

ASCENSION

The road to peace is not without loss.



Wolf Pack

By Stephen J Dutton

STAR TREK: ASCENSION *Wolf Pack*

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While investigating an uninhabited star system the *USS Ascension* falls victim to an ambush and is left badly damaged. Now unable to flee or call for help the *Ascension's* crew are left outnumbered and outgunned, fighting for their lives.

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1.

Stardate 8826.4. *USS Ascension* NCC-1984 patrolling along the Federation-Klingon border.

"I'm afraid that this is the best wine I could find Deborah." Captain Michael Ash, commanding officer of the Miranda-class heavy destroyer told the woman who had joined him in his quarters for dinner as he set a bottle of wine down on the table between them. Deborah Reese was the ship's chief medical officer and she had been in a relationship with Ash since before he had been promoted from first officer to captain of the *Ascension*.

"That's fine Mike." she replied, "I don't expect black market Romulan ale at every meal."

"Romulan ale? The chance would be a fine thing." Ash said, "It was Matt Keeler that always seemed to be able to get hold of that stuff and from what we've learned about him a bit of black market smuggling was the least criminal activity he took part in."

Reese poured herself a glass of the wine and took a sip.

"A bit sharp." she said as she placed the glass back down. Before Ash could respond though they both felt the ship shudder slightly and the star field outside the viewports of his quarters shifted from the blur of faster than light travel to the distinct points of light that they were when viewed while stationary.

"We just dropped out of warp." Ash said and he reached for the nearby intercom panel, "Bridge this is Ash. Why have we dropped out of warp?" he said into it.

"Commander Tan picked up some unusual sensor readings captain." the voice of a young woman responded, "He ordered us to come to a halt so that he could analyse them in more detail."

"Ensign Estevez can you be more specific?" Ash asked.

"Not really captain. Do you want to talk to Commander Tan?" Estevez replied.

"Yes, put him on please ensign." Ash said.

"Tan here captain." Tan's voice then said over the intercom.

"What's the story commander?" Ash asked him.

"Sensors have picked up a number of subspace anomalies coming from up ahead captain. They seem to be focused on a nearby system." Tan answered.

"Inhabited?" Ash said.

"No captain. Not according to our records anyway. There are no planets or moons with breathable atmospheres. At least not for carbon based life forms and none of our probes have ever found any evidence of anything more exotic." Tan explained, "We're far off regular shipping routes and too close to the neutral zone for most prospectors to be operating."

"Could these anomalies be the result of a natural phenomena?" Ash suggested.

"That's what I'm investigating now captain. If the star is producing subspace flares then we need to know before it can disrupt long range scans or communications in the sector." Tan said.

"Okay commander, carry on. I'll come and check on your findings once I'm finished with dinner. Ash out." Ash said before he turned off the intercom and looked across the table at Reese, "That's a relief, I was worried that it might be a distress call. Now we can actually enjoy our meal."

"If not the wine." Reese added and they both smiled at one another.

As Ash had said he would, as soon as he had finished his meal he made his way from his quarters to the *Ascension's* bridge. Here he found that although Tan was technically in command while he had been away from the bridge the ship's first officer was not sitting in the captain's chair, instead he was in his usual place at the science station.

"Found anything yet commander?" Ash asked as he made his way towards the science station and Tan looked up.

"So far there is little to go on captain. Take a look here." Tan responded and he pointed to a nearby display screen. The image on this was centred around the nearby star system that was the source of the anomalous readings that the *Ascension's* sensors had detected while several lines extended away from this. These lines were of varying brightnesses to indicate their relative strengths, "As you can see here captain there are numerous subspace trails focused on this system. Some of them appear to be extending towards the Klingon border but there are also some heading deeper into Federation space."

"How strong are these anomalies?" Ash said.

"It varies captain. I suspect that this is owing to them occurring over a prolonged period. The weaker ones began stronger but have attenuated over time." Tan explained.

"What about the star itself? Have you picked up anything strange about it?" Ash said and Tan shook his head.

"Nothing captain. As far as I can tell it is an ordinary main sequence star that shouldn't be triggering focused subspace emissions of this magnitude." he said.

"So what would?" Ash said and Tan hesitated before he responded.

"The only thing I can think of that would produce these sorts of readings are warp trails but that would mean that this system was being heavily travelled and there is nothing here to justify that."

"Nothing that we know of." Ash said before he turned around to face the navigational and helm console, "Lieutenant Etchemin I want a course laid in to take us to that system." he said and the ship's navigator nodded his head.

"Yes captain." he said.

"Teela how long will it take to get there at warp eight?" Ash added to the Andorian helmsman and she briefly checked her instruments.

"About two hours captain." she answered.

"And if a ship was moving at say warp five from the system towards the neutral zone how long would it take for them to get there and could we overtake them?" Ash added.

"Time to the neutral zone at warp five from the system would be six and a half hours captain. We'd easily overtake them at warp eight." Teela told him.

"Thank you commander, that's exactly what I'd hoped." Ash said.

"Captain do you want me to advise Starfleet command that we are diverting from our patrol route?" Estevez asked from the communications station.

"It's not much of a detour and it shouldn't cause us too much of a delay. Let's wait until we know what to tell them." Ash said, "You can alert Chief Duke though. We may need a boarding party putting together equipped to seize a vessel. Also please let engineering know that we will be needing maximum warp."

"You think there's a hostile ship in that system captain?" Tan said and Ash smiled.

"Let's just say that I'm open to the idea that this system is being used as a transfer point for outlaw traffic, smugglers or possibly pirates. If I'm right then there could be a transport ship in there being used for cargo handling with a crew ready to make a dash for the neutral zone as soon as they detect a Starfleet ship heading towards them."

"So that's why you were interested in overtaking a slower vessel." Tan said and Ash nodded.

"Exactly. It makes sense to have a transfer point on this side of the neutral zone because outlaws are unlikely to detect a cloaked Klingon warship before it decloaked and attacked."

"Whereas we are more visible." Tan added.

"Course locked in captain." Etchemin announced.

"Very good lieutenant. Lieutenant Commander Teela, engage at warp eight." Ash said as he made his way towards the captain's chair at the centre of the bridge and sat down, "Commander Tan I want continuous scans of the system. If any ship tries to make a break for it then I want to know immediately so we can adjust our heading. Lieutenant Etchemin bring us to yellow alert. I want weapons and deflector shields ready on my command."

"My pleasure captain." Etchemin replied as an alarm began to sound throughout the *Ascension*, warning the crew that they were going to yellow alert.

Klingon colony world Qu'Vat.

Klingon Admiral Korda grinned as his opponent fell to the ground in the courtyard of his palace. Beyond the mere thrill of victory there was also the satisfaction that he felt whenever he faced down anyone who had mocked him for his appearance. Whereas the vast majority Klingons in the empire now had the forehead ridges that were natural to their species Korda himself remained disfigured by the augment virus that had spread virulently through the empire in the previous century, giving him almost human features. This led other Klingons, such as the man now bleeding at his feet to refer to him as a 'mongrel'. Mostly this was said when people were sure that Korda was not around to hear them but his opponent now had made the mistake of not making sure that Korda was not around to hear the insult.

Korda took a step back and waited as the other Klingon struggled to get back to his feet, breathing heavily as he reached for where he had dropped his weapon. Then the moment that his hand touched the blade Korda struck, swinging his own *Bat'leth* at his neck and decapitating him. Following this Korda looked upwards to where a female Klingon who shared Korda's lack of forehead ridges looked down at him and smiled.

"Admiral." a stern voice then called out and Korda turned to see his aide Captain Markon, a Klingon who unlike his superior possessed forehead ridges striding towards him.

"Clear that away. Feed it to the targ's." Korda told some nearby guards, pointing to the body of his opponent before turning back towards Markon, "What is it captain?" he asked.

"Admiral we've just received a transmission from the *Bat'leth's Edge*." Markon answered and Korda immediately recognised the name of the vessel.

"Our tanker." he said and Markon nodded.

"Yes admiral." he replied, "The *Bat'leth's Edge's* captain has reported a Starfleet vessel heading for his location."

"What sort of vessel?" Korda said.

"He believes that it is a destroyer. Most likely a Miranda-class vessel." Markon said and Korda snorted.

"A destroyer? Surely there are enough ships in the system to deal with that. It's not like the Federation are sending a battlecruiser to engage the Bat'leth. It's probably just a regular patrol. Tell the captain that I want that ship destroyed. Then he can withdraw, I think that we will have proved our point about extending our operating range to the High Council. I don't want any evidence linking us to the destruction of the patrol though. Is that understood?" he ordered.

"Yes admiral. I will relay your orders immediately." Markon replied.

While his aide returned to the command centre in the building behind him Korda returned to his quarters instead and found the woman who had watched him kill the warrior who had insulted him waiting for him.

"Another fool dealt with." she said as she walked up and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"There will be more I'm sure of it Ah'ken." Korda responded and he made his way to a set of hooks on the wall where he was able to hang the bat'leth he had just used to despatch his opponent without even wiping the blood off it first, "They can't undermine me by pointing out failures as a warrior so they choose biology instead but at the end of the day they forget that we are as Klingon as they are and not to be treated as weakling humans."

"And what did Markon want? I saw him approach you after the duel." Ah'ken added.

"Not much. A Starfleet patrol may have come across the *Bat'leth's Edge*. I've ordered it destroyed and our ships to return. I think that we've proven the idea of extending our striking range deeper into Federation space can work even without our ships being discovered until now."

The *USS Ascension* dropped out of warp on the edge of the star system where the subspace anomalies seemed to be centred around.

"Tactical." Ash said.

"No contacts within range captain." Tan responded as he studied the ship's sensors carefully.

"What about the subspace anomalies commander?" Ash asked.

"Still picking them up captain but from this range I can see that they aren't centred on the star. In fact there is no set pattern for them at all." Tan answered.

"Warp trails?" Teela suggested.

"It certainly looks that way, yes. A large number of them, which fits with the captain's theory about outlaw traffic frequenting this system." Tan said.

"Okay so let's find that transport they must be rendezvousing with." Ash said, "Helm take us in nice and slow. One quarter impulse power should be just fine. Lieutenant Etchemin raise our shields and divert power to weapons. Commander Tan I want an active sweep of the system. Find me that ship."

"Yes captain, scanning now." Tan replied as the *Ascension* began to move deeper into the system, its weapons and defences powering up as it did so.

Aboard the *Bat'leth's Edge* the captain and his command staff watched the approaching Miranda-class destroyer on their main view screen.

"They have raised their shields. They are prepared to do battle." one of the bridge crew said.

"Perhaps. But it doesn't look like the Starfleet vessel has spotted us yet. Their current course will take them past us." another added.

"Of course it will." the captain said, "They probably followed warp trails to get here and we haven't used our warp drive in weeks. Our trail is long gone. Are the others in position?"

"Yes captain. They are standing by." one of the other Klingons told him.

"Then order them to engage as soon as we cloak. Now adjust our orbit, take us a thousand kilometres further out. Let's see whether they can see that." the captain ordered.

2.

"Captain I have an energy reading. It looks like an impulse engine operating." Tan announced when he detected the sudden energy flare.

"Where is it commander?" Ash asked.

"Bearing three-four-four mark zero-nine captain. Orbiting the system's gas giant." Tan said.

"Teela did you get that?" Ash said and she nodded.

"Yes captain. Bringing us to three-four-four mark zero-nine." she said as she turned the *Ascension* towards the gas giant.

"Commander Tan what can you tell me about this gas giant?" Ash said.

"The planet is class-J captain. Radius approximately sixty-five thousand kilometres with at least fourteen moons and several rings consisting mainly of ice but with a percentage of rocky material and some trace metals. Unremarkable in its composition though its energy emissions would disrupt long range scans of the area." Tan said.

"All of which combine to make it the perfect place to hide a ship." Etchemin commented.

"Captain I think I'm picking up something." Estevez said from the communications station.

"Can you be clearer ensign?" Ash asked.

"I think that there was just a rapid burst of subspace energy that reflected in part of the gas giant's atmosphere. I think that it was a communication signal." Estevez answered.

"Can you identify the sender from it?" Ash said but Estevez shook her head.

"Sorry captain. There isn't enough here to identify an encoding pattern. I just detected parts of a few packets." she said.

"Captain if this is the transport ship you suspected was here then it could have detected our approach and be attempting to identify us." Tan suggested.

"You mean that they could think we're one of their own ships here to meet them?" Ash said and Tan nodded.

"Exactly. Though without knowing whether there is a particular way in which we should approach or respond we can't realistically attempt to use that as a ruse to get closer."

"Focus your scans in that area commander but switch to passive operation. Maybe we can take them by surprise still. Let me know as soon as you have something." Ash told him.

"Yes captain." Tan replied before turning his attention back to the *Ascension's* sensors.

"Teela try to keep us low to the horizon of the gas giant. Let's not make it easy for that ship to identify us." Ash said.

"Yes captain." Teela replied.

"Etchemin stand by on the tractor beam." Ash continued, "They may try to run when they spot us and I'd rather be able to immobilise their vessel than be forced to fire on it."

"Yes captain. Tractor beam standing by." Etchemin said.

The *Ascension* continued to head towards the gas giant while Tan ran continued sensor scans, watching for any signs of the ship they were hunting and as they got closer he suddenly looked up from his console.

"Contact dead ahead captain." he said.

"On screen." Ash said and the main view screen changed, zooming in on the space close to the gas giant where there was a starship that could be easily identified as being Klingon in origin.

"Klingons." Etchemin said.

"The vessel is a D-five class light cruiser captain." Tan said, "Though its energy profile suggests that it is a support ship rather than a combat vessel."

D-5s were an older class of starship that had been in service with the Klingon Empire before the Federation was even founded. Although it had long been eclipsed in power by newer classes of starship the Klingons still used the class as a front line combat vessel. As well as this many ships of the class had been refitted as transport ships and used either as fleet support craft or sold off both within and outside the borders of the Empire. Therefore, such vessels could be encountered almost anywhere and there was no guarantee that just because it was a Klingon built ship that it had a Klingon crew.

"Is there a transponder?" Ash said.

"No captain. The ship is not broadcasting any sort of identification." Tan answered.

"Then we are fully within our rights to board her." Ash said, "Ensign Estevez hail the vessel and order them to hold position and prepare to be boarded."

"Yes captain." Estevez replied before she activated the *Ascension's* ship to ship communications, "Attention unidentified vessel, this is the Starfleet vessel *USS Ascension*. You are ordered to hold position and prepare to be boarded. Signal your compliance." she transmitted to the D-5.

Ash waited for a short while, watching as the *Ascension* drew closer to the Klingon built vessel before he glanced at Estevez.

"Any response ensign?" he asked eventually but she shook her head.

"Nothing captain." she replied.

"We'll be in tractor beam range in thirty seconds captain." Etchemin added.

"Engage as soon you can lieutenant." Ash ordered and Etchemin nodded.

"Acquiring target now captain." he responded.

"Federation vessel now within weapon range captain." one of the Bat'leth's Edge's officers reported while the captain watched the *Ascension* closing in on the main viewscreen.

"Have they attempted to make contact again?" he said.

"No captain." the communications officer replied.

"Then they aren't going to open fire." the captain said, "Starfleet are weak and would give an enemy many chances to surrender before opening fire. Their intent is to get close and board us."

"They are no match for Klingon warriors." another officer said, "We will spill their blood."

"We won't even give them the chance to get aboard." the captain responded, "We will continue with my plan. As soon as we cloak the others will attack. Tactical officer wait until we are five hundred kelicams outside their tractor beam range and then engage the cloak."

"Yes captain, standing by on cloaking device." the ship's tactical officer said and the Klingons continued to watch the closing *Ascension*.

"Five seconds to tractor beam range." Etchemin said, "Four. Three."

All of a sudden the image of the D-5 cruiser blurred on the viewscreen while the background remained sharp before it abruptly disappeared.

"They cloaked." Teela exclaimed.

"I've lost my lock captain." Etchemin added.

"Tan can you-" Ash began, wanting to know if Tan could pick up anything that would tell them where the D-5 was but his science officer interrupted him.

"Captain I'm reading increased energy readings from within the gas giant's atmosphere." he said and Ash's eyes widened.

"Helm full impulse!" he snapped, "Get us away from the planet now!"

Teela reacted immediately, bringing the *Ascension's* impulse drive up to full power and turning away from the gas giant beneath the ship, heading for open space. Seconds later a torpedo burst from the dense clouds of gas in the giant's upper atmosphere and streaked towards the *Ascension*.

"Incoming!" Etchemin exclaimed.

