

STAR TREK

NIGHTFALL

THE SLAYER CRISIS

SOMETHINGS ARE BEST LEFT FORGOTTEN



AREA OF EXPERTISE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL ***THE SLAVER CRISIS***

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Before returning to the Meltara sector the *USS Nightfall* is diverted to the *Magellan* science station with which all contact has been lost. Although an accident could explain the loss of contact the research being carried out on the station means that the reason could be a result of an enemy known to some of the *Nightfall*'s crew...

Star Trek: Nightfall The Slaver Crisis available to download at:
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Stardate 68462.7. *USS Nightfall* NCC-82008-A rendezvous with *USS Citadel* NCC-78492 while en route to the Meltara Sector.

"The *Citadel* is signalling ready for transport captain." the transporter operator told Robert Cole, the commanding officer of the Akira-class *USS Nightfall* and he nodded.

"Energise." he said and the crewman activated the transporter.

Moments later there was a glow on the transporter pad before a woman in a Starfleet science division uniform materialised with a bag over one shoulder and a violin case held in her other hand.

"Permission to come aboard Captain Cole." she said, smiling at Cole.

"Granted Doctor Hamill." Cole replied and as she stepped off the transporter pad Cole looked at the operator and added, "Tell the *Citadel* that the doctor is safely aboard and thank them for returning her to us. Then inform the bridge that we can be underway again."

"Thanks." Hamill said as Cole took her bag from her and the pair left the transporter room together, "So how was the wedding?"

"Good thanks. Fortunately the weather stayed fine. Of course T'Lan's father got married during the summer. I'm told that winter weddings on Betazed are very rare." Cole said.

"I can imagine." Hamill commented.

"Of course now a lot of male crewmembers aboard are asking to see photographs of the ceremony and I'm pretty sure that it's all because they want to see my new twenty-year old Romulan mother in law naked." Cole said.

"What, not you and our beloved first officer?" Hamill said, smiling and Cole frowned.

"Do you think so? That would be rather disturbing." he replied.

"What would I know?" Hamill said, shrugging as they came to the turbolift, "I'm the ship's chief medical officer. I see everyone naked. I even see parts of them that they've never seen and it's not always pretty."

"What about your holiday?" Cole asked.

"It was good to see Jack again for a couple of weeks. These long distance relationships can be difficult. I have to say I'm kind of jealous of you and Commander Davis both having your wives aboard."

"As T'Lan often reminds me it is logical to want to be close to someone you love but distance alone cannot determine affection." Cole said.

"Ah the romance at the core of Vulcan belief. I can take that from here thanks." Hamill said, smiling and she took her bag back from Cole.

"Here you go then." he said as he returned it.

"Oh captain I don't suppose Leyla went down to the surface when you were at Betazed did she?" Hamill asked.

"No. Lieutenant Commander Sodyne reminded everyone that she was a naturalised citizen of Earth and then said that as chief science officer she would rather use our time in orbit to recalibrate the lateral sensor array than have a bunch of telepaths poking around inside her head."

"That's a shame. You know I don't think she's seen any of her family face to face since she graduated from the academy?"

"Then it's a good job she has friends aboard this ship to watch out for her." Cole said, stepping back from the turbolift before the doors slid shut.

Hamill selected the floor and section that her quarters were located in and when the turbolift doors opened again she was just a few metres away from them. Then as she opened the door to her quarters she heard her communicator sounding.

"Hold on, hold on. Let me get in first." she said before rushing across the room to the desk on which the communicator was mounted, "Hello?" she said as she activated it and the image of a man in a Starfleet service division uniform appeared on the screen, "Jack," Hamill said, smiling at her boyfriend, "I've just this minute got back. Is something wrong?"

"No in fact just the opposite. I got back to the *Judgement* about an hour ago and I found out that our chief medical officer has just been promoted to full commander and is moving on. She's accepted a new posting to Deep Space Three. That leaves our medical department one short and I thought you could ask for a transfer." Jack told her and Hamill's jaw dropped.

"You mean we could serve together? No more finding a week or two every few months to be together?" she said and Jack smiled and nodded.

"That's right. Plus there's a rumour that the *Judgement* is scheduled to be assigned an eighteen-month

exploration tour. It would be that long until we could meet up again if you weren't here. So what do you say?" he said.

"I'll talk to Captain Cole. I can't believe it. You know we were just discussing how much easier it is to be close to someone you're in a relationship with." Hamill said.

"That's great. I'll talk to Captain Stark at this end and tell her you're interested. I need to go now though. I love you." Jack said and Hamill smiled.

"I know." she said before she blew him a kiss and the screen went blank.

"Anything happen while I was gone?" Cole asked as he stepped back onto the bridge, putting on the headset that all bridge crew wore at the same time.

"No captain. The Citadel has re-entered warp and we are ready to resume our course for the Meltara Sector." T'Lan, the *Nightfall's* Vulcan first officer and Cole's wife responded as she got up from the captain's chair and moved to the one beside it.

"Course zero six one mark five laid in captain." the Bolian helmsman added.

"Very good Commander Ghroc. Engage at warp six. Professor Denning will be wondering where we are.

"Engaging warp drive. Warp factor six." Ghroc said as he twisted the manual flight controls built into his chair and the star field shown on the main viewscreen changed from a static one to blurred lines as the *Nightfall* accelerated to almost four hundred times the speed of light, "Warp drive is stable." he added.

"Good. Bring us up to warp eight." Cole ordered.

"Yes captain." Ghroc replied.

"At this rate we should reach the Meltara sector in eighteen days captain." Sodyne commented from the science station.

"Very good. I don't-" Cole began before the Romulan officer sat at the operations station looked up from her console.

"Captain we're receiving a call from Starfleet. It's Admiral Silar." she said.

"Very good Nayal. On main view screen please." Cole ordered and a blue skinned Andorian admiral appeared on the main view screen in place of the external view. While he was obviously sat in an office at a Starfleet facility the wall behind him was also decorated with images and banners relating to the Andorian Imperial Guard. Having served alongside such troops aboard the previous *USS Nightfall*, Cole was familiar with these and recognised many of them.

"Admiral what can I do for you?" Cole asked.

"Captain I believe you and some of your officers are familiar with the science station *Magellan*." Admiral Silar said.

"It is a Federation science facility that specialises in what humans term 'blue sky' research." T'Lan said and Silar smiled.

"Yes an interesting term if you ask me. However, more recently their research has taken a turn towards something more practical. Thanks to the *Nightfall* in fact, the first one."

"We were told that the *Magellan* was conducting research on Iconian gateways." T'Lan said.

"Let me guess, they've been looking at our experience with them." Cole added.

"Correct captain. Now as I understand it creating a gateway requires a mineral with some very special properties." Silar said.

"It is highly refractive of energy." T'Lan replied.

"I thought we used it all up when we attacked the Iconians." Cole said.

"Starfleet was able to recover a few samples from the debris after the battle. Plus the Klingons returned about half of what was left that you'd applied to their surviving bird of prey. I suspect that their own scientists are looking at the rest." Silar explained, "To get to the point though the scientists at the *Magellan* reported a breakthrough in their research and were preparing to create a test gateway between a number of their stations. That was scheduled to take place eight days ago and no-one has heard anything from them since then. The *USS Woodward* was close enough to conduct a long range scan and they noticed an odd pattern of subspace emissions coming from the *Magellan*. I want you to divert the *Nightfall* and investigate."

"The *Woodward* is a Nebula-class ship. Isn't she better placed to respond?" Cole asked.

"Yes and ordinarily Starfleet would send her in. However, there are exactly three command level officers in Starfleet with practical experience of Iconian gateways and you're all aboard the *Nightfall*. The Meltara sector can wait."

"Yes admiral. We'll change course now. *Nightfall* out." Cole said and the view screen returned to its previous image of a blurred star field.

"Captain the *Magellan* is located at bearing one four three mark six four." Nayal said and Cole nodded.

"Helm bring us out of warp then lay in a course of one four three mark six four and engage at warp nine point eight as fast as possible."

"Yes captain, Dropping to impulse power now." Ghroc replied and Cole turned to look at T'Lan.

"T'Lan you, Nayal and I are the officers Admiral Silar was talking about. I'll keep Nayal here with me to run a

sensor sweep of the *Magellan* as soon as it comes within range but I want you and Lieutenant Commander Sodyne to go to engineering. See what information you can come up with about the work that the *Magellan* has been doing and also what Starfleet may have in the way of reports from Max. He's the one who developed the gateway system we used to get to the Iconian's private little subspace pocket."

"Yes captain. Commander Sodyne, with me." T'Lan replied as she got to her feet.

"Commander Martin." Cole then said to the dark skinned officer sat at the tactical station behind him as the two women entered a turbolift.

"Yes captain?" he responded.

"Commander we can't rule out the possibility that the *Magellan* came under either outside attack or was sabotaged by a foreign agent working within. Iconian gateway technology would give a significant military advantage to anyone who possessed it. We'll go to yellow alert as soon as we're within a hundred million kilometres of the *Magellan*. I want our fighters to establish a perimeter around the facility and a security team ready to beam aboard by the time we get there. Have our ground troops on stand by as well just in case."

"Yes captain." Martin said and then Cole tapped his combadge.

"Cole to Doctor Hamill." he said.

"Yes captain?" Hamill's voice responded.

"Doctor I'm sorry to disturb you before you've had chance to get back into the swing of things but there's been an emergency. The *Nightfall* is diverting to the Federation science station *Magellan*. All contact has been lost with the facility and people could be hurt. I need you to have sickbay ready for casualties and be ready to send a team over to help treat the injured."

"Of course captain. Could we go through this in your ready room? There's something else I need to discuss with you." Hamill said.

"Is something wrong doctor?" Cole asked.

"No captain but I've just had some news I need to talk to you about." Hamill answered.

"Very well doctor we can meet in my ready room in ten minutes if that suits you." Cole said.

"Yes captain, thank you." Hamill out."

Cole was already in his ready room when Hamill arrived and he pointed to a chair as she came through the doorway.

"Please take a seat doctor. Do you have your plan there?" he said and he looked at the PADD she was carrying.

"Yes it's all here. My entire staff will be on duty and I've picked three to beam over to assess priorities if the initial away team deems a large scale operation necessary. I'm guessing that I'll be in that team." Hamill responded and she passed the PADD across the desk to Cole.

"Very good doctor. Now there was something else you wanted to discuss?" Cole asked.

"Yes captain. I know this may be a problem for you but I'd like to request a transfer." Hamill told him and Cole's eyes widened in surprise.

"A transfer? Are you unhappy aboard the *Nightfall*? I know you and Lieutenant Commander Ghroc don't always see eye to eye." he replied.

"No captain, so far this has been a very good posting and none of this is about Antur Ghroc. It's just that Jack called me right after I got back from leave and told me that the chief medical officer aboard the *Judgement* is leaving and he thinks he can get me the position. I'm sorry to have to do this but-

"Don't worry Sally, I understand entirely. Obviously I hate to lose you but I can't deny your request if the captain of the *Judgement* agrees to it as well. The *Judgement*'s a good ship as well, postings like that don't come up every day."

"Thank you for being so understanding captain and I really am sorry to be leaving you in the lurch." Hamill said, "I'll go and make sure that everything is set in sickbay."

"Very good doctor." Cole said as she got to her feet, "Oh and although you've only been aboard a few months it has been a pleasure to work with you."



"I'm not even sure what I'm looking at." Lieutenant Commander Davis, the *Nightfall's* chief engineer said as he looked at a diagram of a version of the Iconian gateway technology that had been created using technology that was largely Federation in origin, "I can see that this looks like it's going to tear a hole in space that will connect to subspace but that's about it."

"There are some really odd variables in this." Sodyne added.

"Lieutenant Maximillian was able to reverse engineer a limited version of the Iconian gateway technology. The equations are the means to target the location that will be travelled to." T'Lan said.

"That guy was a genius." Davis commented.

"Indeed. Lieutenant Maximillian was a former Borg drone who played a large role in the development of the *Nightfall* ships. Although he lost his access to the full amount of knowledge held by the collective he still retained his ability to carry out rapid and complex computations." T'Lan said.

"Well I wish he was here now to properly explain all of this to me." Davis said.

"Unfortunately he was killed during our attack on the Iconian subspace realm. All we have are the records he chose to back up away from the previous *USS Nightfall*." T'Lan said.

"I see there are a few extra notes here." Sodyne commented as she looked at the full listing of files available on gateway technology, "They don't look like they're Starfleet files though. Are they from the Magellan?"

"Quite likely. The last time I visited the station they were already carrying out research on the subject. The Iconians themselves sought to sabotage it." T'Lan answered.

"Trying to make sure they maintained their advantage?" Davis said.

"That is logical, yes. Also without gateway technology it was impossible to reach their realm." T'Lan said.

"What about this material that's mentioned here? I see a reference to it as a 'refractive form of silicon' but that's it. No molecular scans or links to replicator files." Davis said.

"No there are no such files." T'Lan told him, "The properties of the material made it highly unstable when subjected to focused energy waves of any form, including active sensors. The result was a feedback that produced a large, random release of energy. We never found a means of scanning the molecular structure of the material and even the Iconians were unable to replicate it. It had to be mined. That is how we were able to obtain a quantity of it ourselves. The first was a sample block that was being transported when it was intercepted by the *USS Brilliant* and the second a shipment from an Iconian facility. Unfortunately the method devised by Maximillian to create gateways consumed much of the material with each gateway formed."

"Well if the Iconians were still mining it maybe there's just no way around that. Of course their technology would probably be more efficient." Sodyne commented. Then she shook her head and sighed, "Well I'm sorry commander I can't see anything here that would cause an entire science station to shut down. If they'd got their calculations wrong and blasted themselves across the universe then I'd understand it but the *Woodward* has confirmed that the station is still there."

"Then it appears that we will have to wait until we beam aboard to find out what has gone wrong. I would like both of you to join me in my away team. I will also take Doctor Hamill, Lieutenant Commander Martin and an additional crewman from the engineering, medical and security departments." T'Lan said.

"Eight people with two specialists in each field if we count the pair of you as science officers." Davis commented, looking at T'Lan and Sodyne and he noticed the Betazoid frown for a brief moment.

"What exactly will my role be commander?" Sodyne asked, looking at T'Lan.

"Science officer of course." the Vulcan told her.

"So you won't be second guessing everything I do then?" Sodyne said.

"I shall be commanding the away team. I will not have time to act as a science officer as well. However, I have based the makeup of the away team on the possibility that it may need to be split into two separate groups. In that case I would expect you to take command of the second group while I lead Lieutenant Commander Davis, Lieutenant Commander Martin and the junior medical officer selected by Doctor Hamill." T'Lan said.

"Seriously? You'd give me unit command?"

"I believe you are capable. However, if you would rather Lieutenant Commander Davis commanded your unit then-" T'Lan began.

"No, no I'll take command." Sodyne interrupted, smiling.

"Don't go getting yourself measured for that red uniform yet Leyla." Davis commented.

"Secured from warp. All fighters scramble, scramble, scramble." Nayal announced when the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp still some distance from the *Magellan* and in pairs the twelve small attack craft that the

Starfleet heavy cruiser carried raced out of the forward launch door. These the accelerated to low warp so that they could rapidly encircle the *Magellan*.

The *Magellan* itself consisted of not one but several separate space stations, a large central station used for different disciplines of scientific research and six others arranged equally around it as support facilities. Now all of these appeared dark and lifeless.

"I'm not reading any defences captain." Martin said, "No deflector shields and we aren't being targeted."

"The *Magellan* has no offensive weapons." T'Lan pointed out.

"Minimal energy readings. It looks like they have life support though." Nayal said.

"Not that I can find anyone alive over there." Sodyne added. Then her eyes widened as she noticed an alert on a different part of her console, "Captain the Slaver stasis box we have aboard is reacting to the presence of another one aboard the *Magellan*."

The Slavers were an ancient species that had ruled a galaxy wide empire around a billion years earlier before it collapsed following a revolt. Now all that remained of them were ruins that sometimes held their priceless stasis boxes. Time inside such a box stopped completely and anything that could fit inside would be perfectly preserved, even living creatures. One strange property of the boxes was that they would start to glow if brought within about a light year of another and this was regarded as the primary means of detecting them at a distance.

"That is understandable." T'Lan said, "As a research facility the *Magellan* may have been studying the technology."

"Try hailing the *Magellan*'s operations anyway. We should be close enough for short range communications." Cole ordered.

"*Magellan* this is the *USS Nightfall*. Respond please. *Magellan* do you read me?" Nayal transmitted but there was no response at all.

"*Nightfall* I'm not seeing any signs of damage to the main station." the pilot of a fighter transmitted as it performed a close flyby of the central station.

"Lieutenant Nayal activate the lidar." Cole said, "Mister Ghroc hold here."

"All stop. Holding position here captain." Ghroc said as he brought the *Nightfall* to a complete halt.

"Laser audio pickup?" T'Lan asked and Cole nodded.

As well as the standard array of subspace based sensors the ships of the *Nightfall* program were also equipped with a pair of laser emitting turrets above and below their primary hulls. These were primarily intended as an alternative short ranged detections system but the emitters had other potential uses as well. There had been plans to use the lasers as a form of close in weapon system to protect against incoming projectiles but this had never been made to work. However, it had quickly been found that the emitters could function as remote microphones, projecting a continuous beam onto the hull of a ship would enable sounds from inside to be detected.

"That's what I'm thinking. Someone might be able to hide themselves from our sensors but I doubt they'll be able to keep so quiet that a laser aimed at their hull won't pick up any sound they're making." he said.

"Deploying lidar turrets. Switching from pulse to beam mode and locking onto the main station's operations level." Nayal said as she deployed the two laser turrets and then fired the beam from the one mounted above the *Nightfall*'s primary hull at the *Magellan*. Nayal then channelled the feed from the laser microphone into her headset, listening for any sounds that seemed to come from a living person. The microphones were sensitive enough at their highest setting to be able to pick up the sound of just one person breathing but Nayal could hear only the steady rhythmic sounds of the machinery still running aboard the *Magellan*.

