

“And to what do I owe the pleasure of this subspace communiqué?”

Captain K’danz of the starship *USS Dauntless* sat in the chair behind her desk in the quarters she shared with her husband, the starship’s chief engineer, Dar, who sat on the couch across the room reading a tech manual displayed on a large padd. She was dressed in her off duty uniform, her duty jacket hanging off the back of her chair, a glass filled with a carbonated soft drink beverage on the desk next to the monitor, which displayed the face of an older red-haired woman wearing a medical blue uniform.

“I figured you would want to know about the results to some recent tests I made on some of the tissue samples,” Doctor Beverly Crusher replied. Her expression did not match the happy one that K’danz had until that moment. “They presented some very strange and unexpected results.”

“What kind of results?” K’danz asked, a matching look of concern on her own face now. Even Dar stopped reading his manual and moved over to the desk to stand next to his wife.

“I decided to perform a micro-cellular scan the other day. Don’t ask me why, it was just because some of the initial autopsy results have been bothering me since the day we held Captain Koester’s funeral. Most of the cellular damage I detected could be written off to the effects of the chemicals that composed the bomb and the physical effects of the explosion that killed him. But some results weren’t so easy to explain. It wasn’t until I thoroughly reviewed the Captain’s complete medical history that I was able to put my finger on it, and what I’ve determined will blow you away,” Crusher said. “From the review of the Captain’s medical records, your starship’s logs, and the records of several other members of your crew, including yourself, Carrie, I learned that on stardate 61994, the entire crew was exposed to the Genesis Wave,” Crusher said.

“We were present for the detonation of a Genesis device over the planet the Klingons now call *qul’maS*,” K’danz confirmed. “We weren’t exactly in the middle of the explosion.”

“Thank God,” Dar added. “Or we would now be a sub-atomic part of *qul’maS* just like the Duras faction that was using the planet as a hidden base.”

“You may not have been in the direct effect of the Genesis device,” Crusher said. “But you were still within the radiation field the device created upon detonation. It probably spread through half the system where the detonation occurred. Like neutrinos, it passed through all matter present in the system, including your starship and all your bodies, leaving minute yet traceable evidence of your exposure. Everyone who was aboard the *Dauntless* that day, and likely aboard the Romulan ship *Vedrex* too, would show exposure to the Genesis radiation in some small amount.”

“Is it dangerous?” K’danz asked, momentarily worried for her own wellbeing.

“No, you have nothing to worry about,” Crusher advised.

“Then what is the concern?”

“I have been unable to detect any trace of the Genesis radiation in the tissue samples collected from Captain Koester’s body.”

It took a few seconds for Crusher’s words to sink in.

“You mean, Peter was never exposed to the radiation that the rest of us were?” K’danz asked.

“Essentially, yes,” Crusher said with a nod.

“But... But that’s impossible. He was right there on the bridge when the detonation occurred. I was standing right next to him!”

“True as that may be, the man who died on Capria IV was not.”

Both K’danz and Dar were speechless. The half-Klingon chief engineer looked down at his wife, who seemed frozen in indecision. Finally one hand slowly reached for the control button below the monitor.

“Thank you, Beverly. *Dauntless*, out.” And she ended the communication.

Dar continued to watch K’danz for a while, still trying to fully understand the implications of what Crusher had told them. Finally he asked, “What are you going to do about this?”

K’danz looked up at her husband. Her expression was blank and emotionless but there was fire behind her eyes.

“We’re going to get to the bottom of this!” she replied before touching the intercom control on her desk. “Bridge, this is the Captain.”

“Aye, Cap’n?” responded the voice of Commander Alasdair Wallace, the evening shift Officer of the Deck.

“Change course to the Capria system. Ahead warp seven. And call a meeting of the senior staff in the conference lounge in fifteen minutes.”

“Capria? You mean we’re goin’ back t’ Erma?” Wallace asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes. We’re going to find out exactly what happened to Captain Koester there.”

Space, the Final Frontier...

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Star Trek: Dauntless

“Diplomatic Repercussions” By PJK

One by one, the starship’s senior staff gathered in the conference lounge behind the bridge.

“What’s this rumor I hear that we’re headed back to Erma?” Chief Pono Kyman, the starship’s Chief of the Boat, asked Lt Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo. “I thought the Skipper said she’d never set foot on that planet ever again?”

“Mister Wallace told me she received some sort of information concerning the death of Captain Koester that needs looking into further,” Arbelo replied as both men took their seats at the table with the medical department representatives, Chief Medical Officer Justin MacMillan and Ship’s Counselor Tanzania Gera. “Do you know anything about this, Doctor?”

“Th’ first I heard abou’ this was when Alasdair notified me of this briefing,” the dark-skinned man replied in his strong Scottish brogue just as one set of doors swished open and the starship’s first officer, Commander Tom Paris, stepped in, pausing on the steps and noting who was already present.

