

# STAR TREK

## NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...

### FLEET OF GHOSTS

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



# ***STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL*** **FLEET OF GHOSTS**

**By Stephen J Dutton Bsc (hons) Beng (hons)**

The *USS Nightfall* arrives at the Prestus colony and the crew are looking forward to a few days leave. But when evidence is discovered that ships supposedly lost in the Dominion War a decade earlier may not have been destroyed after all they find themselves facing a deadly threat...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
7. Root of all Evil
8. Past Loyalties
9. Peace in Our Time
10. Coming of Age
11. Virtual Warfare
12. Echos Of the Distant Past
13. Cold War
14. Revelations
15. The day the Sky Fell
16. Dark Science
17. Ghost in the Machine
18. The Long Way Home
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21. The Peacemaker
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Stardate 64132.3. USS Nightfall NX-82008 orbiting Prestus colony, along the Romulan Neutral Zone.

Lieutenant Commander Carr checked her appearance in the mirror. She was not in uniform, being off duty and preparing to beam down to the surface of the planet below when the door to her quarters chimed.

"I've got it!" she called out, rushing from her bedroom to the door before her teenage daughter Nikki could get up from where she was studying. Opening the door she saw two more women standing in the corridor outside. One was human like Carr, while the other had the distinctive sloping eyebrows of Vulcans.

However, the fading tattoos along each side of her face gave her away as Romulan rather than one of the closely related logic-driven species, "Come on in," Carr said to the pair, "I'm almost ready."

"Ready for what mom?" Nikki asked, looking up from her studies.

"Oh I'm just beaming down for a girls night out with Lieutenant West and Nayal." Carr responded as she headed back into her bedroom and her daughter smiled.

"I'm a girl. Can I come too?" she said excitedly.

"I doubt where we're going would let you in." West told her.

"No they wouldn't." Carr added as she reappeared clutching a small purse, "And you've got work to do. I saw your last report and I expect the next one to be better."

Nikki's face fell.

"Don't wait up." Carr then said as she and the other two women left her quarters.

"So where are we going exactly?" the Romulan Nayal asked as the trio walked in the direction of the nearest turbolift.

"Some place Jenna says she knows." Carr answered, looking at West, "Right?"

"Right." West replied, "It's a bit of a dive, but if its anything like it was the last time I was there it's a good place to relax and let your hair down."

"We all already have our hair down." Nayal pointed out, taking hold of hr own hair where it hung over her shoulders.

"It's just an expression Nayal." Carr said, "What worries me is that since Jenna's been in stasis for more than a decade we've no idea how the place may have changed.

The three then halted outside a turbolift and waited. When the doors opened a few seconds later both Carr and West straightened up as it revealed two more Starfleet officers inside. One was the ship's Vulcan science officer T'Lan, but it was the man stood beside her that caused the reaction. The man wore the red collared uniform of the command branch and that collar featured four gold pips.

"Good evening Captain Edwards." Carr said.

"Commander." Edwards replied, "Going down to the surface? I thought you'd be joining us at movie night."

"Hamilton picked the film didn't he?" West asked.

"That's right." Edwards answered, "He says it's a classic."

"I think we'll pass." Carr said.

"What about you cousin?" Nayal then said, looking at T'Lan, "Why not come and – what was the phrase? Let your hair down?"

"It's either that or 'Night of the Killer Tribbles'." West said.

There was a brief pause and then T'Lan looked up at Edwards.

"With your approval Captain?" she said.

"You're off duty lieutenant. You may do as you wish."

T'Lan looked back at the three other women and reached up to remove the clip holding her hair in place.

"It's just an expression cousin." Nayal commented.

"Have fun ladies." Edwards said as he stepped clear of the turbolift, "We'll be in spacedock for a few days at least so there's no reason to worry about hurrying back." And then the turbolift door slid shut to leave Captain Edwards alone in the corridor.

The bar was located down a narrow side street, away from the more brightly lit establishments that were clustered in this part of the planetary capital. The group had to descend a flight of stairs before the doormen nodded and opened the door for them to enter.

"Enjoy your evening ladies." One said as they passed.

"You were right about this place being a dive." Carr said.

"The appearance of this establishment suggests that it does not adhere to local regulations commander." T'Lan said.

"Grace." Carr replied, "T'Lan, we're all here as friends. Call me Grace."

"Of course commander- err, Grace."

"You'll get the hang of it cousin." Nayal commented.

"Please stop calling me that. We are not related." T'Lan replied.

"Never mind that now." West said, "Lets get something to drink, you'll see how good this place is. Believe me."

"Well how about we start at the bar then?" Carr suggested.

"Kali-fal." Nayal said, smiling.

"They serve Romulan ale here now?" West responded.

"According to the sign behind the bar they do." T'Lan replied.

"We're right near the Neutral Zone." Carr said, "And there's no embargo any more."

"Then I think we should try some." West replied.

"Allow me." Nayal said and she led the way to the bar where she was surprised to find another Romulan behind it. Obviously he was another refugee fleeing from the civil war engulfing the former empire.

"What can I get you?" he asked. Unlike Nayal's, the man's forehead was heavily ridged so there was little chance of anyone mistaking him for a Vulcan and in addition he still bore the marks or mourning down each side of his face that had become almost universal amongst the species since the destruction of their home planet. Nayal's had by now faded to the point that they were barely noticeable, but the barman's still appeared fresh.

"How's the kali-fal?" Nayal asked in Romulan and the barman smiled.

"Not great. But good enough for these Federation types. Its all that we can get across the border." He replied, also in Romulan, "I've managed to keep a few bottles of something better out back if you'd rather-"

"No thank you." Nayal interrupted, "My friends won't know the difference. We'll take a bottle of your usual and something to dilute it with. Two of them are human."

The barman smiled again.

"Ahh, you'd rather not have to carry them home after one glass?"

"No. I want at least an hour's fun."

The barman placed a bottle of bright blue liquid on the counter and then added four glasses and a second bottle of something completely clear.

"Enjoy your drinks." He said, switching to English and the four women headed towards a nearby table and sat down.

"Oh look they do karaoke now. That's new." West said as she looked at the display set into the table and saw that listed a selection of songs that could be sung.

"What's carry, carry-" Nayal began.

"Karaoke." T'Lan interrupted, "It is a form of Earth entertainment in which songs are performed by amateurs."

"Really? Will we be singing?" Nayal asked.

"Only if I'm very drunk." West replied, "Speaking of which." And she handed her glass to Nayal, "Pour."

"You two better just have a little of this. Dilute it." Nayal said as she opened the bottle of Romulan ale and began to pour it out.

"Yes, the captain mentioned that this stuff has a kick to it." Carr said.

"What Commander Kelak gave to the captain was of much better quality than this." Nayal replied and she gave each of her companions a glass and waited while both Carr and West added some of the colourless liquid to theirs before lifting her own drink and adding, "What's the phrase? Cheers?"

"That's the one." West said and she and Carr both raised their glasses as well before all three took a drink. Nayal just smiled as both Carr and West lowered their glasses almost instantly and gasped.

"Wow." Carr exclaimed, "The captain was right."

"Are you not enjoying your drinks?" T'Lan asked, her own still untouched.

"Oh its just fine." West croaked, "It's just that normally it takes a few more than this before my vision blurs. Now drink your own. You and your identical twin there." And she took another sip, this time much smaller than the first.

"So how is it cousin?" Nayal asked as T'Lan also sipped her drink.

"It is not unpleasant. But please stop referring to me as cousin. It is inaccurate."

"Oh? Am I annoying you?"

"Of course not. Vulcans do not get annoyed."

"You should." Nayal replied, "It would do you good to let yourself go once in a while cousin." Nayal responded but there was no reaction from T'Lan.

"So Nayal, how are you finding life aboard the *Nightfall*?" Carr asked.

"In what way commander? Sorry, Grace."

"She means that since unlike T'Lan you can get annoyed, is being aboard the ship with us annoying you?" West said.

"No. Its rather pleasant."

"Easier than a Romulan ship?" Carr asked.

"Its hard to say." Nayal answered, "I only joined the military after the civil war started. We didn't have quite the same strict procedures as the Fleet had before it."

"And what about the crew?" Carr then asked, "Making many friends?"

"Several." Nayal replied.

"Any special friends?" West then added with a grin.

"What do you mean by 'special'?"

"I believe that the lieutenant is attempting to determine whether you are involved in a sexual relationship with any of the crew." T'Lan explained.

"Indeed I am." West added, "Come on Nayal. Do tell."

"The answer to that is no." Nayal said and then she turned to look at T'Lan, "So who are you evaluating cousin?" she asked.

"I don't know what you mean." T'Lan replied.

"Neither do I." West added, "T'Lan's the only Vulcan aboard the ship. I've not known many date outside their own species, it's that never showing emotion thing that gets in the way."

"That's true." Carr commented.

"But it is because she is the only Vulcan aboard that she must be evaluating someone else." Nayal said.

"Huh?" West responded.

"This subject is ridiculous." T'Lan commented.

"Oh really?" Nayal said, staring at T'Lan before turning towards the two human women, "Look, Vulcans go into pon-farr every seven years right?"

"Right." Carr said.

"Right. So that means that every seven years T'Lan is going to have to find a special friend for herself.

You're not married are you cousin?" Nayal said, glancing back at T'Lan as she asked the question.

"No. My husband was killed during the war with Dominion and I have not remarried."

"So there's no-one waiting for you back on Vulcan." Nayal said, "Which means that you can choose anyone you want and if you can't make it back to Vulcan in time then you'll have to pick one of the men aboard the *Nightfall*."

Both Carr and West turned to stare at T'Lan, but the Vulcan simply looked back at them blankly.

"Oh come on." West said, "You've got to tell us."

"No I do not." T'Lan replied.

"Then we'll just have to figure it out won't we?" Nayal said, "Now let me see. In many cultures it is said that females are attracted to those in positions of power."

"So that would be the captain." West said.

"Exactly." Nayal replied, "But let's not forget that T'Lan knows as well as the rest of us about the captain and Grace."

"What?" Carr exclaimed, "What about the captain and me?"

"I was under the impression that you two are an item." Nayal replied.

"Well we're not okay? Now let's get on with figuring out who T'Lan's got the hots for while you pour me another glass."

"You do make a cute couple." West commented.

"So not the captain then." Nayal said, "She wouldn't want to risk angering Grace."

"Who is clearly very defensive about her man." Grey added, "So who's next on the list of suspects?"

The bridge of the *Nightfall* was quiet. Despite the ship being in spacedock regulations required that it still be manned however, so with Carr on the planet below and Edwards off duty it had fallen to the ship's second officer to take the duty. Lieutenant Commander Cole sat in the captain's chair in the centre of the bridge reading from a PADD while a trio of ensigns monitored the ship's status from the environmental, operations and science stations. Cole was heavily focused on the PADD when there was a chirping sound and the ensign at the science station spoke.

"Err, excuse me sir, but I think you should see this." He said.

"What is it Jackson?" Cole asked, lowering his PADD before standing up and wandering around to the science station.

"I think it's a warp signature sir. Somewhere in the outer system."

"Commercial traffic." Cole said.

"There's nothing due in according to what Prestus gave us." The ensign at ops said.

"It's gone now anyway." Jackson said, "But there was definitely something there."

"Anything from Prestus?" Cole asked, looking towards ops.

"No sir. Traffic control hasn't flagged it and the defence force isn't reacting."

"Maybe they didn't see it." The ensign at the environmental station suggested, "Our sensors are better than theirs I think."

"Well I'm not waking anyone up on the planet for the sake of a bit of a blip." Cole said as he returned to the command chair and sat back down before activating the intercom, "Captain Edwards?" He said.

## 2

*“Hello? Is anyone here?” the woman called out as she entered the building. The room she was in was unlit and she crept slowly along it, keeping one hand on the wall beside her. She paused when she saw light coming from behind a door that had not quite closed properly, what looked like a PADD jamming it slightly open, “Hello?” she called out again as she approached the door and tapped the panel beside it to get the door open properly. Then she screamed as she saw the body lay on the floor in front of her with a pool of blood surrounding it. All around the room were creatures that were nothing more than featureless balls of fur and a number of them were quite clearly in the process of devouring the body. All of a sudden one of the nearby balls of fur leapt into the air, propelling itself towards the screaming woman where it sunk its teeth into her neck and she staggered back with blood pumping from the wound as she attempted to rip it away from her...*

“Captain Edwards?”

Edwards frowned as he got up from his chair and darted out of the room where the film was showing. Then as soon as he was in the corridor where he would not disturb the rest of the audience he tapped his combadge and spoke.

“Edwards here. What is it commander? And let me say this had better be good. We were just getting to the part of the movie with the least artistic merit possible.”

“Sorry to bother you sir, but we’ve picked up something strange.”

Edwards sighed and he took a headset from his pocket and slipped it over his ear so that the tiny built in display was aligned with his eye.

“I’m ready, show me.” He said and the display came to life, showing the sudden pulse of energy picked up by the ship’s sensors, “Now that is weird.” He muttered, then he added, “I’m on my way. I’ll be with you in a couple of minutes. Get Max to meet me there as well, I want his input.”

“Yes sir.” Cole replied before the channel was shut down and Edwards headed for the turbolift.

Exiting the turbolift on the bridge Edward found not only the four duty officers waiting for him but also a Borg drone, only the Starfleet combadge on his chest giving away his allegiance.

“Anything new?” Edwards asked as he crossed the bridge.

“Nothing.” Cole replied, “Though Max only arrived a few seconds before you did.”

“I have already processed the data forwarded to me.” The Borg said, “And I find no reason to dispute the theory that the energy burst seen was a warp signature. In my opinion as chief engineer I believe that it was caused by a faulty start up sequence located somewhere in close proximity to the fifth planet of this system.”

“So what do we know about that planet?” Edwards asked, “It’s a gas giant isn’t it?”

“Yes captain.” Max replied, “Our records indicate that it is prone to large electrical disturbances in its upper atmosphere that make it difficult to navigate near. The area is generally avoided by space traffic.”

“So who’d be out there?” Edwards asked.

“It has to be a local. Someone familiar with the conditions.” Cole replied.

“Captain, might I make a suggestion?” Max asked.

“Go on.”

“I see no reason for any legitimate shipping to be in the vicinity of that planet when there are perfectly adequate facilities here. I believe that we are looking at some form of outlaw traffic.”

“Smugglers?” Cole asked.

“Perhaps.” Max replied, “Bringing contraband goods across the Neutral Zone.”

“Or people.” Edwards added, “The Romulan faction directly across the Neutral Zone from here is a hard line military one. They want nothing to do with us, but I wouldn’t put it past them to try and sneak some people over to our side to keep an eye on what we’re up to. There are a lot of Romulan refugees on Prestus that have fled from their territory and I know for a fact some of them are trying to drum up support for us to intervene over there.”

“From here they could keep tabs on Starbase one twenty-three as well as shipping in the Klingon Empire.”

Cole commented.

Edwards sighed.

“So much taking a few days off.” He said, “We’ll have T’Lan look this over first thing tomorrow and if she thinks it’s worthwhile we’ll go and take a look. At the very least we can have a couple of ships from Commander White’s squadron do a flyby, the fighters should be able to handle the disturbances better than the *Nightfall* can. In the mean time keep an eye out for any more unusual warp signatures. They could shed

more light on the matter.”

”Should I recall Commander Carr’s party from the surface then captain?” Cole asked.

”Yes, you better had.” Edwards replied, ”I’ll meet them in transporter room one to fill them in.”

Nayal and T’Lan were stood by the bar when there was a muffled chirping sound from inside Carr’s purse as it lay on the bar beside them.

”I think we should answer that.” T’Lan said.

”I’m on it.” Nayal said as she rummaged through the purse and took out Carr’s combadge, ”Nayal here.” She said into it.

”Nayal, its Cole. Where’s Commander Carr?”

”The lieutenant commander is busy at the moment.” Nayal replied.

”Okay, well the captain wants everyone back here straight away. Hang on, what’s that noise in the background? That screeching. Where are you?”

Nayal and T’Lan both turned towards the stage where both Carr and West were using not only each other but also a microphone stand for support as they sang.

”That screeching noise as you put it Lieutenant Commander Cole is our respected first officer and expert chief of operations performing a song that I believe is called ‘Can’t live if living is without you.’ I believe it sounds better when performed sober.”

”Just get them back to the transporter site. The captain’s waiting for you now.” Cole replied and then the signal ended.

Nayal looked at T’Lan.

”So cousin,” she said, ”which of us is going to break the news to our human friends’ that their singing careers are not going any further?”

”Energise.” Edwards told the crewman on duty in the transporter and there was a high pitched humming as the system was powered up, followed by a shimmering as four figures materialised in front of him and Edwards frowned, ”What happened?” he asked looking at West who was clearly unconscious and supported between Nayal and T’Lan. Carr on the other hand was still standing unsupported though she had her shoes in her hands.

”Oh she just can’t handle her drink.” Carr said, her speech slurred from the effects of drink.

”I’m afraid that even when diluted neither of them could handle kali-fal captain.” Nayal added, glancing at Carr.

”Hey!” Carr snapped as she stepped off the transporter pad, wobbling slightly, ”I’m perfectly alright.” And then she suddenly stumbled, falling forwards. Just in time, Edwards stepped forwards and caught hold of her.

”Oops.” Carr said and then she leant forward and rested her head against the captain, ”Mmmm. I’m sleepy.” She murmured, ”I need to go to bed. Take me to bed.”

Edwards looked around at the transporter crewman whose wide smile suddenly turned into a more serious expression when he realised that the captain was looking directly at him. Then he looked back at the transporter pad.

”You two get West to her quarters, I’ll take care of the lieutenant commander.” He said.