"Anything Nayal?" Cole asked but she shook her head.

"No captain, all I'm getting is the sound of machinery. Hold on while I try and filter it out." she responded but after she had isolated the different mechanical sounds and filtered them out of what she was hearing she was left with only silence, "Nothing." she said.

"So the sensors were-" Sodyne began before she paused.

"Is something wrong?" Martin asked when she suddenly stopped talking.

"No but there should be." Sodyne replied.

"What do you mean commander?" Cole said.

"I mean that we've been running active sensor scans of the entire complex. So shouldn't we have picked up massive energy spikes whenever those sweeps struck any of that material that's needed to open a gateway?" Sodyne pointed out and T'Lan quickly brought up the sensor readings on her headset.

"Lieutenant Commander Sodyne is correct captain." she said, "There are no traces of the refractive silicon aboard the *Magellan* at all."

"Sounds like someone came here and took it." Martin said.

"But they left a priceless stasis box behind?" Sodyne pointed out.

"Maybe they didn't know it was there." Ghroc suggested.

"We didn't." Martin agreed.

"Well they aren't here now. Unless they aren't doing anything like moving, speaking or breathing." Noyal responded.

"T'Lan I think it's time you took your away team over there and had a proper look." Cole said and T'Lan nodded.

"Commanders Sodyne and Martin with me. We'll be ready to beam over in ten minutes." she said as she got to her feet.

Assembling in the transporter room, the eight members of the away team checked their equipment prior to beaming over to the *Magellan*. Every member of the away team was armed with a phaser and all but Martin and the additional security guard also carried a tricorder. Just in case casualties were discovered Hamill and the junior medical officer had medical kits slung over their shoulders.

"Set co-ordinates for the *Magellan's* operations centre." T'Lan ordered.

"Co-ordinates set commander. Ready to beam you across." the transporter operator responded.

"Very good crewman. Phasers on stun." T'Lan said, drawing her phaser as she stepped onto the transporter pad. Then when the rest of the away team were in place and ready she added, "Energise."

The away team materialised in the operations centre aboard the *Magellan's* central station, right where they were supposed to be. Under normal circumstances this compartment would have been filled with station crew ensuring that every system aboard was operating at peak efficiency. Now though as the away team looked around they saw that the operations centre was deserted and most of the lights were out, leaving the control consoles themselves as the primary source of illumination.

"*Magellan* this is the *USS Nightfall* do you read me?" Noyal's voice said from a nearby console and Davis darted towards it.

"*Nightfall* this is Davis. Transport is complete and we're all over safely. There's no-one else in the operations centre though."

"Blood." the security guard who had accompanied the away team called out suddenly and both Martin and Hamill rushed to see.

"Green. Looks Vulcan." Martin said as they both looked at the smear of dark green dried blood on the side of one of the consoles.

"It is." Hamill agreed as she scanned the blood stain, "It looks like it's been here quite a while. More than a week."

"That fits with the time that contact was lost with the facility." T'Lan commented.

"Oh yeah? Well what about this?" Sodyne said from the side of the room and the rest of the away team turned to look in her direction. The Betazoid was standing beside an open locker that had been stripped of its contents. Now all that remained was the contoured interior mounting that showed the shapes of the objects that had been removed from inside and every Starfleet officer present recognised these shapes as being of phasers.

"Looks like they armed themselves commander." Martin said to T'Lan.

"Which indicates that the command crew at least had enough warning of an attack to try and take precautions." T'Lan replied.

"But they didn't send a distress signal or raise their shields." Davis pointed out.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis does the station appear damaged in any way?" T'Lan asked and Davis checked the console in front of him.

"No commander, not as far as I can tell. Everything here matches the scans we took from the *Nightfall*. Most systems are functioning on automatic in a standby mode." the engineer replied.

"Does that include internal communications?" T'Lan asked.

"Yes, you can access them from any console it appears." Davis answered.

"Good." T'Lan said as she stepped towards the nearest console and activated the intercom, setting it to broadcast across all seven stations that made up the *Magellan* facility, "This is Starfleet Commander T'Lan of the starship *USS Nightfall*." she announced, "Our vessel has been sent to investigate the loss of contact with this facility. My away team has secured main operations and anyone aboard should respond immediately to this message. T'Lan out."

"Good idea. That could save a lot of time on a room to room search across seven space stations." Sodyne said as she walked over to a nearby console and began to inspect it for herself.

"Only if someone replies." Davis commented.

"How many people were aboard this station before contact was lost?" Hamill asked.

"Records indicated that the *Magellan* had a crew of six hundred and forty-two researchers, two hundred and seven support staff and three hundred and twelve dependents when contact was lost." T'Lan said, reciting the information she had read before their arrival.

"So more than a thousand people are missing." Hamill said.

"One thousand one hundred and sixty one to be precise." T'Lan replied.

“And if any of them were able to respond they would have by now.” Martin added, “Commander we’re going to have to do this the old fashioned way. A room to room search.”

“I agree lieutenant commander.” T’Lan said and she tapped her combadge, “T’Lan to *Nightfall*.”

“Go ahead T’Lan.” Cole’s voice responded.

“Captain my away team has been unable to contact any of the *Magellan*’s crew from operations we are going to conduct a search level by level.” T’Lan told him.

“Understood T’Lan. Take care and don’t take any unnecessary risks.” Cole said.

“That would not be logical.” T’Lan replied.

“Of course not. Look while you’re searching the main station I’m going to send a platoon of ground troops over to each of the other stations as well to speed things up. Where do you want them sending aboard the main station?”

“The service decks would be most suitable captain. I suggest two squads sent to operations to search the administrative area and the other two to the engineering section to search the power plant and workshops. My away team will investigate the research decks.” T’Lan said.

“Okay they’ll be over in ten minutes. *Nightfall* out.” Cole said and then the channel went dead.

“Lieutenant Commander Martin, Lieutenant Commander Davis and Doctor Gould, after we have copied the contents of the *Magellan*’s computer to the *Nightfall* you will accompany me.” T’Lan said, looking at the members of her away team, “Lieutenant Commander Sodyne you are to take charge of Doctor Hamill, Ensign Grant and Crewman Foster. My group will search the port side sections of the research decks while yours searches the starboard. Is that understood?”

“Yes commander. Thank you.” Sodyne replied as she copied a file from the console she was standing at to her PADD.

3.

The *Magellan's* turbolifts remained in working order and so the away team was able to quickly descend from the operations centre at the top of the main station down to the research decks below where it split into the two groups defined by T'Lan and began to search the various laboratories that occupied this part of the station.

As a safety precaution the research decks were divided up into distinct sections so that an accident in one of them could easily be contained. These containment points also offered a means of limiting the movement of unauthorised personnel so in the event of a boarding action they could be sealed to block their advance. However, as the search teams progressed they found no evidence that this had been done, all the doors remained unlocked and could be opened at the touch of a button.

"This doesn't make sense." Martin said as he looked around a laboratory where almost every piece of equipment had been smashed and blood was spread over several surfaces, "Someone must have raised the alarm for the command crew to have armed themselves. So why wasn't the station locked down?"

"Perhaps it was and the lock down was overridden from the operations centre." T'Lan suggested.

"I suppose that's possible." Martin agreed.

"Commander there's a phaser out here." Davis then called out from the corridor outside the laboratory and the rest of T'Lan's search team headed out to see. Davis was crouched at a junction holding up a Federation phaser that was of an older model compared to the weapons the away team carried, "It's been fired." Davis added.

"What's it set to?" Martin asked as he walked over to where Davis crouched.

"Level ten." Davis told him.

"Someone was serious." Martin commented. At the tenth of the sixteen setting levels available on Federation issued phasers a target the size of a human would be completely vaporised and Starfleet training emphasised using the weapons on much lower settings even when intending to use lethal force.

"Still no bodies from the crew though." Doctor Gould, Hamill's assistant pointed out and T'Lan took out her tricorder and began to scan the corridor.

"What are you looking for commander?" Martin asked.

"Even at a setting such as ten it is common for some cellular residue to remain after a target is destroyed by a phaser beam." T'Lan replied, "I am scanning for any such residue in case it can tell us who is responsible for the disappearance of the *Magellan's* crew."

"Anything?" Davis asked but T'Lan shook her head.

"No. I can detect multiple small traces of organic matter that are most likely blood but there is nothing that shows the signs of exposure to disruption by directed energy attack. This is most illogical."

"Why?" Doctor Gould asked.

"Do you see any blast marks on the walls doctor?" Martin replied, "Whoever fired this phaser hit what they were aiming at and yet somehow managed to disintegrate it with one hundred percent efficiency. Even at level sixteen there ought to be some traces to find."

"At level sixteen you'd blast the deck plates along with whoever was standing on them at the time." Davis pointed out.

"This is odd. I am picking up strange subspace interference to my scans." T'Lan commented as she continued to use her tricorder.

"Let me see." Davis said as he took out his own tricorder and began to scan their surroundings. Then he nodded and added, "Yes I think I see it too. It's not much but it's definitely there. I'm surprised we didn't pick this up from the *Nightfall* though. A broad focus sensor sweep would produce more than this in refracted energy between the structures but a narrow beam scan would register it."

"I do not believe that Lieutenant Commander Sodyne ran such a scan." T'Lan said and Davis frowned.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I do not know. However, since the priority was to establish whether any of the crew were still alive and no dangerous levels of radiation were detected I did not consider it important either so I did not order it. The omission was mine as well as hers." T'Lan said.

"Well it's definitely coming from below us. Not far though. I suspect that there's a piece of equipment still running in one of the labs." Davis said.

"That would seem to be logical. We will monitor the level of emissions as we progress to ensure they do not become dangerous but until then we will continue with our search pattern." T'Lan ordered.

"Okay here we are at last. Deck six." Sodyne said as she led her search team onto another abandoned deck occupied by research laboratories.

"You sound like you were waiting for us to get here." Hamill commented and Sodyne smiled.

"I was." she replied.

"Why?" Hamill asked.

"Because I took a look at the research assignments by deck and section while we were in the operations centre and according to that what I want is right over here." Sodyne answered as she walked over the entrance to one of the laboratory units that was identified simply by a number but nothing to indicate what purpose it was being put to.

"What you're looking for? Leyla we're supposed to be trying to find out what happened to the crew." Hamill said.

"I know that but there's no harm in taking a look at what they've found out about the Slavers while we're here is there?" Sodyne replied and she opened the door to the laboratory and stepped through it.

Inside the laboratory was in the same chaotic state as everything else the away team had seen so far of the *Magellan*. Furniture was upturned and equipment was lying scattered and broken on the floor. However, at the far corner of the room there was a glowing box about three metres in length and a metre in width and height. This made it significantly larger than the example kept aboard the *Nightfall* which was just large enough to hold an average sized humanoid.

"Is that what I think it is?" Hamill said when she saw this.

"A Slaver stasis box. Glowing thanks to the presence of the one aboard the *Nightfall*." Sodyne said, smiling as she approached it.

"But aren't those things supposed to be valuable?" the engineer Ensign Grant asked.

"Priceless." Sodyne said.

"So why didn't whoever attacked the station take it?" Grant said.

"Maybe they didn't know what it was. Until we got within a light year and it started glowing it would have looked pretty ordinary." Sodyne explained.

"Just keep it away from me." Hamill said.

"It's perfectly safe." Sodyne said, walking over to the stasis box and placing her hand on the top.

"I don't care. I was shut in one of those things and it still freaks me out that time just stopped while I was in there." Hamill said.

"Oh that's just because Nayal tricked you into thinking you'd been inside for thousands of years." Sodyne said and she tapped her combadge, "Sodyne to *Nightfall*." she said.

"*Nightfall* here. Go ahead commander." Nayal responded.

"Lieutenant I've located the Slaver stasis box aboard the *Magellan*. I'd like a shuttle sending over so that it can be transferred to the *Nightfall*." Sodyne said.

"Sodyne did you just say a stasis box?" Cole's voice asked.

"Yes captain. We knew they had one and I think we should move it somewhere more secure than here." Sodyne said.

"We already have one of the things aboard. Do you really need two?" Cole said.

"No captain. In fact we should make sure that we transfer this one off the ship before we return to the Meltara Sector." Sodyne answered.

"Really? Why is that commander?" Cole said.

"Having two boxes aboard the ship will cause them to continuously react to one another's presence captain. That would prevent us from exploiting that reaction to know when we were close to another." Sodyne reminded Cole.

"Understood commander. Very well give us the location and I'll have a shuttle sent over for the box. After you've double checked it to make sure there's nothing inside we'll send it on to Starbase Six via runabout." Cole said and Sodyne smiled.

"The stasis box is on deck six, section four. Lab number two."

"Copy that. Deck six, section four, lab two. A shuttle is on its way."

"Thank you captain. Sodyne out." Sodyne said before tapping her combadge again to deactivate it.

"Oh great. Now I have to share the ship with two of those things." Hamill muttered.

"I thought you were leaving us anyway." Sodyne pointed out.

"Yes but that doesn't mean I want another of those things around. Oh and there better not be any leaving pranks planned that involve me being stuffed in one of them again." Hamill said.

"Don't worry Sally. Our prank has nothing to do with a stasis box." Sodyne replied and Hamill frowned.

"So you are planning something. Well I'm going to be watching out for it now." Hamill told Sodyne as she returned to the doorway.

"Actually it's a bit late for that. Nayal's already taken care of it." she said and Hamill frowned.

"What?" Hamill said.

"You know that list our oh so romantic first officer compiled after the captain's sister gave her some stupid magazine to read about improving your love life? What was it? Two hundred and something different fantasies? Well we sent a copy to Jack."

"You didn't!" Hamill exclaimed.

"Oh not the full thing. We took out everything that made it obvious that a Vulcan had written it and told him that you did." Sodyne told her.

"Oh no." Hamill said as her face fell.

"Enjoy your first night aboard the *Judgement* Sally. Now come on, we've still got another three decks to search." Sodyne replied.

"Nayal I want you to oversee the transfer of that stasis box personally." Cole ordered and Nayal nodded.

"Yes captain. Where should it be put?" she asked.

"I don't want it getting mixed up with the one we already have aboard so take it to the physics lab instead of engineering. She may want to get rid of the thing before we get back to the Meltara Sector but I bet Sodyne will want to examine it first and the physics lab offers the best place to do that." Cole answered and Nayal got up from her seat.

"I'll see to it right away captain." she said before she headed for the turbolift. Before she got there though there was chiming sound as the *Nightfall's* communication system registered an incoming signal.

"It's okay I've got it." Cole said as Nayal's replacement dashed for the console and Cole called up the communications through his headset, "*Nightfall*." he said.

"Nightfall this is Captain Stark of the *Judgement*. I need to speak with Captain Cole." a woman's voice said.

"Ah Captain Stark I was expecting your call. This is Captain Cole, can you hold just one moment?" Cole said and then he looked at Ghroc and added, "Mister Ghroc you have the conn." then he made his way into his ready room and sat down, transferring the signal to the terminal on his desk, "That's better." he said as Captain Stark appeared on the screen, "Now how can I help you captain?"



"The interference is definitely coming from this deck." Davis said, looking at his tricorder as T'Lan's search team entered arrived at another research deck.

"Agreed, although I am unable to isolate it." T'Lan said, looking at her own tricorder.

"I guess we keep just checking rooms then." Davis added.

"Yes. Lieutenant Commander Davis I want you to keep monitoring the emissions and alert me if you suspect they become dangerous." T'Lan said and Davis nodded.

"Yes commander." he replied.

T'Lan and Martin then led the way as the team advanced towards the nearest laboratory and opened the door, again finding it unlocked. Inside the laboratory appeared to be in a worse state than anything the team had seen up to this point with wall mounted screens smashed or ripped free of their mountings.

"It looks like someone went crazy in here." Martin commented.

"Yes but why on this deck? Could it be related to those subspace emissions? Certain energy emissions have been known to cause psychosis." Gould pointed out.

"Yes doctor but only in specific patterns and we are not seeing those here. Plus there is the issue of the missing crew. Had they been driven insane I would expect to find bodies left where they fell." T'Lan said.

"Hey take a look at this." Davis called out and he beckoned for the others to approach where he stood.

"What is it lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked.

"There's an emergency locker here and someone opened it. They took out a fire extinguisher." Davis said.

"Isn't this place fitted with a standard fire suppression system? You said everything was working so why would anyone need an extinguisher?" Martin said and Davis nodded.

"Yes everything's working and my guess is that they wanted to use it as a weapon. The extinguisher is still right here and I can see places on this work bench where the paint has chipped off it. Someone went down swinging if you ask me." he said.

"No arms lockers in the labs so they made do with what they had." Martin commented.

"There is nothing more we can learn here. We should check the next laboratory." T'Lan said and she led the team on to the next of the Magellan's laboratories. As soon as the door was opened this was revealed to be in an even worse condition than the previous one had been. The room looked as if it had been set up as some sort of monitoring station with two rows of consoles all aligned to face what had been a largely transparent wall apart from a short opaque section at each end that had a hatch set into it. These hatches were currently closed but the transparent wall itself had clearly been smashed from the other side and pieces of it were scattered around the room. A number of the consoles were also smashed and there were large amounts of dried blood everywhere.

"I'm guessing that whatever happened it started here." Martin said as he entered the room and then turned to look into the adjoining compartment that the occupants of this room had been monitoring, "What the hell is that?" he exclaimed suddenly.

T'Lan moved forwards and also turned to look through the smashed wall into the other chamber and she saw that in the midst of smashed machinery the air was filled by a pulsing pattern of lights.

"Commander I think we've just found the source of our subspace interference." Davis said as he held his tricorder towards the strange lights.

"Look at the floor." Doctor Gould said softly, pointing beneath the lights to where streaks of dried blood could be seen on the floor, all of them seemingly leading towards the centre of the room where the lights were located.

