

STAR TREK: ASCENSION

A Place to Call Home

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A distress signal from beyond Federation space draws the *USS Ascension* to the site of a new colony that is located in a strategically vital position between the United Federation of planets and the Klingon Empire. However, a mission to provide technical assistance takes a darker turn when the failures are shown not to be accidental.

Star Trek: Ascension available online at:
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1.

Stardate 8814.7 GS-617 system.

The bulky starship manoeuvred into orbit around the planet. The planet had the colouration that was common to class-M worlds, with more than half of the surface covered by water and land masses that were largely covered in vegetation.

"Standard orbit established captain." the ship's helmsman said as he cut power to the impulse drive. This was not a Starfleet vessel and the crew wore civilian clothing instead of uniforms, although they did wear polished badges that indicated their position within the crew.

"Give me a surface scan." the captain said and another of the bridge crew leant over the sensor viewer.

"Conditions are stable captain, just like the probe suggested." she replied before she smiled and looked towards the captain, "Though I'm sorry to say that it is raining at the landing site." she added and he smiled back.

"Then I guess we'll just have to break out the bad weather gear." he said before looking towards the front of the bridge where the planet was visible through the forward viewport, "Helm, disengage from the drive module and take us down." he ordered.

"Aye captain. Triggering separation now." the helmsman responded and the ship shuddered slightly as it split into two, with the longer and thinner forward section separating from the wider ovoid cylinder that made up the rear section where the ship's warp nacelles were mounted. By detaching these the ship could be taken into the atmosphere and landed without risking the consequences of a warp containment breach while surrounded by matter for the antimatter fuel to react with.

Using thrusters only the forward section of the ship descended into the atmosphere and almost immediately began to shake.

"Helm?" the captain commented, frowning as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"Sorry captain, the atmosphere is a bit choppy. Nothing we can't handle though." the helmsman answered.

"It should clear up at about seven thousand metres." the science officer added.

"I hope so. I'd hate to feel what a landing in these conditions would be like. Rain is bad enough." the captain said.

As the ship continued to descend through the atmosphere it entered a cloud bank and the view outside the viewport was obscured. When gaps appeared in the clouds it was obvious that the ship was flying over the ocean as it descended but when it emerged beneath the clouds the horizon ahead was dominated by the black outline of land.

"Engaging lights." one of the bridge crew announced and a set of bright flood lights directed ahead and below the ship activated.

"Captain we are subsonic. Range to landing site now fifteen kilometres." the helmsman said.

"Landing site is clear captain." the science officer added as she continued to monitor the ship's sensors and the captain nodded.

"Good. Helm deploy landing gear and take us down." he said.

"Aye captain. Deploying landing gear." the helmsman said and he reached for the ship's landing gear, extended the six strong legs that would support the ship while it was on the ground. The ship reached the coast in just a few minutes and the helmsman reduced the power to the thrusters to bring it to a halt so that it hovered in mid air above the ground.

"Ground scan shows it is stable and will support her weight captain." the science officer said.

"Setting us down now captain." the helmsman added and the ship slowly descended to the ground, the deployed landing gear compressing as it took the considerable weight. Then the helmsman shut off the thrusters and began to power down the system, "We're down and safe captain." he said and the captain smiled again as he reached for the intercom.

"This is the captain." he said into the intercom and his voice was played throughout the ship, causing the many passengers who were all strapped into acceleration couches to look upwards at the ceiling mounted speakers, "We have just set down on the surface of the second planet of the GS six-one-seven system, known from now on as Shakuru. Welcome to our new home."

Throughout the ship the passengers and crew began to applaud.

Stardate 8815.2 Miranda-class destroyer *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 on patrol near the Klingon Neutral Zone.

With little to occupy his time Captain Ash, commanding officer of the heavy destroyer *Ascension* stood behind his science officer Commander Tan to observe the scans that the man was running. In addition to

being the *Ascension's* science officer Tan was also the ship's first officer and the two men had worked together since long before Ash took command in the aftermath of the previous captain's death. As was typical during a patrol of the Federation side of the Neutral Zone that separated the Federation from the Klingon Empire most of the scans that Tan was running were directed across this border. Even the most subtle anomaly was scanned and rescanned in the greatest detail to ensure that it was not a cloaked Klingon vessel attempting to sneak across the border unseen. However, while Ash and Tan were concentrating on the Neutral Zone the *Ascension's* other bridge officers were instead focusing their attention on their own side of it and it was from here that the ship's communications officer found something.

"Captain I'm picking up a signal. It looks like a distress call." she announced and Ash turned towards her.

"Can you elaborate Ensign Estevez?" he asked.

"It's coming from the GS six-one-seven system." Estevez said.

"About two and a half light years captain. That system is uninhabited." Lieutenant Etchemin, the ship's navigator commented.

"Well somebody is there." Estevez added.

"Okay let me hear it." Ash said as he walked back to his seat at the centre of the bridge and Estevez fed the signal to the bridge speaker system.

"This is the Shakuru expedition in the GS six-one-seven system. We have suffered serious operational failures and require urgent assistance. Can anyone hear me?" a man's voice said and Ash activated the communication system built into his chair.

"Shakuru expedition this is the *USS Ascension*. We are two and a half light years from your position. Can you describe the nature of your problem?" he said.

"*Ascension* thank God. I'm Captain Stern, commanding officer of the expedition. One of our shuttles crashed on take off and my engineer has advised that we ground the other two. Now we're cut off from the bulk of our supplies in orbit. Can you assist us *Ascension*?" the man told him.

"They mustn't have transporter capability then." Etchemin said and he glanced at the Andorian woman sat at the helm station beside him.

"It still doesn't explain what they're doing in a system so close to the Klingon border." she replied.

"Teela raises a good point captain." Tan said, "I've checked the database and Lieutenant Etchemin is correct. The system is supposed to be uninhabited and I've found no reference to the Shakuru expedition."

Ash nodded and then turned his attention back to the communication channel.

"Captain Stern we weren't aware that there was anyone in the GS six-one-seven system. What are you doing there?" he asked.

"We're an independent colonial expedition captain. As soon as our colony is established we'll be registering our claim with the Federation Council." Stern answered.

"Very well captain. We'll be with you in a couple of days Can you manage until then?" Ash said.

"Yes, we have sufficient provisions for several weeks with us. It's the heavier equipment that we're cut off from." Stern said.

"Understood. *Ascension* out." Ash said before he closed the channel and sighed.

"Something wrong captain?" Estevez asked and Teela smiled.

"Independent colony missions have a nasty habit of falling short of the colonists' expectations." she said.

"It's not uncommon for corners to be cut ensign." Tan added, "The consequences are occasionally fatal but quite often the colonists end up calling for outside help."

"Which we are obliged to provide no matter how reckless or incompetent the colonists may have been in their preparations." Ash said, "Lieutenant Etchemin please plot a course to the GS six-one-seven system. Teela take us there at maximum warp and Ensign Estevez please let Starfleet Command know that we are moving off our assigned patrol route and why. Then tell Doctor Reese and Commander Forrester that I'd like to see them both in the briefing room."

Doctor Reese, the *Ascension's* medical officer was the first to arrive in the ship's briefing room and she and Ash smiled at one another.

"You could have just come to sickbay if you wanted to see me Mike." she said as she sat down at the table directly opposite him.

"Unfortunately this is an official briefing Deborah. Adam should be with us shortly." Ash replied before the briefing room doors slid open to reveal Forrester in his engineer's protective suit.

"Captain you asked to see me?" he said and Ash nodded.

"Yes. We've received a distress call from an independent colony mission in the GS six-one-seven system. They've lost one shuttle and have grounded the rest." he said.

"So they expect us to carry out the maintenance they skipped out on?" Forrester replied.

"It looks that way, yes." Ash said, "That's why I wanted to speak to you both. I spoke to the mission commander, a Captain Stern and he didn't mention any casualties but when we get to the colony I want a full environmental study carrying out to make sure that the colonists aren't being exposed to anything."

"I take it that you'll want an engineering team prepared as well?" Forrester asked.

"Yes. I wouldn't count on them having any specific tools or spare parts available so you may want to have our fabricators standing by." Ash answered and Forrester shrugged.

"I'll probably just have to turn most of their kit off and back on again." he said.

"Do you know why the colonists picked a world so close to the Klingon border?" Reese added.

"I didn't ask." Ash told her, "I suspect that it's because the Federation Council is wary of placing colonies this far out that Starfleet may not be able to protect adequately and that policy means that there are a lot of class-M worlds out here that are unclaimed. Nearer the core or on the other side of Federation space things are a lot more crowded."

"I think I'd rather put up with less room to wander than have the Klingons as neighbours though Mike. It's worrying enough on a major planet that is well defended, let alone on a planet where the entire population could be wiped out by a single photon torpedo that they probably wouldn't even see coming." Reese said.

"Me too, but obviously these people are willing to take the risk and as Federation citizens we're required to provide them with help." Ash replied.

With the journey to GS-617 taking just over two days at the *Ascension's* maximum speed all of the crew had the opportunity to rest between shifts and when Ash's ended he made his way to the mess hall for something to eat. There were several other junior officers and enlisted crew present as well but Ash sat down at a vacant table to eat and a few seconds later the door to the mess hall opened and Tan entered with a PADD in his hand.

"Captain may we speak?" Tan said and Ash swallowed the food he was chewing before he answered.

"Of course James. Take a seat." he said and Tan sat down opposite him, "So is there a problem?"

"No captain, at least I don't think so." Tan said, "But there was something familiar about the GS six-one-seven system so I checked my logs."

"I don't remember ever having been there before." Ash commented and Tan shook his head.

"No captain, I don't think that we have. But about a year ago I recommended that we change course to investigate the system." he said and he slid his PADD across the table. Looking at the device's screen Ash saw that it showed a single frame from a sensor scan of a star system that had one of the planets highlighted.

"A subspace field?" Ash commented.

"Exactly captain. Located in close proximity to the second planet, known to be class-M." Tan responded.

"So probably the planet where the Shakuru expedition is setting up their colony." Ash said before Tan continued.

"Given that the system was uninhabited when we were making our flyby I suggested diverting our course to investigate but if you remember my recommendation was countered." he said.

"By Matt Keeler." Ash said, finally remembering the incident, "Didn't he say that it was some sort of communications reflection?"

"Yes captain. He was quite insistent about it as well," Tan said, "and then Captain Franklin ordered us to continue on our assigned patrol route."

"We know that Keeler was working for the Klingons and because of her relationship with him Franklin was involved to some extent too. Do you think that that subspace signal could have been Klingon in origin?" Ash asked.

"It's possible captain. This scan was only brief and from long range. With what we now know about Keeler though, I think that his reaction suggests that he knew that the Klingons were taking an interest in this system. Of course it could just be a coincidence. Captain Stern didn't mention anything about Klingons. I was thinking that now you have access to Captain Franklin's logs we could find out whether she made any mention of what happened." Tan said.

"Give me chance to finish this and we can go and check." Ash told him holding up a fork with a piece of food on it.

When Ash had finished his meal he and Tan made their way to Ash's quarters where Ash sat at the computer console on his desk.

"Computer access captain's log archive." he said. Then he looked at Tan and added, "What stardate?"

"Eight five four nine." Tan answered.

"List entries for stardate eight five four nine." Ash said and a list of three entries appeared on the screen.

"That one is the only one after I detected the subspace field." Tan said, pointing to the last of the three.

"Computer play entry for stardate eight five four nine point eight." Ash said and the screen changed instantly to show Captain Franklin, the *Ascension's* previous commanding officer who both Ash and Tan had served under. It was obvious that the log entry had been recorded here in the captain's quarters and she was sat where Ash now sat wearing her white under shirt but not her tunic.

"Captain's log stardate eighty-five forty-nine point eight." she began, "Lieutenant Commander Tan detected a subspace field in the GS six-one-seven. He recommended that we investigate but I overruled him. Keeler explained the readings as a communication reflection on the bridge. I spoke to him privately later and he suggested that we avoid the system entirely in future if we can and I'm going to make sure that we do." It was then that the log ended and Ash turned to look at Tan.

"Well that was brief and vague." he said.

"I wouldn't have expected her to confess to taking part in espionage and treason in her log." Tan commented.

"It is interesting that she spoke with Keeler privately though." Ash said, "He must have been getting information on the system from his Klingon handlers. Of course this now raises the question of whether whatever brought the Klingons to the system a year ago is still there now."

"Should we alert Starfleet captain?" Tan asked.

"Alert them to what? For all we know the Klingons left. I think that being on yellow alert when we get to the colony would be a good idea though."

2.

When the *Ascension* dropped out of warp the crew were at their stations and the ship's shields were raised. "Captain I'm picking up a vessel in orbit around the second planet." Tan announced as he studied the sensors scans of the system.

"I see it captain." Etchemin added, looking at the targeting sensors on his console. Although the sensor contact was far outside of weapons range the sensors were still able to display it for the navigator.

"Can you identify it?" Ash asked.

"It looks like the engineering section of a colony ship captain." Tan answered.

"Ah, the supplies that Captain Stern mentioned." Ash said, "Ensign Estevez try hailing the colony and let them know that we've arrived."

"Yes captain." Estevez responded before she turned back to her communication console, "This is *USS Ascension* calling Shakuru expedition, do you read me?" she signalled and there was a brief pause before a response was received.

"Hello Ascension, it's good to hear your voice." Stern's voice said, "How far out are you?"

"We're in the system now captain and we have your supply ship on our sensors." Estevez told him.

"Good. How long until you enter orbit?" Stern asked.

"Teela, what's our ETA?" Ash said when he overheard this.

"About four hours captain." Teela said and Ash glanced at Estevez.

"We expect to enter orbit in about four hours captain." she told Stern.

"That's great news. We've been waiting for your arrival. I'll see you in four hours. Shakuru out." he replied before he closed the channel.

"Waiting for us?" Teela commented, "What do you think the chances are that that means they've done absolutely nothing to try and improve their situation?"

"I'd say about even." Etchemin replied and the two officers smiled at one another.

"Even if they had I'd still want to come and take a look at their setup." Ash said, "Teela take us into standard orbit above the colony. Estevez please inform sickbay, engineering and security that I'll need their teams to meet me in the transporter room in four hours."

"Captain do you want me to be part of the away team as well?" Tan said but Ash shook his head.

"No, I want you up here to run scans of the planet. After we've beamed down take the ship into a higher orbit so you can get a better angle on the hemisphere on this side. Depending on what you find I may want you to take the ship around the other side to get a full global scan or just use probes." Ash answered.

Beaming down to the surface would take place in waves. Initially Ash would beam down with Reese, Forrester and Chief Duke, the head of the *Ascension's* security department. The presence of Duke was largely a precaution insisted on by Starfleet regulations whenever officers were beaming down but given the discussion that Ash had had with Tan regarding potential Klingon influence in the system, having the experienced security guard with the party. As a further precaution Ash had insisted that all members of the away team carry phasers, including Doctor Reese and her medical team. It would be the function of this advanced unit to assess the exact needs of the colonists and then further personnel could be beamed down accordingly. Reese had a small medical team prepared while Forrester had put together a larger group of engineers. If the away team was threatened in any way a team of half a dozen more security guards could be beamed down to protect them. Like Duke these guards wore prominent armoured vests in addition to carrying phasers on their hips.

"Do you have the location of the colony?" Ash asked the transporter chief.

"Yes captain. There's a beacon on the surface." he replied.

"What's the weather like down there?" Forrester added.

"Worried about a little rain Adam?" Reese commented with a smile.

"It's always tougher working in the rain." Forrester pointed out as the away team took their places on the transporter pad.

"Sensors show that the colony site is overcast but dry commander." the transporter operator said.

"Not ideal but it will do." Forrester said.

"If everyone's ready." Ash said, looking at the other members of his away team. Then he turned to the transporter operator and added, "Energise."

The away team materialised on a grassy plain among a cluster of structures that had all been constructed from the same type of modular components. In one direction the ocean was visible, the colony having been built close to the coast for access to the resources that the ocean would offer. Dominating the area though

was the nearby colony ship, or at least what remained of it. The vessel had been partially dismantled to provide the components used to construct the other buildings that made up the fledgling colony. Looking around the members of the away team saw several colonists at work assembling another structure and they paused their work to look back at the new arrivals before there was a shout.

"Hello there!" Captain Stern called out from the direction of the colony ship and the away team all turned towards him. Stern waved as he walked towards the Starfleet crew while two other colonists, one male and one female walked with him. All three were human and they walked right up to the away team before stopping, "Captain Ash, I'm Captain Stern." Stern added, identifying Ash from his uniform and he held out his hand to Ash, "Thank you for coming."

"You're welcome captain." Ash replied as he shook Stern's hand, "May I introduce Doctor Reese, my medical officer. Commander Forrester my chief engineer and Chief Petty Officer Duke, my head of security." Stern then smiled at the other members of the away team before he turned to the people stood beside him. "And this is Jane Cooper, expedition science officer and Brad Michaels our chief engineer." he replied.

"So where are these shuttles?" Forrester said, looking around.

"We have some launch pads set up on the other side of the ship." Stern replied.

"I can show you the way." Michaels added and Forrester looked towards Ash.

"Go. Let me know what you find." he said.

"This way." Michaels said and Forrester followed as the colony's engineer turned and started to walk in the direction of the colony ship.

"Captain while our engineers are inspecting your shuttles perhaps we could discuss what brought you here." Ash suggested, looking at Stern and the other captain nodded.

"Of course. Please come with me. There are some other senior members of the mission waiting to see you." he replied and the group began to walk towards an entrance to the partially disassembled colony ship.