“Mister Paris, any idea why we’re going back to Erma?” Kyman asked.

“Not a clue, Chief,” Paris replied as he took his seat to the right of where the captain normally sat. “I’m as surprised as you are. I know your last captain was killed there, but beyond that I know little about that planet. What happened there?”

As Arbelo, Counselor Gera and Chief Kyman told Paris about the *Dauntless*’ first mission to Erma, to observe their first warp flight and make first contact with the emerging civilization and how the planet was divided into two cultures, one embracing the future and the other clawing onto the past, Chief of Security Sean McIntyre stepped into the room, taking his seat next to Kyman, adding his own unique perspective to the events that had occurred during the starship’s two violence-filled visits to Erma, culminating in the death of Captain Peter J. Koester when he was attacked by a Min suicide bomber. He was soon followed into the lounge by the ship’s strategic operations officer, Ensign Carter Breitling.

As the tale ended, the doors parted once more to admit Captain K’danz and Lt Commander Dar. Dar moved to his seat near the rear-facing lounge windows between Paris and McIntyre while K’danz assumed her normal seat at the end of the table opposite Chief Kyman.

“I’ve just received some very puzzling news from the Head of Starfleet Medical concerning Captain Koester,” she said. “Puzzling enough that I am willing to return to that cursed planet and find out exactly what happened to Peter while he was there before he was killed.” She looked intensely at each of her department heads as she stated, “I want them to answer a few direct questions.”

* * * *

Several days later, the *Dauntless* arrived in high orbit over the world the Federation classified as Capria IV and which the humanoid native population called Erma. To the crew’s surprise, one of the two orbiting space stations that they had encountered during their two previous visits, the one that housed their faster than light warp program, was gone. Only orbiting debris remained.

“What’s going on down there?” K’danz wanted to know as, even from orbit, the bright flashes of explosions on the surface of the planet could be seen on the night side. The captain had ordered the ship to yellow alert as soon as they failed to make contact with the Erminian government, and she did not intend to let her guard down as long as the ship was in the star system.

“Captain, I’m picking up video and radio transmissions from the surface. Some are civilian frequencies, but most of them appear to be military,” Arbelo reported. “From what I can tell, the Erminians are in a hot shooting war down there.”

“Monster, hail the President or whoever is in charge down there,” K’danz ordered.

It took several minutes, but eventually someone on the planet responded to the *Dauntless*' hails. Soon after, President Hzud, leader of the more advanced Erminians, appeared on the bridge viewscreen. The image was grainy, as if being transmitted by archaic equipment not entirely compatible with Federation technology.

"*Dauntless!* You have returned!" Hzud exclaimed, genuinely happy to see the Starfleet crew again. "Welcome back to our world, Commander K'danz. I think you would be proud of us."

"Actually, it's Captain K'danz now, thanks in no small part to you and your world," the captain said as she stood up and walked toward the screen. "What is going on down there? Our sensors are detecting massive explosions and large movements of military equipment."

Hzud's smile slipped somewhat as he replied, "After your last visit to our world, when your captain was killed by fanatical followers of Omar Nedalbin, we cut off all diplomatic relations with the Min. Their attacks against us then intensified. My people were dying every day. I finally had to take a stand and fight back. Several months ago the Erminian military invaded what had for centuries been recognized as Min territory and started liberating it. Unfortunately Nedalbin has formed an insurgency in the liberated regions. The fighting has been intense. But I have vowed we will not falter, not surrender, not give up if it means wiping out every last Min on the planet to accomplish our goal and unite this world! We will reach our destined place among the galactic community soon. I thought this would please you?"

K'danz was both angered and appalled by what the President had told her. But rather than lash out at Hzud, she compartmentalized her emotions and said, "The reason we have returned is to find out exactly what happened to Captain Koester on the day he was killed?"

"I cannot tell you what occurred beyond what I myself saw," Hzud said. "I remember that day as if it were yesterday. The missile attack on the negotiation hall. The confusion as each of the participants were grabbed by one of the guards present, no one really caring who went with whom, and rushed to safety. My sadness at learning one of the Min homicide bombers had located your captain and detonated his explosives."

"Wait," K'danz interrupted. "On the day in question, my security chief told me he and Captain Koester were rushed out of the building when the negotiation site was evacuated. Who was it that escorted them?"

"I believe it was one of Omar Nedalbin's guards," Hzud replied. "My guards escorted your Admiral Fil, Mister Wallace, Mister Anders, and myself into a bomb shelter located under the negotiation site. I was sure your security officers and the Min guards rushed everyone else away from the site."

K'danz looked over at her security chief, who manned the tactical post.

"Mack, was Peter with you the entire time when the evacuation occurred?"