"But what is it?" Martin asked.

"I believe that we are looking at a very primitive form of Iconian gateway." T'Lan said as she and Davis both scanned the strange lights with their tricorders, "Logic suggests that this is where the scientists aboard the Magellan were attempting to recreate the technology using the initial duplication carried out aboard the previous *Nightfall*. Clearly they succeeded to a limited extent."

"So if that's a gateway then where does it lead to?" Martin asked and he raised his phaser towards the lights.

"I would not advise using your weapon Lieutenant Commander Martin. The energy field could cause the beam to behave randomly." T'Lan warned him and Martin nodded, lowering his weapon but keeping it in his hand.

"Sure." he said.

Meanwhile Doctor Gould stepped through the broken wall and approached the centre of the other room.

"Doctor stay back please." T'Lan said.

"I need to run a scan for lifeforms." Gould said as he took out his medical tricorder and detached its probe, holding it towards the lights that were right in front of him.

"Lifeforms?" Martin said.

"Yes. Look it's obvious that people were taken through this gateway to who knows where. Maybe I can pick them up." Gould said.

"Very well you may continue but do not make contact with the distortion doctor." T'Lan said and she turned around to face Martin and Davis, "I will inform the *Nightfall* of what we have found." she said and she tapped her combadge, "T'Lan to *Nightfall*." she said but there was just a 'hiss' of static from the device.

"This close to the gateway it must be blocking the signal. Did that happen when you used the technology previously?" Davis said.

"The jumps were instantaneous. If the technology did disrupt our communications then the duration was too brief to be noticed." T'Lan replied before the room lit up and there was a sudden shriek from behind her. The three officers all turned to look at the gateway where Doctor Gould had been scanning it for life readings. No though the doctor was gone and his tricorder was lying abandoned on the floor.

"Did he fall in?" Davis said but before anyone could answer there was a sudden flash of light as the gateway became brighter. Dazzled by the light, all three of them turned away and tried to shield their eyes but this was in vain and they found themselves blinded by the light.

"I can't see." Martin exclaimed.

"Neither can I." Davis added as the two men steadied themselves on a nearby console.

"Remain calm." T'Lan told them as the inner eyelids that all Vulcans possessed began to open, restoring her vision before either of the two humans could recover, "I will-" she began before she found herself enveloped by something and lifted off her feet, her words cut off as whatever it was now covering her head pressed tight against her face and cut off her supply of air.

"Red alert. Captain to the bridge." Ghroc said over the intercom and Cole rushed back out of his ready room.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Captain our sensors just picked up an energy pulse from the *Magellan*." Ghroc told him.

"Weapons fire?" Cole asked.

"No captain." Ghroc answered.

"Then why the red alert?"

"Because the computer has identified the pulse as being caused by the activation of an Iconian gateway captain." Ghroc replied.

"Show me." he said and Ghroc pointed to the schematic of the *Magellan* that had appeared on the main view screen at the front of the bridge. This highlighted one of the research laboratories as the source of the energy pulse.

"The pulse came from here captain." the Bolian said.

"Get me T'Lan." Cole ordered and the officer at the operations console reached for the communication system.

"I'm sorry captain I can't establish a link to Commander T'Lan or any of her party." the officer responded.

"What? Why ever not?" Cole asked.

"The combadges of Commander T'Lan, Lieutenant Commander Martin, Lieutenant Commander Davis and Doctor Gould are not registering captain." the operations officer said.

"That means we can't even get a transporter lock and beam them back." Ghroc pointed out.

"When did we lose contact?" Cole said and the operations officer checked the connection log that tracked the movements of all members of the away team.

"According to my log they entered that section of the station about ten minutes ago captain. That's when we lost them." he said.

And you didn't notice until now?" Cole snapped.

"What about the other teams aboard the *Magellan*?" Ghroc added.

"I'm still getting signals from Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and her team as well as of the ground combat specialists we just beamed over commander." the operations officer answered.

"We could send someone to take a look." Ghroc suggested and Cole nodded.

"Get me Lieutenant Sanders." Cole ordered and the operations officer immediately contacted the leader of the ground combat platoon aboard the *Magellan's* primary station.

"Sanders here." the platoon commander said.

"Lieutenant we've lost contact with Commander T'Lan's search party. I need you to have a squad break off from their own search and investigate. Be advised that we've picked up an energy signature that matches the formation of an Iconian gateway in the area where they are believed to be so your men should be on alert for hostile contacts." Cole said, "They were on deck eight section seven."

"Copy that captain. Deck eight section seven. I'll send beta squad in immediately. Sanders out." Sanders said before the channel went dead.

"What about Sodyne?" Ghroc asked.

"I want her team back here as soon as possible. They can ride back on the shuttle with that stasis box if

there's room but get her back up here on the bridge as soon as she gets back. I need my science officer to tell me exactly what's going on over there." Cole replied.

"You look like you think that thing is going to pop open and spill out some creature from one of your planet's myths." Nayal said to Hamill as they sat in the back of the shuttle along with the Slaver stasis box as the shuttle lifted off and flew out of the *Magellan's* launch bay, "What were they called? Mammoths?"

"Mammoths were real Nayal and one of them wouldn't even fit inside this shuttle, let alone that box." Hamill replied without taking her eyes off the stasis box.

"Nothing can break out of a stasis box anyway." Sodyne pointed out, "It would take an infinite amount of time for something inside to reach the lid and open it."

"That's the point. When the Ferengi stuck me in one I was thinking about what I could do to get out and I was stuck with that exact thought in my head right up until the box was opened from the outside. Not that I noticed anything that happened between it closing and being opened again mind you. I don't even remember it going dark when the lid shut. Just a crack of light before you nasty little prank." Hamill explained. Then she frowned and suddenly punched Nayal in the arm.

"Ouch! Hey what was that for?" Nayal responded, rubbing her arm where it had been struck.

"I may have told her about us sending that list of T'Lan to Jack." Sodyne said.

"Coming up on the *Nightfall* now lieutenant." the shuttle's pilot told Nayal and she nodded.

"Okay set us down and then make sure that this box is delivered to the physics lab." she said.

"Yes lieutenant. Oh and Commander Sodyne, Captain Cole wants you back on the bridge as soon as we dock." the pilot said and Sodyne sighed and shook her head.

"He would. I was hoping to be able to take a look at this box and the notes I got from the *Magellan's* computer first. Just because his wife is missing." she said.

"Leyla that's not very nice." Hamill commented as the shuttle was entering the *Nightfall's* massive flight deck through one of the aft landing doors.

"It's true though. If T'Lan wasn't missing Captain Cole could have asked her advice instead. She's Starfleet's foremost expert in Iconian gateways after all." Sodyne replied.

"Look at it this way commander, it could be worse for you. You could be the one missing." Nayal pointed out, "Then when would you be able to find out what's in this box?"

"We're down." the pilot announced and then there was a 'hiss' from the rear of the shuttle as the door opened to reveal a pair of crewmen from the science department waiting with a set of portable antigravs to move the stasis box.

"This is it." the pilot told the two junior science officers while the shuttle's other occupants were disembarking and he patted the stasis box.

"Well I'm going to head back to sickbay, as far away from this thing and whatever's inside it." Hamill said, glancing at the box.

"It's empty." Sodyne told her, "I checked the *Magellan's* notes and they haven't tried putting anything inside for more than a year now. Open it and see."

"No chance." Hamill replied.

"Are you afraid doctor?" Nayal asked.

"Of course not but-

"Then why not open it and take a look. I promise I won't try and push you in." Nayal interrupted and Hamill frowned.

"Now I just think you will." she said.

"Well what if everyone stands back? Look, there's plenty of room now that it's been unloaded." Nayal said.

"You know we're going to keep nagging you until you do it." Sodyne added, "Come on Sally, face your fears."

"Do it and I'll personally tell your Jack that the list wasn't written by you." Nayal said.

"Oh fine. Everyone get back though." Hamill said as she walked over to the stasis box and placed her hand on it where the release catch was located. Then as she began to open the box she glanced briefly towards Sodyne and Nayal and added, "You promise you'll tell Jack-" before out of the corner of her eye she saw the green-skinned humanoid lunging at her from inside the box with knife and she screamed.

"Knife!" Nayal called out as Hamill fell backwards and the Romulan leapt forwards to grab the man who had been inside the Slaver stasis box.

Sodyne and Crewman Foster both drew their phasers and took aim at the man but Nayal already had hold of his arm, preventing him from using his knife and her superior Romulan strength was enough to hold him still long enough for Hamill to look up at him from the deck.

"A Suliban? Why was there a Suliban in the box you said was empty?" she said.

"I thought it was." Sodyne protested.

"Okay wise guy, start talking. Who are you and what were you doing in there?" Nayal asked the Suliban as he looked around the *Nightfall's* hangar to see all of the crew present approaching them.

"Where am I?" the Suliban replied.

"You're aboard the Starfleet heavy cruiser *USS Nightfall* where you just tried to stab our chief medical officer." Nayal told him."

"Starfleet?" the Suliban said, only then appreciating that everyone around him was wearing a Starfleet uniform, "Thank the spirits. We were attacked. I ran and hid. I hoped they wouldn't find me inside the stasis box."

"Who attacked you?" Sodyne asked.

"Who else? Iconians." the Suliban answered.

"Captain we've got a big problem." Nayal said as she and Sodyne stepped out of the turbolift into the bridge. "Add it to the list Nayal. I've got four missing crewmen, including two department heads and my first officer." Cole replied.

"Well apparently the Iconians have them." Nayal said.

"The Iconians? But I thought you and the captain helped wipe them out." Ghroc pointed out.

"Oh we just destroyed their home. We know for a fact that at least one of them survived and there could be who knows how many more of them scattered around the galaxy." Nayal said.

"Nayal the only survivor we know of was last seen being handed over to agents of an organisation that is so secretive we still don't even know if it has a name. All we do know is that they aren't the sort of people to just grant an Iconian parole. Any other survivors are cut off from one another and have no support structure any more." Cole said.

"Well tell that to the Suliban in sickbay." Sodyne commented.

"Suliban? What Suliban?" Ghroc asked.

"There was a Suliban inside that stasis box aboard the *Magellan*." Sodyne answered, "He told us that he hid in there when the station was attacked by Iconians."

"And how did you find out he was inside?" Cole said.

"We didn't have a clue captain." Nayal responded, "We just dared Doctor Hamill to open it to try and get her over this stupid fear she seems to have of the things and he leapt out at her with a knife."

"Is she okay?" Ghroc asked.

"Still able to play the violin so you're out of luck there." Sodyne said, "But apart from that she was a little shaken up but she's fine. I ordered Crewman Foster to escort her and our guest to sickbay to make sure there's no more trouble but I think the doctor is safe enough while she examines him."

"She did use some very colourful metaphors to describe how much she dislikes being around Slaver stasis boxes when I was helping her up from the floor though." Nayal added.

"I think I had better go and speak to our guest." Cole said, "I also have something that needs to be discussed with the good doctor. Lieutenant Commander Ghroc, you have the conn."

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"Well you seem fine." Hamill told the Suliban sitting on one of sickbay's biobeds as she scanned him with a medical tricorder, "Although I would advise against attacking anyone else with a knife. Especially when that person and a fair few others standing around you are armed with phasers." and then she glanced at the security guard Foster who was stood by the door and watching the Suliban while Hamill worked.

"I'm sorry about that doctor. The last thing I remembered was pulling the lid of that box down on myself before you opened it. I didn't appreciate just how completely time stops inside when the box is closed."

"Don't worry, I know the feeling all too well. I got shut in one myself and not by choice." Hamill said before the entrance to sickbay slid open and Cole entered, "Captain Cole, can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm here to see our guest. I understand he attacked you with a knife." Cole answered, looking at the Suliban.

"Oh we've settled that. I won't be pressing any charges if that's what you wanted to know." Hamill said.

"No, I was more interested in what he could tell us about what happened to everyone aboard the *Magellan*, including our missing away team members. But first let's start with something easier like your name and what it is that you do aboard the *Magellan*. I don't remember you from our last visit there." Cole said, looking at the Suliban.

"My name is Doctor Durtin." the Suliban told him, "I know it's a bit of a stereotype but I'm a geneticist. I was only hired a year ago for a project examining the genetic engineering techniques my people were granted during the twenty-second century by an individual who claimed to be a time traveller from the distant future."

"And you say that the *Magellan* was attacked by Iconians?" Cole said and Durtin nodded.

"Yes. The team that has been working on the Iconian gateway project decided that they were in a position to try out a prototype system that they'd set up." he explained.

"Where were they planning to open a gateway to?" Cole asked.

"From what I heard they weren't planning to open a gateway to anywhere in particular. They set up a prototype gate on each of the stations and planned to link them all together. They wanted to be able to step into any of the gates and appear on another station." Durtin told him, "But then as soon as the time came to connect the gates all hell was let loose. I heard people screaming and alarms sounded. Then I started to hear phaser fire and the command staff ordered an evacuation but there seemed to be nowhere to go. The Iconians were everywhere, they'd come through all the gates at the same time and spread out, hunting down anyone they could find. That's when I decided to take my chances in the stasis box, the researchers working on it had told me that you could survive forever inside one and even the entire station exploding wouldn't damage one."

"I think I'd rather take my chances dodging Iconians." Hamill commented.

"Did you see the Iconians?" Cole said and Durtin shook his head.

"No, I was able to avoid them but they were close when I climbed into the stasis box. That's why I had the knife." he said.

"Very well. Doctor is Doctor Durtin fit to be released from sickbay?" Cole said, looking at Hamill.

"Yes captain. Aside from elevated stress levels he's in perfect physical condition." she told him.

"In that case we'll assign you quarters here on the *Nightfall* Doctor Durtin. Crewman Foster will show you to them now. If there is anything you need then you can contact Doctor Hamill or Lieutenant Nayal via the intercom but I must ask you to remain in your quarters for now." Cole told the Suliban.

"Thank you captain. It's not like I have anywhere else to be anyway." he responded as he got up from the biobed and walked towards the exit from sickbay where Foster opened the door for him.

"This way sir." the security guard said before accompanying him into the corridor outside.

"So do you think it was the Iconians captain?" Hamill asked as soon as the door slid shut behind Durtin and the security guard.

"I don't think so. Even if some surviving Iconians could have come through the gateways that the *Magellan*'s scientists created I don't see how they could have gathered enough strength at such short notice to totally overrun the facility. That would require hundreds of their golems." Cole answered and Hamill frowned.

"Golems?" she said.

"Oh sorry. That was the term that we used to describe what the Iconians called fleshforms. Humanoid bodies sculpted entirely out of their synthetic flesh, Most were large with just a basic humanoid shape but we encountered one that was a more detailed recreation of a human being. The only difference was that he was literally white all over." Cole explained.

"I take it by white you mean the actual colour rather than Caucasian. Hamill commented and Cole nodded.

"Yes. If the Iconians could alter the colour of their synthetic flesh then I never saw them do it. The only time I saw anything made of it that wasn't pure white was Emma, our EMH. T'Lan and our chief engineer Max built

her a body based on the appearance of her hologram.” he said and Hamill frowned.

“They were allowed to tamper with an emergency medical hologram?” she said, “That’s really dangerous.”

“I know. Captain Edwards wasn’t happy and our chief medical officer Doctor King was furious. Although when she did become self aware he seemed to warm to her.”

“So if it wasn’t the Iconians then who was it?” Hamill said.

“Frankly doctor right now I don’t have a clue. Hopefully our troops will find something that will provide us with an answer and also our missing team.” Cole replied and Hamill sighed.

“It’s my fault that Doctor Gould is missing.” she said.

“Sally you can’t blame yourself. As captain I approved every member of that away team and my own wife is among the missing.” Cole said.

“I know captain but I assigned Doctor Gould because I wanted T’Lan to see how good he was. I was going to recommend him as my replacement when I leave. He’s due a promotion to lieutenant commander and this would be the perfect time.”

Yes about your transfer doctor, I received a call from Captain Stark aboard the *Judgement* to discuss it.” Cole said.

“She’s not blocking it is she? I know some captains don’t like the idea of their crew entering into relationships with one another even though Starfleet regulations permit it.” Hamill replied.

“Oh no, she’d be happy to have someone with your experience. It’s just that she’s surprised that you wanted the job. I have to say now that I know more about it I am as well. I know we spoke about how it can be easier to maintain a relationship when you’re closer to your partner but I didn’t think you’d be willing to take a grade reduction to serve alongside Jack.”

“Grade reduction?”

“Yes, to lieutenant.” Cole told Hamill and she frowned again.

“But chief medical officer aboard a Nebula-class ship like the *Judgement* is for a lieutenant commander at least.” she said.

“Sally you wouldn’t be the chief medical officer. Captain Stark promoted one of her own to fill that vacancy. You’d be her deputy and that’s a position for a lieutenant.” Cole said.

“Jack never said a thing about any of this.” Hamill replied.

“Perhaps you should contact him and talk it over with him then. If you really want to go then neither I nor Captain Stark will stand in your way but this could really hamper your career.” Cole said.

Aboard the *Magellan* the ground combat specialists of beta squad advanced cautiously. Fitting with their combat orientated role the squad was far more heavily armed than any of T’Lan’s search team had been with all of them carrying phaser rifles held ready to fire with hand phasers holstered on their legs and stun grenades clipped to the load carrying harnesses that were an integral part of the body armour they wore. To overcome the gloom of the station each of them also had a powerful light fixed to one side of their helmets while a camera on the other allowed live footage of what they saw to be transmitted back to the *Nightfall*.

“This is it.” the squad leader said as the troops arrived outside the laboratory where gateway technology had been studied, “Corporal you’re on point.”

“Yes sergeant.” the squad’s second in command said before he stepped through the open doorway into the monitoring room on the other side and he immediately turned to survey as much of the room as he could and this meant he quickly saw the pulsing lights of the subspace tear in the adjoining room, “Sergeant you need to see this.” he called out before the other members of the squad followed him into the room and spread out.

