

Vice Admiral Penji Fil, senior officer of the Federation Fifth Fleet, sat behind the desk in his small office aboard the starship *Dauntless* reviewing the latest survey reports submitted by the starships *Sarek*, *Lexington*, and *Bellerophon* as Petty Officer John Messer brought the admiral his morning's second cup of katheka, a coffee-like beverage from Andor. Fil was starting to reach for the new steaming cup of hot gray liquid when the intercom speaker whistled and the voice of the starship's commanding officer could be heard.

"Bridge to Admiral Fil."

Fil put the padd he was holding down on the desk and reached over to activate the intercom before saying, "Go ahead, Captain."

"Admiral, there's a subspace communiqué coming in from *Home Plate*. Admiral Raiajh on compic for you," Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester reported.

"Thank you, Peter. Route it here to my office," Fil responded.

"Aye, Admiral. Bridge out."

The intercom deactivated just as a monitor screen started rising out of the top of the admiral's desk. A moment later the pleasant looking face of the half-Vulcan, half-Deltan commander of *Starbase 719*, Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh, appeared on the screen.

"Good morning, Val," Fil greeted his fellow flag officer and shipmate from their days aboard the original *USS Arcturus*. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your communication?"

"I'm afraid this isn't a pleasure call, Penji," Raiajh replied. "The *Dauntless* must take part in a special, and potentially delicate, mission on behalf of Starfleet Command."

"Delicate?" Fil questioned. "How so?"

"In the diplomatic sense," Raiajh answered. "The *Dauntless* must divert to Rura Penthe to retrieve a prisoner that is being released by the Klingons."

"Rura Penthe?!?" Fil exclaimed, almost unsure he heard his fellow officer correctly. "Do you realize how many sectors outside of the Fifth Fleet AOR that region of Klingon space is?? Why must Starfleet send the *Dauntless*? Surely there must be other Starfleet vessels closer to there than we are?" Raiajh appeared about to respond when Fil cut her off again. "No, wait... Let me guess! We're the only ship in the quadrant? I heard that excuse a million times back in the old days."

"Actually, Starfleet could send any ship to do this. It's you specifically they want performing the retrieval," Raiajh informed.

"Me? Why specifically me?"

"Because the prisoner the Klingons are releasing is Carey Copeland," Raiajh informed.

Fil's face went nearly as white as his normal hair color when he heard the name. "Carey Copeland? You mean the same Carey Copeland we served with aboard the *Arcturus*?"

"The very same," Raiajh confirmed. "You're the senior-most officer from the original *Arcturus* crew still serving in Starfleet who's available. That's why HQ wants you to be the one to retrieve him."

Fil became very quiet for a moment, his expression introspective. Finally he remarked, "A. Carey Copeland. That's a name I never thought I would ever hear again." He then looked back at the face on the monitor and asked, "What are the details of this retrieval?"

"I'm transmitting a data package to you as we speak. It will contain all the details of the mission, including the background briefing." Fil looked over at an indicator flashing through the semi-transparent surface of his desk, confirming his computer was receiving the aforementioned data packet. Raiajh then said, "I'm sure he's suffered enough, Penji. Bring him home."

"He wouldn't even be there if it weren't for his own actions," Fil started to gripe. "If he hadn't..."

"Penji," Raiajh interrupted. "You know what WE went through when the ship first emerged in the 24th century, the stresses we all suffered in those first weeks and months. It could have been any of us."

Fil immediately went silent. Then slowly, he started nodding his head.

"You're right, Val. I remember the shock I felt upon first hearing the Federation was allied with the Klingon Empire. It seemed like our whole existence was turned upside-down." The Catullan man then smiled slightly as he added, "I'll make sure he gets home safe."

“Thanks, Penji. Keep me apprised of how it goes. *Home Plate*, out.”

The image of Admiral Raiajh was momentarily replaced by the emblem of Starfleet Command before the monitor slowly lowered back into the top of the desk. Fil sat silently in contemplation for a moment before reactivating his intercom.

“Admiral Fil to Captain Koester.”

“Koester here, Admiral,” came the quick reply.

“Peter, I need to meet with you in your ready room in five minutes,” Fil said as he copied the data packet onto an isolinear chip and palmed the small storage device. “Have your first officer there too. He’s going to want to hear this.”

Koester’s voice sounded slightly confused as he replied, “Aye, Admiral. We’ll be there.”

Fil again deactivated the intercom, then called out toward the small reception room next door as he stood up.

“Petty Officer Messer.”

“Yes, Admiral,” the yeoman inquired, sticking his head into the doorway between the rooms.

“I’ll be up on the bridge, discussing a change in mission with Captain Koester. Cancel any appointments I may have between now and 1200 hours.”

“Aye, aye, Admiral,” Messer replied, quickly returning to his desk as Fil departed by his private entrance to the corridor.

Space, the Final Frontier . . .

