

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



A CONFLICT OF LOGIC

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **A CONFLICT OF LOGIC**

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

A distress signal from within the Romulan Neutral Zone leads the *USS Nightfall* to starships carrying refugees from the civil war. But escorting them to a refugee processing centre, the crew discover that helping those fleeing the fighting is not what someone has in mind...

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Stardate 64812.3 USS *Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol near the Romulan Neutral Zone.

Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole, chief security and tactical officer of the *USS Nightfall* was studying the crew roster for his department on his PADD while the turbolift was in motion. The turbolift halted before reaching Cole's destination and he briefly looked up from the PADD as the door opened to allow Lieutenant T'Lan the *Nightfall's* chief science officer to enter.

"Lieutenant." He said in greeting.

"Lieutenant commander." She replied as she turned around and the turbolift continued on its way.

All of a sudden T'Lan reached out for the control panel beside the door and halted the turbolift.

"Is there a problem?" Cole asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole," T'Lan began, "I just wished to thank you again for your discretion regarding my actions following my being exposed to the toxin aboard the—"

"That's alright T'Lan." Cole interrupted, "Besides, you thanked me already."

"Indeed." T'Lan said, "But since you did not divulge how the toxin made me act to the rest of the crew I now know that I can rely on you to keep such information confidential."

Cole smiled.

"Of course." He replied, "I'd do the same for—"

"What do you know of pon'farr?" T'Lan said before he could finish.

"Pon'farr?" Cole exclaimed, "You mean the Vulcan mating cycle."

"Precisely lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "Unfortunately I appear to be entering the early stages of the condition and I do not have the time to arrange to return to Vulcan."

"T'Lan, are you asking me to—" Cole began, but before he could continue the female Vulcan reached to the back of her head and released the clasp that held her hair in place, allowing it to fall loose.

"Robert I need your help again." She said, stepping closer to the startled Cole.

"T'Lan I—" Cole responded, but T'Lan reached out and placed a finger over his lips.

"Shush." She said, "There is no need to talk." And she reached for the fastener on her uniform.

"And that's when I woke up." Cole said, looking at the three other officers gathered around the table in the crew lounge. Two of the others were human, while the third was a blue-skinned Andorian named Shry in the uniform of an Imperial Guardsman rather than a Starfleet officer. Of the humans only the darker skinned one wore a Starfleet uniform, in his case the red of the command division. The second human instead wore a MACO uniform with the name 'HEART' written on his chest.

"Damn." The other Starfleet officer said.

"Damn? Snowman is that all you can say?" Heart asked. Snowman was not the officer's real name.

Lieutenant Commander William White was a fighter pilot; the commander of the *Nightfall's* attached squadron and Snowman was his call sign.

"Well what else do you expect me to say?" White asked in reply.

"You could have raised the fact that this is not the first time he's had this dream about the Vulcan." Shry commented.

"Fourth time in three weeks." Cole agreed.

"That you can remember." Heart added, "Maybe you didn't wake up in the middle of the others."

"Good afternoon gentlemen." An older Starfleet officer with a blue collar indicating he was a member of the science division and the rank pins of a full commander said as he approached the table with a drink in his hand, "Mind if I join you?"

"Go ahead doc." White said, "The more the merrier."

Commander Henry King was the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer and was known for his no-nonsense approach to medicine.

"Perhaps you can give us your professional opinion of what it means to dream about the same woman four times in three weeks." Shry said and King frowned briefly.

"It means someone needs a good sonic shower." He replied, "Or maybe a holo-suite that includes one of the Vulcan love slave programs."

"I think that sounds more like what Cole's after." Heart said with a smile, "Especially if it's our Vulcan."

"Really? He's interested in T'Lan?" King asked, looking around the table.

"I am not interested in T'Lan." Cole said, "Now I order everyone to stop talking about this."

"Err, point of order." Heart said, raising a hand.

"The chair recognises MACO Captain Heart." White said.