"You're using parts from your ship to construct your colony I see." Reese commented and Stern nodded.

"Yes. The newer designs may be reusable but it was decided that this class better suited our needs." he said, "It's not like we'll be using it again anyway."

"You still have the engineering section in orbit." Ash pointed out.

"And that's right where it will stay for the foreseeable future." Copper said, "Once our colony is complete and all of the supplies are brought down to the surface we'll repurpose it into a space station. It will house sensor and communication equipment that operates better without the atmosphere to interfere with it."

"What about weapons?" Duke asked, "This close to the border you need to be able to protect yourselves."

"Some members of the expedition have some personal weapons but nothing that needs to be mounted on a starship or station." Stern said.

"What, nothing at all?" Ash said in amazement, "Not even a couple of pulse cannons? The Neutral Zone is less than three light years from here."

"We're strictly a civilian operation captain." Stern replied as they reached the entrance to the colony ship and went inside, "Federation security is the job of Starfleet and we don't want to interfere with that." Ash and Duke exchanged nervous looks with one another when they heard this before Stern stopped by a turbolift and summoned it, "This will take us directly to the conference room." he said as the doors slid open.

The group entered the turbolift and Stern selected the destination from the keypad just inside the doorway before it began to move. Then after a few seconds the turbolift car stopped again and the doors slid open to reveal a room that had a large oval table in the centre with chairs all around it. At the far end of the table four of these chairs were occupied by more colonists, all of them humans showing signs of ageing. They were not so old and infirm though that they could not stand up as the team from the *Ascension* was shown into the room.

"Captain Ash I presume." one of the colonists, a man whose white hair contrasted with the darkness of his skin said, "I'm so glad you could help us."

"Actually my engineer hasn't been able to make his assessment yet Mister-?" Ash replied.

"Gatimu Maina captain," the man said, "and my companions are Jean Allard and Do-won Cho. Along with Captain Stern we are the senior planners of this expedition."

"You've come a long way from the core Mister Maina." Reese commented.

"It was necessary." Allard replied, "Though it may be comfortable, Earth and most of the core worlds are rather crowded. The members of our expedition decided that they craved more adventure in their existence as well as wanting to build something for their children."

"And what better than to build a whole new world?" Cho added.

"Couldn't you have chosen a planet that wasn't next to the Klingon Empire though?" Ash said and Maina smiled.

"Oh come now captain, surely you can't have missed what's going on between the Federation and the Klingon Empire right now. We're about to usher in a new era of peace and co-operation. Diplomats from both governments are meeting regularly to improve relations and we are confident that by the time our colony is

fully established here there will already be the beginnings of a treaty in place. Far from being in the way of invasion Shakuru will be in a prime position to be a major trading hub between the two.” he said.

The colony’s two remaining shuttles were much larger than any of the ones carried aboard the *Ascension* but Forrester was familiar with the design. Although they were too large to be regularly carried aboard most Starfleet starships the class was employed aboard space stations or on surface installations like the colony. From the looks of both of the shuttles they had been acquired as surplus from Starfleet and although most of the markings had been removed there were still traces of them along each side of the two craft. Despite being bigger than standard shuttles they lacked the compact warp drives that were fitted to many types of shuttle, limiting them to short range operation only, making them ideal for simple surface to orbit flights.

“Where did you get these from?” Forrester asked, knowing that the class had been in service long enough that some of the ones originally sold off a surplus were now being sold on again third hand.

“Starbase Two was clearing out a bunch of them.” Michaels answered, “I inspected both of these as well as the third one before we bought them and Starfleet provided all the documentation to show that they were up to standard.”

“Yet somehow one of them was destroyed. Can you fill me in on what happened?” Forrester said as he continued to inspect the two large shuttles.

“There’s not much to tell I’m afraid. A couple of our pilots took off on a cargo run to the orbiting aft section of our ship but when they reached about fifteen thousand metres the shuttle simply exploded. The crew didn’t report any problems with any of the systems. I ordered these two grounded after that and since then we’ve been limited to operations that only require the supplies we’d already brought down to the surface. We don’t have transporter capability.” Michaels told him.

“What about the colony ship itself? From the looks of it I’d have said that it was still flyable.” Forrester said and Michaels nodded.

“It is. The problem is that our fuel reserves are too low for a return trip. We could make orbit and dock with the engineering section but that’s it for the thrusters. There wouldn’t be enough fuel to get us back down safely to the surface. Maina suggested that we use the impulse drive instead of the thrusters but I told him that wasn’t a good idea. The blast would incinerate everything for at least a kilometre.” he said.

“True, that was a good call. Did you recover the flight recorder from the downed shuttle?” Forrester asked but Michaels shook his head.

“No.” he said, “We found pieces of the casing but it was destroyed too.”

Forrester frowned when he heard this. The flight recorders aboard all spacecraft were designed to be incredibly resilient and located so that in the event of even a catastrophic explosion they would be thrown clear instead of destroyed.

“I’d still like to see it.” he said as he took out his communicator and flipped it open, “Forrester to *Ascension*.” he said into it.

“*Ascension* here commander.” Estevez’s voice responded from the orbiting destroyer.

“Ensign I want my engineering team beamed down to my location immediately.” Forrester said.

“Understood commander. I’ll pass on your order.” Estevez replied.

“Very good ensign. Forrester out.” Forrester said and then he closed the communicator and returned it to his pocket, “So where is what’s left of the flight recorder?” he asked.

“Aboard the ship. We used one of the cleared holds to store what we recovered. When we heard that you were on your way we left it all in place. We figured you might want to take a look at it officially.” Michaels said before the air nearby was filled with glowing lights as the team of engineers Forrester had put together was beamed down from the orbiting *Ascension*. The six engineers, consisting of two officers and four enlisted crewmen materialised about ten metres away and Forrester immediately waved them towards him.

“Over here.” he called out.

“Reporting as ordered sir.” one of the officers said as the engineering team walked up to Forrester and then he looked at the shuttles, “I take it that these are the shuttles we’re to look at?” he commented and Forrester nodded.

“Yes. The third was a victim of an unexplained mid air explosion. I want you to go over every last component aboard both of these craft and see if you can find anything wrong with them. I want the flight recorder modules included in the inspection.”

“I’m sorry commander, did you just say the flight recorders?” one of the enlisted crew asked.

“Yes crewman, the flight recorder modules. I know that they’re a sealed unit but I want their casings fully inspected and scanned for even the slightest imperfection. Is that understood?”

“Yes commander. We’ll get right on it.” an officer replied and then he turned to address the rest of the engineering team, “Okay everyone, you heard the commander. We’ll start with this shuttle. Begin with tricorder scans of every millimetre and after that we’ll move on to a visual inspection.”

Forrester then turned back to face Michaels.

“How about you show me where the wreckage is being kept then?” he said.

3.

"How long are you going to keep doing that?" Teela asked, standing right behind Tan as he continued to scan the surface of the planet below. Even though he had been left in command of the *Ascension* while Ash was down on the surface his order to conduct detailed surface scans meant that he could not sit in the captain's chair and it remained vacant. On the other hand with the *Ascension* locked into a standard orbit there was no reason for Teela to remain at her station and she was instead wandering the bridge and inspecting each station in turn.

"Until I find something, the captain returns or the sun goes nova. Whichever happens first." he replied without looking up from his console. And Teela looked towards the captain's chair.

"So if you're not going to sit over there can I?" she asked, smiling at Tan as she did so.

"Of course you can." Tan said and Teela smiled again before she turned to head for the captain's chair, "As long as you don't mind being the first officer in Starfleet history to be convicted of mutiny." Tan added before she could take a single step.

"Mutiny?" Teela said, the antennas that poked out from beneath her white hair straightening up.

"Only the officer currently in command gets to sit in that chair Teela and since that's currently me I'm the only one who can sit there. Anyone else would be considered to be trying to seize control of the ship." Tan explained but then he looked up and added, "Just kidding. Go ahead." he said and Teela glared at him.

"Now I'm not sure whether to believe you or not." she said.

"In all the years we've been working together have I ever lied to you Teela?" Tan asked.

"I suppose not." Teela replied and she started to walk slowly towards the captain's chair, waiting for Tan to speak again when all of a sudden there was a beeping sound from Tan's console, "Have you found something?" Teela asked.

"Possibly." Tan said, "There's a signal coming from just outside the colony. Ensign Estevez what do you make of it?" he added, forwarding the sensor feed to the communications console on the other side of the bridge.

"Checking now commander." Estevez said as she fed the signal through her communications analysis system. This was designed to pick out every known form of signal encoding as well as detect the patterns in energy readings that could indicate some form of artificial modulation. However, before she could finish her analysis the signal from the surface ceased.

"I've lost it." Tan said, "Ensign do you have enough for a full breakdown of the signal?"

"Possibly commander. We have several seconds worth and the frequency looks pretty high. I think we have a few hundred megabytes of data which should be enough to pick out patterns like stop bits and checksums." Estevez replied and then she smiled and turned towards him, "Commander I've got it. The signal is Orion in origin. It comes from one of their communicators."

"Orions?" Etchemin said, "What would the Orions be doing here?"

"Could there be an Orion base hidden on the planet somewhere?" Teela suggested.

"They are infamous for being smugglers and pirates." Etchemin commented.

"They are also well known for not being very good at keeping their technology to themselves." Tan pointed out, "It could be an outlaw group from almost any planet in the Alpha or Beta Quadrants. Or even a rival colony group."

"I suppose that there already being a settlement full of people would be a considerable problem to anyone else wanting to colonise the planet." Estevez said.

"If that's the case then we should be dealing with a small group of scouts." Tan said.

"We didn't detect any other vessels in the system though." Etchemin said, "Could a basic scouting party have concealed a ship from us?"

"More likely such a team was just dropped off here by a ship that will be back to pick them up at a prearranged time. In which case they'll be wanting to clear out the existing colony before their ride arrives. Assuming that we are just dealing with a rival colonial scout unit." Tan said.

"Criminals or rival colonists. What other options are there?" Estevez asked.

"Trust me ensign, nothing better than those choices." Tan told her.

What remained of the destroyed shuttle was laid out in an empty storage compartment aboard the colony ship. Considerable effort had been put into identifying each piece of debris so that it could be placed in the correct location relative to the other wreckage and beside each piece there was a label that described what it was as well as noting where it had been discovered. Given the altitude at which the shuttle had been destroyed it was only natural that less than half of the shuttle had been recovered.

"The flight recorder is over here." Michaels told Forrester and he pointed towards a table that had been set up with a computer terminal on it. Beside this terminal there was a standard flight recorder module. It was unsurprising to Forrester that the casing of this was charred and dented from the blast but this was the first

time he had seen such a device in the condition that this one was in. The casing of the recorder appeared to have been peeled open. Sometimes this would have to be done if the external communication ports were damaged so that the parallel interior ports could be accessed instead but instead of just a small area being opened one entire side of the casing was peeled back to reveal the ruined contents.

"This is a mess." Forrester said as he picked up the flight recorder with both hands to inspect it and Michaels nodded.

"We couldn't believe it ourselves." Michaels said, "As you can see the electronics inside were smashed. We couldn't recover the contents of even a single memory cell."

Forrester looked around at the debris laid out on the floor of the storage room again.

"I take that you've not been able to determine the source of the explosion." he said and Michaels shook his head.

"No. I considered making three-dimensional scans of each piece and comparing them to a complete virtual model of the shuttle to see how they had been deformed but our computer just doesn't have the processing power spare to run that sort of program." he said.

"You weren't worried that the fall would have deformed the pieces on impact?" Forrester asked.

"Not really commander. All of this was recovered from swampland that cushioned most of the force of the impact. That's why pretty much all of the pieces we recovered are metal, it was easier to detect them beneath the surface than the polymer components were." Michaels answered.

"What about the crew?" Forrester said, already guessing at the answer.

"We didn't find any human remains. We think they were just burned up in the explosion." Michaels then confirmed.

"Your idea of modelling all this debris is a good one. The *Ascension's* computers should be good enough to run the comparison as well." Forrester said and Michaels smiled.

"I thought you might say something like that commander." he said and he reached into a pocket in his overalls to take out a small bundle of data cards that he held out to Forrester, "These contain the scans I took of each piece. A lot of our equipment isn't quite up to the latest standard but our tricorders are the same model that Starfleet currently issues. Those models should be good enough."

"Thanks." Forrester said, nodding his head as he took the data cards, "This will save a lot of time. I'd like to take the flight recorder as well. I don't like the way it has been damaged and I'd like to see what the equipment aboard the *Ascension* can make of it."

"Of course." Michaels replied, "I thought that would be the case."

Forrester then took out his communicator and opened it.

"Forrester to Lieutenant King." he said into it.

"King here commander." the voice of one of his engineering team responded.

"What's the state of your examination?" Forrester asked.

"We've found some irregularities in the thruster fuel lines aboard the first shuttle commander. It looks like short sections of the lines have been replaced with tubing made of a different material. I haven't identified it yet but I suspect that it's weaker than the original material. We're checking the other shuttle for this now. The matching section of the fuel lines looks okay but we're going over it all just in case a different section of the line has been swapped." King explained.

"Good, Make sure that you bring samples of the original and replacement tubing back to the *Ascension* for analysis." Forrester told him, "I also want the flight recorders removed from both shuttles. They're to be returned to the *Ascension* as well. I've got the recorder from the destroyed shuttle and it's been heavily damaged somehow. I want to check the other two to see if there are any signs of damage to them."

"Our equipment may be old Captain Ash but we did not cut corners on anything that could be dangerous." Maina responded when Ash questioned the quality of the expedition's equipment, "Fortunately we had Captain Stern and Mister Michaels to inspect the quality of everything we acquired. Take this ship for example. It was originally constructed right before the brief conflict between the Federation and Klingon Empire in twenty-two sixty-seven for a colonial expedition to a planet that ended up located in the Neutral Zone and the expedition was cancelled. Newer classes of colonial transports were then developed and this ship was largely forgotten until we were able to acquire it."

"It took us four months to get here from Earth but the time was worth it." Allard added with a smile.

"But you didn't log your expedition with the Federation." Ash pointed out.

"No." Cho replied, "Given the low speed of our ship we didn't want to alert any other potential colony missions that we were on our way here. It would have been too easy for any of them to get a head start on us."

"But you must have filed a flight plan." Reese pointed out and Stern nodded.

"Of course we did doctor. We filed several flight plans, one for each leg of our journey." he said.

"Each leg?" Reese commented.

"We didn't travel here directly from Earth. Instead we made multiple shorter trips between Federation systems, filing a new flight plan before leaving each one. That way we could keep our destination a secret until the final journey from Ajilon Prime." Allard explained before Ash's communicator sounded.

"One moment." Ash said and he flipped the device open, "Ash." he said into it.

"Captain I've conducted the scans you asked for and we have found something that I think you should take a look at." Tan's voice told him and Ash nodded.

"Okay commander, I think we're done down here anyway. Have you heard from Commander Forrester?" he said.

"Yes captain. The commander beamed back up a few minutes ago with some equipment that he took to engineering to study." Tan said.

"Very good. Once I'm back aboard I want a full meeting of the senior staff to discuss our findings." Ash replied.

Upon Ash's return to the *Ascension* all of the ship's department heads gathered in the briefing room with all duty stations being filled by juniors officers instead. Ash began by looking around the table at his department heads before he began to speak.

"I, along with Doctor Reese and Chief Duke have spoken with the colony's senior officials. We've confirmed that they did everything they could to keep their costs low but there's no indication of any reckless behaviour." he said.

"Although they have made no effort to defend themselves. They expect Starfleet to provide all their protection." Duke added and Ash nodded.

"Yes, they are basing their security plan on the hope that the current round of diplomatic efforts will be concluded quickly and be one hundred percent successful." he said.

"They're right though, aren't they captain?" Teela commented, "If they're Federation citizens then we will have to protect them."

"If war does break out then there could be more to it than that." Ash replied and Reese frowned.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You heard the colonists say that they hoped to become a trading hub between us? Well that key location gives it other uses as well. This star system is ideally placed to make it a staging point for advances into the Klingon Empire. The existence of a colony would provide the basic infrastructure necessary In all likelihood Starfleet would move significant forces here." Ash answered.

"Which means the Klingons would have an interest in preventing the system from being settled." Tan said, "That could be why Keeler wanted us to avoid the system before."

"What's this about that creep Keeler?" Teela said.

"Do you remember him arguing with Commander Tan about investigating a subspace field?" Ash asked and Teela frowned.

"I think I remember something like that." she said, "Was that this system?"

"It was." Tan said.

"The signals we picked up were definitely of an Orion format." Estevez pointed out.

"You detected signals?" Ash said.

"Yes captain. That's what I wanted to tell you about. While you were on the surface we detected a brief signal from just outside the area of the colony." Tan said.

"The signal structure was Orion but it was encrypted in a way that I haven't been able to crack yet captain." Estevez added.

"The Klingons have used foreign agents before." Forrester said, "Of course if we are dealing with Klingons then we'll need to monitor the local wildlife carefully. Klingon intelligence is known to have turned a tribble into a bomb to try and assassinate Captain Kirk of the Enterprise."

"Wait, a tribble bomb?" Etchemin said, obviously confused and Forrester nodded.

"Yes. It was aboard space station K-seven when it was being used to store a shipment of quadrotriticale grain for Sherman's Planet. The Klingons attempted to beam an exploding tribble into the grain bins when Kirk was accessing them. They hoped that the bomb would be impossible to locate among the one million, seven hundred and seventy-one thousand, five hundred and sixty-one genuine tribbles aboard the station." he said as the rest of the gathered department heads looked at him in disbelief.

