

"Of course admiral, I will relay your orders immediately." Markon replied.

*"Enjoying the view commander?" Captain Martia Franklin said, approaching Ash from behind as he stood in front of a large viewport that overlooked the construction docks in orbit around Earth. Visible close by was a starship that was still being built. Unlike most Starfleet vessels, the USS Ascension included that possessed two warp nacelles the ship that he was looking at had the mounts for four of them.*

*"Impressive isn't it?" Ash responded, glancing briefly over his shoulder at his commanding officer before turning his attention back towards the partially built starship, "They say that the Constellation-class will be able to cruise at more than warp seven."*

*"Assuming Starfleet ever gets one to work. You know the Constellation herself hasn't passed a single warp trial yet?" Franklin pointed out.*

*"It's only a matter of time captain. Sooner or later the engineers will figure out how to balance the warp fields and ships like this one can enter service." Ash said, "It'll be sad to see the end of the Constitution-class though."*

*"Oh I doubt they'll disappear very quickly. The design is too solid. Mark my words Michael there will still be Constitution-class ships in service into the next century no matter how many Constellations or even Excelsiors are commissioned." Franklin said.*

*"And they'll need captains." Ash added with a smile.*

*"Not thinking of leaving us are you?" Franklin asked.*

*"No captain. At least not until there's a ship like that one available." Ash answered and he pointed towards the incomplete starship.*

*"You know that you'll need a good evaluation from me to get promoted to captain don't you?" Franklin said.*

*"Won't you give me one captain?"*

*"Of course not. Good executive officers are far too difficult to find. I intend to keep you aboard the Ascension until I retire. Then you can get a promotion and not before." Franklin said jokingly and Ash smiled.*

*"I love you too captain." he said.*

*"Well you might want to keep that from our new medical officer. I think she's rather keen on you herself." Franklin said.*

*"Really?" Ash said, "Does she know that we-"*

*"No, I didn't tell her about the night we spent together. She doesn't need to know that but I think you need to make a move quickly. If nothing else it will give you an incentive to stay aboard the Ascension instead of running off after a captaincy of your own." Franklin said before the pair of them turned and walked away from the viewport.*

## 2.

"The information you asked for captain." Tan said and Ash snapped back to the present.

"Sorry?" he asked.

"You asked for what information we have on the Constellation-class." Tan answered and he held out a PADD towards Ash, "Most of the data on the class is still classified so there isn't much but we have a basic overview."

"I was just remembering seeing a Constellation-class ship while it was under construction. It was the *Pavo* I think." Ash said as he took the PADD and looked at the screen. Sure enough this showed a diagram of a Constellation-class cruiser along with the details that were not considered classified.

"A lot of this refers to the theoretical operating state." Tan said, "I doubt that the ship will be running with a full crew compliment or weapons load out on a test flight like this one."

"Captain I'm picking up a pair of warp signatures ahead of us. It looks like they're heading for the Veruvus system as well." Etchemin said.

"It can't be the *Gatchaman* and *Taipei* already." Ash said as Tan dashed back to the science station.

"No captain." Tan agreed, "The warp signatures are Nausicaan."

"Captain the sensor data attached to the *Canis Major*'s distress signal identified the raiders as Nausicaan." Estevez said.

"Red alert." Ash ordered and immediately a siren began to sound all across the ship.

"Raising shields. Powering phasers and loading torpedo bays." Etchemin said.

"Captain should I divert to intercept?" Teela asked.

"At our present speed we will come within firing range of the Nausicaan ships approximately one light minute away from the *Canis Major* in any case captain." Tan said as he plotted the respective courses and speeds of the Nausicaan ships compared to the *Ascension*.

"In that case maintain our course and speed lieutenant commander. Ensign Estevez hail the *Canis Major* and let them know that they have company coming. Advise them that we will be able to intercept but find out what their tactical situation is." Ash said and Estevez nodded.

"Yes captain." she replied before turning back towards her console, "*Canis Major* this is the *USS Ascension*, do you read me?" she signalled.

"*Ascension* this is Lieutenant Commander Hurst aboard the *USS Canis Major*, we read you." a man's voice responded after a moment's pause.

"*Canis Major* we are approaching from one-one-three mark sixteen, eta three-seven minutes. Be advised that we have detected two Nausicaan vessels approaching you. We will be able to intercept them first but please state your tactical situation." Estevez said.

"We have shields and minimal phaser capability *Ascension*. Our torpedo launchers are functional but our ammunition is limited to four rounds." Hurst told her.

"Even if one of the Nausicaans slips past us they should be able to defend themselves then." Teela commented and Ash nodded before he joined the conversation with the *Canis Major*.

"*Canis Major* this is Captain Ash. Tell your captain that we're on our way. Send us a list of materials you need and we'll see what we can provide." he said.

"Err, we don't have a captain sir. This was just a test flight so I'm the ranking officer." Hurst replied and Ash exchanged looks with Tan.

"Probably an engineer." Tan said and Ash nodded.

"Understood *Canis Major*, we'll see you soon. *Ascension* out." Ash said before he closed the channel and looked at Estevez again, "Ensign when the damage report comes in from the *Canis Major* I want you to run it down to engineering and have Forrester take a look at it. Also let Chief Duke know that he is to put together a pair of well armed boarding parties. If we can disable those Nausicaan ships then I want their crews taking back to face trial."

"Captain we have a report from the Nausicaans." a Klingon officer told Markon as he stood in the command centre of Korda's base of operations on the Klingon colony world of Qu'Vat. Turning towards the other officer Markon saw that he was offering him a PADD and he took the device to study the contents. Keeler was also present in the room and he overheard this.

"Let me see." he said, quickly making his way towards the two officers.

"Remember your place Keeler. You do not command here, in the absence of Admiral Korda I do." Markon responded, pulling the PADD away from the human and continuing to read it while Keeler frowned, "This says that two Nausicaans ships will soon reach the disabled Starfleet vessel but that they have monitored the approach of a rescue ship from Starfleet." he said.

"Will it reach the *Canis Major* first?" Keeler asked.

"The Nausicaans think that they will get to the ship at about the same time." the other Klingon officer said.  
"This complicates matters. What about our other allies?" Markon asked.  
"There are several ships en-route but they will not get there for at least a day." the Klingon officer told him.  
"Starfleet is spread thinly in that region of space." Keeler said, "I doubt that they'll have reinforcements there that soon. Perhaps you should call the Nausicaans and get them to hold off until more ships can arrive."  
Markon snorted when he heard this.  
"Keeler, Nausicaans aren't going to hold back just because we ask them to. They will attack." he said.  
"Just two of their ships against a Federation starship? Unless it's a surveyor or transport ship they'll lose."  
Keeler said.  
"Perhaps. Or maybe you are concerned that some of your old allies will be hurt during the battle." Markon said.  
"What makes you say that?" Keeler asked and Markon showed him the PADD.  
"The Nausicaans have identified the ship approaching the Veruvus system Keeler, it is your old vessel the *USS Ascension*." he said.

"Commander Forrester I have the damage report from the *Canis Major* for you." Estevez said as she approached the *Ascension's* chief engineer and handed him a PADD that contained the information sent by the crippled vessel's crew detailing the damage they had suffered.  
"Thank you ensign." Forrester replied as he took the device from her and he quickly looked at the list of damaged systems, "Of course the warp drive is out. Those ships are forever breaking down, the same with the *Excelsior*-class. Do you know if they tried turning it off and back on again?"  
"I didn't ask. Both ships are pioneering new technologies, I suppose it's only to be expected that there would be issues during development." Estevez commented.  
"Yes, especially since we are moving past the point where we are reverse engineering alien technology."  
Forrester said and Estevez frowned.  
"What do you mean commander?" she asked.  
"Didn't you know? All our ships up to now have been reverse engineered from sensor readings taken of a UFO that penetrated the atmosphere of Earth back in the twentieth century." Forrester said and Estevez sighed, suspecting that he was about to repeat another of the outlandish conspiracy theories Forrester was known for believing in.  
"A UFO?" she said and Forrester nodded.  
"Yes, in nineteen sixty-nine a high speed F-one-oh-four interceptor from the United States Air Force observed an alien craft with a profile identical to what we would call a Constitution-class starship. The pilot was able to record radar and camera footage while ground based installations created a full electromagnetic profile of the craft. It took almost a full century to master the basics of what they saw and recorded and only now after another two hundred years have we managed to get to the point where we're ready to try and surpass it. Can you imagine how advanced the civilisation that built that ship must be by now?" he explained.  
"So why haven't those aliens come back to contact us again?" Estevez said.  
"Who says that they haven't ensign?" Forrester said, "After all if our ships are copied from theirs then one of their ships could fly right past us and we'd just think it was another Federation ship." Forrester said.  
"Well I'll leave that here with you commander. I'll be needed on the bridge when we reach the Veruvus system." Estevez said and Forrester nodded.  
"Yes, carry on ensign." he told her before she turned to leave.  
Returning to the *Ascension's* bridge she had just sat down when Teela spoke up.  
"Entering the Veruvus system now captain. Dropping to impulse." she said and the *Ascension* promptly dropped out of warp, returning to sublight speed within the solar system where collisions with other objects were far more likely.  
"Nausicaan vessels bearing one-zero-six mark four. Both appear to be standard raiding craft. Length one hundred and forty-three metres, mass approximately six thousand tonnes. Weapons appear to be high energy disruptors and plasma torpedoes." Tan added.  
"Ensign hail them. Tell them that we are engaged in a rescue mission and that they are not to approach our ship or the *Canis Major*." Ash said but before Estevez could either acknowledge or follow the order Tan spoke up.  
"Nausicaans have raised shields and are locking weapons captain." he said.  
"Helm evasive action. Mister Etchemin return the favour. Lock phasers." Ash ordered and Teela turned the *Ascension* sharply while Etchemin began to target the two approaching Nausicaan ships.  
One of the Nausicaan vessels chanced a rapid shot at the *Ascension*, firing a torpedo without waiting for a proper lock and the powerful explosive weapon streaked past the destroyer before exploding harmlessly out of range.  
"That was close." Estevez said, gripping the arms of her chair instinctively as the torpedo closed on the *Ascension*.

"Phasers locked captain." Etchemin said.

"Return fire. Try to disable their engines and weapons lieutenant." Ash responded and Etchemin nodded.

"Aye captain. Firing now." he said and he fired one of the *Ascension's* forward phaser banks. Blasts of bright red energy burst from beneath the destroyer's saucer section and impacted along the side of the Nausicaan vessel that had just fired on the Starfleet vessel. Although the Nausicaan ship was shielded these were insufficient to resist the firepower of the *Ascension's* phasers and there was an explosion from inside the raiding vessel before one of its nacelles went dark.

"Good shooting Mister Etchemin." Ash said, smiling as he watched the Nausicaan vessel veer off on the main view screen.

Meanwhile the second Nausicaan ship joined the battle by firing a volley of disruptor blasts at the *Ascension* to cover its comrade's manoeuvre that made the ship shudder.

"Shields holding captain." Tan announced, "No damage to us."

"Except maybe my nerves." Estevez muttered.

"Incoming." Teela added when she saw a flash from the prow of the raider and a plasma torpedo shot towards the *Ascension*.

"Hard to port!" Ash snapped and he steadied himself as the *Ascension* turned sharply once again. This time the plasma torpedo turned to follow though, the Nausicaans having had enough time to get a proper weapons lock, "Etchemin, phasers." Ash ordered.

"On it captain." Etchemin replied, firing several rapid bursts from the *Ascension's* starboard side phasers and there was a large explosion as the torpedo was hit and detonated early.

While the *Ascension's* crew had been distracted though, the two Nausicaan ships had regrouped and now came at the destroyer together, both raiding vessels firing their disruptors in unison.

"Shields down to eighty-five percent captain." Tan said as several volleys from the disruptors struck the *Ascension's* shields.

"Is anything getting through?" Ash asked.

"No damage reported captain." Estevez responded.

"Good. Helm I want a close pass by the undamaged ship. Keep it between us and the other one so they can't both fire at us at once. Weapons, fire at will." Ash said.

"Aye captain. Everyone hold on." Teela said, bringing the *Ascension's* impulse drive up to full power as she accelerated towards the oncoming Nausicaans.

Etchemin locked the roll bar mounted phasers onto the undamaged Nausicaan vessel and opened fire, targeting the ship's drive system as he had done with the first ship. He intended to strafe the raiding ship as the *Ascension* passed by it but while the two ships were still in one another's forward firing arc the Nausicaan suddenly fired another torpedo at point blank range.

With no time to either evade or shoot the torpedo down, it slammed into the *Ascension's* shields and exploded there and the destroyer shook violently.

"Damage report." Ash exclaimed as Teela broke off their attack run and Etchemin ceased fire.

"Shields down to thirty percent captain. Hull breached in section nine." Tan reported.

"Captain we're getting reports of casualties." Estevez added.

"Damage control teams?" Ash asked.

"Responding captain." Estevez told him and he nodded, relieved that the damage to the *Ascension* was in fact relatively minor. However, the Nausicaan ship had not been so fortunate.

"Captain look at the Nausicaans." Etchemin said and Ash turned his attention back towards the main view screen at the front of the bridge.

The *Ascension* had been so close to the Nausicaan ship when the torpedo detonated that it too had been caught in the blast radius and with its shields already depleted by Etchemin's phaser attack it had suffered serious damage. Now the vessel was listing badly, turning towards its companion while fires raged throughout its structure and in several places these flames were escaping through hull breaches before dying rapidly in the vacuum of space.

"Analysis Commander Tan." Ash said.

"Nausicaan vessel is badly damaged captain. The power grid is fluctuating. I suspect that a warp core breach is imminent." Tan replied.

"Teela put some more distance between us and that ship." Ash ordered and Teela turned the *Ascension* away from the stricken Nausicaan vessel before the containment fields around the antimatter in the warp core failed and there was a massive explosion that consumed the entire vessel, "Where's the other ship?" Ash then asked.

"Scanning captain. The explosion has disrupted sensors though." Tan replied before he added, "Enemy vessel closing from one-seven-four mark three-six."

"Helm bring us around." Ash said and Teela turned the *Ascension* again so that the ship faced its opponent directly. However, just as the two ships were facing one another there was another explosion from within the Nausicaan vessel as it too exploded.

"I didn't fire." Etchemin said.

"Commander Tan?" Ash said, looking at the science station.

"Energy readings indicate that the ship was destroyed by a Starfleet photon torpedo captain." Tan told him as he scanned the wreckage.

"It didn't come from us." Etchemin said.

"No, I have a Starfleet vessel approaching at impulse from behind the moon at zero-two-four mark six-six. Constellation-class." Tan said and Ash smiled.

"On screen." he said and immediately an image of a Starfleet ship with four warp nacelles instead of the usual two heading towards them, "The *Canis Major*." Ash added with a smile.

### 3.

"Report." Korda said as he entered the command centre.

"As expected the Nausicaans were destroyed admiral." Markon told him, "Our other allies are moving in and we have deployed a probe to monitor the situation."

"And Starfleet?" Korda said.

"We've detected two more ships heading for the Veruvus system but they will not be there for several days yet. They would get there before we could though."

"Then this will be up to our allies. I take it you have stressed the importance of taking the ship intact?" Korda said.

"I have admiral. If it is destroyed then the crew of the vessel responsible will be put to death." Markon replied and Korda nodded.

"Good. Now what arrangements have been made to get the ship back here?" he said and Markon pointed to a large wall mounted display.

"A flight of Birds of Prey under Captain Gruvan is located here. I have diverted their patrol route to take them within one tenth of a light year of Veruvus. They are cloaked so their approach will not be detected. Our scans of the Federation vessel indicate that two of the Birds of Prey acting in concert should be able to tow it at warp five point four while the third acts as an escort."

"And when will they reach the Veruvus system Markon?" Korda asked.