“What the hell is that?” the squad leader said as he looked at the tear as well. Then he activated the communicator that was built into his helmet, “This is Sergeant Sterling to *Nightfall*, are you seeing this?” but all he heard in response was static, “That thing must be jamming us. Second section keep it covered. For all we know it’s some sort of non-corporeal life form. First section we’re going to search this place.” he told his men and the troops split into two groups, one half of the squad taking cover behind consoles and pointing their rifles through the smashed wall while Stirling led the rest of his men in a search of the room they were in.

“Phaser.” one of the searching troops called out when he found a weapon on the floor of the monitoring room. They had found other weapons scattered around the station but all of these had been older models whereas this one was current issue to Starfleet.

“Fully charged.” Stirling commented when he took the weapon and inspected it, “They never managed to get off a shot.”

“None of this blood looks fresh though sarge.” one of his men commented as he looked down at another of the blood stains similar to the many they had found throughout the station already.

“Okay I’ve seen enough, let’s get out of here.” Stirling told his men, “The *Nightfall* needs to know about this and we can’t get a signal out from in here.”

"Did I miss anything?" Cole asked when he returned to the bridge.

"Sergeant Sterling of beta squad has just checked in captain. He sent us this." Ghroc replied and he pointed to the main view screen where a short length of footage from Stirling's helmet camera was playing in a loop. "I'm trying to determine what it is now captain but there's some strange interference at that location of the *Magellan*." Sodyne added from the science station.

"It's a gateway." Cole said, "Check the support stations for similar interference, I think you'll find another spot just like this aboard each one."

"Yes captain." Sodyne said.

"So that's what an Iconian gateway looms like is it?" Ghroc asked.

"As far as I know the fixed gateways resemble something more like a window or viewscreen that shows the destination. This is someone's crude attempt at recreating that and I'd say that it's gone horribly wrong." Cole said.

"I don't remember seeing anything like that before." Nayal added before Sodyne looked up from her console. "Captain you're right." she said, "There's a similar pattern of interference coming from one location on each of the support stations."

"I thought so. Our Suliban guest told me that the crew of the *Magellan* wanted to create a gateway network that connected all of their stations together."

"Neat. No more transporters or shuttle flights needed to cross from home to the office." Nayal said.

"And they'd work through shields as well." Cole added.

"So what went wrong?" Ghroc said and Cole turned to Sodyne.

"Lieutenant commander, the ball's in your court now." he said to her.

"Yes captain." she replied, "From what I know of Iconian gateways they shouldn't disrupt our sensors or communication. I think that the energy that is doing that is coming through them while the spikes that triggered our alert were due to something transiting through them."

"So our away team has gone through them. But to where?" Nayal said.

"Those gateways could connect with anywhere in the galaxy." Cole pointed out.

"I don't think that they do though captain." Sodyne said, "Not our galaxy anyway. In fact not even our universe. I think that instead of creating a stable set of gateways the *Magellan's* researchers just punched a hole into a subspace dimension and what we're picking up and is interfering with our sensors and communications is the energy pattern of that leaking through into our universe."

"And the subspace dimension on the other side of those tears is inhabited by something that came through and attacked the *Magellan*." Nayal said.

"It looks that way, yes." Sodyne said, "Captain destroying the *Magellan* will seal the subspace tears and prevent any further incursions."

"And what about our missing people lieutenant commander? I'm not about to write them off yet." Cole responded.

Martin gasped as his eyes opened and he found himself suspended in mid air by a number of web like strands stuck to his limbs and torso.

"Back among the living?" Martin commented and Davis turned his head to see the *Nightfall's* chief of security similarly suspended by the web like strands.

"What happened? Where are we?" Davis asked.

"It is logical to presume that we have been transported through the subspace tear to wherever is on the other side," he heard T'Lan's voice say and turning his head again he saw that the Vulcan woman was also trapped by the same strands as he and Martin were.

Studying their surroundings more closely Davis saw that they appeared to be in some sort of subterranean environment where the same strands of webbing were stretched across every surface. Here and there he saw lumps in the substance that suggested there were objects that had been entirely encased in it and then left behind by whatever had spun the web. Worryingly he also noticed what appeared to be recognisable body parts from species he was familiar with also hanging from the ceiling. As well as providing a means to restrain captives the web like substance also appeared to have a secondary purpose, that of providing illumination and Davis could see that certain sections of it were emitting a soft glow. Then it occurred to him that for everything he could see there was something that he couldn't.

"What happened to Doctor Gould?" he asked

"The doctor was not here when I awoke." T'Lan told him, "Either he was removed at some point before that or he was not brought here to begin with."

"Do you have any ideas about what put us up here commander?" Davis asked.

"I'm going with some kind of giant spider." Martin commented before T'Lan could answer.

"Arachnids are not the only sorts of creatures to produce substances such as this." T'Lan pointed out,

"Unfortunately I did not get a good look at the creature that attacked me. Although my inner eyelid protected me from the flash blindness that temporarily blinded both you and Lieutenant Commander Martin I was

attacked from behind and enveloped by something. If it was part of the being's body then they are definitely of a non-humanoid species."

"Non-humanoid? You think they might be intelligent?" Martin said.

"Logic indicates that they are." T'Lan replied.

"How?" Martin added.

"Have you not noticed that they have taken our combadges, phasers and other equipment? Animals would not realise the significance of those items lieutenant commander. On the other hand a sentient creature would recognise them as artificial even if they were unable to comprehend their function. We can deduce that they have some equivalent to our sense of vision. The material of this web appears to have luminous properties for a time" T'Lan explained.

"For a time?" Martin said.

"Yes. For example the strands binding us are producing light whereas much of those coating the surfaces are not. That would indicate that it is only the freshly spun strands that glow." T'Lan said.

"And does logic suggest a way for us to get out of here?" Davis said.

"Unfortunately there is too little information available to be able to formulate an escape plan Lieutenant Commander Davis." T'Lan said.

"How about trying to overload this stuff tying us to the ceiling?" Martin suggested, "Whatever put us up here used a lot of it to hold us in place. Doesn't that suggest that that's what's needed to support our weight?"

"You are correct Lieutenant Commander Martin. However, we lack the means to apply any more weight to our bonds." T'Lan said.

"Do we? Maybe we can pull some of it free from the ceiling." Martin said and he lifted one of his arms so that he could get a grip on one of the thick bundles of web before tugging downwards, "It's no good. He said after a few seconds, "I can't apply enough force tied up like this."

"Your idea is not without merit." T'Lan said before she heard a scrabbling sound and she turned to see an alien creature enter the cavern where the three Starfleet officers were held. The creature looked like a hybrid of starfish and spider, with five jointed limbs spreading out from a central body. These limbs were connected together by a thick membrane that made the creature look as if it was walking beneath a sheet.

Right now it was only using four of its limbs to support itself as it moved though, the fifth being used to drag something that had been almost completely wrapped in a cocoon of the web material. This was obviously fresh given the light that was being emitted from it and the creature dragged it to a nearby wall. Without any pause the creature then began to scale the irregular surface, hooking onto the thick strands of web that covered it using the clawed digits that its limbs ended in and it carried the cocoon up to the ceiling where it seemed to squat over the cocoon, hanging onto the ceiling using three limbs while the remaining two reached beneath itself. These worked at something for a while before the creature started to move again, leaving the cocoon now stuck to the ceiling by freshly spun strands of the web.

"Oh no." Martin said when he looked at the cocoon and now that he could see it clearly he saw that it was translucent enough to be able to see what was inside.

It was the remains of Doctor Gould.

The missing officer had obviously been dismembered and not all of his body appeared to be present but his face, with a look of horror frozen on it at the moment of his death, was visible pressed up against the inside of the cocoon and facing towards the other three Starfleet officers.

As the creature moved away from the cocoon it let itself drop down onto just two of its limbs, exposing its underside so that the Starfleet officers could see a beak like mouth at the centre of its body that appeared to be covered in human blood. The creature then let itself fall to the floor, landing on all five limbs before scurrying out of the cavern.

"Well now we know what this place is." Martin said, "It's a larder and we're on the menu."



There were more empty seats in the briefing room than normal when Captain Cole gathered his senior officers together to discuss their situation. Although there were three senior officers missing though Lieutenant Sanders and Sergeant Stirling from the *Nightfall's* two companies of ground combat specialists were also present for this meeting to relate what they had found aboard the *Magellan*.

"We found Lieutenant Commander Martin's phaser in the room next to the anomaly." Stirling said, "It hadn't been fired."

"My men found a number scattered around that had been though." Sanders added.

"No signs of any bodies though?" Ghroc asked and the lieutenant shook his head.

"No sir. None of ours and none of theirs." he answered.

"By 'theirs' I take it you mean whoever attacked the station?" Hamill commented.

"I take we're still going with them not being Iconians." Nayal added.

"For the time being yes." Cole replied.

"So how do we find out who they are?" Hamill asked and Cole looked at Sodyne.

"Commander, can you shed any light on what's happening?" he said.

"I'm sorry captain but we don't have a lot to go on. The subspace portals are blocking our sensors so we can't see what's on the other side of them but I have been able to take readings of the interference around each one and it's identical." Sodyne replied.

"So they all lead to the same place then?" Ghroc said.

"At least to the same subspace dimension, pocket or realm or whatever you want to call it, yes. But just because those portals are less than a hundred kilometres apart from one another here in our universe it doesn't follow that they have the same relative locations on the other side. Subspace isn't flat and they could all come out within an area the size of this room or be millions of light years apart. Given that all seven stations seem to have been attacked simultaneously I'd suggest that they are likely to be close to one another though. Otherwise it would be a massive coincidence that different hostile forces came through them all at once."

"And the nearest thing we have to a witness didn't actually see anything." Hamill commented.

"That reminds me I'd like to run some scans on him pretty soon. I want to see how being shut inside the Slaver stasis box has affected him." Sodyne said.

"One issue at a time please commander." Cole told her, "Getting our missing crewmen as well as any of the *Magellan's* crew who are still alive back has to be our top priority. Then we need to seal those portals so that nothing else can get through them. Doctor Hamill have you had the chance to study the readings Lieutenant Commander Sodyne took yet?"

"I haven't given them to her yet captain." Sodyne said and Cole frowned.

"Then please do so commander. If the environment on the other side of those portals is dangerous then we need to know before I take a team through." he said.

"You captain?" Ghroc asked.

"Yes commander, me. Why, do you have a better idea?" Cole replied.

"Captain Starfleet regulations say that you should remain aboard the *Nightfall*. As second officer and in the absence of commander T'Lan the task of leading a rescue operation falls to me." Ghroc reminded him.

"Under normal circumstances you'd be correct. However, this is likely to be a combat operation and in that regard I'm far better qualified to lead it than you are. I was the tactical and chief security officer aboard the first *Nightfall* and I spent years liaising with the MACOs and Imperial Guard aboard the ship. So on this occasion you will remain in command of the ship while I take command of the rescue team commander." Cole said.

"You can be in command of the rescue team to rescue his rescue team if things go wrong." Nayal said, smiling at Ghroc and the Bolian officer smiled back.

"What and risk my command as well as break regulations?" he replied.

"Lieutenant Sanders I want your platoon readied for deployment. We don't know what we're facing so make sure they're equipped with the maximum amount of firepower available." Cole ordered.

"Do I have your permission to issue photon grenades and launchers captain?" Sanders asked and Cole nodded.

"Yes. Issue them to every trooper that's qualified. Make sure there's one left for me as well." he said before he looked at Sodyne, "Commander Sodyne make sure that Doctor Hamill has full access to all your data and between you come up with a profile of what we can expect when we go through those portals."

"Yes captain." Sodyne responded.

"Okay then I think we all know what we're doing. Dismissed." Cole said and the gathered officers got up to leave, "Oh doctor just a moment." Cole added as Hamill was walking past him.

"Yes captain?" she asked and Cole waited while the last of the other officers left the room before he replied. "Sally have you given any thought to what I said about your transfer?" he said.

"A little." she replied, "I've got a request in for a link to the *Judgement* but it hasn't come through yet. I can't believe that Jack would expect me to give up my rank like that."

"And will you?" Cole said but Hamill hesitated.

"I don't know captain." she answered, "I love being a chief medical officer but I love Jack as well and if the only way we can be together is for me to go back to being a lieutenant and a deputy medical officer then maybe that's what I have to do. How many doctors go on to become captains anyway?"

"Very well. Speak to Jack but you need to make a decision quickly doctor. Just leaving it to drag on won't do you any good at all. Maybe speak to Leyla about it as well. She might be more understanding that I can be but remember that I am here as well if you want to talk."

"Trust me Sodyne, the captain is serious about going through that portal so we need to find a way of telling him what he can expect on the other side." Nayal said while the pair sat in the physics lab.

"Then he's crazy." Sodyne replied, "No sensor we have can penetrate those portals."

"Haven't you run scans of subspace before?" Nayal asked.

"Of course but while there's been a self sustaining overlap that is actively jamming everything around it. Even old fashioned electromagnetic scans won't work. You're a Romulan, wouldn't your people accept the idea of sacrificing four to save five hundred? More even if whatever is on the other side of those portals finds a way to spread beyond the *Magellan*." Sodyne said and Nayal stared at her.

"You're a Betazoid, aren't your people receptive enough to other people's feelings to know when someone won't abandon a loved one?" she responded.

"My people are fools. They spend so much time poking around in one another's heads they forget how to use their own." Sodyne said.

"Well mine are fools too if they can't see the benefit in every life." Nayal said.

"If T'Lan was here then she'd see the logic in putting the lives of everyone else ahead of a handful." Sodyne said and Nayal leant closer to her.

"Listen lieutenant commander, you may outrank me but I've known T'Lan far longer than you have and I can tell you that she wouldn't abandon crew mates at the drop of a hat. She'd see the logic in demonstrating to everyone that she had their back even if it meant personally walking up to one of those portals and jumping right through it." she said and slowly a smile spread across her face.

"Nayal that's it." she said.

"You know that T'Lan wouldn't actually just jump through the portal, right? That would be stupid and T'Lan may appear cold and aloof but she's not stupid." Nayal said.

"Of course but I think we've been thinking about these portals all wrong. They aren't like a transporter where you are beamed from one place to another they're more like a wormhole that actually connected two points in different universes so you should be able to pass an object part way through." Sodyne explained.

"How does that help?" Nayal asked and Sodyne held up a tricorder and mimed throwing it.

"It means that we can just toss an active tricorder through with a bit of string tied around it and then pull it back again." she explained and Nayal smiled.

"And during the time in between it will have performed local scans of the subspace dimension on the other side of the portal." she added.

"Exactly." Sodyne said and she tapped her combadge, "Computer where is Captain Robert Cole?" she asked before looking back at Nayal and adding, "I want to see the captain's face when we tell him this."

"Captain Cole is in his quarters." the computer responded.

"I'm sorry T'Sal but your mother isn't her right now to sing you to sleep." Cole told the crying infant he held but his gentle rocking had affect on calming the child before the intercom at the door to his quarters chimed, "Who is it?" he called out.

"Captain it's Lieutenant Commander Sodyne and Lieutenant Nayal. May we come in?" Sodyne's voice said.

"Yes, come on in." Cole responded and the door slid open to allow Sodyne and Nayal to enter, "I'm sorry about T'Sal. I can never seem to get her to settle the way T'Lan can." he added.

"Give her to me. Let me try." Nayal said, walking over to him and taking his half Vulcan daughter from him and then resting her on his shoulder. Then moments later T'Sal suddenly stopped crying.

"How do you and T'Lan do that?" Cole asked.

"Experience in my case. Though I suspect that it may have something to do with smell. If T'Sal has inherited the superior sense of smell that Vulcans possess then you may be a bit pungent for her." Nayal replied.

"Ah yes, Harriet Davis has said that she's careful about what soap she uses when she's looking after her."

Cole said, mentioning the wife of the *Nightfall's* chief engineer who provided child care for the handful of children aboard the ship.

"How's she coping right now with her husband being missing?" Nayal asked.

"About the same as I am with my wife being missing," Cole answered.

"That's why we're here captain." Sodyne said, "Nayal and I have come up with a way to get around the interference of the portals with our scans."

"That's excellent news. How?" Cole said.

"We just throw some tricorders through on string and pull them out again." Nayal said.

"Then we can see what they recorded. Atmospheric make up, temperature, pressure, gravity, radiation. Everything." Sodyne added.

"Plus by having each tricorder emit a signal we can build up a picture of where all the portals are located in relation to one another in subspace through simple triangulation." Nayal pointed out.

"Simple but effective. Just like what the *Nightfall* herself is designed to be." Cole said, smiling, "How soon can you implement this?"

"I had hoped to speak with Doctor Durtin and run some scans of him so-" Sodyne began but Nayal interrupted her.

"We can go right now if there's a security team available to provide us with an escort captain." she said and Sodyne frowned while Cole nodded.

"Get to it." he said, "But first would you mind putting T'Sal in her crib? I don't want her to start crying again."

"Of course captain." Nayal said, smiling and she walked into the adjoining room where T'Sal's crib was located and gently put her down in it, "I'll get your mommy back for you little one. I promise." she said softly before she turned around and returned to the lounge where Sodyne accompanied her back into the corridor outside.

"I didn't know you had a child Nayal." Sodyne commented.

"Yes, I had a little girl once."

"Once? What happened? Was it the Romulan civil war?" Sodyne asked and Nayal shook her head.

"No. Someone decided that my daughter was expendable." she answered.

7.

Hamill was stood alone in her quarters playing a slow tune on her violin when the terminal on her desk sounded and she rushed to see that the communication link to the *Judgement* she had been waiting for had finally been made.

"Hello Jack?" she said as she sat down, putting the violin down on the desk beside the terminal.