"One million and – How do you get to that number?" Estevez said and Teela winced.

"Oh you had to ask." she said.

"It's based on one tribble multiplying with an average litter of ten, producing a new generation every twelve hours over a period of three days." Forrester explained, "Of course their attempt to get the bomb aboard the station failed. Instead they beamed the bomb into space where it exploded."

"Perhaps you should tell us about what you found out about the colony's shuttles lieutenant commander." Ash said, anxious to change the subject away from one of Forrester's many conspiracy theories and the engineer looked down at PADD he had placed in front of him.

"I was able to confirm that the material of the tubing used in sections of the fuel lines of the two remaining shuttles was non-standard." he said.

"So was it weaker than the original?" Teela asked.

"Actually, no. The overall strength of the material was just as good as the type that is supposed to be used. I think that was done deliberately." Forrester answered.

"Deliberately? Why?" Ash said.

"If someone ran a test of the fuel system then inert gas would be pumped through it to check for leaks. If the replacement sections were weaker then they could split and the pressure loss would be detected. These sections were strong enough to withstand the pressure from the inert gas but when exposed to thruster fuel they would corrode. The samples that I tested were already starting to break down so I think that the shuttles had been used since the change was made. From the description of the explosion my initial theory is that the other shuttle was destroyed when the fuel ate through the replaced lines and leaked into other parts of the shuttle. Then all it took was one spark or flame to trigger a catastrophic ignition that spread all the way back to the fuel tank and the entire supply went up in one go." Forrester explained, "Of course I'll know more once the computer simulation is finished. I'm fairly sure that will confirm that the thruster fuel tank was the source of the main explosion."

"Did the colony's engineering chief say anything about replacing the fuel lines?" Reese said and Forrester shook his head.

"No, I asked Michaels about it and he said that no replacements of fuel lines had been authorised by him, plus they had spare tubing of the correct material in their stores. They had no need to use anything like this even if they were carrying out the work." he said.

"But they didn't notice that the swap had been made." Etchemin pointed out.

"They ran system diagnostics and visual inspections." Forrester said, "The colony's engineers are pretty good but they've got their work cut out for them so they just did the basics." then he smiled and added, "My people were somewhat more thorough."

"I'm glad to hear it commander." Ash said.

"So if the colonists didn't replace the fuel lines then who did?" Duke said.

"Our mysterious Orion communicator?" Ash said, looking at Tan.

"That would be my guess, yes captain." the *Ascension's* science officer responded before he looked at Duke, "Chief, how would you assess the colony's perimeter security measures?" he asked and Duke let out a brief laugh.

"Commander they have no perimeter security." he said, "I didn't even see any barriers to keep out wildlife."

"That could be an issue. Even if there are no dangerous predators, smaller lifeforms getting into machinery could cause significant damage." Forrester commented.

"Hopefully that's not one of the things that they are counting on us to take care of." Reese said.

"First I think we need to confirm that the colony isn't using Orion communication equipment." Ash said, "I know it's unlikely but given the way that they settled for older equipment to save on costs they could have decided that using Orion equipment was good enough and offered better value for what they were getting. In the meantime I want our scans of the surface to continue. Whoever had that communicator had to be talking to someone and if it wasn't the colony then we need to know who it was."

"Captain what about a physical search of the surface?" Duke suggested.

"Yes, I was just getting to that." Ash said before he looked at Tan again, "I take it that there were no signs of a vehicle in use."

"No, nothing like that captain." Tan replied.

"Then whoever was using it has to be within walking distance." Ash said, "Chief Duke I want you to put together two security teams to conduct searches of the surface, starting from the point where the communicator was detected and working outwards away from the colony. Each team will also be accompanied by an engineer and medic. Ensign Estevez I want you to contact Starbase Twenty-four. See if they have any information on other ships that may have registered flight plans that would bring them within a light year of this system. Also double check if there have been any reports from Starfleet Intelligence about Klingon activity in the area."

"Yes captain." Estevez responded.

"So you really think that Matt Keeler's friends could be responsible somehow?" Teela said.

"I haven't ruled it out." Ash told her.

"There could be a cloaked ship in the system." Etchemin pointed out.

"Anything out of the ordinary needs to be logged." Ash said, "I don't care whether it's on the surface, in the air or space or even at the bottom of the ocean. We could just be dealing with outlaws or a rival colonial expedition but we could also be dealing with an attempt by the Klingons to infiltrate Federation territory."

"Captain if it does turn out to be Klingons then what are our rules of engagement?" Duke asked and Ash hesitated for a moment before he replied.

"Somebody sabotaged the colony's shuttles and killed the crew of one. That's a hostile act against

Federation citizens.” he said, “If you think that you’re being threatened then your people can use their phasers.”

4.

Following the senior staff meeting Ash returned to his quarters again and Reese accompanied him. "Mike do you think that we're dealing with Klingons?" she asked when the door slid shut behind them, "I want your gut feeling, not what you can prove." Ash sighed and sat down on a couch, resting his arms on the back. "Yes I do." he replied, "Or at least their proxies. Matt Keeler really wanted us kept away from this system and we know that he was working for them." "You know that every time we engage them we risk starting a war?" Reese commented. "Maybe, but I don't see what choice I have Deborah. If the Federation just lodges diplomatic protests then the Klingons could just deny their presence here being official and if they are using proxies then they can just deny having anything to do with whatever's going on here." Ash said. "So if we do find a hidden camp or base here we're going to attack?" Reese asked. "If that's what it takes, yes." Ash answered, "If we were just talking about damage to equipment then I'd just issue an order for whoever was behind the sabotage to withdraw but they killed the crew of the shuttle and there's no way that I can overlook that. If the people responsible can't be convinced to surrender to be taken back to Starbase twenty-four for trial then I'll order an attack."

Rather than head for the security section to assemble his teams to be beamed down to the surface, Duke accompanied Tan, Teela and Estevez to the bridge where Tan brought up an image from his surface scans on the main viewscreen. "This is the area where I detected the communicator." Tan said and he added a mark on the image that indicated the exact position, "Right there." "It wasn't in operation very long though." Estevez added. "Possibly just checking in with someone." Duke commented, "The location is good, just beyond the high ground line. Anyone there can see the colony while keeping under cover and there isn't much in the way of dead ground to mask anyone approaching." "So if they get spotted and someone comes to see what's going on they can withdraw." Etchemin said and Duke nodded. "Exactly. My guess is that the signal you detected was a lookout warning his friends about us." he said. "So where would you put a camp to monitor the colony chief?" Teela asked. "That's the wrong question commander." Duke replied and Teela frowned. "What?" she said. "He means that the colonists most likely arrived here second. The saboteurs would have already set up their base of operations." Tan told her and Duke smiled, looking at the science officer. "Exactly." he said, "Can we zoom this map out a bit, say three kilometres all around?" "Of course chief." Tan responded before he adjusted the image of the viewscreen so that it showed a much larger area. "See anything?" Teela said. "Possibly." Duke replied and he walked towards the front of the bridge where the main viewscreen was located. Then after studying the map more closely he pointed to part of it where the ground was covered with dense vegetation, "This area offers a lot of cover and is only about two kilometres from where you picked up the communicator." "So you think that they're hiding in the woods?" Tan said. "It seems like the most likely explanation sir, yes." Duke replied. "So you'll be beaming down there then?" Estevez added. "No, not directly." Duke told her, "We'll be better off beaming down about here." he continued and he pointed to an area on the far side of the wooded area from the colony, "If we beam directly into the woods then the transporter signature may give us away. On the other hand there's some dead ground right here we can beam into. Both teams should wear field gear and we'll move into the woods on foot." Starfleet field gear was a variety of uniform types meant for use on the surface of planets were the regular brightly coloured uniforms were considered too conspicuous. "Makes sense." Tan said, nodding in agreement, "If you want to start putting your teams together then I'll inform the captain of your plan."

"Ah commander." one of Forrester's subordinates said when the chief engineer returned to engineering, "I think that we have something." "The virtual model lieutenant?" Forrester asked. "Yes sir. We haven't finished putting all of the debris into the model yet but there are a few parts that are

showing some interesting deformation.” the lieutenant answered.

“Let me see.” Forrester said and the lieutenant led him to a nearby console.

The display on the console showed an image of a shuttle of the class that was destroyed and overlaid on this in various places were the shapes of the pieces of debris that the colonists had been able to recover and identify the original position of.

“This is the significant section here commander.” the lieutenant said and he pointed to the display.

“The debris is deformed outwards?” Forrester asked and the lieutenant nodded.

“Yes commander. All four pieces bend outwards towards the point where they would have met.” he said.

“Right where the fuel tank was located.” Forrester commented.

“Kind of proves your initial theory that it was an explosion in the fuel system doesn’t it commander?” the lieutenant commented.

“Yes it does. Without knowing which sections of the fuel lines were replaced by the alternate tubing the ignition source could have been almost anywhere but the fire would have inevitably spread back to the fuel tank and the entire supply would have gone up.” Forrester said.

“How much fuel do you think was in there commander?”

“It was probably almost full.” Forrester responded, “The shuttle was heading up to the orbiting engineering section of the colony transport for supplies so it must have had enough fuel to get to high atmospheric altitude before cutting in the impulse drive, then manoeuvre for docking before making the return journey fully laden. With that much fuel aboard the crew never stood a chance.”

“Do you think they knew?” the lieutenant asked.

“It depends on the ignition source.” Forrester answered, “If it was far enough from the tank then the damage control system may have detected the fire and sounded an alarm but I doubt they’ll have known how serious it was before the tank went up.”

Ash arrived in the transporter room in time to see off Duke and the two security teams. As Duke had planned the members of each team had replaced their standard red jumpsuits with field uniforms that in this case were a mix of shades of green and brown. All of the team wore standard security armour but this too had been covered by material designed to blend in with a woodland environment. Each uniform still featured a coloured band near the bottom of the sleeve as well as an under shirt in each person’s departmental colour though. Dark green in the case of the security guards and a lighter green for the attached medical officers. “All set I see chief.” Ash said as he looked around at the team members while they carried out their final checks on their equipment. All of the team members were all armed with assault phasers and the security guards also had spare power packs on their belts while the medical officer assigned to each team carried a medical kit in a backpack, “Commander Tan tells me you think that the saboteurs could be located in an area of woodland.”

“Yes captain. It seems like a logical spot for them to be. The terrain offers plenty of scope for concealment.” Duke replied.

“Okay. I want each team to check in every fifteen minutes whether you’ve found anything or not.

Understood?” Ash told him and he nodded.

“Yes captain. Fifteen minute check ins. Is there anything else?” he said.

“Only that if you do find anything though check in immediately but take no direct action unless you have no choice.” Ash said, “Apart from that you may carry on chief.”

“Yes captain.” Duke said before he looked at the others preparing to beam down, “Okay team one with me, onto the pad now. Team two will follow.” Duke and his team that consisted of three other security guards and a medical officer then stepped onto the transporter pads and he looked at the operator waiting behind the control console, “Energise.” he said and the operator activated the transporter.

5.

As soon as they materialised on the planet below the members of the security team all dropped into crouching positions and looked around with their phasers in their hands. As planned they had materialised just outside the woods that Duke suspected was the location of the saboteurs' base of operations.

"Are you picking anything up ensign?" Duke asked, looking at the medical officer who held a tricorder in her free hand.

"Nothing chief." she answered, shaking her head, "Apart from us there are no humanoid lifeforms within tricorder range. I'm picking up a large number of smaller creatures but nothing that looks out of the ordinary for terrain like this." she added before Duke's communicator sounded and he flipped it open.

"Duke." he said into it.

"We're down safe chief." the leader of the second team told him, "The area looks clear."

"Same here. Let the *Ascension* know and then begin your sweep. Duke out." Duke said before he closed the channel to the other team only to open another to the orbiting *Ascension*, "Duke to *Ascension*." he transmitted.

"*Ascension* here chief. Go ahead." Estevez's voice responded.

"Down and safe *Ascension*. We're starting our sweep now. Next check in in fifteen minutes." Duke said as he set a timer on his communicator that would alert him when it was next time to contact the *Ascension*.

"Copy that chief. Speak to you again in fifteen minutes. *Ascension* out." Estevez replied before the channel was shut off and Duke returned his communicator to his belt.

"Okay let's move. Standard box formation. Ensign you go in the middle." he ordered the rest of his team and the four security guards formed a square with the medical officer in the centre before they began to advance into the woodland in front of them.

"Both security teams have checked in captain." Estevez said as soon as Ash entered the bridge and he walked to her station.

"I take they deployed successfully?" he replied and Estevez nodded.

"Yes captain. Both teams reported the landing zones were clear and they are proceeding with their searches. They'll check in as scheduled." she said.

"Very good. I don't suppose that our friend with the Orion communicator has been talking to anyone again have they?" Ash said and Estevez smiled.

"Sorry captain." she said, "They've been staying quiet."

"Oh well, I suppose that it was too much to hope for that they'd make our job easier." Ash said and he turned towards his chair in the centre of the bridge. However, before he had taken a single step the *Ascension*'s communications activated again.

"Don't tell me one of the security teams has found something already." Etchemin said from the navigation console.

"It's not one of the security teams." Estevez said, "It's the colony calling captain. They'd like to speak to you."

"Okay put them on the main screen." Ash said and he hurried to his chair and sat down just as the main screen changed to show the same room that he had met with the colony's senior officers in earlier with Maina, Allard and Cho all sat beside one another.

"Ah captain, thank you for speaking with us." Maina said.

"Don't mention it. How can I help?" Ash responded.

"Your engineers have told us about the sabotage of our shuttles captain. Thank you. Our own people are replacing the fuel lines with the correct parts now." Maina said.

"That's not a problem Mister Maina." Ash said.

"The issue is that the process is likely to take a significant amount of time captain," Cho added, "and we are already far behind schedule. We'd like your assistance."

Ash frowned.

"I'm sorry but I can't really spare any engineers to-" Ash began before he was interrupted.

"No captain." Allard said, "We have enough personnel of our own but we desperately need the supplies that are still aboard the engineering section of our ship. We'd like your help in getting them down to the surface."

"I assume that means that you want to make use of our transporters." Ash said.

"You are correct captain." Maina replied, "Instead of ferrying down our supplies in small batches when we eventually get our shuttles back in service you could beam down everything in a matter of hours."

"Very well Mister Maina. If you'd like to send someone up here to identify which supplies you want then I'm sure that I can spare the personnel needed to tag them for transport." Ash said and the colonists on the screen looked at one another briefly.

"I was hoping that you'd beam down all our supplies captain." Maina said eventually.

"Yes but we don't know which supplies are your priority. Only your people know that. I am prepared to beam down everything from the orbiting section of your ship but unless we know which are the most important you could end up waiting some time for them while equipment you don't need yet piles up all around you."
"Of course." Maina said, obviously embarrassed but Ash did not call further attention to this.
"Perhaps Captain Stern should beam up to the *Ascension*." Cho suggested and Maina nodded.
"Yes. I will put it to him." he said.
"In that case I'll be waiting for him up here." Ash said, smiling.
"Thank you Captain Ash. Stern will signal when he is ready to beam aboard your ship." Maina said before he closed the channel.

"The colony is signalling us captain." the transporter operator told Ash as he waited in the *Ascension*'s transporter room with Forrester and five other crewmen from the engineering department and he nodded.
"Energise." he said, looking at the transporter pad and moments later the bright lights of a transporter signature appeared briefly before they vanished and left Michaels standing on the pad, "Welcome aboard the *USS Ascension*." Ash added.
"Thank you captain." Michaels replied as he stepped down from the transporter and he looked around, "So this is a Miranda class destroyer." he commented.
"Heavy destroyer." Forrester told him, "The *Ascension* is fitted with the enhanced weapons pod and roll bar that increases our firepower."
"You've been aboard one before?" Ash asked but Michaels shook his head.
"No. I did a tour in Starfleet a long time ago but that was aboard a Saladin-class destroyer." he said.
"There aren't many of those left in service now." Forrester said, "That single nacelle just doesn't provide the power needed by a modern starship."
Michaels then smiled at Forrester.
"It's good to see you again commander. I've got my people ripping out the thruster fuel lines from our shuttles. We're replacing the entire system instead of checking each section." he said.
"That's what I'd have done too. There's no telling how the fake sections of line could have contaminated the rest of the system." Forrester said.
"Mister Michaels, Lieutenant Commander Forrester and his team will beam over to your vessel with you." Ash told him, "Then you can identify the equipment that is needed most urgently so it can be tagged. As soon as the tags are active we'll use our cargo transporters to beam the containers over here before sending them down to the surface."
"That sounds perfect captain. When can we get started?" Michaels said.
"Right away." Forrester said, "My people have the tags and palm beacons. We didn't know if you'd have left the lights on."
"Actually we did. Light, gravity, heat and air should all be normal. They use so little power anyway it didn't seem like a problem." Michaels answered.
"Then let's get going." Forrester said and he stepped onto the transporter pad.

Just as Michaels had said the interior of the colonial transport's engineering section was fully lit and had a level of gravity and temperature that was similar to the *Ascension*. He and the team of Starfleet engineers had materialised in a compartment that adjoined a large airlock and Michaels looked around to orientate himself.

"This is your ship. Where to?" Forrester asked.

"This way." Michaels answered and he pointed to a passageway that led away from the compartment. This was wide enough that large cargo containers could easily be moved down it but it was no taller than most standard starship corridors, "There's an access to the hold we want about twenty metres down there."
"Then lead the way. We'll be right behind you." Forrester told him and Michaels started to walk down the passageway.

Just as Michaels had said this led to a doorway that from its size was obviously intended for cargo to be moved through it and when he opened it a large chamber filled with cargo containers was revealed on the other side.