"No," McIntyre replied. "The Min guards that were escorting us took us out of the building through a series of narrow, twisting streets. I lost sight of the Captain for several minutes until we located him and the Min guard in the plaza where he was killed."

K'danz started to think. Several possibilities came to mind.

"It seems rather convenient that a lone terrorist would know where to locate such a high profile target by random chance. Is it possible there was a switch somehow? That the person you saw killed was not Captain Koester?"

"How could that be possible?" Counselor Gera asked. The red-haired joined-Trill woman looked even more confused than K'danz. "I mean, wasn't his identity confirmed by Doctor MacMillan?"

K'danz, growing even more annoyed, pressed the intercom control on the arm of her chair.

"Bridge to sickbay."

"Sickbay. MacMillan," came the quick reply.

"Doctor, when Captain Koester was killed, what did you do to confirm the body was actually him?"

"I took a DNA scan o' th' corpse. Compared it t' th' DNA we have on record in th' medical files. Standard autopsy procedure. Th' only anomalies I detected were attributed t' th' explosion that killed him. Why?"

"What was the result, Doctor?" K'danz asked.

"100% DNA match," the chief medical officer replied. "I had no doubt that it was Cap'n Koester laying on m' table that day."

"Captain, if I may...?" President Hzud interrupted from the viewscreen. K'danz returned her attention to the Erminian man and nodded.

"There is a rumor that has been spreading on my planet that, before now, I put little credence in," he said. "In the months since the *Dauntless*' sudden departure, there have been stories of an alien being held in captivity deep in Min territory, in an area even my military has so-far failed to occupy. Since the Min have always been nomadic by nature, as it is a major element of their culture, they have no cities or permanent settlements for us to capture. But they do have outposts, some of which have been very difficult to overcome. They tend to be large, heavily fortified structures deep in the Min deserts."

“But if Captain Koester was captured and still in captivity on Erma, what did we hold a memorial service for on Earth nine months ago?” Arbelo asked, looking back at the captain.

“I’ve told you about the many advances we’ve shared with the Min trying to help them progress to a point where they would join us,” Hzud said. “Fertilizers to grow food that they turned into bombs. Navigation equipment for aid in traveling their desert lands that they turned into guidance systems for their missiles.”

“Yes,” K’danz responded.

“One of the other advanced technologies we shared with the Min before the war, when we still believed negotiation would help us unite with Omar Nedalbin’s people, was medical equipment capable of growing new limbs and body parts. Nedalbin sneered at the equipment, calling it an abomination of the devil, but still took it with him to who knew where. It is possible he...”

“He what?” K’danz wanted to know.

“Well, given the proper elements, like a viable DNA sample, it might be possible to use such technology to create a clone of a person. I’ve heard of several high-ranking Erminian officials who suddenly lost all their memories. I have long suspected that they were instead replaced with clones, but the clones lacked all experience and knowledge. But if you needed a clone whose only purpose was to die...!”

“Could that be done in the few minutes Captain Koester was out of sight?” Paris asked. “I mean, take a sample, grow a new clone, dress it in the Captain’s clothes and then blow it up when witnesses arrive, all in just a few minutes?”

“That would be impossible,” Lieutenant T’Pan, the Vulcan science officer said. “With accelerated growth techniques, it might be possible to grow a clone to adult size in about a week. Several months would be better. But definitely not in as short a period as a few minutes.”

“Then how...?” K’danz stared to ask.

“The reception!” Dar suddenly interrupted.

“What?” several of the crew asked.

“The reception we attended the first time we visited Erma last year,” Dar explained excitedly.

“The one that was rudely interrupted by a Min bomb that collapsed one wall and killed one of their own guards?” Kyman asked from his position at mission ops directly behind Dar. The half-Klingon engineer turned around to face the El-Aurian.

“Exactly! You remember, Captain Koester was buried in some of the debris after the wall collapsed. One of Nedalbin’s guards wiped the blood off of his face when he was dug out. Is it possible...?”

“Could they really have gotten a sample of the Captain’s DNA from a blood-soaked rag?” Counselor Gera asked.

“More importantly,” K’danz commented. “Could Peter somehow still be alive?”

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 62906.9:

I have come to an agreement with President Hzud, leader of the Erminians. Working together, we will form a joint operation between Mack’s Special Contingent 41 and Erminian Special Forces to locate the stronghold where rumor says the Min hold an alien being captive, infiltrate that stronghold and rescue what I now have hope is Captain Koester.

K’danz, out.

Several people were gathered around the science console on the bridge of the starship *Dauntless*. Among them was Captain K’danz, Lt Colonel Sean McIntyre, Erminian President Wegroeg Hzud and leader of the Erminian special forces, Brigadier Rolyat Doz. Manning the console, both Commander Alasdair Wallace and Lieutenant Spot were carefully scanning the surface of Erma deep in the desert territories of the Min.