"Sally I got a message that you were trying to contact me." Jack told her, "Have you been able to clear your transfer with-"

"Jack what's all this about me having to take a reduction in rank to lieutenant?" Hamill said over him.

"I'm sorry, I only found that Captain Stark had already decided to promote Doctor O'Neil after I spoke to you. But does it really matter?" Jack said.

"Yes it matters Jack. To me at least. I've worked hard the last nine years to get where I am and if I lose my rank now I may never get it back. Starfleet will always look on me as someone who gives up." Hamill said.

"Isn't the important thing that we'll be serving on the same ship? Things are hard enough now without an eighteen month gap before we can meet up again."

"So why don't you transfer to the *Nightfall* then? We already have a tactical officer but he's always looking for good officers to add to his staff and with two companies of ground combat specialists aboard you could pick up some new skills." Hamill said.

"Sally I can't do that. If I'm ever going to captain my own ship then-" Jack began.

"Oh my God you think your career is more important than mine!" Hamill exclaimed.

"No Sally, it's just that a ship's doctor is unlikely to progress as far as a tactical officer." Jack said and Hamill gasped.

"See, you do." she said, "What's even worse than finding out that you expect me to accept ending my career when you won't do the same for me? It's having to find out from my captain who heard it from your captain because you didn't have the courage to tell me yourself and find out what I thought and if you're too impatient to wait eighteen months to see me again then maybe we should just end it now." she yelled at the screen, waving her arms in anger. Then before Jack could respond she reached out and jabbed the control to disconnect the call and the screen went blank.

Hamill leant back in her chair for a moment, considering the consequences of what she had done. Ending her relationship so suddenly seemed excessive but she could not get over the fact that Jack seemed to place so little value on her career compared to his own.

"Computer," she said, "block all personal calls to me from the *USS Judgement* NCC eight-one-four-two-three."

"Confirmed. Communication filter preferences for Lieutenant Commander Sally Hamill have been updated." the computer's voice responded and then as Hamill got back to her feet she picked up her violin again and began to play the same slow tune.

Standing in the room aboard the *Magellan's* primary station where the subspace tear was located, Sodyne, Nayal and the four man security team accompanying them all wore space suits for protection just in case sending anything through the tear would create some unknown environmental hazard.

"Okay it's almost time." Nayal said, checking the time on her PADD. At that moment six other teams were positioned by the subspace tears in each of the support stations, also in spacesuits and each team had with them a tricorder that had a length of cord tied around it. At a pre-arranged time every team would through their tricorder through the tear, wait one minute and then pull it back out using the cord.

"Okay so who's got the best throwing arm here?" Sodyne asked the security guards.

"I grew up on Cestus Three." one of them replied, raising his hand.

"So?" Nayal commented.

"So they play a game called baseball there. It involves hurling a ball at a man with a bat." Sodyne told her.

"Oh right. I saw it in some of the old movies we watched aboard the first *Nightfall*." Nayal replied as Sodyne passed the tricorder to the security guard who had raised his hand.

"If anything does come through then be careful about your line of fire." Sodyne warned the security team,

"We don't know what effect a particle beam fired into the gateway will have. It could collapse it and it would become useless to us."

"Twenty seconds." Nayal added and Sodyne stood back to give the security guard a clear throw. At the same time she took a second tricorder from her belt and opened it up, intending to take readings from this side of the tear when the other one was thrown through, "Ten seconds" Nayal continued and the security guard braced himself ready to throw the active tricorder, "Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Throw it now!"

The security guard then hurled the tricorder into the subspace tear and the moment it passed through there a bright light that caused everyone in the room to flinch. Before any of them could be blinded by the light though the faceplates of their spacesuits darkened to protect their eyes.

Aboard the *Nightfall* an alarm sounded again.

“Activation of Iconian Gateways detected captain.” Ghroc said from beside Cole and the *Nightfall's* commanding officer brought up the sensor readings on the heads up display built into his headset. This highlighted a section aboard each of the stations that made up the *Magellan*, all of them at the locations where the researchers had attempted to create their gateways.

“Looks like our teams are operating right on time.” he commented.

“Yes captain, but I'd be happier if we could get a signal to them. The subspace interference looks worse now that the portals are active.” Ghroc replied.

“I know what you mean lieutenant commander but we'll just have to trust that our people know what they're doing.” Cole said and Ghroc snorted.

“Like the researchers aboard the *Magellan* were supposed to know what they were doing?” he said and Cole smiled.

“What ever happened to that Bolian cheeriness?” he asked sarcastically.

“Give me a day without strange portals to other universes and no violin music and I'll be cheery.” Ghroc answered just as sarcastically as Cole had asked his question.

The subspace tear continued to produce bright light that would have been dazzling without the darkened visors of the Starfleet team's spacesuits but with these visors they were able to look directly at the tears without suffering any damage to their eyes.

“I make it ten seconds left.” Sodyne said, reading the time from her tricorder.

“Agreed. Get ready to start pulling that tricorder back through the anomaly crewman.” Nayal responded and one of the security team protecting the two officers slung his phaser rifle over his shoulder and took hold of the cord that ran through the tear to the tricorder, “Now. Pull it back.” Nayal ordered when the time expired and the security guard began rapidly pulling on the cord to retrieve the device and as soon as it came back through the tear the bright light suddenly ceased as the tear returned to its dormant state.

“Okay let's get these readings back to the *Nightfall*.” Sodyne said as she picked up the tricorder and returned both of the scanning devices she held to the pouches on her belt.

The team then turned to leave but as they were nearing the exit from the research lab they were once again bathed in bright light at the subspace tear became active once again and their spacesuit visors darkened again.

“Contact!” one of the security guards called out as a shape emerged from the subspace tear and moved out of sight.

“Hold your fire. You'll hit the gateway.” Sodyne reminded him as she drew her own phaser, “Fall back. We need to get beyond the interference so we can beam back to the *Nightfall*.”

The away team began to retreat, rushing out of the research lab and moving on down the corridor outside. A screeching sound from behind them caused the team to turn and see a creature emerging from the lab behind them. One of the security guards fired his phaser rifle at the alien and the bright red beam struck its target. However, the creature appeared to shrug this off as it leapt out of the path of the beam and a second alien appeared behind it.

“Stun doesn't affect them.” the guard said.

“Reset to kill.” Sodyne ordered as she adjusted her phaser and fired it at the second alien. The beam hit the creature and it appeared to shatter, glowing pieces falling to the deck where they promptly vanished without trace.

“Whoa, did you have to vaporise it commander?” Nayal exclaimed.

“My phaser's only set to level six.” Sodyne replied, “They must be unstable in our universe.”

Meanwhile the first alien raised one of its limbs, revealing that there was a metallic cone fitted over it and it pointed this towards the nearest member of the away team, one of the security guards and there was a pulse of energy that erupted from the tip. This seemed to solidify as it passed through the air into a long dart that struck the security guard, passing right the way through his spacesuit and body before erupted from his back and he fell dead. The dart that impaled the security guard did not remain sticking through his chest though, instead it seemed to dissolve into thin air, leaving no evidence of its presence other than the hole it had punched through the man's body.

“I've got him.” Nayal said, reaching down to grab hold of the unfortunate man's corpse and with his rifle resting across his chest she began to drag it along the floor as the away team continued to fall back while more of the alien creatures emerged from the research lab.

As soon as the away team was out of sight of the alien Nayal paused and holstered her phaser. Then she picked up the guard's corpse and laid it over one of her shoulders while picking up his phaser rifle in her other hand.

"Here they come." Sodyne said when she heard another screeching sound and Nayal looked around to see one of the aliens appear behind them with its weapon pointing towards them. Before any of the away team could even aim their phaser at it the alien fired. Fortunately it had not had much time to aim in though and the dart that formed from the energy blast passed between the remaining members of the away team before it hit the bulkhead behind them, the impact producing a flash of light before the dart vanished completely.

"I guess we know why the search teams didn't find any evidence of these things aboard." Nayal commented as she and the rest of the team continued to run down the corridor, the security guards firing brief blasts from their phaser rifles behind them to try and slow down the pursuing aliens. However, from the screeching sounds they continued to emit it was clear that they had not been put off pursuing them.

"This should be far enough." Sodyne said as the away team reached a cargo hold on the outer edge of the station and she tapped her combadge, "Sodyne to *Nightfall*, do you read me?" she transmitted.

"...commander...is...*Nightfall*...increase signal....distortion..." a voice that sounded like Ghroc's responded between bursts of static and Sodyne reached for a tricorder again.

"Those aliens are putting out subspace interference themselves." Sodyne said, "The *Nightfall* will never get a lock on us."

"So we have to take them out before we can leave." Nayal said.

"Here they come now." one of the security guards said, firing his rifle towards the doorway and shattering another of the alien creatures before a dart came flying back into the hold and took him off his feet.

"There could be an entire army of them and there are only four of us left." Nayal pointed out and Sodyne looked around.

"Maybe we can seal that door." she said, looking at the entrance to the cargo hold but an alien promptly appeared in it and began firing across the room, forcing the Starfleet personnel present to take cover behind the containers present.

"Perhaps we should have worn armoured spacesuits." Nayal commented when she ducked after firing another phaser blast towards the doorway.

"Spacesuits." Sodyne responded and a smile spread across her face.

"Yes spacesuits. What about them?" Nayal asked.

"Don't you see Nayal? The aliens aren't wearing any." Sodyne pointed out and Nayal smiled as she realised what the Betazoid meant.

"You go for the door. We'll cover you." she said and Sodyne nodded, "Okay everyone, open fire." Nayal ordered and she and the two remaining security guards fired their weapons across the cargo hold, bringing the aliens' advance to a halt and forcing them to seek cover among the cargo containers as well.

Seeing her chance, Sodyne ran for the cargo hold's exterior hatch and accessed the control panel beside it. First she overrode the forcefield that was designed to activate when the hatch was opened and prevent the atmosphere escaping into space. Then she called up the door controls themselves and jabbed at the button to open the hatch.

There was an instant rush of air as the hatch began to open and the atmosphere inside was blown out into space. The sudden decompression triggered an alarm as the force of the escaping air increased with the widening gap below the door up to the point where it was strong enough to carry solid objects out into space with it. It was at this point that the Magellan's emergency systems responded and the cargo hold's inner door slammed shut and the supply of fresh air was cut off. However, it was too late to prevent the members of the away team being swept through the hatchway out into space along with all of the cargo and the aliens who had been inside the compartment as well.

The aliens flailed about as they flew out into the vacuum of space, revealing their outstretched pentagonal shape while the Starfleet personnel all remained calm in the knowledge that their spacesuits would keep them alive for many hours.

One by one the aliens' bodies began to destabilise and they vanished in brief flashes of light. Seeing this Sodyne tapped her combadge again.

"Sodyne to *Nightfall*, do you read me now?" she asked.

"Loud and clear commander." Cole responded and Sodyne breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness. Captain could you get a lock on us and beam us aboard? Ideally before we drift out of transporter range." she said.

"Stand by commander. We'll have you aboard as quick as we can." Cole reassured her and then a few seconds later Sodyne and the other surviving members of the away team felt the familiar sensation of a transporter activating.

Sodyne and Nayal returned to the bridge as soon as they had had chance to change out of their spacesuits.

"Report commander." Cole said to Sodyne when she stepped out of the turbolift.

"Our mission was successful captain." she replied as she walked around the back of the bridge to the science station, taking over from the junior officer who had been filling in for her, "We deployed and recovered the tricorder through the gateway and I took localised scans from our side. The results have been uploaded into the computer and now I just need to process them."

"Of course having half our security detail killed by invading aliens wasn't part of the plan." Nayal added, "Have those things been seen anywhere else?"

"We think that there have been incursions through four of the seven gateways." Ghroc told her, "Three of the teams were able to beam back aboard without any trouble. Your team and two others fell back under fire but you're all aboard now but the final team hasn't responded at all."

"According to our sensors the gateways are inactive again. Though the interference they generate is still registering." Cole added.

"Captain I don't think that the aliens can survive for extended periods of time in our universe." Sodyne said, "If killed their bodies break down rapidly. That suggests a molecular instability in their structure that may be related to the subspace interference that they seem to create."

"How long are we talking about?" Ghroc asked.

"I should think at least a few hours but it could be much longer than that. Unfortunately obtaining a specimen to study appears out of the question.

"What about our people who have been taken through the gateway? Could they suffer the same fate on the other side? Just become unstable and break down?" Cole added.

"I will need to examine the data collected by the tricorders before I can answer that captain," Sodyne replied and Cole nodded.

"Then do so as quickly as possible lieutenant commander." he told her, "Lieutenant Nayal please do your best to find our personnel who may still be aboard the *Magellan*."

"I hear something coming." T'Lan said while she, Martin and Davis continued to hang suspended from the cavern ceiling and moments later a group of the alien creatures appeared dragging between them two figures dressed in Starfleet standard issue space suits. Both figures hung limply between the aliens as they were carried up the walls and to the ceiling one at a time and the *Nightfall*'s three senior officers watched as the aliens spun more of their web material to hang the two new arrivals from the ceiling close by them.

"That's Crewman Lagrande and Gomez." Martin whispered, "Two of my security guards."

"I am Commander T'Lan of the Federation starship *Nightfall*." T'Lan said just as the aliens were finishing off their second set of web strands, "We seek only peaceful coexistence."

If the aliens understood what she was saying though they gave no indication of it and all four scurried back down the walls and out of the cavern, leaving behind them the two space-suited figures hanging from the ceiling.

"Not very good conversationalists are they?" Davis commented.

"It may be that they are unable to communicate vocally at all lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied,

"However, it may be that they have provided us with a means to release ourselves. All we need to do is wait for those two crewmen to regain consciousness."

B.

"Captain I have the preliminary results of our tricorder scans through the gateways." Sodyne announced.

"Go ahead commander." Cole responded.

"The tricorders all seem to have entered a cave structure of some kind. The atmosphere inside of which appears to be largely argon and nitrogen with a breathable amount of oxygen and several other trace gases, none of which appear to be toxic. The overall pressure is a little higher than it is on Vulcan but the temperature is about twelve degrees centigrade." Sodyne said.

"What about radiation?" Ghroc asked.

"We did pick up the same subspace energy as is causing the disruption around the gateways on our side but the overall level is very low. I would rate this as a Class M environment, you could stay there a week unprotected and not even get a sunburn. Significantly this energy didn't cause the same level of signal interference on the other side of the gateways, that must be some side effect of it passing into our universe and I've been able to build up this map." Sodyne said and then she used the bridge's main viewscreen to display a diagram that consisted of six outlines of caves and short stretches of passageways that led from them as far as the scanning range of the tricorders allowed. Each of these caves was marked with a dot and a serial number, "Those numbers indicate the positions of the tricorders sent through the gateways," Sodyne explained, "you will notice that there is a seventh tricorder marked without any local map data. That is the one belonging to the team that has not returned. We don't know what their tricorder found but from its identity signal as read by the others we do know where it was located. We also now know that the gateways all appear to terminate within an area about two kilometres across in subspace."

"That's smaller than the gap between them here. There's hundreds of kilometres between the Magellan's stations." Ghroc pointed out and Cole nodded.

"I've saved the information I think you'll want to hear most for last captain." Sodyne added, smiling and she pressed a button on her console to add another flashing dot to the diagram.

"What's that Sodyne?" Cole asked.

"That is the location of four Starfleet issue combadges captain." she answered, "The transponder codes match those issued to Doctor Gould, Lieutenant Commander Martin, Lieutenant Commander Davis and Commander T'Lan Cole."

"There's your target captain." Ghroc said, "Less than a hundred metres from the closest gateway."

"That gateway is the one that leads to the Magellan's primary station captain." Sodyne said.

"And the aliens were able to respond to an intrusion in about a minute." Cole commented.

"Yes captain. They would likely react at least as quickly to your arrival." Sodyne responded.

"Which gateways didn't provoke a reaction from the aliens?" Cole asked and Sodyne adjusted the display to highlight two of the subspace tears.

"These three captain." she replied.

Two of the highlighted points were on the fringe of the map while the other appeared much closer to the centre.

"Well those two are no use." Ghroc said, pointing to the two points on the fringe in turn

"Which I suppose leaves just that one." Cole said, "It's still about five hundred metres away from the combadges but that's still walking distance."

"In a straight line maybe but there's no direct link shown on that map." Nayal said from the operations console.

"Then we'll have to make our own way through with a phaser. Those cave walls are just regular rock aren't they Lieutenant Commander Sodyne?" Cole asked.

"They are captain." Sodyne replied, "However, I can't be certain of the effect that the background energy field will have on particle weapon fire. The readings suggest that it will at least increase beam attenuation. It could refract them entirely and dissipate the energy over too wide an area for them to have any effect other than at high phaser settings."

"We already know that stun doesn't affect those aliens." Nayal added, "They obviously don't have nervous systems like we do."

"We also saw that their weapon technology was radically different to our own, appearing to be some kind of short lived directed replication technology."

"So if phasers may not work, what then?" Ghroc said and Cole smiled at him, "You've got to be kidding me. How many of our troops can actually use those things properly?" Ghroc added as he realised what Cole was thinking of.

The original mission of the ships of the *Nightfall* program had been to find ways of combating the Borg that would be immune to their ability to adapt. One key aspect explored was the Borg's vulnerability to basic

projectiles and weapons had been developed to take advantage of this. On the *Nightfall* itself these came in the form of two mass accelerators that ran for most of the length of the ship's secondary hulls whereas the two companies of ground troops that the ships were intended to carry were to be armed with old fashioned assault rifles firing 6.5mm duranium tipped bullets that could pass right through the shielding and pierce the armour plating of a Borg drone's body. These rifles were then typically fitted with either a phaser or grenade launcher beneath the barrel for added firepower. However, while the Earth MACOs and Andorian Imperial Guard troops deployed aboard the previous *Nightfall* had been able to dedicate a great deal of time to using these weapons and had become proficient in their use before the ship was launched, the Starfleet ground combat specialists aboard this new ship had not and they were instead armed with standard phaser rifles instead.