"This is it." he said, "There are portable antigravs and loaders in here so we can-" then he suddenly stopped talking and came to a halt.

"What's wrong?" Forrester asked.

"Come and look." Michaels replied and Forrester hurried forward to look into the cargo hold where he saw that among the stacks of containers there were also several on the floor that had been broken open and their contents smashed and strewn around them, "Someone's been here." Michaels added.

"This stuff couldn't have just come loose?" Forrester said.

"No, absolutely not." Michaels responded, shaking his head, "I checked every hold before we separated the two sections and everything was in place and intact. Before we lost the shuttle we were able to make two

supply runs as well and none of the crews of them reported any damage.” then he shook his head and added, “This equipment is vital to our mission
“Getting aboard means that someone would have to use a ship or a transporter. A transporter seems rather advanced for a scouting party camping in the woods but wouldn’t you have seen a shuttle?” Forrester said.
“Possibly not. Our sensors are limited. If a shuttle kept low while it was below our horizon then ran silent in orbit we probably wouldn’t pick it up.” Michael answered.
“Commander if someone has been here then how do we know that they aren’t still aboard?” one of Forrester’s engineers commented and the other gathered engineers looked around nervously.
Forrester himself immediately took out his communicator and flipped it open.
“Forrester to *Ascension*.” he said into it.
“*Ascension* here commander.” Estevez responded.
“Ensign I need to talk to the captain.” Forrester told her and there was a brief pause.
“Ash here commander.” Ash’s voice then said.
“Captain we’ve got a problem over here. It looks like someone has been here ahead of us. Some of the colonists’ equipment has been damaged.” Forrester said, “I need a security team to make sure that they aren’t still around and then I need to get some of the damaged equipment to the *Ascension* to see how bad the damage is and if it can be repaired.”
“Understood commander. I’ll get a security team to your location as soon as possible. I’ll leave deciding what to do with equipment up to you and Mister Michaels. *Ascension* out.” Ash told him before he closed the channel.

Aboard the *Ascension* Ash looked at Etchemin.

“Lieutenant, with Chief Duke down on the surface I want you to lead the security team over to the transport. Go to the security section now to draw a phaser and armour.” he ordered.

“Yes captain.” Etchemin replied and he immediately got up from his seat and headed for the turbolift at the back of the bridge. He used this to take him as close as possible to the security section before walking the remaining short distance.

Upon entering the security section he found a team of eight security guards already preparing to beam across to the transport’s engineering section.

“Ah lieutenant we were told to expect you.” the duty officer said and he placed an armoured vest, assault phaser and communicator on the desk in front of him, “Can you sign for the phaser?” he added and he held out a PADD.

“Thanks.” Etchemin replied, checking the serial number of the weapon against the PADD before he signed his name. Then he looked at the guards who were preparing to board the transport and added, “Have you been told our assignment?”

“No sir.” one of them replied, “Only that we are to accompany you over to the transport.”

“Lieutenant Commander Forrester suspects that there has been an intruder aboard the transport and it’s possible that they are still there. Our assignment is to protect the engineering team and to make sure that the transport is secure. We’ll operate in groups of three. One group will cover the engineers while the other two conduct a search. Each group will require a tricorder as well so we’ll pick three up in the transporter room.” Etchemin explained as he began to put on the armoured vest he had been given.

Michaels, Forrester and his engineers were picking up pieces of smashed equipment when then saw the glowing transporter signatures of the security team beaming aboard and both Forrester and Michaels looked around.

“Lieutenant.” Forrester said when he saw Etchemin.

“Captain Ash wanted me to fill in for Chief Duke while he’s on the surface commander.” he replied and Forrester nodded.

“Okay so how you want to run this?” he asked and Etchemin looked at the security guards who had beamed aboard the transport with him.

“I’ve got three teams of three commander. Team three will stay here to make sure that if there are hostile forces aboard this ship you are protected.” he said.

“That’s comforting to know.” Michaels commented when he overheard this.

“I’ll be leading team one and along with team two we’ll conduct a sweep of the ship, using tricorders to scan for life signs and visual checks in the shielded areas such as the warp nacelles.” Etchemin continued.

“That sounds good to me lieutenant.” Forrester said, “We’re probably going to be kept busy here for some time.”

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After completing another scheduled check in with nothing to report Duke paused to take a drink of water from his canteen.

"If we keep going in the same direction then we're going to reach the other side of these woods soon and we haven't seen any signs of anyone being here before us chief." one of the other security guards said and Duke nodded.

"I know. If we get that far then we'll just move a couple of hundred metres towards the coast and head back." he said before the medical officer suddenly looked up from his tricorder.

"I think I have something chief." she said and Duke turned towards her quickly.

"What have you found?" he asked.

"There was a humanoid life sign at the edge of tricorder range in that direction chief." the medical officer told him and she pointed towards the ocean.

"Right at the edge?" Duke said.

"Yes chief. It was there for a moment and then gone. It looked like they stepped into range for a moment and then back out again. It wasn't there long enough to get detailed information such as the exact species though, sorry." the medical officer explained.

"That's okay." Duke said before he looked at the rest of his team, "Okay we're changing direction. We'll head towards the ocean and see if the signal appears again. Let's move."

The members of Duke's team changed their formation as they advanced through the forest towards the life sign that the medical officer had detected. Instead of the box formation centred on the medical officer the four security guards now advanced in a line side by side with the medical officer following just behind them and still scanning with her tricorder.

"Chief, I've got something." she said about a minute after they began to advance and Duke signalled for the team to come to a stop. As they halted they all crouched and looked around.

"I don't see anything." Duke commented.

"Range to contact is about seventy-five metres chief." the medical officer said.

"Okay we move in pairs. Kraus, with me." Duke said before he glanced at the medical officer and added, "You just keep up."

Duke and one of his men then darted forwards through the undergrowth for a short distance before they dropped into crouching positions once again. This was then the signal for the other two security guards to move forwards, passing by Duke and Kraus on their way before they too stopped and crouched further ahead. Meanwhile the medical officer also moved forwards so that she remained just behind the rearmost of the security guards.

"Fifty metres chief." she told him quietly.

"Can you give me any details?" Duke asked and she studied her tricorder more closely.

"Scanning." she said, "Body temperature looks similar to human, maybe a little high." then she frowned.

"Something wrong?" Duke said.

"I just lost the signal." the medical officer answered.

"Did it move out of range again?" Duke said but the medical officer shook her head.

"No, it was there one moment but gone the next. I didn't pick up any energy signatures either so they didn't use a transporter to get away." she said.

"Then whoever it is must still be there, just shielded from detection somehow." Duke said.

"If they are shielded then the shielding is incredibly localised." The medical officer replied, "I'm still getting readings from that location and the surrounding area."

"So no hole in the readings?" Duke said, thinking back to his own training in the use of a tricorder and trying to remember anything that had been pointed out that could hide a specific target from a scan while still permitting a normal scan of the surrounding area.

"No, everything else is exactly as it should be." the medical officer said.

"Okay I'm going to call this in. I think that this definitely qualifies as something that the captain needs to know about." Duke said as he reached for his communicator and he flipped the device open, "Duke to *Ascension*." he said.

"*Ascension* here chief. You've still got five minutes before your next scheduled check in time. Have you found something?" Estevez responded.

"Found? Maybe, it's difficult to tell." Duke told her.

"Care to expand on that chief?" Ash's voice then added.

"Captain, Lieutenant Sharpe picked up a life sign on her tricorder but as we moved in closer it just disappeared without trace. No signs of a transporter and apparently nothing interfering with the scan. The signal just vanished." Duke explained.

"Can you give me a location?" Tan's voice said as he activated his console's communication system to join the conversation.

"Commander it's about fifty metres ahead of our position, towards the coast." Sharpe answered.

"Scanning now." Tan said and aboard the *Ascension* he focused the destroyer's sensors on the area indicated by the medical officer.

"Duke what's your impression of the area?" Ash asked while Tan was running his scans.

"I've not noticed anything strange captain. The vegetation has been changing as we get closer to the coast but I wouldn't call that unusual. It's just different species that prefer different conditions." Duke replied.

"Scan complete captain." Tan announced, "Results are negative. I'm not picking up any humanoid lifeforms, energy signatures or disturbances that would indicate the operation of a cloaking device."

"Chief Duke I want you to continue your search and make a visual inspection of the area where the lifeform was detected. Maybe the mark one eyeball will be able to detect something that is invisible to electronic means." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain. Duke out." Duke responded before he closed the communicator and returned it to his belt.

When Etchemin returned to the cargo hold aboard the orbiting colony transport's engineering section he found Forrester and Michaels still in the process of inspecting the damaged equipment and assessing what could be easily repaired and what needed more significant work carrying out in the *Ascension's* machine shops.

"Find anything lieutenant?" Forrester asked him when he saw the navigator enter the compartment.

"Nothing commander. Apart from us this ship is empty. I've sent the other security guards back to the *Ascension* but I thought that the third team should remain here to protect you just in case." Etchemin answered as he looked at the row of equipment cases that now had labels attached to them that indicated the condition of the contents, "Have you found anything interesting here?" he said.

"Whoever did this had a good idea of what to damage to sabotage the colony itself." Forrester said, "Pretty much all of this equipment is stuff that's needed early in the process of setting up the colony."

"Some of the equipment won't be needed for a while," Michaels added, "but replacing it will be difficult."

"The whole thing would be easier if some of the pieces weren't mixed up." Forrester said.

"Can I help?" Etchemin said and Forrester looked around.

"How about the row over there?" he said, looking at Michaels and pointed to the end of the compartment.

"Sounds good." Michaels responded, nodding.

"Okay Etchemin, I'd like you to take a look at the stacks right at the end of the hold. As well as the cases that were just opened and the contents smashed and scattered we've found a few that had been opened and the contents tampered with more discretely. Check the seals and see if you can find any that look like they've been broken and then repaired. You'll need to use your communicator to detect it and you can use an antigrav platform if you want for the ones higher up." Forrester told Etchemin.

"Yes commander." he said before he made his way to the far end of the hold and looked up at the stacks of cargo containers around him. Some of the smaller ones were stowed on shelves that meant any of them could be accessed easily but the larger ones were free standing and stacked directly on top of one another. This meant that in order to access the containers at the bottom of the stack those on top would have to be moved from on top of them first.

Etchemin began by inspecting the smaller but more numerous containers on the shelves. Just as Forrester had told him, each container had a small seal stuck across the point where they opened. This was intended for customs purposes and would have told inspectors at each of the planets that the colony ship had visited during its journey that the contents matched the manifest. Of course a simple adhesive label could be cut through and then re-glued afterwards to make it appear unbroken visually so the labels included a wireless identification chip and coiled antenna that would be broken if the seal was cut and applying an adhesive to repair the visual damage would not repair this.

As Forrester had told him, Etchemin took out his communicator and set it to emit a signal on the frequency that the customs seals operated on. That way when he passed it within a few centimetres of an intact seal the communicator would receive a response and signal this with a simple 'beep'. This made checking the seals quick and simple and Etchemin was able to check an entire shelf in under a minute. The first few three shelves that he checked revealed that all of the seals were intact but as he moved up to the fourth shelf he came across a container where the seal did not broadcast a response and he stopped, holding his communicator next to the container for several seconds just in case the response was delayed. However, when no response came even after this delay he put his communicator away again and pulled the container from the shelf.

"Commander Forrester." he called out as he set the container down on the floor, "I think I've found one."

"Hold on we're coming." Forrester responded and Etchemin waited while he and Michaels hurried to see what he had found.

"This seal doesn't respond to my communicator." Etchemin told the two men.

"These are agricultural supplies." Michaels said, looking at the shelves that Etchemin had taken the container from, "We brought a range of seeds so we could grow test crops. Not enough to feed the colony but enough to find out whether the soil was suitable for various types."

"Perhaps we should take a look inside." Forrester suggested and Michaels knelt down.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to tell if anything's wrong with the contents." he said as he opened the container, "The crop experiment was a science project that Allard was running, not an engineering issue." however, when he opened the container it was immediately obvious that the contents had been tampered with.

The container held half a dozen glass cylinders that contained the test batches of seed but one of these had been smashed and the seeds it had held had spilled out.

"Why do I get the feeling that breaking that cylinder wasn't the extent of the intended sabotage?" Forrester said and Michaels nodded in agreement.

"It doesn't make sense." he said, "We could easily separate the broken glass from the seeds and use them."

"Perhaps we should send these to the *Ascension* for Commander Tan and Doctor Reese to take a look at." Etchemin said.

"That sounds like a good idea." Forrester said and Michaels closed the container again.

"Yes I agree." he said.

"Okay lieutenant, take this back to the *Ascension* for analysis." Forrester told Etchemin and Michaels handed him the container.

When he materialised in the *Ascension's* transporter room Etchemin found both Tan and Reese waiting for him.

"One container of seeds." he told the pair as he passed the container to Tan, "It's got five intact cylinders inside and one broken one."

"It sounds like someone tried to tamper with the seeds." Tan said, "Possibly just to render them inert but they could have added something that would poison anyone who ate anything that grew from them."

"We should take this to sickbay." Reese said.

"Of course doctor." Tan replied and the two officers took the container from the transporter room, heading for sickbay.

Once in sickbay Tan set the container down in Reese's office beside a medical scanner while Reese activated the device. Tan then opened the container to reveal the contents.

"I'm going to start with one of the seeds from the broken cylinder." Reese said as she picked up a pair of tweezers. Then she used these to pick out a single seed from among the broken cylinder and placed it in a specimen dish. Placing this dish beneath the scanner Reese started the scan sequence, analysing the genetic profile of the seed as well as checking for contamination.

"These readings look like good old quadrotriticale." Tan said and Reese smiled.

"Don't tell Adam for God's sake or he'll start going on about tribble bombs again." she said and Tan smiled back at her.

"I don't see any signs of tampering." Tan added, "No genetic alterations and no chemical contaminants."

"Maybe whatever was to be done to this cylinder wasn't finished because it broke." Reese suggested and Tan nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps we should try another cylinder." he said, "I'll go and fetch one."

Tan then returned to the case to pick out one of the intact cylinders of grain seeds. However, as he was carefully picking the cylinder out from among the scattered grain and pieces of glass from the broken one he noticed that one of the fragments of the broken cylinder had something stuck to it right at the edge, a dull reddish spot. Picking this fragment of glass from the container Tan looked at the spot closely and frowned.

"Doctor what do you make of this?" he asked, holding out the broken piece of glass so that Reese could see the spot as well.

"Blood?" Reese said.

"That's what I was thinking." Tan replied.

"Pass it here and I'll take a look under the scanner." Reese said and she took the piece of glass from Tan before removing the seed from under the scanner and replacing it with the glass. She then spent a few moments aligning the scanner so that it was focused on the spot before she and Tan looked at the screen.

"That is blood." Tan said and Reese nodded.

"Yes. Obviously it's been here long enough to dry out." she said.

"Can you still isolate the DNA?" Tan asked.

"Yes, there doesn't appear to be any degradation yet." Reese answered and she began the analysis.

There was nothing particularly exotic about the blood on the glass and so the analysis took less than a minute before the nature of the blood appeared on the scanner's screen and both Tan and Reese stared at it for a few moments in silence.

"This certainly complicates matters. Though I can't say that it's entirely surprising." Tan said.

"Shall I tell the captain or do you want to do it?" Reese asked.

"I'll let you do it doctor. You're on much better terms with him." Tan told her and she reached for the nearby intercom control.

"Sickbay to bridge. Captain Ash are you there?" she said into it.

"Ash here doctor." Ash's voice responded.

"Captain, Commander Tan found blood on a piece of broken glass." Reese told him.

"Have you been able to analyse it?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. It's Klingon." Reese answered.

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"Thank you doctor. Please continue to analyse the contents of the case to see if you can find out what they're up to. Let me know as soon as you have something. Bridge out." Ash said.

"So it is the Klingons." Estevez said, "Do you think that there's a cloaked ship in the system?"

"If they had anything more than a shuttle in the system then I'd have expected them to attack." Teela replied, "A swift run over the horizon from either port or starboard to limit the effectiveness of our torpedoes."

"Yes, I think we're still dealing with a small group on the surface." Ash agreed, "Ensign Estevez get me Chief Duke."

"Aye captain." Estevez replied as she opened a channel to Duke's communicator.

"Chief Duke." Duke's voice said.

"Chief, Doctor Reese and Commander Tan have uncovered evidence of Klingon involvement. If they are down there on the surface then you should expect to come under attack." Ash told him.

"Thanks for the heads up captain." Duke said as he looked around. His team had reached the approximate location of the life sign that Sharpe had detected but so far they had found no indications that whoever the medical officer had detected was still close by and the ground was firm enough that no significant tracks had been left, "So far this area looks deserted though. We're almost to ocean and there are no signs of intelligent life anywhere."

"They're still there." the Klingon watch officer said when his commanding officer entered the room. The watch officer had been monitoring the progress of the two Starfleet teams in the woods since they first beamed down but was now focusing on Duke's team alone while two other Klingons kept watch on the orbiting *Ascension*. None of the Klingons wore uniforms that would mark them out as members of the Klingon Defence Force or any of the militias operated by the great houses but all of them still carried weapons varying from daggers to disruptor pistols.

"Gartoth was careless. He let them detect him instead of staying out of their scanning range." the commanding officer replied, looking at the screen that showed footage of the Starfleet team, "Have they discovered anything?"

"No commander." the watch officer answered, "The shielding on our external security sensors is proving effective."

"And so it should." the commander said. Then he looked at the other Klingons in the room, "What about their starship?"