“Commander, I’m detecting three unusual heat traces at the following coordinates,” reported the British-accented, slightly mechanical sounding voice of the non-corporeal science officer. A series of coordinates appeared on a small monitor on the console.

President Hzud was amazed.

“Is your Lieutenant...? Is he a... ghost?” the president asked.

“Not technically,” K’danz replied. “He is as alive as you or I. He just exists as energy rather than matter, so he is able to interface with our equipment and sensors to a degree no humanoid ever could.”

“It’s confirmed, Cap’n,” Wallace said a moment later. “Sensors are detectin’ three structures in what I would consider th’ middle o’ nowhere.”

“Amazing!” Brigadier Doz said.

“Performing a close range scan on target number one,” Spot reported. “Detecting less than a dozen life signs but no indication of any humans. Unlikely Captain Koester is being held there.”

“Then we can cross that one off our list,” McIntyre said.

“Now scanning the second target,” said Spot. “I’m detecting numerous life signs.”

“Are any of them human?” K’danz asked hopefully.

“Indeterminate,” Spot replied. “There are so many life signs present moving around a multi-level structure, that it is confusing the sensors. Based on the structure, though, I would say this is a fortress in the middle of the desert.”

“A good place to hide a prisoner,” Doz commented. “Will this be our objective?”

“What about the third structure?” McIntyre asked the two science officers.

“The third heat source is not an artificial structure, Colonel,” Spot said. “From the sensor readings I am obtaining, it appears to be a complex cave system. Unfortunately some of the mineral deposits are blocking our sensor scan, so I cannot determine how many people are in the cave or if indeed there are any life signs.”

“How can you be sure there are even any Min in the cave? It could be deep enough to be tapping the geothermal vents that abound in that region of the world.” Hzud remarked. “I think we should concentrate on the second target. That’s probably where you will find your captain.”

“Because the readings on the heat patterns coming from the cave do not match geothermal venting. There are fires down there. Probably a great many fires, heating sections of the tunnels. And in order for those fires to keep burning...”

“...There has to be someone maintaining them,” K’danz concluded. “So what are your recommendations, Colonel?”

McIntyre and Doz conversed together for a few minutes, the Marine contingent commander outlining some preliminary plans on a padd he carried. The two military men discussed various ideas and approaches, McIntyre having to explain some of the technology at their disposal that the Erminians knew little to nothing about that could help their mission.

Finally, after several minutes, the men presented their plan.

“Captain, Mr. President, this is our plan of attack,” McIntyre said. “We have decided it would be best to attack both locations simultaneously. We’re going to form two joint squads of sixteen personnel, each consisting of nine of my Marines and seven of Brigadier Doz’s special operations forces, each under the command of one of my captains, Mendez for Squad 1, Drake for Squad 2. Each tem will beam down together at midnight local time under the cover of darkness, capture each objective and make a thorough search for Captain Koester or any indication he has ever been in that location. Brigadier Doz and I will command and coordinate from here aboard the *Dauntless*.”

“Very well,” K’danz remarked. She then turned to the Erminian president and asked, “Are there any concerns?”

“No,” Hzud said, looking at the chronograph he carried in his pocket. “It’s still three more hours until midnight at those locations. I think we should prepare.”

* * * *

At almost precisely midnight in the high desert, the first squad of seventeen people materialized within the fortress the Min had built along one of their ancient migration paths. Their appearance seemed to have gone unnoticed, as no one was present in the courtyard and only a single sentry patrolled the high stone walls.

Captain April Mendez, using silent hand signals, sent her personnel to strategic points around the fortress. The quiet was pierced by the sound of phasers on stun as the squad members came across roving guards before heading into deeper and more remote areas of the fortress in search of Captain Koester.

Several dozen kilometers away, Squad 2 under the command of Captain Michael Drake materialized just outside of the target cave’s entrance. Unlike their first squad compatriots, Squad 2’s arrival did not go unnoticed as the several guards who protected the entrance reacted to their sudden appearance. Again, phasers set to stun quickly ended the melee, and the squad quickly entered the cave, Gunnery Sergeant ‘Olly’ O’Laughlin taking point to determine if the alarm had been raised deeper inside.

* * * *

“Squad 1 to *Dauntless*,” said the voice of Captain Mendez. McIntyre, who had been leaning forward on his tactical console, looked up and exchanged a glance with Captain K’danz before tapping his combadge.

“This is Mack. Go ahead, April.”

“We’ve secured the objective, Colonel,” Mendez reported. “The joint team has captured eighty seven Min prisoners, most of whom were asleep when the assault started. No casualties to report. The fortress contained a lot of equipment; bomb making materials, surface to surface missile launchers, plans for nerve gas and radiological weapons. But after a thorough search, I can report we have found no evidence of a human ever having been held here.”