”Of course captain.” Nayal replied and she and T’Lan carried West out of the room.

”Okay let’s get you back to your quarters then.” Edwards said to Carr, guiding her towards the door as well.

”Good idea.” Carr replied as she continued to lean on the captain, ”My bed is there I think.”

The door to Carr’s quarters slid open automatically for Edwards as he half carried and half dragged her inside.

”Here we are.” He said quietly.

”That way.” Carr replied, pointing to her bedroom and Edwards sighed before helping her towards it. Then she suddenly added, ”West says we make a cute couple by the way. We are aren’t we?”

”Mom?” a voice said from in the darkness and Edwards turned to see Nikki standing in the doorway to her room looking at them.

”Err, I think your mother had a bit too much fun.” He said, ”I think she just needs to sleep it off.”

”Typical.” Nikki snorted, ”When a MACO replicated me one beer she went berserk and now she’s hammered.” And she wandered over to help Edwards with her mother.

Between them they move Carr into her own bedroom and deposited her on the bed before retreating into the other room.

”Sorry about disturbing you.” Edwards said.

”Hey its not your fault.” Nikki replied, ”But she’s such a hypocrite.”



"Well she needs to be on the bridge by oh-eight thirty tomorrow. Can you make sure she gets up in time?"

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Yes just one thing. Remind her that being drunk on duty is a disciplinary offence." Edwards replied and Nikki smiled.

"I'll be glad to captain."

"Thanks Nikki. You're a good girl really."

Carr winced as she stepped out of her bedroom the next morning and Nikki deliberately banged her spoon against the inside of her cereal bowl.

"Hi mom. Sleep well?" she called out and Carr winced again and blinked.

"Where are my glasses?" Carr asked as she opened a drawer and began to rummage through it.

"What would you need glasses for?" Nikki asked.

"The light seems a bit bright at the moment that's all. Ah, here they are." Carr said as she took a pair of dark glasses from the drawer and slipped them on.

"Can you wear those on duty?" Nikki asked.

"No. But I'm going to see Doctor King to see if he's got anything to help with my eyes and the pounding in my head."

"I thought The King didn't like having his time used up with that sort of stuff." Nikki said as Carr headed for the doorway.

"Only when the same people turn up every week." Carr replied, "And don't call him The King. He's Doctor King or Commander King to you."

"Whatever. Oh and mom?" Nikki added just as the door opened to allow her mother to leave.

"What now Nikki?" Carr responded.

"Is Captain Edwards going to be my new daddy?"

"Oh shut up." Carr snapped before the door slid shut after her and Nikki grinned.

"Computer." Nikki said, tilting her head upwards, "Decrease lighting level back to normal."

"Confirmed. Light level reducing from one hundred and twenty percent." The automated voice responded.

As the door to the *Nightfall's* sickbay slid open Carr saw that West had had the same idea as she had and was now sat perched on the edge of one of the biobeds while a white haired man in the blue collared uniform of Starfleet's medical branch stood beside her. Also like Carr, West clutched a pair of dark glasses in her hand.

"Ah Lieutenant Commander Carr." The doctor said as he looked around at her, "I was wondering if you'd be paying a visit to the court of King Henry this morning. Feeling the worse for wear after your night on the town?"

"You could say that." Carr replied.

"Its all Nayal's fault." West commented, "She's the one that recommended Romulan ale."

"Now, now lieutenant." King responded loudly, "No point in casting blame about. You could have refused. Now follow me the pair of you." And he walked into his office and sat down behind his desk, the two women following him and sitting down on the other side, "Do you see that man sat out there?" he then asked, looking through the transparent wall back into the main sickbay where a man in an enlisted man's service division uniform was also sat on a biobed.

"What about him?" Carr asked.

"That is crewman Leon Jones." King began, "He works in the hangar. He's a deck marshal. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes." Carr answered, "It means that he directs-"

"He points at things lieutenant commander." King interrupted, "At some point during his training he decided that he wanted to spend his entire career pointing at things. A professional pointer is what he is. He parents must be so proud."

"What does this have to do us?" West asked.

"My point it that despite his job involving nothing but pointing at things he still seems to find that too much to bear. In the less than two months I've been on this ship he has been in here on no less that nine occasions for no good reason. He is a hypochondriac and a malingerer who wastes my time all too often. Now I'd like you to see how I deal with that. Watch and learn." Then he got up from his chair and returned to the main sickbay, striding towards Crewman Jones, "I have your results here crewman," He said clearly, "and they're rather disturbing I'm afraid."

"I'm really sick doc? How long will I be out of action?" Jones asked.

"No time at all. You have a circulatory problem crewman. One easily solved by increasing your level of physical excursion. Now I'm going to let your superior know that you need to be give extra duties and I'm going to recommend that you also be reassigned as a loader."

Jones' jaw dropped.

"Lots of lifting. Not the heavy stuff you'd use an anti-grav unit for though. Just the things that will exercise your muscles. Now get going. Come on, quickly now. Left-right-left-right-left-right." King said, watching as the crewman scurried out of sickbay leaving a grinning King behind him. When the door slid shut King returned to his office, "There you go ladies." He said as he walked back to his desk and opened a drawer, removing a small plastic container from which he took four tablets that he placed on the desk in front of him, "Simple painkillers that either of you could have got from your replicators. Now take two each and get out of here. And remember that I don't like having my time wasted." There was a brief pause as King sat down and put his feet up on his desk, "The King has spoken." He added. Frowning, both Carr and West took two of the tablets each and got up to leave, both replacing their glasses. In the corridor outside sickbay West turned to Carr and spoke.

"He's a damned sociopath isn't he?"

Carr froze and suddenly grabbed West's arm.

"Ow! What?" West asked.

"Last night."

"What about it. I can hardly remember any of it."

"Well I just remembered part of it. I told the captain we were a cute couple."

West gasped.

"But I thought you said you weren't-"

"We're not. But I told him that anyway. But it gets worse."

"How?"

"I told him you said it."

"I fail to see the point in this endeavour lieutenant commander." T'Lan said as Cole stood over her, adjusting the settings on her console.

"You mean you don't know what this will do?" Cole asked her.

"Of course I do. It will cause the audio reports of the system to progressively increase in volume. But what is the point in altering all of the bridge consoles to do this?"

"Because Carr and West are hung over." The man sat at the helm station replied as he made the same adjustments to his own console, "So the sound will really irritate them."

"See, Hamilton gets it." Cole said.

"But what is the point in causing such discomfort?" T'Lan asked.

"I think they consider it amusing cousin." Nayal said from the chair she occupied. This was one of two located either side of the central captain's chair that was at present unoccupied and since it lacked a console of its own she was just watching as the other stations were altered. Just then the turbolift doors slid open to reveal Carr and West, both still wearing dark glasses.

"Oh hey look everyone." Cole called out as he looked up at them and then went back to his own tactical station, "It the Blues Sisters."

"Cole I'm going to tell you what I just told Nikki." Carr replied as she took off her glasses and replaced them with her control headset, "Shut up." And then she sat down in the empty seat on the opposite side of the captain's to the one Nayal occupied.

"Actually the captain would like to see you." Cole told her, "He's in his ready room."

Carr and West looked at one another.

"Here goes." Carr said softly as she got up and approached the door to the captain's ready room. She pressed the button beside the door to alert Edwards to her presence and then flinched at the sound produced, "God that's loud she muttered."

"Come." Edwards' voice called out from behind the door and it slid open, "Ah good morning commander." He said as Carr entered his office, "Take a seat. Get a drink if you want one. Water, or coffee maybe."

"I'll be fine for now captain." Carr replied as she sat down, "Captain about last night. I-"

Edwards leant back in his chair.

"Lieutenant commander I am aware that your recall to the ship was unexpected and I'm going to overlook your condition this time round, but in future I suggest you avoid Romulan ale." He told her.

"Of course sir." Carr replied, "Thank you."

"Good. Now to the reason why I called you back to the ship." Edwards said and he held out a PADD to Carr. "A warp signature?" she said as she looked at it.

"Exactly. One that shouldn't have been there and from the reaction it got from the locals it may as well not have been. I'm concerned that it could be an effort by the Romulans to sneak someone across the border."

"Why not just infiltrate someone amongst the refugees?" Carr asked.

"Perhaps because they don't want to risk there being any evidence of their agent's presence. Now I've got T'Lan studying the data and Max is configuring a probe to loiter in the area. But I'd rather keep this to ourselves, the ship's crew I mean, rather than letting the locals in on it. I don't want to go causing a panic before we know exactly what's happening."

"Yeah." Carr commented, "Given the number of refugees here any suggestion of a Romulan invasion could go bad for them."

"Precisely. Now-" Edwards began but he was interrupted by the door chime that made Carr flinch, "Come." He then called out and the door opened to reveal T'Lan clutching another PADD.

"I have the report you requested captain." She said as she entered the office and handed him the device. Edwards frowned as he read it.

"A Federation warp signature."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied, "To be specific, a *Miranda*-class destroyer."

"But I didn't think that there were any other Starfleet ships in the area." Carr commented.

"There shouldn't be." Edwards replied, "Particularly not an antique like a *Miranda*-class."

"Captain. It is possible that such a vessel could be in private hands after being decommissioned." T'Lan suggested.

"But that still doesn't explain why it would be where this warp signature came from." Edwards said and he stood up, "No. We need to take a look at this more closely. What do we know about previous Starfleet operations in this system?"

"Only regular patrols I thought." Carr said, "A ship comes in and then goes out again. Most don't even stay as long as we already have."

"But we know the patrol schedule and there's nothing apart from us on it."

"Captain." T'Lan then said, "There is one other possible explanation."

"Oh really?" Edwards asked, "What's that lieutenant?"

"As I'm sure you know the Federation was highly motivated to clean up after the Dominion War." She said.

"Yes, no-one wanted pirates from looting battlefields and getting away with heavy weapons." Edwards replied, "But there weren't any battles anywhere near here during the war. The last time this system was fought over was in the Romulan War two hundred years ago."

"Indeed captain, but the task of removing derelict craft from battlefields was not undertaken by Starfleet alone. Instead outside agencies were brought in to speed up the process. These groups removed the vessels from where they had been disabled, took them to more secure locations and evaluated each one in turn. Those that could be returned to service were fixed, often using components scavenged from other disabled ships, while the remainder were scrapped."

"Are you saying that Prestus did some of the salvage work T'Lan?" Carr asked, "But we're light years away from the closest battlefield."

"Precisely commander. There is no logic in bringing derelict craft this far unless-"

"Unless someone's planning on diverting some of the salvage for their own purposes." Edwards interrupted.

"But captain, the ordnance those ships could have contained." Carr said, "It doesn't bear thinking about the havoc someone could cause if they got hold of any of it. We could be talking far more firepower than the Maquis ever had."

"Plus ships capable of mounting it." Edwards added.

"You don't think they'd steal complete ships do you?" Carr asked in horror.

"Oh a piece here and there. After ten years they could have put together a ship without the authorities noticing it." Edwards replied, "Lieutenant T'Lan I want you to look into this further. I'll call a full briefing when you've got something. I want to know exactly what got sent here and what happened to it. I want to now how close to being complete that ship could be. Contact Starbase one twenty-three as well if you have to, but we need that information. Understood?"

"Yes captain." T'Lan responded, "I will have my report ready for you as soon as possible."

"Good, an hour it is then. In the mean time I'm going to go and speak with Commander White about the practicalities of conducting fighter operations near the gas giant." Edwards said as he got to his feet and headed to the door to the bridge. At the doorway he came to a sudden halt and frowned, looking around, "Can someone please tell me why all the consoles sound so loud this morning?" he asked and both Cole and Hamilton averted their gaze as Carr and West glared in their directions.

### 3.

"A *Miranda*-class?" Lieutenant Commander White asked, his arms folded as he lent against the hull of his *Peregrine*-class fighter in the *Nightfall*'s hangar, "Captain, if one of those ships can tolerate conditions around that gas giant then my fighters can and quiet frankly even without support from the *Nightfall* we can take care of an obsolete destroyer. No matter how well they know the area."

"Its not actually the starship itself that worries me so much." Edwards replied.

"You're not worried about a starship?" White commented.

"Not as much as I am about who'd be responsible commander. Someone who can rebuild a ship and just make it vanish must have some pretty impressive backing."

"Romulan?"

"Perhaps. But I'm also thinking about the Orion Syndicate."

"Ah." White said, "Yeah I can see how that would be a problem. A *Miranda*-class may not be much threat to a modern starship, but to any merchantman it came across it'd be unstoppable."

"And we all know how much the Orion Syndicate prizes its security." Edwards continued, "This gas giant would be just the sort of place they could set up fortifications that we wouldn't know a damn thing about until they were already firing on them."

"I take it you have a plan though captain."

"I do. Max is modifying a probe so that it will tolerate the conditions and we can use it to give us a picture of what's there. I'm thinking that we use a runabout to deliver the probe and act as a command and control ship for your squadron."

"Plus troops?" White asked and Edwards nodded.

"I'm going to get Cole to put together a team." He said.

"I'd have thought Heart and Shry would love to get their men involved." White said.

"Maybe. But if there's anything to be done that isn't aboard a vessel under direct Federation authority then we can't deploy MACOs or Imperial Guard without running it by the locals first and if it is the Orion Syndicate then—"

"Then there could be informers about." White interrupted, nodding his agreement, "Oh well I suppose Cole's people are up it."

"Captain are you available to speak?" T'Lan's voice said via Edwards' combadge and the captain tapped it to activate the transmitter.

"I'm here lieutenant."

"Captain I have the information you requested."

"Good. So are we on the right track?" Edwards asked.

"The right track?" T'Lan repeated.

"Has someone rebuilt a starship in this system lieutenant?"

"I believe so sir."

"Okay. Then transfer your report to the briefing room and I'll meet you there with the other senior officers. Edwards out."

The heads of each of the *Nightfall*'s departments sat around the table of the ship's main briefing room, aside from Max who rarely sat down anyway and T'Lan who was stood by the main display screen in the room. In addition to the Starfleet personnel Noyal and two other men were present as well. One of these was human and the other was Andorian, both of who wore the uniforms of their own homeworld's militaries, the MACOs and the Imperial Guard.

"So I hear a rumour you've lost a ship captain." The MACO officer said from the opposite end of the table to Edwards, "A bit careless that."

"I'll let T'Lan explain." Edwards replied and he looked towards his science officer, "If you don't mind lieutenant, you may begin."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied and using her PADD she activated the display screen to show various images of wrecked starships, "As I am sure you are all aware the losses suffered by Starfleet during the war with the Dominion were considerable."

"You Vulcans do have a talent for understatement don't you?" the Andorian Captain Shry commented as T'Lan continued.

"The clean up process has involved the work of dozens of bodies other than Starfleet and that includes the Prestus colony government, who recovered well over a hundred vessels and either returned them to Starfleet or broke them up for scrap and supposedly disposed of them."

"Supposedly?" Carr commented.

"Yes commander. I have compared the information available regarding what ships were brought to this system with those brought back into service since and records of hazardous materials disposed of. They do not match."

"So someone in this system does have a *Miranda*-class ship then?" Hamilton asked.

"Actually it's worse than that lieutenant." Max commented.

"Indeed it is." T'Lan added, "Captain I have reviewed all the available data with Lieutenant Maximillian and we can reach no other conclusion than there has been a massive fraud perpetrated here that has resulted in numerous starships simply vanishing."

"Define numerous." Edwards said looking from T'Lan to Max, "Either of you."

T'Lan and Max glanced at one another.

"Twenty-eight." Max said and there were gasps from around the room.

"Twenty-eight?" Edwards repeated.

"Yes sir." T'Lan replied and she altered the display beside her to show the outlines of the ships she and Max had identified as missing, "These break down as twenty-two *Miranda*-class ships, four *Excelsior*-class, one *Ambassador*-class and one *Nebula*-class."

"So that's six squadrons of one command ship and three escorts, plus a four ship destroyer raiding group." Hamilton said.

"Oh that's just great." Cole exclaimed, "Someone having a century out of date *Miranda* was bad enough, but now they've got more than twenty of them."

"Plus a state of the art *Nebula*-class ship that could easily go toe-to-toe with us." King added, frowning.

"There's more." Max said.

"More?" West exclaimed, "What more could there be?"

"I also conducted a review of the individual components returned to Starfleet," T'Lan answered, "and I can find no evidence of any of the photon or quantum torpedoes from any of the salvaged vessels to come through this system being put back into our inventory."

"How many?" Edwards asked sternly.

"From the ships that were brought here it could be anywhere up to sixty four thousand." T'Lan replied. Then as there were more gasps and moans she added, "Though that would be a worst case scenario that would require all of the salvaged ships being recovered with their entire complement of torpedoes intact and unfired."

"Do we actually know that all these ships are still in this system?" Nayal asked, having up until now just listened patiently to the briefing.

"Where else would they be?" Shry asked.

"They could have been sold." White replied.

"I've been toying with the idea that the Orion Syndicate is involved." Edwards announced, "But quite frankly this seems a bit big even for them. For now we'll operate under the assumption that every ship on T'Lan's list is still here."

"Then we need reinforcements." Carr said, "Captain, even with our fighters we can't fight a force that big."

"No we can't." Edwards agreed, "But we may not have to. A force of that size needs an equally large crew and they need to be trained. Unless our mystery looters have come with enough crewmen then those ships are just targets." Then he looked at Cole, "Lieutenant commander I want you to beam down to the surface and pay a visit to the local defence forces. See if you can get a look at their records and see if they've noticed any increase in unexplained starship sightings over the last ten years. Also we need to know if they've lost any equipment, if someone's willing to steal from us then they're not going to be worried about stealing from a local force."

"Keep it under wraps though?" Cole asked.