"Still in orbit commander. It's shields are still down and its weapons are not powered. They are vulnerable if we strike." one of them reported.

"Vulnerable Kordos? And what do you propose we use to attack?" the commander replied.

"We could beam aboard commander. I volunteer to lead." Kordos began.

"You will lead nothing Kordos!" the commander snapped at him, "Humans may be weak but we could not subdue the entire crew of that starship before they were able to warn Starfleet of our presence here. They could even detect the operation of our transporter and fire on us from orbit. We too have no shields."

"What are your orders commander?" the watch officer asked and the commander hesitated while he considered his options.

"For now we wait but I want the guard on the main hatch doubled." he said, "Draw rifles from the armoury. If Starfleet try to attack us then I want them to learn what the consequences of facing Klingon warriors are."

"Keeler." a stern voice said from behind the seat occupied by the only human in the Klingon command centre and he turned to see Admiral Korda, recognisable by his smooth forehead and almost human appearance when compared to the warriors standing just behind him.

"Yes admiral." Keeler responded, getting to his feet and standing up straight in the admiral's presence.

"I understand that our listening post in the GS six-one-seven system has missed several check ins." Korda said.

"Yes admiral that's true. Their last message said that the colonists had summoned a Starfleet vessel to help them with their shuttlecraft problems." Keeler told the admiral and he snarled at the human in response.

"The commander of the listening post requested that we shoot down the colony ship Keeler but I put my trust in your idea that the colonists could be driven away without risking one of our warships being detected in Federation space. Now you tell me that instead of being forced to leave the system the colonists are being reinforced?" Korda said angrily.

"And I stand by that suggestion admiral. The presence of the Starfleet vessel explains why our listening post hasn't sent its regular report though. If they use their communications array then they'd give away their position to the starship." Keeler said.

"So now that Starfleet are involved how do you propose we protect our listening post?" Korda asked.

"The listening post is safe admiral. It is shielded from detection by the sensors on a Miranda-class destroyer like the *Ascension*. All the commander has to do is wait for them to leave. Then they can send their report and we can look at other ways of getting rid of the colonists. A pirate raid or two perhaps. The important thing is that the commander of that outpost doesn't lose his head and do something stupid." Keeler answered.

"Captain Ash, how can I help you?" Stern said when his face appeared on the *Ascension's* main view screen. "Captain Stern I take it that you've been informed of the damage aboard the engineering section of your vessel?" Ash said and Stern nodded.

"Yes, Mister Michaels told me that some of the supplies had been sabotaged. Is the damage worse than I was originally told?" he responded.

"I've not been given any information to suggest that but my science and medical officers have been analysing some of the seeds your expedition brought along to experiment with growing crops." Ash told him.

"Yes, I know the ones you mean." Stern commented.

"My officers were looking for signs of tampering in a case that had a broken container in it and they found a trace of blood on the glass. Obviously whoever broke the glass cut themselves in the process. Not deeply it seems but enough to leave behind a sample that a DNA test could be carried out on." Ash said.

"So you know who's trying to sabotage our colony then captain?" Stern asked.

"The species at least, yes. They're Klingon. Our best guess is that the Klingon Empire is trying to prevent your colony from being established." Ash answered.

"But what threat are we to the Klingons? We only have a handful of weapons. You know that our plan was to ask Starfleet for protection under the Federation charter." Stern said.

"It is probably your location captain. A colony here could serve as a forward operating base for Starfleet if the peace talks fail and war breaks out. I think that someone in the empire is planning for that outcome and trying to undermine our position. Sabotaging your shuttles and supplies while leaving your transport operation would make staying difficult but leaving a practical option." Ash explained.

"I see. In that case I suppose that I should warn the rest of our senior council and organise what defence I can. I'm sure I can put together a small force from the colonists who brought weapons." Stern said.

"Actually Captain Stern I think that it's best that you don't." Ash said and Stern frowned.

"But why not? If there are Klingons around then we have to defend ourselves." he said.

"You need protection, yes but I think it's better that you let my crew take care of that captain." Ash told him,

"I've got a team of forty security guards aboard the *Ascension* and I can deploy half to the surface. They're well trained and well equipped. Plus I think there's less chance of them misidentifying a target and us ending up with a case of friendly fire on our hands."

"Of course. Thank you captain. I'll put your offer to the others and recommend that we accept it." Stern said, his expression lightening at the idea of having a professional force to protect his colony from the Klingons.

"I've also sent word to Starfleet." Ash continued, "If the Klingons are wanting to undermine your colony then I think that moving up your schedule for requesting Starfleet protection. I don't think that a full fledged starbase is likely to be constructed here but I wouldn't be surprised if Starfleet wanted to put a well armed outpost in orbit and add this system to regular patrol routes."

"Commander if Starfleet construct an outpost in-" the Klingon watch officer began as the Klingons in the room listened in to the conversation between Ash and Stern. Although the *Ascension*, like all Starfleet vessels had an encrypted communication system as a civilian ship the colony transport lacked such a system and that made signals sent to and from it easy to monitor.

"I know what it means!" the Klingon commander snapped at him.

"Surely we must attack them now commander." Kordos said.

"Yes we must. But we must be cautious." the commander replied, "By sending half their soldiers to the surface the Starfleet captain has made his vessel more vulnerable but not vulnerable enough to guarantee us a quick victory. The colony must be our target."

"But commander our efforts to sabotage the colony haven't driven them away and now that they have Starfleet protection the colonists will be emboldened." the watch officer said.

"We won't be trying to drive them off Granak. We're going to wipe them all out." the commander responded.

"How commander?" Granak asked.

"There is a fusion reactor aboard their colony ship. If we can overload that then the entire colony can be destroyed in one go." the commander replied.

“Commander Graf,” one of the other Klingons said, “sabotaging a fusion reactor is one thing but making sure that the damage cannot be undone will require it to be guarded right up to the moment of detonation. It will be a suicide mission.”

“Today will be a good day to die.” the commander said.

“No luck then chief?” Ash said when Duke and his team materialised back aboard the *Ascension*.

“Nothing captain.” he replied as he stepped down from the transporter pad, “Whoever was down there just vanished into thin air without leaving any tracks or a transporter signature. I’d have kept searching but we were losing light so I figured it was best to come back to the ship.”

“Yes you made the right decision.” Ash said, nodding his head in agreement, “Also I want to go over what we know with the senior staff.”

“I heard that you confirmed that we’re dealing with Klingons.” Duke replied.

“At least one, yes.” Ash said and then he looked at Sharpe, “Lieutenant Sharpe I’d like you to get your tricorder to sickbay. Doctor Reese and Commander Tan are there now and I’d like them to take a look at the readings you took.”

“Yes captain.” the medical officer replied and she made her way from the transporter room while Ash turned his attention back to Duke.

“Chief before the meeting I need you to organise a security force for the colony. I want half your staff on the surface to protect the colony. Organise shifts as you see fit.” he said.

“That’s going to leave us pretty light up here and thin on the ground down there. Can I take extra personnel from engineering for key areas of the colony ship captain?” Duke asked.

“How many were you thinking about chief?” Ash replied.

“About half a dozen. On the basis of a three shift system that will put two of them on duty at any time. I was thinking of deploying them to the colony ship’s engineering section.” Duke told him.

“Okay check with Lieutenant Commander Forrester first though. Engineering have a lot on with sorting out the Klingon sabotage so he may not have the personnel to spare.” Ash said.

“Yes captain. I’ll have a schedule drawn up for you within an hour.” Duke responded.

For the second time since entering orbit Ash gathered all of the *Ascension*’s department heads in the briefing room.

“Okay,” he began, “I wanted to gather all of you here to make sure that everyone knows exactly where we are up to and to discuss how we’ll be going forwards. As you all know Commander Tan and Doctor Reese were able to identify a blood sample left behind by a saboteur as Klingon in origin. Therefore, I think that it is safe to conclude that we are dealing with Klingon agents.”

“The tricorder scans made by Lieutenant Sharpe also indicate a Klingon.” Reese commented, “There wasn’t enough data to run a DNA comparison against the blood sample so I can’t tell you whether it was the same individual.”

“The Klingons have been known to send solo operatives into foreign territory.” Tan commented and Duke nodded in agreement.

“It makes it harder to pin their activities on the Klingon government.” he added.

“I’ve communicated what we know to Starfleet but we haven’t received a reply yet. Until we do I’ve decided that as well as continuing to hunt for the saboteurs we’ll be providing a defensive force for the colony just in case the Klingons attempt any more sabotage.” Ash said before he looked at Duke, “Do you have your force prepared?” he asked.

“Yes captain.” Duke answered as he consulted the PADD he had brought with him, “As you requested we have deployed a force of twenty of my staff to the surface operating on a three shift pattern. These have also been bolstered by six engineers that Lieutenant Commander Forrester has been able to provide me with. This has given us a total of eight personnel for each shift, plus two spare. I’m proposing that the engineers will be assigned to protect the colony ship’s engineering section. Four security guards will patrol the perimeter in pairs while two more will patrol the interior of the colony. I’m confident that they’ll be able to deal with small incursions but if there is a larger scale attack then the guards not actively on duty will be available as a reserve.”

“So they’re already on the surface?” Tan commented.

“Yes commander. They beamed down just before this meeting began. The personnel on active shift should be in place within a few minutes if they aren’t already.” Duke told him.

“If people have been taken from engineering then won’t that slow down the repairs to the damaged equipment?” Estevez asked and she looked at Forrester.

“No, not to any significant degree.” he told her, “My department is the biggest one aboard the ship to begin with and most of what was damaged is equipment that usually considered to be off the shelf. We have all the designs and materials available for our fabricators. They’re already running to produce replacements and I estimate that we’ll have about half the broken parts replaced by morning. Of course there are some things

that will be harder to reproduce like the rotorcraft parts-”

“Rotorcraft?” Teela said, her antennas twitching as she said this, “They have helicopters? Or are they tilt rotor vehicles?”

“Tilt rotors.” Forrester replied, “The colonists brought along five of them in pieces. Three small scouts and two larger cargo carriers so that they can conduct long range operations without using their shuttles.”

“You know captain I think that it would be a good idea if we conducted a test flight of one of those once our engineering department has produced the parts they need.” Teela said, smiling at Ash.

“How long has it been since you last flew one Teela?” Reese asked.

“Years.” Teela replied, “I loved flying them at the academy but it’s not like Starfleet has many of them in active service.”

“Perhaps for now we should just concentrate on doing our jobs.” Tan commented.

“Have your scans revealed anything new commander?” Ash then asked him.

“So far nothing captain.” Tan answered, “I’ve run detailed scans of the surface for a radius of five kilometres around the colony and found nothing. No signs of Klingon life signs and nothing to indicate how anyone could have reached the transport’s engineering section in orbit.”

“The security teams that searched the ship didn’t find any signs of how they got aboard either.” Etchemin added, “They must have beamed aboard. Could a ship have left the system before we arrived?”

“It’s possible. Though it would have to have been cloaked.” Tan replied.

“Are we sure that there isn’t a cloaked ship on the surface? That would explain how that Klingon managed to disappear.” Estevez said.

“Not a chance ensign.” Duke responded, “My team stood right where he disappeared and there was nothing there. The ground was too heavily wooded for even a small shuttle to have landed there and we’d have heard and felt the blast of thrusters if it was overhead.”

“We’re going to have to expand our search outwards.” Ash said, “Increase the scan radius to ten kilometres. I don’t know how the Klingons could travel that far to reach the colony without being detected but I don’t see that we have much choice.”

“Yes captain.” Tan said, “I suspected that you’d want that so I already have a search pattern drawn up.”

“Thank you.” Ash replied and he looked around at the other department heads at the table, “I think that covers everything. So unless anyone has anything else to bring up we’ll end this meeting here and continue our operations first thing in the morning.”

8.

When Ash stepped from the turbolift onto the bridge the next morning he found Tan already at his post while the junior science officer who was supposed to be on duty at that point was manning a different console.

"Putting in extra hours commander?" Ash commented.

"I just wanted to review the results of the scans taken overnight in person captain." Tan replied, "I have every confidence in my staff of course but-

"Don't worry commander, I'm not about to question the capability of your department just because you want to confirm their findings." Ash interrupted, "So what have you found?"

"In a word, nothing captain." Tan answered, frowning, "We've scanned every square metre of ground for ten kilometres around the colony and there's nothing down there. No energy sources, no life signs, not even a camp fire and none of the disturbances created by a cloaking device reacting to an atmosphere. Everything seems to point towards a cloaked vessel in space, possibly in a higher orbit to us but even a small Klingon warship could have destroyed the colony transport when it first arrived in the system or bombarded the colony site from space."

"Wiping out the colonists before they could call for help and leaving us none the wiser since they may have filed a flight plan to come here but they didn't register their colony with the Federation." Ash said and Tan nodded.

"Exactly captain." he said, "Everything points to the Klingons having a ship here but their behaviour doesn't match that. They're acting as if they are camping somewhere near the colony on the surface but somehow they've managed to completely avoid detection by our sensors and a physical search."

"Yet they seem to be able to come and go at will. Or maybe it's just 'him'. After all we've only seen proof that there is one Klingon. It could be a lone agent." Ash said and then he frowned.

"Is something wrong captain?" Tan asked when he saw the change in his expression.

"Could the Klingon have stowed away on the colony transport at its last stop?" Ash said, "If he did then he could be hiding within the colony itself."

"That still doesn't explain how he managed to shake off Chief Duke and his security team captain." Tan pointed out and Ash sighed.

"Yes, that is a mystery. For a civilisation that are making use of cloaking devices on more and more of their warships their warriors don't seem to value stealth as much as Federation forces do." he said.

"The idea of hiding within the colony itself is a good one though captain. Perhaps one that deserves further investigation. Ordinarily I'd volunteer to beam down myself but I think my time is better spent here to monitor our sensors." Tan replied.

"Don't worry, I think I can find someone who can interpret tricorder scans well enough to pick out Klingon bio signs." Ash said with a smile.

"Deborah?" Ash said as he appeared at the doorway to Reese's office in sickbay and she looked up and smiled at him.

"Come on in Mike." she replied, "So is this a personal visit?"

"I'm afraid not Deborah." Ash answered as he sat down opposite Reese, "James and I have been discussing our Klingon problem. In particular trying to find them, or maybe him."

"Still no luck, hey?" Reese commented.

"No but we came up with the idea that maybe a Klingon agent was able to stow away aboard the colony ship at its last port of call. If that's the case then they could be hiding within the colony itself." Ash explained.

"Ah, so you want me to beam down and see if I can pick out Klingon life signs among all the Federation species?" Reese asked and Ash nodded.

"Exactly. You and James are most qualified to be able to pick out the differences and he's needed on the bridge just in case we're wrong. Of course I'll come down with you to-" he began.

"Hold my hand?" Reese interrupted.

"I was going to say act as escort." Ash said, "If I send Chief Duke or another of his men then I pull even more security away from the Ascension and we might alert the Klingon to what we're up to. On the other hand the pair of us will just look like we're having a general look around. We'll tell everyone that you're just conducting an environmental and ecological survey."

"You're not even going to tell the colonists why we're beaming down?" Reese said and Ash shook his head.

"No. Hinting to a civilian population that there could be a Klingon spy among them isn't going to do anything other than cause panic. We all know that there are some Klingons that can pretty much pass for human and the last thing we need is the colonists accusing one another of being Klingons just because they've taken a dislike to one another." he said.

"Okay so when do you want to leave?" Reese said.

"Now. Grab your tricorder and we'll draw communicators and phasers and beam down right away. If we get down to the colony early enough then maybe there won't be that many people about and you'll be able to pick out a Klingon more easily." Ash told her.

Ash and Reese materialised close to the colony ship but outside where they were surrounded by the structures built from material taken from the starship. Rather than immediately reach for her tricorder Reese took the time to look around.

"Looks like you were wrong about the colonists not being early risers." she said to Ash when she saw a number of the colonists already moving about outside despite the early hour.

"Will it make a difference to your scans?" Ash asked.

"Well a stationary subject is always easier to scan but if anyone around here is a secret Klingon then I should still be able to spot them even without the forehead ridges." Reese replied and she lifted her tricorder and began to scan the surrounding area.

Reese began to walk as she conducted her scan and Ash walked alongside, looking around at the colonists. Many of the colonists looked at the two Starfleet officers, though they accepted their presence in the colony enough that none of them approached to enquire what they were doing on the surface. Ash made brief eye contact with a few of these and he wondered for a moment whether he was looking at someone who was truly human or a cleverly disguised Klingon.

As well as the colonists, the streets of the colony were being patrolled by a pair of Duke's security staff and when they saw Captain Ash and Doctor Reese they came towards the two officers.

"Captain we weren't informed that you were coming." one of them said and Ash smiled back at him.

"No crewman. Doctor Reese has some scans to run and I'm just here to act as a liaison if needed." he responded.

"Of course captain." the security guard said, "Do you want us to escort you?"

"No that won't be necessary crewman. Continue with your patrol and we call you if we need you." Ash told him and he patted the communicator he had on his belt.

"Yes captain." the security guard said before he and his comrade turned around and walked away.

"You aren't going to warn them Mike?" Reese asked quietly when the security guards were out of earshot.

"Warn them about what?" Ash commented, "Unless you are able to identify an enemy agent with your scans then there's nothing to bother them with and if you find nothing then telling them what we're doing may just distract them."

"Well so far everyone around here seems to be exactly what they seem." Reese replied before a voice called out from behind them.