“Very well,” McIntyre said, his shoulders drooping after hearing the news that Captain Koester had not been found. “Hopefully Squad 2 is having better luck than you. In the meantime, I’ll have Brigadier Doz send teams to your location to take custody of your prisoners. *Dauntless*, out.”

“Aye, Colonel. We’ll be waiting. Squad 1, out.”

McIntyre tapped his combadge once more, then looked again at K’danz.

“Do you think Squad 2 will find him?” she asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know, Carrie,” the Marine colonel replied.

* * * *

Meanwhile, back at the cave, Squad 2 was experiencing anything but good luck. The Squad had already come across several hidden booby traps that, were it not for the tricorders several of the Marines carried, would have killed many of them already. Then there were the hidden passages, areas of the tunnel system hidden behind camouflage that, even with sensors, were difficult to find. One passage even contained a hidden door made of solid rock that closed behind the lead members of the squad, cutting Gunny O’Laughlin, one of his Marine privates and six of the Erminian soldiers off from Drake and the rest of the Squad. It took several hours and a careful mapping of the cave, both natural and man-made, before both halves of the team reunited. And all throughout, no sign of Captain Koester. The mission, however, was far from a failure.

“Drake to McIntyre.”

“This is Mack,” came the reply.

“I have good news and bad news for you, Colonel,” Drake reported as the sun started to rise over the distant horizon. “Which do you want first?”

“Can I assume the bad news is you didn’t locate the Captain?” McIntyre inquired.

“That’s an affirmative,” Drake replied. “No sign of the Captain, no human life form readings on the tricorders. But we did find a big fish.”

On the bridge of the *Dauntless*, K’danz and Gera looked over toward McIntyre, who was frowning.

“He’s supposed to be finding the Captain and he’s fishing instead?” the Trill counselor asked.

“Please clarify your last transmission,” McIntyre requested.

At the cave entrance, Drake smiled broadly as he said, “Tell Brigadier Doz to send some of his troops our way. We have the Omar of the Min himself in custody.”

“Nedalbin?” Doz asked with disbelief. “You captured Nedalbin in the caves?” The Erminian brigadier looked toward the captain. “No wonder we have never been able to locate him since the liberation started. He hid himself underground!”

Drake, still on the planet’s surface, walked up to the cuffed Min leader, who was covered by O’Laughlin and his compression rifle Betty as well as three Erminian special forces personnel. “Where’s Captain Koester?” he demanded to know.

Nedalbin, his face still covered by his traditional Min robes, only his hate-filled eyes showing, looked at Drake and, with a voice dripping like venom, said, “Wherever you buried the devil.”

Drake restrained himself from hitting Nedalbin across the face with the butt of his phaser, instead walking back toward the cave entrance.

“We also located and released several Erminian prisoners,” the Marine captain reported. “A couple just as they were about to be executed. Most are captured military personnel, but one says he is the governor of Alexia province and another the mayor of Discolu city.”

“Those are two of the officials that had suddenly lost their memories in the last few months,” Doz said after dispatching more of his troops to reinforce those at the cave and transport their prisoners back to Erminian territory.”

“That helps bolster our clone theory,” McIntyre said. “But it still brings us no closer to finding the Captain, if he’s even still alive.”

* * * *

Captain’s log, supplemental:

With the desert cave complex secured by the Erminian military, I have authorized a science team, lead by Commander T’Ashara, to beam down to the surface and conduct an extensive investigation of the site in the hopes we will find some evidence that Omar Nedalbin kept Captain Koester prisoner there.

“So far there has been no indications that Captain Koester was ever here,” Lieutenant T’Pan told her fellow Vulcan, T’Ashara. “The away team has gone over the inhabited areas of the cave with every instrument in our inventory, including detronal scanners, medical tricorders, portable sensor arrays, and we have not found any traces of human DNA or life signs. I do not believe Captain Koester was ever here.”

T’Ashara was studying a reading on a tricorder she was holding as she asked, “Has Lieutenant Kafcos determined where this power reading I have detected is coming from? I was informed there was no power generating capability in these tunnels.”

T’Pan glanced at T’Ashara’s tricorder before pulling out her own and scanning the vicinity.

“The reading appears to be coming from above the main tunnel. The indication is weak. It is unlikely it would be detected by the ship’s scanners,” the younger Vulcan said as she tapped her combadge. “T’Pan to Kafcos, what is your present location?”

“I’m at the intersection of tunnel C and tunnel E, approximately half a kilometer from the main entrance to the system,” the Martian native replied.

“Commander T’Ashara and I have detected an unusual energy reading about two hundred meters from your current location. Can you please investigate?”