"In just over two days time admiral. More than a day ahead of the Starfleet reinforcements. But admiral what are your orders for if our allies have failed to secure the Starfleet prototype? Should they reveal themselves and attack?"

Korda considered this for a moment. On this occasion his hope was to be able to present the advanced Starfleet vessel to the high council without antagonising them by engaging in battle against Starfleet directly. However, he also knew that delivering such a prize would win him the support of many other high ranking military officers no matter how it was obtained and although privately the high council may be furious they could do nothing publicly. Even if he was denied a seat on the council then he would gain more influence in the military and that could be just as effective in his larger scheme.

"Yes." he said eventually, "Tell Gruvan that I want that ship. If our allies have not already done so then he should destroy the *Ascension* and send his warriors aboard this new battle cruiser. Kill anyone who gets in the way and bring me that ship."

The transporter room of the *USS Canis Major* was not too dissimilar to the ones aboard the *USS Ascension* when Ash beamed across with an away team that consisted of Doctor Reese, Lieutenant Commander Forrester and Chief Duke the *Ascension's* chief of security.

"Captain Ash, I'm Lieutenant Commander Hurst. Welcome aboard the *USS Canis Major*." the man standing in front of the transporter platform said when the away team had fully materialised and Ash noticed that as he and Ash had suspected the man wore the colours of the engineering division.

"Thank you commander." Ash replied as he stepped down from the transporter pad, "Allow me to introduce my staff. Doctor Reese is my medical officer, Lieutenant Commander Forrester is my chief engineer and Chief Duke is my chief of security."

"I'm glad you're here captain. With our warp drive down we're stranded out here." Hurst said.

"Let me take a look at it. I'm sure we'll figure something out." Forrester said.

"With respect Lieutenant Commander Forrester the *Canis Major* uses a highly advanced warp drive unlike anything that you're used to." Hurst told him and he frowned.

"Does it warp space around the ship to travel faster than light using a matter-antimatter reaction for power?" he asked.

"Of course, there is no other-" Hurst began.

"Then I'll figure the rest out." Forrester interrupted.

"Perhaps someone should show Forrester to engineering." Ash suggested.

"And I should get to sickbay." Reese said before she looked at Hurst and added, "I take it that your medical instruments are to Starfleet standard?"

"Yes doctor." Hurst said and he looked around at the man standing behind the transporter control panel,

"Ensign please show Doctor Reese to sickbay and Commander Forrester to engineering." he told the man.

Then as Reese and Forrester were being shown from the room Ash spoke to Hurst again.

"And I think we should go to the bridge where you can fill me in on what happened." he said and Hurst nodded.

"Yes captain, please come this way." he said and he led both Ash and Duke from the room.

As they made their way through the corridors of the *Canis Major*, Duke could not help but notice the similarity in design philosophy between the ship and the *Ascension*.

"You know I was kind of expecting something more advanced looking," he commented and Hurst smiled.

"The point of the Constellation-class chief petty officer is that it uses as much available technology as possible. Apart from our warp drive pretty much everything is the same as it is aboard the current generation of Starfleet ships. There are refinements of course, but generally speaking any Starfleet crew should be able to pilot this ship," he said.

"Piloting isn't the same as operating," Ash said as they reached the turbolift and went inside. Once again the interior of the car could easily have been mistaken for one aboard the *Ascension*.

"Bridge," Hurst said before he turned his attention to Ash's comment, "No, as I told your engineer the warp drive aboard this ship is highly advanced. There are not many engineers in Starfleet who could keep it running," he said before the doors opened to reveal the *Canis Major's* bridge. As with the turbolift and corridors this compartment bore a strong resemblance to the bridge of the *Ascension* apart from a number of displays that showed the structure and layout of the vessel. The captain's seat was vacant and being the only command division officer present Ash sat down in it and looked at Hurst while Duke took a position behind him.

"How about you start by telling me what happened?" Ash said to the engineer.

"We left spacedock three weeks ago for a test flight along the border," Hurst responded.

"Why such a vulnerable area?" Duke commented.

"One of the systems that has been upgraded is the sensors and Starfleet wanted to test their effectiveness against difficult to detect objects," Hurst explained and Ash smiled.

"Ah so you were to try and see through Klingon cloaking devices. Could you?" he said.

"Some, yes. We're carrying a number of sensor probes we were able to use for a benchmark and we picked up several objects using our sensors that the probes missed. Before you get too hopeful about being able to completely offset the advantage of Klingon and Romulan cloaking devices the ships we detected were older classes that we can already detect at close range. All we managed was to improve the range of detection." Hurst answered, "It was while we were running scans into Klingon space that we picked up the Nausicaans, eight of them in total. Of course we raised shields and powered weapons so when they hit us we were ready and it was obvious that we outclassed them. We destroyed six while taking only minor damage in return before the surviving Nausicaan ships turned to leave. Unfortunately that was when our warp drive became unbalanced and we had to shut the core down to avoid a breach so we couldn't pursue or return to Federation space."

"So you sent out a distress signal instead," Ash said.

"Yes captain, it seemed like the logical thing to do," Hurst replied.

"Perhaps, but that's what probably caused the Nausicaans to come back. Your distress call told them that the reason you didn't pursue was because you'd suffered major systems failure," Ash pointed out and Hurst winced.

"Sharks smelling blood in the water," Duke added.

"Well fortunately our arrival has dealt with the remaining Nausicaans, assuming that they didn't get the chance to warn any more of their clan that may still be out there. Now what's your status?" Ash said.

"Well as you know our warp drive is still off line. We've been able to rig some phaser capability by tying them into the impulse drive instead but that severely limits our firepower and we didn't exactly have a lot of torpedoes when we left spacedock, just enough to test our targeting system for a live fire test. Our shields are functional though, as are all secondary systems."

"Then all we need to do is fix your warp drive and we can get you back to Federation space," Ash said.

"Or we could just tow them captain," Duke suggested.

"For a Miranda-class heavy destroyer to tow a Constellation-class cruiser would limit the destroyer's speed to warp four," Hurst said.

"I'll take your word on that," Ash commented, guessing that Hurst would have made the calculations when the *Ascension* had responded to the *Canis Major's* distress call.

"The point is that by the time we could get back to Federation space then we could probably have repaired the warp drive anyway," Hurst continued.

"Very well. I'll wait to hear what my engineer has to say," Ash said.

"With respect captain, Lieutenant Commander Forrester is not qualified to repair our warp drive," Hurst said and Ash glared at him.

"Lieutenant Commander Hurst!" he snapped and Hurst jumped in shock, "Lieutenant Commander Forrester is my chief engineer and you will show him the respect that his rank and position are due. I am the ranking officer here so what I say goes and I say that I will wait for the assessment of my chief engineer who I am sure will base his report on his examination of your warp drive, the information provided by your own engineering team and his personal knowledge of the ability of the *Ascension* to provide resources, a subject

that I suspect he is far better qualified to judge than you are. Now are you capable of following my orders or should I relieve you of your team leadership position and talk to your deputy?"

"Of course captain, I'll do as you say." Hurst replied after a moment's hesitation and Duke smiled at him. "Good choice." he said.

With Ash off the ship Tan sat in the captain's chair at the centre of the *Ascension's* bridge waiting to hear from his superior.

"Anything on sensors Lieutenant Etchemin?" he asked. With Tan himself not at the science station the *Ascension's* navigator was instead monitoring the ship's sensors.

"Nothing commander." Etchemin replied with a shake of his head, "The sky is clear."

"I don't like it." Teela commented, "I have an uneasy feeling about this."

"Something making your antennas tingle?" Etchemin commented.

"Trust me Jack, it's not danger that makes my antennas tingle." Teela replied with a smile.

"So what does?" Etchemin asked.

"Enough of the chit chat please." Tan told the two officers sat at the flight console in front of him, "Mister Etchemin are there areas of the system where hostile vessels could be hiding?"

"A few, yes commander." Etchemin answered, "Our approach vector prevented us from scanning behind most of the system's larger bodies. Of course the *Canis Major* was lurking behind one and their position would have given them a good view from alternative angles but even if there's nothing in the system now someone with advanced knowledge of the positions of those bodies could get within about two light minutes of our position before we'd have a line of sight to them."

"Launch a probe lieutenant." Tan told him, "Place it above the orbital plane of the system so we can look over those bodies. I don't want to be taken by surprise by any more raiders."

"Aye commander, preparing probe now." Etchemin responded.

"Do you think that there could be more Nausicaans coming?" Teela said, turning around to look at Tan.

"Let's just say that you're not the only one who is uneasy about this lieutenant commander." Tan told her,

"Even if I don't have your antenna." he then added with a smile and Teela smiled back at him, deliberately twitching her antenna before she turned back to her console.

"But everyone wishes they did." she said.

"Commander I-" Estevez began, raising a hand to her earpiece before she suddenly stopped speaking.

"Is there a problem ensign?" Tan asked, turning his chair towards the communications station.

"I'm not sure commander. I thought I picked something up for a moment. It was very brief but it seemed to be a modulated subspace burst."

"A flare from the star?" Teela suggested but Estevez shook her head.

"No, there was definitely a regular pattern there. It lasted too long to be something random that looked artificial." she said.

"Do you have a bearing?" Tan said.

"Yes commander. Two-four-seven mark seven-three." Estevez told him.

"Mister Etchemin what do our sensors show in that direction?" Tan said, turning his chair to face forwards once more.

"Scanning now commander." Etchemin said before he smiled and added, "Picking up multiple objects commander, indications of duranium and other alloys. Shall I put it on screen?"

Tan nodded.

"Yes lieutenant. Let's take a look." he said and Etchemin brought up an image of what he had detected on the bridge's main view screen. This showed a field of debris drifting in space that included several familiar lines and shapes among it.

"The wreckage of a Nausicaan raider." Teela said.

"There must be something among the wreckage that still has power." Etchemin said, "Something that produces subspace emissions and is turning off and on at random."

"That sounds reasonable." Tan said, "I don't want any chances taken this far from any support though.

Lieutenant Etchemin, keep our sensors locked onto that wreckage. Ensign Estevez, continue to monitor for subspace signals."

## 4.

The engineering section of the *Canis Major* was a hive of activity when Ash stepped out of the turbolift and looked around. Most of the personnel present were from the engineering division but there appeared to be more officers present than was usual for a Starfleet vessel. In addition to this there were also a number of science officers present that gave an indication of how the starship's warp drive was still considered experimental.

Across the compartment Ash saw Forrester standing with several officers from the *Canis Major's* crew near to the warp core itself. A functioning warp core produced an obvious glow but the warp core of the *Canis Major* was currently dull, indicating that there was no antimatter held inside it. Ash walked across the room, with enlisted engineers getting out of his way in respect of his rank until he reached Forrester and the other officers. Here he could see that they were studying a display on a nearby console that showed the various subsystems that made up the *Canis Major's* warp drive and how they were connected.

"Commander Forrester." Ash said to attract his attention.

"Ah captain." Forrester responded. "Let's go over there where we can talk." he added and he pointed to an alcove at the side of the compartment where there was a row of equipment lockers.

"Of course." Ash replied and the two officers walked over to the alcove. Then when they got there he looked directly at Forrester and asked, "So is there a reason why you wanted us to talk away from the *Canis Major's* crew Adam?"

Forrester sighed before he replied to this question.

"They're not bad people captain but every one of these officers is an R and D geek. Other than a few trial runs like this I don't think any of them has logged a single space hour since their cadet cruise. They just don't understand how a warp drive works in practice and what it takes to keep one running."

"You think that's why they keep having so many failures?" Ash said and Forrester nodded.

"That would be my guess, yes. One of the science boys showed me the numbers and they all look fine to me but they just don't take into account what happens when you start pushing an engine."

"So can you fix it for them?" Ash said.

"Given time, yes captain. But Lieutenant Commander Hurst was right when he was saying that the technology of this engine is more advanced than is used for other classes of starship. It'll take time to follow the system through to find the source of the failure but our fabrication system should be able to come up with the replacement parts needed to get them up and running again." Forrester said.

"What about their own fabrication system?" Ash asked.

"Most of it hasn't been delivered yet and what they do have is in crates in their hangar. I was told that it was due to be installed on Wednesday." Forrester said.

"I swear that's the only day spacedock work crews do anything." Ash commented and Forrester smiled.

"And it's a half day too." he added.

"Too right." Ash said before there was a chirping sound from his communicator and he took it from his belt before flipping the cover open, "Ash here." he said.

"Captain it's Commander Tan." Tan's voice said.

"Go ahead commander." Ash replied.

"Captain I just thought you should know that Ensign Estevez detected a subspace signal that was clearly of artificial origin. The source appears to be within a debris field left when the *Canis Major* destroyed one of the attacking Nausicaan ships but I've ordered Estevez to continue monitoring for more signals." Tan explained.

"Very good commander. Let me know if she picks up anything else. Also let Starfleet know, we may be too far away for them to send help in time if we do run into trouble out here then I'd at least like them to know what happened." ash said.

"Yes captain. What about the *Canis Major*?" Tan asked.

"Forrester thinks that we will be able to help with the repairs but they are probably going to take some time. I'm almost done here though so I should be returning to the *Ascension* soon." Ash answered.

"Understood captain. Your chair will be waiting."

Approaching the Veruvus system from the far side of the star to where the *Ascension* and *Canis Major* were located allowed the assorted raiding craft that were among those acting as proxies for Admiral Korda to approach it without being detected by either of the Starfleet vessels. The vessels came from a variety of sources with Federation, Orion and Suliban built craft all present when a pair of Klingon craft joined them. Both of these were considered obsolete designs and no longer in frontline service with the Klingon Defence Force or any Klingon house. One of them was an armed transport ship while the second was a Raptor-class scout and it was the commanding officer of this scoutship that then hailed the vessels already there.

"This is Gortoth." he said as images of the other captains appeared on his viewscreen, "Admiral Korda has placed me in command of this force."

"The admiral didn't say anything about appointing you." a heavily scarred Tellarite responded.

"Did you think he would leave us all to bicker among ourselves while the Starfleet ships escape?" Gortoth said with a snarl, "You can accept my orders or leave and answer to the admiral in person."

"I'd like to see proof of this authority as well." a green skinned Orion added and Gortoth let out a brief growl before jabbing at the control panel built into the arm of his chair. This triggered a simultaneous transmission to the other gathered raiding ships that showed an image of Korda's face.

"Gortoth when you get to the Veruvus system I want you to take command of the other ships gathering there. I need a commander I can rely on and I know you have the experience needed to command a squadron." he said before Gortoth ended the transmission.

"There, is that enough to satisfy you or do you still doubt my word?" he said.

"No, the admiral clearly wants you in command. So what are your orders commander?" the Orion responded. Gortoth had always been a cautious commander, preferring the certainty of victory over impulsive and ill thought out attacks. Unfortunately for him that had not impressed his superiors when he had been an officer aboard a Klingon battlecruiser and he had been expelled from the Klingon Defence Force, compelled to join the crew of a renegade ship where caution had proven to be a useful survival trait.

"For the moment we wait. There are more ships approaching and when they arrive we will outnumber the Starfleet ships by ten to one. More than enough to overwhelm them. In the meantime send me status reports on all your vessels, we will continue to observe them using the admiral's probe. If possible we will separate the two ships, that will give us the opportunity to attack the primary target while it is vulnerable. Now wait and prepare, when the time comes to do battle we must be ready. The admiral has sent ships to take the target back to Klingon space and I do not want to have to tell them that we failed in our part of the mission." Gortoth told the other ships' captains before he abruptly shut off the transmitter. Looking at his control panel he saw that as ordered each of the other raiding vessels was sending him a status report.