"He can't order any of us not to talk about this subject." Heart replied.

"Try me." Cole said.

"Heart has a point lieutenant commander." Shry said, "You hold equal rank to Snowman, while Commander King outranks you. Heart and I may have ranks that are technically below yours, but neither of us is a Starfleet officer. In short, you can't give any orders at this table."

"Perhaps Lieutenant Mackey could help you out." White suggested.

"That waste of space?" King exclaimed, "Look I've known dozens of ship's councillors, not one of who I'd ever consider worth keeping around but he's got to be one of the worst."

"Then what would you suggest?" Cole asked.

"Stop telling people about your dreams unless you're ready for us to make fun of you for it." King answered. Cole was about to speak again when the voice of the ship's captain sounded over the public address system.

"All senior officers to the bridge." He announced.

"Well gents, it seems that I'm needed." Cole said as he got up and headed for the exit. From there he went to the nearest turbolift and got in.

"Bridge." He announced and the turbolift began to move.

It halted before reaching the bridge and when the door opened T'Lan entered and Cole's eyes widened briefly.

"You are responding to the call to yellow alert?" T'Lan asked and Cole just nodded. Then T'Lan turned around to face the door again, leaving her back towards him and the turbolift began to move again. Briefly T'Lan looked around and saw Cole staring at her, "Is there a problem lieutenant commander?" but before he could answer the turbolift stopped once more and the door opened to reveal the bridge.

From what Cole could see that out of the *Nightfall's* senior bridge crew only he and T'Lan were not already at their stations. Captain David Edwards occupied his central position while the long red hair of Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr was visible just beyond him, indicating that she too was present. Further forwards Lieutenant Bradley Hamilton was sat at the helm station while Lieutenant Jenna West rounded out the bridge crew at the operations console.

"No." Cole said to T'Lan in response to her question, "Why would there be?" and he darted past T'Lan and hurried to the tactical station close to the rear of the bridge and sat down. Meanwhile T'Lan followed him, walking around behind him and taking up her position at the adjoining science station, "What's the emergency?" Cole then asked as he reviewed the readouts on his console. As far as he could tell all of the ship's systems were functioning correctly and no heightened alert status had yet been ordered.

"Maybe nothing." Carr replied, keeping her attention focused on the main display screen. At present this showed only the star field ahead of the ship.

"We've picked something up in the Neutral Zone." Edwards added.

"There's a ship of some sort making its way across from the Romulan side." West said, "Moving at low warp."

"So not running cloaked?" Cole asked, "Doesn't sound like raiders."

"We're guessing more refugees from their civil war." Carr said.

"T'Lan see if you can get us some more information." Edwards ordered.

"Of course captain." T'Lan replied and then after a short pause she added, "That is odd."

"What is?" Edwards asked.

"I would need to conduct a visual scan to be certain captain." She told him.

"Should be in range in about two minutes." Hamilton said from the helm station.

Just then the door to one of the turbolifts slid open and a Romulan woman in the uniform of the former Empire's military stepped onto the bridge.

"You called?" she asked as she approached the vacant seat beside Edwards and Carr.

"Ah yes Nayal." Edwards said, "We think we may have picked up another group of your people trying to get to Federation territory. We're moving to intercept."

Nayal sat down and looked at the small console set into the chair. Then she frowned.

"Problem?" Edwards asked.

"I don't recognise these readings." Nayal said without looking up from the console.

"A faulty cloaking device?" Cole suggested, but Nayal shook her head.

"I don't think so. Are we sure that there's just the one ship?" she replied.

"T'Lan won't tell us." Hamilton commented.

"Why not cousin?" Nayal said, looking up from the console and towards T'Lan.

"It is inappropriate to refer to me as your cousin. Particularly when we are—" "Oh just tell us." Nayal interrupted.

"Captain?" T'Lan said.

"I'm kind of curious." Edwards replied, "Even if your data is incomplete."

"There is a second power source that is slightly offset from the primary reading." T'Lan said.