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“The Returned” By PJK

Almost half an hour later, Fil was still in the captain’s ready room with Koester and Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo, the *Dauntless*’ first officer and another past crew member of the *Arcturus*. The *Dauntless* had already been turned toward Federation space, and Koester was retrieving several drinks from the nearby replicator as Arbelo continued reviewing the information about Copeland displayed on a padd.

“So the Klingons are letting Colonel Copeland go after twenty years?” Koester asked, passing the drinks to his fellow officers before returning to his seat behind the desk.

“The official record says here that following an ‘incident’ on Ajilon Prime, Carey pled guilty to assault and manslaughter charges and was sentenced to life at hard labor on Rura Penthe,” Arbelo commented. “Not quite how I remember it happening.”

“Me neither,” Fil agreed.

“I read the information from Starfleet Command that Val’ri sent you,” Koester remarked. “It was pretty generic. Nothing about why Colonel Copeland was arrested and incarcerated aside from the plea.” The Fleet Captain took another sip of his drink before adding, “I have to admit, I don’t know much about Colonel Copeland other than the fact he is one of the few, if not only, Federation prisoners currently incarcerated on Rura Penthe and that he was a shipmate of the two of you who arrived in the 24th century aboard the *Arcturus*.”

“That’s not exactly true, Peter,” Arbelo remarked, sharing a look with Fil. “Copeland had been thought killed in battle with a faction of renegade Orion pirates a few weeks before the mission that accidentally brought the *Arcturus* forward in time. What we didn’t know at the time was that Copeland managed to punch out of his fighter in an escape pod that somehow was overlooked following the brief battle.”

“Don’t tell me he was preserved like that in stasis for three-quarters of a century!” Koester protested.

“Actually, the story gets even stranger,” Fil remarked. “A couple of years before the *Arcturus* re-emerged, a life pod was found in deep space and the pilot recovered. Everyone at Starfleet and in the Marine Corps considered Copeland’s survival nothing short of a miracle. Once the doctors at Starfleet Medical cleared him, he underwent re-training and returned to the Corps, eventually getting promoted to Lt Colonel. Then, in 2369, two years after the *Arcturus* and her crew returned to Earth, he heard about the commissioning of the new *Arcturus-A* and rumors about her crew and requested transfer to the new starship.”

“Sounds like Colonel Copeland acclimated to the new time period as successfully as most of your other shipmates did. What went wrong that got him sentenced to a Klingon prison?”

“As Penji said, this story gets even stranger, Skipper,” Arbelo added. “A few weeks after what we all believed was our Copeland transferred aboard the *Arcturus-A* and settled in with the crew, a mission we were assigned brought us back to the Beta Rigel system where the battle against the pirates had taken place more than eighty years earlier. While transiting the outer reaches of the star system, we came across an old and battered life pod with one dormant life form registering aboard it. We recovered the pod and found Carey Copeland - battered, bruised, and barely alive.”

“Wait!” Koester implored, holding up his hand to stop his first officer. “You’re telling me there were two Colonel Copelands?”

“Technically, no, since the Copeland the *Arcturus* found still held the rank of Major,” Fil remarked with a half-smile. “Once he was revived in our sickbay he told the most remarkable tale of having been found and experimented on by an unknown alien race, though he didn’t know why or to what end. It didn’t take Admiral Johnson or Doctor Arcadian long to figure out that Lt Colonel Copeland was a clone of the original, especially since Major Copeland still exhibited all his old scars, injuries, and broken bones, wounds the clone Copeland never received.”

“So what happened?” Koester asked.

“Eventually the two Copelands reconciled to the fact of each other’s existence and agreed to consider each other brothers. A lot like Admiral Raiajh and her ‘sister’ Lady Val,” Arbelo explained. “The clone Copeland adopted the name James Eric and transferred off the *Arcturus* a few months before the mission that led Penji and I to transfer to the starship *Sarek* after it was launched, while Starfleet agreed to allow the original Copeland to start acclimating to his new time period and begin re-training among friends aboard the *Arcturus*. He was even promoted to Lt Colonel like his brother before too long.” Arbelo again exchanged a knowing look with Fil before adding, “Unfortunately, his transition wasn’t quite as successful as ours, as Ajilon Prime demonstrated.”

“It sounds like the two of you know the real story behind this so-called incident,” Koester remarked. “What happened on Ajilon Prime?”

“You want to tell this story, Monster, or should I?” Fil asked Arbelo.

“You were there for the whole incident,” the Commander replied. “Why don’t you tell it?”

Fil nodded, then looked at Koester as he said, “It happened about six months after Copeland was revived...”