Studying the reports told Gortoth that the ships he was commanding were far from the fleet of battlecruisers he considered it his right to command but thanks to the support provided by Korda to his proxies each of the raiders was reasonably well maintained even if their weapons and shields were more suited to raiding commercial vessels. Individually they were no match for anything but the smallest of Starfleet vessels but acting in concert Gortoth was confident that he had enough firepower to do what was necessary, even without the addition of the extra ships he knew were on their way. However, he also knew that the additional firepower of these ships would make the task of seizing the *Canis Major* and destroying the *Ascension* much easier. This would be especially true if the crew compliment of the *Canis Major* was anywhere close to what a typical vessel of its size would require. This would be several hundred officers and men who could be expected to put up a fight. The raiding ships temporarily under Gortoth's command carried crews of a few dozen each and although as a Klingon Gortoth was not afraid of a tough battle, this could leave them at a significant disadvantage when it came to the boarding phase of the operation. With the reinforcements expected Gortoth estimated that he would be able to count on an extra fifty troops. With those added to his force he was confident that he would be able to take the *Canis Major* and with it be rewarded with the restoration of his military commission and command of a warship in the Klingon Defence Force.

"Mike hold up!" Reese called out down the corridor as Ash was returning to the *Canis Major's* transporter room and he turned around to face her, watching as she rushed up to him.

"All done in sickbay already?" he asked.

"Luckily there wasn't really all that much to be done." Reese answered, "A few minor injuries and burns but that was about it. The worst injury was from fragmentation to the head that almost cost an engineer an eye. That was the only thing that the *Canis Major's* medical staff couldn't handle so I took that."

"Let me guess, the *Canis Major's* medical team aren't as good as ours." Ash said.

"I hate to admit it Mike but they aren't. None of them are qualified to carry out major surgery and most can't even deliver a general anaesthetic. Giving first aid is all that most of them are any good for and I could ask security guards to do most of that." Reese said.

"Adam Forrester said pretty much the same thing about the engineering department. This isn't a crew that is intended to run a starship operationally, they only came out here to see how well the *Canis Major* works. Or doesn't work as the case appears to be." Ash said as the pair of them entered the transporter room, "We're going back to the *Ascension*." he told the operator standing behind the console who nodded as Ash and Reese stepped up onto the transporter platform.

"Link established captain." the operator said.

"Energise." Ash ordered and the operator activated the transporter.

Moments later Ash and Reese materialised back aboard the *Ascension* in one of its transporter rooms.

"Welcome back captain. Doctor." the *Ascension's* transporter operator said.

"Thank you crewman." Ash replied, "Anything exciting happen while I was gone that Commander Tan didn't tell me about?"

"I don't think so captain but the commander is expecting you on the bridge." the crewman answered.

"Thank you. Let the commander know that I'm back aboard and I'll be with him shortly." Ash said before he exited the transporter room with Reese.

This time Reese headed to the bridge along with Ash and they entered it together.

"Captain on the bridge." Tan announced as they stepped from the turbolift.

"Report commander, have I missed anything?" Ash said.

"Nothing new captain. How are things aboard the *Canis Major*?" Tan replied.

"Oh about as well as can be expected from an experimental ship with a crew better suited to spacedock support roles." Ash said before Estevez turned her chair.

"Captain I'm picking up that signal again." she said.

"Commander take a look at it." Ash ordered and Tan dashed to the science station.

"I've lost it captain, it stopped again." Estevez said.

"Did you manage to record it?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain." Estevez answered.

"We have five point three seconds captain." Tan added as he examined the data recorded by the *Ascension's* communications system.

"Is there another starship out here?" Reese asked.

"Only wrecks doctor." Etchemin answered.

"The signal appears to originate from within the wreckage of a Nausicaan raider." Tan added, "However, the nature of the signal in Ensign Estevez's recording would appear to contradict this."

"Explain commander." Ash said, walking across the bridge to join Tan at the science station.

"Ensign Estevez was correct to say that the subspace signal is artificial and features a modulating pattern. It is clearly a communication system. However, the modulation pattern is not from any known Nausicaan source." Tan said and Ash winced.

"Don't tell me commander, it's Klingon isn't it?" he said.

"I'm afraid so captain. The modulation is one known to be used by the Klingon Defence Forces for data transfer signals." Tan said.

"A cloaked Bird of Prey?" Teela suggested.

"I don't think so." Tan responded, "The crew of a cloaked ship would be unlike to make a transmission such as this that would reveal their position. Instead they would reposition their ship so that a secure signal could be sent without our being able to detect it."

"Then what is it?" Reese asked.

"I suspect that there is a probe concealed among the debris doctor." Tan said.

"Makes sense." Ash said, nodding in agreement, "The Klingons probably monitored the initial engagement between the Nausicaans and the *Canis Major* then picked up the same distress signal that we did. I'd be surprised if they didn't send a probe to try and get a better look at one of Starfleet's latest prototypes."

"Perhaps we should send a torpedo its way." Teela suggested and Etchemin smiled.

"I'll only need one shot." he added.

"Captain this may offer us an opportunity." Tan said before Ash could decide whether or not to order the firing of a torpedo.

"What sort of opportunity?" Ash asked.

"Captain although I have been able to identify the signal as a Klingon transmission, it is encoded in a manner that Starfleet has been unable to crack. Perhaps if we could capture that probe then we could study the way in which it does it." Tan said and Ash smiled.

"Hand it over to Starfleet Intelligence?" he said.

"Exactly captain." Tan replied.

"Helm stand by to head for that probe at one half impulse power." Ash said, "Estevez, let the *Canis Major* know that they'll need to-"

"Captain the probe may react negatively to the approach of a starship." Tan interrupted, "I recommend that a shuttle be sent instead."

"So we send a shuttle with a two man crew to perform an EVA and bring the probe back here?" Ash said and Tan nodded.

"Exactly captain." he said, "The drive system will have to be deactivated before it can be brought aboard or the probe may self destruct."

"Captain I'd like to volunteer to pilot the shuttle." Etchemin said.

"Lieutenant Etchemin is the ideal candidate captain." Tan said, "An experienced pilot will be required to successfully navigate the wreckage."

"An officer with knowledge of communication systems would be useful as well sir." Estevez added with a smile.

“Okay ensign, you’re in. The pair of you can go and get ready but you may want to alert the shuttle bay to prepare a shuttle first ensign. Oh and make sure that you get some replacements up here.” Ash replied.

## 5.

Lieutenant Commander Hurst was in his quarters aboard the *Canis Major* when Forrester came to see him. "So have you completed your assessment of our engines Mister Forrester?" he asked.

"I have, it's impressive. At least it would be if it was working. If you don't mind me saying I think you should consider getting a few starship engineers to take a look at it instead of just relying on your civilian and starbase staff." Forrester replied and Hurst glared at him for a moment.

"Given your experience as a starship engineer Lieutenant Commander Forrester, can our warp drive be repaired in a timely manner?" he said.

"You've got a dozen plasma injectors that have blown out. All the other damage just needs bypassing or sealing but those will need replacing and you've only got four spares. That still leaves you eight short." Forrester told him.

"Yes Mister Forrester, I can add." Hurst commented.

"Well the *Ascension's* fabricators can produce them for you. Taking the damaged ones back to rend down for the base material will help speed things up but we're still looking at about four days to get it done."

"Four days in which we're stranded." Hurst commented.

"Yes but the Gatchaman and Taipei will be here in two days. I wouldn't be surprised if they can't help with the work as well. That's two more fabricators and two more engineering teams. We may be able to shave a day off the work and we'll have a lot more firepower available in case any more raiders turn up." Forrester said.

"Very well Mister Forrester, I will give the order to send the damaged plasma injectors over to the *Ascension*. Is there anything else?" Hurst asked.

"No I think that covers everything." Forrester said, glancing at the PADD he held.

"Good. Then you are dismissed Mister Forrester." Hurst said.

"Of course lieutenant commander. If you need me I'll be aboard the *Ascension*." Forrester said before he turned and left the room.

"Are you two sure you don't want a security team with you?" Duke said when he encountered Etchemin and Estevez as they entered the *Ascension's* shuttle bay. Both of the officers were wearing spacesuits instead of their regular uniforms, the bulbous helmets held in their hands.

"I don't think that we'll run into any Klingons out there chief. It's just a probe." Etchemin replied.

"I was thinking that you may want someone qualified to defuse explosives lieutenant." Duke said, "I wouldn't put it past the Klingons to wire their probe to blow if someone tries opening it."

"We'll scan the probe before we open it." Estevez said, "If we detect any booby traps we'll ask you what to do."

"If you're sure. I could be suited up in ten minutes." Duke said.

"Very sure chief. Besides, an extra ten minutes in this suit is something I'd like to avoid." Etchemin said.

"Your concern is appreciated though. Thank you." Estevez added.

"Always happy to oblige." Duke said before Etchemin and Estevez carried on walking towards a nearby shuttlecraft that had the name *Faraday* written on the side and the main rear ramp of which was lowered.

"Everything's set for you lieutenant." a ground crew chief told Etchemin, "She's fully fuelled and the phasers are armed."

"You've given us an armed shuttle?" Etchemin commented.

"I thought it would be a good idea." Estevez told him, "Just in case."

"Good thinking." Etchemin replied and they walked up the ramp into the shuttle.

While Etchemin and Estevez took their seats at the front of the shuttle the ground crew exited the hangar and the massive doors at the rear of the hangar slid open.

"Shuttle *Faraday* you are cleared to depart hangar." a voice said over the shuttle's communication system.

"Copy that launch control." Estevez responded as Etchemin took hold of the flight controls.

"Engaging thrusters." he said and the shuttle rose up off the deck before slowly moving out of the hangar into space, "*Faraday* to *Ascension* we are clear of the hangar. Engaging impulse drive now." Etchemin added, turning the shuttle towards the debris field where the Klingon probe lurked.

"So how long until we get there?" Estevez asked as Etchemin leant back in his seat, allowing the shuttle's autopilot to take over while the tiny craft was just moving through open space.

"About three hours." he told her, "Assume two to carry out the work and then another three back to the *Ascension*. That makes eight hours until we can get out of these suits and back into regular uniforms."

"You don't like wearing a spacesuit?" Estevez said with a smile and Etchemin frowned.

"No, it rides up way too much. Not having to breathe pure oxygen for half an hour beforehand may be more convenient but I'm not sure getting my butt squeezed so much is worth it." he said.

"Well if your butt didn't look good in a spacesuit I wouldn't have set you up with one of my friends." Estevez said and Etchemin smiled as well.

"Have I thanked you again for that recently Sonia?" he said.

"No. So it's going well then Jack?" Estevez said.

"For me it is, yes. Monique seems happy with things as well. She's not said anything to you has she?" Etchemin replied.

"I think you see more of her than I do now. Just remember that if you two do end up getting married I expect you to use your influence to make sure that I'm maid of honour." Estevez said.

"Consider it a deal." Etchemin replied before he looked back at the console in front of him.

"Captain we have detected a launch from one of the Federation warships." one of Gortoth's crew told him when he came to see him in the mess hall.

"Which ship?" Gortoth asked.

"The destroyer." the crewman answered simply.

"A probe?"

"No captain, it looks more like a shuttle. It is heading for the wreck of one of the Nausicaan ships, the one where Admiral Korda's probe is located. They may have detected it."

"If they get as far as the probe they may be able to see us." Gortoth commented as he thought about the relative positions of his raiders, the hidden probe and the two Starfleet vessels on the opposite side of the star to his small fleet.

"Yes captain. What are your orders?"

"That slimy Suliban has cell ships aboard his transport." Gortoth said, thinking back to the reports he had read, "Two of them ought to be enough to deal with a shuttle. Have them intercept and destroy it. The cell ships will then head out of the system in full view of Starfleet before either circling around to us once more or simply waiting for us to complete our mission here." then all of a sudden an idea struck him, "No wait, they aren't to destroy the shuttle. I want them to board it and bring me the occupants. If we are to board that Federation prototype then I want to know more about what resistance we will face. The Suliban should still give the impression that they are leaving the system though. Starfleet must not discover our presence just yet."

"Yes captain, I will relay your orders to the Suliban now." the other Klingon said before he turned around and walked away, leaving his captain to the meal that still wriggled in the bowl on the table in front of him.

The Suliban cell ships were the product of the previous century but the weaponry they carried was still effective, powerful particle beams based on technology supplied to the group known as The Cabal supplied to them by an advanced ally. The Cabal had long since fallen but its technology remained and a large portion of it had fallen into the hands of renegades such as this group of pirates. Magnetically clamped to the exterior of the Suliban transport that served as the pirates' primary vessel, two of the cell ships were simply detached by their pilots before speeding away from it on a course that would take them around the system's star towards the same debris field that Etchemin and Estevez were heading towards in the *Ascension's* shuttlecraft.

"Does that look like a ship to you?" Estevez asked when she noticed an energy signature on the shuttle's sensors and Etchemin looked for himself.

"If it is then they're taking a risk, they're flying very close to the star's corona." Etchemin said and then after a brief pause he added, "I suppose it could be more debris from a Nausicaan ship being pulled in by the star's gravity."

"You mean being hurled around by a slingshot effect?" Estevez said and Etchemin nodded.

"Exactly. It'll make a few orbits of the star before gravity pulls it all the way-" he began before he noticed a flare of energy, barely detectable against the output of the star but present none the less.

"What is it? Jack?" Estevez said.

"It looked like an impulse drive firing." Etchemin told her.

"Could the energy from the star triggered something?" Estevez suggested but Etchemin shook his head.

"No. we're picking up two objects and both just produced the same sort of energy flare at about the same time." he replied.

"Definitely two objects? One isn't a reflection of the other?"

"Definitely two objects. The interval between the energy flare was about half a second. If one was a reflection of the other then at the proximity we're looking at here I'd need the computer to tell me about the time difference, I wouldn't have seen it by eye. I think you were right to begin with, those are genuine sensor contacts. Signal the Canis Major." Etchemin said.

"The Canis Major? Not the *Ascension*?" Estevez said.

"No, the crew of the Canis Major were conducting tests in this system. I want to be sure that they didn't

launch a couple of solar probes that may still be active before I start saying that we've picked up any potentially hostile vessels." Etchemin said.

"This is shuttle *Faraday* to *USS Canis Major*, come in please." Estevez transmitted.

"This is the *USS Canis Major*, go ahead *Faraday*." a voice responded.

"*Canis Major* did you launch any solar probes as part of your systems tests?" Estevez asked.

"Negative *Faraday*, no probe launches have been carried out."

"Understood *Canis Major*. *Faraday* out." Estevez replied before she shut off the communication system and looked at Etchemin, "Okay Jack, what do we do now?" she asked.

"I'm raising our shields. Those contacts are too small to be anything other than shuttles or fighters themselves. We need to keep watch for a mother ship. In the meantime alert the *Ascension* and ask for instructions. I know the captain didn't want to-" Etchemin said before he saw both of the sensor contacts vanish from the shuttle's displays, "They're gone." he said.

"To warp?" Estevez said.

"I don't know. One minute they were there and the next they weren't. Inform the *Ascension* that we picked something up but that it's gone now. We're only a few minutes from the debris field so it seems like a waste of time to abandon the mission now. We'll keep our shields up and our eyes open."

"I don't like the sound of this." Ash said while he considered what Estevez had just told him about the mysterious sensor contacts near the local star, "Commander Tan what do you think?"

"From the information supplied by Ensign Estevez there is only so much we can know captain. The contacts were both located on the far side of the star so we wouldn't be able to pick them up from here." Tan said.

"Scan the area between the star and the debris field anyway. If there is a threat to our shuttle then I want to know about it." Ash told him and he nodded.

"Scanning now captain." he replied, looking at the sensor display on his console. Then he looked up and added, "Captain I have two contacts. Both are roughly spherical and about four metres in diameter. They appear to be using cloaking devices of a type considered obsolete, our sensors can pick them up but those aboard the *Faraday* probably cannot." he said.

"Can you identify them?" Ash asked.

"From the available data captain I would say that they are Suliban cell ships." Tan said.

## 3.

"Okay this is it." Etchemin said, bringing the shuttle to a stop relative to the debris field when it was just a few hundred metres away. From this distance it was possible to make out recognisable shapes among the wreckage that pointed to the functions of individual pieces. More disturbingly there were also several bodies that could be seen drifting among the twisted and melted metal.