"So two ships then." Carr said and she looked at Edwards, "Could be a raider trying to sneak over the border without a cloaking device by using a transport for cover."

"Step up to yellow alert." Edwards ordered and a klaxon sounded to alert the entire crew.

"Entering visual range." Hamilton said.

"On screen." Carr said.

"On screen. Maximum magnification." West said as the display changed.

The image was now of a pair of vessels easily recognisable as Romulan transport ships moving in what looked to be a dangerously close formation. Both ships were large bulk carriers that were slow and had limited manoeuvrability. A mistake by either helmsman could result in both ships colliding with one another.

"So not a raider then." Edwards said.

"They'd have to be pretty desperate to use either of those ships for piracy." Hamilton added.

"Especially since I'm not detecting any weaponry on either of them." Cole said.

"Can anyone explain why the crews of those two ships are flying them so close together?" Edwards asked, looking around the bridge.

"I believe I may have the answer captain." T'Lan replied.

"Really cousin? Do tell." Nayal said with a grin.

"Go on T'Lan." Edwards said.

"The two vessels are physically connected." T'Lan explained.

"There does only seem to be a single warp field." West added.

"I believe that is because only one vessel has a functional warp drive." T'Lan continued, "The second ship is operating on auxiliary power only."

"So they joined their ships together so that both could make it across the Federation space." Carr said.

"Well not for much longer." Edwards said sternly and he shook his head slowly, "Operating like that's just not safe. One mistake and both ships could be destroyed. Lieutenant West, hail them and tell them to stop. We separate the ships and take the damaged one under tow with our tractor beam. From the looks of things it'll be faster as well as safer for everyone concerned."

"Captain I've got another contact to stern." West said suddenly.

"Can you identify it?" Carr asked.

"Yes, it's broadcasting Federation ID." West replied and Carr and Edwards exchanged glances.

"There aren't supposed to be any other Starfleet ships for at least a dozen light years." Edwards commented.

"And no commercial vessel would enter the Neutral Zone without an escort." Carr added.

"It's a Federation vessel but it appears to be operating under Vulcan control sir." West said.

"Vulcan?" Nayal repeated, "Friends of your cousin?"

"The ship appears to be a V'Shar patrol craft." West said, "And they're hailing us."

"What is the Vulcan Security Service doing all the way out here?" Cole said.

"They are a bit outside their jurisdiction." Hamilton agreed.

"On screen." Edwards said, "We can just ask them."

"Putting them through now captain." West said and the image on the main screen changed once more, this time to show the bridge of a starship that looked significantly more cramped than an Akira-class cruiser like the *Nightfall*. There appeared to be only three crew on the bridge of the smaller vessel, all of them Vulcans in the uniform of the V'Shar.

"Hello captain." Edwards said, addressing his greeting to the Vulcan sat in the centre seat, positioned in front of the others who looked sideways relative to him, "This is the *USS Nightfall*."

"You are mistaken." The Vulcan responded, "I do not hold the rank of captain. My name is Investigator Strall."

Edwards smiled.

"Sorry." He said, "Starfleet tradition is to refer to all starship commanders as 'captain' regardless of rank."

"I am aware of this." Strall replied, "But this is not a Starfleet vessel."

"Friendly sort isn't he?" Nayal muttered.

"What is your purpose here *Nightfall*?" Strall asked.

"Border patrol." Edwards answered, keeping his explanation short and simple.

"You have crossed the border captain." Strall pointed out, "You are in the Neutral Zone."

"We came to investigate a vessel trying to cross the zone." Edwards said, "What about you?"

"We are here to render assistance to the two ships carrying Romulan refugees." Strall said, "Your assistance is not needed."

Carr looked at T'Lan.

"Can they tow that damaged ship?" she asked and T'Lan consulted the sensor display in front of her.

"Possibly commander." She replied, "They do carry a tractor beam. But their power generation capabilities are significantly less than ours. I doubt that they could manage more than warp three while towing the transport."