“Acknowledged,” replied Michael Kafcos. The science officer altered his tricorder from scanning for biological indicators to energy detection. Almost immediately he started reading the energy signature that T’Ashara had discovered. He followed the fluctuating indication down the tunnel to an outcrop of rock, behind which the energy source appeared to be located. The Martian man tapped his combadge again as he said, “Kafcos to T’Ashara. I have located the source of the energy reading, but it appears to be behind a sealed off area of the cave. I’m going to need some equipment to get inside.”

“Acknowledged,” replied T’Ashara. “I will be there presently with help.”

Several minutes later, T’Ashara, T’Pan and Gunnery Sergeant O’Laughlin, carrying his favorite rifle Betty, arrived on the scene where Kafcos had detected the energy signature.

“I’ve been able to determine this outcropping is actually a cleverly disguised door, similar to the one Mister Drake reported had separated his squad,” Kafcos reported. “But I have been unable to locate any means of opening it. Whatever is behind there, the Min didn’t want it being found.”

“No problem, Lieutenant, sir,” O’Laughlin said as he moved up to the camouflaged door, studying it closely. “I have a key right here.” He took a couple of steps away from the door and flipped his 20th century camouflage cap around before raising Betty to his shoulder. “You folks might want to take a few steps back,” he added over his shoulder before shouting out, “Fire in the hole!”

Betty let loose with a compressed beam of phased energy directly at the outcropping. The tunnel was filled with the loud sound of an explosion as dust and debris filled the space. A moment later O’Laughlin was waving his old cap around, trying to clear the air, coughing slightly. As the dust settled, T’Ashara, T’Pan and Kafcos could see a large hole in the tunnel wall where the outcropping had been, with stone steps leading up beyond where they could see. T’Pan activated her tricorder once more.

“Commander, the energy readings are very strong now. I’m also detecting numerous life signs.”

T’Ashara decided to be cautious, especially since the explosion had ended any chance of a surprise assault on whoever and whatever was at the other end of the stairs.

“T’Ashara to *Dauntless*.”

“Go ahead, T’Ashara,” replied the voice of Captain K’danz.

“Captain, we have discovered a hidden section of the cave with numerous life signs and an energy signature. We request Colonel McIntyre’s men in case there is any resistance.”

“Understood. Mack is on his way right now.”

Five minutes later, Colonel McIntyre, Captain Mendez, several of their Marines, Captain K’danz and Brigadier Doz and several of his men arrived at the hidden entryway.

“Marines, take point!” McIntyre ordered. Immediately O’Laughlin and his subordinates entered the stairs and carefully started their climb. The stairs curved to the right as they went up, and the Marines, followed by the Erminians and the *Dauntless* officers eventually emerged in a large chamber filled with lab equipment.

“This equipment is powered by solar cells, no doubt mounted above on the surface,” T’Ashara reported as she studied the readouts on her tricorder. “It is no wonder we did not detect the power units at night.”

“What is all this stuff?” one of the Marine privates asked.

“I recognize some of our genetic medical tools that we donated to the Min to help advance their medical care,” Brigadier Doz said. He stepped over to several bed-sized tubes along one wall and wiped the condensation off the glass. “Dear goddess!”

K’danz and McIntyre rushed over to where Doz stood in shock, staring into the tube. Inside was what looked like a dead body, yet the monitoring equipment attached to it indicated what was inside was alive.

“That looks vaguely like President Hzud!” McIntyre said. He wiped away the condensation from the next tube. “And this one looks like you, Brigadier! And from the looks of things, almost fully grown!”

“Clones!” K’danz surmised. “Nedalbin was planning on replacing both you and your President.”

Unexpectedly, the discovery was interrupted by the sounds of gunfire, as a projectile ricocheted off of one of the nearby monitoring computers. All the Starfleet personnel and Erminian soldiers ducked behind the cloning tubes as more gunfire erupted from the far side of the chamber.

“I’m reading seven... no, eight targets, Colonel, sir,” O’Laughlin reported as he peered through Betty’s targeting scanner.

“Can you get them?” McIntyre asked.

“I’ll do my best, sir,” the Gunny replied, shifting his well-chewed, unlit cigar to the other side of his mouth as he kneeled behind the tube containing Hzud’s unfinished clone and took careful aim. He centered his sights on the nearest of the Min insurgents and, slowly releasing his breath, squeezed his trigger. In milliseconds, the first Min was unconscious on the cavern floor. Within seconds, he was joined by his seven other comrades.

“Location is secure!” Corporal Medaal reported as the Marines and Erminian soldiers converged in the tunnel beyond the cloning gear.

“Secure, Captain,” McIntyre said after walking over and verifying the situation. “Captain, I think you need to see this!”

In the short tunnel beyond the lab were a series of heavy doors with barred windows. There was no doubt that they were prison cells, and already hands were emerging through the windows as weak voices started pleading for help. The Erminian soldiers started unlocking the cell doors and releasing the prisoners. Most were innocent Erminian civilians the Min had captured during recent battles, their purpose in the lab unknown.