"I think I see the probe over there." Estevez added, pointing through the viewport to where a stubby cylinder could be seen among the wreckage.

"Okay let's get this done then." Etchemin said and he reached for his helmet. However, just at that moment the shuttle's communication system activated.

"Shuttle *Faraday* this is the *Ascension*." Ash's voice said with a sense of urgency, "You may have Suliban cell ships in the area. You are ordered to—"

All of a sudden the shuttle lurched as it was struck by an energy blast and the communication from the *Ascension* was cut off.

"We've lost comms." Estevez exclaimed.

"Shields holding." Etchemin responded before a cell ship streaked past the viewport and fired again, "Hold on." he added and he turned the shuttle sharply so that the cell ship remained visible before firing the shuttle's phasers.

The twin blasts of energy struck the cell ship briefly but its shields held long enough for the pilot to be able to roll out of the path of the phasers before they penetrated its shields. Then the shuttle lurched again and alarm sounded.

"Our shields are collapsing." Estevez said and moments later there was a shimmering from the rear of the shuttle as someone beamed aboard.

"Hand phasers!" Etchemin snapped, reaching for the drawer set into the flight console that held a pair of assault phasers and energy cells.

Even as he was opening this drawer the Suliban fully materialised and fired a blast from his disruptor that struck the main control console to produce a massive shower of sparks while the two Starfleet officers both took cover and loaded their weapons.

Etchemin was the first of them to return fire, leaving the phaser set on 'stun' as it was stored and the beam hit the Suliban in the chest. However, the intruder was wearing an armoured vest that the beam could not penetrate and he remained standing as he fired again, forcing Etchemin to retreat behind his chair to avoid being hit.

"Stun's no good." Etchemin said as he adjusted the setting on his phaser and Estevez did likewise.

Leaning around their chairs the two officers fired again but the Suliban dived out of the way to take cover behind an equipment canister that had been loaded to store the Klingon probe safely. Now the sturdy canister provided protection for the Suliban as Etchemin and Estevez continued to fire their phasers.

In return the Suliban held his weapon around the canister and fired again without aiming. This time the energy blasts struck the inside of the shuttle's viewport and the fact that they did not damage it told Etchemin and Estevez that the intruder's weapon was not set to a lethal level.

"It didn't crack." Estevez commented.

"No, he must want us alive." Etchemin replied and then quietly he added, "Can you reach your helmet?"

"I think so. Maybe. why?" Estevez asked.

"Because that Suliban isn't wearing one." Etchemin pointed out and Estevez smiled.

"Cover me." she said and Etchemin fired his phaser again, using short bursts to keep the Suliban pinned down why Estevez quickly leant out from behind her chair to grab her helmet from where it had landed.

Before retreating again she also grabbed hold of Etchemin's helmet and brought it back with her, rolling it across the floor towards him.

"Thanks." he said as Estevez fitted the helmet to her spacesuit and then she nodded at him as she held her phaser ready again.

"Now." she said, leaning around her chair and firing the weapon in the same way that Etchemin had when giving her cover and he took the opportunity to fit his helmet and make sure that his spacesuit was operating correctly.

"I'm set. Hold on to something." Etchemin said, using the communicator built into his spacesuit to keep the words secret from the Suliban at the rear of the shuttle.

Estevez ceased fire and grabbed hold of the chair she was using for cover firmly. No longer under fire the Suliban emerged to attack once more but as he looked towards the front of the shuttle he was just in time to see Etchemin lean over the flight controls and quickly press a sequence of buttons on the console. Before the Suliban could react there was a brief alarm and the ramp to the rear of the shuttle was suddenly ejected from the craft. This produced a sudden rush of air as all that was inside the shuttle was instantly blown out

into space. The Suliban realised what Etchemin was planning and he reached for his communicator, intending to activate the recall signal that would automatically beam him back to his cell ship. However, before he could manage this the shuttle was decompressed and he was blown out into space as well, the communicator slipping from his grasp before he could save himself.

"Quick, the other ship will be coming back." Etchemin said and he and Estevez quickly returned to their seats. However, looking at the control console they saw that even set on stun the disruptor had inflicted significant damage.

"We've got no weapons or shields." Etchemin said as he tried to bring the shuttle's defences back on line.

"What about helm control? Can you get us out of here?" Estevez asked.

"I'll try." Etchemin said and he tried using the shuttles thrusters to turn the craft around.

Slowly the shuttle began to turn but it did so erratically as if the control signals leading to the thrusters were cutting in and out. Before Etchemin could complete the turn there was another flash of light from outside the shuttle as the second cell ship closed in and fired its particle cannon. The beam struck one of the impulse units at the rear of the shuttle and it exploded. The force of the blast put the shuttle into a spin that Etchemin could not stop without full thruster control.

"We need to get out of here." he said and he got to his feet, tucking his phaser into his belt and steadying himself on his chair as the shuttle's inertial dampening field began to fail.

"Outside?" Estevez said, "We can't EVA all the way back to the *Ascension*."

"No but we might be able to commandeer one of those cell ships." Etchemin replied.

The two officers linked arms as they walked towards the rear of the spinning shuttlecraft and paused just inside the gaping hole where the ramp had been ejected.

"Ready?" Etchemin asked and Estevez nodded.

In unison the two officers then jumped from the shuttle into space while still holding onto one another and let themselves drift together. Their path took them towards the nearby debris field and Estevez took note of one of the larger pieces. This looked like it had been the section around the ship's bridge and as such had been sufficiently reinforced to have survived the destruction of the ship relatively intact.

"What about that?" she asked, pointing to it.

"Yes, that looks good. Keep hold of me and I'll take us in." Etchemin replied. He then let go of Estevez so that only her grip on him kept them together.

While their spacesuits were not equipped with full propulsion packs they did include limited thrusters fed from a cylinder of compressed gas and Etchemin fired these to steer himself and Estevez towards the remains of the Nausicaan ship's bridge.

While Etchemin and Estevez were hiding themselves among the debris the second Suliban cell ship turned and came back towards the stricken shuttlecraft. Slowing down, the pilot of the cell ship scanned the shuttle for any signs of life but found nothing. In frustration he then fired his craft's weapon again and the particle beam sliced through the *Faraday* before it exploded in a bright flash of light.

"Now what do we do?" Estevez asked, "Our phasers won't penetrate that thing's shields."

"No but the weapon from the other cell ship might." Etchemin replied, "We need to find it."

"Over there, look." Estevez said, pointing from the wreckage they were standing on towards where the now empty cell ship drifted. This was only several hundred metres away from their location but it meant crossing open space to reach while the second cell ship was still hunting for them.

"We have to do this now." Etchemin said, "We can't wait for that Suliban to give or up he'll probably take the empty cell ship with him, they're designed to connect together."

"So how do we get there?" Estevez asked.

"You don't, I do." Etchemin answered.

"Why you?"

"Because I'm the qualified pilot between us." Etchemin pointed out as he took his phaser from his belt and handed it to Estevez, "Here, take this." he told her.

"What am I supposed to do with this? I already have a phaser." she said as she took the weapon anyway.

"Just try to get that Suliban's attention. I need him looking away from me for a couple of minutes." Etchemin said as he looked around, searching for another large piece of debris positioned as near to the drifting cell ship as possible. He found one that was obviously the remains of a warp nacelle, "I'll signal you when I'm ready." he added before he jumped from the wrecked bridge section and used his spacesuit's thrusters to propel him to the warp nacelle instead.

Estevez watched him reach the warp nacelle safely before she began to search for the cell ship that was in return hunting for them and she found it on the far side of the debris field. The alien pilot had correctly predicted that the two Starfleet officers would make for the only cover available but did not know exactly where among the debris they would be hidden. In preparation of her role to provide a distraction Estevez made sure that both the assault phasers were set to a strong disrupt setting. With only one already partially depleted power cell per weapon this limited Estevez to perhaps a dozen shots with each but she needed her attacks to be powerful enough to at least register against the cell ship's shields.

“Okay Sonia I’m in position. Let me know when you have a shot.” Etchemin signalled and Estevez took cover behind part of the wreckage she was standing on and took aim with one of her phasers.

As soon as the cell ship came clearly into view Estevez fired the phaser briefly before ducking out of sight and at the same time she signalled to Etchemin.

“Jack go!” she called out.

The instant he received the signal Etchemin leapt from the ruined nacelle towards the drifting cell ship and fired his thruster again, using a sustained burst of several seconds to build up a reasonable amount of speed before cutting the thrusters entirely and coasting through space.

Positioned on the far side of the debris field from Etchemin, the cell ship did not detect the use of his thrusters and instead the pilot moved towards Estevez, cautiously weaving between the debris. In response Estevez fired her phaser again, firing several shots at the approaching cell ship before she took cover again and began to crawl across the wreckage in search of a new firing position. Reaching the end of the outcrop of metal that she had been using for cover Estevez leant around to shoot at the cell ship again only to discover that it was almost on top of her. Nevertheless she fired the assault phaser again to keep the alien pilot’s attention focused on her. This time she used a more sustained beam but this depleted the last of the energy in the phaser’s power cell and it cut out suddenly.

“Oh not now.” she said to herself as she took cover and looked around again. Spotting a hole in the wreckage close by she made her way to it as quickly as possible while the cell ship continued to circle as its pilot hunted her. Before the ship could get into position to spot her though Estevez was able to crawl through the hole into the interior of the wreckage.

The hole took her into an interior compartment that had been located close to the bridge and as she looked around at her surroundings she found herself suddenly almost face-to-face with the floating corpse of a Nausicaan. Estevez gasped at the badly burned body before she pushed it out of the way and drew her second phaser.

While Estevez was drawing the attention of the Suliban, Etchemin continued to drift through space without using his thrusters to avoid notice. He kept on in this way until he was within twenty metres of the cell ship before firing the thrusters again, making sure that he would intercept the cell ship rather than continue to drift right past it and also that he would not hit it so fast that he would injure himself. Doing this enabled Etchemin to successfully land on the hull of the compact vessel but by this point a flashing light on the control interface mounted on his spacesuit’s wrist was warning him that his thruster’s fuel reserves were almost depleted. He did not see this as an issue though, intending to make use of the cell ship from here on.

The first challenge was to gain access to the craft and Etchemin quickly located the hatch and control panel. The pilot had not foreseen the possibility that someone would attempt to enter his vessel and so the hatch was not security sealed and Etchemin was able to open it easily. The interior was still pressurised though and there was a sudden blast of escaping air from inside the cell ship. Etchemin gripped the hull to avoid being blown away from the cell ship without enough fuel to be able to guarantee that he would be able to return to it before he climbed inside.

The interior of the craft was cramped, designed to be operated by a lone pilot but with just about enough room for a single passenger as well if they sat close to one another. Once again the fact that the Suliban pilot had not expected his craft to be commandeered worked in Etchemin’s favour and he had left the controls fully active.

Sitting down on the flight couch the first thing Etchemin did was close the hatch and instruct the life support system to repressurise the interior of the cell ship, enabling him to remove his helmet. Grasping the flight controls Etchemin then fired the cell ship’s impulse drive, steering towards the debris field where the other cell ship was still circling the wrecked Nausicaan bridge.

“Naranik what happened?” the voice of the other Suliban pilot said over the cell ship’s communication system said, obviously wondering why his comrade’s ship was suddenly moving again.

Rather than attempt to bluff his way closer to the other cell ship Etchemin targeted it with his own particle cannon. The Suliban detected this and realised that he was under attack, veering off suddenly before Etchemin could fire. However, in doing so his ship clipped the wrecked nacelle that Etchemin had leapt from earlier. Both the cell ship and the wreckage bounced off one another, both of them spinning in different directions. This gave Etchemin the chance to re-establish his lock on the other cell ship while its pilot was fighting to regain control.

Firing the cell ship’s particle cannon, Etchemin hit the other vessel from behind and there was a flash as its shields collapsed. Etchemin then followed the first shot up with a second that again hit the rear of the cell ship where its impulse drive was located. The hit did not cause the drive to explode in a manner that would have vaporised the small craft entirely but it did create enough of a blast that the cell ship was thrown sideways into another large piece of wreckage. Lacking its shields, the force of the impact was enough to tear open the cell ship and moments later what was left of it exploded.

“Sonia can you read me?” Etchemin signalled with the communicator built into his spacesuit.

"Yes I'm here Jack." Estevez replied, "Is it over yet?"

"I wish you could have seen it. That other Suliban ship went up like a small nova. Keep this channel open and I'll use it to get a transporter lock on you. Then we can head back to the *Ascension*."

"Tan I need to know what's going on out there." Ash said while Tan scanned the area of space around the debris field.

"Uncertain captain. I can't detect the *Faraday*." Tan responded.

"Has it been destroyed? What about Etchemin and Estevez?" Teela said, obviously concerned about the officers who were also her friends.

"We're too far away for me to detect their life signs." Tan said.

"Communications try and raise them." Ash told the crewman filling in for Estevez at the communications console and he nodded as he tried to establish contact with either of the officers aboard the shuttle.

"Captain if the *Faraday* has been destroyed then Etchemin and Estevez's personal communicators may not have the range to contact us." Tan pointed out.

"Can you at least tell whether our signals are being received?" Ash asked and Tan looked back at the *Ascension*'s sensors.

"Scanning." he said before he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Ash asked when he saw this.

"Captain the Suliban cell ships are firing on one another." Tan said, looking up from his console.

"Can you put it on the main viewscreen?" Ash said.

"I believe so captain." Tan said and both men looked towards the large viewscreen at the front of the *Ascension*'s bridge just in time to see one of the cell ships spin uncontrollably into a large piece of wreckage and explode.

"What the hell just happened?" Teela exclaimed when she saw this.

"The cell ship has been destroyed." Tan replied.

"That much is obvious commander but we still have two officers missing out there." Ash said.

## 7.

Etchemin slid over as far as he could on the flight couch before he activated the cell ship's transporter and Estevez materialised beside him.

"Are you okay?" he asked as she was removing her helmet.

"Starting to share your opinion of these suits I think." she replied, "Not knowing whether I was ever going to see the inside of a ship again was somewhat disconcerting. Even if the ship is barely larger than a goldfish bowl." she added and she looked around the interior of the cell ship, "So now what?"

"I've got the Klingon probe on our sensors and we have a tractor beam." Etchemin said.

"Are you thinking of towing it all the way back to the *Ascension*?"

"Why not? It's what we came here for after all." Etchemin said, "In the meantime I think you should contact the *Ascension* and let them know that we're okay and will be coming back in an alien ship. I'd hate to be shot down by mistake."

While Etchemin was manoeuvring the cell ship closer to the Klingon probe Estevez quickly located its communication system and adjusted it to transmit on a standard Starfleet frequency before she activated it.

"Estevez to *Ascension* do you read me?" she said.

"Ensign I can't tell you what a relief it is to hear from you. Are you okay and is Lieutenant Etchemin there as well? We saw you come under fire from a pair of Suliban cell ships and when the *Faraday* was destroyed we feared the worst." Ash's voice responded after a brief pause.

"Yes captain he's right here and we're both fine." Estevez told him, "We were able to abandon the *Faraday* before it blew up and Etchemin made it to one of the cell ships."

"And took out the other I see." Ash said.

"Yes captain. The lieutenant has located the probe and intends to use the cell ship's tractor beam to tow it back to the *Ascension*."

"Understood ensign, we'll leave the door open for you. *Ascension* out." Ash told her and then the channel was shut off.

"Looks like we're good to go." Estevez said, looking at Etchemin.

"Okay here we go." he replied as he locked the tractor beam onto the Klingon probe where it lurked within the debris field, "Engaging tractor beam now."