"Aft phasers!" Ash ordered and Etchemin fired the phasers mounted on the rear of the *Ascension's* roll bar, where the bulk of the ship's weapons were mounted, sending a rapid series of energy pulses towards the torpedo and detonating it far out of range, "Analysis Commander Tan." Ash said but before his first officer could respond a group of small space vessels burst from the gas giant's atmosphere into space.

"Eleven ships closing captain." Tan said, "Eight are Raptor-class scouts and three are Vo'n'talk-class frigates."

Like the D-5, the Klingon Raptor-class and Vo'n'talk-class ships were designs that dated back to the previous century and was no longer seen in front line service with the Klingon Empire's forces. On the other hand it was frequently seen in the hands of outlaw groups throughout the quadrant. The Vo'n'talk-class had once been referred to as a Bird of Prey before it was applied to the class of ship that had since superseded it in service with the Klingon fleet. One on one any type of Miranda-class vessel was capable of defeating these two classes of ship and a heavy destroyer like the *Ascension* could defeat two or three with little difficulty but taking on almost a dozen of them as well as the now cloaked D-5 class transport would almost certainly guarantee the ship's destruction.

"Helm take evasive action." Ash said, "Take us out of the orbital plane and get us into warp. We can easily outrun them."

"Aye captain." Teela replied, frowning at the idea of retreating from a fight despite the odds clearly being against them.

The Klingon ships all turned to follow the retreating *Ascension* and began to fire their disruptors, pounding the Starfleet vessel's aft shields.

"Shields down to seventy percent captain." Tan reported.

"Mister Etchemin you may return fire." Ash said and Etchemin smiled.

"With pleasure captain. Aft torpedoes firing." he said before launching a photon torpedo towards the pursuing Klingon squadron.

The high closing speed of the Klingon ships gave their crews little chance to react to the launch of the torpedo and the weapon struck one of the Raptors head on. The scout ship's shields were woefully

underpowered by the standards of the twenty-third century and the modern torpedo punched through them easily to blast the forward section of the ship apart and leaving the rest of it tumbling through space uncontrolled.

"That's one down." Teela said, grinning at the sight of the burning remains of the Klingon Raptor.

"That just leaves another eleven including that D-five." Ash commented, "How long until we are clear for warp?"

"Safely? We'll reach clear space in four minutes captain." Teela answered.

"Good. Ensign Estevez we need to alert Starfleet command that there is a squadron of Klingon raiders lurking in this system." Ash said.

"The Klingons are jamming all frequencies captain. I'm trying to find a clear one but so far I can't get a signal out on any of them." Estevez replied before the *Ascension* shook violently.

"Torpedo strike to aft. Shields down to thirty-two percent captain." Tan said, "At this rate we will lose shields entirely in under three minutes."

"Teela can you get us any more speed and get us out of here before that?" Ash asked.

"Sorry captain, this is all I can do with the available power." Teela responded and Ash activated the intercom built into the arm of his chair.

"Bridge to engineering." he said, "Commander Forrester are you there?"

"Yes captain but we're kind of busy down here." the *Ascension's* chief engineer replied, "Whatever it is could you just try turning it off and back on again?"

"I'm calling about our engines commander. The last thing I want now is to shut them down. We need more power." Ash told him.

"Sorry captain but if we put more power into the impulse drive she'll melt and we'll be left with nothing but thrusters." Forrester said.

"Commander Tan we need a hiding place. What can you give me?" Ash asked.

"There is a moon at one-four-six mark three-seven captain. It has no atmosphere and a surface largely made of silicon compounds with significant amounts of various metals." Tan reported.

"Captain if we just fly behind a moon won't the Klingons follow us?" Estevez asked.

"Yes ensign, they will. Or at least they will try." Ash answered, "That's why we need to make it as difficult as possible for them to do that. Teela change course for the moon. I want a close pass followed by an impulse turn. Etchemin continue to fire phasers at the enemy but keep our aft torpedo bays loaded. I want two rounds ready to fire on my command."

"Yes captain. Maintaining phaser fire. Holding torpedoes." Etchemin said. So far he had fired just one torpedo at the ships following them but he checked to make sure that this had been replaced in the launcher by another taken from the *Ascension's* magazine of sixty such weapons before firing the ship's aft mounted phasers again. This time his attack struck one of the Vo'n'talk-class frigates but was barely able to penetrate the ship's shields and inflicted only superficial damage to it.

The *Ascension* then shook once more as it was hit by another torpedo fired by a Raptor and an alarm sounded on Etchemin's navigation and weapons control console.

"Damage report." Ash said.

"Captain we've lost power to phasers." Etchemin told him.

"Bridge this is engineering." Forrester's voice then said over the intercom, "We've lost warp drive. Main power is offline. Auxiliary is holding but I don't know how long it will take to get the mains back. I hope you have a plan that doesn't involve going to warp."

"Helm how far to the moon?" Ash asked.

"We'll be in position in twenty seconds captain." Teela answered.

"Do we still have photon torpedoes?" Ash added and Etchemin nodded.

"Yes captain. All launchers loaded and ready to fire." he said.

"Lieutenant target the surface and fire aft torpedoes on Lieutenant Commander Teela's command." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain. Standing by." Etchemin said.

The ships chasing the *Ascension* continued to hammer at its aft shields with their disruptors as the destroyer fled towards the moon, continually whittling down their strength. However, even under the repeated disruptor hits the ship's shields were still active when the destroyer came within a few hundred metres of the surface.

"Now!" Teela exclaimed and Etchemin jabbed at the controls to fire the *Ascension's* photon torpedoes, sending two of the potent anti-matter based weapons into the moon's surface where they detonated on impact. The resulting explosion sent thousands of tonnes of debris up into space behind the *Ascension* and as the cloud of debris obscured them from the sensors of their pursuers Teela fired the ship's impulse engines again to perform a sharp turn that caused it to be caught by the moon's gravitational pull and hurled around it at high speed.

"All systems shut down. I want silent running now." Ash ordered, using the intercom to carry his order throughout the ship, "Teela use thrusters only."

All around the ship crewmembers worked to shut down all non-essential systems as fast as they could, dramatically reducing the amount of power required to run the ship. Only the bare minimum of life support was maintained while the impulse drive and shields were shut down completely with the intention of turning the *Ascension* into what was as close as possible to an inert object radiating as little energy as possible. All of this happened while the *Ascension* was temporarily shielded from detection by the pursuing vessels by the cloud of debris and then by the moon itself as the ship was flung around it.

Teela monitored the *Ascension*'s position in orbit around the moon carefully, her console set to project the path that the ship would take if it left orbit at that moment and she waited until this aligned exactly with the course needed to take the ship towards the gas giant instead before she fired its thrusters and sent the *Ascension* flying away from the moon again.

"Are they after us Commander Tan?" Ash said, looking at Tan who was using the *Ascension*'s passive sensors to search for the ships that had attacked them.

"Hard to tell captain. I can only see four of the hostile vessels, all of which have taken up a high orbit over the moon. The others are beyond our line of sight and invisible to our sensors." Tan responded.

"ETA to planetary orbit?" Ash added.

"Three minutes captain." Teela replied and Ash nodded.

"Put us in a low orbit as soon as possible. Then once we're in eclipse take us into the innermost ring. Commander Tan do you think that that will hide us from their sensors?" he said.

"It should captain. Unless they have been significantly upgraded and the emissions I have detected so far indicate otherwise." Tan said.

"Good. Then all we need to do is stay out of sight for about three minutes." Ash commented.

Tan continued to monitor the Klingon built ships that had attacked the *Ascension* while the ship itself sped towards the gas giant on a purely ballistic course. This took the destroyer just close enough to be caught by the planet's gravity and be pulled around it without Teela even needing to use the ship's thrusters to enter orbit.

"How about that then?" the Andorian woman said with a smile.

"Show off." Etchemin commented.

"Well done Lieutenant Commander Teela." Ash said.

"No sign of pursuit captain. My last readings suggested that the enemy were looking for us further out from the planet after we carried out our slingshot manoeuvre." Tan said from the science station.

"Excellent. Now all that remains is to get us into cover before those ships double back." Ash replied.

"What about the D-five?" Estevez asked, "Could it have seen us?"

"Unlikely ensign." Tan told her, "The D-five's cloaking device will limit it to passive detection only and we are emitting very little energy. Unless they happen to have directed visual sensors directly at us it is doubtful that their sensors will have detected us."

"If they had then I think that the other ships would already be turning around and coming after us." Ash added.

"We're in position to enter the ring captain. I think I've found us a nice gap between the larger chunks." Teela said.

"Then take us in commander." Ash ordered and Teela fired a quick burst from the *Ascension*'s thrusters, taking the ship out of orbit of the gas giant once again. This time the Miranda-class vessel moved into the innermost of the planet's rings and as Teela had predicted the path she had chosen took the ship between the larger pieces of ice and rock that made it up. However, while the *Ascension* was able to avoid these larger objects the hull was still struck by numerous smaller ones and without even navigational deflectors operating the crew could hear the sound of these objects striking the hull like hailstones on a roof.

"Will they penetrate the hull?" Estevez asked nervously.

"No, the duranium of our hull is too resilient to be pierced by such small and slow moving objects." Tan replied, "On the other hand some of the damage we have suffered may be exacerbated by multiple strikes, even small ones like these."

"Speaking of damage," Ash said as he got up from his chair, "how badly were we hit?"

Ash then walked over to the science station where Tan also got to his feet and the two men stood in front of a screen highlighting the damaged areas of the *Ascension* on plan and elevation diagrams of the ship.

"The torpedo struck the mounting of our port side nacelle captain. That's what took out our warp drive." Tan said, pointing to the largest section of damage on the screen.

"Lucky it wasn't a few metres lower or we'd have lost the entire nacelle." Ash commented and Tan nodded.

"Yes, especially considering the violent manoeuvres Teela had to carry out to get us here." he said.

"What about hull breaches?" Ash asked.

"Just here in the primary hull captain." Tan answered, "It's not large and the section would have been empty when it was hit."

"Do we have any news on casualties?" Ash added.

"Nothing official yet." Tan told him before he reached for the intercom.

"Bridge to sickbay." he said into it.

"Sickbay here captain." Reese's voice responded.

"Can you update me on our casualties doctor?" Ash asked and Reese sighed.

"I suppose you could say that we were lucky." she said, "I've not had any reports of deaths and only nine injuries but two of those are serious."

"Thank you doctor. Let me know if there are any changes to that. Bridge out." Ash said and then he shut off the intercom and turned towards Estevez, "Ensign are our communications still being jammed?" he asked and Estevez nodded.

"Yes captain, I can't find any clear channels. I'm sorry." she replied.

"No need to apologise ensign. Just keep monitoring but don't send any signals without my approval first. If we send a subspace signal then we need to be certain that the enemy won't detect it." Ash told her, "In the meantime we need to focus on repairing our damage."

3.

The *Bat'leth's Edge's* captain slammed his fist on a console and snarled when he received the report from the captains of the raiding squadron. Although its crew were loath to leave the destruction of the *USS Ascension* to the other ships of the task force the D-5 had remained cloaked and stationary while they hunted their target.

"Gone?" he yelled, "How can they be gone?"

"The *Starfleet* vessel used a screen of debris to conceal its withdrawal. By the time our ships made it around this the vessel was gone." the first officer said.

"If they went to warp then why can't we track them?" the captain said.

"Our ships searched for a warp trail but haven't been able to find one. They may have been able to mask it." the first officer said before the captain bared his teeth in a grin.

"Or perhaps we have wounded them badly." he said, "Maybe rather than masking their warp trail there was no warp trail to be masked. One of our ships may have damaged their warp drive, in which case they are still here in the system, running silent and hiding instead of facing us like true warriors."

"What do we do now captain?" the first officer asked.

"We follow our orders. First we find the *Starfleet* vessel and then we destroy it." the captain answered,

"Without warp drive they must still be close by, skulking close to the planet or one of its moons. We lack the ships to drive them into the open and I will not beg for reinforcements just to find a single helpless ship. We will have to spread our ships among the planet and its system of moons. Once we have found them we will gather our forces and attack. We can easily overwhelm them. Now go and give my orders to our captains. The longer we delay, the longer we give the *Starfleet* crew to repair their ship."

Ash paused when he entered the *Ascension's* main engineering compartment to permit one of the ship's engineering staff dressed in a radiation resistant suit to rush past him with a toolkit.

"Sorry captain." the man said, slowing down.

"Don't mind it crewman, just get those tools where they are needed." Ash responded and the crewman nodded before he resumed hurrying towards the far side of the compartment. Looking around Ash saw that the entire engineering department was hard at work, attempting to repair the *Ascension's* warp core and restore main power. It took Ash several seconds to pick Forrester out among the other engineers, all of them wearing the same white uniforms. The *Ascension's* chief engineer was stood at a console with several of his subordinates discussing an identical image to the one that Ash and Tan had studied when assessing the damage inflicted on the ship. Ash waited as Forrester handed out assignments to the other engineers and they rushed off to carry them out, leaving him alone before he turned around and Ash walked up to him.

"Adam how bad are we hurt really?" he said softly.

"It could have been a lot worse captain." Forrester responded, "There's nothing to suggest that any of this damage will require us to dry dock. Everything can be fixed out here as long as we have enough time and don't suffer any more damage of course. On that subject you know that being in this ring isn't doing us any good? I can't send anyone outside to do an EVA when there's the danger of them being shredded by micro-meteors."

"Is that going to be a major issue?" Ash asked.

"I don't think so, no. On the other hand if we do find anything that isn't showing up on these displays then it may be necessary for someone to go outside." Forrester said.

"Okay then. If that does become necessary then let me know. On the other hand if everything does go to plan then how long until we can get the mains back on line? There are still eleven hostile ships out there and we'll need full power to take them on." Ash said.

"That depends on exactly what you want captain. I expect to be able to give you partial mains power in about three hours. Enough to keep our shields up and power our phasers but we'll be limited to about warp three." Forrester said.

"Warp three? Even if we could make it to clear space where we could engage our warp drive that wouldn't be enough to outrun what we're facing." Ash responded.

"What are we facing exactly captain?" Forrester said.

"It's a squadron of older Klingon ships. They all date back about a century or more so there's no telling who's operating them. There's a D-five transport, some Raptors and a few Vo't'alks. The only interesting thing is that the D-five has a cloaking device and the Klingons aren't known for selling off ships that are capable of cloaking." Ash told him.

"Well my people will do everything we can captain, but right now all I do is promise you is continued auxiliary power. Our impulse drives are undamaged and while we're running silent we don't need the power to propel the ship." Forrester said.

"That will do for now commander. I'll be on the bridge if you need anything." Ash said before he turned to leave engineering again.

Markon looked up when Admiral Korda entered the command centre of his headquarters on Qu'Vat. Korda was not scheduled to be present at this time and he had not signalled ahead to provide some indication of why he was there.

"Admiral." Markon said with respect as he got to his feet, "What brings you here?"

"The *Bat'leth's Edge*. Has its captain confirmed the destruction of the Starfleet vessel?" Korda said

"No admiral. We haven't heard from the *Bat'leth's Edge* since I sent them your orders." Markon answered.

"How long can it take to destroy a single ship? Get me the *Bat'leth's Edge's* captain now." Korda ordered, looking towards the communications consoles and moments later the face of the *Bat'leth's Edge's* captain appeared on one of the command centre's large wall mounted screens.

"Yes admiral?" he asked.

"Captain Voroth why have you not confirmed the destruction of the Starfleet vessel yet?" Korda said sternly and the Klingon captain hesitated, "Well captain? The question is not that difficult." Korda added impatiently. "Admiral I regret to say that the Starfleet vessel was able to elude my squadron." Voroth admitted and Korda snarled.

"You let them escape." he said calmly.

"No admiral." Voroth responded without hesitation, "I mean they are still in the system, just hidden. I have ordered my ships to find them and when we do I promise that we will destroy them as you ordered."

"Be sure that you do captain. Do it quickly as well. If you can't manage to find and destroy one ship then perhaps your first officer will prove more capable." Korda said before he signalled to one of the communication officers to close the channel, preventing Voroth from responding. Korda then turned back to Markon, "Have our listening posts reported any increased Starfleet activity along the border?"

"No admiral. The only ships we are tracking are the regular patrols on their assigned routes. Only the *Ascension* has-" Markon began.

"The *Ascension*?" Korda interrupted.

"Yes admiral. We have determined that it was the *USS Ascension* that diverted to investigate the system we were using to test our refuelling strategy." Markon said.

"Where is Keeler?" Korda asked.

"In his quarters I think. Do you want him brought here admiral?" Markon said.

"No. I will go and fetch him myself." Korda responded before he turned around and strode out of the command centre.