“Captain!” shouted McIntyre as he looked through the barred window of the furthest cell. “Come here, quick!”

K’danz rushed down the tunnel to where McIntyre and O’Laughlin were hurriedly trying to open the lock, unsuccessfully.

“Stand back, Colonel, sir!” O’Laughlin finally said in frustration as he pulled a type two phaser from his uniform and aimed it at the lock, pressing the power setting up to level 8. A second later the locking mechanism vaporized and the Gunny pulled the door open. What was inside shocked Captain K’danz.

Laying on the floor inside the small cell, wearing only tattered rags that had once probably been a Min cloak, lay a semiconscious human man. He was so badly beaten, his bearded face was almost unrecognizable, but K’danz instinctively knew it was her close friend and mentor of many years. Both McIntyre and K’danz rushed into the cell and assessed Captain Koester’s condition.

“Can we beam him out from here?” K’danz asked.

McIntyre looked at the stone walls around them and said, “I think the rock here is too thick to get a proper lock. We’re going to need to get him to the surface. Gunny, see if you can find something we can use as a stretcher!”

A few moments later, K’danz and McIntyre carefully placed Koester’s body on a makeshift stretcher that O’Laughlin and his Marines had created out of some pipes and canvas they found in the lab. McIntyre grabbed the end nearest Koester’s head as K’danz started to grab hold of the other end.

“Allow me, Captain, ma’am,” O’Laughlin said as he shouldered Betty and offered to carry the stretcher out.

“Thank you, Gunny, but I want to do this,” K’danz replied, bending down and grabbing the ends of the pipes and, with McIntyre, lifted Koester off the cave floor.

Several minutes later they had reached the cave entrance, every member of the *Dauntless* crew who had been involved in the search of the complex already having heard about the amazing discovery and either helping to carry the stretcher or following along close behind. K’danz and McIntyre carefully lowered the stretcher back down before the Captain jammed her hand onto her combadge and almost shouted, “K’danz to *Dauntless*! Medical emergency! Three to beam directly to sickbay!”

In seconds, they were gone.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 62912.4:

I have informed Starfleet Command and Starfleet Medical of our discovery on Capria IV. Needless to say, there is an overwhelming amount of joy in San Francisco tonight as word of our rescue spreads.

Meanwhile, Captain Peter Koester is recovering in sickbay, after being treated by Doctor MacMillan. The Chief Medical Officer reports that Captain Koester’s injuries looked far worse than they were, and although he had been severely beaten and malnourished during his nine months in captivity, he is expected to make a full recovery, given time. K’danz, out.

Captain’s personal log:

In spite of how badly I wanted Peter to still be alive once Beverly Crusher had told me about the tests she had conducted, it still comes as a shock to me that we have him back, alive and whole. And I can’t help but wonder what the future now holds for us all?

Captain Peter J. Koester, one of his eyes blackened and still swollen shut, was finally awake, lying in the biobed where Doctor MacMillan closely monitored his condition. Standing around him were Captain K’danz, Lt Commander Dar, Admiral Penji Fil and Lt Colonel Sean McIntyre, who were listening to Koester tell what had happened to him on that fateful day nine months earlier.

“When the Min rockets started hitting the neighborhood around the negotiation hall, all hell broke loose. I saw one of the Erminian guards grab Admiral Fil and the rest of our away team and lead them out of the room in one direction while one of the Min guards grabbed me and Mack by the shoulder and pulled us toward the door in the other direction.

“Once we got outside, there was a series of explosions. I think some of the Min missiles hit the building where the negotiations had been taking place. In the confusion, I lost track of Mack. The guard who was escorting me led me through what seemed like a bunch of back alleys until we reached an open square. That guard assessed the situation and said it wasn’t safe to be out in the open like we were, so he found an unlocked door and rushed me inside. There were a couple of people inside. One of them wearing traditional Min garb. The other, to my surprise, was a human and was sitting in a chair in the center of an empty room. I was even more surprised when I realized he looked exactly like me! But before I could say anything, someone hit me from behind and knocked me unconscious.”

“What happened next?” Admiral Fil asked.

“I don’t know how long I was out for, but by the time I came to, it was dark and eerily quiet outside, and I was no longer wearing my uniform. The Min had me tied to the chair where my double had been sitting. About an hour later Nedalbin arrived. He told me I was in one of the so-called safe-houses that he maintained in Erminian territory, where many of the terrorist attacks were planned and executed from. Then he told me I was already a dead man. I thought he meant he was going to kill me right then and there, but instead he placed me under formal arrest, accusing me of being a spy against the Min. Then they dressed me in one of their full-body robes and, under the cover of night, smuggled me over the border and into Min territory.