Despite the cover offered by the debris field Etchemin was able to clamp the tractor beam onto the Klingon probe with his first attempt and he began to back the cell ship away, dragging the now captive probe towards free space. Initially the probe attempted to maintain its position by firing its thrusters but the rate at which the cell ship was towing it depleted the fuel that remained.

"Okay its engines just shut down." Etchemin said, "Hopefully that's the extent of its countermeasures."

"Do you think it's rigged to explode like Chief Duke said?" Estevez asked.

"Maybe. If it does then I expect it will have gone off before we get back anyway. Hopefully we'll be outside of the blast radius if it does." Etchemin answered.

"How long until we get back anyway? It's not that I object with sitting right next to you but this thing is pretty cramped compared to our shuttle." Estevez said.

"You'll be glad that this ship is also much faster than the shuttle then." Etchemin told her, "Even without being able to go to warp inside the system the impulse drive is much faster. I expect we'll be back within the hour."

"Captain the Suliban are calling." one of Gortoth's bridge officers told him.

"Put him through." the Klingon captain said and an image of a green skinned Suliban appeared on the bridge's main viewscreen, "I take it you are calling to tell me that the Starfleet shuttle crew is in the custody of your pilots and that they will be presented to me soon." Gortoth said to the Suliban, already aware from his own ship's sensors that one of the cell ships had been destroyed and the second had last been seen heading towards the two Federation starships with the probe in tow.

"No Gortoth." the Suliban responded after hesitating for a moment, "Unfortunately I have lost contact with both cell ships. We saw one destroyed on our sensors but-

"But it was shot down by the second cell ship and that vessel has since disappeared behind the star and is probably heading towards the Starfleet vessels." Gortoth interrupted.

"Yes Gortoth." the Suliban said, frowning.

"So what you are telling me is that your pilots were so incompetent that instead of securing us a source of intelligence on the enemy they have cost us not only a pair of attack vessels but also provided Starfleet with intelligence about us?" Gortoth said.

"Gortoth I-" the Suliban began.

"Be silent PetaQ! You are lucky I do not order the destruction of your entire vessel for this failure." Gortoth snapped and he pointed aggressively towards the viewscreen, "Mark my words Suliban, Admiral Korda will not be impressed by this failure. I recommend you and yours commit yourselves to finding a way to make up for it."

Gortoth then gestured for the channel to be closed and before the Suliban could respond he disappeared from the screen, replaced by a view of the space outside the raptor and the other raiding vessels in it.

"Captain." another of the bridge officers then said.

"Speak." Gortoth said, without looking at the man.

"Captain we have lost more than the Suliban's two cell ships. We are no longer receiving telemetry from the probe the admiral sent. Its last transmission indicated that it had been caught in a tractor beam. It seems likely that Starfleet has it now." he explained.

"I want a replacement found. We need to be able to monitor the Starfleet vessels until we are ready to strike." Gortoth replied, "That requires a means to see around the star."

"None of our ships have probes." the other Klingon officer pointed out.

"Then contact that Suliban fool and tell him that I have already found a way for him to try and atone for his failure. Have him send another cell ship to the debris field where the probe was positioned. It can monitor the Starfleet ships from there and relay its sensor data back to us." Gortoth ordered.

"Your captain is being too cautious." Keeler said to Korda in the privacy of the admiral's office, "He's got more than enough firepower to take down a Miranda-class heavy destroyer."

"Gortoth appears to think otherwise." Korda commented, barely bothering to look up at the human stood on the opposite side of his desk, "His plan to maximise his strength is sound."

"And unnecessary. What happened to that fabled Klingon honour and bravery I keep hearing about?" Keeler said dismissively but when he heard this Korda suddenly slammed his fists on his desk and leapt to his feet, staring Keeler straight in his eyes.

"Remember your place!" he yelled and Keeler jumped in surprise, "Gortoth has served me well in the past and his men respect him. Just because he is not here to justify himself does not mean that you can question his courage or his honour."

"I didn't mean to-" Keeler began.

"I don't care." Korda interrupted, "Remember this Keeler, you may be useful to me for now but don't think that I will stop any Klingon warrior from defending his honour if you chose to insult it. Now get out of my sight."

"Of course admiral." Keeler replied before he turned and left the room, trying not to make it look like he was eager to get away from the admiral.

Etchemin's estimate for how long the journey back to the Ascension would take was close to what it actually did, with the cell ship closing in on the destroyer's hangar a little under an hour later. Disengaging the cell ship's tractor beam, Etchemin let the probe drift before positioning the craft to dock.

"Cell ship you are cleared to land. Welcome back." the voice of a crewman from the Ascension said over the communication system when the cell ship was about a hundred metres away from the open hangar doorway.

"Understood Ascension, we're coming in now." Estevez responded and then Etchemin fired the cell ship's thrusters to take it into the hangar, "Does this thing have landing gear?" Estevez asked him before they reached the hangar and he checked the flight controls.

"It doesn't look like it to me. I think this thing just sets down on its base like a shuttle." he replied.

"Then just make sure you bring us in level, okay? I don't want to roll around the hangar like I'm inside a giant hamster ball." Estevez commented and Etchemin smiled.

"I'll try not to take that too personally." he said as he brought the cell ship to a halt, hovering above the deck for a few seconds. Although Starfleet shuttles also landed directly on their bases instead of relying on deployable landing gear they possessed a much larger landing area than the cell ship and it was unheard of for them to just topple over. On the other hand the cell ship's shape meant that if it was angled too far from the deck in any direction it could easily start to roll. After double checking the instruments to make sure that he had the cell ship level Etchemin decreased the power to its thrusters, lowering it to the deck before he shut them off entirely and hesitated.

"Don't get too smug Jack." Estevez said when the ship remained upright and she reached for the hatch controls, opening it up so that they could both exit the cell ship.

As soon as both Etchemin and Estevez had disembarked from the tiny craft they started to walk away carrying their helmets under their arms while a ground crew rushed towards it to make sure that it was properly secured and posed no threat to the *Ascension*.

"Try not to scratch the paintwork. It's brand new." Etchemin joked to one of the crewmen.

"Don't worry sir. We'll give it a wash and wax and put one of those little air fresheners shaped like a pine tree inside for you." the crewman replied before the doorway that the two officers were heading towards opened

and Chief Duke entered the hangar.

"Welcome back." he said, "I hear you ran into some trouble out there."

"You could say that." Estevez replied.

"At least we got the probe." Etchemin added, "It's drifting outside by the way."

Duke nodded.

"Yes, I've ordered a security team to go out with an engineer to take a look at it. Right now though I think the captain's more interested in your ride though. Being different to the ship you took out after all." he said and he looked towards the cell ship.

"Is he on the bridge?" Etchemin asked.

"No, his quarters." Duke told them.

"Thanks, just give us the chance to dump these life support packs and we'll head right there to see him." Etchemin replied.

"Come in." Ash said when the intercom to his quarters sounded and the door slid open to reveal Etchemin and Estevez. The two junior officers had removed the bulky life support packs from their suits but still wore the form fitting spacesuits themselves as they entered Ash's quarters and walked up to his desk, "Ah Etchemin, Estevez it's good to see you both back aboard safely. Please take a seat." Ash added, gesturing towards the two chair positioned on the other side of his desk and they both sat down, "So how about you give me a summary of what happened out there? We spotted the cell ships and watched from here but the details are somewhat lacking." Ash added.

"Yes captain. We didn't detect the Sulibans' approach and their initial attack took out our communications so we couldn't communicate with you directly." Estevez told him.

"So your attackers were Suliban?" Ash asked and Etchemin nodded.

"Yes captain. At least one was. After they disabled our shields one of them beamed aboard." he said.

"You were boarded?" Ash commented.

"Yes, I think they wanted to take us alive. The Suliban had his weapon set to stun captain. Given that they'd already used significant force to disable the *Faraday* I don't think that they were interested in the shuttle itself. That leaves only us." Etchemin said.

"That's worrying." Ash said, "Why would a pair of Suliban be interested in two Starfleet officers?"

"Unfortunately we didn't get the chance to ask before we blew him into space." Estevez said.

"The second pilot didn't give anything away when he tried to make contact with the first either." Etchemin added.

"So what we have is a pair of Suliban piloting short ranged craft who attempted to kidnap a pair of Starfleet officers. It seems like too much of a coincidence for them to have come here so shortly after a group of Nausicaans attacked the *Canis Major*." Ash said.

"Do you think they are working together captain?" Etchemin said.

"There haven't been any recent intelligence reports about alliances between Nausicaan and Suliban renegades." Estevez told him. Despite only being an ensign, her position as chief communications officer aboard the *Ascension* gave her a high level of security clearance and access to the majority of intelligence reports sent to the ship.

"That only means they haven't been caught yet." Ash commented, "Those two can't be working alone though and the identities of their co-conspirators are probably in that cell ship you commandeered." Ash then reached out and activated the intercom on his desk, "Ash to engineering." he said.

"Forrester here captain." Forrester responded.

"Commander where are you up to with fabricating the plasma injectors for the *Canis Major*?" Ash asked.

"The patterns have been loaded into the fabricators captain, the first unit is about half done." Forrester answered.

"Can your staff handle things for a while then?" Ash said.

"Of course captain. What do you need me to do instead?" Forrester replied.

"Etchemin and Estevez are back and the cell ship they captured is in the hangar. I need you to pull its logs and find out what brought the Suliban here and if there are any more of them or if they're working for someone else." Ash told him.

"Yes captain, I'll get right on it." Forrester said.

"Thank you commander. Let me know as soon as you have anything. Ash out." Ash responded before he deactivated the intercom and turned back to Etchemin and Estevez, "Okay you two that's all for now. You've obviously been on duty for quite a while so you can take some time to change and rest before reporting for duty again."

"Yes captain." Estevez said and both she and Etchemin got up to leave.

### 8.

Accompanied by two more of his engineers, Forrester went to the *Ascension's* hangar where the ground crew had already given the Suliban cell ship a brief inspection. Being a design that was a century old there was nothing new in its technology that would interest Starfleet so as soon as it had been determined to be safe it had simply been put to one side where it could be kept until being turned over to Starfleet for disposal. "Okay this is our task for today." Forrester told the engineers, "This ship may not be much to look at and its technology is primitive compared to what you're used to but inside this thing's memory banks could be information useful to us. So here's what we're going to do, we're going to dismantle the sensors and communication so we can pull the data logs from them both as well as the black box flight recorder. Between all that we should be able to find out where this ship came from, who operated it and whether the pilot had any friends who could be on their way to us right now. So are there any questions?" Forrester said and one of the engineers raised his hand.

"So what are we doing after dinner commander?" he said with a grin.

The massive D'Kyr-class combat cruiser that dropped out of warp represented the most powerful vessel in Gortoth's growing fleet but like so many of the vessels available to him, the antiquated technology of this ship rendered it less effective one-on-one against either of the Starfleet vessels in the system. This particular craft had been decommissioned and seized by a group of Vulcan renegades during the massive overhaul of the Vulcan High Command in the previous century just as the species that would later go on to form the United Federation of Planets had begun their co-operation with one another. Since then a lack of replacement parts and trained crew had reduced its effectiveness even further and only the recent support from Admiral Korda had enabled the crew to keep their vessel operating at all. However, it was still a warship and Gortoth could make use of it.

"The Vulcans are here captain." Gortoth's communications officer said.

"I can see that for myself." Gortoth responded, snarling as he spoke.

"Their captain wishes to talk to you." the communications officer added.

"Put him through." Gortoth said and the image of a Vulcan appeared on the main viewscreen. Although Vulcans were far more long lived than many other humanoid species the Vulcan captain as well as the other bridge crew visible behind him had grey hair and other signs of ageing that showed them to be the original renegades who had stolen the ship.

"Gortoth I am Stracus. My crew and I stand ready to support you." the Vulcan said and Gortoth smiled.

"Piracy is an interesting path for a Vulcan." he replied.

"Strength of purpose is essential for any species to prosper. It is illogical to ally and take direction from a weaker one as my government has done with humans. The Klingon Empire may not be perfect but your people are at least strong. Allying with your admiral is the logical path." Stracus said.

"What is your tactical status?" Gortoth asked.

"Our deflector shields are not functioning and we have only four operational particle cannons. Our torpedo launchers are functional but we have no ammunition for them." the Vulcan answered.

Gortoth knew that even fully functional the weapons and shields of a D'Kyr-class cruiser could not match those of a modern Miranda-class heavy destroyer but he had been hoping for something other than a ship that was little more than a giant target. With no deflector shields and only four low powered weapons the ship was of less use than any of the newer armed freighters. However, the cruiser's torpedo launchers offered a possibility.

"I will have the other ships in the fleet transfer their torpedoes to your vessel. When we launch our attack your role will be to provide fire support, is that understood?" he told the Vulcan.

"It is. I shall instruct my crew to prepare to receive the weapons." Stracus replied before Gortoth shut off the channel and glanced towards his navigator, "When will the rest of our ships arrive?" he asked.

"Between four and nine hours captain. The next will be another D-five transport, followed by two other armed freighters, a scoutship and a pair of Orion interceptors." the other Klingon said.

Gortoth's fleet already included one D-5-class vessel and although the freighter version lacked the firepower of the original light cruiser they were at least durable and would make good assault ships. He also knew that had either of the D-5s that would be in his force been fully armed then Admiral Korda would have given command of this fleet to the captain of that ship instead of Gortoth.

"And what about the Starfleet ships? Are the Suliban in position to tell us what they are doing yet?" Gortoth asked.

"Yes captain, we are receiving sensor data from the Suliban craft. The Starfleet vessels have not changed their position. The captured Suliban craft cannot be detected so it is likely aboard one of the Starfleet

vessels.” one of his bridge officers replied, “There is no indication that the prototype ship has made any significant progress in repairing its warp drive, the ship does not have an active warp field.”  
“Then they are not leaving any time soon. We can afford to wait until we have the greatest force possible.” Gortoth said.

Just as Gortoth’s navigator had said, the next outlaw vessel to approach the Veruvus system was a Klingon D-5 class ship that had been converted from the original light cruiser configuration to an armed transport. However, rather than following the approach route designed to hide the growing fleet from being detected by the two Starfleet vessels in the system it continued on a path that would take it around the star towards them even after dropping out of warp.

“Hail that ship. Order the captain to halt immediately.” Gortoth ordered.

“Yes captain.” his communications officer responded and he relayed Gortoth’s instruction to the D-5 before turning back towards Gortoth, “Captain, the D-five does not respond.”

“Put it on screen. They will respond to me.” Gortoth said.

It took just a few seconds for the communications officer to establish a link to the approaching D-5 and an image of its bridge appeared on the main viewscreen of the raptor’s bridge. However, rather than the Klingon crew Gortoth had been expecting to see he saw a command crew comprised entirely of large feline humanoids.

“Kzinti!” Gortoth hissed.

The Kzinti were a predatory species that occupied a region of space that bordered both Federation and Klingon space. The species had fought several conflicts with humans and then later the Federation at the conclusion of which the Kzinti had been forbidden from operating a fleet apart from a handful of police vessels. Despite this there were many groups of them that existed as pirates that raided vulnerable ships and outposts across several sectors.

“I am Krayt-Captain. What do you want Klingon?” the Kzinti captain said in response.

“Turn your ship aside Kzin.” Gortoth told him, “If you continue on your current course the Starfleet vessels will detect you.”

“Sit and cower in the shadow of this star if you want Klingon but we Kzinti will not. We will face the prey head on and consume their flesh.” Krayt-Captain said before he reached out and shut off the communications system.

“Captain,” the Klingon navigator then said, “the Kzinti will leave the shadow of the star in ten seconds. The humans will detect them.”

“Do you want us to intercept them?” the Klingon weapons officer asked.

Gortoth was about to give the order for his fleet to attack when he suddenly reconsidered. The D-5 had a significant lead over Gortoth’s other ships and reaching it before it could round the star was unlikely. In addition even a successful interception would likely result in the loss of the D-5 as well as damage to other ships in the fleet.