"Yes." Edwards replied, "I don't want to tip anyone off. Particularly if it means that they come at us with their armada."

"Captain I believe that I should accompany the lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and both Cole and Edwards looked at her, "If the same techniques have been used to manipulate the local defence force inventories as was used to hide the misappropriation of our vessels then I will know what to look for."

"That's true captain." Cole added.

"Then it's settled." Edwards said, "The two of you will beam down to investigate the local situation. Make sure you're both armed, just in case. Phaser twos I think."

"What about having a tactical team on standby just in case they need extracting?" the MACO officer suggested.

"Yes, but it'll have to be Starfleet security Captain Heart." Edwards replied, "If I send yours or captain Shry's men down to a sovereign world without an invitation there'll be hell to pay."

"Why is that?" Noyal asked, "Isn't this a Federation world?"

"It'll look like Earth and Andoria are attempting to exercise control over Prestus. This isn't the Romulan Empire Noyal, the core worlds don't dominate the other members and both Captain Heart and Captain Shry and their men are technically forces of their own worlds rather than the Federation itself." Carr answered.

"Where do we stand with the probe?" Edwards then asked Max.

"I have adjusted a class two probe to reduce its sensor profile and be able to distinguish between the natural emissions of the gas giant and those of artificial origin captain." He replied, "The modifications will also allow for the probe to be able to avoid the disturbances and remain on station longer. Barring it being discovered and shot down it should be able to remain in orbit of the gas giant for seventy two hours and make one complete orbit every two hours."

"So we'll get a full picture updated regularly then." Edwards said, "Good. Now are there any questions?"

"I have one." King said, "What happens if we find out that all those ships are here and they're operational?" Edwards paused.

"I need a tactical update on all Starfleet units in the region. Lieutenant Commander Carr, I want you to handle that while Cole is on the surface."

"Yes captain." Carr replied.

"Okay then, on the basis that we'll be going into action soon I want the ship kept on yellow alert. But above all we mustn't let slip what we know."

"What little we know." Noyal commented.

"Precisely." Edwards responded, "So as far as the planetary authorities are concerned everything is normal and we're not on a heightened state of alert. Now everyone get to work."

"I am sorry but I cannot help you right now Nikki." T'Lan said as Nikki stood in the doorway to her quarters while she packed a small case, checking the setting on her phaser before adding it to the collection of tools and electronic diagnostic instruments she had collected together.

"This paper's due tomorrow and Max is too busy to help either. I don't know what's going on but it's got everyone running around like crazy." Nikki said, "Will you be able to help me before then?"

"Perhaps." T'Lan replied as she then slipped a tricorder into a pouch at her waist, "I have to beam down to the planet's surface for a while. But I should be back before this evening. Will that suffice?"

"It should, thanks. Let me know if there's ever anything I can do for you."

"I am a science officer. I doubt that there is any subject that-" T'Lan began and then she paused.

"What?" Nikki asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No. I am fine. But I there may be something in which you can offer me some advice."

"Sure anything. What is it?"

"We can discuss it later if I consider it appropriate. In the mean time I must be going. Lieutenant Commander Cole will be waiting for me and I do not wish to cause him delay. I have found that it makes him harder to deal with."

"Okay then." Nikki said, stepping aside to allow T'Lan to leave her quarters and then she raised her right hand in an approximation of the standard Vulcan greeting, "Live long and prosper. Right?"

"Close." T'Lan replied, holding up her hand in the correct form.



As T'Lan had expected Cole was already in the transporter room when she arrived. Unlike her he wore his phaser openly on his waist, but he was taking no other special equipment.

"Got everything?" he asked her, glancing at the case.

"Yes lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "I have all the equipment I expect us to require. If we need anything more—"

"Never mind that now." Cole interrupted and he looked towards the transporter operator, "Set us down outside the defence ministry headquarters. I don't want to go setting off any alarms by beaming straight in." "Yes sir." The operator replied. Then when T'Lan was in position on the transporter pad with him Cole gave the order.

"Energise."

Cole and T'Lan materialised in the street outside the entrance to a large building that had a uniformed guard standing beside it.

"Can I help you?" the guard asked as his surprise at seeing the two Starfleet officers suddenly appear subsided and his hand moved away from the phaser he carried.

"We need to access some of your records." Cole said.

"Ah, then you'll have to speak with someone inside." The guard said and he stepped aside to allow Cole and T'Lan access.

"Thank you." Cole replied as they walked past the guard.

Inside the defence ministry there were two more guards sat behind a desk who looked up as the Starfleet officers approached them.

"How may I help you?" one them asked.

"We need to run a check on the logs from your subspace sensor arrays." Cole replied.

"Is there a problem with them?" the guard then asked.

"I don't think so." Cole told him, "We just need to make sure that our records are up to date."

"Why not just get them uploaded to your ship?" the other guard asked.

"Because this is how my captain ordered us to get the data." Cole replied sternly, "Now are you going to let us in or not?"

"You are required by Federation law to share all data from the orbital and surface mounted subspace—" T'Lan began before the first guard interrupted her.

"Yeah I know that. You can come in." he said, picking up a scanner, "I just to need to verify who you are." And he held the scanner out to the combadges that Cole and T'Lan wore, "Okay you check out. You can go on through. Records are in the basement. Someone there will show you to an office." The guards then both waited and watched as Cole and T'Lan headed for the nearby turbolift and as soon as they were out of sight the one who had spoken with the two Starfleet officers activated the communications panel in front of him, "I have a message for General Harris. Tell him that Starfleet just turned up asking for access to our records."

"Okay we're clear." Cole said as he peered out of the tiny room he and T'Lan had been shown to before stepping fully inside to allow the door to close. Two chairs were placed in front of the desk and computer terminal that was the only feature of the room and T'Lan sat down in front of the terminal and brought it online.

"This appears to possess a standard interface." She commented, "This should not take long."

"Good." Cole replied as he sat down beside her, "Because I don't have any idea how we could explain it if we were caught accessing anything other than sensor logs. I'm in your hands here."

"Then I shall endeavour to please you lieutenant commander." T'Lan said as she began to sort through the menu structure of the computer in front of her. After several seconds she paused.

"Found something already?" Cole asked, peering at the screen.

"No. But to proceed further I will need to bypass some of the network's identification protocols. I brought along a module that will assist me in this from the *Nightfall*."

"Let me." Cole said, bending down to where T'Lan had set down her case. He did so at the same time as T'Lan and they came close to colliding.

"I am sorry commander." She said, backing off.

"No. My fault." Cole replied and he picked up the case and placed in on the desk.

"Thank you." T'Lan said. Then she opened the case and removed an isolinear chip and a multipurpose tool. Standing up, she used the tool to open up the rear of the computer and exchanged one of the isolinear chips inside for the one she had brought with her.

"So what will that do?" Cole asked.

"When the network issues any security queries the chip will also download the correct response and echo it back to the source. We should be able to continue without any need to provide any security verification."

"Then let's see if there's more than just starships going missing in this system."

There were several individuals all in military uniforms sat at computer terminals in the room when an older man entered. He too wore a military uniform, but his bore the markings of much higher rank.

"General present!" one of the computer operators called out when he saw the man and everyone present got to their feet and stood at attention.

"As you were." The general said and as the men sat down again he approached one of them, "Well?" he asked.

"They're in sir." He answered and he pointed to his screen where a network data location was displayed. As the general watched the location shifted in time with T'Lan's exploration of the defence force network.

"What about the security?" the general asked.

"They're bypassing it sir. I'm not sure how. But I can terminate their connection if you-"

"No. Let them continue for now. Starfleet has access to superior technology than we do so it's not unexpected. But I want you to log every file they access and send the list to me. Then delete all records of this. Do you understand?"

"Err, not really sir."

"Then just do it."

"Of course sir."

The general then turned and left the room, making his way to his own office where he sat down and activated the communicator on his desk.

"It General Harris." He said, "Tell him that Starfleet are poking about in the defence network. I've got someone keeping tabs on them and I'll take a team to deal with them if they get too far." And then he shut off the device.

"So what do we have?" Edwards asked, sitting in his chair on the bridge and looked at Carr sat beside him as she reviewed Starfleet deployments in the region, "Apart from a pounding headache?"

Carr frowned briefly and then turned her display to give the captain a better view of the map marked with Starfleet emblems.

"There's nothing within five days of us captain." She began and she tapped the display where the closest Starfleet emblem was shown, "Taskforce Anderson is the closest to us. Four *Steamrunner*-class ships. The *Thunderbird* under Captain Tracey, the *Stingray* under Captain Tempest, the *Fireball* under Captain Zodiac and the *Spectrum* under Captain Scarlet."

"Well that's a start I suppose." Edwards replied.

"Shall I request they divert to rendezvous with us?"

"No. Not yet. If whoever has those starships sees them coming then it could provoke them into launching before they get here. We'll continue as we are for now until we've got a better idea of what we're up against. Then if we need to we'll pull out of the system and hook with the taskforce. Then we'll have much better odds than going up against those missing ships alone."

"And in the mean time I suppose we just need to wait and find out what Cole and T'Lan can discover."

Cole was leant back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head while T'Lan continued to work. He had watched the screen for a while, but the Vulcan worked so quickly that he had been unable to keep up and soon become bored.

He yawned.

"That is unusual." T'Lan said, raising an eyebrow.

"No its not." Cole replied, "I'm bored. It makes me sleepy and I yawn when I'm sleepy."

"No sir. I meant this." T'Lan said and she pointed at the display. Cole leant forwards and looked at the screen.

"What am I looking at here?" he asked.

"I have found no evidence of equipment missing from the stocks of the local defence forces. But I have discovered that two installations have been removed from official records."



"Installations? What sort of installations?" Cole asked, sitting up straight and alert, "Are we talking about planetary phaser banks?"

"No commander. All tactical systems are in order, but two bases were emptied eight years ago and then deleted from all distribution and service systems. They are no longer officially supplied or maintained and yet there is no record of their closure."

"So you're telling me that two bases simply vanished?"

"That is correct."

"But that no equipment was stolen from them?"

"No. As far as I can tell even the furniture was removed and redeployed to other bases."

"So why would someone want to empty two military bases and then pretend they didn't exist any more?" Cole asked.

"Logically I can think of only one reason. They had something they needed to store in secret and had nowhere else to keep it."

Cole grinned.

"T'Lan I could kiss you. Now come let's go."

"To somewhere where you can kiss me? Is this room not suitable?"

"No. Let's go see what's in those bases." Cole replied and he raised his hand to his combadge, but before he could activate it T'Lan reached out and stopped him.

"That would not be advisable. Given that we are inside a defence force facility there is every possibility that any transmission we make could be intercepted." She cautioned him.

"Good point." Cole said, "Then we better leave the way came in and contact the ship from outside."

"That would make logical sense."

"You want to go where?" West asked when Cole contacted the *Nightfall*.

"Yes, I know it looks like the middle of nowhere but trust me, T'Lan thinks she's on to something and I think she's right." Cole told her, "I want a site to site transport that puts us down about five hundred metres from that location."

West sighed.

"Okay, I'll see what I can come up with. Do you want me to let the captain know?"

"Yes. There's a second location and he may want to send someone else to investigate it before T'Lan and I can get back." Cole said. The he glanced at T'Lan, "Upload the other co-ordinates." He said and T'Lan nodded.

"Okay I've got them." West said, "Standby for transport. *Nightfall* out."

"Right then." Cole said as he looked at T'Lan, "It looks like we're all set." And then there was the familiar sensation of a transporter engaging.

The pair materialised in a forest and immediately T'Lan opened up her tricorder and began to scan the area.

"Won't they pick that up?" Cole asked.

"I am limiting myself to passive scanning commander." T'Lan responded and then she pointed through the trees, "This way. About four hundred and ninety metres. There is an energy source."

"I'll lead." Cole said, drawing his phaser and making his way through the trees, "Let me know if you pick anything else up."

"Of course commander."

Their path took them to the edge of the forest where a basic chain link fence that extended in both directions. Beyond the fence there were several squat buildings that looked to be of sturdy construction.

"So was this the energy source?" Cole asked quietly, looking in both directions, "Is this thing electrified?"

"No commander. The energy source is coming from within this facility though. I believe that it is from that building over there." T'Lan replied and she pointed to one of the larger buildings visible.

"Well I don't see any guard towers so we may just be able to climb the fence and sneak in."

"I would not advise that."

"Oh really? Why not?"

"Without running an active scan I cannot tell if there are tension detectors built into the fence that would alert any security personnel to our presence."

"And an active scan could be detected."

"Indeed. The same goes for using a phaser to cut through the fence. The energy discharge would be easily detectable to even the most basic of passive sensors."

"So we can't go over it or through it. That only leaves going under it, but we don't have the time or equipment to dig a tunnel. Unless-" Cole said and he looked at the equipment case T'Lan still carried.

"You have an idea?"

"I do." Cole said, "Empty that case."

"I assure you commander, there is nothing in here that we can use to—"

"It's not your tools I'm interested in. It's the case itself. We'll separate it into halves and use them as shovels to scrape away enough of the soil to allow us to get under."

"Your idea has merit commander." T'Lan said, opening up the case and removing the equipment. Most of it she placed beside the closest tree, but her phaser she instead fastened to her waist.

"Problem?" White asked as the runabout pitched sharply.

"No, none at all." Carr replied, lying. She was still feeling the effects of the Romulan ale from the previous evening and the disparity between being sat still in the shuttle and seeing the terrain outside as it shot past was making her feel quite nauseous, "Oh, why couldn't this place be on the same side of the planet as the *Nightfall*? Then we could just beam down and I wouldn't have to put up with you flying like a madman. This isn't one of your fighters you know."

White smiled.

"Would you prefer it if one of the MACO or Imperial Guard pilots had flown instead?" he asked.

"Absolutely not. Those guys always fly like they're under fire, never mind trying to get in under sensor coverage." Carr answered.

"Well hang on because I need to make a sharp turn around those cliffs up ahead, then we should be right over the base."

"Okay I'm on the sensors." Carr said and she turned her attention to the console in front of her.

"Hang on." White said as he performed another sudden turn that even the runabout's inertial dampers could not fully negate and Carr wretched as the craft rolled onto its side as it flew above a cluster of buildings below.

"Wow." She commented, "For an abandoned base there sure is a lot of activity down there. Look."

White threw a glance at the display, trusting in the runabout's systems to prevent it from flying right into the ground. The runabout's passive sensors had had no difficulty in detecting the movement of the people below, while thermal imaging had picked up even more inside the buildings.

"There's a lot of energy being output from down there." He commented.

"No kidding." Carr responded, "It's as if every square centimetre of the buildings has been filled with something electronic."

"And not just any electronics either." White added, "Whatever equipment they're running down there is really power hungry."

"Problem is that with all those people down there we'll never be able to sneak in without being spotted." Carr said.

"Too late to worry about that I think." White said as an alarm sounded, "We've got company. Looks like a pair of interceptors."

"Can we outrun them?"

"At this altitude? No chance. But since we've been spotted anyway we may as well just make a break for it."

White said and at the same time he reached out for the thrusters controls. The sound of the runabout's engines grew as the craft suddenly gained altitude, causing Carr to quickly grasp the arms of her seat as she feared she was about to vomit.

## 5.

With a narrow channel scraped in the ground beneath the fence, Cole and T'Lan crawled under it on their stomachs. They paused just inside the fence and Cole drew his phaser as he looked around for any sign that they had been observed. Meanwhile T'Lan took out her tricorder again.

"Still the same?" Cole asked.

"It is." T'Lan replied, "There are low level energy emissions from the building directly ahead of us."

"Then I see no need to wait. Let's see how secure that window is." Cole said, looking directly at a window set at ground level.

They scurried forwards, sliding to a halt beside the window and resting up against the side of the building. Cole looked down at the window, but from this close it was easy to see that the inside had been painted over.

"Looks like someone doesn't want us seeing what's in there." He commented.

"But my readings indicate that the power source is very close commander."

"Then we need to get in. Ideas?"

"My tricorder." T'Lan suggested, "I can set it to produce a short range sonic beam. By varying the frequency it may be possible to find one suitable to shatter the glass."

"Do it." Cole told her and T'Lan began to adjust her tricorder. There was a sudden high pitched whining sound and T'Lan held the device out, pressing it up against the window. The frequency of the sound increased steadily and after a few seconds Cole was unable to hear it any longer, "Well so much for that idea. Got a plan B?"

"None is necessary commander. The sound has merely gone beyond the range of your hearing, that is all." T'Lan replied and then there was a sudden 'Crack!' as the window broke, cracks spreading out from around where the tricorder was making contact.

"Well done." Cole said as T'Lan folded up the tricorder and Cole struck the centre of the damaged window with the grip of his phaser, knocking the glass out. Cole then winced as he heard the pieces of glass falling to the floor inside, "Oh I hope no one else heard that." He added, putting his phaser back in its holster and then he got down on his stomach and began to crawl through the destroyed window. T'Lan watched as Cole crawled into the building until he suddenly vanished, gasping as he fell the remainder of the way.

"Lieutenant commander? Are you injured?" she asked, peering into the darkness inside.

"Just my pride." Cole replied, "Be careful as you come through."

"I have no pride to be injured commander." T'Lan said as she too began to crawl through the window and like Cole she reached a point where she lost her balance and suddenly slid through the rest of the way. Unlike Cole though she had a softer landing as she landed on her superior. The pair collapsed in a heap with T'Lan on top of Cole, his face buried in her chest, "I apologise commander." She said as she picked herself up.

"Not at all lieutenant." Cole replied as he also stood up and he looked around. The room was unlit and although he could tell that it was filled with something that had been stacked up he could not tell exactly what it was, "Now let's find out what's in here shall we? First order of business, find a light switch."