Stardate 46818.4

Earth Year 2369

The *USS Arcturus NCC-1807-A* orbited serenely over the colony world of Ajilon Prime. Vice Admiral Eric W. Johnson, commanding officer of the *Arcturus*-class starship, was finally feeling that his crew – the 400 members of the original *Arcturus* crew who had been carried forward more than three-quarters of a century in time aboard their starship, supplemented by an additional 550 newly assigned crew members, many of whom had been involved in the construction of the new class of starship – were finally coming together as one crew. ...With some exceptions, Johnson noted. Achilles Carey Copeland, who had recently been awarded a promotion to the rank of Lt Colonel after completing a retraining course to bring his knowledge up to present standards, was still having trouble adjusting to the idea of living in the 24th century, where ‘cowboy diplomacy’ was generally frowned upon, starship

captains were more likely to end hostilities with words rather than a fully charged phaser pistol, and the Klingons were allied with the Federation and conducting joint operations with Starfleet.

It had been one such joint operation that brought the *Arcturus* to Ajilon Prime. The starship had been tasked with conducting interdiction operations with two Klingon warships around the Korvat system, a binary star system that had been part of the Empire for nearly 200 years before the colonists on Korvat had declared their independence the previous year, and Starfleet was helping the Imperial Klingon Defense Force in making sure the newly-independent Korvatites did not use the opportunity to attack vessels passing close to their system, either Klingon or civilian. Johnson had been thankful that all interaction with the Klingons – his first personal contact with his former enemies since the first *Arcturus* had been lost in time – was entirely via ship-to-ship communication and not face to face. He was still unsure how he would react when he eventually stood in the same room as his erstwhile enemy, and wondered how some of his crew would react in a similar situation.

It was mainly in reward for his crew's outstanding performance while operating alongside the two Klingon ships that they were now visiting Ajilon Prime, Johnson deciding they deserved a few days of R&R after the tension of the past several weeks. He had not counted on the fact that the commander of one of the Klingon ships – a Vor'cha-class battlecruiser – had come to a similar decision.

Six Federation transporter beams coalesced into the forms of Lt Commander Kalin Kale, Lieutenant Idrisu, Lieutenant (JG) Setton To'Lock Arbelo, Ensign Penji Fil, Dr. Athena Arcadian, and Lt Colonel A. Carey Copeland on the edge of the colony's central square. All six had heard good things about the recreational facilities located in Tanandra Bay, the planet's largest city, and Copeland had even visited the planet once before – almost a century earlier when he was a young 1st Lieutenant not long after the colony had been established on the very edge of what at the time had been the Neutral Zone and was under constant threat of attack by the Klingon Empire, but the young Marine officer had still had a good time.

“Where do you want to go?” Kale asked the group once they had completed materialization.

“I don't know about you guys, but Carey and I are heading over to the recreation district. There's a bar he told me about that we want to see if it's still there after all this time,” Arcadian, the *Arcturus*' chief medical officer remarked.

Kale looked over at the doctor from his native Alpha Centauri, noting her enthusiasm to be hanging out with Copeland, but was uncomfortable with the idea of the two going off drinking on their own – and not simply because of the history the pair shared aboard the original *Arcturus*. Admiral Johnson had requested Kale keep an eye on Copeland, especially with the Vor'cha in orbit, since it had become a not-so-well kept secret aboard the *Arcturus* that, in trying to cope with his present circumstances, Copeland had started going to extremes - spending hours after watch late into the night on the holodeck either in personal training or simulated combat missions, often with the safety protocols reduced if not entirely shut off, or spending numerous hours in one of the smaller lounges aboard the starship drinking himself into a stupor while reminiscing about the 'good old days' and, as the ship's counselor informed the Admiral, trying to forget the trauma of the incident that put him in his present position.

“Too early to drink. I want to head over to that shopping bazaar I heard about,” Arbelo said. “Anyone with me?”

“I wouldn't mind doing a little shopping and sight-seeing before planting myself on a bar stool,” Idrisu replied.

“Kalin?” Arbelo asked the Centauri man.

Kale looked at Arbelo, the desire to see a little more of the colony and perhaps buying a souvenir or two pulling at him, then looked back at Copeland and Arcadian, remembering his promise to the Admiral.

“Maybe a little later, Monster,” he finally said. “I think I'm a little thirsty.”

“Penji?” Arbelo asked.

“I think I'm going to hit the bar with Commander Kale, Doctor Arcadian, and Colonel Copeland,” the white-haired Catullan replied. “I need to talk with Doctor Arcadian about scheduling my final physical exam so I can make the transition to a gold uniform.”

“Okay,” Arbelo said. “We'll meet you at the bar in two hours.”

“Sounds good,” Kale said. “See you there.”

* * * *

Things started on a downhill slide almost from the moment the four Starfleet officers entered the bar. While Arcadian, Kale, and Fil ordered beers brewed from native ingredients combined with synthahol, Copeland spent extra credits to buy a bottle of real alcohol, imported from Aldebaran, and proceeded to pour himself several large glasses of the whiskey over ice. While Kale and his companions were able to easily shake off the buzz of the synthahol, Copeland proceeded to get drunk, and the drunker he became, the louder his voice carried across the bar. Kale wondered if they would still be at the bar when Arbelo and Idrisu finally showed up, or if the proprietor would request Copeland leave in the immediate future.