“No.” he said, “Let them go. Let them die.”

“Captain there is a vessel approaching.” Tan announced when the D-5 showed up on his sensors.

“More Suliban?” Ash asked.

“I do not think so captain. Sensors indicate that it is a Klingon vessel. D-five class.” Tan said, “Analysis suggests that it has limited armament and only moderate shielding.”

“So it’s a transport ship. No match for us.” Teela said.

“Maybe but I’m not taking any chances. Sound red alert. Raise shields and power weapons. Crewman I need to speak with the *Canis Major*.” Ash said.

“Putting you through now captain.” the crewman at the communication station responded before an image of Hurst appeared on the main viewscreen.

“Commander Hurst our sensors have picked up a Klingon ship on approach. Have you seen it?” Ash asked.

“Yes captain, our sensors are excellent. We’ve raised our shields and we’re powering phasers.” Hurst answered.

“Have you run a detailed scan of the ship?” Ash said and Hurst hesitated.

“No captain, not yet.” he said.

“Well we have. It’s a freighter, not a cruiser. We’re going to try and warn them off but if it comes to having to fight it out we need to move together. Have a course ready at bearing three-zero mark one-five. At one half impulse. Keep the Ascension between you and the Klingon.” Ash said.

“Captain I have further information.” Tan added, “The environmental conditions and life signs I am reading from inside the approaching vessel do not match the usual profile of a Klingon vessel.”

“Do you have a match on record?” Ash said just as the turbolift door slid open and Etchemin and Estevez returned to the bridge, summoned by the red alert, “Take your stations.” Ash told them and both officers dashed to their regular stations, replacing the junior crewmembers who had been filling in for them.

"The conditions and life signs both match the warship we encountered in the Khasran system." Tan said.

"You mean the Kzinti?" Teela asked.

"Exactly." Tan said.

"Then I don't think that we're going to be negotiating our way out of this." Ash said.

"Not even by making them think that they're going to be beaten by a bunch of girls?" Teela commented, remembering how the crew had exploited the extreme sexism of the Kzinti.

"That just encouraged them to attack." Estevez pointed out.

"Ensign open hailing frequencies. See if you can get me a channel to them." Ash told her and she nodded.

"Opening hailing frequencies captain." she said and almost immediately the image on the main viewscreen split down the middle to leave Hurst on one side while the snarling face of a Kzin appeared on the other.

"Kzinti vessel this is the Federation starship *USS Ascension*. Your presence in this system is a violation of the Treaty of Sirius. You are ordered to-" Ash began.

"I will devour your flesh and suck the marrow from your broken bones monkey!" Krayt-Captain snapped before Ash could finish and then his image vanished, leaving only Hurst.

"Well that was rude." Ash commented, "Lieutenant Commander Hurst are you set?"

"Yes captain. We'll follow your lead. Three-zero mark one-five." Hurst responded.

"Very good commander. *Ascension* out." Ash replied before closing the channel. Then he looked at Etchemin, "Lieutenant lock weapons onto the Kzinti and prepare to fire." he ordered.



"First Gunner what is our status?" Krayt-Captain said, staring at the image of the two Starfleet vessels on the tactical display. Both vessels had begun to move at impulse power when the D-5 rounded the star and it was clear that they were moving to engage the Kzinti rather than attempting to flee.

"Weapons locked Krayt-Captain. We will be in optimum firing range in twenty seconds." the vessel's chief gunner said.

"The humans are also locking weapons Krayt-Captain." another Kzin announced as he studied the sensor emissions from the *Ascension* and *Canis Major*.

"How long until they can fire Science Officer?" Krayt-Captain asked.

"They are already close enough to fire their torpedoes Krayt-Captain." Science Officer told him.

"First Gunner fire disruptors now, don't wait for optimum range." Krayt-Captain ordered, not wanting to give the approaching Starfleet vessels the chance to fire first. He knew that at this range the chances of hitting the Starfleet vessels would be low and so much of the energy would have been dissipated that the remainder would be unlikely to penetrate their shields. However, the simple act of firing could disrupt any counter attack from the Federation vessels until the Kzinti could get close enough to launch a more effective attack.

"Firing!" First-Gunner exclaimed and streams bright green energy blasts erupted from the disruptors that had been left fitted to the D-5 even after it had been decommissioned as a front line warship.

As was to be expected most of the energy blasts from the Kzinti vessel passed only through empty space but several struck the shields of the *Ascension*, causing the ship to rock.

"Damage report!" Ash exclaimed.

"Shields holding at ninety-six percent captain. No damage to the ship." Tan replied.

"No casualties reported either captain." Estevez added.

"As expected captain, the enemy disruptor power is only moderate." Tan said.

"Mister Etchemin let's show them some real firepower. Fire at your discretion." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain. Firing photon torpedoes." Etchemin responded as he reached out to launch a torpedo from one of the *Ascension's* forward launchers in the roll bar mounted weapons pod.

The missile weapon burst from the launcher and immediately angled towards the rapidly closing Kzinti vessel. Evading the continuing streams of disruptor fire, the torpedo struck the D-5 head on but off centre and impacted on one of the wing assemblies. With its shields as outdated as its weapons, the D-5's defences were unable to absorb the force of the impact and the subsequent anti-matter explosion that proceeded to rip open the wing assembly. The damage this inflicted on the warp nacelle mounted on the wing tip caused it to erupt in flames as the plasma held within it was ejected before this fire flickered and died to leave the nacelle in darkness.

Despite the severity of the damage inflicted by the torpedo strike the combat effectiveness of the Kzinti operated D-5 remained largely unaffected. None of the systems currently being used by the Kzinti needed to draw power from the single remaining warp nacelle and given that the battle was taking place within a solar system all of the combatants were manoeuvring on impulse power alone. This meant that the loss of the nacelle would only become significant if the Kzinti attempted to flee at warp and retreating was something that the Kzinti rarely did even when facing overwhelming odds. This had contributed to their losses in the successive conflicts they had fought against humans and other species when they attacked without adequate preparation and then compounded their losses by refusing to retreat and save ships that need not have been lost.

On the other hand the Kzinti were familiar with the idea of evasive action and under Krayt-Captain's orders the Kzinti helmsman turned sharply away from the *Ascension* before another photon torpedo could be launched. The stress of this sudden tight turn proved to be too much for the damaged wing assembly though and it was torn free of the starship so that while the D-5 turned the damaged nacelle continued along its original trajectory directly towards the *Ascension*.

"Helm take evasive action." Ash said when he saw the tumbling wreckage heading straight at the ship.

"Yes captain. Everyone hang on." Teela replied before she too performed a sharp impulse turn and the lag in the *Ascension's* inertial dampening system forced the crew to steady themselves.

The *Canis Major* matched the *Ascension's* turn and this caused the tumbling debris to pass by the ships without striking either of them. However, in matching the turn precisely instead of modifying it to take into account the new heading of the D-5 suddenly left the Constellation-class cruiser in the Kzinti's line of fire and the feline alien gunner was quick to take advantage of this by firing another volley of disruptor blasts at the already damaged starship. The combination of firing from a much narrower distance and the weakened shields of the *Canis Major* meant that the disruptor blasts were able to penetrate the cruiser's shields and they struck the vessel's saucer section.

"Captain I have Lieutenant Commander Hurst for you." Estevez announced.

"Put him through. Audio only though, we need the main view screen." Ash told her and she nodded.

"Ascension this is the *Canis Major*, our primary hull is hit." Hurst's voice said.

"How badly are you damaged?" Ash asked.

"The hit was on an already damaged section. Some of the hull breaches that were patched have been blown open again. Fortunately we didn't have anyone in that section and we have no casualties. The big problem is that the couplings for one of our phaser banks was hit, the bank has been destroyed and we've got coolant leaking out. I'm going to have to take the entire phaser system off line until the leak can be plugged." Hurst told him.

Phaser coolant was highly toxic and Ash knew that repairing the leak was essential to protect the crew of the *Canis Major*. Luckily his plan for defeating the Kzinti did not rely on the limited firepower of the cruiser so this did not pose a problem to him.

"Just get back out of the line of fire Hurst. We'll cover you." he said before he looked at Etchemin and added, "Lieutenant, fire phasers."

Nodding, Etchemin fired one of the phaser emitters mounted on the *Ascension's* roll bar and maintained the stream of energy blasts as it impacted on the D-5's lateral shields and let the impacts sweep along much of the length of the ship. Once again the D-5's shields were inadequate to protect the ship and the phaser blasts were able to penetrate them very rapidly to strike the ship beneath. In turn this produced a string of explosions as the hull was breached in numerous locations.

Krayt-Captain roared as he felt his ship shake.

"Damage amidships Krayt-Captain." Science Officer reported, "Shields at twenty-percent."

"Are any critical systems affected?" Krayt-Captain asked.

"No Krayt-Captain." Science Officer answered, "All hull breaches are in the cargo holds. We have lost provisions and a small number of low ranked warriors only."

"Operations Manager send repair teams to seal those breaches." Krayt-Captain ordered, "Helmsman keep after the humans. First Gunner maintain fire, the destroyer is the only one shooting at us so concentrate on that."

The Kzinti fired their disruptors at the *Ascension* again and this time they hit the shields on the upper surface of the heavy destroyer, not far from the phaser emitter that Etchemin had just fired. The force of the hit was just enough to weaken the *Ascension's* dorsal shields and when First Gunner followed it up with a second volley soon after the first he struck the weapons pod mounted at the centre of the roll bar.

"Captain we've lost photon torpedoes." Etchemin exclaimed.

"How bad is it?" Ash asked.

"It's the charging mechanism captain." Etchemin said as he checked his console readouts, "We can't transfer antimatter into any of the torpedoes."

"So we'd be shooting blanks?" Teela commented and Etchemin nodded. As a safety precaution the antimatter used in the warheads of the *Ascension's* photon torpedoes was not stored inside the torpedoes themselves. Instead it was only loaded when the weapon itself was moved into the launcher. The process took only a few seconds but it still limited the rate of fire that could be achieved. With the mechanism to load the antimatter out of commission though, any torpedoes launched would be without any of the antimatter needed for their warheads.

"Lieutenant Commander Forrester can deal with that. What about phasers?" Ash said.

"Still fully operational captain. The first hit was close to one of the emitters but it didn't get through our shields." Etchemin said.

"Then continued firing lieutenant. I want those Kzinti out of my sky. If they won't leave then that's their problem, not ours." Ash told him, "Lieutenant Commander Teela bring us around."

Teela turned the *Ascension* to face the D-5 head on and the helmsman of the *Canis Major* matched this manoeuvre, placing the Constellation-class cruiser behind the destroyer to keep it out of the Kzinti's line of fire. From this angle the D-5 lay within the firing arc of not only the *Ascension's* main forward firing phaser banks but also the two phaser emitters mounted on the roll bar. Etchemin quickly linked all of these weapons together so that they would fire in unison before taking aim and locking them onto the D-5.

"Firing phasers." he announced the moment his console told him that a lock had been established.

The barrage of phaser fire hit the forward section of the D-5 and there was a large explosion as the nose of the ship was torn open. Had this been one of the light cruiser variants of the D-5 it would have destroyed the main forward torpedo launcher but the transport variant lacked this weapon system and only a secondary cargo loading bay was destroyed.

"Hull breach in the prow Krayt-Captain." Science Officer called out as alarms sounded around the D-5's bridge. This was located just a few metres from the location of the latest phaser hit and chain reactions of

system failures produced several small secondary explosions that were heard there. In addition to this there was a sudden flash and a loud 'bang' before Krayt-Captain could respond as a plasma conduit exploded beneath a nearby console and one of the junior bridge crew shrieked in pain as his fur caught fire.

"Get him to Surgeon!" Krayt-Captain snapped as one of the burned crewman's comrades quickly put out the fire with a portable extinguisher and then turned to Science Officer, "Science Officer, report." he added.

"Damage to main and auxiliary command and control systems. Main computer core memory damage is reducing our processing speed. If we try to use too many of our systems at once then the entire system could crash." Science Officer told him.

"What about weapons and shields?" Krayt-Captain asked.

"We can use both but shield recharge rates may be limited, especially while we are firing." Science Officer replied and Krayt-Captain snarled.

"Helmsman keep the Starfleet destroyer in our forward arc and First Gunner keep firing. Don't give them the chance to return fire." he ordered.

Both the Kzinti bridge officers addressed did as they were told. Failure to carry out the order of a superior officer, especially one who had earned himself even a partial name as Krayt-Captain had done was an easy route to summary execution aboard a Kzinti warship so the two officers did not hesitate and the D-5 continued to head towards the *Ascension* with its disruptors firing continuously.

"Shields weakening captain. Down to seventy percent." Tan reported as the *Ascension's* forward shields were repeatedly struck by disruptor fire from the D-5.

"Estevez tell the *Canis Major* to break off at full impulse, tell them we'll cover them. Teela bring our nose down by three degrees and take us under the Kzinti. Etchemin stand by to fire on my mark." Ash ordered. The D-5 continued straight on as the *Ascension* adjusted its heading. The change was not enough to take the Starfleet vessel out of the D-5's forward firing arc so the Kzinti helmsman held his course steady while First Gunner continued to bombard the *Ascension* with their disruptors.

"Shields now down to fifty percent captain. We should expect localised failures to occur." Tan said.

"Fire now captain?" Etchemin suggested but Ash shook his head.

"Just a few seconds more lieutenant. Helm give her all she's got." he said.

"Aye captain, going to full impulse." Teela responded and the *Ascension* suddenly accelerated, taking the ship beneath the D-5 before its helmsman could adjust its course and speed to counter the manoeuvre.

"Now Mister Etchemin! Fire phasers!" Ash yelled and Etchemin immediately fired the *Ascension's* dorsally mounted weapons.

The *Ascension* was so close to the D-5 that all of the phasers mounted on the upper surface of its saucer section as well as those in the roll bar were able to fire on it. Maintaining the fire from the phasers as the *Ascension* passed under the full length of the D-5, impacting along it all and triggering a series of explosions. With the ventral side of the armed transport already damaged and large sections exposed to space, the phaser attacks were able to penetrate deeply without needing to be held on target and as the *Ascension* reached the engineering section at the back of the D-5 the neck assembly that connected this to the control module at the front exploded about half way along and broke the ship in two.

"Teela get us away from that ship." Ash said, knowing what to expect next.

"Already gone captain." Teela replied as she kept the destroyer's speed up to put as much distance as possible between it and the two tumbling halves of the ruined D-5.

It took less than a minute for the magnetic containment field around the D-5's warp core to collapse and the entire engineering section was consumed in a massive explosion. The blast of this also consumed the severed command module as it drifted helplessly through space nearby, with no means to get to a safe distance first. On the other hand both the *Ascension* and *Canis Major* were far enough away to be outside the blast radius and neither Federation starship was harmed.

"Ensign hail the *Canis Major*. Check on their status." Ash said and Estevez nodded.

"*Canis Major* this is *Ascension*. What is your status?" she said into the communication system.

"*Ascension* we still have no weapons but we are intact and have no casualties to report." the voice of the *Canis Major's* communications officer responded and Ash breathed a sigh of relief before activating the intercom.

"Ash to engineering." he said.

"We're all a little busy down here right now captain." Forrester responded, "Can you try turning it off and back on?"

"I think the damage to the photon torpedo system may require a little more than a reboot lieutenant commander." Ash said, "I need a full report on how long repairs to our systems will take."

"Of course captain. What about the examination of the cell ship in the hangar?" Forrester asked.

"I'll want you to return to that as soon as I have your report on repairs but make sure you only use the crew you need to get that done. We need to be in full working order as soon as possible." Ash answered.

"And repairs to the *Canis Major*? We're probably going to need to fabricate new parts and that means

interrupting doing the plasma injectors for them." Forrester pointed out.

"Prioritise us. Including the Nausicaans this was the third lot of raiders in this system and I get the feeling that we're going to see even more of them." Ash replied. Then he looked at Estevez and added, "Ensign has there been any more word from the *Gatchaman* and *Taipei* about when we can expect them?"