"I suggest following the wall."

"You don't say." Cole replied as T'Lan began to feel her way along the wall. Then he began to feel his way along in the other direction.

"Commander I believe I have found a doorway." T'Lan called out, "It is logical that a light switch should close by. Yes, this seems to be it." And then there was a brief flickering before the room was lit up to reveal both its massive size and contents. Cole gasped as he saw what it contained.

"Well." He commented as he looked around the room, "It seems we've found the torpedoes."

"Eleven thousand nine hundred and four of them." T'Lan responded.

"Huh?"

"Each stack appears to contain eight torpedoes. There are twenty four stacks in each row and there are sixty two rows." T'Lan explained, "That makes a total of—"

"Yes, I heard. Just under twelve thousand."

"Eleven thousand nine hundred—"

"Yes I heard T'Lan." Cole interrupted, "Now let's see if we can pull some serial numbers off these things and prove where they came from."

"Say that again." General Harris said over the noise of the hopper's engines. The vessel had been on final approach when the signal had come in and he had not quite understood what had been said.

"A Starfleet vessel has just over flown site alpha sir." The voice repeated.

"Did it land?" Harris asked in response.

"No sir and there were no transporter signatures. But it definitely flew right over the base at an altitude that may have been intended to avoid detection."

"Did they scan the base?"

"Not with active sensors."

"So they'll have no idea what's in there then."

"There are two interceptors in pursuit, but the Starfleet vessel will be in range of its mothership before they get into engagement range."

"Then tell them to break off. We're about to set down at site bravo and I want to take these people by surprise. That's not going to happen if we're taking pot shots at one of their ships."

"Yes sir, I'll order them to return to base."

"You do that. Oh and while you're at it get in touch with George and let him know I should have something for him soon."

"Touching down now general." The hopper pilot called out just as Harris shut off the communicator.

"Okay men this is it." Harris called out to the soldiers in the hopper with him, "Remember, phasers on stun. What's stored here doesn't react too well to high energy particle beams." And then the hopper's main hatch hissed open and the soldiers rushed out, their weapons held at the ready.

"T'Lan come and look at these." Cole called out as he looked at several stacks of torpedoes that appeared different to the others. Their markings were still those of Starfleet, but the physical structure differed somewhat.

"Quantum torpedoes." T'Lan said as she saw them, "How many have you found?"

"It looks like all of them back here are quantum torpedoes instead of photons. I'd say several hundred of them at least." Cole said and then he placed his hand on one of the torpedoes where a thick cable had been connected to a port in its casing. Each of the torpedoes, both photon and quantum featured an identical cable, "I'm guessing that these are the cause of the energy emissions." He said.

"Indeed commander. They appear to be power lines that are maintaining the magnetic field that holds the warhead. If it were not for these then undoubtedly they would have failed some time ago."

Cole suddenly withdrew his hand as he realised the implication of this.

"These things are live!" he exclaimed and he looked around frantically, "T'Lan what happens if any of these should happen to go off?"

"In all likelihood any accidental detonation would produce a chain reaction that would cause all eleven thousand nine hundred and—"

"I get it." Cole said, "Boom. Right?"

"Yes commander."

"Okay then let's get out of here. All of a sudden I don't feel safe here." Cole then said but before either of them could move a doorway slid open and men in the uniform of the local defence force began to swarm into the room. Instinctively Cole reached for his phaser.

"Don't touch it!" one of the soldiers yelled as they surrounded the Starfleet officers, their weapons trained on them and Cole's hand stopped just short of the holster, hovering over the weapon's grip.

"I'd listen to them if I were you lieutenant commander. Cole isn't it?" General Harris said as he entered the room, "And you must be Lieutenant T'Lan." he added.

"I am." T'Lan answered.

"Of course." General Harris replied, "Now I suggest you surrender your weapons and combadges because you are both under arrest."

Carr inhaled sharply as White flew the runabout back into the *Nightfall's* hangar, making use of one of the access doors at the rear of the saucer section instead of the main launch door at the front.

"You do realise that these things can go slower don't you?" she said just as White finally decelerated and brought the runabout to a sudden halt right in front of one of the hangar marshals.

"To me that was slow." White replied with a smile and with the runabout still hovering above the deck he pivoted it sharply enough that Carr gasped and clutched the arms of her chair before setting it down on an elevator platform that could move it down into its storage and maintenance hangar.

The hatchway towards the rear of the runabout cockpit hissed open and Carr leapt up from her seat and rushed out of the craft. As soon as she was outside she dropped down onto all fours.

"Oh that's so much better." She exclaimed, "I love decks that don't move." Then she noticed as someone walked up to where she was crouched and stood over her. Tilting her head back she looked up into Captain Edwards' face and smiled at him.

"Lieutenant commander." He said.

"Captain." She responded.

Stood beside Edwards, Max also looked down at Carr.

"Do you require medical attention lieutenant commander? I can summon Doctor King if you-" he asked.

"No. I'm just grateful that this deck is nice and still." Carr answered.

"At least until Mister Hamilton gets the opportunity to put this ship through its paces again." Edwards said and he held out a hand to help Carr back to her feet.

"Thank you sir." She said as she took it.

"You're welcome. Now what did you find?"

"I've got the logs right here." White said as he exited the runabout, holding up a PADD and Edwards threw a glance at Max, "Whatever's going on down there it requires some pretty hefty power generation." White went on as he handed the PADD to the Borg engineer.

"Liase with Noyal." Edwards told Max, "If there are any Romulans involved she may recognise something in that log."

"We didn't notice any Romulans captain." White said.

"Though we weren't exactly moving slow enough to get a detailed look." Carr added.

"Well we'll leave it to Max and Noyal to figure out." Edwards said, "In the mean time I think that you should get some rest."

General Harris looked up as one of his subordinates entered his office.

"Well major?" he asked.

"The prisoners are secure general. But shouldn't we at least try and interrogate them?"

"No major you should not."

"But don't we need to know what they know sir?"

"Starfleet knows nothing major. If they did know anything then they wouldn't just sent a pair of officers sneaking around the warehouse, they'd have sent a much larger away team. Now I have a meeting with the governor in under an hour and I need to figure out what to tell him. By this point he probably already knows that we've detained a pair of Starfleet officers and will be wanting to know why. We may need to be ready earlier than intended. Can we be?"

The major paused as he thought.

"I'll get in touch with the shipyard sir. But what about the warehouse?"

"It will need emptying major. But not while there's a Starfleet heavy cruiser in orbit. For now just increase the number of guards and set up a transport inhibitor. But try and make it look natural. That starship doesn't know about the torpedoes yet and probably doesn't know that we've got two of their crew. Let's try and keep it that way until we decide otherwise. Understood?"

"Yes general. I'll get right on it."

"Well this is cosy isn't it?" Cole said as he looked around the cell in which he and T'Lan had been placed.

The room was featureless apart from a raised platform that ran along the wall opposite to the door and it was upon this platform that the two officers now sat beside one another. Unlike the brig aboard a starship that used a force field across the entrance to keep prisoners inside this cell made use of a simple heavy metal door. This meant that although the only way for a guard to see the prisoners was to open door.

"It would seem that this cell is designed for a single occupant lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.

"Strange that they put us in here together." Cole commented, "They must not be worried about us conspiring to escape."

"Perhaps because logically we cannot."

"What do you mean T'Lan?"

"The door is sealed from the outside and we have no tools with which to break the seal. We know that there are armed guards in the building, but do not now how many or how they are deployed. Even if we were able to exit the building, without our combadges we cannot contact the-"

"I get it." Cole interrupted, "Though I don't much like the idea of sitting here until the *Nightfall* can find us.

Now the general knows that he's been discovered he'll probably pass those torpedoes onto whoever they're intended for."

"Logic suggests that there is no other party involved lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.

"How so?"

"Given how long it has been since the base used to store the torpedoes was removed from official records it would indicate that they are not to be delivered to anyone else. If there was someone else expecting to take delivery of them then they would have done so by now."

"So the general's stockpiling enough torpedoes to equip a starbase or two for his own personal use? But who does he intend to use them against?"

"There are three possibilities lieutenant commander."

"You know what T'Lan? Dispense with the lieutenant commander for now. Just call me Robert while we're in here. It'll save time."

"As you wish. Robert."

"Good. Now tell me who the general could be intended to fire torpedoes at."

"Firstly there are the Romulans. The faction in their civil war closest to Prestus is known to be hostile to the Federation."

"Okay. Romulans. Who else?"

"Klingon space is fairly close by also. The feudal nature of their society makes raids by them impossible to rule out."

"Almost twelve thousand torpedoes would see off more than just a raid T'Lan. But I suppose you're right that some Klingon house could decide to use Prestus for target practice. Now you said there were three possibilities and you've covered both major powers in the area so who is there left?"

"The Federation."

"What? Us? But what reason would he have to think that we'd attack Prestus? It can't be the starships he's amassed. They're just a means to deliver the torpedoes."

"Perhaps because of something he intends to do at some point in the future."

"Something the Federation wouldn't approve of? But the governor could just have him arrested."

"Assuming that the governor is still in power." T'Lan replied and Cole's eyes widened.

"You can't seriously be suggesting," he began, "that the general is planning a military coup?"

"Logic suggests that it is a real possibility." T'Lan said.

## **6.**

Max and Nayal entered Captain Edwards' ready room together.

"I take it you've got something from the sensor logs." Edwards said to them as Nayal sat down while Max remained standing behind her.

"It's not Romulan." Nayal replied, "If my people are involved in what's going on in this system then they're keeping a low profile."

"Rather than telling me what's not going on how about you tell me what is?" Edwards said.

"The energy readings are identical to those created by Federation holodecks captain." Max answered.

"Lots of holodecks." Nayal added.

"Fourteen to be exact." Max then said, "Though it is possible that there were more that were not operation when Carr and White flew over."

"We're guessing that they were plundered from some of the ships brought here that were considered write-offs." Nayal then said.

"Its not like holodeck technology is restricted though." Edwards said, "So why go to the trouble of taking them from wrecked ships?"

"I would offer two reasons captain." Max said, "Firstly it means that the resources that would have been required to construct them can be used elsewhere and secondly it means that programs present within their databanks can be made use of."

"You mean like Starfleet training simulations." Edwards said sternly.

"Precisely captain." Max replied, "Commercially available flight simulators do not provide every detail of starship operations."

"Which is a problem if you've got twenty-eight starships that need crewing." Nayal commented.

"This ties these bases to the missing ships." Edwards said, "But none of it answers the questions of who is responsible and why."

"Regrettably not captain." Max responded and Edwards tapped his combadge.

"Bridge. Have Cole or T'Lan checked in yet?"

"No captain." West's voice replied, "Do you want me to contact them?"

"No." Edwards told her, "We don't want to interrupt anything they may be doing. Just try and get a lock on their combadges for now. I want to make sure they're still alright."

"Yes captain." West said and then the channel went silent.

"I don't like this." Edwards said to Max and T'Lan, "Those two have had plenty of time to check out that other base. Now what about the probe?"

"The probe has yet to reach the orbit of the gas giant captain. The mission requirements necessitated a sublight velocity, but we should start receiving telemetry within three hours." Max said.

"So until then all we can do is wait to hear about Cole and T'Lan." Edwards said before being interrupted by West.

"Captain there's no response from either Lieutenant Commander Cole or Lieutenant T'Lan's combadges. They're definitely inactive."

"Very well. We'll just have to—" Edwards began before west cut him off.

"There is another signal coming in from the surface though captain." She said, "It's Governor George and he wants to speak to you directly."

"Put him through them." Edwards replied and he turned to face the display mounted on his desk, "Let's see what he wants." He then muttered before the display activated to show an image of a grey haired man with a stern expression, "Governor George. I wasn't expecting to here from—"

"And I wasn't expecting to hear from my security people that members of your crew have been violating my planetary sovereignty captain. Explain yourself." The governor replied.

"Err. I'm not sure that I know what you mean governor." Edwards said.

"Don't give me that captain. Two of your officers were caught red handed. They broke into a classified computer system and then broke into a restricted area."

Edwards glanced away from the display, towards Max and T'Lan.

"Perhaps if I could speak with my officers." He then said to Governor George.

"You can explain yourself to me captain." The governor said and as Edwards drew in breath to reply he then added, "Not like this. In my office. I want to see you down here right away and mark my words captain I will be lodging an official complaint with Starfleet over this." And then the screen went blank as the governor terminated the connection.

"So the locals have them." Max said.

"That's what it look like." Edwards replied as he got up.

"If they were caught inside the other base is it possible that they were just shot?" Nayal asked and Edwards paused.

"No." he responded, "The local military wouldn't dare do that. At worst they'd have been stunned and taken into custody."

"If you say so." Nayal said, "But it wouldn't work like that in the Empire."

"Fortunately this isn't the Romulan Empire Nayal." Edwards replied, "But just in case I don't think I should go down there alone." And then he tapped his combadge again, "Doctor King?"

"King here." The doctor responded.

"Doctor, can you meet me in transporter room one in five minutes. I'm beaming down to the surface and I'd like you to accompany me."

"Certainly captain. Will I need to bring a phaser?"

"No, just basic medical equipment. Where we're going it wouldn't be the done thing to turn up armed."

The building that housed the governor's office featured a transporter room of its own and it was here that Captain Edwards and Doctor King materialised to be met by an official from the governor's staff.

"If you'll come with me gentlemen, the governor is waiting for you now." The man said to the two Starfleet officers without displaying any hint of emotion.

"Friendly around here aren't they?" King whispered to Edwards as they stepped off the transporter pads and followed the man, "Why do I get the feeling that this isn't just a quick meeting to provide the governor with a good photo opportunity to impress his constituents?"

"Just be ready with that tricorder doctor." Edwards replied, "If our people have been mistreated then I want to know right away."

"Mistreated? What the hell is going on here?"

The door to the governor's office slid open almost silently to reveal not only Governor George sat behind his ornate desk but also General Harris sat in another chair in front of it and as the Starfleet officers entered the office the general got to his feet. The doors slid shut again behind Edwards and King and then Governor George leaned forwards, resting his elbows on the desk.

"Sit down gentlemen." he said, his eyes darting towards more vacant chairs.

"Governor," Edwards said as they sat down, "may I ask-"

"No." the governor interrupted, "You are not here to ask questions, you are here to answer them. Why did two of your officers break into a government building? What is it you think you are hunting for?"

Edwards inhaled deeply.

"Governor George. I can assure you that my crew have acted only in accordance with Federation law." He replied.

"Oh really? Then just how do you explain this?" the governor asked, leaning back once more and pressing a button on the touch screen in front of him. The doors then slid open once more and a pair of soldiers entered, bringing with them Cole and T'Lan. Edwards glanced at King who stood up and took out his tricorder, holding the medical probe towards them each in turn.

"We haven't been mistreated captain." Cole said.

"We've been exceptionally patient with them in fact." General Harris said as he stood up, "We could have simply passed them over to civilian law enforcement and had them charged with criminal trespass and breaking and entering."

"Though that would mean you'd have to explain the torpedoes to them." Cole commented.

"The torpedoes?" King said, glancing at Edwards.

"Eleven thousand nine hundred and four." T'Lan said, "A mix of photon and quantum torpedoes."

"Care to explain those to the governor general?" Cole asked, turning to face General Harris.

"Captain, it appears that the general is planning to overthrow the legitimate government." T'Lan added as King scanned her and the surprised King briefly turned towards the general.

Governor George snorted and both he and the general grinned.

"Captain Edwards," the governor said, "I can assure you that General Harris has not been assembling a secret arsenal."

"We saw it governor." Cole said, staring at Governor George.

"Yes I'm sure you did lieutenant commander. After all I'm the one who gave the order to place them in the facility you broke into." The governor replied calmly.

"What?" Edwards exclaimed, taken aback by his frank admission.



"Captain I am required by Federation law to administer this world in a manner that allows for its continued security and since we are located only a few light years away from then rapidly disintegrating Romulan Empire I believe that taking precautions against an attack by them is only reasonable."

"Reasonable?" Edwards exclaimed, "Twelve thousand-

"Eleven thousand nine hundred and-" T'Lan began.

"Yes I heard!" Edwards snapped.

"She keeps doing that." Cole muttered.

"Governor those torpedoes are the property of Starfleet and I must insist that you surrender them to me immediately." Edwards said, scowling at the governor.

"I think not captain." General Harris responded.

Edwards got to his feet, still frowning.

"Governor you may rest assured that I will be informing Starfleet command of your failure to turn over those torpedoes and you can be certain that action will be taken." He said.

"Oh I'm sure of it." The governor replied, "But action against whom? Both I and my predecessor had it with full legal authority that the contract between us and the Federation in which this world agrees to recover derelict vessels allows us to retain any and all equipment we wish."

"We'll see about that." Edwards said and he looked around at the other *Nightfall* crewmembers present, "Come on. We're leaving."

"Of course." King replied and he held out his hand to the nearby General Harris, "Pleasure to meet you general." He said with a smile. The general paused, confused, but he accepted the doctor's offered hand and shook it.

Edwards turned and marched towards the door, followed by his crewmen while the governor and general just watched. When the door closed again after they had left the two men turned to one another.

"So that's it then." General Harris said, "They know and soon the Federation will as well. You should have denied everything. The time taken for an investigation would have bought us the time to finish the ships."

"Perhaps. But Edwards could have asked to be involved in the investigation and it would have taken only one inconvenient witness to link me to the plan as well. This way is better, but we will need to bring the ships on line faster than expected."

"I've already asked someone to look into it."

"Go and find out for yourself." The governor told the general, "Now."

"Of course." General Harris replied and he turned away from the governor, taking a single step and vanishing into thin air.