"The Vulcans can't have been planning on taking them very far then." Hamilton said.

"Investigator Strall, where do you plan on taking these refugees exactly?" Edwards asked.

"To the processing camp on Kywin Four." Strall answered, "That is where we are based."

Edwards looked at West who consulted the computer records of Kywin as soon as Strall mentioned it.

"There is a refugee camp there captain." She said, "It's mainly operated under the authority of the Vulcan government to process requests to asylum. There is a small Federation team there as well for those Romulans denied permission to go to Vulcan."

"Investigator Strall," Edwards began, "we will take the damaged transport under tow and take it to Kywin Four. I suggest that you return there now."

"The Romulans requested our help captain." Strall said.

"Investigator, we're in a heavy cruiser. You're in a corvette. I think that the Romulans would much prefer our help. Isn't it logical for the larger ship to undertake this mission?" Edwards said.

"Of course captain." Strall said, "I will see you on Kywin Four." And then he disconnected the communication link.

"He's steering about." West said, "Heading back into Federation space. Towards Kywin I'd say."

"Then I suggest we get on with the job at hand." Edwards said, "T'Lan, I want a full report on that damaged transport. If they need more than just a tow we need to be ready to provide it when we rendezvous with them."

Z

The two Romulan ships dropped out of warp just before the *Nightfall* and when the Starfleet cruiser arrived it's crew were finally able to inspect the connection between the two ships more closely. The Romulan crews appeared to have used cargo handling grapples to join their ships together. Since they extended from large hatches in the lower hull of the two ships it meant that their orientation in relationship to one another was inverted.

"Looks like more than just an anchor line." Edwards commented and he pointed to the main display screen, "See along the rear edge. West, magnify that." And the image on the main display zoomed in on the connection. Focused on this, the *Nightfall's* crew could now see where the two grapples had been joined together and a bundle of thick cables wound around them.

"Power transfer lines?" Carr commented and Edwards nodded.

"Makes sense. If warp power failed then impulse could be next." He replied.

"The second vessel's impulse drive appears functional for now." T'Lan said.

"Captain we're being hailed by one of the Romulan ships." West announced and then she frowned, "Though I'm not certain which one from this range."

"Put them through." Edwards said and the image of a Romulan appeared on the main display. More Romulans were visible on the bridge behind the one pictured centrally and the fact that none of them wore a military uniform served to suggest that this had nothing to do with any of the various warring factions trying to establish domination of the Romulan Star Empire in the wake of the destruction of Romulus.

"Starfleet vessel," The Romulan announced, "this is the transport *Rel'Shek* we are transporting refugees away from the fighting. But our sister ship has suffered engine failure and we require help. Can you assist us? We are unarmed. I repeat we are unarmed and pose no threat."

"*Rel'Shek* this is the *USS Nightfall*." Edwards replied, "We have monitored your situation and are prepared to take your other ship under tow to the camp on Kywin Four."

The Romulan captain smiled.

"Thank you *Nightfall*. That was where we were heading. How soon can we continue?" he asked.

Edwards glanced at Carr who nodded,

"Cole, Nayal, with me." She said. Then she tapped her combadge, "Doctor King, Max, meet me in transporter room one as soon as possible. We're beaming over to the Romulan transport."

There were startled expressions on the faces of both the Romulan captain and his transporter technician when the away team materialised in front of them. Their reaction was entirely down to the appearance of the *Nightfall's* chief engineer; Lieutenant Maximillian had been assimilated by the Borg collectives and existed only as a drone until regaining his individuality along with the rest of the drones aboard his vessel. Since then he had joined Starfleet and many of the innovations aboard the *Nightfall* were down to him.

"It's alright." Carr told the Romulans, "He's with us."

"If you could show me to where you've linked your vessels I'll investigate how long it will take to separate them." Max said as he stepped off the transporter pad and the Romulan captain nodded nervously.

"Show him." he told the technician.

The rest of the away team watched as the nervous looking technician led Max out of the room.