Korda then made his way to the habitation levels of his headquarters. Here there was a corridor that was permanently monitored not only by electronic surveillance devices but also a pair of warriors stationed at the only entrance to it.

"Is the human in his quarters?" Korda asked the guards.

"Yes admiral. He had food brought to him not long ago and he hasn't sent the plates back yet." one of them replied.

"Then I suppose I will just have to interrupt him while he is eating." Korda said before he walked down the corridor to the entrance to one of the quarters, "Door open." he said out loud and the door's control mechanism instantly identified him, opening the door without giving the occupant of the quarters the choice. The door slid open to reveal a male human sat inside at a table with a plate of food on it. By Klingon standards the choice of food was strange but that was in keeping with the relatively squeamish nature of humans when it came to their meals. As well as eating the human was looking at a PADD that had been propped up on the table and he jabbed at the screen as Korda entered the room.

"Admiral." he said, leaping rapidly to his feet.

"Watching something interesting Mister Keeler?" Korda asked, reaching down to pick up the PADD and he tapped the screen to restart the video that Keeler had been watching when Korda entered his quarters. The video was of a female human who was obviously naked but covering herself with a towel that was just about large enough to maintain a minimum amount of modesty.

"Come on Matthew, put the camera down." the woman said, waving towards the camera.

"Oh come on, just drop the towel." Keeler's voice responded from out of shot, "Don't you want me to have something special to remind me of you when we can't be together?"

Korda stopped the playback again before tossing the PADD back onto the table.

"So you are still fantasising about your former captain." he said.

"You did say that if I continued to co-operate then you could provide me with a clone of her. A clone that would-" Keeler responded.

"I know what I said we would give you Keeler," Korda interrupted, "and you know what I require in return. You need to earn your keep."

"I've done everything you asked of me so far admiral." Keeler replied.

"So far, yes and now I need more information from you. Your old comrades have placed themselves in my way again and I need to destroy them." Korda told him.

"The *Ascension*?" Keeler asked. Matthew Keeler had been the chief communications officer aboard the *USS Ascension* under its previous commanding officer, Martia Franks, the woman who was in the video Keeler had been watching. Keeler had been acting as a spy for Korda for several years while aboard the *Ascension* and he had managed to involve Franks in his treason as well until she had tried to end this and Keeler had murdered her. Forced to flee he had been able to make it to Klingon space where he now provided intelligence to Korda while the Klingon admiral plotted to provoke a war between the Federation and Klingon Empire even as the two governments attempted to negotiate a stable peace between them.

"Yes, the *Ascension*. The crew have stumbled across an operation that I do not want exposing and now they must die to maintain the secret." Korda told him.

"So what do you need to know?" Keeler asked.

"The *Ascension* has evaded our initial attack and hidden itself. I need you to tell us what the crew are thinking and where they would go to hide. Then we can eliminate them." Korda said.

"I'll need to see detailed information about the system they are in." Keeler pointed out.

"And that will be made available to you. Now come with me to the command centre. Everything you will need is available there." Korda responded.

Tan looked up from his console when Ash returned to the *Ascension*'s bridge.

"Captain I think you should see this." he said and instead of heading for his own chair Ash headed for the science station instead.

"What have you got commander?" he asked and Tan turned in his chair to face a display that he pointed to.

"I've been tracking the enemy ships as far as I can and it looks like they've split up to hunt for us. Most of them are out of our line of sight but I've picked up a few energy reflections that have allowed me to put together some estimates of their positions with a high degree of certainty but there are three that are visible to us." he explained and Ash looked at the screen Tan was looking at to see the plotted positions of the Klingon built ships. The three that were directly visible from the *Ascension* were all labelled as Raptor-class scouts whereas the ships whose positions had been plotted from reflections had no such markings, "As you can see we know where seven of the enemy ships are. Their deployment suggests that they have been spread out to cover the maximum amount of space possible while still remaining close enough to one another to co-ordinate their actions."

"They really don't want us to get away do they?" Ash commented.

"They do seem keen to keep us here captain." Tan agreed with a nod, "If we were to try to escape under impulse power in any direction then they'd undoubtedly detect us. Right now the ring is shielding us from detection but if any of those ships get closer then they're bound to find us eventually."

"Ensign Estevez are our communications still being jammed?" Ash asked, looking towards the communications station again and the young woman nodded her head.

"Yes captain. The jamming isn't as strong now that the enemy ships have spread out but but it's still powerful enough to stop us getting a signal out, even if we could send one without giving away our position." she told him.

"Very well ensign." Ash responded, "Inform Doctor Reese, Lieutenant Commander Forrester and Chief Duke that I'm calling a meeting of all department heads in half an hour. I want full status reports from everyone and any ideas that anyone has. Right now I'll consider almost anything."

When Keeler entered the command centre with Korda he was shown to a work station that had a large display screen showing the star system where the Klingon squadron was hunting the *USS Ascension*. The image indicated the course that the *Ascension* had been taking before it vanished behind the cloud of debris as well as the most recent information on the deployment of the Klingon ships.

"These are all antiques. How do you expect to take on a modern Starfleet ship like the *Ascension* with them?" he said.

"Their crews are Klingon." Markon said, snarling at Keeler, "Their skill in battle is unmatched."

"It is the age of these ships that made them suitable for this mission Mister Keeler." Korda added, ignoring what his aide had just said, "We are using the cloaked D-five to serve as a resupply vessel while the other ships conduct long range penetration missions into Federation space. The intent is to demonstrate that we can strike deep into Federation space, even as far as the core worlds of Earth, Vulcan, Andoria and Telar. When the war begins we will use more modern ships equipped with cloaking devices but for now these older ships give us deniability if they are discovered. Many of these vessels are in the hands of others, even some individuals in the Federation operate them."

"Only your plan has already failed. The *Ascension* found your supply ship and even if Starfleet can't pin the actions of these ships on you then they'll still be alert to the tactic if war breaks out. They'll litter star systems with sensor buoys to watch for your supply ships." Keeler pointed out.

"Which is exactly why you're going to tell us where the *Ascension* went Mister Keeler." Korda said, leaning over the human, "Our ships have jammed their communications so they aren't going to be telling anyone about our operation on the Federation side of the border. As far as Starfleet will know the ship simply vanished while on patrol. I'm sure that some will suspect our involvement but there'll be nothing to prove it."

"At least not if you do your job properly." Markon commented.

"Okay then, let's take a look at what we've got here." Keeler said, turning his attention to the display screen again, "Where would Mike Ash run to?"

4.

Ash knew that entrusting the running of the *Ascension* at such a critical time to junior officers and enlisted men was risky but it was calculated risk. He needed to make sure that his entire command staff knew their exact situation and to hear any suggestions that they may be able to make so he gathered all of his department heads together in the *Ascension*'s briefing room. In addition to the senior bridge officers this included Doctor Reese, Forrester and also Chief Petty Officer Duke, the *Ascension*'s head of security. Among the department heads Chief Duke was enlisted whereas all of the others held commissions. "As I'm sure you're all aware we are currently being hunted by almost a dozen Klingon built ships. Now all of these are about a hundred years old in design terms and even on auxiliary power we could take any of them out individually, but if we take out one then all the others will know where we are and come at us together. Sheer weight of numbers will practically ensure our destruction. I've gathered everyone here so that we can try to come up with a way to escape. Unfortunately just making a run for it and going to warp isn't an option just now with the mains off line. Commander Forrester has also indicated that when the warp drive is brought back on line we still won't be able to outrun the enemy."

"So we're limited to photon torpedoes?" Duke said, "What about our shields?"

"Shields are functional, though we can't raise them while we're still running silent." Tan responded.

"We're still looking at restoring partial main power in a little under three hours. That should get us phasers back at least." Forrester added, "Though as the captain has already said it won't be enough to let us outrun the Klingons."

"We don't actually know whether those ships are being operated by Klingons." Tan pointed out.

"Sure, though what difference does it make right now? If we're going to want to outrun them then we need to find something that would block their warp drives from operating. Maybe if we could recreate whatever happened in the Lantaru Sector on a smaller scale." Forrester said and Estevez frowned.

"The Lantaru Sector?" she commented.

"There's a large subspace anomaly there that prevents warp drive from operating. The entire sector is pretty much cut off." Etchemin told her.

"Oh it's no random anomaly," Forrester said and Teela groaned.

"Here we go again. Tell us what grand conspiracy caused the anomaly to form Adam." she said.

"It was a top secret experiment that went wrong and released energy that was so unstable it even damaged subspace. Starfleet covered it up and only ships' captains are allowed to know about it just in case they encounter anything else like it." Forrester said and Duke grinned.

"Well captain, is that true?" he asked.

"Of course not." Ash replied.

"Which is exactly what you'd say if Starfleet had ordered you to lie about it." Reese commented as she also smiled.

"If we could get back to the matter at hand." Ash said, "There are eleven ships out there trying to kill us and we need to come up with a way to stay alive."

"What about something to get them looking somewhere else captain?" Etchemin suggested.

"Such as what lieutenant?" Tan asked.

"I was thinking that we might be able to use some of our probes as decoys." Etchemin said.

"That could work captain." Forrester added, "We can easily rig a probe to emit energy signatures that would look like a starship trying not to be seen. It shouldn't take much more than half an hour and would only need a couple of men to carry it out."

"What about fitting a warhead to one?" Ash said and Forrester frowned.

"You mean a torpedo warhead captain?" he replied and Ash nodded.

"Exactly. When those ships detect the probe they're going to move in for the kill and I'd like to turn that into an opportunity to kill them first." Ash said, "If we had to we could place the probe somewhere that we could pick off a ship moving in to attack and fire on them ourselves but that would give us away if there were any others close by."

"It should be straight forwards enough again, though it would be easier if we could remove the antenna assembly so that would mean we couldn't use it as a decoy as well. If you want both then the warhead will have to be fitted externally and that will take longer to rebalance the propulsion control subroutines." Forrester replied.

"In that case I want at least two probes modifying commander. Most should be configured as decoys but one needs to be equipped with a torpedo warhead. We'll deploy a decoy and the armed probe together and see what we can catch in our little trap." Ash told him.

"Yes captain." Forrester replied with a nod and Ash turned towards Tan.

"Commander what about new hiding places?" he asked, "I doubt that we'll be able to stay here long after we use the probes so we'll need to move quickly. If necessary we can launch another couple of probes to act as a distraction and leave the enemy chasing phantoms."

"I've come up with a few possibilities captain." Tan replied, glancing at the PADD he had placed on the table in front of him, "I've plotted the movement of the various moons orbiting the gas giant as well as observing the activity within the upper layers of the atmosphere of the planet itself. Unlike the enemy vessels obviously we aren't designed for operations within the confines of a planetary atmosphere but we can still use any EM emissions created by storm activity to our benefit. I'll need to liaise with Teela and Etchemin of course but I'm confident that there are several other places that we can use to conceal ourselves from the enemy."

"You know captain a Raptor typically only has a crew of a dozen." Duke pointed out, "If we get into transporter range of one then I could take a boarding party over to it. Even if it's a bigger ship with a larger crew then we could still take one down from the inside. The crew would be spread out after all while I could keep a boarding party together."

"Are you really suggesting going into hand to hand combat with Klingons chief?" Reese asked."

As the captain said, we don't know if there are Klingons aboard those ships doctor. It could be Orions or any number of other species." Duke pointed out.

"But it could be Klingons. Worse still if they aren't Klingons then they could be Kzinti." Reese said.

"Maybe so doctor but the thing about phasers is that they are equal opportunity killers. I'm not proposing that we beam over there with phasers set to a light stun. I'm saying that we'll shoot to kill. The idea is that the enemy won't get close enough to my people to be able to make use of a bat'leth or their claws. Then a couple of photon grenades hurled into the bridge or main engineering ought to do something." Duke said.

"How would you get through their shields though chief?" Estevez asked.

"That is a good point ensign." Ash said, "But I think that Chief Duke's plan is still worth looking at.

Commander Tan can you add finding a way to penetrate the enemy's shields to your list of things to do?"

"Of course captain. My readings so far indicate that the shields of the enemy vessels have not been upgraded. I'm sure that I can find a way to disable them somehow." Tan responded.

"Then I think that we can add that our list of possible actions too." Ash said, "Chief get your team prepared. Draw whatever weapons you think are necessary from the armoury. Though I'd like to say that it would be nice if you could stun at least one of the crew. Dead raiders can't answer as many questions. Obviously the lives of your team are more important, don't risk any of them being killed for the sake of a prisoner."

"Captain perhaps one or two of my team should join any boarding party." Forrester suggested, "If they could access the enemy ship's computer then we could get our answers from that."

"Good point. Find two of your people and have them ready to join any boarding party when it goes." Ash said.

"I should go with them as well." Reese added and Ash looked at her.

"You?" he said and she nodded.

"As you pointed out doctor a boarding party will be dangerous." Duke reminded her.

"Which is why you're going to need a medical officer chief." she replied, "I can provide immediate medical aid to anyone who is injured before they are beamed back to the *Ascension*. Plus I'll keep my phaser set on 'stun' so nobody else has adjust theirs to take the prisoner that the captain wants."

"Very well, you can join the boarding party too." Ash said with a sigh, recognising the sense in what Reese was saying despite not wanting to risk her getting hurt, "Chief, make sure that she is issued with a phaser and body armour, okay?"

"Yes captain." Duke responded.

"Well if no-one else has anything to add I think that we can end this meeting now. We all have our tasks to carry out. If anyone has a problem or even another idea to get us out of this mess then don't hesitate to come and talk to me." Ash said and as he stood up the others in the meeting also got out of their seats to leave the briefing room.

In the corridor outside the briefing room each of the people who had been present at the meeting headed in the direction that would take them back to their duty stations. However, Ash paused and looked at Tan.

"I'll see you on the bridge James. You have the conn until I get there." he said and Tan nodded.

"Of course. I'll see you there." he replied before he carried on his way towards the *Ascension's* bridge. In the meantime Ash headed in the other direction, following Reese towards sickbay, dashing to catch up with her.

"Not going to the bridge Mike?" she asked.

"I just wanted a word with you first Deborah." he answered.

"About what Mike?"

"About you volunteering to join a boarding party." Ash said.

"I've been on away missions before Mike and I've been shot at too." Reese pointed out.

"I know that Deborah, but this is going to be far more dangerous and I'm worried that you could get seriously hurt." Ash explained.

"Yes Mike but what choice is there? I can't send one of my staff to do something just because you think that it's too dangerous for me to do it." Reese said and Ash sighed.

"Of course not. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm the captain and I can't start putting other people at risk just because I'm afraid of what could happen to you. I'll let you get on." Ash said and he turned back towards the bridge.

"Hey Mike." Reese said, placing a hand on his shoulder before he could leave.

"What?" he asked.

"It means a lot that you care." Reese said before she checked that they were alone in the corridor before she leant closer and kissed him briefly, "Now you go and do what captains do. Save us all."

5.

"Here." Keeler told the Klingon officers gathered around him and he pointed to the screen in front of him, "Michael Ash will hide the *Ascension* here in the rings around the gas giant. It offers much better cover than trying to stay in eclipse behind either the planet itself or one of its moons. Plus the ship will be able to use its passive sensors more effectively from inside a ring. While rigged for silent running it will blend in with all the debris whereas your ships will be sending up flares every time they make a turn on impulse power."

"If the *Ascension* is running silent then it won't be able to have its shields up. It will be vulnerable." Markon pointed out, "Just one torpedo is all that it would take to destroy them."

"Assuming that you can find them and take your shot before they can raise their shields. Like I said, they'll be able to see your ships coming much easier than you will be able to see them." Keeler said.

"The *Bat'leth's Edge* is fitted with a cloaking device. It could get closer without being seen." Markon said.

"The *Bat'leth's Edge* also lacks torpedoes." Korda said, "Captain Voroth's ships will have to use their passive sensors only to detect the *Ascension*. Now that we can say with a high degree of certainty that the Starfleet ship is hidden within the planet's rings they can move in a way that will allow them to scan all of the rings in detail until they find her. Then they must strike quickly, without giving the *Ascension's* crew any time to react."

"The rings?" Voroth said when he read the orders that had been sent by Admiral Korda.

"Yes captain. What are your orders?" the communications officer replied.

"The rings cover a huge region of space. Searching even just one of them could take days. It will take our entire squadron to manage it. Pass the admiral's orders on to our other ships. Tell them all to gather around the innermost ring and begin a sweep. I want half our ships to move one way around the planet and the rest to start at the same point but move in the opposite direction. I don't want that Starfleet vessel slipping past away from us. Leave them nowhere to run to." Voroth told him.