"I can use one as well as any of the troops on the last *Nightfall*." Cole said and Nayal then raised her hand. "Gary Heart and Shry taught me how to use one as well." she added, "I may not be a sniper but I can hit a stationary target at about four hundred metres four times out of five."

"And Martin has been training our troops in their use since we launched." Cole said, "I'm sure I can drum up a squad of men who can shoot reasonably straight with an automatic rifle. We'll all carry handphasers as back ups anyway."

"Captain does that mean we'll be carrying grenade launchers too?" Nayal asked, smiling.

"Gomez!" Martin shouted when he heard a groaning sound from inside the security guard's spacesuit and Gomez flinched as he was roused back to consciousness only to start struggling to free himself from the web that held him to the ceiling.

"What's happening?" he asked as he looked up and saw T'Lan, Martin and Davis also suspended from the ceiling of the cavern.

"We have been taken captive by the aliens of this world." T'Lan told him.

"You mean subspace?" Gomez said.

"The tears lead into subspace, not just through it then?" T'Lan said and Gomez nodded, "The captain is planning a rescue mission but he needed to know what conditions were like on this side first so he had us throw tricorders through the portals. Then we were supposed to just pull them back out on string."

"A crude yet effective technique." T'Lan said.

"Well my team was attacked as soon as we threw ours through. Tucker and Rip were killed instantly. The last thing I remember was being jabbed with some sort of stun baton and then I woke up here." Gomez said.

"Crewman Gomez do you think you can remove your helmet?" T'Lan said, "It is important that you keep hold of it though."

"I'll try." Gomez said.

"What good is a helmet?" Martin asked.

"You will see shortly if my plan works lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied as Gomez struggled to get his arms to his head and remove the helmet from his spacesuit.

With his arms held in the web Gomez had a similar limited range of movement as the senior officers did but he did manage to release the seal and removed the helmet, holding it in front of him in both hands.

"Okay now what?" he asked.

"Crewman I need you to tie something to the internal catch loop. Something long enough to reach the floor while you still keep hold of the other end.

"Like my safety line?" Gomez said and he let go of the helmet with one hand while he reached for where there was a safety line rolled up in a pouch. This was anchored to the suit at one end while the other was intended to be connected to either a second person in a spacesuit or a fixed anchor point.

"That looks suitable, yes. Please secure it to your helmet." T'Lan told him and he clipped the sprung hook at the end of the line to the catch inside his helmet before looking back at the Vulcan, "Good. Now drop your helmet to the floor." T'Lan said and Gomez frowned.

"But-" he began.

"Just drop your helmet crewman." she ordered and he promptly let go of it, letting it fall to the floor of the cavern where it landed on its side, "Now pull it back up and drop it again. Keep repeating that until the faceplate breaks." T'Lan told him and Davis smiled.

"You're planning on using the broken plate as a blade to cut through this web." he said.

"Exactly lieutenant commander. The aliens may have known to remove all technology and tools from us but they seem to have overlooked our ability to improvise." T'Lan replied.

It took four attempts at dropping the spacesuit helmet for it to land on a piece of rock that cracked the faceplate then the shock of the fifth impact caused several pieces to break free entirely. Some of these fell onto the floor of the cavern but other remained inside the helmet as Gomez pulled it carefully back up towards him until he was able to pick one out, checking to see which edge was the sharpest.

"So I just use this like a knife, right?" he said.

"That is correct." T'Lan replied, "I suspect that you will not need to cut though all of the strands holding you

up. Once a critical point is reached the rest will simply tear. Hopefully the effect of that will be that you do not simply just drop to the ground and instead can control your fall without injuring yourself on landing.”

Gomez let his helmet drop again as he brought his arms together and began to cut through the strands of web binding one of them with the jagged edge of the toughened face plate. The alien material was tough, as was to be expected from something being used to bind prisoners but the edge of Gomez’s crude blade still managed to cut through this until the crewman’s arm was free. Then he changed hands and began to cut through the web on his other arm. With his cutting arm now free Gomez was able to work faster and free his second arm in less time than the first.

Even with his arms free the remaining web material was still able to support Gomez and he had to reach behind his back to try and cut through the material stuck to his torso. This was slower going than with his arms but as he continued to cut through the web strands he felt himself shift as his weight became too much for the remainder to bear.

“I think it’s working.” he announced when he felt another cluster of web strands snap and his body dropped at one side. This proved to be a tipping point and the remaining web strands started to fail. This resulted in Gomez tipping forwards until he dropped from the ceiling to hang upside down supported only by the web material attached to his legs for a moment until it too snapped under his weight and he fell.

Prepared for this Gomez shielded his head with his arms as he landed and rolled aside. Then he sat up, somewhat dazed by the landing.

“Still with us Gomez?” Martin asked.

“It’s alright commander. I landed on my head.” Gomez responded and the two men grinned at one another. Gomez then picked up his helmet and the broken pieces of the faceplate and carried them to where the senior officers were hanging from the ceiling and gave each of them a piece so that they could begin to free themselves.

“Are you sure about this captain?” Ghroc asked as Cole, Nayal and a platoon of ground combat specialists assembled in one of the *Nightfall*’s cargo holds, intending to use the cargo transporter to beam across to one of the *Magellan*’s support stations in a single go.

“Certain.” Cole replied at the same time as he inserted a magazine of armour piercing bullets into his assault rifle. Like the other such weapons carried by every member of the assault team this was fitted with a grenade launcher beneath the barrel and he also carried a standard issue Starfleet hand phaser in a holster on his belt. Cole and Nayal had dispensed with their ordinary fleet uniforms though, swapping them for armoured ground combat uniforms that it was hoped would be able to resist the projectiles fired by the alien weapons.

“We’ll drop this as soon as we arrive on the station.” Nayal told Ghroc and she held up a compact subspace transceiver beacon, “Then we’ll lay a hard line from it through the gateway into the subspace dimension where we’ll set up a second beacon. With any luck that will allow us to keep in contact with the *Nightfall*.”

“We’ll test it as soon as we’re through and after that if we miss two quarter hour check ins in a row you’re to use the *Nightfall*’s quantum torpedoes to destroy the *Magellan*. All of it, every station. We need to keep these aliens contained here.” said Cole.

“And what’s to stop the aliens just unplugging the repeater?” Ghroc asked.

“I’ll be leaving half my force just on the other side of the gateway as a reserve.” Cole answered, “The other two squads will come with me to rescue our missing people.”

“Or at least that’s the plan as soon as our assigned medical officer arrives.” Nayal added just before the door to the hold opened and Hamill entered also wearing an armoured uniform and carrying a helmet and an assault rifle with grenade launcher.

“I’m here.” she said.

“Doctor Hamill I only asked you to assign us a medical officer. Just because of what happened to Doctor Gould doesn’t mean you have to go yourself.” Cole said.

“If you don’t mind me saying captain you don’t have to go either but you are.” Hamill replied, putting the rifle down on the floor of the hold as she tried to figure out how to put the helmet on correctly.

“One last away team before you leave us?” Ghroc commented.

“I’m staying. I’m withdrawing my request for a transfer.” Hamill said, still focused on the helmet.

“Staying? I take it that your conversation with Jack didn’t settle things then.” Cole said.

“Nope.” Hamill said.

“Wait does this have anything to do with our communication system getting pinged by the *Judgement* every fifteen to thirty minutes but automatically rejected because of a blocking filter set at our end?” Nayal said.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Can we get going?” Hamill responded.

“Do you even know how to fire one of those rifles?” Cole said, looking at the weapon on the floor.

“I point it and pull the trigger. How hard can it be?” Hamill said and Nayal smiled.

“If we get into a firefight then just scream and I’ll come rescue you Sally.” she said and Hamill frowned as she finally put on her helmet only for it to come down over her eyes.

“Is it supposed to do that?” she said, lifting the front of the helmet so that she could see out from under it.

“Let me help you with that.” Nayal told her.

3.

After freeing themselves, T'Lan, Martin, Davis and Gomez cut Lagrande down from the ceiling of the cavern and then shook him awake.

"Where am I?" he asked, confused to see everyone looking down at him.

"In a subspace realm that is home to the aliens who abducted us." T'Lan said.

"And now we're looking to get out of here." Martin added, "Can you stand?"

"I think so. Nothing hurts so I don't think any bones are broken." Lagrande answered and helped by the others he got back to his feet.

"So now what? Everyone was unconscious when they were brought here so we don't have a clue where we should be going." Davis said.

"That is true." T'Lan replied, "However, we did witness Crewmen Gomez and Lagrande brought in from that direction. Therefore, it is logical to assume that there is a means of returning to the *Magellan* that way."

"What happens if we run into any of those aliens?" Gomez asked.

"Then we're no worse off than if we'd hung around here waiting to be next on the menu." Davis said.

"Menu?" Lagrande commented.

"It seems that these aliens eat people crewman." Martin said and he walked over to where the web sack containing the remains of Doctor Gould still hung from the ceiling and turned it so that the thinner section where the dead man's face could be seen pressed against the inside could be seen by the crewmen, "See? It looks like they made themselves a doggy bag for later."

"Do we have a plan for what to do if we encounter any of the aliens? Especially if they're armed." Davis said.

"Then we shall do our best to avoid contact with them lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.

"Do you think your nerve pinch technique will work on them?" Martin said.

"Unlikely. Especially since they are a non-humanoid life form and as such I do not know where any of their nerve clusters are located, assuming they even have such a thing." T'Lan pointed out, "Now I will lead the way. Please do not fall too far behind me."

"Commander as the *Nightfall's* chief of security I should lead the way." Martin said.

"Ordinarily I might agree Lieutenant Commander Martin. However, on this occasion my superior senses of hearing and smell my prove to be of use to us. Therefore, I shall invoke an old Earth custom that I believe goes something like 'females being in front'."

"You mean ladies first and that isn't supposed to apply in dangerous situations." Martin said but T'Lan just turned and started to walk towards the passageway that Gomez and Lagrande had been brought into the cavern through.

"Looks like we're following her then." Davis commented and as he started to follow the others joined him. T'Lan moved cautiously away from the cavern. Elsewhere in the network of underground passageways it appeared that the aliens had less use for their web material although there were strands of it along the ceilings to act as basic lighting and it appeared that these were periodically replaced, with newer web strands that still emitted light having been spun over the old. Whenever T'Lan heard the sound of the aliens moving over the rocky surface of the underground passageways she signalled for the group to come to a stop and they waited until the creatures had moved on before continuing. The fact that none of the group had been awake to see the route they were carried along was a problem though and in effect they were just wandering through the passageways at random. This continued until T'Lan heard another sound and she signalled for the group to stop once more while she listened to try and determine what it was.

The sound was obviously technological in nature and comprised a mixture of different sounds together, some of them sounding electronic while others sounded more like power tools in use.

"Commander what is it?" Martin whispered.

"Lieutenant Commander Davis, perhaps you should come and listen." T'Lan suggested and Davis moved closer.

"Sounds like someone's hard at work." he said when he heard the sounds as well, "Interesting that they obviously have technology if they can make weapons such as stun batons-"

"And those things that shoot those shard things." Lagrande interrupted.

"I wasn't aware of them." Davis commented before he looked back at T'Lan, "On the other hand the way that we've seen them behave here in these caves up until now could be the same way they've acted since their equivalent of Earth's Stone Age."

"Then this warrants further investigation." T'Lan said.

"What happened to just getting out of here?" Davis asked.

"We will not delay any longer than is necessary lieutenant commander." T'Lan reassured him, "However, seeing what lies ahead could make our escape easier. Especially if we are able to locate a map of these caverns of some sort. It is illogical to think that the aliens would not have produced one."

"If you say so commander." Davis replied.

"I do say so lieutenant commander. Please accompany me and remain as quiet as possible." T'Lan told him and then she began to creep forwards with Davis following close behind her.

The passageway led to a large cavern, one much bigger than the one the *Nightfall's* crew members had been held captive in and it came out high up near the ceiling. The aliens had covered the surfaces of the cavern in their webs, meaning that they could just as easily move up the near vertical walls and across the ceiling as they could across the floor but for the two Starfleet officers there was no obvious way down. There were more than a dozen of the aliens in view in the cavern, all of them clustered around a strange column structure in the centre that ran from the floor right up to the ceiling. This appeared to be made largely from the web material they secreted, enabling them to climb it just as easily as the walls, but here and there obviously technological components could be seen protruding from it and it was around these that the aliens worked.

"This is fantastic." Davis said softly as he studied the column and its components closely.

"Can you determine what the function of this apparatus is Lieutenant Commander Davis?" T'Lan asked but the *Nightfall's* engineer shook his head.

"No, sorry commander. These components are obviously not of Federation origin so I'd have to-" he began before he suddenly tailed off.

"Is something wrong lieutenant commander?" T'Lan said.

"That looks like part of a Federation computer core." Davis told her and he pointed to where a piece of machinery was embedded in the web column close to a console that had a pair of aliens at work at it.

"They must have recovered it from the *Magellan*." T'Lan said.

"And look there." Davis added, "Those look like mineral sample containers. I wonder what they'd need them for?"

"The refractive mineral used to create gateways." T'Lan said and Davis looked at her.

"How do you know that?" he said.

"The mineral has a scattering effect on energy that is related to its ability to form a gateway. However, if it was passed through an unstable subspace tear such as the ones connecting the *Magellan* to this place then the effects could be catastrophic. Those containers are shielded against such energy so would allow the safe transfer of the mineral." T'Lan explained.

"Then they must be trying to create gateways of their own." Davis said, "Never mind the crew of a space station, if those things appeared on a populated planet then the casualties could run into the millions."

"I believe your assessment is correct lieutenant commander. Merely escaping this dimension is no longer enough. We must find a way to destroy the aliens' gateway project." T'Lan replied.

The assault force from the *Nightfall* beamed aboard one of the *Magellan's* support stations as planned, materialising in one large group and quickly looking around to make sure that none of the aliens were close by.

"Cole to *Nightfall*, transport complete. Nayal is deploying the first beacon now." Cole said after tapping his combadge.

"Copy that captain. We will await your next signal once you've set up the second relay on the other side of the gateway." Ghroc responded.

"We're ready." Nayal told Cole as soon as the communication beacon was set up and the end of a reel of cable plugged into it.

"Okay let's move out." Cole ordered and the assault team began to move through the *Magellan* towards the compartment where the researchers had chosen to set up their prototype gateway.

A fire team of ground combat specialists had been assigned to take the lead on their advance and they were the first to see one of the aliens step out from around a corner and open fire with its strange weapon.

"Contact!" one of the soldiers yelled as the team pressed themselves up against the walls to present the smallest target they could. This was not enough to prevent one of them being hit by the darts created by the alien weapon but the projectile that struck him hit his armoured chest plate where it shattered before the unstable fragments disappeared. The Starfleet troops then returned fire with their automatic rifles and the corridor was filled with the roar of firearms. The alien was hit repeatedly by these and it let out a brief shriek as it staggered and then fell dead before its body dissolved into thin air.

"Hamill flinched when she heard this, never having been so close to firearms being fired before and she clamped her hands over her ears.

"Loud enough for you doc?" Nayal commented.

"Where are those ear plugs?" Hamill responded as she searched her equipment for the set of protective earplugs she had been given in the *Nightfall's* armoury, "I thought everyone was just joking about them." and

when she found the packet she tipped the earplugs into her hand before pushing one into each of her ears. This did not block the sound entirely but the tiny electronic devices were able to muffle it to a more bearable level while still allowing her to hear what the other team members had to say to one another.

"Looks like these guns work well enough then." one of the troops in the advanced unit commented after seeing the effectiveness of the old fashioned weapon for the first time in practice. Then before the team leader could call for the advance to resume more of the aliens appeared and a flurry of darts came down the corridor towards the assault team.

"This route is blocked." Cole said over the din of projectile fire, "Nayal can you find us another way around?"

"That passageway back there captain." Nayal responded, pointing back down the corridor the way they had come, "It hooks up to the main route through the dependants' quarters. It's quite a detour but it will take us around these particular aliens."

"Okay let's fall back and try to circle around them. Hopefully they're just a patrol and not part of a larger garrison protecting the gateway." Cole said and as the leading unit of troops laid down covering fire the assault team began to retrace its steps until coming to the junction Nayal had indicated. Another fire team checked down this passageway and signalled that it was clear before Cole nodded.

"Proceed corporal. You have the point." he said.

As the assault team moved onwards it became obvious that there were more than just a handful of the aliens present aboard the space station, despite it having been clear of them during the mission to send tricorders through the gateways into the subspace dimension. The first indication that there were more of them present came in the form of screeching sounds in the distance before a small party of them appeared ahead of the assault team. The aliens obviously had not expected to encounter the Starfleet assault team at this point and they were not prepared for combat. This gave the lead units of the assault team the opportunity to open fire first and the aliens fell back, two of them quickly vanishing as the bullets tore through their bodies.

Hamill was quick to take out her medical tricorder and try scanning the aliens from a distance. This yielded little useful information, their very presence creating a subspace field that blocked the device from scanning their biology. However, Hamill was able to spot a pattern in the disruption.

"Captain I think I have something here." she said.

"What is it doctor?" Cole asked.

"Captain there's a pattern to the interference that the aliens create on our scans. I can't filter it out but I think it might be possible to scan for it specifically." Hamill told him.

"Let me see." Nayal responded and she took out her own tricorder as she looked at Hamill's, "I see it. About sixty four megahertz." the Romulan continued as she quickly configured her tricorder to scan for the presence of the aliens and almost right away she picked up a large reading from close by, "Looks like they're gathering in large numbers right up ahead. They must be keen to keep us away from that gateway captain." she said.

"Everyone switch to phasers. Set to level seven. We can't afford to use up all our rifle ammo here when we may need it on the other side of the gateway." Cole ordered and the assault team all slung their rifles and drew their phasers instead as they continued to advance.