"Not for another nineteen hours at least captain." she replied.

"Then if there are any more raiders on the way we had better hope that they take their time getting here." Teela commented.

"A fool's death." Gortoth said when he saw the D-5's destruction on the main viewscreen, the footage relayed by the Suliban cell ship lurking within the same debris field that the probe had been hidden in, "At least we have not lost a competent captain."

"Captain there is something in the footage that I think you should see." one of Gortoth's bridge officers said as he studied the information sent by the cell ship.

"What is it?" Gortoth asked.

"The Starfleet vessel began by firing a photon torpedo at the Kzinti but after that it only used phasers, no more torpedoes were fired." the Klingon officer said, "Given the footage at this point, I believe that this was due to more than a tactical decision by their captain." and he brought up a brief clip of the combat footage taken at the time that the *Ascension's* roll bar mounted weapons pod was hit.

"So their torpedo launchers were hit." Gortoth said with a smile, "It's not that they didn't want to use a weapon that would crack the Kzinti ship like an egg, they couldn't."

"And likely still can't." the Klingon officer said.

"If the Starfleet vessels are helpless we should strike now." another Klingon commented.

Gortoth could respect this position, attacking the two Starfleet vessels while they were weakened made a great deal of sense. However, the advantage offered by the reinforcements that would join his existing force was greater than attacking while the *Ascension* was unable to fire photon torpedoes.

"No, we will stick with the existing plan. Tell the Suliban to watch for any signs that the Starfleet destroyer has repaired its weapons but I want the maximum possible strength before we attack. If luck is with us then the Starfleet destroyer will not be able to repair its torpedo launchers by the time they arrive." Gortoth said.

"Perhaps that Kzin captain was not such a fool after all." one of the Klingons commented.

"No." Gortoth replied, "No matter what damage he inflicted he still lost his ship, his crew and his life. He was a fool."

## 10.

A small but noticeable energy spike in the *Ascension's* sensor logs caught Tan's attention as he was studying the data recorded during the battle with the Kzinti and he turned towards Ash.

"Captain I think there may be another Suliban cell ship in the system, possibly more." he said and Ash frowned.

"Where?" he asked.

"The debris field captain." Tan answered.

"You mean the one where Estevez and I recovered the probe?" Etchemin said.

"And were almost killed." Estevez added.

"Yes, the very same." Tan said.

"So you've picked up the cell ship?" Ash said.

"Not precisely captain. Although the cloaking device of a cell ship is not enough to fully block our current generation of sensors the combination of cloaking field and the debris to block and refract energy has been able to mask the ship so far." Tan said.

"So how do you know it's there commander?" Ash said.

"During the engagement with the Kzinti our sensors recorded a number of subspace energy spikes. These were too intermittent to be able to discern any pattern from them but they were definitely artificial in origin. Clearly the source can't have been there earlier or Etchemin and Estevez would have detected them, that only leaves the possibility of another cloaked vessel or a probe having taken up position there." Tan explained.

"You think that the emissions are signals from another cell ship?" Ash said and Tan smiled.

"That's the most likely explanation captain.." he said, "There could have been a third vessel with the two that attacked the Faraday or possibly it arrived later and hid itself in the debris field when it found that the first two ships had been destroyed."

"Obviously it's reporting back to someone." Ash said and Tan nodded again.

"Yes captain." he agreed.

"Company's coming." Teela said before the turbolift doors slid open and Forrester exited it.

Ash turned his chair when Forrester stepped from the turbolift onto the bridge.

"I take it you have news lieutenant commander." he commented and Forrester nodded.

"Yes captain. The arming system for the photon torpedoes isn't that badly damaged. Give my people about three hours and they'll have the launchers up and running again. We'll need to fabricate some new parts though which will mean slowing up repairs on the Canis Major." he said.

"Okay do it." Ash said, "I want all our tactical systems up and running as soon as possible. It's looking likely that there are more Suliban on the way."

"Yes captain. What about the cell ship in our hangar?" Forrester said.

"I want you and Commander Tan to focus on that personally. It may hold the intelligence we need to find out exactly what we're up against."

"Of course captain." Forrester said as Tan got up from the science station and walked to join him by the turbolift.

"Lead the way." he told the engineer.

The scoutship was a Rigellian vessel of a type that could be seen in many Federation ports. Although the reptilian Rigellians were a largely peaceful people they still saw the sense in protecting their ships with weapons and shields acquired from other Federation member species. Unfortunately the phasers and deflector shields they chose were both out of date, the Rigellians more interested in retreating than standing to fight. However, the ship was fast and nimble and Gortoth knew that even its weak tactical systems outclassed many of the other outdated vessels in his force. Of the crew he was not so sure though, clearly they were criminals and outcasts from their society but they were still from a species of pacifists and that made them unreliable in Gortoth's opinion.

"The Rigellians are requesting instructions captain." the Klingon communications officer said and Gortoth snorted.

"Tell them to position themselves a hundred kelicams to our port side. I want those lizards where I can keep an eye on them. Are the Orions still on schedule?" he said.

"Yes captain. They will be here on time." the communications officer replied.

"And then we attack?" the Raptor's gunner asked and Gortoth grinned.

"Yes, then we attack and we claim our prize." he said.

Tan stared at the cell ship as he and Forrester walked across the *Ascension's* hangar towards it. Every hatch and access panel had been opened and now numerous parts had been removed and lined up along the deck.

"I see you and your men have made a good start Adam." he said and Forrester nodded.

"This is all the easy stuff James." he replied, "Starfleet's had the design specifications for these ships since before the Federation was even founded. The only hitch is being able to put together a suitable interface to the data network so we can try to figure out all the access protocols. Etchemin and Estevez were lucky this thing was left active by its pilot or they'd never have been able to fly it back here."

"If only Starfleet thought it worth giving us those details as well." Tan commented.

"We're still some way off being able to put all the knowledge of the Federation into one computer, you ought to know that. For now we make do with what people who sit behind desks all their lives think is important." Forrester pointed out.

"Okay so where do you want to pick this up?" Tan asked as they reached the Suliban craft.

"I think right about here." Forrester answered, pointing to one of the open access panels, "This thing's main computer is right behind it."

Ash opened his tunic as soon as he entered his quarters and went to make himself a drink. He was tempted to get one of his supply of bottled beers from the fridge but given that he could be called back to duty at any moment he instead began to make himself a cup of coffee. He was part way through this when the intercom on his door sounded and he groaned.

"Come in." he called out and the door slid open to reveal Doctor Reese, "Deborah thank God it's you." he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Expecting someone else Mike?" Reese replied as she entered the room.

"The way things have been going I'm still expecting someone to come rushing in to tell me that the Klingons have launched an all out invasion of the Federation. I was just making a coffee. Do you want one?" Ash said.

"Mm, yes please Mike." Reese said, sitting down on a couch.

"So what brings you here?" Ash said, getting out a second mug and starting to prepare a drink for her.

"Me? Oh the Klingons invaded sickbay so I thought I ought to come and let you know." Reese said with a smile and Ash glared at her for a moment.

"Tell me doctor what are the effects on a highly stressed individual when he is mocked while making coffee?" he said.

"Does it involve spitting in a mug?" Reese said.

"In the absence of kangaroo urine to put in it, yes." Ash said.

"Then the reason I'm here is to show my support to my amazing boyfriend and my loyalty to one of the finest captains in Starfleet." Reese replied.

"One of?" Ash commented.

"Don't get too cocky Mike. When I was a junior lieutenant I once came away from a party with an invitation to tour the *Enterprise* from Jim Kirk himself." Reese said.

"Jim Kirk hey? Now there's a man who knows how to boldly go." Ash said, walking from the compact kitchen unit to the couch and handing Reese a mug of coffee as he sat down beside her, "So how's your day been?"

"Not bad actually. Adam Forrester's people are rushing around making repairs to everything that isn't nailed down so there have been the expected cuts, bruises and sprains that you'd expect but despite you taking us into battle twice and the *Canis Major* being shot up we've managed to escape a lot of serious injuries. A few broken bones and three people will need cosmetic treatment for the burns they've suffered but that's about it."

"Then I have you all to myself for a while." Ash said, lowering his mug and both he and Reese leaned closer to one another to kiss. However, before their lips could touch the intercom activated.

"Bridge to Captain Ash." Teela's voice said and Ash groaned as he and Reese both sat up straight. Then Ash reached out to activate the nearby intercom unit.

"Ash here Teela." he said into it.

"Captain I hope I'm not disturbing you but I've got Lieutenant Commander Hurst calling from the *Canis Major*." Teela said.

"What does he want commander?" Ash asked.

"He's complaining about the delay to the fabrication of the parts needed to repair his ship." Teela said. Ash sighed.

"Put him through to me Teela." he said.

"Yes sir." Teela said and then a few moments later Hurst's voice spoke.

"Captain Ash what's this I'm being told about the parts needed for repairs to the *Canis Major* being delayed because you've ordered your fabricators be used for other purposes?" he said and Ash took a deep breath.

"Lieutenant Commander Hurst," he began, "you may or may not be aware that the *Ascension* was damaged during the recent engagement with the Kzinti operated D-five. That damage included prevents us from firing

any of the photon torpedoes we are carrying. Now since recent events suggest that more hostile spacecraft may be on their way I have decided that it is prudent to make sure that this ship's tactical systems are in full working order and since I both command the *Ascension* and outrank you it is my decision to make. Is that clear Lieutenant Commander Hurst?"

"Captain Ash I-

"I said is that clear lieutenant commander?" Ash interrupted.

"Of course captain but-

"Good. If you want updates on the schedule for fabricating your parts I suggest you contact my engineering department but they will not be changing their priorities. *Ascension* out." Ash said before Hurst could finish and he quickly shut off the intercom before the other man could respond. Then he looked at Reese and smiled, "What do you think? Too harsh?"

"Maybe just a little. Think angry kangaroo instead of full on Tasmanian devil Mike." she replied.

"Full on Tasmanian devil? So is that better or worse than a wombat stampede?" Ash said and Reese grab a cushion that she then hit him with, "Hey careful of my coffee." Ash protested before the intercom sounded again.

"What does that jumped up little drongo want now?" Reese said just as Ash was reaching for the intercom.

"Who's an idiot?" Forrester's voice said, the intercom having been activated just in time for him to hear the insult.

"Not you commander." Ash said, "I take it you have more news for me?"

"Yes captain. Commander Tan and I have found something. We think that you should come down to the hangar and take a look at it as soon as possible. It's important." Forrester said.

"Okay I'm on my way." Ash said.

"He means we're on our way." Reese added before Ash could turn off the intercom and then she reached out to turn it off herself, "What?" she said when she noticed him looking at her, "Anything urgent could turn into a medical emergency so I may as well hear about it sooner rather than later."

When Ash and Reese reached the hangar they found both Tan and Forrester standing in front of a portable computer terminal that had been connected to the Suliban cell ship via a long, trailing cable.

"You aren't using our main computer?" Reese commented when she saw the smaller computer.

"We didn't want to take the chance on their being any aggressive cyber security measures in the cell ship's computer doctor." Tan replied.

"Good thinking commander. The last thing we need is to be dealing with malicious code running rampant in our system." Ash said, "Now how about you tell me what's so important that you had to interrupt a very important meeting between this ship's captain and the chief medical officer?"

"We've managed to gain access to the cell ship's sensor logs captain." Forrester said, "I think you should see what they show."

"Do they show the mother ship that it came from?" Ash asked as he and Reese walked around the computer to see the display.

"Yes captain and much more besides." Tan said.

"What the hell?" Ash said when he saw the group of sensor contacts shown on the display.

"Are those all ships? How long until they get here?" Reese added.

"Yes doctor, each of those contacts is a ship and technically they are already here." Tan told her.

"They're hiding behind Veruvus itself." Forrester added.

"The far side of the sun. An old trick but a workable one." Ash commented.

"That's just the overview captain." Tan said, "The cell ship recorded far more detailed data on each of them when it was launched."

"So what are we looking at?" Ash asked.

"The usual mix of armed freighters and out of date warships captain. There is a modern Rigellian scout among them as well though." Tan answered.

"The cell ship looks to have been launched by one of the freighters and when it was close enough it picked up more detail about the ships. As far as we can tell they've got a lot of weapons there. Nothing too powerful on its own but working in concert they could easily overwhelm us." Forrester added.

"So what are they waiting for?" Reese said, "Why only send one ship against us when they had all that?"

"We think that the Kzinti may have attacked of their own accord doctor." Tan said, "It appears that the ships behind the star may be waiting for further reinforcements. The cell ship's long ranged sensors detected a pair of Orion interceptors closing on a vector that is hidden by the star."

"That must be how all these ships got there without us noticing." Ash said and Tan nodded in agreement.

"That does seem likely captain." he said, "The arrival of the two interceptors will bring the total number of ships to nineteen, plus any further cell ships that the Suliban transport may be carrying."

"I don't like this." Ash said, pointing at the display.

"Neither do I. That's a lot of ships." Reese said.

"No I mean look at the types of ship we're seeing here. Klingon, Orion, Federation, Suliban. This doesn't make any sense. No way would all of these pirates work together unless they were all being told to by a larger backer." Ash said.

"But what would they want?" Reese said, "To destroy a couple of starships? The *Canis Major* hasn't even been fully commissioned yet."

"I think that the *Canis Major* is what they're after." Ash said, "Capturing it would be a major achievement for the Klingon Empire."

"You think the Klingon Empire is responsible for this?" Reese said.

"Someone doesn't seem happy about the peace negotiations between us." Ash replied.

"Perhaps the same individuals who were behind the raid on the *Delta Fourteen* outpost?" Forrester suggested and Ash nodded.

"They made it look like a renegade ship." he pointed out, "They must want the *Canis Major* and I intend to make sure they don't get their hands on it."

"Captain the Orion ships will be here well before our reinforcements can arrive." Tan said, "If this pirate fleet attacks as soon as they are at full strength we won't have the firepower to take them all on at once."

"We don't have to destroy all of the pirate ships commander." Ash said, "The only ship I have to destroy is the *Canis Major*."

## 11.

"Are you sure there's no other way captain?" Hurst said when Ash delivered the news to him.

"None." Ash responded, shaking his head, "There are just too many ships out there. If we were dealing with independent raiders armed with nothing more than lasers or pulse cannons then we could fight off an entire armada of them but these ships are too well armed and there are too many of them. Coming at us in concert they'll overwhelm us. We have to withdraw and since the *Canis Major* can't go to warp we have to scuttle the ship before it falls into the hands of the Klingons."

"Captain it's not that I want the ship to be taken by the Klingons but I'm responsible for it, even if I'm not technically her captain." Hurst said.

"I understand that commander but it's the only way and we may not have much time. Those raiders could chose to attack at any moment. Order your crew to evacuate to the *Ascension* and then you need to set the self destruct." ash told him.

"Ah." Hurst responded and Ash sighed.

"Let me guess, you can't set the ship to self destruct." he said.

"No captain. The mechanisms used to co-ordinate the timed destruction of the ship by overloading the warp and impulse drives together aren't due to be installed until-" Hurst began.

"Wednesday?" Ash interrupted and Hurst nodded.

"Yes captain, I'm sorry." he said.

"In that case we're going to have to improvise. How long will it take to rig up a release for your antimatter fuel tanks that we can trigger from the *Ascension*?" Ash asked.

"I don't know. None of my people have ever had to make anything like that." Hurst replied and Ash took out his communicator, "Ash to *Ascension*." he said into the device after flipping it open.

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

"Ensign I need to speak to Commander Forrester." Ash told her.

"Yes captain, putting you through now." Estevez said before Forrester's voice spoke.

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

"Commander I'm not about to ask you to fix something. I want something breaking. Permanently." Ash told him.

"You mean the *Canis Major* captain?" Forrester asked.