"Both probes are ready to launch now captain." Etchemin reported when the modified probes were loaded into the *Ascension's* forward torpedo launchers and Ash nodded.

"Deploy the probes lieutenant." he ordered and moments later both probes burst from their launchers into space. Unlike torpedoes that were built for maximum acceleration with a reasonable degree of manoeuvrability to guide them to a target, the probes were able to limit their speed as they steered their way through the gas giant's innermost ring. They made their way to their assigned position approximately five thousand kilometres away from the *Ascension* before they both came to a halt. Both probes were relatively close to the outer face of the ring but still positioned so that they would not be instantly visible from outside it. Their movements were tracked by the *Ascension's* sensors and marked on a tactical display shown on the bridge's main viewscreen.

"Probes in position now captain." Tan said, "The armed probe is one thousand kilometres away from the decoy."

"Very good commander. Activate the decoy and let's see what's out there." Ash told him.

"Yes captain, engaging decoy now." Tan replied and moments later the tactical display on the main

viewscreen changed, the symbol indicating the decoy probe becoming a duplicate of the *Ascension* itself, "Emissions active captain. The probe should appear to passive detection systems as a Miranda-class heavy destroyer operating under impulse power only." Tan added.

"It will be more obvious than us though, right?" Teela asked and Tan smiled.

"Yes lieutenant commander, it will. Our impulse reactors are operating at less than ten percent of capacity. The probe is simulating a thirty percent power output to mimic a vessel engaged in rapid repair operations and making maximum use of its onboard fabrication units." he explained. Then he glanced at Estevez and added, "It will also emit periodic bursts of modulated subspace energy to simulate attempting to establish contact with Starbase twenty-four through the enemy jamming."

"Additional decoy probes now loaded into forward launchers captain." Etchemin said.

"Okay so that gives us a total of four decoys to cover our escape." Ash said, "Commander Tan, where does that stand us with getting to an alternate hiding place?"

"At present I estimate we could reach any one of six of the planet's moons and move into eclipse with those decoys captain. I would recommend launching them all at once and activating them in a sequence designed to lay a trail moving away from us. Of course depending on how long it takes the enemy to discover our present location that could change though I estimate that my calculations will hold for at least another twelve hours yet." Tan said.

"Excellent. Then let's hope that our opponents are not competent enough to see through our decoys but still competent enough to detect them." Ash said, leaning back in his chair and looking at the tactical display on the main screen.

It took about half an hour before there was a bleeping alert and another icon appeared on the tactical display. "Contact bearing two zero-four-mark six-five captain." Tan announced, "Klingon Raptor-class scout closing at one sixth impulse power."

"Heading for us or the decoy?" Ash asked.

"The decoy it seems captain. Energy readings suggest that they have raised shields and powered their weapons." Tan answered.

"Just as expected." Ash said, smiling as the icon on the tactical display moved closer to the two probes. The Raptor positioned itself low against the gas giant's ring with the orbiting mass of ice and debris beneath the obsolete scout ship and manoeuvred as if closing in to attack the decoy probe. However, before it opened fire two more icons appeared on the tactical display.

"Two more contacts captain. One Raptor-class scout and one Vo'n'talk-class frigate. Moving in unison towards the decoy." Tan said.

"So the scout has friends." Ash commented.

"Captain do you want to withdraw?" Teela said, glancing over her shoulder.

"No, not yet Teela." Ash responded, "Mister Etchemin reload forward torpedo launchers with live ammunition."

"Aye captain." Etchemin said as he instructed the *Ascension's* torpedo launchers' auto loading systems to remove the two decoy probes currently loaded into the forward launchers and replace them with live photon torpedoes, "Torpedoes loaded captain." he added when the process was complete a few seconds later.

"Very good lieutenant. Now I want you to establish a firing solution on those two new contacts. One torpedo per ship and using passive sensors only. Let's not let them know that we're here just yet." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain." Etchemin said and Ash turned towards Tan again.

"Commander how close to our armed probe is that Raptor now?" he said.

"Twelve thousand kilometres captain." Tan told him.

"Okay. Wait until it gets to within a thousand. Then engage the Raptor with our probe at maximum acceleration. Try to keep the first Raptor between the probe and the other two ships." Ash ordered and Tan nodded again.

"Yes captain. I understand." he said.

Turning his attention back to the main viewscreen Ash watched as the trio of Klingon ships continued to move closer, all thankfully appearing to head towards the decoy probe rather than the *Ascension* itself.

"Raptor now at six thousand kilometres range captain." Tan said and Teela smiled.

"The crew are probably wondering why they can't see us clearly yet." she commented.

"Do you think they might figure out that it's a trick?" Estevez asked.

"We better hope they don't." Etchemin replied.

"If they are Klingons then they'll want to get close before they go for the kill anyway." Teela added.

"Three thousand kilometres range." Tan said, "Two thousand."

All of a sudden there were flashes of light as the Raptor fired its disruptors into the ring, blasting at the material.

"Looks like they're trying to blast their way through the ring to us." Etchemin said when he saw this on his console.

"One thousand. Engaging probe impulse drive at full power." Tan said, his finger moving to the probe controls and outside in the ring the armed probe began to accelerate.

The probe moved swiftly to the edge of the ring before engaging its impulse drive at full power. The energy bursts from the Raptor's own disruptors had served to conceal the probe's manoeuvring until now and the Klingon crew only realised that they were under attack at the last moment, too late for them to take any defensive action. Instead the probe slammed into the Raptor's shields just behind the ship's command module and the photon torpedo warhead it carried detonated instantly. The powerful blast easily overcame the Raptors deflector shields that were woefully underpowered by the standards of the late twenty-third century and the scout ship was ripped in half in an instant, with flames billowing out of the two sections that tumbled away from one another.

"Excellent shooting Mister Tan." Ash said as the *Ascension's* bridge crew all watch the burning wreckage with relief.

"Thank you captain. Targets two and three are accelerating." Tan replied.

"I've got a lock on them both captain. I can open fire on your command." Etchemin added.

"Not just yet lieutenant. I want to see exactly what they do." Ash responded.

The two other nearby Klingon ships accelerated towards the gas giant's innermost ring and began firing their disruptors. Fortunately these energy blasts were not targeted on the *Ascension*, or even the decoy probe. Instead they were aimed towards the point where the armed probe had emerged from the ring. Shielded from view by the now destroyed Raptor, the other Klingons had been unable to positively identify the probe and they thought that it had been a standard torpedo. Now they were attempting to use its trajectory to back track

to where they thought the *Ascension* was located, not realising that they were out by thousands of kilometres.

"Captain the enemy crews appear to have focused their shields towards the front of their ships." Tan said as he studied the energy emissions from the two ships and Ash smiled.

"Exactly as they should for a target directly ahead of them." he said, "Will we get a shot at their aft sections?" "Yes captain. The enemy vessels will pass by us at a range of approximately eight thousand kilometres." Tan told him.

"Lieutenant Etchemin that will be your cue to fire photon torpedoes." Ash said.

"Yes captain. Standing by." Etchemin replied.

The two Klingon ships continued firing as they came in and just as Tan had predicted they flew right past where the *Ascension* was really hidden within the ring, instead focusing on where they thought the attack on their destroyed comrade had come from and this exposed their relatively unshielded aft sections to the destroyer.

"There they are." Teela commented.

"Firing torpedoes now." Etchemin said calmly as he fired the *Ascension's* two forward facing torpedo launchers. As soon as they exited the launchers the torpedoes each followed individual flight paths, targeting both Klingon vessels. Taken entirely by surprise the crews of these ships had no time to adjust their shields, which would have provided minimal protection anyway and both torpedoes punched through what shielding there was to the aft sections of the two enemy vessels. The two Klingon ships were both hit by the torpedoes in their engineering sections and almost immediately lost containment of their warp cores. This triggered a pair of massive explosions that consumed the two vessels in brilliant bursts of light.

"Both targets destroyed captain." Tan said, just confirming what the rest of the bridge crew already knew.

"Congratulations Mister Etchemin. Two kills with one volley." Ash said.

"Leaving only eight more of them out there." Teela added.

"Yes captain. Do you want the torpedo launchers reloaded with live weapons again or should I reload the decoys?" Etchemin asked.

"Commander Tan do we have any other company?" Ash said.

"Scanning captain." Tan said, looking at his console, "I'm picking up the movements of several enemy vessels though none of them will have had a line of sight to what just occurred here."

"Then I think that now is a good time to slip away. When those other ships do get here I doubt it will take them long to figure out where we were hiding. Etchemin deploy our decoys as soon as we emerge from the ring and activate the first pair. Keep the others on standby. We'll engage them once the enemy have spotted the first two to keep them guessing." Ash ordered.

"What course should I follow captain?" Teela said and Ash looked at Tan.

"We should head for the moon at two-three-eight mark zero-four and move into eclipse from the planet. There are no enemy ships in that area." Tan said.

"Understood. Coming about to two-three-eight mark zero-four and firing thrusters." Teela said before she carefully flew the *Ascension* down through the gas giant's ring and back into clear space.

"Deploying decoy probes now captain." Etchemin announced as soon as the ship was clear of the ring and he launched four more probes into space. These moved in pairs, heading away from the *Ascension* in different directions. Tan activated one probe in each pair and they began to emit energy matching what was being emitted by the *Ascension* even as the ship ran as silently as possible. To an outside observer who was able to detect the starship and its decoys it would have appeared as if there were in fact three *USS Ascensions* all moving in different directions.



Aboard the *Bat'lketh's Edge* Voroth stared in disbelief at the view screen showing the wreckage that was all that remained of three of his ships. In theory a Starfleet Miranda-class heavy destroyer was a match for a Vo'n'talk -class frigate and a pair of Raptor-class scouts even acting together, but the *Ascension* was damaged, lacking the warp power it needed to operate its phasers and faster than light drive.

"Tell me what happened," he said flatly.

"The Starfleet vessel destroyed three of our ships," one of his bridge officers replied.

"I can see that petaQ! I have eyes!" Voroth snapped back at him, "Tell me how this happened and tell me where the Starfleet vessel has gone now."

"Captain I have three sensor contacts," another of the bridge officers called out.

"Three? Identify them immediately," Voroth said.

"It is difficult to say captain, they are emitting very little energy. They could be Federation starships rigged to run silent," the Klingon officer told Voroth.

"Three ships? No, there is only one. The Starfleet crew must have constructed decoys to try and fool us. That must be how they were able to destroy our ships so easily. They used trickery and deceit rather than face them openly," Voroth said.

"Captain if we decloaked then I could use our active sensors to—" the officer began.

"No!" Voroth interrupted angrily, "The Starfleet ship will be waiting for us to decloak so that they can attack as soon as we do. We will wait behind our cloak until the Starfleet vessel reveals itself to us. Our other ships will carry out the hunt itself."

"Captain I am reading four more enemy vessels closing in. They are coming around the planetary horizon now," Tan said when he detected the approach of more Klingon ships.

"Heading?" Ash asked.

"Three are moving towards our decoy probes while the fourth is on course to intercept us," Tan said.

"So they haven't seen through our ruse yet," Ash said, "Engage probe number three commander, let's see if we can pull the wool over the enemy's eyes a bit further."

"Yes captain. Engaging probe number three," Tan responded as he activated the emitters on another of the decoy probes.

To begin with this created what looked like an echo in the emissions being given off by the probe that it was accompanying but then a few moments later the two probes began to move away from one another. This gave the appearance of a ship launching a decoy and then the two following separate courses. Using the gas giant's rings for additional cover against visual scanning helped to bolster the ruse and the Klingon ships immediately focused on this pair of probes, concluding that they had just witnessed the deployment of another decoy and that one of the pair of contacts had to be the *USS Ascension*. Meanwhile, as the Klingon vessels turned to intercept these probes the real *USS Ascension* continued towards one of the gas giant's moons before Teela moved them into its shadow.

"Report," Ash said, looking at Tan.

"It worked captain," He replied, "No signs of Klingon pursuit. I have redeployed probe four to give us a view of the other side of the moon. Since its emitters remained inactive the enemy shouldn't have seen it yet. My readings suggest that the enemy is still focusing on searching the rings for us."

"Excellent work everyone. Remind me to complement Lieutenant Commander Forrester on his department's outstanding work on our decoys. For now though we'll see how long we can remain here," Ash said.

When Duke entered sickbay he found Reese standing beside a biobed that had a crewmember sleeping on it and looking at the display mounted above it.

"Is now a good time doctor?" he asked and when she looked around at him she saw the large bag he was holding.

"It's fine chief. This patient is stable enough. We can talk in my office," she answered and she led him into the adjoining room, "I take it that that is my kit for the boarding party?" she said, pointing to the bag Duke held and he nodded.

"That's right doctor," he said as he put the bag down on her desk and opened it. The first item that he removed from the bag was an armoured vest of the type often worn by Starfleet security officers. This covered the wearer's torso and offered protection against physical attacks and also against some energy attacks.

"Thanks chief," Reese said as she took the vest and lifted it over her head to put it on, tightening the straps until the fit was snug, "I suppose that there's a phaser in there too," she added and Duke nodded before he

removed a plastic case that he set down before also taking a PADD from the bag.

"I need a signature for the phaser doctor," he said.

"Of course," Reese replied, taking the PADD from him. Then she unclipped the stylus from the side of the device and signed across the screen, "There you go," she said, returning the PADD to Duke.

"Thank you doctor," he said as he put the PADD back into the bag and then opened the case to reveal the assault phaser it contained along with two power packs for the weapon, "And here's your weapon. Set to level one of course. I know you want to keep it set on 'stun' but I'd still recommend that you adjust it to a heavier stun than the minimum setting."

"Oh don't worry about that chief. I have no intention of getting my inside ripped out by an angry Kzin because I shot him with a phaser set too low to bring him down," Reese replied with a smile and Duke smiled back at her.

"That's good to hear doctor. Of course my men will do their best to keep you out of danger but I can't make promises," he said.

Thanks to the decoy probe that had not been activated the *Ascension* was still able to monitor activity on the near side of the gas giant even though the Starfleet vessel was sheltering behind one of its moons and the planet was not directly visible. The moon was large enough to be able to maintain an atmosphere of its own without it being lost to the gravitational pull of the planet that it orbited. As with all of the other objects in the system this atmosphere was hostile to humanoid life but this in part due to the severe electrical storm activity in its upper layers and the emissions from this served to help conceal the *Ascension* while it remained in a low orbit.

The probe had been moved far enough out that it was able to relay its sensor readings to the *Ascension* using a direct beam that was undetectable to the Klingons as long as they did not fly through it.

"Captain the Klingons appear to be focusing on the rings. All of the ships visible to us are positioned to search within it," Tan said while he watched the data being relayed by the probe.

"So they fell for our decoys then?" Estevez said.

"It looks that way, yes," Tan replied.

"At least it gives us more time to make repairs," Ash said.

"Could the trick with the probe equipped with a warhead work again?" Estevez suggested.

"Well I suppose that the only ships that saw what happened were destroyed," Ash responded and he turned to Tan, "Do you think that we could get probes into the rings from here commander?" he asked.

"Possibly captain. However, the distance is significant so there could be ample opportunity for the enemy to detect them before they made it to their destination. Plus we have only limited numbers of probes. At present we have six more configured to act as decoys and none fitted with a warhead. Commander Forrester would need to make the modifications," Tan answered.

"In that case we'll consider something different. I don't want to pull Forrester or any of his team off our repairs again. I'd sooner have our phasers back," Ash said.

"There's always Chief Duke's boarding party," Teela pointed out.

"Yes, Commander Tan how far have you got with finding a way to penetrate the enemy ships' shields with our transporters?" Ash said.

"Possibly captain. Given the out of date nature of the enemy vessels it may be possible to overwhelm their shields with a powerful enough energy pulse. If we were to release the energy from our navigational deflector in one go then that could cause their shields to blink out. The effect would last only a few seconds, maybe a minute at the outside, but it would be enough to get a transporter beam through. The drawback is that the deflector is not designed for use as a weapon and its range is limited," Tan told him.

"How limited?" Ash said.

"Perhaps five hundred kilometres. Anything more than that and the energy pulse will attenuate too much to completely overwhelm a ship's shields," Tan replied.

"So we need to close to point blank range with our shields down so we can use our transporters? That sounds like fun," Teela commented.

"Your definition of fun and mine are somewhat different lieutenant commander," Ash responded.

Voroth snarled as he reviewed the reports coming in from the other ships of his squadron.

"How can they have just disappeared?" he said angrily, "We saw them enter the ring but now they have vanished."