In an incredible stroke of timing, just moments after Copeland started on his latest rant about the Klingons – how they might be considered allies but that he would never consider them trustworthy nor turn his back on one, before starting to toss random drunken insults at Chancellor Gowron and the High Council – a landing party from the Vor’cha walked into the barroom door.

An uncomfortable silence descended on the bar, the only sound that of Copeland disparaging the mother of the commander of the Klingon ship in orbit as the Klingon crew looked around.

“Carey! Shut up!” Kale hissed under his breath just as the colonel stopped to gulp down another mouthful of whiskey.

“What? Why?” Copeland replied uncertainly before looking in the direction he noticed both Kale and Fil looking. A drunken smile crossed his lips as he saw the ten Klingons walking in, sharing a sidelong glance with Arcadian.

“Now Carey, don’t do anything stupid,” Kale warned.

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Arbelo and Idrisu approached the bar they had been told about, but even from over half a block away they could hear the ruckus inside.

“Sounds like a lively place,” the Deltan science officer remarked with a grin toward Arbelo.

“I don’t know,” Arbelo said hesitantly. “That doesn’t sound like people are having a good...”

The two Starfleet officers were startled to see a Klingon literally tossed out the door and over two meters into the street beyond. They watched in shock as the Klingon, dark blood trailing down from the corner of his mouth, wiped his face, got up, and rushed back into the bar door.

“What’s going on?” Idrisu asked with shock.

“I hope it’s not...,” Arbelo said as he cautiously approached the door and looked in. “Damn. That’s what I was afraid of.”

Inside the bar, dozens of chairs and tables were piled haphazardly around the room as in the center the ten Klingons were scuffling with the four Starfleet officers and a trio of locals. The Starfleet crew was seriously outnumbered, and the only one seemingly holding his own was Copeland, who was kicking away one Klingon as he slammed his fist repeatedly in the face of a second.

“What should we do?” Idrisu asked anxiously.

“Help our shipmates!” Arbelo shouted as he rushed into the bar, pulling one of the Klingons off of Fil by his collar and tossing him over the bar before turning his attention on another.

“Oh hell...,” the bald-headed Deltan officer remarked to himself as he too plunged into the melee.

In one corner of the bar, Copeland began to realize the Klingons were regarding him as a bigger threat than his shipmates. More and more of the Klingons were leaving the others laying on the floor and turning their attention on the Tamurilian, and it was obvious he would soon be overpowered and at the Klingon’s mercy – if such a thing existed. Hurling still more racial epithets, Copeland reached under his uniform jacket to a small pocket he had specially added, quickly withdrawing a type-I hand phaser he kept hidden in the fold of his uniform for just such an occasion as this. Without even thinking, he aimed it at the closest Klingon, depressing the trigger. Half a second later the Klingon was unconscious on the floor. Someone in the bar screamed and people started rushing out the

door into the street. Even drunk, Copeland let his combat training take over, just like he was on the holodeck again, turning the phaser on the next Klingon, then the next, and the next, the last one dropping to the floor just as Colony Security burst through the door, shouting for everyone to freeze!

As the security officers separated the four Klingons still standing to one side, the Starfleet crew to another side, and the locals close to the bar itself, a single security officer with his weapon drawn and pointing at Copeland approached the Marine.

“Drop your weapon, sir!” the officer emphasized.

“It’s alright,” Copeland assured, starting to move to return his phaser to its hiding place.

“I said drop the weapon! Sir!”

Another security officer approached Copeland, twisting the uncomprehending Marine’s arm back and forcing the phaser-I out of his grip before cuffing his hands behind his back. A second officer started checking the unconscious bodies on the floor, starting with the several locals who had been hit with flying furniture or knocked aside by the brawlers before moving on to the Klingons. Just then a security team – a mixture of Marines and Starfleet security – from the *Arcturus* arrived and entered the bar, taking in the destruction.

“What happened here, Commander?” the senior officer asked Kale as he approached the operations chief.

“Hey, Sergeant!” the security officer checking the Klingons called out, feeling for the artery on the Klingon’s neck. “This one is dead!”

“No he’s not,” Copeland said with a laugh. “I only had the phaser set on st...”

“Are you sure?” the sergeant asked. “Sometimes it might be hard to tell. Klingons aren’t built like humans.”

“This one too, Sarge,” the officer reported, having moved over to the next closest Klingon.

“You!” the Security sergeant, apparently the man in charge of the detail said to the bartender. “Have you got an emergency medical scanner in here somewhere?”

“Of course,” the bartender replied, tossing a first aid kit that was stored below the bar over to the security officer. The sergeant pulled a civilian med scanner out of the kit and started scanning everyone still laying on the floor of the barroom. The civilians, though injured, exhibited healthy life signs. The Klingons on the other hand...