"Captain Ash, I heard that you had beamed down. I'd have thought that you'd have come to us to announce your presence." Maina said and when Ash and Reese turned towards him they saw him along with two other colonists standing in the middle of the street. Significantly the colonists standing either side of Maina carried sidearms attached to their belts. Neither of the weapons was as modern as the assault phasers that were Starfleet standard issue but they were still lethal.

"I'm sorry Mister Maina." Ash replied, "I would have come to you when Doctor Reese was done with her tricorder sweep but until that happens I don't even know if there is anything that you need to know about."

"And what exactly are you scanning for here?" Maina added and Ash looked at Reese.

"I'm curious about the ecosystem Mister Maina." she said, "I want to make sure that there is no reason other than general sabotage that the Klingons attempted to tamper with your crops."

"The environmental studies we carried out show nothing dangerous about this planet doctor." Maina told her.

"That may be but there can often be things that don't show up at first. Especially when it comes to local lifeforms that have a hibernation cycle. If the Klingons arrived before you then they may have learned something about this world that you haven't yet." Reese said.

"Very well. Though as a matter of principle I would rather that either Captain Stern or the council had been told before you began this study. It does no-one any good when my people are asking me why you are conducting scans that I know nothing about." Maina said.

"Of course, we'll make sure to do that Mister Maina. Please accept my apologies." Ash replied and Maina smiled.

"Thank you captain." he said before he and his guards started to walk back towards the colony ship.

"Well that's gratitude for you. Here we are trying to save his colony and he's worried about whether we call ahead and ask permission. I've seen koalas with more sense." Reese muttered as she watched the colony director leaving and Ash smiled, the pair of them having been born and raised in Australia on Earth.

"Something you just told him gave me an idea though." Ash told her and she looked at him.

"What?" she asked.

"That bit about the Klingons getting here first." Ash answered, "So far we've been working on the idea that the Klingons are just a scouting party and that they've either got a small camp or a ship around somewhere. But supposing that they've been here longer. Maybe right as far back as when Matt Keeler was making sure

we didn't come here or even before that. If they were planning on staying here for a prolonged period then don't you think that they would have been able to put in place ways to avoid being detected? They must have realised that sooner or later a ship would come here. Keeler couldn't get the entire system quarantined on his own authority." Ash explained.

"So you think that the Klingons could have constructed some sort of shielded outpost here?" Reese said and Ash nodded.

"Exactly. With the right materials an entirely passive concealment system can be built that would make it blend into the environment." he said.

"Isn't it a coincidence that the colonists happened to land within walking distance of this outpost though Mike?" Reese pointed out.

"No, not at all." he replied, "The colonists will have picked this area for very specific reasons. Access to the coast and a stable geology along with a location as close to the equator as possible to make space launches easier. The same would go for the Klingons when they built their outpost."

It was not difficult to find volunteers to attack the colony ship from among the Klingon staff. Deployment to this station was not considered a prime assignment given the lack of potential for combat or contact with the enemy. Therefore, as soon as the mission to sabotage the colony ship's fusion reactor had been announced there had been a rush of volunteers even though it was known to be a suicide mission. Now four Klingons, all of them selected for their technical skills were gathered in the armoury while Graf briefed them.

Like the sidearms that the Klingons carried and the clothing that they wore, the equipment being issued to the assault team lacked uniformity. While every effort had been made to keep their presence in the system a secret, preparations had been made for if the Klingons were discovered and that included making their equipment anonymous. While Graf himself and some of his most senior officers had the latest weapons the rest of the Klingons had a variety of older model weapons. Only the bladed weapons that had remained unchanged since before Klingons even ventured into space were common to all of them.

"You have the plans of the colony ship." he told them, "Use those to locate their fusion reactor and disable the cooling system. If our calculations are correct then it will take fifteen minutes for the reactor to overload and the core to explode. You will need to hold their engineering section for that long."

"Commander fifteen minutes is a long time. Preventing the colonists from forcing their way into the engineering section will be easy enough but what about the Starfleet vessel in orbit? If they use their transporters to beam us out-" one of the Klingon assault team began.

"They will not be able to get a transporter lock on you." Graf interrupted and then he held up a device about the same size as a tricorder, "Each of you will be issued with a pattern disruptor such as this one. It will prevent the Starfleet ship from locking onto you or anything within about three thousand metres. It will also prevent them from beaming troops down within that area. Position yourselves carefully and the only ways into the colony ship's engineering section will be through the hatches. By concealing three of the pattern disruptors around the perimeter of the colony you will make it impossible for the colonists to be evacuated to the Starfleet vessel as well. This is important because we must do everything we can to destroy any evidence that it may take back to the Federation of our presence here and that includes witnesses. The destruction of the colony will eliminate all physical evidence and these pattern disruptors will make sure that the colonists cannot get far enough away to escape the blast.

"As for you, your names will be remembered with honour. K'plah!"

"K'plah!" the members of the assault force repeated before one called out, "Today is a good day to die!"

"Commander I've got Captain Ash calling from the surface." Estevez said, looking at Tan. Despite being in charge of the *Ascension* while Ash was on the planet's surface, Tan was still sat at the science station so that he could run scans of the planet in person.

"Put him through ensign." Tan ordered and Estevez turned back to her console, "Captain." he added when he saw that the channel was open.

"Commander there's something I'd like you to look into." Ash told him.

"Of course captain. What is it?" Tan asked.

"It's occurred to me that what you may have detected when Keeler blocked us from coming to this system could have been the Klingons actually in the process of constructing an outpost I know that there are plenty of passive ways of hiding something like that from detection but I'm trusting in you to find a way around those to locate it." Ash told him.

"Of course captain. I'll start running geological scans immediately." Tan said.

"Thank you commander. We're going to continue with our scans down here just in case there is a Klingon hiding among the colonists. Let me know right away if you find anything. Ash out." Ash told him before he closed the channel.

"Scanning for a hidden base as well now?" Etchemin commented, "The captain has a pretty big list of demands right now."

Tan smiled and looked at the navigator.
“Lieutenant, that’s the definition of a captain.” he said.



The Klingon assault team approached the colony from the ocean, using breathing apparatus to allow them to swim along the coast before coming ashore. Rather than be weighed down by the helmets and life support packs that they had used for this the four Klingons quickly discarded this and concealed it. They knew that they would not be using the equipment again so were not concerned about losing it but they knew that if it was discovered then it would alert the colonists to their presence in the area. As soon as the equipment was hidden the four Klingons hurried inland, heading for the colony with their weapons held ready.

"Someone is coming." one of the Klingons said as they entered the wooded terrain that lay between them and the colony and all four Klingons quickly took cover and waited.

A few moments later they saw two figures in red uniforms appear as one of the security patrols from the *Ascension* approached.

"How could they have detected us so quickly?" one of the Klingons hissed, scowling as he watched the two security guards.

"They haven't." a second added, "Their weapons are still in their holsters. If they suspected that we were here then they'd already be holding them."

"Then we should kill them before they can raise the alarm." another said and he brought his disruptor rifle up to his shoulder.

"No!" the second Klingon snapped, "The shot may give us away. We will do this silently." and as he slung his rifle over his shoulder he drew his knife.

The other Klingons copied this and prepared themselves for hand to hand combat, an area at which they knew they had an advantage over the two Starfleet security guards. The Klingon closest to the two security guards waited until both of them had walked past him before he burst from his hiding place among the undergrowth with a yell and he plunged his knife into the security guard to the rear who could not turn around in time to adequately defend himself. The Klingon thrust his weapon into the security guard's side where he had no armour and pushed the blade in as deep as it would go before he pulled it back out and turned to face the remaining security guard.

The other security guard immediately reached for his phaser and dived clear as the Klingon tossed his bleeding comrade aside, getting out of arms' reach as quickly as he could. However, in getting away from the Klingon he could see he inadvertently brought himself closer to one of the others and the alien warrior jumped out of hiding as well. Reacting quickly the security guard raised his phaser to shoot the Klingon but before he could fire it the Klingon swung his arm out ahead of him and knocked the weapon from the security guard's grasp, sending it flying into the undergrowth before he lunged at the security guard with his blade held out in front of him, intending to stab him.

Although disarmed, the guard was not entirely helpless and he reacted reaching out to grab the hand in which the Klingon held his d'k tahg knife and push it away from him. He was only partially successful in this effort and although he was able to alter the trajectory of the blade he could not move it away from himself, only towards the armoured vest that he wore. This was just enough to save him though and the Klingon hesitated as his weapon scratched at the surface of the body armour without being able to penetrate it. This gave the security guard the chance to suddenly let go of the Klingon's arm with one hand and elbow the alien under his chin. This blow had enough force to momentarily stun the Klingon and he dropped his knife as he staggered backwards which gave the security guard the chance to reach for his communicator. However, he had only just flipped open the device when the Klingon who had stabbed the other security guard was able to reach him and he drove his knife downwards through the hole in the security guard's body armour where his neck passed through.

This wound was almost instantly fatal and the dead security guard collapsed in a heap, his communicator falling from his grasp and landing out of sight in the undergrowth all around him where it was not noticed by any of the Klingons.

"Get these bodies out of sight." one of the Klingons said as he looked around for any indications that the two security guards were just the advanced scouts of a larger party, "Then we carry on towards our objective."

"Commander I think I've got something here." Estevez said when the *Ascension's* communications console began to alert her to an incoming signal but could not open a channel.

"A transmission?" Tan asked and Estevez nodded,

"Yes commander, it looks like one." she answered.

"Is it Klingon?" Tan added.

"I don't think so commander." Estevez replied and she looked back at her console, "The protocol looks like it's Starfleet in origin and it looks like it's from a communicator rather than part of our intercom but the channel isn't opening properly and there's no identification data to show whose communicator it is."

"It could still be a problem with the *Ascension's* internal communication system." Tan suggested as he walked over to join Estevez, "Contact engineering."

"Yes commander." Estevez said as she activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering." she said.

"Bridge this is engineering." Forrester's voice responded, "We're rather busy down here sorting out all these spare parts. Whatever it is can you just try turning it off and back on again then call me back if it doesn't work?"

"Forrester we just need a check on the short range communications system." Tan said, "We're picking up a signal that isn't making contact fully. Can you tell me whether it's coming from inside or outside the ship?"

"Hold on a moment commander." Forrester replied as he brought up a system status report on his console in main engineering, "Yes, I see it." he added, "Tracing back shows that the signal is coming in through the external antenna. It's not enough to fill up the available bandwidth though show you should still be able to make use of the system without noticing any lag or data drop out. Unless you want to organise a conference call with about fifty or people that is."

"Any idea what's causing it?" Tan said.

"Probably a damaged communicator. For some reason one is sending the request to open a channel over and over again. It's stuck in that operation so that's why it's not identifying itself or acknowledging any response from our system." Forrester said.

"Would you recommend that I filter it out commander?" Estevez added.

"Well unless you enjoy having your console trying to permanently alert you to an incoming signal that you can't respond to, yes." Forrester told her.

"What about identifying the source?" Tan said.

"Oh that's easy." Forrester replied, "Just call everyone up that's on the surface and find out whose communicator won't respond. Then you know whose is faulty. Engineering out."

"That's his answer? Just call everyone on the surface up?" Teela said when she heard this, "We've got more than two dozen people down there, each of them with a communicator. Calling all of them up in turn just to say 'Hi is your communicator working?' is going to take a while and annoy the hell out of anyone who happens to be asleep."

"Just look on the bright side commander." Etchemin commented, smiling as he looked at the Andorian woman sat beside him.

"The bright side?" she responded, looking back at him.

"Yes, at least we're not the ones doing it." Etchemin said and Tan patted Estevez on her shoulder.

"Carry on ensign." he told her before he turned around and started to walk back towards the science console.

Ash and Reese had circled the entire colony without finding any Klingon life signs and Reese sighed as she turned off her tricorder.

"Nothing Mike." she said and he nodded.

"Oh well." he replied, "It was worth checking. Did you notice anything about the environment while you were scanning?" he said.

"No, it's perfectly habitable and stable." she said.

"In that case I think we should get back to the *Ascension*. Duke will be beaming down soon to restart his search for the Klingon in the woods." Ash replied and he took out his communicator, "Ash to *Ascension*." he said.

"*Ascension* here captain. Is Doctor Reese still with you?" Estevez's voice replied.

"Yes she's here. Why?" Ash asked, looking at Reese.

"Is her communicator working properly captain? We've got an issue with one of them continuously transmitting without identifying itself." Estevez told him and Reese reached for her communicator to check on it.

"Well this isn't sending anything." she said.

"Did you get that ensign?" Ash asked, "Reese's communicator is inactive."

"Okay captain. I'll carry on searching. I've checked with the engineers down there and the ones off duty are helping to check the communicators issued to the security guards." Estevez said.

"Is Duke still aboard?" Ash said.

"Yes captain. The chief is scheduled to beam down with his team in about fifteen minutes." Estevez said.

"In that case find out from him who is scheduled to be walking the perimeter right now and check in with them." Ash ordered.

"You think there's an issue with the patrols?" Reese said.

"Let's just call it a hunch." Ash replied before he spoke into the communicator again, "Have Duke and his team ready to beam down to the colony instead of the forest. I think that the Klingons could be making a move against it."

"Yes captain." Estevez replied.

"In the meantime I want Doctor Reese beamed back aboard the *Ascension*. If the colony is under attack-

Ash began.

"Then you're going to need a medical officer with experience treating combat injuries." Reese interrupted sternly before she patted the phaser on her hip and added, "Besides I'm armed. I can take care of myself." "Oh very well. But we should get inside the colony ship. Any defence will have to be co-ordinated from there." Ash said, "*Ascension* let me know what you find from the patrols and bring the colonists up to speed. Hopefully they'll have somewhere that they can seek shelter. Ash out." he added before he closed the communicator again."

"Commander one of the patrols isn't responding." Estevez announced, turning to look at Tan, "One of their communicators shows that it is active while the other just isn't being answered."

"Then that's the source of our communications disruption ensign. Tell the transporter room to beam Chief Duke and his men down to the colony as the captain ordered then sound red alert." Tan told her as he hurried to the captain's chair and sat down, leaving a subordinate to take his place at the science console. "Aye commander." Estevez replied before she activated the intercom, "Bridge to transporter room. Please beam the security team down to the colony now." she said.

"Bridge this is transporter room one, I can't get a lock on the colony. Some kind of pattern disrupting field just activated about five seconds ago." the transporter chief responded and Estevez looked at Tan.

"Contact the captain." Tan ordered, "Tell him he was right but that he's on his own. We can't beam reinforcements down and we can't beam anyone up."

Ash and Reese ran through the colony towards the transport ship at its heart. The threat of an attack had the colonists also hurrying to seek shelter. A few headed for the transport as well but most headed for other buildings that they hoped would not be considered priority targets.

"Captain!" a voice called out as the two Starfleet officers neared the colony ship and they saw a pair of security guards standing outside the hatch they were heading for. Both guards were armoured and they had their phasers in their hands while one also held his communicator.

"Crewman what's our status?" Ash asked as he and Reese rushed up to the two men.

"All our people are ready captain. Both the active patrols are checking the section of perimeter that the missing men were probably patrolling when they vanished to see if they can find them." the security guard with the communicator told him.

"Has anyone actually seen a Klingon yet?" Reese asked.

"No doctor. So far there's been no contact with the enemy at all." the security guard replied.

"Then I suppose there's still a chance that all this is a false alarm." Reese said.

"I hope not." Ash replied and Reese frowned.

"Really? You want us to be under attack?" she said.

"The Klingons are up to something. We've got two men missing and we can't beam to or from the *Ascension*. If those don't mean that we're about to be attacked by the Klingons then I can't think of what it means and that scares me more than being attacked by Klingons."

10.

The Klingons moved in short, rapid bursts as they made their way through the streets of the colony, moving from one piece of cover to the next. All four would have happily slaughtered their way through the colonists to reach the colony ship, but they knew that stealth was more important for this mission so they did everything they could to keep their location a secret until they found themselves looking across a short stretch of open ground to the colonial transport.

Rather than assault one of the entrances to the starship the four Klingons made their way to the rear of the ship where a cluster of cables exited it. This was how the colony was currently being supplied with power. Eventually as the colony grew and its power requirements increased an assortment of fusion, solar, tidal and wind generators would be established to supply them but for now the fusion reactor that powered the colonial transport's impulse drive was more than capable of supplying all of the colony's power needs.

While three of the Klingons crouched beside the opening that the power cables exited the ship through the fourth crawled inside where his path was blocked by a hatchway besides which were the sockets that the cables plugged in to. The hatch was only intended to keep wildlife from entering the starship and potentially damaging it by chewing through power cables or nesting in places that needed to be kept clear and the colonists had not locked it. Therefore, as soon as the Klingon pressed the control panel it slid open and he found himself looking up into a Jefferies tube.

"The way is open." he told the other Klingons as he looked into the tube with his disruptor rifle held ready just in case there had been someone on the other side and then he began to crawl inside.

One by one the other three Klingons followed him into the Jefferies tube and they crawled along it, following the power conduit that it serviced until they reached another hatch at the other end where they paused and the lead Klingon set his rifle down so that he could take a sonic pulse grenade from his belt. Arming the weapon he kept a tight grip on it while he reached for the controls to the hatch in front of him. Without taking the time to study the compartment on the other side of the hatchway, the Klingon hurled the grenade through as soon as it slid open and then closed it again as quickly as he could.

The grenade went off before any of the engineering staff on the other side of the hatch realised exactly what had happened. Instead of containing an explosive charge to produce a single sudden disorientating burst of light and sound the grenade's energy cell was used to generate a rapid series of pulsing lights and sound that filled the entire engineering compartment of the ship and caused everyone present to collapse as their nervous systems were overwhelmed and this included the two Starfleet engineers who were present to provide security.