"Yes I do. Lieutenant Commander Hurst has told me that the ship won't have the self destruct mechanism installed until-"

"Wednesday captain?"

"Yes, Wednesday. I need you to give us an alternative." Ash said.

"Should be easy enough. I've studied the layout of their power system so cutting it to the magnetic containment bottles should be easy, the same goes for the impulse reactors. With chief Duke's help we should be able to rig some spatial charges that will blow in unison, release the antimatter and ignite the fuel for the impulse reactors. I take it that you'd rather be able to trigger it from aboard the *Ascension*?" Forrester said.

"Yes commander. Being able to avoid being blown up along with the *Canis Major* would be preferable." Ash replied.

"Understood captain, I'll get working on it right away. I should have something for you within the hour." Forrester said.

"Very good commander. Ash out." Ash said before he closed the communicator and returned it to his belt.

The turning to look at Hurst again he added, "There you go commander. Now all you have to do is organise your evacuation."

The spatial charge was small enough to fit in the palm of Duke's hand but correctly placed it was enough to destroy the *Canis Major* outright. The *Ascension*'s chief of security pressed the explosive against the power coupling that supplied power to the containment field generator that was used to create the magnetic field in which the *Canis major*'s supply of antimatter fuel was stored. As a safety precaution the field generator could draw power from more than one source to prevent damage or a malfunction in one resulting in the sudden destruction of the ship but all these various sources fed into the generator through this coupling, making it the most vulnerable point in the system.

Pressing a button on the side of the charge activated its magnatomic base and sealed it to the side of the coupling and he looked up the shaft he was part way down.

"It's in place." he called out to the engineering crewman above him, "Send me the line."

"Line coming down now." the engineer responded and he began to feed a narrow fibre optic cable down the access shaft.

Duke watched the end of the cable get steadily closer until he was able to reach out and grab hold of it, pulling it towards him until he was able to plug it into the spatial charge.

"It's hooked up. Test the circuit." he called out.

"Testing." the engineer replied and moments later a small light appeared on the side of the spatial charge.

"Okay that's working." Duke said, satisfied that the detonation circuit was functional and he armed the explosive, "I'm on my way up." he added before starting to ascend the ladder built into the side of the shaft. When he reached the top the engineer gave him a hand out of the shaft and he saw that the other end of the cable was now connected to the *Canis Major's* intercom, "So that's it huh?" he commented and the engineer nodded.

"Yes chief." he said, "As soon as the coded signal comes in from the *Ascension* it will be relayed down here."

"And to all the other charges that are being set." Duke added as he looked around the compartment in the knowledge that all of it would shortly be destroyed, "At which point all this gets blown to the galactic barrier."

"Just as long as I'm not aboard when it happens." the engineer commented and Duke smiled as he took his communicator from his belt and flipped it open.

"Duke to Lieutenant Commander Forrester." he said into it.

"Forrester here Duke, go ahead chief." Forrester responded.

"Commander the charge to release the antimatter is set. That should trigger a bang big enough for the captain." Duke told him.

"Good. The team setting the charge by the impulse reactor's fusion fuel tank have also confirmed that they're done. I'm just making sure that everything is set with the communications array. As well as waiting for our trigger I'm adding a condition that will detonate the charges if we're out of contact for more than five minutes." Forrester said.

"Worried that we may not make it away commander?" Duke asked.

"With all those ships ready to head this way I'm taking no chances. If the *Ascension* is destroyed before we can trigger the charges then the *Canis Major* needs to be destroyed before the raiders can claim her." Forrester answered.

"Haver a little more optimism commander. I'm sure the captain's plan will work. Duke out." Duke said before he closed the communicator and looked at the engineer, "Okay we're obviously done here. Let's get over to the *Ascension*. I don't want to be on a doomed ship one minute longer than necessary." he added and the engineer smiled at him.

"Now who needs a little optimism chief?" he commented.

The last ships to arrive were a pair of Orion interceptors, fast and deadly raiding craft that were built in a number of shipyards hidden where forces such as Starfleet were unable to locate them.

"All ships reporting ready captain." one of Gortoth's bridge crew told him and the Klingon captain bared his teeth as he smiled.

"Signal all ships to begin. Fist wave to move at full impulse, second at one third." he said.

Splitting a force was often regarded as a poor strategy but in this case Gortoth felt it was the wisest solution to the problem of the wide variation in the speeds of his ships. The faster ships in Gortoth's force would form the assault group and speed towards the two Starfleet vessels at full impulse while the slower vessels would hold back and provide an escort to the Vulcan D'Kyr-class cruiser that was now laden with an assortment of spatial, plasma and photon torpedoes that would be fired in salvos to cover the assault group.

The crew of every ship in the renegade force knew which group they were to be a part of and they immediately began to move off in their two groups, making for the star's horizon that represented the point at which they would become visible to the two Starfleet vessels.

"Captain sensors are reading multiple contacts coming over the solar horizon." Tan announced when the *Ascension's* sensors detected Gortoth's first wave.

"All of them?" Ash asked.

"It doesn't appear so captain. Just over half of the total number." Tan answered.

"Then what are the others waiting for?" Etchemin said.

"That doesn't matter right now. Ensign Estevez is everyone aboard from the *Canis Major*?" Ash said.

"Not yet captain. There are still two teams left aboard." Estevez replied.

"Then tell them to get a move on. I want them back aboard in two minutes even if it means leaving some useable kit behind." Ash said, "Mister Etchemin lock weapons on the lead raiders. Let's make it look like we're going to make a fight of it."

"The Starfleet destroyer's sensor profile indicate that it is locking weapons captain." a Klingon bridge officer warned Gortoth.

"If they have torpedoes they will have to launch them at long range to try and thin out our numbers. As soon as the Vulcans are in position order them to fire a salvo first. Spatial torpedoes only." Gortoth ordered and the other Klingon frowned.

"Spatial torpedoes captain? They won't-" he began.

"I gave an order! Follow it!" Gortoth snapped, "I know spatial torpedoes won't penetrate the shields of a Starfleet destroyer. I just want to see how they react."

"Captain." the Klingon ship's gunner said and Gortoth looked at him.

"Speak." he said.

"Captain the Starfleet destroyer may be locking weapons but it has not yet raised its shields." the gunner said, his targeting display telling him that the target he was aiming the Raptor's disruptors at was unshielded.

"Did the Suliban scans observe any damage that could have affected their shields?" Gortoth said.

"No captain, only their weapons appeared to have been affected. Both Starfleet vessels were shielded when the Kzinti were destroyed." the Klingon navigator said.

"What about the primary target? What is the prototype ship doing?" Gortoth said.

"Nothing captain. Sensors indicate that it has power but it is not moving and has not raised shields or attempted to lock its weapons on us." the navigator told him.

"I do not like that. Monitor it carefully, the Starfleet crew may be planning something. I want to know immediately if it attempts to escape, begins targeting our fleet or raises shields." Gortoth ordered.

"Captain a second wave of vessels is coming over the solar horizon. This appears to be the remainder of their fleet." Tan said. Then he looked up from his console and added, "I am detecting weapon locks."

"Incoming." Etchemin added when he saw the launch signatures of torpedoes from the Vulcan combat cruiser.

"Analysis." Ash said.

"Sensors confirm a volley of four spatial torpedoes approaching captain. Wait, second volley launched." Tan said, "From their profile I would say that they are spatial torpedoes."

"They won't penetrate our shields." Teela said.

"Our shields are down." Etchemin pointed out.

"Ensign please tell me everyone is aboard." Ash said.

"Transporter room reports that the last team just beamed back aboard from the *Canis Major* captain." she replied and he smiled.

"Mister Etchemin raise our shields." he said and Etchemin nodded.

"Gladly captain." he responded as he quickly raised the *Ascension's* deflector shields before the first wave of incoming spatial torpedoes could hit the ship. This was accomplished with several seconds to spare before the four torpedoes struck the *Ascension's* shields in rapid succession and the ship shuddered.

"Shields holding captain." Tan said, "Second volley closing."

"Etchemin can you lock phasers on them?" Ash asked but before Etchemin could attempt to shoot down the incoming torpedoes they too hit the *Ascension*.

"Shields at ninety-six percent." Tan said when the ship shook again.

"Etchemin return fire, two rounds rapid at that Vulcan cruiser." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain. Firing torpedoes." Etchemin responded as he locked the *Ascension's* torpedo system onto the D'Kyr and fired a pair of photon torpedoes together from the ship's two forward launchers.

These sped towards the approaching renegade fleet and there were numerous flashes of energy weapon fire as the D'Kyr's escorts attempted to shoot them down. This was successful in one case and the torpedo exploded in a brilliant flash of antimatter annihilation but the other slammed into the Vulcan vessel's ring shaped warp drive and there was another large explosion as the cruiser's shields failed to stop the torpedo a section of the warp drive was destroyed. This had no immediate effect on the vessel though and it launched a third volley of spatial torpedoes despite their ineffectiveness so far.

"Photon torpedoes. Captain the enemy have repaired their weapon system." the Klingon navigator called out.

"I can see that for myself. All ships open fire now!" Gortoth exclaimed and moments later the entire first wave began to fire at the *Ascension*. With their torpedoes transferred to the D'Kyr-class cruiser they had only energy weapons and the space ahead of the renegade fleet was filled with the flashes of fire from these.

"Helm evasive action!" Ash snapped and Teela turned the *Ascension* sharply to try and avoid the incoming energy blasts. The sheer number of them meant that this could not be totally effective and several of the shots impacted on the destroyer's shields.

"Shields down to seventy percent captain. Torpedoes closing." Tan said.

"That's their plan, use their energy weapons to drain our shields before the torpedoes hit." Ash said,

"Lieutenant Etchemin, fire all phasers and shoot down those torpedoes."

Etchemin fired rapid bursts from the *Ascension's* phasers, switching between the saucer mounted banks and the roll bar mounted emitters as Teela continued to weave through space in an attempt to evade the incoming fire. Despite the difficulty this caused in aiming Etchemin was still able to shoot down the first two torpedoes while the third was unable to maintain its lock on the manoeuvring starship and flew past it, missing by several kilometres before the fourth and final torpedo hit the ship.

"Shields down to twenty percent captain." Tan warned Ash and he nodded.

"I think it's time we departed. Is our course set?" he said.

"Set and locked in captain. Just say the word and we can go to warp." Teela replied.

"Impulse power for now commander. Mister Etchemin fire aft torpedoes to give us some cover." Ash said.

Turning directly away from the renegade fleet, Teela took the *Ascension* to full impulse power and accelerated towards the outer system. At the same time Etchemin fired the destroyer's aft facing torpedo launchers and two more photon torpedoes sped towards the renegades, this time targeting ships among the first wave. Instead of locking the torpedoes onto a specific target Etchemin had fired them blindly, leaving their own onboard sensors to acquire a target and in this situation it worked to the *Ascension's* advantage.

None of the renegade force detected a lock on themselves so none took any evasive or defensive action until the two torpedoes acquired targets on their own and steered towards them. By this time it was too late for their crews to react and both torpedoes struck their targets, one hitting one of the Orion interceptors and the other the Rigellian scoutship. The Orion ship's shields were strong enough to absorb most of the damage but one of its wings was still shattered by the blast. On the other hand the scoutship's shields were out of date and underpowered and when the torpedo hit it punched right through before destroying the vessel in an instant. Despite the destruction of one ship and damage to another though the renegade fleet still vastly outnumbered the *Ascension* and she flew on regardless.

"Captain the primary target is now at fifteen thousand kelicams." the Klingon navigator told Gortoth.

"Are its shields raised?" the captain asked.

"No captain. Shields and weapons are inactive. Also there are no life readings aboard the vessel, it appears abandoned." the navigator answered.

Gortoth was immediately suspicious about this. The *Canis Major* was a prototype cruiser and simply abandoning it represented a major loss to Starfleet. He doubted that they would let it go so easily, even when faced with the overwhelming odds that they were.

"Run more scans, does it look like the self destruct system has been enabled?" he said.

"No captain. Scans suggest that the warp core is inactive. The ship is hibernating." the navigator told him and Gortoth then looked at his gunner.

"Take a pair of engineers and three other men over there. I want to know what Starfleet have done to that ship." he ordered.

## 12.

"Captain a Klingon Raptor-class scout has split off from the main force and is approaching the *Canis Major*. Current range eight thousand kilometres." Tan said as he watched the Raptor head towards the stranded cruiser on his sensor display.

"Now captain?" Estevez asked.

"Not yet ensign." Ash replied, "Commander Tan, how close will that Raptor have to be to the *Canis Major* to be destroyed in the blast with her?"

"With its shields raised as they are now the minimum safe distance for the Raptor will be three thousand kilometres. However, if they drop their shields then they are already too close captain." Tan answered.

"And they'll have to drop their shields to go aboard." Teela commented.

"Exactly lieutenant commander." Ash responded with a smile, "We've no choice but to destroy the *Canis Major* but taking one of those raiders with her will at least do something to even the score a little, even if a Raptor is hardly equal to a Constellation-class starship."

"Captain the Klingon vessel is slowing." Tan added and then he looked up, "They are lowering their shields."

"Now Ensign Estevez, send the signal." Ash said.

"Aye captain, sending coded signal now." Estevez replied.

Transmitted using the *Ascension's* subspace communication system, the coded signal reached the *Canis Major* almost instantly. Once received the cruiser's computer fed the code intended to trigger the spatial charges that had been set aboard the ship into the internal intercom and from there it was spread to all of the spatial charges in unison.

In an instant the spatial charges exploded. In the case of the charge placed by the fuel for the ship's impulse reactor this tore open the tanks and ignited the hydrogen within. In turn this created a fireball that began to spread through the ship. However, the expansion of this was cut short by the effect of the charge placed by the power coupling for the antimatter containment field. As soon as this exploded the coupling was destroyed and the magnetic field that prevented the *Canis Major's* stored antimatter fuel from interacting with the structure of the vessel collapsed almost immediately. The result of this was instant matter-antimatter annihilation and the release of such a massive amount of energy that the entire ship was consumed in a brief but brilliant flare of light. The energy of this blast was not confined to the *Canis Major* though and it spread out into space as far as Gortoth's Raptor. At a range of only a few thousand kilometres the Klingon command crew barely had time even to register what was happening before their ship was also destroyed, consumed in the same brilliant light as the *Canis Major*.

"Detonation confirmed captain." Tan announced and Ash looked at him.

"You don't say." he said.

"Sensors confirm the total destruction of both the *Canis Major* and the Klingon vessel captain." Tan said.

"And the other renegade ships?" Ash asked.

"Still closing captain." Tan answered.

"Captain I'm picking up increased signal traffic between the enemy ships." Estevez added, "It sounds like they're trying to establish who is in command."

"Captain the Klingon Raptor may have been their command ship. With it gone their other ships will have lost their command and control." Tan suggested.

"In that case let's not give them the chance to get organised again. Lieutenant Commander Teela engage at warp six. Get us back into Federation space." Ash said.

"Aye captain. Engaging warp drive now." Teela replied and then she activated the *Ascension's* warp drive, accelerating the ship to faster than light speed and leaving the *Veruvus* system and the remaining renegade ships there behind entirely.

The news of the *Canis Major's* destruction was delivered to Qu'Vat a number of times as multiple ships delivered the news over time as their commanding officers worked up the courage to be the bearer of bad news.

Keeler sighed when he saw these reports. Although the information was incomplete it was obvious that the crew of the *Ascension* and *Canis Major* had been able to rig a self destruct system while Gortoth was waiting for reinforcements.

"I knew it." he said before he became aware of the presence of Markon standing close behind him.

"Perhaps you would like to remind Admiral Korda of that." the Klingon officer said and Keeler thought back to how Korda had lost his temper when he had suggested that Gortoth's strategy was the wrong one.

"No." he said eventually, "I don't think he needs to hear that."

"A good choice human. A very good choice." Markon replied and he smiled at Keeler.