"Captain I think that we have been tricked," Voroth's first officer said and Voroth glared at him, making him realise that he needed to be careful about how he proceeded, "The wreckage of our ships suggests that they were attacked from within the innermost of the planet's rings and the two signals that we followed went into that ring as well. I suspect the Starfleet crew are deliberately trying to focus our attention on that particular ring instead of elsewhere. Perhaps they have moved into one of the other rings or maybe they have

abandoned the rings entirely," he explained and Voroth turned towards one of his bridge officers.

"Where did the other contacts we detected go?" he asked.

"One circled around the planet and the other went behind one of its moons before we lost track of them captain," the officer responded.

Voroth leant back in his chair and frowned.

"Order the Raptors to continue searching the rings. Have them move out to the next one and begin searching it," he said, "Tell the frigate captains to follow the paths of the other signals we detected. Impress on them the importance of finding the Starfleet vessel before the admiral next demands an update."

Aboard the *Ascension* Tan saw the change in the Klingons' deployment on his sensor display and he waited until their intention became more obvious before looking up. In particular he took note of how the two Vo'n'talk-class frigates were following both the paths taken by one of the decoys and also the *Ascension* itself.

"Captain the enemy is splitting up. One of the ships appears to be heading towards our location," he said.

"What class?" Ash asked.

"It's a Vo'n'talk-class frigate captain," Tan answered.

"Damn. Chief Duke and his team are going to have their work cut out for them," Ash commented, thinking about how this class of frigate could have up to fifty crewmembers aboard, "How should we manoeuvre to prevent them from detecting us until the last possible moment? Ideally when they are within five hundred kilometres."

"I doubt we can get within five hundred kilometres without being detected but if we retreat two thousand kilometres we will remain in eclipse to the other enemy ships and delay the point at which we are detected until they are also in eclipse from the rest of their force," Tan said and Teela smiled.

"At which point we can use our impulse drive. The other ships won't be able to tell the difference between our engines and theirs," she said.

"Ensign Estevez, since the enemy are jamming our communications do you think that you could return the favour?" Ash said, turning his chair towards the communications console.

"I think so captain. I can target them with general subspace static," she replied.

"Very good," Ash said, "Now this is the plan. We position ourselves to delay the enemy being able to detect us as long as possible. As soon as we have a direct line of sight to them I want their communications jammed and our impulse drive brought up to maximum available power. We'll make a dash straight for them and fire the energy pulse from our deflector to bring down their shields. Then we'll do two things at once, firstly we'll grab their ship in a tractor beam to hold it in place and facing away from us. At the same time we'll also beam over our boarding party. If the crew of that frigate is anything like what it usually is then Chief Duke and his men should be able to seize the ship pretty rapidly before Forrester's engineers can get everything they can from the main computer."

"What do we do if the pulse doesn't work on their shields captain?" Teela asked.

"In that case we open fire. Judging by what we've seen so far a single photon torpedo ought to be enough to destroy the enemy ship," Ash answered.

"Captain an explosion of that scale will be detectable even from the other side of the moon," Tan pointed out.

"Yes I realise that commander. Can you recommend an escape route?" Ash replied.

"I think so captain. If we remain in the moon's shadow as long as possible then we can run at full impulse for another moon at one-six-six mark zero-two. Ideally we should follow a course that will enable us to perform a partial sling shot, decelerating rather than completing the manoeuvre," Tan said.

"So we stay hidden but move further out from the planet?" Etchemin said.

"Exactly," Tan said, "The further from the planet itself we get, the closer we will be to open space once Lieutenant Commander Forrester and his engineering teams can restore enough warp power for us to escape."

"Then we can just make a run for it," Ash said.

"Yes captain. At least as far as needed to re-establish contact with Starfleet. I suspect that the enemy would withdraw if we were able to do that before reinforcements can be despatched to support us," Tan said.

The Vo'n'talk-class frigate decelerated as it approached the moon that the *Ascension* was hidden behind. Although its crew were eager to do battle with a Starfleet vessel the captain did not want to blunder into an ambush and so he limited his ship's speed as it rounded the moon just in case the *Ascension* was prepared for its appearance. Of course the *Ascension* and its crew were fully aware of the approaching Klingon vessel but their response was not what what the Klingon captain had expected.

The Klingons expected the *Ascension* to be located roughly in the middle of the moon's shadow for maximum concealment regardless of which way another ship came around it. However, since the crew of the *Ascension* had had advanced warning of which way the Klingon vessel would come from they had moved

further in the opposite direction so that they remained over the horizon for longer as the Klingons flew past the moon.

"They aren't here." the captain said as he watched the main view screen that showed empty space.

"Your orders captain?" the frigate's helmsman asked.

"The Starfleet vessel may still have used the moon for cover while getting further away from us." the captain said, "Continue on this course."

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"Captain the Klingons are staying on their heading. They will pass by us as planned." Tan said when the data being relayed from the probe confirmed the Klingon frigate's heading.

"Helm stand by for full impulse on Commander Tan's word." Ash ordered, "Communications commence jamming at the same time. Weapons engage tractor beam as soon as the target is range."

"Engines ready captain." Teela said.

"Engage in five seconds." Tan told her, calculating when to fire the *Ascension's* impulse engines so that the ship could take the Klingon vessel by surprise from side on rather than in the front or rear arcs. This was a decision taken to prevent the frigate from being able to fire on the *Ascension*. Most of its weapons faced forwards except for a single turret that was mounted beneath the hull that could turn through three hundred and sixty degrees. However, its field of fire was limited by the ship's wing assemblies that extended downwards and thus prevented it from firing to the angles blocked by them, "Four. Three. Two. One. Engage." Tan continued and as soon as he said 'engage' Teela triggered the ship's impulse drive at full power and at the same time Estevez began broadcasting a subspace jamming signal designed to overwhelm the Klingon ship's communications.

The *Ascension* sped towards the Klingon vessel, suddenly appearing from behind the moon and taking the Klingons by surprise. The Klingon crew managed to react quickly enough for them to begin executing a turn that would bring their main weapons to bear on the Starfleet destroyer. However, before the ship could turn around Etchemin activated the *Ascension's* tractor beam and seized the frigate in it.

"Tractor beam engaged captain. Target immobilised." Etchemin announced.

"All stop." Ash ordered, "Fire deflector pulse."

"Firing." Etchemin said as he used the *Ascension's* main deflector to launch a powerful energy pulse at the Klingon ship. This was not a coherent blast like a particle weapon and it spread out as it headed towards its target and by the time it hit the Klingon ship it had spread out enough to envelope it entirely. As intended the pulse was not strong enough to inflict any physical damage to the ship but its disruptive effects overloaded its shields, causing them to flicker before they collapsed entirely.

"The target's shields are down captain. I estimate ninety to one hundred seconds before they can be reset and raised again." Tan announced and Ash activated the intercom.

"Ash to transporter room. Do you have a lock on the target?" he said into it.

"Yes captain. Transporter is locked onto the target's cargo hold." the transporter operator responded.

"Engage now. You have less than a minute and a half to get the entire team over there." Ash ordered.

In the *Ascension's* transporter room Duke and five of his security staff were standing on the pads ready to be beamed aboard the Klingon ship. All six men wore armoured vests and carried phaser rifles in addition to the assault phasers holstered on their legs.

"Okay send us over first and the second and third teams as soon as you can afterwards." Duke said and the operator nodded his head as he activated the transporter. All six men on the pad were enveloped by pale blue light before they vanished.

"Team two go!" the transporter operator exclaimed and six more armed and armoured security guards rushed up onto the transporter pads for him to beam across to the Klingon ship.

"I guess we're next." Reese commented as she watched this second group of security guards dematerialise. Unlike the first two groups the third was a mix of personnel. As well as Doctor Reese there were also a pair of engineers who had also been issued with assault phasers and body armour in addition to the three extra security guards who rounded out the group. If the Vo'n'talk-class ship they were boarding had the standard crew compliment then the boarding party from the *Ascension* would likely be outnumbered but they would at least have the advantage of surprise as well as being able to focus their attack on particular sections of the ship while its crew would have to keep multiple areas manned.

"Team three go." the transporter chief called out and Reese and the other members of the team all rushed onto the transporter pad.

"Oh wait-" Reese began as she fumbled to draw her phaser from its holster but before she could get the weapon free she felt the transporter activate and the *Ascension's* transporter room faded away.

Reese stumbled as she materialised aboard the Klingon vessel and she felt a hand grab her by the arm.

"Are you okay there doctor?" Duke asked, looking down at Reese.

"Thanks chief." she replied as she straightened up and looked around. As planned the boarding party had arrived in the frigate's cargo hold and they were surrounded by various crates and other containers, "That's Klingon writing. Wouldn't pirates operating on this side of the neutral zone have cargo taken from Federation shipping in their hold?" she said when she saw the markings on the containers and Duke nodded.

"Yes doctor, it looks like we are facing Klingons after all." he said.

An alert sounded on the bridge of the Klingon vessel and the captain turned towards one of his officers.

"Report." he said sternly.

"Captain, sensors have detected an energy signature in the cargo hold. It looks like a transporter." the officer responded.

"We're being boarded!" the first officer exclaimed.

"Take as many men as you can get hold of." the captain told the first officer in response, "Show these fools what it means to try and board a Klingon vessel."

"Yes captain." the first officer replied, drawing his disruptor before he turned to exit the bridge.

The layout of a Vo'n'talk-class frigate was well known to Starfleet who had been able to board and capture several such vessels during the century that they had been encountering them and so schematics including detailed floor plans had been provided to the boarding party on PADDs issued to several members of the team. Duke checked the PADD he had brought with him and checked their surroundings against it, looking for the quickest way to get from the hold to a more vital area.

"We take that door." he said, pointing to one of the two internal exits from the hold, "Then main engineering should be about twenty metres dead ahead. The computer core is located there."

Duke then returned the PADD to the pouch on his belt and led the boarding party to the door where they formed up around it with their phasers aimed towards it before Duke struck the controls and the door slid open.

On the other side there was a corridor that stretched out ahead of the doorway and terminated in another large door at the far end.

"Okay let's move. Samuels, you're on point." Duke ordered and one of his men nodded before advancing through the open doorway with his phaser rifle held at his shoulder ready to fire.

As the boarding party advanced along the corridor they heard the sound of shouts in Klingon before a pair of the crew burst out from around a corner. One of them was equipped with a disruptor while the other just held a knife in his hand. Samuels reacted quickly and he fired on the disruptor armed Klingon with his rifle. The beam struck the Klingon crewman in his chest and he collapsed before he could fire his own weapon. Rather than waste time attempting to recover his fallen comrade's disruptor the other Klingon let out a roar and began to charge at Samuels before Duke fired his own phaser and shot him as he ran, causing him to fall and roll forwards across the floor.

"Move, quickly. Half the ship will have heard those two." Duke said and he waved the rest of the boarding party onwards.

However, just as Duke had said the shouts from the two Klingons had attracted attention and the doors at the far end of the corridor slid open to reveal another small group of Klingons. Most of these were armed only with bladed weapons but there were two that had disruptors and they opened fire immediately. One of their shots struck Samuels and he dropped his phaser rifle as he fell.

"I've got him!" Reese exclaimed as she rushed to assist the fallen man while Duke and the security guards returned fire at the Klingons, one of whom fell while the two armed with disruptors took cover at the sides of the doorway and the rest disappeared from view.

"That's the engineering compartment. We need to get in there." Duke told the boarding party, "Just be careful where you're aiming. A lot of things in there don't react well to phaser beams."

"Neither do people." Reese added as she opened up the medical kit that she had brought along with her.

The boarding party pushed forwards towards the entrance to the engineering compartment, firing their phasers to keep the Klingon defenders pinned down as they advanced. One of the disruptor armed Klingons attempted to fire again but he leant around the door frame he was hit by a phaser beam and he fell dead, his weapon falling from his grip and bouncing out into the corridor where it was impossible for any of the other Klingons to retrieve without exposing themselves to fire.

"Move in and spread out. Remember to check those corners and expect every Klingon to be armed. Don't let them get close enough to stick a blade in you." Duke said before he saw the other disruptor-armed Klingon appear in the doorway and he fired before the Klingon could. This time though the Klingon fell backwards as he died and his weapon fell out of sight. Knowing that there were no more Klingons armed with ranged weapons lurking by the doorway though, Duke sprinted forwards before anyone could close the door from the inside and he reached the doorway just in time to shoot another Klingon who had been about to pick up the dropped disruptor.

All of a sudden a Klingon who had been lurking close by the open doorway lunged at Duke with a blade in his hand and Duke swung the butt of his phaser rifle at him, striking him in the face. Then as the Klingon staggered back Duke turned his phaser rifle around again and shot him in the chest.

Behind Duke more security guards rushed into the engineering compartment and searched for targets. The Vo'n'talk-class frigate had a much smaller engineering section than a Miranda-class destroyer and most of

the compartment was visible from the doorway. The only area that remained out of sight was that portion of it that was hidden behind the prominent warp core. Fortunately now that the boarding party was inside the engineering section the Klingon engineers were not inclined to lurk out of sight and wait for the Starfleet security guards to come to them, instead they either drew knives or grabbed various large tools that could be wielded like weapons and they charged at the boarding party.

The Starfleet personnel fired at the Klingons as they charged but the limited amount of space available meant that only a handful of them could fire in any direction and although they cut down most of the Klingons before they got within arm's reach some of them still managed to get close enough to attack. Luckily the armoured vests and helmets that the security guards wore offered almost complete protection against physical impacts and edged weapons and although the Klingons were successful in knocking some of them to the floor this exposed them to fire from the next line of security guards and within the space of two minutes all of the Klingons in the engineering compartment were dead.

"Area is secure." Duke announced before he looked at the two engineers that had come along as part of the boarding party and added, "Okay you two, get to work."

Although the ultimate aim of the engineers was to obtain information from the ship's main computer they initially began to work on the Klingon warp core. Shutting this down would deprive the ship of most of its power as well as making it more difficult for the command crew to set the ship to self destruct.

Meanwhile in the corridor outside engineering that led back to the cargo hold Reese had stabilised Samuels and was closing up her medical kit when she heard the sound of heavy footfalls coming from the same side corridor that the first two Klingons they had encountered had come down. And when she looked over her shoulder she saw a group of heavily armed Klingons led by the ship's first officer charging towards her.

Reese rolled to one side just as the first officer fired his disruptor and the blast struck the bulkhead behind where she would have been had she remained where she was.

"Chief!" she yelled as she fumbled with the phaser holstered on her leg, "We've got company!"

In response to this several other members of the boarding party rushed back from the engineering to engage the Klingons but the first of them was hit by a blast from a disruptor rifle that was set to maximum and he let out a brief scream before he was vaporised by the energy.

Reese's eyes widened in shock at watching the security guard die in this way but this did not prevent her from being able to draw her phaser and point it towards the Klingons, aiming for the closest of them before she fired and hit the first officer directly. The stun blast rendered the Klingon unconscious in an instant and he fell forwards before lying sprawled across the floor. Another Klingon aimed his disruptor at Reese but before he could return fire another blast of phaser fire from a security guard hit him.

The loss of two of their number in rapid succession made the rest of the group take cover, pressing themselves up against the wall where structural brackets provided hiding places for them.

"Doctor, you need to get clear." one of the security guards said as they fired their phasers towards the Klingons.

"Help me with Samuels, we need to get him out of the way as well." Reese replied and while phaser fire kept the Klingons pinned down another security guard quickly darted to where Samuels lay, grabbed hold of his armoured vest and began to pull the injured man back towards the engineering section.

The captain of the Vo'n'talk-class frigate was growing ever more angry and impatient. His ship remained caught in the *Ascension's* tractor beam, it was unable to communicate with the rest of the squadron to tell them what was happening and worst of all there were Starfleet troops aboard his own vessel.

"Captain the humans have taken over engineering!" one of his bridge crew called out when one of the first officer's team reported in.

The captain slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair. His engineering staff had alerted the bridge that they were under attack but the captain had not anticipated that the intruders would be able to capture that section of the ship. Then alarms began to sound and several screens changed to show that some of the ship's systems were shutting down.

"We're losing warp power captain." one of the command staff exclaimed, "Disruptors off line."

"Get me Commander Mellok!" the captain snapped.

"Captain, Commander Mellok is reported shot. The other warriors think that he is only stunned but he has been incapacitated." the communications officer responded.

"Shot? You mean my own first officer can't even take on weakling Starfleet soldiers?" the captain shouted angrily before he stood up from his seat, "Alert all crew to converge on engineering. Leave just skeleton crews to monitor key systems but the priority has to be regaining control of engineering."



"Quick! Grab some of those equipment cases." Duke ordered, pointing to a number of equipment cases secured at the side of the engineering compartment, "Double check that there's nothing explosive in any of them and then use them to block the entrance. We'll fire from behind it."