"Captain my name is Lieutenant Commander Carr." Carr said to the captain before introducing the rest of her team, "This is Lieutenant Commander Cole, Commander King and Sub Lieutenant Nayal."

"You have one of my people among your crew?" the captain asked. Then he glanced towards the door, "As well as a Borg?"

"I'm more of an advisor than crewmember." Nayal replied.

"We spend our time along the Neutral Zone." Cole explained, "It makes sense to keep her around."

"Well my name is Navus." The Romulan captain said, "And I welcome you to the freighter *Rel'Shek*."

"Can you explain what happened to the other freighter captain?" Nayal asked as she stepped forwards.

"Were you attacked?" Cole added.

"No." Navus answered, "We've found a route that takes us clear of the fighting."

"What about Remans?" Carr asked, "Our intelligence suggests that they're spreading further every month."

"They are." Navus said, "But what would two small ships have to make attacking us worthwhile?"

"Slaves." King suggested, "I'm sure that there are plenty of Breen who wouldn't mind having your people compelled to serve them."

"Maybe so, but we've seen no signs of them on any of our trips. The *Var'Talla* suffered an accidental warp

drive failure. The result of too much use and too little time or resources to effect repairs.” Navus explained. “So you’re using this ship to drag the other across the Neutral Zone?” Cole said, “Do you know how dangerous that is?”

“What choice did we have?” Navus asked in reply, “We couldn’t fix the *Var’Talla*’s warp drive and I wasn’t going to leave all those people adrift.”

“How many people are we talking about?” King asked.

“About four thousand split between the two ships.” Navus told him.

“Any sick or injured?”

Navus nodded.

“A few. Nothing seriously contagious though, I wouldn’t let them aboard my ships if I thought they were going to start an epidemic. I don’t have a proper medical staff on either ship.”

King looked at Carr.

“I should check them out.” He said, “Just to be sure.”

Carr nodded and turned back to Navus.

“If you could show where your sickbay is.” She said, “Doctor King can take a look at your sick while we arrange to take the *Var’Talla* under tow.”

“Let me get this straight.” Edwards said when the away team contacted the *Nightfall*, “We need to use the phasers?”

“That is the quickest option captain.” Max replied, “I have studied the connection and the quickest way to separate the two ships is to simply cut through the grapples with the *Nightfall*’s phasers.”

Edwards then looked at T’Lan.

“What do you think?” he asked her.

“I would defer to Lieutenant Maximillian and Lieutenant Commander Cole’s expertise in this matter.” T’Lan answered, “My calculations for towing the Romulan vessel are almost complete and a lengthy procedure to separate the two vessels would delay our arrival at Kywin Four.”

“Did you get that?” Edwards asked.

“Yes, we got it.” Carr replied.

“And what about the medical situation?” Edwards said.

“Oh there are a few minor injuries and cases of sickness in the sickbays of both ships, but nothing worth noting.” King told him, “Frankly I’d rather leave them to the first aiders over here that have more experience with their physiology.”

“Okay then. Get back over here and we can start preparing to get underway.” Edwards said.

“Captain, given the mass of the *Var’Talla* I think that we ought to have a couple of people aboard the ship while we tow it.” Max responded.

“What for?” Edwards asked.

“Just to make sure that no one tries interfering with any of the systems. We are talking about a vessel of significant size here.” Max answered, “Cole and Nayal should be able to-“

“Captain I disagree with that assignment.” T’Lan interrupted.

“Really cousin? Why?” Nayal asked.

“Whoever is on the Romulan vessel should be qualified to monitor the tractor beam.” T’Lan said.

“So you think Max ought to stay over there instead?” Edwards asked.

“No captain. The lieutenant is better-suited overseeing operations from the *Nightfall*. I believe that Lieutenant Commander Cole and myself should be the ones stationed aboard the *Var’Talla*. I can alert you should the connection become unstable or if more of the freighter’s systems fail.”