Inside the Jefferies tube the Klingons heard this, though the hatch was thick enough to provide adequate protection against the sonic pulses and when the sound stopped the lead Klingon opened it again and crawled out.

Ash and Reese were in the colony ship's bridge with Stern when Ash's communicator sounded.

"Ash." he said into it after flipping it open.

"Captain this is Petty Officer Clarke. I'm down near engineering and I think something's wrong. I just heard rapid bursts of sound from inside. It could have been a sonic grenade." one of the security guards aboard the colony ship told Ash and he looked at Stern.

"Can engineering be accessed from outside the ship?" he asked and Stern winced.

"The power for the colony is fed out direct from there." he answered, "There's a Jefferies tube that-"

"Okay, so yes." Ash said and he raised his communicator again, "We've got intruders in engineering. I'm on my way down there now. Get all of our engineers to you as well. Ash out." he said before he closed the communicator and looked at Reese, "Are you coming?"

"There may be wounded. Yes." she replied, nodding and the pair rushed from the bridge leaving Stern just watching them.

While one of the Klingons went to the reactor control console to begin the process of overloading it the others began to move the unconscious engineers out of the way, not wanting to have to deal with them regaining consciousness while the Klingons were trying to defend the compartment. However, when one Klingon dragged the first of these to the exit from engineering and opened the door he found himself looking at a pair of armed Starfleet security guards. One of the guards raised his assault phaser and fired the weapon towards the Klingon but he was able to duck out of the way in time to avoid the beam. Defiantly the Klingon then fired his disruptor around the door frame towards the security guards before closing the door again.

"What's going on? I heard phaser fire." Ash said as he and Reese then came rushing around a corner towards the security guards.

"A Klingon opened the door captain. We exchanged fire before he closed it again." Clarke told him before the other four of the *Ascension's* engineers aboard the colony ship came rushing up to them.

"Crewman is there another way into engineering than that door?" Ash asked one of them, pointing towards the door that the Klingon had appeared in.

"Other than Jefferies tubes, no captain." the man answered.

"Which is how the Klingons got in it seems." Reese commented.

"If the Klingons knew about the Jefferies tube that led to the outside of the ship then it's a fair bet that they know about the others too and they'll be watching them as keenly as that door." Ash said before he communicator sounded again, "Ash." he said into it.

"Captain Ash," Stern's voice said, "we've got a problem with the impulse reactor."

"What sort of problem captain?" Ash responded.

"Our readouts up here on the bridge suggest that someone is disabling all of the safety protocols. If they carry on then the reactor will meltdown and-" Stern said.

"And blow us all to kingdom come." Ash interrupted before looking around at the personnel he had available to him. Two security guards, four engineers and a medical officer were not much of a strike force when dealing with four Klingons defending a fixed position but luckily for him he knew that he had other troops available to him close at hand, "Don't worry Captain Stern, we'll retake engineering before the Klingons can carry out their plan. Ash out." he said before he adjusted his communicator to address every other Starfleet communicator aboard the colony transport, "This is Ash to all Starfleet personnel aboard, assemble at main engineering. The Klingons have seized control of the section and we're going in. Ash out."

"A frontal assault?" Reese commented.

"A multi-pronged one actually." Ash replied as he drew his phaser and checked the setting, "We can't risk any damage to the reactor so make sure your phasers are set to stun." he told the other Starfleet crew present before he addressed the four engineers specifically, "I want each of you to lead a group of three security personnel through the Jefferies tubes to access points spread around engineering. Once everyone is in position we'll attack from them and through this door all at the same time."

It did not take long for the remaining Starfleet security guards aboard the colonial transport to arrive outside engineering where Ash divided them up into groups with three going with each engineer into the Jefferies tubes while the rest stayed with him and Reese outside the main entrance.

"Don't give any warnings to the Klingons." Ash told the members of his team as they waited for the other teams to report that they were in position, "Just shoot on sight. Our main priority is to prevent them from destroying the ship. Second is securing the safety of the people who were inside. From the sounds of things the Klingons used a sonic stun grenade so I'm confident that they'll be alive."

"You don't think the Klingons will have executed them then captain?" one of the security guards asked and Ash shook his head.

"No. If they're smart then they'll be more concerned about us storming the compartment than killing some already incapacitated captives." he said, "They obviously see this as a suicide mission but they still need to survive long enough for the reactor to go critical. That means staying alert."

It was then that the first of the engineers signalled Ash to tell him that his team was in position by an access point from the Jefferies tubes to engineering and this was followed by three more signals as the other teams reached their destinations.

"Okay this is it." Ash said into his communicator so that all of the other assault teams could hear him, "Three. Two. One. Go!"

Ash just tossed his communicator aside rather than waste time closing the device and returning it to his belt and at the same time one of the security guards opened the door to engineering. Before the door was even fully opened the other security guards started to fire their phasers. A few of the energy beams hit the door as it opened, being unable to damage it while the weapons were set to 'stun' but most passed through the rapidly widening gap and into the engineering compartment on the other side.

The phaser fire did not hit any of the Klingons in the engineering compartment but it did cause them to turn towards the entrance while elsewhere in engineering four access points to Jefferies tubes also opened and the Starfleet personnel inside them exited them as quickly as they could.

The Klingons returned fire on the security guards at the doorway and one of them was struck in his chest by a disruptor blast. Unlike the phasers carried by the Starfleet assault teams the Klingon weapons were set to a lethal level but the armoured vest that the security guard wore was able to displace the energy enough to save him. Some of the energy was still able to pass through the vest though and the guard collapsed with a large scorch mark on his armour.

It was at this point that there was another volley of phaser fire from another of the assault teams just as the Klingons were becoming aware of their presence. These struck one of the Klingons and he collapsed before he could return fire on them.

Aware that they were under attack from multiple directions, two of the remaining Klingons took cover and began to fire at any movement they saw while the Starfleet assault teams tried to get into the best firing positions. Meanwhile the final Klingon remained at the console he was working at, hurriedly trying to disable the impulse reactor's safety systems.

The first two Klingons continued to fire their disruptors but with the Starfleet assault teams spread out they could not keep all of them pinned down at the same time. This allowed the assault teams to surround the Klingons and another of them was quickly stunned.

"How much longer?" the second Klingon providing cover yelled at the one working at the console before there was another phaser blast that hit him and he too collapsed. The Klingon by the console heard his comrade fall but did not turn around instead he jabbed at the console rapidly until an alarm began to sound. "Captain, the reactor is going to overload!" one of the Starfleet engineers yelled as the Klingon picked up his disruptor again and ducked behind the console and started firing.

"How long?" Ash responded.

"Maybe ten minutes." the engineer responded.

"That's plenty of time." Ash said and he fired his phaser again, forcing the Klingon to cease fire. Seeing this Ash charged towards the Klingon and continued to fire his phaser in short blasts to try and keep him pinned down. However, the Klingon refused to simply cower while he was fired upon and he tried to rise just long enough to shoot back at Ash but the moment he exposed himself a blast from Ash's phaser struck him in the chest and he too fell to the floor unconscious.

With all the Klingons incapacitated Ash holstered his phaser and sprinted across the engineering compartment towards the console that one of the alien warriors had been working at and here he saw the display showing the increasing temperature and pressure inside the colony transport's impulse reactor.

"Ensign get over here and take a look at this." he called out to the nearest engineer and the man rushed to join him, "So can you shut this thing down before we all get vaporised?" Ash asked.

"It looks straight forward enough captain." the engineer answered, "Systems like this aren't designed to be used to force an overload and there are no internal lock outs."

The engineer began to work quickly, re-engaging the reactor's safety systems that the Klingons had deactivated. Ash stayed by his side as he worked, watching the display's time readout closely as it came closer to the estimated time of detonation.

"All the engineers are alive." Reese said as she walked up to Ash, "You were right, the Klingons just left them alone after the grenade knocked them all out. They should recover. The Klingons too."

"Good." Ash replied, nodding his head, "I know it's unlikely that they'll talk but maybe Chief Duke will be able to get some answers out of those Klingons when they wake up."

"Assuming that this reactor doesn't explode first." Reese said.

"Got it!" the engineer suddenly exclaimed and as he took a step back from the console the alarms warning of an overload and explosion ceased.

"You're sure about that?" Ash said.

"Yes captain. I've re-engaged the coolant system and cut the fuel input to one percent maximum. The pressure is already falling and it should be back to normal within a couple of minutes." the engineer told him.

"Good work ensign." Ash said then he took a breath and added, "Now we just need to shut down that jamming field so we can re-establish transporter contact with the *Ascension*. The Klingons have made their move and I want to return the favour in kind."

"Sensors indicate that the reactor temperature is dropping commander." one of the Klingons told Graf.

"Then our warriors failed." Graf responded, snarling.

"Commander I volunteer to lead the second assault." Granak said.

"No." Graf said without looking at his subordinate.

"Commander I-" Granak began.

"There will not be another assault Granak." Graf interrupted.

"But commander-" Granak said before he was cut off again by Graf.

"Starfleet came here to deal with saboteurs and now it has four of them either dead or in captivity." Graf said,

"The High Council will declare them to be renegades because to them that is what this entire operation is anyway. So with four renegades to show for their effort and no proof of the existence of this facility that starship and its crew will have no reason to remain here. All we need to do is wait for them to leave and we can deal with the colonists at our leisure."

"Commander, what are you doing down here?" Forrester asked when he saw Tan enter the *Ascension's* engineering section.

"Well we're not on alert any more and there's something I'd like to talk over with you." Tan answered.

"Is something on the bridge broken because you should just try turning it-" Forrester began.

"No, no nothing's broken Adam." Tan interrupted, "I just need your help in reconfiguring our sensors."

"Sure. What are you looking for?" Forrester asked.

"It's not what I'm looking for, it's more a question of sensor diagnostics." Tan said and Forrester frowned.

"Sensor diagnostics?" he said and Tan nodded.

"Yes, diagnostics. I've run several scans of the surface and found nothing so any base that the Klingons have down there must be well hidden. Maybe the sensors aboard an Oberth-class could find it but ours lack the capability so we need to find an alternative way of finding them." he said.

"And I'm guessing that you've found a way James. Am I right?" Forrester replied, smiling at the science officer and Tan smiled back at him.

"As a matter of fact I think I have." he said, "I started thinking about why the Klingons would come here and the only thing I could come up with was the construction of a listening post and if it's going to detect anything beyond the system in real time then a listening post needs a subspace antenna array."

"Something like that is pretty hard to hide." Forrester pointed out.

"I know, but the Klingons have managed it somehow. The one thing that they can't control though is the property of the antenna to absorb energy. My plan is to use a narrow angled active subspace scan and sweep the surface with it. I've already run active scans over wider areas so I don't think that I'll get any returns that those didn't pick up but when the sweep passes over the antenna array-

"It will sink current that a diagnostic will show up." Forrester said, grinning, "Smart. Very smart. I like it."

"Thank you. Of course to see that then I need to be able to access the sensor diagnostic data at the same time as the system is operating." Tan said.

"I can do that." Forrester said, "It shouldn't take more than about ten or fifteen minutes. Though the sensors and your console will need rebooting to get the new subroutines into them." Forrester said.

"So turn it off and back on again?" Tan commented.

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"We found this in the forest just outside the colony captain." one of the security guards told Ash as he handed over one of the Klingon transporter jamming devices.

"You've shut it off?" Ash responded.

"Yes captain, but the field is still active so there must be more of these out there. The rest of the squad are looking for them now." the security guard added.

"Very good crewman. Let me know as soon as any further devices are found." Ash told the security guard before the man turned and walked away.

"Mike I don't think that we can afford to wait for the search teams to find the rest of the jammers." Reese told him.

"Why not? Didn't you say that all of our people who were stunned by the Klingons are stable?" Ash replied.

"And they are, but so are the Klingons and they're going to wake up soon." Reese said, "I don't know about you but I'd rather have them safely in the *Ascension's* brig than just handcuffed. Especially given all the civilians around. You know how Klingons feel about the idea of being taken prisoner. They won't hesitate to risk death if they can take one of us with them."

"I see your point." Ash said and he reached for his communicator only to find it missing from his belt, "Where the-"

"Looking for this?" Reese asked as she handed him the communicator he had thrown aside when engineering was stormed and he smiled as he took it from her.

"Thanks." he said before flicking the communicator open, "Ash to *Ascension*." he said into it.

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

"Ensign we need a shuttle with a security team down here as soon as possible." Ash told her, "Doctor Reese has recommended that we transfer our Klingon prisoners up to the ship as fast as possible. She and I will also be coming back aboard."

"Understood captain. I'll contact the shuttlecraft bay immediately. Stand by, *Ascension* out." Estevez told him before she closed the channel and as Ash closed his communicator again and turned towards the security guards who were currently standing watch over the four unconscious Klingons, all of whom had their wrists bound behind their backs with plastic ties, "Okay let's get them outside. There's a shuttle en route to us to take them back to the ship." he told them.

Rather than use the intercom to contact Tan, Forrester made his way to the bridge to talk to the science officer directly.

"The sensors are reconfigured." he said when he stepped from the turbolift and found Tan sat in the captain's chair while he waited for the modifications to the *Ascension's* sensors to be carried out.

"Excellent." Tan replied and he stood up to return to the science station, accompanied by Forrester,

"Lieutenant you are relieved." he told the officer manning the console while he was in the captain's chair.

"Yes commander." the junior science officer responded as they vacated the seat and Tan sat down in their place.

"So I just need to reboot the system?" Tan asked, glancing at Forrester and the engineer nodded.

"That's right. When it restarts it should come up with a window that shows the power flowing into the sensors while they're running." he explained.

Tan shut down the sensors and waited a few seconds to ensure that every part of the system was fully shut down before he then reactivated it and his console came to life again. Most of the displays appeared to be identical to how they had been prior to the reset but now one display had a small section of it dedicated to showing the power consumption of the sensors.

"Okay I've got it." Tan said, "Now let's see what happens when I run another scan. Setting main sensors to active sweep mode, narrow field."

Tan then initialised the sensor sweep of the surface and both he and Forrester watched the power being consumed by the system as it operated. Starting from a point several kilometres inland, the sweep moved back and forth to cover the search area a small section at a time. As expected the results of the scan were just as they had been on earlier attempts with no indications of technology or sentient life outside the area of the colony. Tan and Forrester focused more on the power consumption display than the actual scan results but even as the sweep was approaching the ocean this remained steady.

"Commanders, Captain Ash's shuttle has just docked. He's on his way here now." Estevez announced, turning around in her chair to face the science station and both Tan and Forrester turned to face her just as the turbolift doors slid open again to reveal Ash and Reese who both stepped out onto the bridge.

"Any progress?" Ash asked.

"Not really captain." Tan answered, "Commander Forrester has been able to make some modifications to the sensor system so we can see how much power is being used by it but so far-" and then he glanced at the display again to see that the power being consumed by the sensors had leapt by a significant amount, "Wait, this could be it." he said.

"Where are the sensors pointing?" Forrester said as he looked at the console too and Ash and Reese hurried to join them.

"Into the ocean." Tan replied.

"The ocean? You mean the Klingon base is underwater?" Reese said.

"It would make it much harder to find." Forrester pointed out.

"And access." Ash added.

"The base itself might not be underwater captain." Tan said, "This sweep is designed to detect the subspace antenna array I suspected the Klingons had to be operating. By placing it underwater the Klingons have made it impossible to detect visually and also shielded it from thermal imaging."

"It's huge." Forrester said, noticing that as the sweep continued through the ocean the power drain of the sensors remained higher than normal.

"How big?" Ash said.

"I'd say at least fifteen square kilometres captain." Tan told him.

"An antenna that big could probably see as far as Andoria." Forrester commented and Teela glanced at him when she heard the mention of her homeworld.

"I can see why the Klingons would be so keen to keep us away from here then." Ash said, "A sensor array this big and powerful would give them a massive advantage in a conflict."

"Yes captain. Even running silent, our ships would probably be visible to this sensor array about ten light years away." Tan said.

"All the more reason for Starfleet to crack cloaking technology." Ash commented, "Now what about the base that serves this array? Can you tell me anything about that?"

"Not yet captain. I suspect that the Klingons have placed a layer of shielding material over the outpost though from the way in which the Klingon life sign that Chief Duke's team detected I would think that there is an entry point about here." Tan said and he pointed to the sensor display in the rough area where Sharpe had detected the Klingon before he vanished.

"So how do we detect it?" Ash asked before Tan and Forrester looked at one another.

"Seismic detection?" Forrester suggested and Tan nodded.

"It could work." he said, "We equip a handful of probes and land them in a pattern about twenty kilometres across. Then we have each one in turn emit a powerful low frequency sonic pulse, well into the infrasound range while the others listen out for it."

"What will that tell us?" Reese asked.

"We'll know exactly how far apart the probes are so the time difference between the sonic pulse being emitting and received the other probes will tell us the density of the material in between. Any variation will indicate the presence of a foreign mass." Forrester explained to her.

"It's not perfect but it will give us an idea of what we're looking for." Tan added, "I'd recommend that a similar scan is carried out near where Duke's team detected the Klingon but on a smaller scale captain, if we use tricorders to generate and receive the sound waves then we may be able to detect where the outpost comes to the surface."

"Very well." Ash said, "Is Chief Duke on the surface already?"

"Yes captain. He beamed down beyond the range of the Klingon jammers as soon as the colony ship's impulse reactor had been stabilised." Tan told him and Ash turned to Estevez.

"Ensign can you get me the chief?" Ash said.

"Yes captain, putting you through now." she responded as Ash walked to the captain's chair.