“Call for medevac!” the sergeant yelled, moving quickly from Klingon to Klingon. “Five of them are dead! This one is still alive, though barely! He needs medical help now!”

Almost as soon as the sergeant had spoken, a team of paramedics arrived and rushed into the bar. The security officers directed them to the badly injured though still-living Klingon. Copeland, his hands still cuffed behind him, watched in disbelief as they attached several medical stimulator devices to the Klingon’s chest and forehead before loading him onto a litter and carrying him to a waiting shuttle outside. The sergeant then walked back over to Copeland, leaning down to pick up the phaser that had been forced out of the Marine officer’s hand and examining it.

“Note in the incident report, the phaser was set to level seven,” the sergeant said in the direction of the security officer documenting the crime scene. “I’m not 100% certain, but I believe on a Starfleet phaser that is a kill setting.”

A look of shock appeared on the faces of Kale, Arcadian, Arbelo, Idrisu, Fil, and even Copeland.

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Kale and Fil were standing at attention outside the door of the ready room. They had been standing there, near motionless, for more than fifteen minutes already. A few moments later the doors parted and Doctor Arcadian rushed out. She paused, looking at Kale with an unreadable glance, then disappeared into the nearby turbolift.

“Kale! Fil! Front and center!” the pair heard Johnson’s voice bellow. The two wordlessly entered the ready room and assumed attention in front of the desk. Behind the desk sat Vice Admiral Eric W. Johnson, looking the angriest either Kale or Fil had ever seen him in all their years of serving under him, while standing behind and just to the left of the Admiral was the *Arcturus*’ Vulcan first officer, Solek, his face as impassive as ever.

As the ready room doors swished shut once again, Johnson's voice took on a low, barely calm tone. "Do the two of you have any clue what I have been doing in here for the last two hours? Aside from near constant communiqués with both Starfleet Command and the Governor of the Colony, I have been profusely apologizing to Captain K'Lek of the *IKV qeyllIS betleH*, and Klingons are not generally known to be amicable to apologies! Five officers dead! A sixth just barely holding on in their sickbay! Once I'm through with the two of you, I have to beam over there and offer my own and Starfleet's sincerest apologies in person, and I can tell you I'm NOT looking forward to that!"

The admiral turned his piercing gaze on Kale as he said, "I thought I asked you to keep an eye on Copeland for me!"

"I'm sorry, Admiral," Kale apologized contritely. "Things got out of hand too quickly, and before I knew it the first punch had been thrown and I was on the floor after a bar stool hit me in the chest."

"Mister Fil," Johnson said, prompting the communications specialist to snap even more to attention. "Tell me what happened down there."

"Everything was fine at first," Fil tried to explain. "Colonel Copeland may have been drinking a little excessively, but..."

"Wasn't he drinking synthaholic beverages like the rest of you?" Johnson interrupted.

"No, sir," Kale answered. "He splurged for the good stuff. I tried to get him to moderate what he was drinking, but you know how Copeland has been lately..."

"All too well," Johnson admitted before looking back at Fil. "Go on."

"As I said, things were okay until the Klingons arrived, right in the middle of the Colonel's rant about how he remembered Klingons to be."

"Oh, wonderful," Johnson said, sharing a look with Solek.

"The Klingons seemed good-natured about it at first. Threw a few insults our way, like they thought it was a game. Started calling the Colonel 'Little Human,' which seemed to piss him off even more. After telling the Klingons he was Tamurilian several times, he finally stood up to confront the senior Klingon officer, who asked him, 'What are you going to do, Little Human? Punch me in the knee?'"

"I tried to stop him, Admiral," Kale explained, a tone of desperation in his voice. "I really did."

"What happened next?" Johnson asked, figuring he already knew the answer.

"The Colonel gave him a round-house across the jaw. Knocked the Klingon back at least three meters. Took him completely by surprise."

"I don't think it was too much of a surprise," Kale suggested. "I think those Klingons were itching for a bar fight. The rest of them were on top of us before we could even get out of our seats."

"I wish it had been as simple as just a bar fight," Johnson remarked. "Where did Copeland get the phaser from? You all know you're not supposed to beam down armed unless requested by the Governor!"

"I don't know, sir," Fil replied.

"Kale?"

"It looked like he pulled it out from somewhere inside his uniform, sir," the operations officer replied.

"That confirms what Doctor Arcadian told me," Johnson said with a nod. "She said Copeland has always had hidden pockets in various places in his uniform where he hides small hand weapons and knives. I suppose it came in handy a few times during missions back aboard the old *Arcturus*, but in this situation..."

"Request permission to speak freely, sir?" Kale asked.

"Granted."

"For what it's worth, sir, I don't believe Colonel Copeland meant to kill those Klingons. I think he honestly believed his phaser was set to mild stun."

"Perhaps if he had the foresight to double check before using it, we would only be having a Captain's Mast instead of a full-blown murder investigation," Johnson remarked. "Perhaps if he hadn't been carrying it at all..."