"Chief." Reese said as the security guards were beginning to construct a barrier across the entrance to the engineering compartment. Once this was built far more of the *Ascension's* boarding party would be able to use it for cover while they fired out into the corridor than the two who could practically take cover at the sides of the doorway. Fortunately the Klingons trying to force their way into engineering and reclaim it had no such additional protection and the only cover they had was what was provided by the structure of the corridor.

"Yes doctor?" Duke asked.

"Chief I could still do with getting Samuels back to the *Ascension* and into sickbay. That disruptor blast was largely absorbed by his armour but he's still suffered significant burns." Reese answered.

"I appreciate that doctor but if you pull out now then we won't have any medical support left. Can you have him beamed back to the ship without going with him?" Duke said.

"I suppose so, but I'd like to be able to treat him myself rather than passing him over to my staff." Reese said before an alarm sounded and one of the engineers called out.

"Chief we've locked down the warp core." he announced, "The ship's disruptors are off line."

"What about other systems?" Duke asked.

"They still have shields and torpedoes chief." the engineer answered.

"Their shields are up?" Duke said, "Well I guess that puts a stop beaming Samuels back to the *Ascension* ahead of us. It takes time to recharge the ship's main deflector so we can't keep using it to knock down the Klingon's shields and we may need to pull out in a hurry. You'll both have to stay here with the rest of us I'm afraid."

"Okay chief, but can you give me an idea of how long that will take?" Reese said and Duke looked at the two engineers.

"How long will it take you two guys to unlock that computer?" he asked them.

"Difficult to say chief." one of them responded, "If the core is still as old as the rest of this ship then maybe we can get it done in a few minutes but if it's been upgraded then there could be more physical and software based security features."

"Then get on with it. The sooner you get started the sooner we can get out of here." Duke said as he reached for his communicator and flipped the device open, "Duke to *Ascension*." he said into it.

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

"Ensign Estevez can you let the captain know that we've secured engineering. The crew is Klingon and they're moving in to try and retake the section from us. Forrester's men have disabled the ship's warp drive and they're moving on to try and access the main computer." Duke said.

"Understood chief. Be aware that the enemy vessel has raised its shields again so we need to fire another energy pulse before we can beam you back." Estevez said.

"Yes ensign, I've already been advised of that. I'll be in touch when we need extraction. Duke out." Duke said before he closed his communicator and returned it to his belt.

The frigate's captain could hear the sound of disruptor and phaser fire from ahead as he led a unit towards it. "Report!" he snapped at the first member of his crew already exchanging fire with the *Ascension's* boarding party came into view.

"Captain the Starfleet crewmen still control engineering but we have them trapped." the other Klingon said.

"Trapped? You think you have them trapped? We are stuck in their tractor beam and without warp power and full control of this vessel we have no chance of breaking free. Why have you not assaulted the engineering compartment directly?" the captain responded.

"They have barricaded the door and fire at anything in the corridor. Four of our warriors have already been killed trying to get close to them." the other Klingon explained and the captain snarled.

"Take a unit to the section above engineering and use torches to cut through. If we cannot get through the main door then we will make one of our own instead." he ordered.

"Yes captain." the other Klingon replied before he rushed away, leaving the captain and the other Klingons who had arrived with him to join those attempting to shoot down the corridor towards the ship's engineering compartment.

When one of the security guards firing over the improvised barrier blocking the doorway was hit by a disruptor blast Reese crawled across the floor to check on him while another guard rushed to take his place so that the level of phaser fire into the corridor could be maintained. Looking up she saw Duke staring at her

and she shook her head, having found no signs of life.

"How much longer?" Duke called out to the two engineers who had located the Klingon vessel's main computer core and removed the bulkhead that covered it to be able to access it directly.

"Almost there chief." one of them replied, "We've enabled the data ports and we're just patching the PADD in now. Then it's just a question of navigating the file system until we find the communications logs."

"Okay, just keep working and let me know the moment you're done." Duke told them before he turned his attention back to the doorway.

While the engineers worked and the security guards focused holding off the Klingons, Reese monitored the casualties that they had suffered so far. Of the fifteen security guards who had beamed over from the *Ascension* two had been killed and three injured. Samuels was in the worst condition out of these three men but Reese still wanted to monitor the other two carefully and she was running another tricorder scan of one of them when she noticed a brief flash from the corner of her eye and she looked up at the ceiling to see what it was. There she saw a small area of the ceiling no more than a few centimetres across was glowing red.

"Chief! Up there!" she called out, pointing to the ceiling and Duke looked up at where she pointed.

"They're cutting through." he exclaimed.

"What do we do?" Reese asked.

"Hope they don't cut through before we're ready to beam out. They could drop anything down through that without needing to expose themselves." Duke replied before he grabbed the man standing close by him,

"With me crewman, we need to cover that section of the ceiling. You too doctor if you don't mind." he added.

"Do the Klingons use stun grenades?" Reese said while drawing her phaser again, "Surely they wouldn't use something more lethal in here."

"They might use gas doctor. Nerve gas, not anaesthetic gas either." Duke said, "As soon as you see a hole open up fire through it, don't wait for a target to present itself."

"Okay." Reese said nervously, the gruesome effects of most chemical weapons foremost in her mind.

The glowing point on the ceiling moved in a roughly circular pattern as the Klingons in the compartment above engineering continued to create a new way into it. However, when the cut became a semicircle there was a shout from the other side of the room.

"Chief Duke we've got it!" one of the engineers called out, "The entire communications log has been downloaded."

Immediately Duke reached for his communicator and flipped it open.

"Duke to *Ascension*. Get us out of here now." he said into it.

"Captain, Chief Duke is requesting immediate extraction." Estevez said when she received the transmission from Duke.

"Status of deflector?" Ash asked.

"Fully charged captain." Etchemin answered.

"Then fire the pulse. Estevez tell the transporter room to commence beam out the moment that they have a lock." Ash ordered.

"Yes captain." Estevez responded before passing his orders on to the transporter room.

"Firing energy pulse now captain." Etchemin announced as he used the *Ascension's* deflector to project another shield disrupting energy pulse towards the Klingon vessel, overloading its shields for a second time.

Reese, the two engineers and the injured security guards were the first to be beamed off the Klingon ship and the moment that they dematerialised Duke turned his phaser rifle on a nearby row of consoles, firing into them to make it as difficult as possible for the Klingons to regain full control of their ship. After this he just had time to fire a second blast from his phaser into the still exposed main computer and he saw it explode right before he felt the effect of the transporter as he was among the final group to be beamed off the ship.

"Transporter room reports all personnel now back aboard captain." Estevez announced when the last of the boarding party were back aboard the *Ascension*.

"Shields up." Ash ordered, "What's the status of our torpedoes?"

"Armed and ready captain." Etchemin responded.

"Captain the target's shields are still down." Tan added and Ash smiled.

"Lieutenant Etchemin you may fire when ready." he said.

"Aye captain. Firing now." Etchemin said as he launched a single photon torpedo. Still held in the *Ascension's* tractor beam and lacking power, there was nothing the Klingon ship could do to avoid the torpedo as it rushed towards its target and without shields there was nothing to stop it from striking the hull directly before it detonated. The resulting explosion utterly annihilated the Klingon frigate, shattering it into pieces no bigger than a few centimetres across.

"Target destroyed captain. We have debris impacting our shields but they are holding." Tan reported.

"Another Excellent shot lieutenant." Ash said.

"You know that the other Klingons are going to notice when that ship doesn't check in." Teela commented.

"Yes, I think it's about time that we found another place to hide. Suggestions Commander Tan?" Ash said.

"Sensors suggest two alternatives captain." Tan replied as he checked his console, "We could proceed further out among the planetary subsystem and take cover behind the gas giant's sixth moon or alternatively we could double back towards the planet itself. The current deployment of the Klingon vessels indicates that we will have a clear run to the planet's southern pole where we can hide in the magnetic disturbance there."

"I like the sound of that." Ash said.

"Assuming that that D-five isn't waiting for us to try something like that." Teela commented.

"You're not normally so pessimistic lieutenant commander." Ash replied, "Mister Etchemin plot us a ballistic course from here to the planet's southern polar region. Teela I want you to put us as close to the atmosphere as you can."

"Captain the closer we are to the atmosphere the more power we'll have to use to remain in place. We can't enter a stable orbit there." Teela pointed out.

"I'm aware of that but the closer we are to the atmosphere the stronger the interference to the Klingon sensors will be. Am I right Commander Tan?" Ash said.

"Yes, you are correct captain." Tan answered, "The stronger interference below one hundred kilometres will more than offset our increased use of thrusters to maintain our position."

"You see Teela, perfectly safe." Ash added smiling at the Andorian helmsman.

"As you wish captain." she said before the door to one of the turbolifts opened and Duke entered with one of the engineers who had been assigned to the boarding party, both men still wearing their armoured vests.

"Chief Duke, where is Doctor Reese?" Ash asked when he turned and saw the two men.

"She's fine but she went to sickbay with the casualties captain." Duke told him and Ash nodded.

"Of course she did. So what do you have for me chief?" he said.

"Well it's not me exactly captain, but the petty officer here has something." Duke said and the engineer standing beside him held out the PADD that he had used to download data from the Klingon computer.

"We managed to access and copy the Klingons' entire communications log captain" he said and Ash grinned as he took it.

"Just what we needed." he said before he looked at Duke and added, "I don't suppose that you were able to bring back a prisoner were you?"

"Sorry captain. Doctor Reese stunned one Klingon who came charging at her but we weren't able to secure him for transport before we had to fall back. He's still over there." Duke explained and Teela smiled.

"Not any more he isn't chief." she told him without taking her eyes off her console.

"We've destroyed the frigate and are about to double back to the gas giant chief." Ash added.

"Doubling back captain? So you think that the Klingons will think we went the other way?" Duke asked.

"That's the hope yes." Ash said, "For now though I'm going to hand this PADD off to Ensign Estevez to see what she can make of it and then I'm going to head to sickbay for an update from Doctor Reese."

Commander Tan, you have the conn."



Ash found Reese standing beside a biobed when he arrived in sickbay. There were other members of Reese's medical staff present as well, all of them administering treatment to the casualties that the Ascension had suffered since the Klingons had first attacked.

"Samuels?" he said, recognising the man lying on the bed and Reese looked around at him.

"Yes, he was hit when the Klingons counter attacked. If he hadn't been wearing that body armour then he'd have been killed but his condition is still serious. I've already stabilised his condition and I can regenerate a lot of the damage but it would be much better for him if we could get him to starbase twenty-four. Even a civilian trauma unit would be better." she said.

"Well I can't make any promises just yet Deborah." Ash replied "There are still seven Klingon ships out there that we can't outrun, including one that we can't even see thanks to its cloaking device. Now what about you? Are you okay after your adventure aboard the Klingon ship?"

"I'm fine Mike. Chief Duke took very good care of me." Reese said.

"I'm glad to hear it." Ash replied.

"What about that PADD that Adam's men brought back?" Reese asked, "Do you think it was worth the price we paid for it?"

"Another ship lost?" Voroth exclaimed when he saw the remains of the Vo'n'talk frigate on his bridge's main view screen. It required maximum magnification to be able to pick out most of the debris and it was impossible to identify any particular components among it.

"Sensors indicate a photonic weapon was used captain." one of the bridge officers said.

"Do you think I cannot see that? That single Starfleet vessel has now destroyed five of our ships. Sensors, find them now!" Voroth demanded.

"They appear nowhere on our sensors captain. Perhaps if we were to decloak and use our active-" a bridge officer responded before Voroth interrupted.

"No!" he snapped, "We will remain cloaked."

"Captain." Voroth's first officer said and Voroth suddenly turned to glare at him.

"Speak commander." he said.

"Captain the Starfleet crew are cunning. With our ships spread out to try and locate them we are vulnerable. A Miranda-class heavy destroyer is more than a match for our ships individually. Only together can we defeat it." the first officer explained.

"But first we have to find this phantom of a ship commander and if all our ships are in one place then a crew as cunning as the one we face will simply slip away." Voroth pointed out.

"Yes captain, which is why I recommend something of a compromise. Form our ships into two groups. Three Raptors with us while we remain cloaked and the other two can accompany our last frigate. Each group will have enough firepower to challenge even a battlecruiser." the first officer said and Voroth considered this.

"Instruct the *Chargwl* to rendezvous with the *Thlop* and *Hurgh*. Then have the *Potlh* and *Chev* rendezvous with the *SuS*. We will also join that group but remain cloaked. I want the *Chargwl*'s flight to position itself beneath the system's orbital plane while our group will go above it. Then we will start at the gas giant itself and move outwards in opposing spiral patterns. Ignore the rings, it will take too long to search them all and the Starfleet vessel has probably already moved on from there. All ships other than us will use full active sensors and we'll drive them into the open." he ordered, "Then contact Admiral Korda and update him."

"Admiral we have an update from the *Battleth's Edge*." Markon said and Korda looked across the command centre towards him.

"Let me see." he said as Markon walked towards him and then held out a PADD towards him. Korda took the device and began to read. He quickly started to frown and his expression hardened as he read on.

"Haven't they found the Ascension yet?" Keeler asked from the console he was still sat at.

"Read for yourself!" Korda snapped as he spun around and hurled the PADD towards Keeler, forcing him to duck out of the way before it struck him in the face, "Four ships destroyed and still no sign of the Ascension." he said before looking at the command centre's guards, "Take him back to his quarters."

One of the *Ascension*'s engineers had removed one of the ship's warp plasma injectors and was scanning the component when Forrester walked past.

"Commander, injector number six is burned out as well. We'll need to fabricate another." the engineer told him and he frowned.

"Another part to be fabricated? We're already backed up." Forrester said as he looked at the damaged warp plasma injector. It was then that he saw the injector's output was deformed and he pointed to it.

"Is that all that's wrong with it?" he asked and the other engineer nodded.

"Yes sir. The whole piece shows signs of thermal disruption. There must have been a surge that made the plasma containment field fail for a moment, not long enough for a serious breach but long enough for a few ions to escape."

"So just rip it out and replace it with some plasma conduit. You'll need to cut away some of the casing but the terminals themselves are the same." Forrester told him.

"But sir, that won't stand the pressure." the other engineer pointed out and Forrester smiled and nodded.

"Quite right crewman, it won't. The moment we try going to warp the entire injector will explode and we'd have to eject the core." he said.

"Then why do it?" the other engineer asked.

"Because it will still hold long enough to get us power to the phasers." Forrester told.

"Captain I think that I may have something important here." Estevez said from the communications station, turning her chair towards the centre of the bridge where Ash sat.

"Let me see ensign." he responded, getting out of his chair and walking over to the communications station to see what it was that Estevez had found.

"It's right here captain." she told him, pointing to one of the screens mounted above her console. Looking at this Ash saw that it appeared to show an index file with entries in chronological order.

"This is the directory of ship-to-ship communications received by the Klingon frigate that Chief Duke boarded captain." Estevez began before she pressed a button on her console and the screen changed to show a similar but obviously different list, "While this is the list of sent messages."

"So who were they talking to?" Ash asked.

"A lot of the signals were routed through their short-ranged antenna, including all the signals sent and received since we entered the system, though every so often there are short periods where they were using their long-range communications instead. Significantly though the address data remained the same. I think that this indicates that they spent most of their time within about four or five light years of this system but that every so often they travelled further out but still kept in touch with the same people right here." Estevez explained.

"The D-five?" Tan said from across the bridge and Ash looked towards him.

"Even as a transport it is the most significant ship we've seen here." he responded. Tan then got to his feet and crossed the bridge to join Ash and Estevez at the communications station, "The D-five could be acting as a command and control ship for the smaller vessels. With its cloaking device it would be difficult to detect." he added.

"Yes, but command and control for what purpose?" Ash said before he looked at Estevez, "Ensign has Starfleet Intelligence flagged any increased pirate activity in the area?" he asked and Estevez shook her head.

"No captain. There have been no reports of significant attacks on shipping or fixed facilities along the border for weeks." she answered, "The few reports we do have also identify the ships involved as modified commercial transports rather than surplus Klingon warships."

"That fits with Chief Duke's report that the frigate he boarded did not appear to contain any stolen goods captain." Tan pointed out.

"You say that there were only a few longer ranged signals in the log ensign?" Ash said, turning back to Estevez.

"Yes captain, that's right." she replied.

"And what about gaps the log? Periods where there are no signals being sent or received that could indicate a ship was trying to run silent and remain undetected?" Ash added and Estevez smiled and nodded.