“Very well.” Edwards replied, “Gather what you need and beam over to the *Var’Talla* as soon as you’re done here.”

“Yes captain.”

“In that case I’m going to head over to the *Var’Talla* now captain.” Cole said, “I’ll meet T’Lan there.”

Aboard the Romulan vessel King leant closer to Cole and whispered in his ear.

“Looks like you get to be alone with the woman of your dreams lieutenant commander. Play nice.”

Cole frowned.

“Err, Lieutenant Commander Carr.” He said out loud, “May I make a further suggestion?”

“T’Lan!” a voice called out as she approached her quarters.

“Nikki.” T’Lan replied as she turned around, recognising the voice. Nikki Carr was the teenage daughter of the *Nightfall*’s first officer and with no formal school aboard the ship she often came to Max or T’Lan for

help with school assignments that T'Lan had noticed were often due at short notice when the girl came for help, "I apologise but I am unable to help you with your schoolwork at this time. I am about to transport to the Romulan vessel we are about to take under tow. Lieutenant Commander Cole is waiting for me."

Nikki smiled.

"So, Robert hey?" she said, "Arranging some time alone?"

"I will be there to observe-" T'Lan began and Nikki groaned.

"Oh come on T'Lan." She said, "For months you've been asking me for tips on getting a guy and I've seen how you've reacted to some of the things he's said to you. Now you're arranging to spend time with him.

Will it be just the two of you?"

"It will. But we will both be on duty and-"

"Yeah right." Nikki said before T'Lan could finish, "Look I've done the same thing myself. How do you think I got into Bradley's role playing group?"

"You told me you found it interesting." T'Lan said.

"I do now, but I'd never been interested before I asked to join the group. I'd just come aboard the ship and Brad was really nice to me and I thought he was really cute." Nikki said, "Of course I know he's like more than ten years older than me and I didn't know about his girlfriend at the time. But the idea's the same. Ten hours alone on a Romulan ship-"

"The trip to Kywin four will take us nine point eight hours." T'Lan interrupted, "And we will hardly be alone. There are approximately two thousand Romulans aboard the ship."

"But you're hoping that they won't have anything to say to you right?" Nikki asked.

T'Lan looked around, confirming that they were alone.

"I would rather this information went no further." She said and Nikki smiled.

"You can count on me." She replied.

Cole was waiting in the transporter room when T'Lan materialised.

"Lieutenant." He said, nodding.

"Lieutenant commander." She responded as she stepped down from the transporter pad.

"Lieutenant T'Lan meet Viktus." Cole said, indicating the Romulan stood beside him, "He's the commanding officer of this ship."

"Jolan tru Lieutenant." Viktus said, giving the traditional Romulan greeting.

"Good evening captain." T'Lan replied, "I take it you have a station prepared for us?"

"Of course." Viktus said, "Commander Cole provided us with the information to configure it according to your requirements."

"Then I suggest we proceed directly to your bridge and begin." T'Lan said.

"It's this way." Cole said, having already familiarised himself with the command and control sections of the ship.

The bridge of the Romulan ship was laid out in a traditional manner, with a central command position surrounded by the various flight stations, only a handful of which were currently manned.

"This is yours." Viktus said, pointing out a vacant position and T'Lan walked over to it, "My crew are just finishing off here and after that you can have the bridge to yourself."

"This will suffice." She said as she sat down.

"Well you specified how you wanted it set up cousin." Nayal's voice suddenly called out and the central command chair turned to reveal her sat in it, deliberately slouched so that she would not be visible from behind.

"Sublieutenant Nayal." T'Lan said, any surprise concealed by her Vulcan discipline, "I did not expect to see you here."

Nayal sat up straight and grinned.

"Well since this is a Romulan ship it was decided that I ought to be present to deal with any issues the crew or passengers have in dealing with you Starfleet types." She explained.

"I was not informed of this alteration." T'Lan commented, looking at Cole.

"The lieutenant commander suggested it just before he beamed over here." Nayal said, "Carr cleared it with Edwards while you were off the bridge."