"Go and get your combadges replaced." Edward said as he stepped off the transporter pad but without looking at either Cole or T'Lan, "Then meet me in my ready room. I want know exactly what happened down there."

"If it's alright with you I'll be heading back to sickbay." King said.

"Are these two fit for duty?" Edwards asked him, now looking at Cole and T'Lan.

"As Lieutenant Commander Cole indicated we were not mistreated captain." T'Lan commented.

"They're fine." King added.

"Then I see no need to keep from your duties doctor. Carry on." Edwards said.

King nodded and left the transporter room ahead of the others, turning towards the nearest turbolift that would take him to sickbay. When he got to his destination King headed straight into his office and picked up a narrow pick that he ran under one of the fingernails on the hand he had shaken the general's with and the material that he removed he then spread out on a scanner slide.

"Now let's see what you're made of general." He muttered to himself as he sat down and activated the scanner.

"So how are things going Katrina?" General Harris asked as he stepped back into existence in what was clearly a room aboard a Federation starship and the woman he had appeared behind jumped.

"Don't do that!" she snapped at him, "Appear in front of me for goodness sake."

"If I'd done that I couldn't have properly assessed the room." Harris replied, "Supposing someone had been standing over there in the corner and had seen me. What would we do then?"

"Oh like you didn't know the exact position and state of every molecule in this room before you arrived."

Katrina said, "Now what do you want? I'm rather busy you know. This primitive technology does nothing for efficiency."

"That's what I need to know." Harris said, "How long until we can have these ships online? All of them."

"All of them? Are you crazy? None of them are ready. I've got all the parts I need, but the work crews just

aren't up to the task. They are having to learn all this on the job you know. I explained all of this to that little minion of yours you keep getting to call me when I'm trying to work."

"Well Starfleet are on to us. They've over flown the training camp and I caught two of them poking around the warehouse."

"What? How the heck did that happen? Wait no, I know how it happened. It was that warp pulse."

"What warp pulse?" Harris asked and Katrina sighed.

"Some idiot was fitting an anti-matter flow regulator to one of the *Excelsiors* and accidentally the drive. The ship wasn't loaded with anti-matter so the engine couldn't sustain the reaction, but the fusion generators kicked in with just enough power to create a brief subspace burst. All your surface installations are configured to ignore everything that comes out of her but I'm betting that doesn't apply to that *Akira*-class ship in orbit." She explained to him.

"No it doesn't." Harris said, "They're not getting a sensor feed from us. They must have got suspicious that we didn't react and gone looking for why."

"But how come they've not come here?"

"That's a good question Katrina. I suggest you start looking for some evidence of covert surveillance. From what we know of the *Nightfall* it's got some experimental technology aboard and personnel that aren't from Starfleet, so don't just go by the Starfleet playbook because they could be using something new."

"And what will you be doing while I'm mixing counter surveillance with getting these ships up and running?"

"Preparing for whatever Captain Edwards decides to try next." Harris replied and then he turned around and vanished once more.

## 7.

"Do you know how they knew you were there?" Edwards asked as Cole and T'Lan sat down in front of him. Carr was also present, the captain believing that this discussion was one that she needed to be involved in. "No sir." Cole replied, "We could have tripped a passive alarm at almost any point."

"It is also possible that my intrusion into the local defence computer network was detected." T'Lan added.

"Can they fire those torpedoes?" Carr asked.

"Not from the surface." Cole answered, "All of the ones we saw were clearly intended for starship launchers. They couldn't escape the gravitational pull of the planet and still have enough fuel left over for any meaningful manoeuvring."

"They could be adapted for use by orbital defence platforms however." T'Lan added.

"That still requires them to be brought into space." Edwards said, "I'm more concerned about what they can try and hit us with now." Then he looked at Carr, "Do we know the state of their planetary defences?"

"Inactive the last I heard." She replied.

"They must know that we're going to take action." Edwards said, "All that stuff about them having the right to those torpedoes is nonsense and they know it. Let alone the ships."

"Do they know that we know about the missing ships?" Cole asked.

"I didn't mention them to Governor George." Edwards said, "But I doubt they're not smart enough to figure out that we've been looking for anything out of the ordinary."

"That could work in our favour captain." Cole said.

"How so?" Carr asked him.

"Well we think the ships are out by that gas giant right? But the torpedoes for them are on Prestus. Sooner or later they're going to have to try to get those weapons aboard the ships." Cole explained.

"The crews as well." Carr added, nodding gently, "Right now those ships are just targets."

"They still have phasers lieutenant commander." Max pointed out, "And we have no way of confirming whether there are crews on any of them."

"Basically you're saying they could still put up a fight." Hamilton added.

"Assuming we could find them." Edwards said, "But so far there's nothing from the probe Max sent."

"Captain, perhaps now that Governor George is alerted to at least some of our suspicions we should take the *Nightfall* itself to investigate the gas giant. Its sensors are far superior to—" T'Lan began before she was interrupted by the intercom.

"Captain its Doctor King. We need to convene a meeting of the senior officers as soon as possible. I've got new information about General Harris and possibly some of the other local officials involved in this."

"What is it doctor?" Edwards asked.

"I think its best that I show everyone together." King replied.

"Very well then doctor. I'll gather everyone together and you can show us what you've found."

The *Nightfall's* entire senior staff assembled together in the briefing room once more, but this time it was Doctor King who stood beside the main display to show off his findings.

"So what's up doc?" Shry asked.

"When I scanned Lieutenant Commander Cole and Lieutenant T'Lan in the governor's office I also accidentally caught General Harris in the scan," King explained, "and the readings were not what I would consider normal."

"In what way?" Edwards asked.

"His body temperature was low and there was unusual electrical field activity within his nervous system."

"Could he have some sort of medical implant for something?" West asked upon hearing this.

"Oh I think there are implants of some sort in him, but I don't think that any Federation doctor put them there." King replied and he activated the view screen to show two images of magnified cells, "One of these I was able to scrape off the general when I shook his hand." He went on, pointing to one of the images, "While the other comes from the Romulan who tried to sabotage our warp core in the Tieran system."

"But humans and Romulans do not share a common biology doctor." Nayal commented, "Your body has iron at the core of its cells while ours has copper."

"Like Vulcans." Shry added.

"Indeed." King said, "But what these two samples have in common is that they are both necrotic. The individuals they came from were dead even though they were still walking about and acting as if nothing was wrong."

There were nervous looks around the table and Edwards leaned forwards.

"Doctor are you telling us that you think General Harris is one of these – these – what are they anyway?" he asked.

"Well I can't tell you what they are beyond very cleverly reanimated corpses. They could be fully aware or they could just be some sort of puppet being operated from a remote location. But either way we have seen how dangerous they can be and if they are here in this system then we need to find them all quickly."

"They?" Hamilton said, "Who else do you suspect doctor?"

"Governor George." Edwards replied before King could, "He admitted to giving the order to store the torpedoes"

"Then what are we waiting for?" Heart asked, leaning back in his chair, "Arrest them both. Scan the governor and see if he's one of them."

"We need to find the missing ships first." Edwards replied, "If the same group involved at Tieran is manipulating events here then we can't risk letting them get hold of them."

"What about that camp we flew over?" White then asked, "Do we know how many of the people there who are really these things?"

"I took a look at your sensor log to investigate just that possibility," King replied, "and from what I could tell they were all perfect normal. There were none of the abnormalities I noticed in the general."

"So they're just using the locals for their own purposes." Carr said, "Like they did with the Jem'Hadar at Tieran."

"And the Remans." Nayal added, "Didn't the ones you captured indicate that their commander simply vanished right in front of them?"

"They did." Cole replied, "And of course that Romulan simply appeared aboard this ship." Then he turned to Edwards and added, "Captain, they could attempt that again."

"Yes I realise that." Edwards said, nodding, "We need to ensure that the ships is secure. I want guards on all critical areas. In groups of at least four preferably." Then he looked along the length of the table to where Heart and Shry were sat, "We'll need your men as well to secure the ship."

"Not a problem captain." Heart said, "any time you Starfleet boys need your hands holding I'm here to help. But what about this general and the local governor?"

"Do you need a strike force assembling?" Shry then asked in addition.

"There may be a problem with using MACOs or Imperial Guard captain." Cole said, "This is still a Federation world and we don't have permission to deploy troops from Earth or Andor."

"You're really going to worry about that now?" Shry asked him.

"We have to do all this properly." Edwards responded, "The sight of troops from two member worlds invading another will not play out well, no matter how well intentioned. So no, we won't need a strike force from either of you. Lieutenant Commander Cole's security people will have to take care of things on Prestus itself."

"That still leaves the missing ships though." Hamilton commented.

"Exactly." Edwards said, "Those are Federation territory so I can order troops to be deployed there. But we still need to know exactly where they are. Max, is there any news on that yet?"

"None captain." Max answered, "The probe has reached the gas giant and conducted a full orbit, but none of its readings show anything out of the ordinary."

"Actually captain I have a theory regarding that." T'Lan then said.

"Go on." Edwards told her.

"The subspace energy pulse did indeed come from the direction of the system's largest gas giant but that is not the only planetary body there. The gas giant itself is orbited by more than thirty moons. Some of which are up to three thousand kilometres in diameter."

"That's more than big enough to hide a ship behind." Hamilton said, "Or twenty-eight of them. But the gravity pull would still be negligible."

"Indeed lieutenant." T'Lan said before she turned back to Captain Edwards, "Captain I suggest retasking the probe to scan the moons instead. In particular there are three that were located between the gas giant and us at the time that the subspace pulse was emitted. I believe that we should concentrate our efforts on these."

Edwards nodded.

"T'Lan, work with Max and get it done. Commander Carr I want you get in touch with Taskforce Anderson, the locals know we're on to them now so we may as well bring in our reinforcements as soon as possible. The rest of you make sure that your departments are ready for us to go into action."

When Governor George entered his office he noticed that his chair was turned to face away from the door, something he never did.

"It's you isn't it?" he said as soon as the door had slid shut behind him and he would be overheard from outside.

"Of course it is." A child's voice replied and the chair was turned to reveal the young human girl sat in it, "You are being reckless governor." She then added, snarling as she said the word 'governor'.

Governor George snorted.

"You're being paranoid more likely. Its that body. Just because you look like one of their young doesn't mean you have to be afraid of everything like one." He replied.

"Oh I'm not afraid." The girl replied, getting out of the chair and walking towards him, "But you should be. The Romulan faction on the other side of the Neutral Zone is under our control and when this world is independent of the Federation we will control all of the Neutral Zone between here and there. You know how important that is to us don't you? What would happen if anyone started poking their noses into what's there?"

The governor snarled.

"Yes." He hissed, "I know."

"Good. Then we both agree. Failure here would not be looked upon kindly by those in authority." And then with another step the girl was gone.

The governor walked to his now empty chair and sat down, exhaling heavily at the implied threat by the mysterious visitor. Then he smiled and leant forwards to activate his communicator.

"Get me Starbase one twenty-three. I want to speak with Admiral Jennings immediately."

Captain Edwards and Carr were stood behind T'Lan as she reviewed the probe telemetry when West spoke up from ops.

"Signal coming in from Starbase one twenty-three captain." She announced, "Admiral Jennings wants to speak with you. Shall I put him through to your office?"

"No put him on the main viewer." Edwards replied and the view screen that dominated the front wall of the bridge came to life to show a man in a Starfleet admiral's uniform, "Ah Admiral, it's good to—"

"What are you playing at captain?" the admiral demanded. Then before Edwards could respond he went on, "I've just had Governor George demanding to know why you're infringing his sovereignty."

Edwards and Carr looked at one another.

"Admiral I have information that the governor may not be who he claims to be and that he has been diverting Starfleet resources for his own purposes." Edwards explained.

"Oh really?" the admiral asked in reply, "Can you prove any of this?"

"Two of my officers can testify that they saw thousands of torpedoes taken from Starfleet vessels sir."

"Would these be the torpedoes that Governor George says his administration manufactured to resupply their defence platforms captain? The ones your officers could have triggered when they went blundering into a restricted storage facility?"

"Admiral I can assure you that those torpedoes were not of local manufacture." Cole said when he heard this.

"Thank you lieutenant commander, but I'll need more than just your assurances." Admiral Jennings replied, "Can you give me any actual evidence that the governor is lying?"

Cole glanced at T'Lan.

"Unfortunately my tricorder was confiscated admiral." She said.

"So that's a 'no' then is it?" Admiral Jennings asked, "Captain Edwards I want you back here as soon as possible."

"But admiral if we don't take action—" Edwards began but the admiral interrupted him.

"We will take action captain. But not until we have assessed the evidence. Now I've ordered taskforce Anderson back to where its supposed to be and I want you to get your ship and crew to Starbase one twenty-three immediately. Then I'll listen to what you have to say and decide where we go next. Jennings out." And then the image of the admiral was briefly replaced with the emblem of Starfleet before the display went blank entirely.

"He didn't seem happy." Nayal commented from her seat.

"So what do we do now?" Carr asked.

Edwards sighed.

"We return to Starbase one twenty-three and report to the admiral." Edwards replied, "Hopefully between our computer searches, Cole and T'Lan's testimony about the torpedoes and the results of Doctor King's tests we'll be able to convince him to let us come back here."

"You know that by that time we may well need a full task force don't you?" Carr said.

"Yes I am aware of that." Edwards replied and he began to walk towards his ready room, "Lieutenant Hamilton set a course for Starbase one-twenty-three. Warp factor seven." Then just as the door to his ready room opened he halted rather than going through, "But take the scenic route lieutenant. I think that it would be a shame to leave without seeing that gas giant first don't you?"

"Yes sir." Hamilton replied, grinning widely.

## **B.**

"What have you done?" General Harris demanded when his face appeared on the screen in front of Governor George.

"What do you mean?" the governor asked in response.

"I mean why has the *Nightfall* broken orbit? I thought it was supposed to be here for another three days yet."

"Yes, well I thought that with Captain Edwards' people poking about where they're not wanted it would be better if I had them recalled to Starbase one twenty-three."

"Is that so governor? Well perhaps you should see where they're heading. I'll give you a clue, it's not Starbase one twenty-three." And the screen promptly split into two halves, one still showing the general while the other instead showed a sensor readout of the system. The readout clearly showed the Prestus colony itself and also the USS *Nightfall* as it departed. A solid line showed the path that the starship had taken; while a broken line was projected ahead of it to indicate the course it seemed to be taking. A course that led it straight to the system's largest gas giant.

"That can't be." Governor George exclaimed, "Standard procedure is for a ship to leave the orbital plane at impulse and then go to warp as soon as they're clear."

"Well they're travelling at impulse alright." General Harris responded, "But they're not showing any hurry to get out of the system. At their current speed they'll reach the gas giant's subsystem in about three hours. Now at the moment the shipyard is on the far side so they can't see it, but I don't see how they can miss it if they do a full flyby."

Governor George's jaw dropped.

"But if they see the shipyard-" he began.

"Then they'll be fully justified in diverting to investigate. Governor, unless Katrina can get everything and I mean everything shut down in the next three hours then all that we've worked for will have been for nothing. And mark my words governor, when our superiors demand answers both Katrina and I will be handing them your head. Harris out." And the screen went suddenly blank.

Governor George slumped back in his chair.

"They'll kill me." He said to himself.

The bridge of the *Nightfall* was quiet, a sullen mood having come over its crew following the order to withdraw. Edwards himself had left Carr in command and withdrawn to his ready room while he waited for them to reach the gas giant, their last chance to justify their actions to Starfleet.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr I am receiving a signal." T'Lan said suddenly from the science station and Carr turned to face her.

"Can you tell what it is yet?" she asked.

"I believe that it is telemetry from the probe commander." T'Lan replied and Carr leapt up from her seat and darted around the console to see for herself.

"It's the probe alright." She agreed, "And I'd say it's found something." Then she activated the intercom, "Captain I think you should come and see this." She said.

"I'll be right there." Edwards responded moments before the door to his ready room slid open and he walked back onto the bridge, "What have you got?" he asked.

"Put it on the main screen." Carr instructed T'Lan and the screen changed from a forward view from the ship to the data being sent back by the modified probe.

"Is that one of the suspect moons?" Edwards asked.

"It is captain." T'Lan replied, "It was not the most likely, but it was a possibility."

"Right now it's in eclipse from our position captain." West commented.

"Maybe, but the probe's got a decent view." Cole added.

"What's that in the upper left quadrant?" Edwards asked, noticing a discolouration in the surface.

"Actually captain that is located along the moon's equator." T'Lan corrected him, "It is merely the angle of the probe's scans that-"

"Just tell me what it is lieutenant." Edwards interrupted.

"Magnifying." T'Lan said and the image shifted to one that just showed the discoloured portion of the moon. At this level of magnification it became clear that there was a rectangular hole dug straight down into the moon.

"God doesn't do straight lines." Edwards muttered, just loud enough that his crew overheard him.

"I doubt he does deflector shields either." Cole added as he examined the emitters located around the mouth of the opening.

"I believe that it is a low level atmospheric shield captain." T'Lan said.

"Or at least it was." Cole added as he looked at his tactical display, "It just went dark." And on the main view screen there was a sudden cloud of vapour that erupted from the hole as the atmosphere held behind the shield escaped into the vacuum of space.

"So they wanted to be able to work without space suits." Edwards commented.

"But are they shutting down because they've seen the probe or because of us?" Carr said.

"Us most likely." Hamilton said, "I'm not doing anything to conceal us and Max did say he made the probe as stealthy as he could."

"That's where the ships are." Edwards said, "So that's where we're going."

"And how are you going to do that without attracting attention?" Nayal asked.

"She's got a point captain." Carr said, "The authorities on Prestus are bound to be watching us closely and if they don't see us leave they're going to call the admiral again."