Johnson's voice trailed off as his head dipped, his gaze falling on his desk top. After what sounded like a sigh, the Admiral looked up and said, "Thank you, gentlemen. Dismissed."

Both young officers nodded and, with a sense of relief, headed toward the door to the bridge. Kale paused at the threshold for a moment, turning back to look at Admiral Johnson.

“What is it, Kalin?” the admiral asked.

“What’s going to happen to Carey?” the Centauri asked.

Again Johnson sighed before saying, “Copeland’s fate lies entirely in the hands of the diplomats right now. He’s been charged with five counts of murder, five counts of attempted murder, aggravated assault, and various other charges. On top of that, the Klingons want their hands on him, and if they get him, the crimes he’s charged with are capital in nature. The Empire would probably execute him without a second thought.”

Kale turned back around and entered the turbolift to return to his quarters, with a feeling like several large rocks in the pit of his stomach.

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What happened after that?” Koester asked. “Obviously Colonel Copeland wasn’t executed by the Klingons. How did he get sentenced to Rura Penthe? The Klingons are not generally renowned for their compassion.”

“An impassioned speech by the Federation Ambassador to the Klingon Empire explaining Copeland’s history and background, along with an agreement that he would not fight extradition and simply plead guilty to lesser charges equivalent to manslaughter convinced the Klingon magistrate in charge to commute the sentence to life at hard labor on Rura Penthe,” Fil explained.

“Still a death sentence. Just one prolonged by years. But if Colonel Copeland was sentenced to life in prison, why are we on their way to retrieve him?” Koester asked, genuinely curious.

“I wondered about that myself, so I did some digging to find out,” Fil replied. “It appears the Empire recently negotiated with the Federation for dilithium mining rights on Ajilon Prime. They agreed to some concessions, and one of those concessions was the release of Carey Copeland.”

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Several days later, the *Dauntless* arrived at the Federation border with the Klingon Empire, where she was met by a Klingon Bird-of-Prey and escorted into orbit of the prison gulag Rura Penthe. After settling into standard orbit over the frozen world, Admiral Fil contacted the prison’s warden/governor.

“Good day, Warden,” Fil said to the Klingon official over the main viewscreen. “I’m Vice Admiral Penji Fil of the Federation Starfleet. I’m here to secure the release of one of your prisoners and escort him back to Earth.”

“Yes, Admiral,” the warden - a descendent of the wardens who had overseen Rura Penthe for generations - replied. “I have been told to expect you. I would be more than happy to meet with you in person and make the prisoner transfer. However, we have a slight problem.”

“A problem?” Fil questioned. “What sort of a problem?” The admiral feared that, after traveling such a long distance to Rura Penthe, the Klingons were going to refuse to cooperate and release Copeland as agreed.

“I’m afraid Prisoner Copeland has grown somewhat paranoid during his incarceration with us,” the warden stated. “He refuses to cooperate to be processed for release.”

“What do you mean, he refuses to cooperate?”

“Apparently he believes we’re trying to trick him with plans to exile him to the surface, which as I’m sure you’re aware is a death sentence. He’s already sent three of my guards to the infirmary and has threatened to kill the next one that tries to detain him.”

Fil thought for a moment before finally saying, “Perhaps it would help if I were to beam down and meet with him myself and explain that he is being released back to the Federation?”

“You’re welcome to try, Admiral,” the warden said. “However, there are still security precautions you must abide by. You will not be able to beam directly to the prison because of the forcefield we have in place. You

must beam down to the in-processing center outside the shield and travel overland to reach us here.” A somewhat cruel smile appeared on the warden’s lips as he added, “And the journey is not exactly a pleasure trip.”

“I understand, Warden,” Fil replied. “We will beam down to the in-processing center within the next thirty minutes.”

“Very good,” the warden said. “Also, for your own personal safety, we request no more than three of your crew beam down. And may I recommend you wear your... I believe the humans call them ‘long underwear.’” The warden chuckled at his own humor.

“Thank you for the advice, Warden,” Fil replied. “I look forward to meeting you face to face soon. Fil, out.”

As the viewscreen changed back to the view of the snow-white world seen from orbit, Koester stood up from the center seat and approached the admiral.

“I’m not comfortable with the idea of you beaming down there personally, Penji,” he said. “Monster has told me he’s more than willing to go down there...”

“I appreciate the offer, Peter,” Fil replied. “But Starfleet told me I have to be the one to retrieve Copeland, and I’m not going to pass it off on a subordinate. I’ll beam down with Petty Officer Messer and get the Colonel myself. Now, can you contact the transporter room and tell them to have arctic gear standing by for us?”

“I can do more than that,” Koester remarked. “From my understanding, it takes almost a full day to walk from the processing center on the outskirts of the shield to the prison entrance. I can cut that down significantly for you. Mister Bloom has put together two snow-cats with enclosed, heated cockpits. It should only take you an hour or so to reach the prison with those.” Koester then turned to face the Marine officer standing at the tactical console and said, “Major Mendez.”