"Yes captain, there are." she said, "In fact there is a pattern to the communications. Periods of short-ranged signals followed by periods without any communication at all. Then there are a few long ranged signals followed by another period of communications silence. Then it starts again with short ranged communications."

"They're running deep penetration missions." Ash said, "Probably avoiding inhabited systems to see how far they can get into Federation space without being detected. They travel a certain distance before checking in with the D-five and then return to wait for another assignment. They're plotting the best routes through Federation space for a long-ranged raiding force or worse yet, an invasion force to take."

"A force that would likely consist of significantly more modern ships." Tan added, "Ships fitted with cloaking devices that would make them even more difficult to detect."

"But why the D-five? Why not just operate from the other side of the neutral zone?" Teela asked.

"Range lieutenant commander, range." Ash answered, "The D-five is acting both as a command and control ship and a resupply vessel as well. That's why the Klingons selected a transport ship instead of one configured as a light cruiser."

"Captain the significance of this cannot be understated. If the Klingons were able to deploy a large enough number of cloaked D-five transports in systems on our side of the border then they could dramatically reduce the amount of time required to resupply their ships. Starfleet could not count on the benefit of shorter supply lines to improve the relative availability of our forces unless we detailed significant resources to sweeping systems in search of cloaked resupply units."

"Managing a system like that sounds like a nightmare though." Ash commented.

"Perhaps the reason for this is a dry run captain. It is also possible that the Klingons see this a way of avoiding any provocation of the Organians. We know that they are willing to intervene in any conflict between us and the Klingons if their own territorial sovereignty is infringed but this willingness to interfere seems to

decrease the further from Organia conflict takes place. The Klingons could be looking for a way to avoid having to attack through the strategically placed Organian system while still sticking close to the advantageous route that it offers. Making use of obsolete ship classes that would give the Klingons a degree of deniability." Tan replied.

"Hard to deny it when we've been aboard one of their ships and taken their communications logs." Etchemin said.

"They could still choose to blame the actions of this force on a renegade faction. Klingon society is well known for its semi-feudal nature and competing factions, not all of whom operate fully under the direction of the high council." Tan reminded him.

"Actually I think that we may be able to narrow down the source of this plan a little more Commander Tan." Estevez said.

"Really? How?" Ash said and Estevez brought up another screen of information, this time showing excerpts taken from passages of text.

"Even though this ship doesn't appear to be at the centre of the force we're facing some of the communications that it received have contained pieces of information that refer to a higher authority. In particular I found six uses of some variation of a Klingon equivalent of the phrase 'orders from Admiral Korda'." she said and she pointed to the text on the screen where the phrase was used, "There are also mentions of an unnamed admiral in numerous other messages both received and sent by the ship. From the context it looks like most, or possibly all of them refer to this Admiral Korda if he is the one giving orders to these ships."

"All of this needs logging carefully ensign." Ash said, "Every bit of it needs to be passed on to Starfleet Intelligence as soon as we are clear of the Klingon jamming. Regardless of whether or not this Admiral Korda has the approval of his government to be carrying out this operation or not it needs to be investigated further."

"Yes captain." Estevez responded with a nod.

"Captain this information has the potential to cause a great deal of diplomatic fallout." Tan commented, "There are elements in the Federation who would use it to argue for ceasing all negotiation with the Klingons immediately for what could just be the internal politics of the Klingon Empire spilling over into our territory." "That's why I want it sending directly to Starfleet Intelligence instead of just passing up the chain of command where more people could see it. They can classify all of it as they see fit. If this just as you say the internal politics of the Klingon Empire then none of it needs to be made public. Starfleet operations can strengthen our patrols along the neutral zone to watch for further incursions like this but that's as far as things need to go. On the other hand if it represents a change in the high council's policy towards us then they can make sure that everyone who needs to know finds out quickly so that we can make our own plans accordingly." Ash told him.

Just then the intercom sounded and Estevez placed a hand to her earpiece.

"Captain I have Lieutenant Commander Forrester for you." she said.

"Put him through ensign." Ash replied before he leant closer to the intercom panel set into the communications station, "Yes commander?" he asked.

"Captain we've just carried out a workaround on the warp core that I think ought to get us phasers back. Can you get Lieutenant Etchemin to check his weapons console? If the power isn't already showing up then get him to turn the console off and back on again, it ought to show up then." Forrester said and Ash turned towards Etchemin who had already overheard what Forrester had said and was checking the status of the *Ascension's* weapons.

"Phaser power reading green captain." he said, smiling as he looked at Ash.

"Commander Forrester can we perform a test firing?" Ash said into the intercom.

"Captain, you should be able to fire a full salvo from every phaser simultaneously. I can't give you warp drive yet though. The work around won't tolerate that and we'll lose the entire core." Forrester said.

"Commander Tan, what's your opinion of running a live fire test of the phasers now?" Ash said.

"As long as the power output is limited to under twenty percent we should remain hidden captain." Tan replied and Ash nodded.

"Okay lieutenant, fire forward phasers at twenty percent." Ash said.

"Aye captain. Firing phasers." Etchemin replied and he fired a brief burst of fire from the phaser bank mounted beneath the front of the *Ascension's* saucer section. This was aimed down into the clouds of the gas giant below and it resulted in a brief flash of flame as volatile atmospheric gases were ignited, "Test complete captain. Phasers operational." Etchemin added.

"Now all we need are targets." Ash said, "Commander Tan, what can you give me?"

Tan made his way back to the science station while Ash returned to his chair in the centre of the bridge.

"Scanning captain." Tan said and then a few moments later he added, "Captain the Klingons appear to have formed their ships into two groups. One group consists of two Raptors and the last Vo'n'talk-class frigate

while the other is made up of the other three raptors.”

“What about that D-five?” Teela asked.

“Still cloaked, or possibly located in a sensor blind spot.” Tan said.

“If the Klingons are banding together so they can try and outgun us then I wouldn’t be surprised if it was lurking close to that trio of Raptors. That way the firepower of each group would be more even.” Ash said, “Which group is closer?”

“The group led by the Vo’n’talk-class frigate is approaching our location now captain.” Tan said,

“Have they seen us?” Ash said, suddenly wondering whether his decision to test fire the ship’s phasers had revealed their position to the Klingons after all.

“I don’t think so captain. The other group is making its way towards the planet’s northern pole. It looks like they are setting up a new search pattern. However, if they continue on their current course the group heading towards us will undoubtedly detect us soon.” Tan said.

“So us against two scouts and a frigate?” Ash said and Tan nodded.

“Yes captain. Between them they do have a similar level of firepower to us.” he said.

“Then it would be in our best interests to shoot first wouldn’t you say commander?” Ash said.

“Yes captain.” Tan responded, “I would recommend engaging them with photon torpedoes as soon as possible. Now that we have phaser capability again the final ship could be engaged with them. Even just using phasers we would have an advantage over any single enemy vessel in one on one combat.”

“Helm bring us around to face the enemy. Stand by to go to full impulse and take us between the frigate and one of the scouts. Weapons I want you to lock onto those two scouts with our torpedoes, one round per ship. Then as we pass by the frigate we hit it with phasers.” Ash said, “Commander Tan, how long do you think it will take for that other group to respond to an attack?”

“Not long captain. After we have destroyed the first group I recommend that we go to active sensors and attempt to keep the planet between us and them. They’ll know where we are but if they want to catch us then they’ll have to split up.” Tan said and Teela smiled.

“Otherwise I hope everyone likes flying around in circles until we run out of fuel.” she said.

“Hopefully Starfleet will declare us overdue and come looking for us long before then lieutenant commander.” Ash responded.

Teela fired the *Ascension*’s thrusters cautiously, turning the ship towards the oncoming group of Klingon ships before she switched the impulse drive to a state of readiness.

“Heading locked in captain.” she said, “We’ll pass by the frigate on the starboard side.”

“How close commander?” Ash asked.

“About five hundred metres captain. Just enough to avoid any splashback off their shields from our phasers.” Teela answered.

“Did you get that lieutenant?” Ash said, looking at Etchemin and he nodded.

“Yes captain. Phasers will fire to starboard as we pass.” he said.

“Captain the two groups of Klingon vessels are now in eclipse from one another.” Tan announced.

“Teela, engage full impulse.” Ash ordered and Teela engaged the *Ascension*’s impulse drive, sending the ship speeding towards the oncoming trio of Klingon vessels.

“Firing torpedoes.” Etchemin said as he launched a pair of photon torpedoes simultaneously. These spread apart as they shot towards the Klingon ships, one heading for each of the Raptor-class scouts. The crews of these ships saw the torpedoes heading straight for them and both turned aside in an attempt to evade them but their guidance systems had already locked onto them both and they turned to track their targets. One of the torpedoes hit the Raptor it was fired at the rear of its command pod. The explosion overwhelmed the obsolete vessel’s shields and the entire forward half of the ship was destroyed. On the other hand the second Raptor came closer to avoiding the torpedo aimed at it entirely and it was hit on a wing tip where its warp nacelles were mounted and the explosion tore off most of the wing while leaving the main body intact. Etchemin began firing the *Ascension*’s phasers almost as soon as he had fired the two torpedoes, initially targeting the Vo’n’talk-class frigate with the destroyer’s forward phasers as well as the phaser mounted in the roll bar that had a wide field of fire, hammering the frigate’s forwards shields. The crew of the frigate did not sit idly by as they came under fire though and they fired their disruptors back at the *Ascension* before following up with a torpedo launched from its own nose mounted launcher. Although the frigate’s weapons were just as out of date as the rest of the ship’s systems the sheer number of them that it mounted meant that the Starfleet vessel’s shields were hit so heavily that when the torpedo struck the *Ascension* as well the blast caused the ship to rock violently.

“Damage report.” Ash exclaimed as he clung onto his chair.

“Forward shields down to fifteen percent captain.” Tan said.

“Casualty reports are coming in from forward areas captain. There is a fire on deck six, section two.” Estevez added.

“Damage control teams?” Ash said.

“Responding now captain. Bulkheads have closed to contain the fire.” Estevez answered.

"Weapons?" Ash said.

"Phasers and photon torpedoes still operational captain." Etchemin replied.

"Then continue firing and see if you can knock out their weapons." Ash ordered.

"My pleasure captain." Etchemin responded adjusting the aim point of his phaser fire to try and disable the frigate's weapons.

As the two ships closed in on one another the frigate left the firing arc of the *Ascension's* forward firing phaser bank as well as the emitter mounted on the port side of the ship's roll bar and Etchemin ceased firing them. The emitter mounted on the starboard side of the roll bar could still target the Klingon ship though and he continued to fire this, aiming for the command pod where its torpedo launcher was mounted. The weapons mounted on the Klingon ship also had limited firing arcs though and when Etchemin was forced to reduce his fire the Klingons were also forced to stop firing their fixed forward weapons, leaving them with only their ventrally mounted turret. Even though the *Ascension's* shields had been weakened by the disruptor and torpedo fire so far, this turret was too underpowered to be able to inflict any further damage to them. On the other hand the *Ascension's* phasers were far more powerful and the frigate's already weakened shields collapsed just as the two ships passed by one another. At this point the Klingons could no longer fire their turret because of the wing assembly blocking its line of fire but Etchemin was able to add the starboard saucer mounted phaser bank and as the two ships sped passed one another the *Ascension's* phasers raked the side of the now defenceless Klingon frigate. There were numerous explosions along the length of the ship before the damage became so great that it started to break up and there was a single larger explosion that ripped what was left of the frigate apart.

Before the *Ascension's* crew had the chance to take in the destruction of the frigate though the ship was rocked by another torpedo impact to stern.

"Photon torpedo hit aft. Aft shields down to eighty percent captain." Tan said.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Ash exclaimed.

"The second Raptor-class scout captain. Its crew appear to have regained control of their vessel." Tan told him.

"We can't afford to hang around. Mister Etchemin, aft torpedoes." Ash ordered.

"Loading torpedoes on target captain." Etchemin responded, "Firing now."

A single photon torpedo burst from one of the *Ascension's* aft facing torpedo launchers and raced towards the Raptor. The damage that the scout ship had already suffered meant that its crew could not evade the weapon and it struck the ship head on. Its shields already down and having already suffered severe damage the small vessel could not withstand a second torpedo hit and it was consumed in a brilliant flash of light.

Although being cloaked meant that the *Bat'leth's Edge* could not make use of its active subspace sensors the trio of Raptors flying in close formation with the larger transport were relaying the information that they were able to gather to the cloaked ship and from this Voroth was able to see the same tactical plot as them. This allowed the furious Klingon to see the destruction of the other half of his squadron, though to his approval they did not go down without a fight and now the plot showed the *USS Ascension* circling the same gas giant as his remaining ships so that it remained on the opposite side of the planet.

"They mock us." his first officer said as he watched the tactical display on the bridge's main screen, seeing the representation of the *Ascension* staying on the other side of the planet.

"They are trying to goad us into splitting up the ships we have left." Voroth said calmly, "Unless they have suffered damage that we are unaware of they can keep this up indefinitely and sooner or later that means more Starfleet ships will come to look for their missing vessel. Even just a couple of frigates on a border patrol would give them overwhelming firepower. The obvious solution is to split our ships up and send them in opposite directions to force the Starfleet vessel to engage us but we have seen where that leads. They will pick us off one by one."

"Then what do we do captain?" his first officer asked and Voroth considered his next move carefully. He still had enough firepower to destroy the *Ascension* in open battle but he knew that their chances of victory dropped massively if the Starfleet destroyer was able to get the first shot. Its weapons were far more powerful than those carried by Voroth's obsolete ships, a single torpedo could destroy a Raptor even through its shields while the *Bat'leth's Edge* could easily be crippled with one blow as well.

However, Voroth's force still had one clear edge that the *Ascension* lacked. The *Bat'leth's Edge* itself had a cloaking device good enough to hide it from even their opponent's active sensors.

"We will give them what they want." Voroth said eventually as his expression changed from one of fury at the string of defeats his force had suffered to satisfaction with the victory he now anticipated.

"But if we split our forces they will be outgunned." the first officer said.

"Yes but our enemy will not realise that until it is too late." Voroth said, "Our Raptors will continue to circle the planet as they are now while the Starfleet vessel matches their speed and heading to remain on the opposite side. On the other hand we will bring the *Bat'leth's Edge* to a stop and wait for them to come to us. They know that we are in the system but they probably believe that we are accompanying our Raptors. They will

not expect this ship to be the one to attack them directly while our torpedo armed scouts act as decoys. We will wait for the Starfleet ship to come to our position and decloak beneath them before firing into their ventral hull. Most of their weapons are placed to cover above their ship so their ability to fire on us will be limited by this angle of attack. If we strike quickly from close range we may be able to penetrate their shields and inflict serious damage then engage the cloaking device again before they can respond."

"A bold plan captain." his first officer responded, "But what will be our main target? Their shields? Or their weapons?"

"Neither. We will target their engines. They need their warp drive for phasers and their impulse drive to manoeuvre within a star system. By removing both of these we leave them crippled and vulnerable." Voroth said, "Then when our Raptors come back around the planet they will be able to finish what we started."

11.

Aboard the *USS Ascension* the bridge crew looked at an almost identical tactical display on their main view screen to the one that was shown on the screen aboard the *Bat'leth's Edge*. The gas giant was shown centrally while the opposing Starfleet and Klingon vessels circled it on opposite sides, neither side able to see one another directly but aware of the presence of one another thanks to the disturbances registered in subspace that their active sensors could detect.

"Much more of this and I'm going to get dizzy." Teela said and Etchemin smiled.

"I thought Andorians didn't get dizzy." he said.

"Even we have our limits." Teela replied.

"This is getting rather monotonous." Ash said, "Commander Tan, are there any signs that the Klingons are about to change their strategy? Surely they must realise that they can't catch up with us like this."

"Nothing captain." Tan responded, shaking his head, "All indications are that the Klingons are just orbiting the planet the same as us."

"And they're still jamming us?" Ash added.

"Yes captain." Estevez answered, "All channels are blocked."

"The strength of the jamming suggests that it is a combination of the three Raptors. We may be able to overcome the jamming of one of the vessels but the combination of all three is more than our transmitters can penetrate." Tan said.

Ash then activated the intercom.

"Ash to engineering." he said.

"Engineering here captain. We're still run off our feet down here so if something has failed try turning off and back on again." Forrester's voice responded.

"I'm just after an update commander. There are three Raptors on the other side of the planet that seem happy to keep chasing us around and around. If you give us full warp power then we might be able to withdraw." Ash said.

"Sorry captain but the damage was more severe than originally thought. It'll be a couple of hours before I can give you even limited warp speed and eight or nine for anything over warp five." Forrester explained.