"And we still have proof of nothing more than an illicit structure out here." Cole said, "Something that could just be an illegal mining operation."

"Something that is the responsibility of local authorities unless our help is specifically requested captain."

T'Lan added, glancing at Cole.

"Then we need to make certain that Prestus sees us leaving then don't we? Or least sees something that they think is us leaving." Edwards said and then he tilted his head back slightly as he activated the intercom,

"Bridge to engineering." He said.

"Engineering here." Max replied.

"Max meet me in the fighter maintenance hangar. I need you to modify one of them and you've got less than three hours to do it in."

White looked at the work Max was carrying out suspiciously.

"You know what removing all that shielding from the warp drives will do don't you?" he said to Captain Edwards.

"It'll make the warp field look about twenty times bigger than it actually is." The captain answered.

"Which means everyone in the system will be able to see it, even from behind a planet the size of this gas giant." White responded.

"That's the idea." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Commander White, I want this fighter flown on a course towards Starbase one twenty-three at warp factor seven."

"So it looks like the Nightfall bugging out?" White asked.

"Precisely." Edwards answered, "If we use a runabout it'll be limited to warp five and the governor, or whatever it is that pretending to be the governor may contact Admiral Jennings to complain about us not moving fast enough. I think we'll have tested his patience just by taking this heading to being with."

"There is one other issue captain." Max said without diverting his attention from the fighter, "Without this shielding the warp field will not auto stabilise the subspace barrier. According to Starfleet regulations drives operating in this manner should not be run at greater than warp factor five."

"One little trip won't hurt." Edwards said, "The barrier isn't particularly weak here and after we're done we can run a sensor sweep and fix any damage done."

"And what about the rest of my squadron? Do you have plans for us in this little scheme of yours?" White then asked.

"Yes, an important one." Edwards told him, "We're going to be busy today. Very busy indeed."

Not long after his conversation with the captain, White stood in the main hangar control room as the modified fighter was brought up from the maintenance hangar and moved into launch position, guided by a marshal. Then when the compact attack craft was correctly positioned the marshal withdrew to a safe location and White activated the intercom to speak with the pilot.

"Okay Quarterback, this is Snowman." He said, addressing the pilot using both their call signs, "This may not be a combat op, but good hunting."

"Copy that Snowman." The pilot responded, "Ready to launch."

"Bridge this is hangar. Ready to go." White then said.

"Copy that hangar. Skies are clear, launch when ready." West's voice responded and White glanced at one of the flight controls beside him and nodded.

"Quarterback, scramble." The man said and there was a sudden roaring sound as the fighter's thrusters were fired, accelerating the craft through the deflector shield covering the forward launch door. The moment



the fighter was through this shield its impulse engines flared brightly as they came to life and it rapidly disappeared from view until a tiny flash of light in space gave away its jump to warp speed.

"Fighter is clear sir." The flight controller said, looking around at White who just smiled.

"Now I better go see what the rest of the captain's plan is." He said.

General Harris was in the governor's office when the planetary sensor net detected the warp field.

"That's the *Nightfall*." Harris said, "Off to Starbase one twenty-three."

"Are you certain it's not a trick?" Governor George asked.

"Look at the strength of the field governor. Too big for a fighter and moving far too quickly to be a runabout fitted with an enhanced subspace field generator. No, that's the *Nightfall* alright. We got lucky."

"There are four primary targets, four secondary and twenty two tertiary." Edwards announced as he began his briefing, "The *Nebula* and *Ambassador*-class ships are the most dangerous and I want to be sure that they don't escape. The *Nebula* especially." Then he looked at Heart and Shry, "I want you two to concentrate on that ship, your command sections plus a full platoon. Then a platoon for the *Ambassador*." "You mentioned four primary targets." White commented.

"Yes, the other two are on *Prestus*." Edwards answered, "Those torpedoes have got to be secured and made safe." Then he looked at Max, "Lieutenant I'm entrusting that task to you. Take twenty of Lieutenant Commander Cole's men with you. Plus an engineering team to assist you."

"And the fourth target?" Carr asked.

"Is two targets actually. The governor and General Harris." Edwards said, "We have to try and arrest them."

"So I'll be going after them then?" Carr then asked.

"No. I will." Edwards replied and Carr and Cole exchanged glances.

"Captain," Cole began, "regulations state that the captain—"

"Yes, I know. I'm supposed to sit on the bridge while everyone else fights on the front line. But I know what I'm doing and quite frankly I want to see their faces when we detain them." Edwards interrupted.

"We?" Cole commented.

"Yes, I want you and another twenty of your men with me commander. Plus Lieutenant T'Lan and Doctor King. Assuming that the pair are two of our mysterious reanimated corpses then he may decide to flee when they're cornered. I'm hoping that the pair of you can spot something that'll prevent that happening."

"And what will I be doing while you're running about in a combat zone?" Carr asked.

"You'll be commanding the ship of course." Edwards answered, "If the local defence force tries to stop us then we may have no choice but to open fire and I want you directing fire. Target transport routes to block any troop movements."

"The accelerator cannons?" Hamilton asked, referring to the pair of mass accelerators built into the *Nightfall's* secondary hulls. It was well known that they would make devastating weapons when it came to planetary bombardment.

"No. Absolutely not and no torpedoes either." Edwards answered, "Phasers should be more than adequate. Set them for stun if you have to engage anything other than structural targets, we're not here to slaughter the locals." Then he looked at White, "Lieutenant commander I want what's left of your squadron aboard to patrol the upper atmosphere below the *Nightfall*. If any of the defence platforms look like they're targeting the ship you are free to engage them. Use whatever force you deem necessary, they're fully automated. In addition you are to fly close air support for the ground units. If we need supporting fire you are to use the same level of force as the *Nightfall*, phasers only and set for stun against living targets."

Edwards then paused as White nodded to acknowledge the order.

"The *Excelsiors* are our secondary targets." Edwards went on, "Each of them needs to be secured by two squads of troops drawn from the MACOs and Imperial Guard. Plus a platoon command section."

"That only leaves four platoons of ground troops and just over thirty security guards for the *Miranda*-class ships." King noted, "They'll be spread pretty thin."

"I know." Edwards said, "We can only afford to deploy a single squad of troops to each, split into two fire teams."

"One for the bridge and one for engineering right?" Shry asked.

"You know what you're doing." Cole commented.

"We have been trained for this sort of thing you know." Shry replied. Then he looked at Edwards, "So that covers sixteen ships. Seventeen if we put the two remaining command sections onto another."

"You've not enough men to take the rest using your security staff." Heart then added, also looking at Edwards.

"I know. We'll have to supplement them with engineering staff. They're better qualified to overcome any defences based on changes to the ships' systems anyway. That's why I'll be assigning one to each MACO and Imperial Guard team as well." Edwards answered and the two military officers exchanged nervous glances.

"What sort of resistance are we looking at?" Heart asked, "It could be good to know. Particularly if we're babysitting Starfleet officers."

"T'Lan?" Edwards said to his science officer.

"I found no evidence of personnel transfer from the defence force captain." She replied, "It is logical to assume that the majority of those present will be work crews."

"That's easy then." Shry said, "We go in with phasers on stun and just fire on everyone we see. We can sort them out later on."

"Stun doesn't affect those walking corpses." King pointed out.

"We've our assault rifles for them." Heart replied and before any of the Starfleet officers could object to the use of firearms aboard starships that were to be taken intact he added, "Don't worry though; we'll use the frangible rounds. Your precious ships won't get a scratch."

"At least until you start using grenades hey boys?" West responded.

"There's one thing you've not covered yet captain." Cole said, "How are we to get to all these targets? I'm guessing that you'll want to be hitting them all at the same time, but they're a few million kilometres apart."

"Two billion, eight hundred and six million, fifty-seven thousand four hundred and seven to the nearest kilometre." T'Lan said.

"It'll take pretty much every ship we've got." Edwards admitted, "The teams to hit the starships will go in using shuttles. The assault gunships, heavy lifters, runabouts and the shuttles themselves. Transporting from them won't be an option, so they'll have to actually dock with their targets. Shuttlebays if possible, but blowing open a few hatches is good enough if there's no alternative. After we've deployed the shuttles the *Nightfall* will make jump to maximum warp just long enough to get us to Prestus." He then said and there were some looks of concern at this last point.

"Err captain, but going to warp within the orbital plane isn't exactly what I'd call safe." Hamilton said, looking at Carr and Cole for support.

"I know." Edwards said, "That's why we'll have to let the computer fly the ship. T'Lan, West, I need a program that will execute a precise warp jump to take us from around the gas giant right into standard orbit around Prestus so we can beam down. Think you can handle that?"

"No." West replied.

"I can." T'Lan then added, "There are no unknown variables. The relative positions of the two planets are known, our navigational deflector will eliminate any risk of collision with smaller objects, and—"

"Okay, so you can do it." Edwards said rather than wait for the Vulcan to explain every detail of the calculation.

"Yes captain. That is what I was explaining." T'Lan replied.

"And showing off." Shry added, then muttering, "Just like a Vulcan."

### 3.

Even with Lieutenant Commander White's fighter squadron still in their maintenance hangar, the main hangar was a hive of activity as both Starfleet personnel and the ground forces assigned to the *Nightfall* assembled to board their craft. Most carried rifles, the ground troops had their experimental assault rifles with phaser emitters attached beneath the barrels while the Starfleet security personnel had been issued with phaser rifles. Heart and Shry both headed for one of the assault gunships, a vessel similar to a Starfleet aeroshuttle but with superior tactical capabilities and designed to deliver a full platoon of troops into battle. The platoon inside had been assembled from squads of both human and Andorian troops so that each of the company commanders would be commanding their own men.

"Hey guys wait up!" a voice called out and the two men turned to see Nayal rushing towards them, dodging the soldiers and security guards.

"Wait up?" Heart commented, "Where did you learn that one?"

"Movie night." Nayal answered as she ground to a halt in front of him and Shry, "So have you got room for one more?" and she patted the Starfleet issue phaser holstered at her waist.

"The captain's okay with this?" Shry asked.

"Sure he is." Nayal replied, "It's not like there's anything for me to do here, I can't exactly help fly the ship when I've not got the security clearance or training to operate most of its systems. So I asked if I could join the boarding parties and he said yes."

"The people aboard those ships may use anesthizine gas to try an stop us." Heart said, "You got a respirator?"

Nayal reached behind her and produced a respirator.

"Fortunately the ship has replicator patterns for the filters against all biochemical that affect Vulcans." She said, "So I just got one of those."

"Then get aboard." Heart replied.

"But keep your head down." Shry added, "Unless you replicated a helmet to protect those pointy ears."

Nayal just grinned and followed the two men aboard the gunship. Inside the compact vessel was cramped, with the armoured soldiers sat shoulder to shoulder. While Starfleet shuttles tended to be designed more for comfort over prolonged periods of time the assault gunship was instead intended to carry as many troops as possible for just short periods.

"Grab yourself a seat." Heart commented as a hissing sound heralded the closing of the main access ramp, "Because we're ready to go."

The swarm of shuttlecraft exited the main hangar of the *Nightfall* and immediately turned towards the opening in the nearby moon, all this happening while eclipsed from Prestus to prevent the colony from observing the activity and realising that the *Nightfall* had not as they believed left the system.

The subterranean shipyard had just re-established the force field holding in the artificial atmosphere when the first of the shuttles, the assault gunship carrying Heart, Nayal and Shry passed through it and peeled off towards the nearby *Nebula*-class starship.

"We're in." the pilot called out as he aimed for the starship's shuttle bays, "Bays are still sealed."

"Fix that would you?" Heart said, looking at one of the nearby Starfleet engineers, a female ensign who nodded and got out of her seat before rushing to the control console at the front of the ship. Leaning over the shoulders of the two pilots she tapped at the communications panel, exchanging data with the *Nebula*'s computer system.

"Got it!" she exclaimed.

"Confirmed." The pilot added, "Prepare for deployment."

Immediately the troopers crammed into the gunship all got to their feet and performed last minute checks on their weapons.

"Okay everyone you know the drill." Shry called out, "Secure your masks and make sure your transport inhibitors are broadcasting."

"Transport inhibitors?" Nayal commented as she too stood up.

"Yeah." Heart replied, "The defenders may try to get rid of us by using the transporters. The inhibitors will stop them getting a lock on us."

"Err, I don't have one. Will I be okay?" Nayal asked.

"Probably." Heart answered, "Just stay close to us and you should be protected by the ones we're wearing." And then he pulled on his respirator and began to fit his helmet.

"Besides," Shry then added, "Being reduced to your individual molecules by a transporter isn't too bad a way to go. Assuming they do that of course, they could just beam away half of you, or beam you into space or into a bulkhead. That could be unpleasant." And then he too donned his mask and helmet as Nayal looked at him nervously.

"Bay doors are closing. Looks like they found the override." The pilot called out, "Hang on." And then the gunship lurched as he accelerated, aiming to get into the *Nebula's* hangar before the door could shut on them. The extra burst of speed allowed the gunship to slip under the closing hangar door just before the opening became too narrow and then it lurched even more violently as the pilot brought it to an abrupt halt. The main ramp to the rear of the gunship suddenly dropped open and hit the deck with a loud 'Clang!' that echoed around the hangar.

"Go!" Heart yelled and the troops carried by the gunship rushed out into the hangar.

Shocked by the sudden appearance of the gunship and the masked and armoured soldiers now spilling out of it the handful of workers in the hangar looked on in disbelief.

"Get down! Down on the floor!" the first of the soldiers bellowed at the workers, their words muffled somewhat by their respirators. Most of the workers were too shocked to react immediately and the soldiers yelled at them again, waving the muzzles of their rifles to convince them to comply.

As Nayal stepped from the gunship there was a sudden red flash and the whine of phaserfire as one of the workers made the mistake of picking up a tool and wielding it at an Imperial Guard fire team like a weapon. The four Andorians responded simply by opening fire, knowing that their weapons were set on stun and would be unlikely to cause permanent damage to the man who may have simply panicked. This roused the rest of the workers from their stupor and with their hands raised above their heads they lay down on the deck of the hangar.

"Secure them!" Heart yelled, "Leave them with the gunship crew. Imperial Guard head for engineering, MACOs with me. We're heading for the bridge."

The scene was repeated throughout the dockyard, with the assortment of shuttles carrying the boarding parties into shuttlebays or docking with airlocks that the accompanying Starfleet engineers overrode to gain access to the ships. On the bridge of the *Nightfall* Carr sat in the captain's chair and listened as each report of a successful boarding came in.

"That's the last of them." West said, glancing round at Carr.

Smiling Carr activated the intercom.

"Bridge to transporter room one. Phase one complete, bridgeheads established." She said.

"Copy that bridge." Edwards' voice responded, "Proceed with phase two."

Carr turned towards Hamilton.

"Mister Hamilton, engage." She ordered.

"Affirmative. Impulse engines online." Hamilton replied as he pulled back on the manual flight controls set into his chair and the rest of the bridge crew felt the shift in the *Nightfall* as he brought the vessel around the gas giant to bring Prestus into view in his headset, "In position." He added, "Activating program T'Lan one." And to an outside observer it appeared as if the ship simply vanished in a flash of light as it made the jump to warp speed.

Moving at warp factor nine, or one thousand five hundred and sixteen times the speed of light, it was only a handful of seconds before the ship dropped out of warp in a high orbit around Prestus.

"We're there commander." West reported, "Altitude sixty thousand kilometres."

"Hamilton, take us in closer." Carr ordered before activating the intercom again, "Snowman, this is Carr.

Scramble, scramble, scramble."

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman. Proceeding with launch." White replied from the cockpit of his fighter and on the main viewscreen the fighters of his squadron appeared as they emerged one by one from the hangar and activated their impulse drives, descending towards Prestus.

"Transporter range in five seconds." The blue collared officer at the science station reported and Carr nodded.

"Transporter rooms standby. Lock on destinations and energise on my command." She said.

"In range now." The science officer then said.

"Energise." Carr ordered and she waited for the reply.

"Transporter room one, transport cycle complete."

"Transporter room three, transport cycle complete."

"Transporter room four, transport cycle complete."

"Transporter room two, transport cycle complete."

"That's it!" Carr exclaimed, "Shields up!"

An alarm blared as General Harris burst into the planetary defence command centre.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"Starfleet heavy cruiser." The nearest officer replied, "Transponder reads as the *USS Nightfall* but she's not answering our hails."

"The *Nightfall*? But she left the system." The general said as he gazed at the various displays. "Atmospheric insertion detected." Another officer called out and General Harris turned his attention to the screen showing the line of *Peregrine*-class fighters entering the atmosphere of Prestus. He frowned.

"How many?" he asked, "Tell me how many fighters there are."

"Eleven sir."

"Eleven. Damn it!" the general exclaimed, "That's how they did it. They must have rigged a fighter with a fake warp signature."

"General I'm also getting a signal from our dockyard facility. They say that the ships there are being boarded. But reports are uncertain as to who is responsible. Some report Starfleet personnel while others say armoured infantry. There's also at least one reporting of what looks to be a Romulan amongst them."

The general did not reply to this. Instead he strode towards a row of consoles.

"Bring the defences on line." He ordered, "Lock phasers and torpedoes and open fire."

"But sir—" the man the general had given the order to replied, bewildered, "That's a Starfleet vessel. It's one of ours."

"They're attacking damn you!" the general yelled and he grabbed hold of the officer and as the other defence personnel watched in surprise he dragged him with one hand from his seat and hurled him aside before slamming his hand down on the weapons console himself.

"What have you done?" another officer said and the general glared at him.

"What I had to." He replied and then he stepped forwards and vanished.

"Defence satellite locking phasers!" West snapped, "No wait, make that multiple satellites locking on."