With Nayal having warned them about the presence of more aliens the lead unit of the assault team was prepared when they reached a junction in the corridor leading to the gateway and found a large number of the creatures present. Before any of the aliens could react to the appearance of the armoured ground troops the Starfleet troops themselves opened fire, bright red phaser beams cutting through the improvised barricades that the aliens had erected from furniture aboard the Magellan.

The aliens returned fire quickly though and one of the troops of the lead unit cried out in pain as a dart ripped open his leg and he fell to the floor clutching at the wound while the projectile itself rapidly faded into nothing.

"I've got him." Hamill said, rushing forwards while the rest of the assault team took cover and opened fire.

Together with another of the ground combat specialists Hamill dragged the injured man clear. This close to so many of the aliens Hamill's tricorder was useless in scanning the wound so she had to rely on a visual inspection. This inspection told her that the wound was deep but clean and she quickly opened up her medical kit.

"Hold him steady." she told the other ground combat specialist and she quickly set to work, thankful that although her tricorder did not work the rest of her kit seemed to be fully functional. A medical laser cauterised the wound and stemmed the bleeding while a dermal regenerator covered it, removing the need for any sort of dressing, "Can you still walk?" she asked and the soldier nodded.

"I think so." he said and Hamill and the second soldier helped him to his feet.

"Keep moving. Force them back." Cole called out, firing his phaser at another alien that promptly vaporised as it became unstable.

Outnumbered and clearly outgunned, the aliens began to fall back as the assault team pressed its attack. It was obvious that the aliens had little experience in combat involving directed energy weapons from their choice of material for their barricades. The lightweight furniture may have slowed down or stopped projectiles but phasers blasted through them as if they were not there and the aliens retreated in search of a stronger

position. The Starfleet assault team could not afford to allow them to simply leave though. If they were able to find a superior defensive position then they could stop the rescue mission in its tracks whereas if even one of them made it back to the subspace tear then they would be able to warn the rest of their kind, meaning that they could be prepared with an overwhelming force when the assault team from the *Nightfall* made it through. With this in mind the Starfleet troops continued firing even as the aliens were heading away from them, cutting them down as they ran.

"The gateway is about twenty metres that way captain." Nayal said as she checked her tricorder, "I'm starting to get interference with my scans from it now."

"So if there are any aliens waiting up ahead for us you can't tell us." Cole replied.

"Yes captain. Sorry." Nayal said.

"That's alright lieutenant. Just be ready to set up that second beacon once we're on the other side of the gateway." Cole told her and she nodded.

There was a strange pattern of lights coming through the open doorway of the compartment where the subspace tear was located and Cole signalled for the assault team to stop when he saw this.

"Okay swap back to your rifles." he ordered, "I don't want to risk any phaser fire from now on." then he looked at the fire team that had been at the front of their advance, "You four with me." he added and then he led them towards the open doorway and took a quick look into the compartment on the other side. There he saw a pair of aliens standing guard beside the glowing subspace tear and he ducked back out of sight before they could see him.

"Two." he whispered, holding up two fingers and then he lowered the darkened goggles that he had on his helmet over his eyes to protect them from the light of the subspace tear and brought his rifle up to his shoulder, "Go!" he snapped when the four ground combat specialists had done the same and all five men burst into the room where the two aliens were guarding the subspace tear and opened fire with their rifles. Taken by surprise the aliens stood no chance as the Starfleet troops fired several rapid bursts at them both. One of them was able to let out a shriek before it died while the other simply collapsed and then vaporised, at which point Cole summoned the rest of the assault team.

"Okay this is it." he said, "We know that the gateway will put out a lot of light when we go through so no-one comes in here without their goggles. We'll go through by squads and once the area is secure we'll set up the next stage of the communications relay, After that alpha and beta squads are with me while charlie and delta will stay with the relay and cover our exit. Lieutenant Nayal and Doctor Hamill will be with me. Any questions?"

There was not enough room inside the compartment where the subspace tear was located for the entire assault team so they entered one squad at a time before proceeding through into the alternate dimension where they emerged in an empty cavern that was large enough to hold the entire team.

"What's this stuff on the walls and ceiling?" Nayal said when she came through with the second squad of ground combat specialists and she looked at the strands of web material covering several areas of the cavern. Meanwhile behind them the subspace tear continued to emit a strong light as the cable she was trailing behind her held it active.

"Never mind that right now. Just get that beacon set up so we can let the *Nightfall* know that we've arrived safely." Cole said and Nayal unhooked the beacon from her load carrying equipment and set it down on the ground before connecting to the reel of cable that had been unravelling behind her.

"Okay that should be it." she said and Cole tapped his combadge.

"Cole to *Nightfall*, do you read me?" he said and then he smiled when Ghroc's voice responded.

"Loud and clear captain." the Bolian said, "Lieutenant Commander Sodyne informs me that the gateways has activated."

"That's correct commander. We are on the other side and Nayal's relay seems to be working perfectly. We'll check in every quarter hour." Cole said.

"Understood captain. In the mean time our torpedo launchers are loaded and ready to fire. *Nightfall* out." Ghroc said before the channel went dead.

"So just one slip and we could be trapped here forever." Hamill commented.

"What a cheery thought." Nayal said.

"Well let's just make sure we get out before Ghroc decides that he likes being in charge of the ship enough to commit mutiny. Nayal please give us directions."

Nayal promptly took out her tricorder again and scanned for the transponder signals from Starfleet combadges.

"I'm picking up six signals." she said, "T'Lan, Martin, Davis, Gould, Gomez and Lagrande."

"Gomez and Lagrande were in the missing team. The aliens must have brought them through as well." Cole said.

"I suppose that means the other two are dead." Hamill added.

"Well setting the portal as our reference they're all at a bearing of two hundred and sixteen degrees." Nayal said and she pointed.

“That passage looks like the best one to take.” Cole said as he raised his rifle, “Alpha and beta squads on me.”



Aboard the *Nightfall* Ghroc thought about the order Cole had just given him to destroy the *Magellan* if the assault team failed to check in and he tapped his combadge.

"Ghroc to Lieutenant Sanders he said.

"Yes commander?" the ground combat officer responded.

"Lieutenant I want you to prepare a company sized force to deploy to the *Magellan* on short notice. They'll have to be armed with assault rifles so I hope they're at least half way competent with them." Ghroc told him.

"Yes sir. What's our mission?" Sanders asked.

"Search and rescue. If the captain fails to check in then I'm sending you in to retrieve him." Ghroc said.

"Yes commander." Sanders replied before Ghroc tapped his combadge again.

"What about the captain's orders to destroy the *Magellan* to contain the aliens?" Sodyne asked from the science station.

"Sodyne if Captain Cole doesn't come back then I'm the ranking officer and I'll fire those torpedoes only when I'm satisfied that we've exhausted all options to get him back." Ghroc replied.

Once they moved away from the cavern that was well lit by the subspace tear itself Cole and his half of the assault team discovered the light emitting properties of the web material in the passageways where strands could be seen glowing outside the area covered by the compact lights fitted to the sides of their helmets.

"I wonder where that stuff comes from?" Nayal said.

"Maybe the aliens themselves secrete it." Hamill suggested and Nayal frowned.

"I wonder what else they secrete?" she added before she was interrupted by one of the ground combat specialists.

"Contact right!" he yelled when he spotted an alien appear from a side passage but before he could open fire the alien raised its weapon and shot at him. Although rapidly aimed the dart struck him in the neck, above the area protected by his body armour and he collapsed to the floor while around him the assault team returned fire. The alien was rapidly cut down although here in its own dimension its body did not suddenly dissolve and Hamill was about to go and try to examine it when more of the aliens appeared and began firing on the assault team.

"Wait." T'Lan said as she continued to lead the escaped prisoners through the underground passageways.

"What is it? More aliens?" Martin asked.

"No. Weapons fire. Specifically chemically propelled projectiles fired from an automatic weapon." T'Lan told him.

"Assault rifles from the *Nightfall*." Davis said, "Sounds like our rescue is here."

"And coming under attack if they're shooting. Which way are they?" Martin said.

"This way." T'Lan said, pointing straight on, "Of course if the rescue team is firing then as you say they are under attack, meaning that we can expect aliens to be converging on that location as well."

"We aren't going to get out of here if we hide from our own rescue team commander." Davis pointed out.

"Agreed Lieutenant Commander Davis. However, we must be cautious. Not only to avoid the aliens but also to ensure that we are not accidentally shot by our own side." T'Lan replied before she continued walking along the passageway.

While the assault team was focused on the aliens directly ahead of them a second group of the creatures appeared from a passageway behind them, threatening not only to catch them in a crossfire but also to cut them off from the subspace tear.

"Second squad cover our rear." Cole ordered and half of the troops under his command turned to face this new threat. Seeing that they were surrounded Hamill also brought up her rifle and took aim towards the aliens in front of the team but when she pulled the trigger nothing happened and she frowned as she looked at her weapon.

"The safety." Nayal said, "The switch by your thumb. You need to release it."

"Oh right." Hamill replied as with a flick of her thumb she released the rifle's safety catch. However, when she pulled the trigger for a second time the result was exactly the same and the rifle failed to fire.

"Have you even chambered a round doc?" Nayal asked and Hamill looked at her confused, "Damn it doc you need to chamber the first round yourself. Pull back on the handle here." Nayal told her, pointing to the cocking handle on her own weapon.

"I'm starting to see why nobody in their right mind uses these things any more." Hamill said as she went through the procedure of loading a bullet into the rifle's chamber and then taking aim again, "Phasers are so

much simpler.” then she pulled the trigger a third time and finally the rifle fired. However, her aim was off and the bullet ricocheted off the rock wall of the passageway instead of hitting any of the aliens.

“Nayal we need to get away from here before more of these things can turn up.” Cole said, “Can we get around them through that passageway over there?” and he pointed to another side passage between the two groups of aliens.

Nayal ceased firing her own rifle to check her tricorder again but she could not identify a route around any of the aliens within its range.

“I don’t know captain. These passageways might link up again later but that one may just keep on going for thousands of metres.” she said.

“And which way are the signals from our people in a straight line?” Cole asked.

“That way captain.” Nayal answered, pointing directly towards the source of the combadge signals.

“Okay let’s find out if these things work down here.” Cole said as he quickly swapped his rifle for the phaser on his belt. Initially he left the weapon set to its current lethal disruptive level as he pointed it in the direction Nayal had indicated before he fired it.

The bright red beam initially stuttered in the presence of the background subspace interference but the regenerative properties of the weapon were able to compensate for this and after about a second the beam stabilised and began to burn into the rock. Seeing that the weapon was effective Cole ceased fire and adjusting to its highest setting before he fired again.

At level sixteen a Starfleet phaser was able to disintegrate well over six hundred cubic metres of rock with a one second discharge and Cole held the firing button down so that the weapon was able to bore through the rock until it reached another empty space and he ceased fire.

“Let’s go.” he called out and he kept his phaser in his hand as he began to run down the newly created tunnel through the rock.

“Thank goodness I don’t need to use this thing any more.” Hamill commented as she followed him and she slung the rifle she had struggled to use over her shoulder and drew her own phaser as well.

Nayal followed next before the two squads of ground combat specialists began to fall back, still using their rifles as they laid down covering fire to keep the two groups of aliens away from them until they could all reach the tunnel. Then one of the soldiers drew his own phaser and kept its setting as it was while he fired it into the web covered roof of the passageway, collapsing the entrance to the tunnel behind them and making sure that the aliens could not follow them.

When the assault team reached the end of the tunnel they found themselves in another cavern that was almost entirely covered by the alien’s secreted web material but there was only a single alien present and Cole shot this dead as soon as he emerged from the tunnel.

“Nayal where now?” he asked when the Romulan woman appeared behind him from the tunnel.

“They’re here captain.” Nayal replied as she used her tricorder to lock onto the combadges again, “Range between six and fifteen metres.”

“Then why don’t I see them? All I see is this-” Cole began before he suddenly realised that the combadges were obviously embedded with the web, “Where’s the closest?” he asked and Nayal pointed.

“Here. It’s Davis.” she said and then she, Cole and Hamill rushed to one of the walls and started trying to tear at the web with their bare hands,

“Hold on, my medical laser may do this.” Hamill said and she set down her medical kit and quickly took out the laser it contained. Placing this beside the web covering the wall she activated it and began to cut through the alien material.

“Lieutenant Commander Davis can you hear me?” Cole shouted, hoping that his voice would be able to penetrate the irregular shape of the web and reach Davis within it, “Ashley?”

However, there was no response to his shout and a few seconds later Hamill’s medical laser penetrated deep enough to reach the combadge itself and it simply dropped out of the web and fell to the ground.

“They aren’t here.” Nayal said and Hamill then took out her own tricorder and started to scan the cavern.

“Captain I’m not picking up any biological readings as we’d understand them anywhere in here.” she said,

“Whatever that alien’s made of I still can’t get a good reading on it.”

“Can you extend the range of your scan doctor?” Cole asked.

“I’ll try captain but the background energy levels are limiting my scan range.” Hamill answered as she adjusted her tricorder.

“Just try your best doctor.” Cole said and then he turned to Nayal, “Show me where the other combadges are and scan for anything else that could be hidden in the walls. There could still be some clues about what happened to our people in here somewhere.”

“You better take this then captain.” Hamill said, handing him her medical laser.

Guided by Nayal, Cole used the laser to cut free the other combadges that had been embedded within the web material that coated most of the cavern’s walls. As with T’Lan’s own combadge there were no signs of the crewmembers themselves.

“They must be here somewhere Nayal.” Cole said as he removed the last of the combadges from the wall.

"I know captain but without their combadges to track them by and Doctor Hamill unable to pick up their life signs-"

"I think I've got something captain." Hamill suddenly called out.

"You've managed to increase the range?" Cole asked but Hamill shook her head.

"No they're coming closer. I've got what looks like a cluster of warm bloodied creatures moving towards the location where we engaged that last lot of aliens. About sixty metres away." she told him and she pointed towards an exit from the cavern not far from where the tunnel Cole had bored with his phaser had come out.

"If they keep going that way they could run right into those aliens we just got away from captain." Nayal pointed out.

"Let's move. Watch for friendlies." Cole ordered and then he began to move towards the passageway indicated by Hamill.

"What was that?" Gomez asked when there was a rumbling sound from in the distance somewhere ahead of them.

"I've got a nasty feeling that it was a cave in." Davis said.

"I am inclined to agree with you lieutenant commander." T'Lan added, "Furthermore I can no longer hear any firing."

"So either our rescue team just shot the last of the aliens or they just all got buried alive." Martin commented. "A logical assessment Lieutenant Commander Martin." T'Lan said, "In either case our logical course of action is to proceed. If the rescue team is waiting then we will be able to rendezvous with them. Alternatively we may be able to rescue survivors or at the very least obtain weapons that will help us escape. We should remain cautious though." and then she continued to advance along the passageway.

T'Lan kept going in the direction that the gunfire and the sound of the cave in had come from, using only her memory to maintain her bearing. However, before her party could reach the site of the cave in she brought them to a halt again when she heard the noises being produced by several of the aliens heading towards them.

"Get back." she exclaimed, waving the team back away from the aliens before she heard a distant screeching from behind them as well.

"Let me guess, we've got more following us." Davis said.

"I believe so." T'Lan replied.

"So what do we do now?" Lagrande asked, "We've no weapons we're-"

"To begin with we do not panic crewman." T'Lan told him and she looked around until she noticed a natural alcove set into one of the passage walls, "We will conceal ourselves there. If we are fortunate then at least one of the groups of aliens will turn away from us before it is too late for us to evade the sight of the other."

"And if they don't?" Martin said.

"Then lieutenant commander we will see how effective Starfleet's unarmed combat training techniques are against these creatures." T'Lan responded.

The group retreated into the alcove and waited to find out what the aliens closing in from around them would do. Unfortunately it seemed that both groups of the creatures were heading towards them and before long the human team members could hear the screeching sounds that they were producing.

"We've got to make a run for it. There was a side passage back there. Maybe we could-" Lagrande said as he suddenly leapt out of the alcove and began to run back the way the team had come.

"Get back here you fool!" Martin hissed but he was too late and as the group of aliens approaching from behind the team came around the corner they saw the security guard right in front of them. One of the aliens immediately raised the weapon he was carrying and fired, sending a replicated dart right through him.

It was then that the aliens ahead of the group also appeared further along the passage, trapping the *Nightfall's* crewmembers between them.

"I think they know we're here." Davis said as both groups of aliens started to move slowly closer to the alcove with their weapons held ready to fire.

"Orders commander?" Martin asked.

"They are too far away for us to try charging them. I doubt we would get half way before being shot." T'Lan said.

"So what other choice do we have?" Davis said and T'Lan considered all the options she could think of on the spot. Unfortunately in the absence of being able to effectively fight or flee she could think of only one other thing to try.

"Our only chance of survival appears to be to surrender. Perhaps a rescue team can still reach us in time." she said.

"You mean before we get eaten?" Davis commented.

"Unfortunately yes lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied as she stepped out of the alcove with her hands raised, hoping that the aliens would understand the gesture, "I am Commander T'Lan, first officer of the Starfleet vessel *USS Nightfall* and on behalf of-" she began.

"Cousin get down!" Nayal's voice suddenly called out from beyond the group of aliens that had approached from behind T'Lan and her team. T'Lan immediately responded by throwing herself to the ground and there was the sound of phasers being fired, the bright red beams cutting through the aliens and passing over T'Lan to hit the second group of aliens on the other side of her.

The phaser fire ceased as rapidly as it had begun and T'Lan looked up just as Cole rushed towards her and reached down to help her to her feet. Then he embraced her tightly.

"I was so worried. I thought I might have lost you." he said, kissing her.

"Your assumption was incorrect and might I remind Lieutenant Nayal that we are not related." she replied and Cole let out a brief laugh.