“Aye, Captain?” Major April Mendez replied, looking at the starship’s commanding officer.

“Who’s next on the away mission duty roster?”

“1st Lieutenant Cron,” Mendez replied.

“Good. Have Cron report to Transporter Room 1 in fifteen minutes.” As Mendez acknowledged and contacted the Lurian Marine officer, Koester turned back to Fil. “I just hope he doesn’t talk your ear off on the trip to the prison. He can be quite the conversationalist when he wants. Good luck, Admiral.”

“Thanks, Peter.” Fil then stepped toward the nearby turbolift as he tapped his combadge. “Fil to Petty Officer Messer. Meet me in Transporter Room 1. And dress warm.”

* * * *

Ninety minutes later, three vehicles approached the very center of the area of the planet’s surface covered by the anti-beaming shield. Two were the size of the average ground car with four broad tracked wheels, painted bright orange with Starfleet markings and capable of carrying two people each. The third was a Klingon vehicle - open-topped and looking much like a 20th century Earth snowmobile, upon which two Klingons wearing heavy uniforms and goggles with narrow slits across the lenses rode.

As the three vehicles came to a stop, the Klingon riding the rear of the snowmobile got off and pointed what looked like a remote control toward the snow piled in front of them. The controller produced a low buzzing noise. A moment later a metal pole with a red light on top poked up through the snow almost three meters ahead of the stationary vehicles.

As Fil, Cron, and Messer climbed out of the snow-cats, the Lurian Marine officer having been atypically quiet the entire trip from the processing center due to his discomfort with the extreme cold, a hatch beneath the snow opened and a rough-hewn set of stairs leading below the surface appeared.

“Come. Follow me,” the Klingon who had been driving the snowmobile said as he stepped through the open hatch. Fil, glad for any opportunity to get out of the freezing wind, followed closely behind, Messer and Cron immediately following, while the Klingon holding the remote followed last. As soon as all five had descended the first set of carved steps, the hatch shut behind them, cutting off the howling wind.

“Welcome...!” the Klingon warden said as Fil and the others reached the first landing several meters underground, “...to Rura Penthe! It is not often we are graced by such an important individual as yourself, Admiral.” The warden then saluted Fil with a fist against his chest before saying, “Would you and your party care for a tour of our historic facility?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have a whole lot of time to partake in your hospitality, Warden,” Fil answered. “If you could just take me to Colonel Copeland so we can get him out of here?”

“As you wish, Admiral.” The warden then turned to one of his guards and spoke in guttural Klingonese. One of the guards then addressed the three Federation visitors.

“Follow me,” he said.

Fil, Cron, and Messer followed the lead guard down deeper into the prison, two other guards following close behind, their weapons quite evident. The excavated tunnels and stairs eventually opened up into a large cavern beneath several catwalks the visiting party now crossed. This was evidently the prison yard, where dozens of prisoners of numerous species and descriptions wearing tattered clothes and rags milled about. Some of the prisoners noticed the Starfleet officers crossing above and a few pointed excitedly, wondering if ‘fresh meat’ was being added to the mix. Cron, uncomfortable with the apparent age and visible corrosion of the catwalks they crossed, nervously fingered the phaser he was keeping hidden beneath the folds of his winter parka.

The six soon reached what looked like two ancient elevator doors. The first guard pulled the door of one open by hand and stepped in, followed by the three Starfleet visitors and a second guard before the door was closed by the final guard from the outside.

“He’s not coming with us?” Fil asked.

“The elevators must be operated manually from the main level,” the lead guard explained. “It helps keep the prisoners from rioting and escaping.”

Fil had never ridden an elevator like this one before. Used to the smooth, almost inertia-free ride of a Federation turbolift, the mining elevator was noisy, rough, and felt like the cable holding it would snap at any moment and drop them to horrible deaths deep down the shafts. The admiral tried to calculate how far beneath the surface they were descending, but it was hard to tell how fast the elevator was actually moving in the near total darkness.

Finally, after what felt like several minutes, the elevator slowed to a stop and the door was opened from the outside by another Klingon guard. If Fil had thought the prison yard was dim and confining, the infamous dilithium mines of Rura Penthe were downright dark and claustrophobic!

The lead guard stepped over to the mine guard that had opened the door and spoke in Klingonese. The mine guard gestured down the tunnel to the left and replied in the same harsh language. The lead guard then turned to his visitors and said, “I am told the prisoner you seek is on this level half a kellicam down the mining tunnel to the left.” He then gestured to the mining cart on rails that was parked in front of the elevator and told the Federation visitors to get aboard.