"Fire phasers." Carr ordered and the main dorsal phaser array fired, the bright red beam striking the closest satellite dead on. At such short range and against a target that had not yet had chance to fully raise its shields the effect was devastating and the automated satellite was torn apart," Snowman this is *Nightfall*. We could do with an assist."

"Rodger that *Nightfall*. Standby." White responded.

Now located in the upper atmosphere White's fighter squadron was still close enough to be able to fire on the orbiting defence satellites without losing too much energy from phaserfire or risk having their torpedoes simply run out of fuel. White himself activated his torpedo system and waited as the bleeping sound of the targeting system became a continuous tone.

"I've got lock!" he signalled to the *Nightfall* and there was a flash from the underside of his fighter as he fired the torpedo. The weapon streaked upwards and slammed into the underside of another defence platform, sending it spinning down into the atmosphere, "Watch it!" he broadcast to his squadron, "Incoming debris. Hammerer and Foghorn break off and make sure none of it reaches the surface."

Max and his group materialised in the forest surrounding the camp where the torpedo stockpile was located and instantly the security guards brought their rifles up to their shoulders.

"This way." He called out and he began to advance on the camp. His cybernetic eyepiece gave him a clear view of the camp even through the trees and he saw the unmistakable thermal signatures of humanoids, "Be ready for resistance." He told the rest of the group, "There are guards."

Max was the first of the group to emerge from the forest, right into view of one of the patrolling guards who almost dropped his weapon in terror.

"Borg!" he yelled, "The Borg are attacking!" and he raised his phaser. However, before he could open fire there was a flash from beside Max as one of the *Nightfall*'s security personnel fired first and the terrified guard was knocked unconscious.

"Thank you chief." Max said and he raised his own phaser and pointed it at the fence. Pressing the firing button and holding it down he swept the weapon along the fence and watched as a long section was simply vaporised. Then he reset the phaser to stun and began to walk forwards again, heading for the building emitting the energy signature T'Lan had briefed him on, "Advance." He called out.

In two clusters, Cole, Edwards, King and T'Lan along with a force of security guards were transported in front of the colony's main government building to avoid triggering off any alarms by being beamed directly

into the building. This was much to the surprise of passers by who came to a halt and stared when they saw the heavily armed Starfleet landing party

"Quickly." Edwards said as he rushed up the steps to the building.

As the landing party followed him a group of government security guards appeared from inside the building, some of them had their hands resting on their phasers but none had taken the step of actually drawing them.

"What's going on here captain?" the leader of the guards demanded when he saw Edwards and recognised the rank markings on his collar.

"The governor is under arrest." Edwards replied.

"Ridiculous. What is the charge?"

"Treason." Cole responded, "Now get out of way."

Confused, the security guards remained blocking the entrance to the building when all of a sudden the air was filled with the sound of a siren and there were flashes of light from above the cloud as the Starfleet vessels began to exchange fire with the planetary defences. The leader of the guards pulled his weapon from its holster, but before he could aim it at any of the Starfleet personnel T'Lan stepped in front of him and pressed her fingers into the base of his neck. The man sighed briefly and then just collapsed.

"Don't." Cole then said, aiming his phaser rifle at the head of a nearby guard who also looked as if he were about to draw his weapon, "Now stand aside and we'll just be taking those phasers before someone gets hurt. All of you."

Reluctant and still not understanding what was going on the guards all stepped out of the way of the building entrance and waited as several of the Starfleet security officers confiscated their sidearms.

Edwards was the first into the building followed by Cole, King and T'Lan, the latter two holding tricorders rather than the phasers the others held. Most of the security staff assigned to the entrance had gone outside to head them off, but there was still a handful of armed guards as well as unarmed reception staff in the lobby and the appearance of the Starfleet team was no less confusing to them than it had been to those encountered on the steps outside.

"Can – can I help you?" the receptionist asked as the Starfleet team strode towards her.

"No I know the way." Edwards replied.

"But you can't just-" the receptionist began before King interrupted.

"Young lady he most certainly can and so can we." He said.

There was a cluster of turbolifts just beyond the lobby and Edwards summoned one.

"Unit one with me." He said, "Lieutenant Commander Cole will take unit two."

"Where to?" Cole asked.

"The top floor." Edwards answered, "That's where the governor's office is."

"So why can't we use the turbolifts?" Cole then asked.

"Because if someone overrides them I don't want all of us stuck." Edwards pointed out.

"Captain it is logical that I should accompany the lieutenant commander." T'Lan then added.

"Very well lieutenant." Edwards said, nodding, "Off you go."

***id.***

General Harris reappeared in the governor's office again.

"We've got trouble." He said, "The *Nightfall*'s back. She's deployed troops to the dockyard and will probably start sending people down here at any time. They could be here already."

"But we saw them leave. You said so yourself." Governor George replied.

"Well I was wrong. They probably used a modified fighter to fool us."

"Fool you, you mean. So what are you planning on doing about it?"

"I activated the orbital defences and locked the system so that they can't be shut down. Then I came straight here because I'll need your authority to start mobilising our other forces."

The governor frowned.

"The humans saw you relocate?"

"Yes. It was necessary."

"You idiot. How do we explain that to anyone?"

"We don't bother. They weren't going to fire on the Starfleet vessel anyway. But now that the shooting's started we, or more accurately you can claim the *Nightfall* started it. You can bypass the defence command facility and speak to unit commanders directly."

"Why don't we just contact Starbase one twenty-three again. The admiral can order Edwards and his ship to back off."

"Didn't you hear what I said? They're at the dockyard as well. That means they know about the ships and there's no way we can explain them away to Starfleet. Our only hope is that Katrina can deal with their boarding parties and then bring the operational ships here. Once we get crews aboard them the *Nightfall* will have no choice but to withdraw. But we need to buy her time to finish and that means getting the defence force into the fight."

Still frowning, Governor George activated his communicator.

"I need to be put through to defence force field commanders. All of them. Tell them it's an emergency."

As he waited the general strode to the door and opened it, much to the confusion of the governor's secretary.

"General. I didn't know you were—"

"Never mind that now." he interrupted, "Get security. The governor needs to be protected."

"But general, I've just heard from security. They say that there's a large force of Starfleet officers in the building. They think that they're headed up here."

The general scowled and drew the phaser from his waist.

"Get security here now!" he snapped.

As soon as the work crews at the dockyard realised that their ships were being boarded they took whatever measures they could to slow down the boarders. Those with functional counter intruder systems attempted to release anesthizine through the ventilation system. But the gas was ineffective against the respirators that the boarding parties had brought with them and served only to hamper the movement of the work crews themselves so the systems were soon shut off. However, with full control over the secondary systems the work crews soon figured out that they could slow down the boarding parties simply by locking down turbolifts and erecting force fields where they were available.

Aboard the older *Miranda*-class vessels this was less of an obstacle to the boarding parties, they were smaller ships and the distance from access points to the bridge and engineering sections was easier to cover on foot. Additionally these older ships lacked the number of force field emitters that the platoons aboard the *Ambassador* and *Nebula*-class ships had to contend with.

"Perhaps we should have brought more engineers with us." Nayal commented to Heart as they waited for the Starfleet engineer accompanying them to disable the force field blocking their path to a shaft they expected to take them all the way up to the *Nebula*'s bridge. Heart was about to reply when there was the distinctive sound of a phaser being fired towards the MACOs.

"Oh great." Heart exclaimed, "Looks like the workers decided to head for the armoury."

A figure appeared around a corner behind the MACOs and pointed a standard issue Starfleet phaser towards them. But before he could fire a second shot the MACOs let off a volley from their own phasers and he collapsed, the phaser clattering across the deck.

"I need this." Heart said to the engineer as he plucked the man's tricorder from his belt and then handed it to Naya, "Here. Make yourself useful. I don't want anyone else sneaking up behind us like that. Understood?" "I think so." Naya replied as she opened up the tricorder and tried to remember what all the controls did. "That's it!" the engineer then snapped and there was not one but three flashes of light along the corridor ahead, starting with the force field right in front of them and progressing further away, "That should take down every force field on this deck."

"So we're clear to the bridge?" Heart asked.

"We should be. According to the specs there aren't any force fields in the access shaft." The engineer replied, "Though since this ship is put together from scavenged parts from several others its entirely possible that a few changes have been made."

"Well we'll just have to proceed as if everything's as it should be." Heart said as he brought his rifle up to his shoulder and prepared to advance down the corridor. Pausing, he glanced at Naya, "Keep right behind me and sing out if you pick up anything."

"Sing? You mean like what Lieutenant Commander Carr and Lieutenant West did while intoxicated?" Heart frowned.

"Just warn me if you detect anyone. Okay?"

"Okay. Go."

"Thank you." Heart said and he began to advance.

Max's Borg-enhanced senses could detect the interference field that would prevent the *Nightfall* from getting a lock on the torpedoes and beaming them away without needing to use a tricorder like the other Starfleet engineers.

"Jenkins, Frost, Cooper." He called out as he was about to enter the building in which the torpedoes were stored, "Take two security officers each and locate the sources of the jamming. I will prepare the torpedoes for transport." and then he stepped inside.

Only to be struck by a phaser beam.

Fortunately for him the weapon was set to stun, the individual wielding it well aware of what could happen if a beam on a more lethal setting happened to hit one of the weapons stored here. For a split second Max was dazed by the assault, but his implants rapidly stepped in to prevent any serious effects and before the guard could fire again Max swung one of his cybernetically upgraded arms and knocked the man off his feet. The guard scabbled across the floor to try and retrieve his dropped weapon, but just as he reached out for it one of the security officers accompanying Max shot him in the back and he slumped to the floor.

"Remove him." Max ordered, "And make sure that this room is secure. I shall begin to prepare the torpedoes." Then he walked up to a nearby control panel and held out his arm, his fist clenched. Two tubes emerged from his hand and connected with the panel, at which point the display began to flicker rapidly as Max took control of the monitoring systems.

"Can anyone tell what's actually going on down there?" Carr asked and the other bridge crew glanced at one another nervously.

"Commander I'm not even sure that the people down there know what's going on around them." West answered.

"What do you mean?" Carr replied.

"I'm getting conflicting reports from different sources." West told her.

"I agree commander." T'Lan's stand in added, "I've managed to patch into the defence force communications and they don't seem to know why their defences are firing. I've got a request from their central command for assistance in shutting down the orbital platforms. It seems as though they're firing on us without authorisation."

"The media are making things up as they go along it would seem." West said, "Some are saying that the planet is being invaded by the Borg while others are saying it's a system-wide assault by the Romulans.

"Looks like Max and Naya have been spotted then." Hamilton commented.

"Have they tried sending for help?" Carr asked, looking at West.

"No." she replied, shaking her head, "The only subspace activity I've read since we got back here was an incoming transmission from the spacedock."

"Good." Carr said, "Then we don't need to worry about having any of our own ships turn up and firing on us."

"Contact bearing two zero zero Snowman. Looks like two atmospheric interceptors."

"Got it Drummer. I see them. Everyone follow my lead, we need to warn them off." White responded and he banked his fighter sharply so that the tiny specs in the sky that were the approaching aircraft were ahead of



him, "Locking on." He added and his targeting system began to bleep as his attempted to lock onto the rapidly approaching craft.

The other fighters in his squadron did the same and this did not go unnoticed by the pilots of the interceptors, whose systems informed them of the attempted sensor locks. White heard the continuous tone from his targeting system, but instead of firing a torpedo at the manned interceptors he switched to his phasers and fired a short burst without the benefit of the lock, sending the bright red beam between them. "Come on." He muttered, "You're outclassed here and you know it. Break off."

Almost as if the interceptor pilots had heard what White had said the two craft began to turn away as soon as the phaser beam ceased. The backs of the interceptors flared brightly as the pilots brought their engines to full power and they raced away from the *Peregrines*.

"Snowman do we pursue?" one of the other pilots in White's squadron asked.

"Negative." White replied, "Stay on station. We just need to make sure that nothing gets close to our people."

"Cole someone's pulled the plug on the turbolifts." Edwards reported, "We're trying to get them moving again. How close are you?"

"At the top floor now sir." Cole answered, "Still in the stairwell."

"Very good. Go on without us."

"Understood captain." Cole said and he looked at T'Lan, "Go on T'Lan. Make me happy." he asked her with a smile.

"I do not understand—"

"Just tell me what's on the other side of this door."

"There are four individuals immediately beyond it." T'Lan said as she studied her tricorder, "All are armed with phaser type weapons."

"Okay on my signal open the door." Cole replied as he took up a position beside it, "Everyone stand back and be ready to follow my lead." Then he looked at T'Lan and nodded.

As soon as the door slid open there was a flash of red as a phaser set on wide beam was fired from the other side. One of Cole's men was too far over and the energy pulse clipped him, throwing him back and rendering him unconscious. As soon as the energy blast ceased Cole held his rifle around the doorframe and without looking fired it repeatedly. Hearing the sound of something heavy hitting the floor he then dived through the doorway and rolled across the floor as a phaser beam shot over him and struck a far wall. In response he, accompanied by the next security officer through the door returned fire, their phasers incapacitating the three guards positioned next to the turbolifts.

"Okay T'Lan get out here." Cole called out as he rushed towards the turbolifts. There he saw that a panel in the wall had been opened up to expose the electronics behind it, "What's been done to this?"

"It appears that the isolinear chip controlling the turbolift doors has been removed lieutenant commander. Without that these doors will not open."

"Check the guards." Cole replied and he began to search the unconscious form of the nearest security guard. T'Lan knelt down beside him and began to help and a few moments later she produced an isolinear chip.

"Here." She said, getting back to her feet and she plugged it into the empty slot in the exposed circuitry. Immediately the doors to the two turbolifts slid open and the Starfleet personnel inside swarmed out into the corridor.

"Looks like they were set up to open fire when the doors opened." Edwards noted as he looked down at the unconscious guards. Then he looked up at Cole, "Did they give you any trouble?" he asked.

"Not thanks to this talented lady captain." He replied, putting his arm around T'Lan and pulling her closer to him, "She detected the guards and then for an encore got you out of the turbolift. I swear I could kiss her."

"Would that not be a distraction?" T'Lan asked. Then when she saw how Edwards and King were staring at her she added, "Another figure of speech?" and Edwards and King nodded slowly.

"I've got life signs this way." King then said, holding up his tricorder and pointing, "The governor's office I think."

## ii.

As soon as the access hatch burst open Heart leapt out and began firing his phaser. Behind him Nayal was the next out and she too opened fire, but unlike Heart who just kept his phaser active and swept it across the bridge she picked out the cowering workers. When he had swept the entire bridge Heart got rapidly to his feet and followed by more MACOs he rushed around the room, checking that all the workers in view had indeed been incapacitated and that none had found anywhere that they could hide from the phaser beams. "Clear!" he yelled out, pulling off his respirator. Then as the Starfleet engineer assigned to his unit appeared he added, "Congratulations lieutenant. As the highest ranking Starfleet officer here you've just become a captain." And he pointed to the chair in the centre of the bridge, "Now how about you get us control of the anesthizine gas injectors and those force fields?"

"Activity confirmed commander." West said as she put the image of an airbase on the main viewer. There a row of interceptors sat out in the open as a towing vehicle moved away from them.

"Are they manned yet?" Carr asked.

"Not yet, but I'd say that their pilots are probably suiting up as we speak." West answered.

"But still under cover." Carr then said to herself, "Tactical can you hit those interceptors without damaging any of the structures?" she then asked.

"Easy commander. It's a stationary target."

The base is shielded commander." Hamilton pointed out, "Punching through the shield will spread the beam."

"Then we need to get someone to knock that shield down don't we?" Carr said, "Hail Lieutenant Commander White."

Most of the workers aboard the *Nebula*-class vessel had been located on its lower decks, closer to engineering than the bridge. So it was not surprising that Shry's Imperial Guard squads were facing tougher resistance. Even after acquiring weapons from the ship's armouries the workers were no match for the battle-hardened Andorian troops. But they were present in such numbers and defending ground they had control over thanks to the workers on the bridge manipulating force fields in their favour.

"Shry come in. What's your status?" Heart asked via his communicator.

"Just forwards of engineering." Shry responded, "But we've run into a large group of workers who seem to have looted an armoury. We'll get past them I'm sure, but it's going to take a few minutes."

"Can you get around them?" Heart asked.

"Perhaps. But it would take time thanks to all these force fields and they'd noticed we'd gone."

"Then keep up with your attack." Heart told him, "We've taken the bridge. We've not been able to get into the security systems yet, but we've got the turbolifts back on line. I'll bring some men down behind engineering and we'll catch them between us."

"Understood." Shry replied, "See you soon."

The row of armoured vehicles was clearing heading towards the capital city. White recognised them as the same type of wheeled infantry fighting vehicles as the *Nightfall* carried for its contingent of MACOs and Imperial Guard, but these vehicles bore the markings of the Prestus defence forces instead. Judging by the number of vehicles in the convoy they had enough troops to overwhelm the Starfleet landing party. But they had to get to them first.

Ahead of the convoy was a bridge and judging by its appearance the convoy would have to break up so that only one or two of the vehicles would be crossing it at any time. But White did not intend for any of them to be able to get across at all.

Swooping in low he flew directly at the bridge and waited for the central support to be dead centre of his targeting display before firing his phasers. The twin beams sliced through the structure. The vaporisation of the support produced a bright flash and brief ball of flame that White avoided only narrowly as he pulled back on his fighter's controls to gain altitude as quickly as possible. Checking his scanners, White saw that his run had produced the desired effect and the bridge was now broken in half with a gap far too large for the convoy to cross in the centre. In all likelihood the weight of even a single IFV would now cause the rest of the structure to collapse. Alerted to the destruction of the crossing point ahead of them the convoy came to a halt and an alert sounded in White's cockpit to warn him that he was being targeted.