"That's the woman I love. Always so passionate." he said.

"Where's Doctor Gould?" Hamill asked when she noticed that her subordinate was not among the group in the alcove.

"I'm afraid the aliens killed him Hamill." Martin replied and Hamill's jaw dropped, "Now how about you pass me that rifle you aren't using?" Martin added and he held out his hand towards her.

"We are all that is left." T'Lan added and Cole nodded.

"Okay. Now come on, we need to get back to the gateway. Now we know we can use phasers here we've got more than enough weapons for everyone to have one. We have your combadges for you as well." he said.

"Robert we cannot leave just yet." T'Lan told him and he frowned.

"Of course we can. What else is there here to stop us?" he asked.

"The aliens are trying to make gateways of their own captain," Davis said as he took a phaser from one of the ground combat specialists, "and from what T'Lan and I saw of the machinery they're putting together they could have a good chance of succeeding."

"If they make their own gateway then there's no telling where they could end up." Nayal said.

"A couple of squads ought to be enough to take control of the cavern where the aliens are building their machine though." Martin added.

"Damn it. I was hoping that this would just be a quick in and out mission." Cole said and then he tapped his combadge, "Cole to *Nightfall*."

"Yes captain?" Ghroc's voice responded.

"Ghroc we've recovered survivors. You can tell Harriet Davis that her husband is among them." Cole said.

"Excellent captain. What's your ETA?" Ghroc asked.

"That's complicated I'm afraid Ghroc. The aliens are attempting to recreate the Magellan's gateway experiments and we need to stop them. My orders still stand about destroying the Magellan if we miss two check ins in a row but if you're forced to do that Starfleet needs to be warned. There's no telling where the aliens could appear. Hopefully the data gathered by Sodyne will allow Starfleet to take action." Cole told him.

"Understood captain. We'll warn Starfleet. Do you need reinforcements?"

"No, I don't want to risk any more lives than necessary. Just make sure that Starfleet knows what's happened here and has all the data available. Cole out." Cole said and as he shut off his combadge he looked at T'Lan again. "Okay T'Lan I guess this is your show now. Show us where this contraption the aliens are making is." he told her.

"Still convinced that we should send in more troops?" Sodyne asked.

"More than ever Sodyne. Unless you can give me a one hundred percent guarantee that your data will allow Starfleet to stop the aliens creating a gateway to our side." Ghroc replied, "Well can you?"

"No sir. I hate to admit it but I barely understand any of the notes I've read from the research team. It looks to me like the only way to reliably create a gateway is to have a brain that was once plugged into the Borg collective." Sodyne said.

"Then this is where we draw the line in the sand." Ghroc said.

T'Lan was able to retrace her groups' steps perfectly back to the passage opening that overlooked the cavern where the aliens were building their equivalent of the *Magellan's* gateway project.

"That thing's huge." Nayal said softly as she looked at the column with its embedded technology and the aliens moving up and down it using the web material to hold onto.

"Our weapons should be enough to deal with it. A couple of photon grenades at the base will bring that whole thing down." Martin said.

"Is this all there is?" Cole asked, "I'd hate to go through all this just for them to be able to rebuild their machine after we leave."

"They are integrating Federation technology into the machinery. If we destroy that then they will not be able to replace it once the existing subspace tears are closed." T'Lan said but then she looked to where the Federation computer core had been located and saw that it had been removed, "This is unfortunate." she said.

"What is?" Nayal asked.

"The computer core the aliens appeared to be drawing their information from has been removed." T'Lan replied.

"Where to though?" Nayal said.

"It is impossible for me to say. It could be anywhere in this subspace realm and we do not know its extents." T'Lan said.

"So we can't destroy the tech they took from us after all. Is there anything else that would be irreplaceable?" Cole asked.

"The refractive mineral. They brought that from the *Magellan* as well and kept it sealed up inside that container. Maybe they don't have any of it here. There's a shielded mineral container down there that probably contains all they have of it." Davis said and Cole frowned.

"What is it Robert?" T'Lan asked him.

"That mineral, it absorbs and refracts energy, right. We know it causes feedback in our scanners so what if it was constantly bombarded by a subspace field?" Cole said.

"Eventually the material would become saturated and release all its stored energy at once." T'Lan answered, "That is how Max was able to recreate a version of the Iconian gateways."

"T'Lan there's a constant subspace field all around us here. It's not much but-" Cole began.

"But it would turn that mineral into a bomb." Nayal interrupted.

"Perhaps destroying both the machinery they have created and also an irreplaceable component of the system." T'Lan added, "A logical target."

"Then the container is our target. We'll open it up and make sure it can't be sealed again before the mineral cooks off." Cole said.

"Unless we find another way around we'll need lines to get down there." Martin said and Cole nodded.

"Don't worry commander, we brought everything we'll need." he replied.

The first that the aliens inside the chamber knew of the attack was when it was filled with the roar of automatic weapons fire as a squad of Starfleet ground combat specialists opened fire from the opening at the top. As panicked aliens shrieked and scattered an eight strong group led by Cole, T'Lan and Martin began to abseil down the wall. Some of the aliens made a break for an exit at floor level and the Starfleet troops turned their weapons towards them but they were unable to prevent a pair of the aliens escaping before Cole's team reached the bottom of the wall. Drawing phasers these eight then began to spread out, firing at any alien that presented itself.

"Captain, lookout to your left." Nayal called out from above when she saw a group of aliens appear in the floor level entrance, most likely summoned by those who were able to escape. Unlike the aliens who had been working in the chamber though all of these were armed and they immediately opened fire on the Starfleet forces, shooting two of them dead in seconds while the others quickly took cover behind the machinery the aliens were constructing.

"Covering unit, target the entrance." Cole ordered using his combadge to communicate with the troops above and they turned their rifles on these new arrivals, killing two rapidly and forcing the others to scatter as they sought cover.

"There could be more of them on the way." T'Lan pointed out and Col nodded.

"Commander Martin, seal that passageway." he ordered.

"Yes captain." Martin replied and he unslung his rifle from his back and loaded the grenade launcher mounted to it. Then he took careful aim towards the entrance to the chamber, setting his sights on the centre of the opening itself, "Fire in the hole!" he yelled as he pulled the trigger and there was a 'bloop' sound as the photon grenade was fired.

The explosive projectile flew through the air, passing between the aliens without hitting any of them before it passed through the cavern entrance and began to travel down the passageway outside. Being a low velocity round the grenade lost height rapidly and hit the floor of the passageway about ten metres away from the cavern entrance. Then it bounced once before its timer expired and the grenade detonated.

The blast from the powerful explosive was easily enough to collapse the passageway and this was why Martin had not just aimed for the entrance itself. Any explosion inside the cavern would have caught the Starfleet team in its blast radius as well. On the other hand by launching the grenade into the passageway Martin not only blocked the only access point to the cavern that was not controlled by the crew of the *Nightfall* but also minimised the risk of friendly casualties. The force of the explosion was still enough to blow the alien warriors off their feet though and before any of them could recover the assault team finished them all off.

"Can anyone see the sample container?" Davis asked.

"Over here." T'Lan responded, darting across the chamber to where the shielded sample container was held against the central column by web material. Adjusting her phaser to a level that she estimated would burn through the web without damaging the container, T'Lan then began to cut it free while Davis and Cole rushed to join her.

"How much is in there?" Cole asked when T'Lan freed the container just as the two men reached her.

T'Lan opened the container carefully and then peered inside before closing the lid again.

"I estimate about seven kilograms in granular form." she said, "If the established calculations are correct then when saturated this amount of the material should create an explosion that will vaporise everything within six hundred metres."

"Sounds like enough to put a stop to the aliens' plans. How long will we have until it detonates?" Cole said.

"Given its granular form that depends on how it is exposed to the background energy field." T'Lan replied, "If

we simply open the canister and leave the material inside then it will reach a critical point in approximately one point four hours. On the other hand if we scatter it then it will soak up energy more rapidly and an explosion will take place in approximately twenty-three minutes.”

“Nayal how far are we from the nearest gateway in a straight line?” Cole called out and Nayal checked her tricorder.

“About two hundred metres that way captain. It’s the one that comes out in the Magellan’s primary station.” she responded, pointing her hand and Cole tapped his combadge.

“Cole to charlie and delta squads.” he transmitted.

“Charlie squad, Sergeant Drummer here captain.” one of the squad leaders guarding the gateway that the assault team had used to enter the subspace realm responded.

“Sergeant I’m ordering you to withdraw and get back to the *Nightfall*. We’re taking another way out.” Cole told him.

“Yes captain? What about the communication relay?”

“Leave it in place. It doesn’t matter if the aliens destroy it now. Tell Lieutenant Commander Ghroc that he is to destroy the Magellan in half an hour unless he hears from any of our team first. If he hasn’t then we aren’t coming back. Cole out.” Cole ordered the soldier before he shut off his combadge and then looked at his phaser again as he set it back to its maximum setting, “Martin I may need your help. I don’t know if there’s enough energy left in this to bore all the way to the gateway.” he added before firing at the wall of the chamber.

“Everyone should get down here now. We are evacuating.” T’Lan told the crewmembers still on the ledge overlooking the chamber and at the same time she tipped over the mineral sample container, spilling the entire contents out onto the cavern floor where it began to soak up energy from the background subspace field.

Cole rapidly drained his phaser boring through the rock and Martin took over with his, burning a hole all the way to the chamber where the subspace tear leading back to the *Magellan's* primary station was located. Alert for the possibility that more troops could come through this the aliens had left a pair of guards to watch over it but they were not prepared for a hole to suddenly appear in the wall before another pair of phaser blasts despatched both of them.

"Quickly, everyone through the gateway. Those without eye protection may want to shield them." Cole said. "Yeah, I remember." Davis commented as he covered his eyes with his hands and then stepped through the subspace tear.

It was then that the sounds of aliens shrieking were heard from down one of the naturally occurring passageways that led to this chamber and these began to grow louder.

"Sounds like they're coming after us." Nayal said.

"We should hurry." Martin added.

"Keep moving. Get through the gate." Cole ordered and the members of the assault team began passing through the subspace tear as quickly as they could while Martin crouched down and aimed his rifle towards the source of the alien sounds, ready to provide cover if it was needed. However, the rest of the team was already through the subspace tear by the time he saw the first alien coming towards him and instead of firing he turned around, closed his eyes and hurled himself through it.

"Last man." he exclaimed when he emerged aboard the *Magellan*, "But we've got aliens about twenty metres behind me."

"T'Lan can we seal this thing with a phaser?" Cole asked, turning to his wife.

"Yes but it is not advisable." she replied.

"Why not if it stops the aliens getting through?" Hamill said.

"There is no way to tell the manner of the collapse of the subspace tear doctor. It may simply fold in on itself or it could create an explosion that would destroy this entire station." T'Lan explained.

"With us aboard," Davis added.

"Then we move. We need to get away from this thing to contact the *Nightfall*." Cole said.

"Where exactly are we going captain?" Nayal asked as the team rushed from the laboratory where the subspace tear had been created, "If those aliens get close enough they'll block a transporter lock, remember?"

"The shuttle bay." Cole responded, "We know that the *Magellan's* shuttles were damaged in the fighting but the *Nightfall* can send more to pick us up."

Nayal checked the PADD she carried to find the quickest route to the *Magellan's* shuttle bay and with the sounds of alien warriors close behind them all the way they ran towards it. The space station was well equipped with shuttles ranging from small single seat work pods up to long range craft capable of carrying more than twenty. However, as Cole had said all of these had been damaged during the fighting between the aliens and the *Magellan's* crew so Cole activated his combadge.

"Cole to *Nightfall*." he transmitted.

"Captain it's good to hear your voice." Ghroc responded.

"Thanks. Commander we need a pick up. Can you send shuttles for twenty people to the *Magellan's* main station? We're in the shuttle bay now and about to have company it seems." Cole said.

"I've got two assault shuttles already prepared for launch captain. They'll be with you in five minutes. *Nightfall* out." Ghroc told him.

"Incoming!" Martin suddenly called out from by the doorway when he saw an alien appear and he fired a rapid burst from his rifle towards it.

"Take cover. Evac is on its way." Cole ordered and the assault team took cover among the damaged shuttlecraft as the aliens began to enter the room.

The first wave of aliens were shot down quickly but more followed behind them and the air was filled with replicated darts as they opened fire. It was clear that the aliens had sent a large force through the subspace tear in pursuit of the escaping Starfleet team and their numbers continued to grow. Their numbers enabled the aliens to spread out as they attempted to surround the Starfleet team but they had not expected a pair of heavily armed assault shuttles to suddenly race in through the forcefield covering the shuttle bay's outer doorway. These two craft came to a sudden halt and one of them settled down on the deck while the other turned its weapons on the alien warriors. The assault shuttle's phasers were powerful enough to blast through the shuttles that the aliens were also using for cover and entire squads of them were killed with each volley. While this shuttle provided cover the hatches of the second assault shuttle opened and the Starfleet personnel in the shuttle bay all ran towards it as quickly as possible.

"We're in. Close up and get us out of here." Cole told the pilot when the last of them was aboard and she nodded.

"Yes captain." she said, lifting off the deck while the doors were still closing and she fired the craft's weapons at the aliens to help keep them back.

"Commander the assault shuttles are exiting the *Magellan* now." Sodyne said as the two assault shuttles sped back into space and headed towards the *Nightfall*.

"Tactical arm quantum torpedoes." Ghroc said.

"Torpedoes armed commander." the tactical officer responded.

"Shuttles approaching landing doors now." Sodyne added as the two assault shuttles flew past the *Nightfall's* saucer section and then turned to land, one of them approaching each of the landing doors, "They're in."

"Shields up." Ghroc ordered.

"Shields up commander." the tactical officer responded and Ghroc smiled.

"Fire torpedoes." he said.

Armed with fifteen multi-purpose torpedo launchers the *Nightfall* was able to launch all seven quantum torpedoes simultaneously towards the stations that made up the *Magellan*. The weapons were designed to be able to punch through deflector shields before striking their targets so against unshielded targets the effects were devastating. All seven stations exploded within moments of one another, sealing the subspace tears within them forever. These explosions sent debris hurtling through space and this hammered against the *Nightfall's* shields but could not penetrate and harm the ship within.

"Cole to bridge, what's our status?" Cole's voice asked over the intercom.

"Target destroyed captain. You can have your ship back now." Ghroc told him.

T'Lan was already in bed by the time that Cole returned to their quarters but as he began to undress she sat up.

"What did Starfleet have to say?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?" Cole responded.

"No. I was waiting for you to return."

"Well Starfleet was obviously concerned about the possibility of predatory aliens suddenly appearing on Federation worlds and bypassing all our defences. However, largely it isn't a matter for us." Cole said.

"The defence of individual planets is the responsibility of that planet's government." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Exactly. Of course Starfleet can provide support if an attack takes place but until that happens then colonies will have to keep monitoring for Iconian gateways forming. Starfleet is advising the Federation council that foreign governments should be warned as well. The hope is of course that we destroyed all of that refractive mineral that the aliens were able to take from the *Magellan*." he told her.

"The subspace field in their own dimension does make it impossible for the mineral to occur naturally there." T'Lan added.

"So overall Starfleet is calling this a win. Although there could be trouble coming from the Federation Science Council." Cole said.

"They are taking the loss of the *Magellan* poorly then?"

"That's a classic Vulcan understatement T'Lan. They're furious and right now we are kind of working largely under their authority. Hopefully we can help Professor Denning and his people make a big discovery to smooth things over. Until then though we need to watch our step."

"That only leaves the issue of Doctor Hamill. I understand that she has decided to remain aboard the *Nightfall*." T'Lan said and Cole nodded.

"Yes." he said, sighing, "It looks like her boyfriend, sorry ex-boyfriend now, wasn't being totally honest with her about transferring to the *Judgement*. She decided to remain here as chief medical officer rather than accept a grade and rank reduction. Very logical of her wouldn't you say?"

"Perhaps. But there is more to life than just logic Robert. Remember that I gave up the opportunity to transfer to the *Ek'Duv* because I wanted to continue to serve with you." T'Lan pointed out and Cole smiled before leaning closer and kissing his wife.

"And I'm glad you did." he replied.

"Nevertheless we should consider the effect this will have on the doctor." T'Lan said and Cole smiled.

"Don't worry about that T'Lan. It's well in hand." he responded.

Hamill sat alone in her quarters on her bed among a number of items relating to her relationship with Jack. Some were items he had given her or keepsakes of particular events but there were also photo display units that she looked at as she thought over the end of her relationship. She sniffed and wiped her nose as she fought back tears before the intercom of her door chimed.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Sally open up." Nayal's voice said, "It's me and Leyla."

"Open the door Sally." Sodyne's voice added and Hamill got up to answer the door. When she did this her eyes widened when she saw Nayal wearing a onesie patterned with cartoon ducks while Sodyne stood beside her in a robe and obviously soaking wet beneath it.

"Leyla did you just get out of the shower?" Hamill asked and Sodyne sighed.

"Our operations officer used her position to bypass the lock on my quarters to get in while I was showering and said I had ten seconds to put something on and come with her or she was just going to drag me here naked." she replied.

"And I was going to go via all the most crowded sections of the ship." Nayal said as she walked past Hamill and pulled Sodyne along with her.

"Okay so what are you doing here?" Hamill said.

"We came to help you get over your break up of course." Nayal told her.

"May I borrow a towel?" Sodyne added and Hamill nodded.

"What makes you think I need help?" she asked as she walked into her bathroom and retrieved a towel that she then tossed to Sodyne.

"All of this." Nayal answered, pointing to the items on Hamill's bed and then she produced a bottle of blue liquid from behind her back.

"Romulan ale?" Hamill said and Nayal smiled.

"Trust me Sally, never mind forgetting about that veruul Jack. After a couple of shots of this a human like you will forget how to walk." she said.

"Wait there. I'll get us some glasses." Hamill told her.