"Hopefully the Klingons will oblige us and stay on the other side of the planet for that long. Ash out." Ash said before shutting off the intercom again and he sighed, "Well it looks like we get to stay on this merry go round for a few hours yet."

Voroth smiled when he saw the *Ascension* appear over the planetary horizon and head towards the *Bat'leth's Edge*.

"Just as planned." he said, "Helm get us into position. Stand by to drop cloak and attack."

"Captain I'm picking up an energy surge." Tan announced.

"Where from?" Ash asked, turning his chair towards the science station.

"Beneath us captain." Tan answered before he suddenly looked up, "Captain the surge is closing on us."

"A cloaking device?" Ash said but before Tan could respond the *Ascension* shuddered.

"Disruptor hits to ventral shields captain." Tan called out.

"Etchemin return fire. Don't wait for the lock." Ash ordered and Etchemin fired a rapid burst from the *Ascension's* ventrally mounted phasers. Without the time to establish a target lock the blast narrowly missed the Klingon ship that continued to fire its disruptors at the Starfleet vessel. Unlike the D-5 cruisers that were still in service the weapons of the *Bat'leth's Edge* had not been upgraded and the *Ascension's* shields held for several seconds before the continued barrage of disruptor fire was able to pierce it at which point the ship shook violently.

In the *Ascension's* engineering section there was a sudden explosion centred on the jury rigged plasma injector and an alarm began to sound.

"Engineering to bridge." Forrester said into the intercom as engineers rushed to deal with the damage, "That jury rigged injector just blew. We just lost main power."

"Can you get it back? We need those phasers commander." Ash responded.

"I'll see what I can do captain but I can't promise anything. Engineering out." Forrester told him before he shut off the intercom and hurried to help with the repairs.

It was obvious to the Klingons that the *Ascension* had lost warp power when its phasers abruptly ceased fire.

"Maintain fire. Target their impulse drive." Voroth ordered.

"Teela take evasive action. Etchemin we need a torpedo lock." Ash ordered and Teela steered the *Ascension's* prow upwards sharply, trying to get the Klingon transport into the ship's rear arc where it could be more easily be fired on by with a photon torpedo. However, as the *Ascension* started to climb relative to the D-5 the Klingon vessel was able to pierce the destroyer's shields again.

"Captain we've just lost impulse power." Teela exclaimed, "We're down to thrusters."

"Etchemin do you have a lock yet?" Ash said.

"Not yet captain." Etchemin responded.

"Enemy vessel is cloaking again captain." Tan said as the *Bat'leth's Edge* veered off and vanished from the *Ascension's* sensors.

"What's our tactical status?" Ash said.

"Shields are holding captain but only just. Without warp or impulse power we can't recharge them." Etchemin replied, "Phasers are offline but we still have torpedoes."

"Captain the Raptors are accelerating." Tan said suddenly and Ash looked at the tactical display on the main screen again to see the three Klingon scoutships moving more quickly now.

"Bridge to engineering, we could really do with some engines." Ash said into the intercom.

"We're working on it captain. We just need a few more minutes." Forrester responded.

"I'm counting on that commander." Ash told him before he shut off the intercom and looked towards Tan, "Commander can you plot where they'll appear over the horizon?" he asked.

"I can give a probable point, yes. Of course the accuracy will improve the longer we track them." Tan answered.

"We need enough accuracy to guide a torpedo." Ash told him.

"You mean hit them right as they come over the horizon?" Teela said, smiling at Ash.

"Exactly lieutenant commander." he responded, "I don't want to risk our shields against three torpedoes fired together but if we can take out two of those Raptors before they can fire then we'll stand a much better chance. Maybe the third if we can reload quickly enough."

"Calculating now captain." Tan said.

"Lieutenant Etchemin, be ready to fire as soon as the Klingons appear." Ash said.

"Yes captain." Etchemin replied.

"Target data plotted captain." Tan announced moments later, "The Klingons are on a direct course, remaining in formation. Transferring data to weapons control now."

"Targeting data received captain." Etchemin added, "Targeting outer Raptors."

"Mister Etchemin you may fire at will." Ash said.

"My pleasure captain." Etchemin commented as he focused on the tactical display, waiting for the Klingon vessels to appear.

The three Klingon Raptors continued to speed around the gas giant until they appeared over the horizon behind the *Ascension* and Etchemin fired both of the destroyer's aft torpedo launchers. The crews of the Raptors had not expected the *Ascension* to be ready to fire as soon as they appeared and were unprepared to be fired on and neither of them had the chance to take evasive action before the torpedoes struck them head on and both Raptors exploded.

The third Raptor, its crew not knowing for certain whether the *Ascension* was prepared to fire again turned away rather than return fire, flying in an evasive pattern.

"Drop the cloak!" Voroth snapped when he saw the two Raptors explode, "Fire disruptors."

The bridge crew obeyed the order immediately and the *Bat'leth's Edge* suddenly appeared several thousand kilometres off the *Ascension's* port side and began firing its disruptors again. Upon seeing this the remaining Raptor also turned back towards the *Ascension* and began to fire its own disruptors, the two Klingon ships catching the Starfleet destroyer between them.

"I've got a lock on the Raptor captain." Etchemin said as the *Ascension* shook under the barrage of disruptor fire.

"Fire." Ash ordered and Etchemin launched another photon torpedo. This prompted the last remaining Raptor to turn away to try and evade the attack but the torpedo turned to follow it and slammed into the rear of the ship where its impulse drive exhaust was and the resulting explosion consumed the entire ship.

"D-five still closing captain." Tan said.

"Etchemin can you get another torpedo lock?" Ash asked.

"I'm trying captain." Etchemin responded before the *Ascension* shuddered again.

"Shields down captain." Tan said.

"Best guess Mister Etchemin." Ash told Etchemin and he fired the torpedo he was trying to lock onto the Klingon transport.

"Evasive action!" Voroth ordered and the Klingon helmsman turned the ship sharply, one last disruptor blast striking the unshielded *Ascension* before the Starfleet vessel passed out of the D-5's firing arc. However, the torpedo fired towards the Bat'leth's edge was able to acquire the vessel with its own targeting sensors and it turned as well, striking the ship along its upper hull before detonating and producing a series of small secondary explosions along the length of the ship.

Alarms sounded around the bridge of the *Bat'leth's Edge* and everywhere Voroth looked there was a screen showing some sort of warning. Several of the bridge crew were obviously dead, killed as power conduits behind their consoles overloaded and exploded. However, there were still enough officers left to operate the ship.

"Damage report!" he yelled.

"Weapons offline. Shields inoperative." his first officer responded, "We still have engines though. We can cloak and withdraw."

Voroth suddenly reached for the disruptor holstered at his waist and drew the weapon, pointing it at his first officer and firing before he could react. The first officer let out a brief scream as the energy from the disruptor enveloped him in a reddish light before he was vaporised and Voroth looked around the bridge at his remaining command crew.

"I will not run!" he shouted at them, "If we are to die then we will take the enemy with us. Helm lay in a collision course for the Starfleet vessel and engage at full impulse. Today is a good day to die!"

12.

"Impulse power restored captain. Helm ready." Teela said.

"Well done Adam." Ash muttered before he looked at Etchemin, "What about weapons?"

"Offline captain. There's no power for phasers and the photon control was damaged by that last hit." he said shaking his head.

"Captain the last enemy vessel is coming about." Tan announced as he saw the D-5 turning on his sensor display.

"Shields?" Ash said.

"Shields now at ten percent captain." Etchemin told him, "They're charging but it's slow."

"Will that be enough against their weapons?" Estevez asked.

"Sensors indicate that the enemy's weapons are also offline. Shields as well. Our torpedo damaged their power distribution grid but they may still be able to cloak." Tan said.

"And they can clearly manoeuvre. But what are they playing at? They should just withdraw." Ash said.

"Enemy vessel is now facing us directly captain. They are accelerating." Tan continued.

"They're go to ram us." Ash said.

"Taking evasive action." Teela said but Ash held up his hand.

"No!" he exclaimed and the other officers on the bridge all looked at him.

"Captain our shields will not withstand a collision." Tan told him.

"I know that commander. Teela stand by to put everything you have into the impulse engines. I want one big burst of power when I give the word. Commander Tan are the Klingons still accelerating straight towards us?" Ash said.

"Yes captain. I estimate impact in less than twenty seconds." Tan answered and Ash nodded.

"Give me a countdown from ten. Teela are you ready?" Ash said and Teela nodded.

"Yes captain." she replied.

"Good because we've only got one shot at this. Too soon and the Klingons will be able to turn away. Too late and-" Ash said.

"And they hit us." Teela interrupted and Ash nodded.

The main viewscreen showed the *Bat'leth's Edge* as it came towards the *Ascension* and Ash felt himself becoming impatient but he knew that the timing had to be perfect.

"Ten seconds captain." Tan announced, "Nine. Eight. Seven."

"Almost." Ash said softly, still staring at the image on the view screen.

"Six. Five. Four. Three." Tan continued.

"Now Teela!" Ash exclaimed and Teela slammed her hand down on the controls to fire the *Ascension's* impulse engines.

Engaging at full power, the impulse drive propelled the *Ascension* forwards rapidly and Voroth gasped as he saw the Starfleet vessel move out of the path of the *Bat'leth's Edge* and he realised that the D-5 was now hurtling towards the gas giant instead. Unlike the small Raptors and Vo'n'talk-class frigates the D-5-class transport was not designed for atmospheric operation and entering the gas giant at such a high speed and steep angle would undoubtedly destroy the vessel.

"Break off!" Voroth shouted at the top of his voice.

"It's too late!" the helmsman exclaimed as he cut power to the ship's impulse drive and fired its thrusters, doing his best to slow the ship down as well as adjust its heading. However, Ash had timed the *Ascension's* sudden acceleration so that the *Bat'leth's Edge* would already be too close to the planet to be able to correct its course to avoid entry into its atmosphere and less than two seconds later the Klingon ship hit its upper reaches.

The tremendous friction between the ship's hull and the atmosphere ripped protruding parts away and triggered a huge build up of heat across its surface that produced a visible layer of bright plasma. The stress soon proved to be too much for the ship's already weakened superstructure and what started out as a groaning sound soon turned into the sound of twisting and tearing metal as the ship's wings were ripped free and what was left began to tumble wildly before it too broke apart.

The *Ascension's* bridge crew witnessed the destruction of the *Bat'leth's Edge* on the main view screen.

"Commander Tan do you think that there were any survivors?" Ash asked but Tan shook his head.

"No captain. The ship, like the other Klingon vessels was lost with all hands." he answered.

"And the subspace jamming?" Ash said, turning towards Estevez.

"Cleared captain." she said.

"Very good ensign." Ash responded, "Please alert Starfleet Command to what's happened here. Tell them

that we will make repairs and be underway as soon as possible. Also send the information from the Klingon communications logs to Starfleet Intelligence. Maybe they can make something of it all."

"A dozen ships Korda. A dozen." The Klingon shown on the screen that Korda sat in front of in his quarters said, "Not to mention the more than two hundred warriors aboard them. All of them lost because of your foolhardy cross-border raid."

"They were all from our reserve forces. The loss of ships is minimal and the warriors died in battle like Klingon should, not wasting away in a barracks or sat across a table and talking to our enemies." Korda responded.

"The Federation are not weaklings Korda and they grow stronger with every passing year." the other Klingon began.

"All the more reason to strike quickly Durkra." Korda interrupted, "Before they can work out the problems with their new cruisers and battleships. We can defeat them easily."

"Defeat them? Yes, but not easily Korda. The empire would be crippled and for what? We wouldn't have the strength to occupy the entire Federation and if we did we would barely have the strength to defend our border against whatever was left of it. Not to mention the Romulans. They may have been our allies in the past but only because they saw us as a useful counter to the Federation. Without any other significant external threat do you really think that they would be satisfied with staying in their own space and ignoring us? On the other hand the Federation will stick to its word, one of the few honourable things about them. If we make a treaty that finalises our border then they will stay on their side of it while we get to do what we want on ours. If there is to be a war then it will be at a time of our choosing when we know that the advantage is ours."

"An advantage I was planning to give us Durkra." Korda said, "I can open up the core worlds of the Federation to attack. A single squadron of Birds of Prey could make it as far as Earth itself."

"And be shot down by their sentry ships as soon as they decloak to attack. You know as well as anyone how deep Earth's defences are Korda." Durkra replied, "Besides, your foolish experiment has revealed the potential for using cloaked supply ships to Starfleet. Do you really think that they won't soon begin working on a way to counter that?"

"Just because they destroyed our ships doesn't mean that Starfleet knows about my plan." Korda said, "That was another reason for selecting older ships instead of new ones and look what I was able to achieve with them. Give me battlecruisers instead of obsolete scouts and see what I can do then."

"Nobody's transferring any more warships to your command Korda. In fact you should consider yourself lucky that you are keeping the ones you have. I contacted you directly to see if you could be persuaded to stop what you are doing. Continue to fail like this and I could be congratulating Markon on his skill assassination of you and awarding your rank to him instead." Durkra said before he suddenly terminated his transmission and the screen went blank.

Korda then turned to where his mate Ah'ken lay on a large bed looking at him and she smiled.

"Durkra is a fool." she said as Korda got up and approached the bed, "Markon is far too loyal to ever turn on you. He understands the importance of your work."

"Yes Ah'ken Markon is loyal, but there are plenty of others who might see the opportunity for advancement if they were to kill me." Korda said, sitting down on the side of the bed and placing a hand on Ah'ken's head to stroke her hair.

"So what will you do now my love?" she asked.

"Continue of course." Korda answered, "I don't care what Durkra or the high council have to say, our destiny lies in conquering the Federation not making peace with it and I still believe that preparing for such conquest is the right course of action."

Ash sat down on his couch as soon as he returned to his quarters and looked out of the viewport to see the streak of stars as the *Ascension* travelled at warp speeds. Just then the intercom on his desk sounded and Ash had to get up to walk across the room to answer it.

"Ash." he said.

"Captain there's a signal coming in from Starfleet Intelligence for you. Do you want me to put it through to you?" Estevez's voice said.

"Intelligence? Yes, put it through." Ash told her and he sat down in front of the desk mounted terminal just as the screen activated to show an image of another Starfleet captain.

"Captain Ash I'm Captain Holloway, Starfleet Intelligence." the man said.

"Hello captain. What interest does Starfleet Intelligence have in the *Ascension* now?" Ash asked him.

"We thought that you should be brought up to speed with our enquiries into the data packet you sent to us." Holloway answered and Ash frowned for a moment.

"Already. You can't have received it that long ago." he commented.

"No, it landed in my inbox about four hours ago but there are some details that stood out when compared to things we've already been trying to keep tabs on." Holloway replied.

"Oh really? Such as what?" Ash said.

"Primarily this Klingon Admiral Korda. Believe it or not his name has already come up in a few conversations we've had with members of the Federation Diplomatic Corps. Korda is based on the Klingon colony world of Qu'Vat just on the other side of the neutral zone and he's definitely a hawk where it comes to interstellar relations. We suspect that he's gunning for a place on the High Council but so far it's eluded him.

Interestingly he doesn't have the forehead ridges that are common among the Klingons, especially in their upper ranks but that doesn't seem to have held him back from what we can tell. He served under General Korrd for a while before his fall from grace and there are some rumours that Korda may have helped in that. Apparently he saw Korrd as being soft. Korda on the other hand has been constantly arguing for the Klingon Empire to take a much tougher line in negotiations with the Federation, apparently he believes that the empire is strong enough to beat us in a straight up fight and thinks peace talks are a waste of time. This is the first time that we've had any proof of him actually carrying out any operations on our side of the border although we've suspected his involvement with a number of recent incidents, including the attack on *Delta Fourteen*." Holloway said,

"He was behind that?" Ash said in amazement, "I thought that the Klingons were denying anything to do with it."

"They still are and we think that the operation wasn't necessarily authorised by the High Council, though they know full well what really happened. It's the opinion of Starfleet Intelligence that other more hawkish members of the council consider Korda useful in giving them plausible deniability. There is one more thing that might interest you about him as well." Holloway said.

"Really? What's that?" Ash asked.

"According to our sources Korda has a house guest at his headquarters, an old acquaintance of yours in fact." Holloway said and Ash scowled.

"Keeler." he said and Holloway smiled as he nodded.

"Exactly. After Lieutenant Matthew Keeler defected to the Klingons he was taken in by General Korda himself. Starfleet Intelligence thinks that your old communications officer as well as Captain Franks herself were working for him and that Keeler still is." he said.

"So what you're telling me is that if we take down this General Korda then maybe we can get our hands on Keeler as well? That sounds like a good deal to me." Ash responded.