"Chief Duke." he said into the communication system built into his chair.

"Here captain." Duke replied.

"How is your search going chief?" Ash asked him.

"Nothing to report yet captain. Visual and tricorder searches are still coming up negative." Duke answered.

"We're going to try something different chief. Commander Tan and Lieutenant Commander Forrester have confirmed the presence of a Klingon listening post. They've come up with a plan to determine the exact size and position of the base itself but we need your team to locate the entrance. How many tricorders does your team have?"

"Three in total sir. I brought a two man science team as well as a medical officer this time. They've been scanning for Klingon life signs and anything that suggests the presence of advanced technology but we're coming up empty." Duke told him.

"Okay chief. Your team needs to reconfigure their tricorders for a ground penetrating sonar scan. You're looking for any changes in ground density." Ash said.

"Understood captain. We'll get started immediately. Duke out."

"Commander the Starfleet vessel has launched torpedoes!" one of the listening post's command staff exclaimed and Graf rushed to look at his console, "They're heading this way." the Klingon sensor operator added.

"Those aren't torpedoes." Graf told him, "Look at their trajectories. If they were torpedoes they'd wipe out their own colony. Starfleet are too weak willed to do that just to destroy us. No, those are just probes. They must still suspect that we are here and they are planning to locate us somehow." then he looked at another of his officers, "Alert the armoury and engineering. We must be ready to repel invaders long enough to ensure that they cannot take control of this facility."

The probes launched by the *Ascension* all landed on the surface of the planet in two rows, spaced hundreds of metres apart at which point phaser emitters built into the bases of the probes began to bore into the ground to create holes into which sonic transceivers could be lowered. Once these holes were bored and the transceivers lowered into them the probes began to emit sonic pulses into the ground while the other probes scanned for them in sequence that repeated with the transceivers lowered deeper into the holes. Meanwhile aboard the orbiting *USS Ascension* Ash and Tan monitored the telemetry from the probes carefully. With each sonic pulse emitted and detected the *Ascension's* computer compared all of the readings and combined them to create an image of the relative ground densities in three dimensions.

"There it is captain." Tan said as the shape of an underground structure began to form.

"A structure of that size could house quite a few Klingons." Ash commented.

"Yes captain. On the basis of what we know about Klingon technology I'd say that a facility of that size would perhaps house about forty Klingons. Maybe fifty at most." Tan replied.

"Even with four of them in custody that's a lot for our security department to deal with." Ash said.

"What about destroying the outpost from orbit captain? It hasn't got any shields so our phasers and torpedoes-" Etchemin began.

"Lieutenant our phasers and photon torpedoes would create a massive dust cloud that would swamp the colony." Tan interrupted.

"Quite. On the other hand if Chief Duke can locate an entry point then maybe we can flood the entire base with anaesthesia gas." Ash said.

"We would need a limited and precisely targeted phaser strike to achieve that captain." Tan said.

"How precise?" Ash asked.

"It depends on the size of any access point that Chief Duke's team is able to locate captain." Tan answered and he pointed to the image of the outpost that the *Ascension's* sensors had created. This appeared to show a tower that extended away from the main section of the structure deep underground that made its way up towards the surface before terminating about twenty metres short, "I think it's safe to assume that any access point to the surface will be in this area here, with the connecting shaft to the outpost too narrow to have shown up on our somewhat crude system. If we can gain access to it then our phasers would need to be fired directly through the access point in a path that took the beam all the way down this tower to the lowest level of the outpost. The outpost itself will absorb the vast majority of debris created so there won't be any collateral damage to the colony and we'll be able to deliver the gas down the path of the phaser strike."

"I don't suppose we could just beam canisters of the gas into various parts of the base could we?" Estevez asked.

"No ensign." Tan replied, shaking his head, "The same material that makes the outpost invisible to our sensors will also block a transporter signal. Any transporter system the Klingons are equipped with must have an emitter that physically passes through and we can't lock onto that. The best we will be able to manage is beaming canisters of the gas onto each level immediately surrounding the hole our phasers create."

"Well lieutenant, how do you feel about having to hit a target that may only be a metre or two across from orbit?" Ash said to Etchemin and the *Ascension's* navigator smiled back at him.

"It may be small but it's a static target captain. The trick will be getting the *Ascension* properly positioned so I can align our forwards phaser bank properly with the shape of the Klingon base." he said.

"Did you hear that Lieutenant Commander Teela?" Ash asked the Andorian helmswoman, "If Lieutenant Etchemin misses then it's your fault for not steering the ship correctly."

Teela then turned her head towards Etchemin and scowled at him.

Duke and his security staff could do little more than keep watch while the two science officers and medic used their tricorders to scan the area. Since receiving the instruction to conduct sonic scans of the ground these officers had significantly changed how they were operating. Rather than holding their tricorders in front of them while they scanned now they had to place their devices against the ground so that they could broadcast and detect the sound waves. Since any sound could be detected by the tricorders all noise had to be kept to a minimum so while the scans were taking place the rest of the team had to remain still and quiet.

This was a slow process compared to the usual methods of using a tricorder and Duke was well aware that placing the team in one place for so long made them vulnerable.

"Chief over here!" one of the science officer called out suddenly and Duke turned to see the man waving towards him.

Duke then hurried towards the science officer and crouched down besides the man.

"You've found something lieutenant?" he asked and the science officer nodded.

"Take a look ahead of you chief. What do you see?" he asked.

"Not much. Open and flat ground." Duke replied as he looked ahead of them at the ground that was covered in leaves and other debris that looked to have fallen from the trees all around them.

Well according to these sonic scans there's a shaft that gets to the surface right about there. I don't know exactly how the Klingons have concealed it but they've done a good job." the science officer told him.

"And a regular tricorder scan can't pick it up?" Duke said.

"No. My guess is that the hatch is made of some material that can mimic the surrounding ground and the Klingons have applied some kind of preserving agent to organic debris so they can use it for camouflage." the science officer said.

"So can you get us inside?" Duke said.

"Sorry chief. Whatever the entry mechanism is, it's just as well hidden as the hatch."

"Oh well, thanks anyway lieutenant. I'll call this in." Duke responded and he took out his communicator and opened it, "Duke to *Ascension*." he said into it.

"*Ascension* here chief. Go ahead." Estevez told him.

"Lieutenant Drakkos has located an access point to the outpost but there's no obvious way in." Duke said.

"Chief this is Captain Ash." Ash's voice then added, "I want you to force entry into the Klingon base. You may use whatever force you consider necessary. Is that understood?"

"Yes captain, I understand." Duke replied.

"Very good chief. Check in when you're inside. *Ascension* out." Ash said before the channel was closed.

Duke then returned his communicator to his belt and as he stood up he adjusted his phaser to its maximum output level.

"So right in front us hey lieutenant?" he asked Drakkos and the science officer nodded his head.

"That's right chief. Roughly in the centre of the clearing." he said before Duke aimed his phaser at the ground and fired.

Rather than just firing a short blast from his weapon as was normal, Duke maintained the beam and the ground around the point where the beam hit glowed blue before being vaporised. This grew deeper and wider as Duke continued to maintain the beam until the phaser's power cell was depleted and he ejected it before inserting a new one.

"Chief you're in!" one of the other security guards called out while he and the other armoured guards trained their phasers on the opening in the ground that had been revealed. Upon hearing this Duke took out his communicator again.

"Duke to *Ascension*, we're in." he signalled.

An alarm sounded in the outpost's command centre and Graf turned towards one of his staff.

"Security, report." he said sternly.

"The main entry hatch has been breached commander. There are more than a dozen Starfleet troops outside." the other Klingon officer responded.

"Sound intruder alert. A dozen is not enough to take this base but they may summon reinforcements." Graf ordered.

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Ash turned towards Tan as soon as he heard that a way into the Klingon listening post had been opened and Tan turned to his console.

"Scanning captain." he said before he added, "I'm reading multiple levels that match our previous sonic scans."

"Ensign Estevez instruct chief Duke to withdraw to a distance of a thousand metres. Lieutenant Commander Teela please position directly over the Klingon outpost. Lieutenant Etchemin, lock forward phaser bank on target and stand by to fire on my command." Ash ordered.

Teela used the *Ascension's* thruster to reposition the starship slightly, positioning the destroyer directly above the exposed Klingon listening post.

"Our alignment is now correct captain." Tan announced.

"All stop." Ash ordered.

"Aye captain. All stop." Teela responded.

"Phasers locked on target captain." Etchemin added.

"Ensign what is the status of our away team?" Ash asked.

"Chief Duke has cleared the area sir." Estevez responded and Ash nodded.

"Fire phasers." he said.

Etchemin fired the *Ascension's* forward phaser bank, the bright red beam erupting from the underside of the ship's saucer section and heading towards the surface of the planet. The beam struck the surface exactly where Duke had already opened a way into the listening post and proceeded to burrow its way down through the multiple levels until it reached the bottom, at which point Etchemin terminated the beam.

"Phaser strike complete captain." he announced, looking over his shoulder at Ash.

"Damage assessment." Ash said and Tan turned to the sensor display.

"Strike was on target captain." Tan responded, "All levels are now exposed. There are sixteen in total."

"Can you get a transporter lock?" Ash said.

"Yes captain, from this position we can beam gas canisters to all levels simultaneously." Tan said and Ash smiled.

"Tell the transporter room to energise." he said.

More alarms sounded throughout the Klingon listening post as the facility shook under the phaser strike. Unlike a general surface bombardment the strike created little debris and of this most remained confined within the outpost's structure rather than escaping into the atmosphere to pollute the environment. Graf's order to prepare to defend the outpost from a Starfleet assault had resulted in large number of the Klingons gathering close to the tower that led to the surface and as this was consumed by the phaser strike the resulting blast and flames consumed them.

"Damage report!" Graf yelled over the sound of the alarms.

"All levels breached commander." one of the command staff responded, "No contact with any of the defence units."

"Commander I'm picking up transporter signatures in the damaged sections," another Klingon added.

"Starfleet is beaming its troops into the base." the first Klingon exclaimed.

"No." the second responded, "Objects being beamed in are inorganic. No life signs."

"Bombs?" Graf asked.

"No commander. No explosives detected either." the second Klingon controller answered before another alarm sounded and he looked at another part of his console, "Environmental contamination detected commander. Starfleet is using a chemical weapon."

"What sort of chemical? Tell me quickly." Graf said sternly, knowing that most Federation governments had moral objections to the use of lethal gases on the battlefield.

"Environmental sensors are damaged captain but it does not seem to be toxic." the Klingon controller told him.

"Anaesthesia gas. Starfleet intends to render us unconscious and seize the base." Graf said angrily, "Can you seal the ventilation system?"

"No commander, the system is damaged. There's no way to contain the gas and we don't have any masks." the controller said and Graf snarled.

Although there were smoke masks for use in firefighting and underwater breathing apparatus amongst the listening post's equipment it had not been foreseen that it would come under chemical attack and so there were no suitable respirators available for the Klingons to use to protect themselves from the gas.

"Tell reactor control that I am on my way." he said before he turned around and ran from the command centre, knowing that with the gas spreading throughout the outpost he had only a few minutes to reach the

reactor before he was overcome and rendered unconscious. Being killed in battle was something that many Klingons aspired to, but the idea of being rendered helpless and taken prisoner horrified them. However, if Graf could make it to the reactor control then he would make sure that none of his warriors would face such a humiliating fate. As he neared the reactor control section though Graf noticed a strange smell in the air and a cloud of vapour starting to form across the floor and he realised that the Starfleet gas had reached this part of the listening post.

"Commander! The gas!" the lead Klingon in the reactor control room called out when Graf burst in to find the Klingon technicians all struggling to remain upright.

"I know. Is the reactor prepared?" Graf demanded.

"Yes commander all it requires is your confirmation." the lead technician replied and he pointed to a nearby console.

Graf rushed across the room, taking a key from his pocket as he did so but at the last moment he stumbled, coughing as the gas entered his lungs and his vision began to blur. However, in his last moments of lucidity he focused on a slot in the console in front of him and he thrust his key into it, at which point another alarm began to sound.

"Captain I'm picking up energy emissions from the surface. They're coming from the Klingon outpost." Tan announced, looking up from his console.

"I thought the outpost was shielded against that." Ash said.

"Yes captain, the logical answer is that the Klingons have set their reactor to overload." Tan replied.

"How big will the blast be?" Ash asked.

"Uncertain captain. Though it will likely be much smaller than what would have resulted from the colony's transport had its impulse reactor overloaded. However, I would not recommend having any of our people in proximity when the overload happens." Tan told him.

"Ensign Estevez, what's the status of Chief Duke's force?" Ash said, turning towards the communications station.

"Preparing to enter the listening post captain. We've beamed down respirators so that the gas won't affect them." Estevez replied.

"Ensign tell them not to enter the outpost under any circumstances. I want them to retreat towards the colony as quickly as possible and we'll beam them up as soon as possible." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain." Estevez responded.

"Move!" Duke yelled when he received the order to withdraw and he and the rest of his assault team began to run towards the colony. The *Ascension* began to lock onto the team members and beam them away from the surface as quickly as possible but about half the assault team, including Duke himself was still there when he felt the ground shake beneath them, "Down!" he shouted and the remaining team members threw themselves to the ground.

Largely confined beneath the ground, the blast from the overloading fusion reactor was channelled up through the tower that had been hit by the phaser strike and this sent a blast of flame thousands of metres up into the sky.

When the ground stopped shaking Duke rolled over onto his back and looked towards where the listening post had been and saw a narrow column of smoke rising high into the sky.

"Problem solved I think." he said.

"Tan, how big was the blast?" Ash asked.

"Approximately thirty kilotonnes captain." Tan answered, "Most of it appeared to have been confined underground and I'm detecting a large void that suggests the blast triggered a collapse of the ground above it."

"So there's nothing left for us to take a look at then?" Ash said.

"Not of the outpost itself captain, though the antenna is still intact and studying it may be of benefit." Tan replied before Estevez spoke up.

"Captain I've got the colony calling." she said.

"Put them on the main screen ensign." Ash told her and the main view screen changed to show the colony's council and Captain Stern.

"Captain Ash," Maina began, "can we assume that the large explosion we just felt means that the Klingons are no longer a threat?"

"Their outpost has been destroyed, yes. Though there could still be some Klingons on the planet so we'll stay in orbit until a relief force can arrive." Ash replied.

"Thank you captain. You and your crew have the gratitude of the entire colony." Maina said and Ash smiled.

"Thank you Mister Maina but it's all in a day's work for Starfleet." he said.

"Where are you going Keeler?" a Klingon voice called out and both Keeler and the Klingon warrior escorting him halted. Despite his service to the Klingon Empire the human was still not allowed to wander the admiral's headquarters alone and warriors would be assigned to ensure that he only went places that he was supposed to be.

"I'm going to see Admiral Korda. He needs to know that the listening post has been destroyed Markon." he told the Klingon captain who served as Korda's aide.

"Do you really think that is a smart move human?" Markon asked and Keeler turned to see the Klingon striding towards him.

"Better than trying to hide it from him." Keeler commented casually.

"You really don't understand us, do you human?" Markon said, "Admiral Korda is furious. A lot was invested in that listening post that you said would be secure because the Federation wouldn't place a colony in that system for fear of antagonising us. Then you said that the colonists could easily be driven away. Finally you said that even when your old friends became involved the listening post would be undetectable and safe but none of that was true. Three lies you told to Korda's face."

"I never lied. If the crew of the listening post had just remained hidden instead of-" Keeler began.

"Enough human!" Markon snapped at Keeler and he flinched, "Blaming others for your failings is not going to impress anyone. Admiral Korda is losing patience with you Keeler. Since your treachery was discovered by Starfleet you have done almost nothing to justify the expense of keeping you here. Take my advise and start looking for a way out. There are other former spies in the empire, perhaps you should consider joining them and reminiscing about your deceptions. The alternative is staying here and I can promise you that eventually the admiral's wrath will find you. The admiral already knows about the loss of the listening post anyway. All you will achieve by going to him is to give him someone to take out his anger on. So are you going to take your chances with the admiral?"

"Come in." Ash called out when the intercom of the door to his quarters sounded and the door opened to reveal Estevez. She stepped through the doorway but then came to a sudden stop when she saw Ash and Reese sat on the couch with their arms around one another.

"I'm sorry I didn't realise I was interrupting you captain. I can come back later." she said.

"Just get on with it ensign." Ash told her.

"The *USS Athens* just dropped out of warp captain. She's beamed a security team down to the surface and our security staff are all back aboard." Estevez said.

"Yes, we saw her come out of warp." Reese said and she pointed towards one of the viewports in Ash's quarters.

"The *Athens* is Oberth-class. Is Starfleet sending any other ships to defend the planet?" Ash asked.

"Yes captain. The *Dragon* and the *Minotaur* are sixty hours out. They're both Cole-class frigates so the Klingons will think twice about threatening the system." Estevez said, "Starfleet intelligence is also sending a team to take a look at the subspace antenna to see if there is anything that they can learn from it. They haven't given an ETA though."

"In that case if everyone is back aboard and the system is secure I think we can leave, we still have a patrol to finish." Ash said and Estevez smiled.

"Actually captain, not quite everyone is aboard." she said.

"Who's missing?" Ash asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Teela beamed down to the colony about an hour ago. She said she wanted to take advantage of the colonists' gratitude and was calling in the favour." Estevez answered.

"What on Earth is she doing?" Reese said.

Michaels grasped the arms of his seat in the cockpit of one of the colony's rotorcraft and looked ahead in terror while Teela piloted it at high speed through a canyon at barely more than treetop height.

"This is fantastic!" she exclaimed.