"Oh hell no." he said to himself and he rolled his fighter just as several beams of energy erupted from the phaser cannons mounted on the vehicles below criss-crossed the sky ahead of him. One of them clipped the shields of his fighter and it shook slightly, but a quick glance at his instruments showed that the fighter itself was undamaged.

"Snowman this is *Nightfall*." He heard Carr's voice say.

"Snowman here. Go ahead *Nightfall*."

"Snowman there's an airbase at bearing one five seven. It looks like they're getting ready to launch." Carr told him, "We can deal with the interceptors on the ground, but we need you to knock out their shields first."

"Copy that *Nightfall*. Steering to one five seven, phasers hot. Everyone follow me in."

The governor's guards had formed a final defensive line just outside his office, with upturned furniture used to improvise a barrier. The relatively lightweight construction of the furniture would have offered no protection at all had the Starfleet team set their phasers to lethal settings, the stun settings they were using could not damage the structure. Fortunately the guards were similarly constrained, and although they had set their weapons to levels that would inflict more permanent damage they did not want to inflict any serious structural damage to the building and so the corner the Starfleet team were hiding behind offered adequate protection.

"Captain, a higher setting would allow us to penetrate the—" T'Lan began.

"No." Edwards interrupted, "Those guards probably don't know the truth about the people they're working for." Then he began to adjust his phaser.

"Wide beam?" Cole asked and Edwards nodded.

"Well they did try it on us." King commented and he too began to adjust his phaser.

"Count of three." Cole said as he finished making adjustments to his rifle.

"Is that go on three or one, two, three and then go?" T'Lan asked.

"Really?" King responded, glaring at her.

"One." Edwards said.

"Two." Cole added.

"Three!" King yelled and simultaneously he, Cole and Edwards lunged around the corner they were using as cover and opened fire. The three wide angled phaser blasts filled the corridor and flowed around the improvised barriers in front of the governor's office. Without exception, the guards using them for cover had at least some portion of their bodies exposed and as a group they collapsed.

"Think we got them all?" King asked when they ceased fire.

"An illogical question doctor." T'Lan replied, "If you had not then surely they would be returning fire upon you."

"Says the one still hiding around the corner." King commented as he swapped his phaser for his tricorder again, "Well I'm not reading anybody conscious down there." He said and then he looked around at T'Lan, "That means you can stop hiding." He added.

The air around the base shimmered slightly due to the effects of the shield interacting with the atmosphere and this helped guide White and his squadron to their target.

"Okay people you know the drill." He broadcast to the other fighters, "We're just here to take down the shield."

"Snowman I have a phaser bank to the north." The pilot nicknamed Drummer warned him, "Looks like it's just outside the shield."

"I see it Drummer. Everybody break south after your run. Keep the shield between us and that phaser." White said and then he dived down at the base.

He held his fire until he began to pull out of the dive and level off. That way if the shield suddenly collapsed he would not be firing in a base full of people, but his phasers would instead pass harmlessly over it. White's volley was insufficient to overload the shield and he broke off his run just in time to avoid colliding with it, heading south so that the anti-aircraft battery could not fire on him without first having to punch through the base's own shield. Checking his aft scanner White saw the rest of his squadron copying his manoeuvre. Already the next two fighters were firing while the rest were descending towards the base. All of a sudden there was a bright blue flash and the haze around the base vanish.

"*Nightfall*, Snowman. Shield down." He broadcast, then to his fighters he added, "Break, break break! That phaser can hit us now."

Sure enough the phaser battery began to fire but the shots were rapid and unaimed, intended to simply spoil the aim of any further attack runs the *Peregrines* made. However, there were no more runs to be made as all of a sudden the sky was lit up by a phaser beam that punched down through the clouds and swept along

the row of parked interceptors. Stationary and unshielded they made easy targets and one after another they were reduced to nothing more than twisted burning wrecks.  
“*Nightfall*. Snowman. Targets destroyed.”

“Clear.” Nayal said, checking her tricorder and the MACOs rushed forwards to take up positions around the doorway that lead to main engineering. The work crews did not expect to be attacked from this direction and so the door was not sealed when Heart tried it. As soon as the door was opened the MACOs heard the sound of phaserfire coming from inside as the workers continued to exchange fire with Shry’s Imperial Guard.

“Spread out and keep it quiet.” Heart ordered before he stepped in through the open doorway. As expected he found the workers using the various engineering consoles as cover as they struggled to hold back the Andorians, who by this time were already at the entrance at the other end of engineering. Without speaking Heart opened fire, with two rapid shots taking down a pair of workers armed with phaser rifles.

“Ambush!” another of the workers yelled and he spun around only to be hit by a phaser blast in the back from an Imperial Guard.

Now caught between two sets of professional soldiers the workers began to panic and what little organisation they had collapsed.

Shry headed towards Heart and Nayal, crouching down beside them.

“Nicely timed.” He said.

A sudden phaser beam shot from an overhead walkway and struck one of the Andorian troops. The beam hit the soldier’s chest, but the armoured vest he wore dissipated the energy of the shot and the soldier ducked out of the line of fire. Turning to face the direction of the attack Heart and Shry caught sight of Katrina as she retreated behind a bulkhead.

Scowling as she heard the Federation troops closing in on her position Katrina altered the setting of her phaser. Firing anything other than a stun level shot in engineering risked damaging the very ship she was trying to restore, but low-level shots had been proven to be ineffective against the armour worn by the boarding party. Fortunately the warp core was inactive, so there was no danger of a stray shot causing a breach. Katrina spun around and fired again, the beam striking a MACO this time and the man just had time to flinch before the energy beam consumed him and his body vaporised.

Nayal returned fire just as Katrina retreated again.

“I got her.” Nayal exclaimed, smiling. Just ahead of her Heart was scaling a ladder up to the walkway.

“Well she’s not here now.” He said as he climbed up onto the walkway.

“But I’m sure I hit her.” Nayal replied as she followed Shry onto the ladder.

“There’s a hatchway at the end of this walkway.” Heart said, “She must be through there.”

“Stun grenade?” Shry asked and Heart nodded. The two soldiers ran along the walkway and pressed themselves up against the wall either side of the hatchway. Nayal followed and stood behind Heart. The MACO placed his hand on the controls for the hatch while Shry pulled a stun grenade from his webbing and pulled out the pin before looking at Heart and nodding. Heart pressed the button to open the hatchway and as soon as it began to slide open Shry tossed the grenade through the gap. There was a sudden ‘Boom!’ accompanied by a flash of light as the grenade detonated, producing a sudden burst of light and sound. Then when the door was fully opened the two soldiers dived through one after the other.

Inside Katrina had been unaffected by the stun grenade even in this confined space and she fired her phaser again. This time the beam passed between Heart and Shry and narrowly missed Nayal as she stepped into the doorway as well.

Heart fired the phaser mounted beneath his rifle, keeping his finger on the activation switch as the beam hit Katrina in the chest. She staggered backwards but despite the continuous stream of energy designed to interfere with a humanoid’s central nervous system she remained standing. Heart ceased fire only when she backed into the wall behind her and she stared at him and grinned.

“I think I’ll be leaving now.” She said.

“I think not.” Shry responded and he fired a single shot from his rifle.

The six millimetre round hit the side of Katrina’s head and her eyes widened as it broke up inside her skull. The fragments of the bullet exited on the far side of her head and the wall was stained with red and white fluids as her lifeless body slid down it.

“I may not be an expert on human anatomy,” Nayal said as she stepped into the compartment and looked at the wall, “but isn’t all human blood red?”



The panel in front of Max indicated that each of the almost twelve thousand torpedoes was now operating on their own internal power and that the containment fields for their warheads were stable.

"Lieutenant Maximillian to *Nightfall*." He said, tapping his combadge.

"*Nightfall* here. Go ahead Max." West responded.

"The torpedoes are ready for transport. You may proceed when ready."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* in orbit above Prestus West looked at Carr.

"Max reports ready Commander." She said.

"What's our status?" Carr asked, looking at the science station.

"I'm not detecting any activity targeted against us commander." The science officer told her.

"And our fighters?" Carr then asked, turning back to West.

"On station between us and the capital." She answered.

Carr nodded and activated the intercom.

"Cargo bay two standby. Lock onto the torpedoes and beam them aboard the moment our shields drop.

Inform the bridge the moment you've completed the process." She said and then she paused before looking at West again, "Drop shields." She ordered.

"Shields down." West responded and Carr inhaled sharply as she realised that the *Nightfall* was now defenceless. All of the nearby defence platforms had been destroyed and so far none of the planet-based weapons had attempted to target the ship, but that could change and if it did the *Nightfall* was vulnerable.

"Commander there's a defence platform coming over the horizon." The science officer reported.

"Time to target?" Carr asked.

"Its already scanning us." The science officer answered, "Ten seconds until it locks on."

"Trying for a lock." The tactical officer added as he frantically tried to beat the defence platform to a weapons lock.

"Bridge, this is cargo bay two. Transport successful and—"

"Shields up!" Carr yelled before waiting for the message to be completed.

"Defence platform has target lock." The science officer exclaimed and then the *Nightfall* shook as a powerful phaser blast hit it dead on.

"Well we're still here." Hamilton commented.

"Shields came up just in time." West said.

"Commander I have a lock." The tactical officer then told Carr.

"Fire quantum torpedoes." She ordered and on the main view screen a pair of glowing white spheres raced from the *Nightfall* towards the newly arrived defence platform. The first slammed into the shields of the defence platform and there was a flash as they collapsed. The second torpedo struck the defenceless satellite and as it exploded Carr breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well that's the torpedoes dealt with." She said to no-one in particular, "Now let's just hope the captain's part of all this is going to plan."

"The door is a duranium alloy." T'Lan said as she waved her tricorder over the door to the governor's office.

"So we'll be here all day if we try cutting through it with our phasers." Cole replied.

"I would not recommend that course of action lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "The nature of the alloy is such that the beam from a particle weapon will likely be reflected back in this direction."

Edwards walked over the panel beside the door and struck it with the grip of his phaser three times in rapid succession, causing the panel to drop open and expose the circuitry behind it.

"Okay lieutenant." He said to T'Lan, "Get this door open."

Inside the governor's office General Harris watched the door while Governor George sat at his desk and studied the reports coming in.

"Yes Colonel Fowler I do know what is happening. I know much more than you in fact." The governor said to the military officer he was in contact with, "That's why I'm ordering you to bring your men into the capital.

The Federation has already blocked all the surface routes so I need you to bring your men in by hopper. I am authorising you to fire on any Starfleet force you encounter."

"Tell him to hurry." General Harris commented, "I don't know how much longer that door will keep them out."

"Anything new West?" Carr asked but the lieutenant shook her head.

"It looks like the defence forces are still unsure about what's happening. They seem to be getting conflicting orders from their headquarters and via the governor's office. Though it seems that the media are no longer calling it a Borg attack."

"There's a new group of sensor contacts heading for the city commander."

"Get me the captain." Carr said.

There were several clunking sounds as T'Lan attempted to trigger the motors that would open the door, but it remained shut for the time being.

"Captain, it's Lieutenant Commander Carr." Carr's voice spoke from Edwards' combadge.

"Go ahead commander." Edwards replied, taking a step further away from the door.

"Captain we've picked up a squadron of hoppers approaching the city. They should be right on top of you in a few minutes." Carr told him.

"What sort of force are we looking at?" Edwards asked.

"Battalion sized it looks like. Too many for you to fight unless—"

"Unless what commander?"

"Unless you allow Lieutenant Commander White's squadron to intercept them. Hoppers are no match for fighters."

"I know that commander. But my orders still stand. No live fire at manned targets." Edwards said and then he looked at T'Lan, took a deep breath and added, "Besides we're almost done here. I hope. Edwards out."

And then he tapped his combadge to shut it off, "We are almost through aren't we T'Lan?" he then asked.

"I am uncertain captain." She replied, "This locking mechanism is not one I have seen before."

"What if we just use our phasers on it?" King asked.

"As I said earlier doctor," T'Lan said, "the alloy of the door is—"

"I never mentioned the door." King interrupted, "I mean what if we just shoot the lock?"

"Then the motors will have no power and the door will remain in its current state." T'Lan answered.

"But there won't be anything holding it shut other than its own inertia." Cole said. Then, readjusting his phaser he added, "Get back." And aimed at the exposed locking circuitry. T'Lan scurried back and as soon as she was clear Cole fired one long beam into the lock. There was a flash and shower of sparks as the circuitry burst briefly into flames and Cole ceased fire.

"Now all we need to do is pry this door open." He said.

"What was that?" Governor George exclaimed.

"That governor was probably someone from Starfleet getting shot by their own phaser blast." General Harris responded with a grin, then he suddenly turned his head when there was a banging from the door.

"That doesn't sound like they're knocking." The governor said.

"No they're not." General Harris said and then there was a sudden 'clunk' and he saw that the two halves of the door had separated. The gap was too narrow for a person to pass through but it was more than enough for the general to fire his phaser through and there was a brief cry of pain followed by the sound of a phaser being dropped to the floor followed by a sudden shout.

"Get clear of the gap!" Edwards shouted. However, as most of the landing party quickly moved out of the line of fire Cole instead thrust the muzzle of his phaser rifle through the gap and took aim at the general. Rather than aim for the general's chest Cole instead took aim at the hand in which he held his own phaser and fired. A startled look appeared on the general's face as the shot struck his hand and blew it off at the wrist. But rather than cry out or even clutch the stump that the phaser blast itself had cauterised shut he simply stared at it.

Seeing Cole's rifle still protruding through the gap in the door Governor George dived for the general's dropped phaser. However, before he could reach the weapon Cole fired again and the phaser was simply blown apart. The blast of the exploding phaser blew both the general and the governor off their feet just long enough for the Starfleet team outside the door to pull it open enough for Cole to burst through the gap, with Edwards and then King close behind him.

"It's over governor." Edwards said sternly as the rest of the landing party made their way through the gap,

"Or whoever you really are."

"You just don't have a clue do you?" Governor George replied as he picked himself up, "You think you've won here today? Well let me tell you, you haven't. You've just delayed your precious Federation's inevitable fall for a short time." And he took a single step forwards into thin air.

"Grab him!" Cole yelled and he dived towards General Harris as he still lay on the floor but before he could reach the man he too disappeared and Cole just rolled through the empty space he had been in.

"Doctor? Lieutenant?" Edwards asked, turning to look at King and T'Lan who both held their tricorders.

King shrugged.

"I detected nothing to indicate that they were about to beam away captain." T'Lan then told him.

"Governor can you hear me?" a voice suddenly called out from the communicator on the desk, "Governor it's Colonel Fowler. My force is on approach but defence control is ordering me to abort. What are your orders? Governor are you there?"

Edwards tapped his combadge.

"*Nightfall* this is Edwards. What's the situation?"

"Captain Shry reports that the ships in the dockyard have been secured with minimal losses and the torpedoes are safe in cargo bay two. What about you?"

"The governor and General Harris have both opted to withdraw. But what can you tell me about those hoppers? I think their commanding officer is unsure of what to do."

"Understandable sir. From what we can tell the defence command complex is trying to get everyone to stand down. They're claiming that the general was responsible for starting this."

Edwards looked at Cole and the pair smiled at one another.

"In that case Lieutenant Commander we'd appreciate a pickup whenever it's convenient. I think we ought to withdraw and let the locals sort things out from here on."

When the runabout touched down in the *Nightfall's* hangar the ship's senior Starfleet officers were all stood waiting. The runabout's hatch slid open and Captain Heart was the first to emerge, followed by Shry and then Nayal.

"I figured we'd be best borrowing one of your runabouts captain." He said to Edwards, "Our gunships don't have warp capability and I didn't fancy spending several hours cooped up in one to get back here with this."

"What is this exactly that you can't discuss over a communication link?" Edwards asked.

"You'll like this captain." Nayal responded and then looking at T'Lan she added, "So will you cousin."

"It's actually for Doctor King mainly." Shry then said as a pair of Starfleet security officers exited the runabout carrying something between them under a blanket.

"Is that a body?" Carr asked and Shry smiled.

"Sort of." He said as the two men came to a halt beside him. Reaching down he pulled back enough of the blanket to reveal Katrina's face and then tilted her head to expose not only the massive exit wound in her skull but also the synthetic implants within, "Any use to you doc?"

"Why did they divert us here?" Governor George asked General Harris as he looked around at the featureless grey walls of the room they had appeared in.

"Because you don't deserve to be anywhere else." A voice said and the young girl who had spoken with the governor in his office appeared simply by stepping through one of the walls. Behind her came two more figures. Both were vaguely humanoid and they towered over not only the child but also the two men in front of her, but the way they lacked any facial features made them appear as if they were only half completed figures sculpted from white clay while their chests did not rise and fall with respiration.

"Where is Katrina?" General Harris demanded.

"She is gone." The girl answered, "She no longer responds to any attempt at communication. So not only have your failures cost us eight years of effort, you've also cost us one of our own."

"What are you going to do with us?" Governor George asked and the girl smiled and stepped forwards with both hands raised. She pressed the palm of each hand against the foreheads of both men and they simply gasped and then collapsed in a heap.

"Put those somewhere." She then said to the two silent figures behind her and then she stepped back through the wall.

When the turbolift came to a halt and the doors remained closed the two men who were the sole occupants turned to face one another.

"You've heard about Prestus I take it?" one said.

"Of course. The *USS Nightfall*, Captain Edwards' ship." The other replied.

"It seems that what happened in the Tieran system was not an isolated incident then."

"And that the Federation is also a target for this group. Whoever they may be."

"Indeed. I think it's about time our section took an interest in this."

"Agreed. It's definitely a task for our section."