“Nedalbin kept telling me that both the Erminians and Starfleet had agreed to let me be tried and convicted of spying and war crimes in exchange for a new attempt at peace negotiations. At first I refused to believe him, convinced you and the crew would come to my rescue,” Koester said looking up at both K’danz and McIntyre. “A few days later, Nedalbin conducted his kangaroo court proceeding and declared me guilty of war crimes, sentencing

me to life imprisonment and incarcerating me in the cave where you found me. Each day Nedalbin or one of his men would beat me pretty badly, trying to get information out of me like where the Erminian military staged their supplies or what civilian sector would be most vulnerable to a missile attack? And as the weeks continued to pass, turning into months, I really started to feel like the Federation had abandoned me.”

“We didn’t abandon you, Peter,” K’danz tried to explain. “From what we have been able to piece together recently, the person you saw that looked like you was a clone the Min had created using a blood sample they took from you during our first visit to Capria IV, using medical equipment the Erminians had donated to the Min. They used that clone in a staged suicide bombing that also killed the Min guard that had lead you to that building, to make us believe you had been killed. Drake was almost killed trying to rescue what we thought was you from the suicide bomber. After the attack, an autopsy conducted by Doctor MacMillan confirmed the body was yours.”

“Which is why Nedalbin kept insisting I was a dead man,” Koester remarked. K’danz nodded as she continued.

“We carried what we believed was your body all the way back to Earth. The funeral on the grounds of the Academy was very moving.”

“I wish I could have been there to see it,” Koester remarked wryly, his lips forming a half-smile. K’danz reached down and grasped her friend’s hand in her own.

“After the funeral, I had a meeting with the Admiralty. They turned the *Dauntless* over to me and our mission continued.

For the first time, Koester glanced at the collar of his former-first officer’s uniform and noticed the four gold pips mounted there. He was suddenly filled with conflicting emotions of pride and sadness.

“Congratulations, Carrie. It’s about time.” Koester then smiled weakly as he said, “Request permission to come aboard, Captain.”

“Permission granted, Captain,” K’danz replied, smiling in spite of the tears forming in her eyes.

“Where’s Gem?” Koester asked, noticing for the first time that his daughter was not present. “Did she go with Michelle after you thought I was dead?”

“Actually, Commander Petersen’s starship was assigned an extended mission, one that neither she nor Gem felt would be appropriate for a teenager to be a part of,” McIntyre answered. “They won’t be back in Federation space for over two more years.”

“Then where is...?”

“DADDY!” a voice suddenly shouted from the doors across sickbay, and in an instant a red and black blur rushed over to the biobed and practically engulfed the recovering captain. “Daddy, you’re alive! You’re back! What happened?!?” Gem asked, tears flowing down her own cheeks as she tightly hugged her father. In spite of the pain, Koester reached around her with his own arms and drew the sixteen year old girl up onto the biobed with him, hugging her tightly back in return. “I missed you, Dad!”

“I missed you too, Sweetie,” Koester replied. “I thought I would never see you again.”

“Me too,” the teenaged girl responded.

“Welcome back, Captain,” Counselor Tanzia Gera said as she stepped over to the bed from the doors. She had had to rush to keep up with her young roommate after telling her the news about her father’s return.

“Thank you, Counselor,” Koester replied. “Thank you for taking good care of Gem.”

The joined-Trill woman nodded acknowledgement as the sickbay doors swooshed open again and Chief Pono Kyman rushed in.

“I’m mighty glad to see you again, Skipper,” the El-Aurian man said, placing a hand on the injured officer’s shoulder. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks, COB,” Koester replied hoarsely.

“Okay, that’s enough fer now. This is a sickbay, not a bloody recreation lounge,” Doctor MacMillan said. “I have a patient that needs t’ recover, so if you aren’t required t’ be here, be gone!”

As Dar, Fil, McIntyre and Kyman started heading toward the door, Gem looked up at Counselor Gera with fear in her eyes.

“Do I have to leave too?”

“No, I think Doctor MacMillan will let you stay,” Gera replied. “Call me if you need me.”

“Thank you, Counselor,” Gem said as she cuddled into another hug with her dad, complaining about the feel of his long whiskers and causing the man to grimace in pain for a moment as the ship’s counselor headed out into the corridor too. As MacMillan returned to his office on the other side of the transparent wall, it left Koester, Gem and K’danz alone.

“You don’t know how I feel right now,” K’danz said.

“Probably somewhere close to how I feel,” Koester replied. “I’m relieved, elated, mad, sad, and a hundred other emotions all at once.”

“That pretty well sums it up,” K’danz admitted.

“What’s going to happen now?” Koester asked.

“I don’t know. I guess that’s up to people in a higher paygrade than ours,” K’danz said before leaning over and giving Koester a brief kiss on the forehead. “In the meantime, I’m glad to have you home again.”

“Me too,” Gem echoed.

“Me three,” Koester added.

To Be Continued...