The lead guard sat at the controls, the second guard sitting at the rear. Fil exchanged a look with Messer and Cron before shrugging and climbing aboard the uncomfortable passenger car. It took nearly seven minutes to travel through the dark tunnels where still more prisoners were using laser picks to slash through the rock and release the crystals of dilithium from the strata. Several of the prisoners paused in their labor to watch the Starfleet personnel in their clean white parkas pass by before other guards convinced them to return their attention to their work with the snap of a whip.

Finally the mining train stopped near a trio of prisoners. Two of them were alien species Fil did not recognize, though that may have been due more to the grime and dirt that covered them than anything. The third, though equally as grimy, looked like a human of short stature - only a meter and a half tall - but muscular build. The lead guard shouted a single word in Klingonese, and all three prisoners stopped their work and turned around.

“Copeland!” the guard said.

Copeland looked like he was about to respond when he finally noticed the three visitors. His eyes narrowed suspiciously and he dropped his laser pick, taking a couple of steps closer to Fil.

“What is this?” he asked, his voice reflecting his suspicious nature.

“Carey, it’s me,” Fil replied, climbing off the mine train and taking a step toward his former shipmate. “It’s Penji Fil.”

Fil knew Copeland to only be in his late-40’s, but the Tamurillian looked twice as old as his actual age. His face, once youthful in spite of how roughly he had chosen to live as a Starfleet Marine, was now covered with wrinkles, lines, and scars. He stood slightly stooped over, as if having gotten used to walking around like that to avoid hitting his head on the low overhead of the mine tunnels. Fil was shocked that the Tamurilian had survived his living conditions for two decades.

A smile that could have appeared on the face of an inmate on Elba II appeared on Copeland’s lips as he looked at Fil. “Penji Fil? An Admiral in Starfleet? My mind has finally cracked,” he said, sharing a knowing look with one of his fellow prisoners. The two aliens looked at Copeland uncomprehendingly. The former Marine officer then looked back at Fil, unexpectedly snapping to attention and performing a mock-salute. “Hi-ya Admiral,” he said with a wide grin, revealing several of Copeland’s teeth to be missing. “I’m General Copeland. Reporting for duty as ordered, sir!”

Fil exchanged puzzled looks with both Cron and Messer. Meanwhile Copeland chuckled to himself as he turned back around and picked up his mining tool, activating it and returning to work.

“Carey! You’re being released,” Fil called out over the sound of the pick. “You’re going home.”

Copeland threw down his pick in unmistakable rage, turning around to face Fil once again, a look of anger covering his features. “No!” Copeland said. “No. You’re not here. That’s impossible!”

“I am here, Carey,” Fil assured. “I’m here to get you.”

“This is a trick! You’re just trying to get me to lower my guard. You just want to send me to the surface! You want to kill me!”

“No one wants to kill...!”

“I’m not an idiot! I’m not falling for your tricks!”

“It’s no trick! I’m here to...”

“I don’t believe you! You’re nothing more than my imagination playing tricks on me! A hallucination! Nothing more! Do you know how many times I have imagined Admiral Johnson coming to get me out of here? Or Solek? Or Dave Maddox? I used to dream of them all showing up and telling me it was all a mistake. I actually thought I saw them just like I’m seeing you now! But I didn’t fall for it then, and I’m not falling for it now! You’re nothing more than my subconscious trying to get me to give up and let the Klingon bastards exile me to the surface.”

“Carey, I’m really...”

Copeland looked on the verge of physically attacking Fil if he completed his sentence. The admiral looked back and forth, first at the Klingon guards, then his own escorts, wondering what to do before an idea occurred to him.

“Lt Colonel Copeland... Atten-SHUN!”

Years of Marine Corps training overrode Copeland’s current emotions. Unconsciously, Copeland snapped to attention. Fil then stepped right up into the Tamurilian’s face and said, “Whether you choose to believe or not does not negate the fact that I am here. Touch me!”

For a split-second, uncertainty appeared on Copeland’s face again. He appeared on the verge of balking when Fil again shouted, “Touch me, Colonel! Confirm for yourself that I’m real!”

Copeland suddenly seemed uncertain. There was a part of him that wanted desperately to do as told, to reach out and touch Fil’s face and confirm his former shipmate was real, was here, and was going to release him from the horrid Klingon gulag. At the same time, another part of him feared that if he tried to reach out to Fil, it would only confirm the supposed admiral was nothing more than a figment of his damaged psyche, that he was still trapped on Rura Penthe for life, and that death would be the only escape. The two halves battled in Copeland’s mind.

“Carey... Please,” Fil implored.

Finally, hesitatingly, Copeland reached up, touching Fil’s cheek like one might touch a long-lost relative. Revelation slowly dawned on Copeland’s face as he reached up with his other hand, running his fingers through the

locks of Fil's white hair. Tears started to form in the corners of his eyes as the former Marine began to laugh with a vigor he never realized he still possessed.

"Penji! Penji, you're real! You're real and you're here!" Copeland said in amazement. He enveloped the taller man in a bear hug as he asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to take you home," Fill assured.

To Be Continued...