"*Var'Talla* this is *Nightfall*." West's voice then sounded from the communications system, "We are ready to engage tractor beam."

"Confirmed *Nightfall*. All propulsion systems are shut down. You may proceed at will." T'Lan responded.

Then there was a short pause before the *Var'Talla* shuddered slightly, "Tractor beam is engaged and secure." T'Lan added.

“Copy that.” West replied, “We’re going to warp now.” And on the main display the stars blurred as the two ships accelerated to warp speed.

Nayal got to her feet and walked over to T’Lan.

“So cousin, nine point eight hours to go of just the three of us.” She said, “Unless you count any of those guys and they don’t seem interested in us.” She then added, glancing at the small number of bridge crew still present, “They just want to finish their work and get back to their quarters.”

“If you are to liase with the Romulans on this ship then perhaps you should go and speak to them.” T’Lan replied, “How else can you determine if they have any issues they wish to raise.”

“Oh, err, I think that the crew are quite capable of coming to us if they need to.” Cole added, “Nayal can stay right here.”

3.

Kywin Four was a temperate world, with wide oceans and a mix of terrain types. Its speed limited by towing the *Var'Talla*, the *Nightfall* arrived after the *Rel'Shek* but that was not the only ship in orbit around the planet.

"I'm picking up the V'Shar patrol ship plus an Apollo-class transport." West reported, "There are also several Romulan ships both in orbit and on the surface. Civilian craft only, no warbirds."

"So aside from whatever the Romulans could use to bring themselves here we're looking at Strall's ship plus a Vulcan transport." Carr commented and Edwards nodded.

"Have we been hailed yet?" he asked.

"Not yet captain." West replied.

"Then we ought to hail them." Carr suggested.

"I'm picking up more than one communications node on the planet." West said, "There are two Vulcan government channels, plus one Federation one."

"Hail the Federation node." Edwards said, "I'd like to hear how this place works from one of our own."

"Yes captain." West replied, "Opening hailing frequencies."

"Hello *Nightfall*. We've been expecting you." The reply came almost immediately and on the main bridge view screen the image of a grey-haired human woman appeared, "I'm Sonia Green and I'm in charge of the Federation mission here."

"So it's not a Vulcan operation then?" Edwards asked her.

"Goodness no. The Vulcans are only here because most of the Romulan refugees who turn up are wanting to request asylum on Vulcan or one of its colonies."

"Let me guess," Carr said, "they think it's logical to come here rather than wait for the Romulans to come to them."

"You got it in one." Green said with a smile, "You must have worked with Vulcans before."

"A few." Edwards said, "Now we've got another couple of thousand of them for you." And Green sighed, wiping her hand across her face, "Is there a problem Miss Green?" Edwards asked.

"Sort of." She replied, "Look captain, we've got almost ten thousand Romulans here as it is in a facility designed for only eight. I can't move them on until their requests for asylum have been processed and I don't have the staff to do that quickly."

"Perhaps we can be of assistance then." Edwards said, "I have a starship and all its resources at my disposal."

"I'd hate to take you away from your duties captain." Green said.

"Not at all. Right now our mission is to deliver these Romulans to safety and I'd hardly call an over crowded refugee camp safe. We'll beam down as soon as we're in range. *Nightfall* out."

The transporter room that Carr and Edwards materialised in was clearly of Federation design, but smaller than those aboard the *Nightfall*. Waiting for them was the woman they had already spoken with, but apart from her the room was deserted.

"Welcome to Kywin Four." Green said.

"Miss Green." Edwards replied, "Nice to meet you in person." And he held out his hand in greeting.

"Oh call me Sonia." The woman responded as she shook his hand.

"Only if you call me David." Edwards said, "And this is my first officer Lieutenant Commander Carr."

"I must say I wasn't expecting the pair of you." Green said, "I thought you'd send security or engineering personnel."

"I want to see what you need first." Edwards said, "Do you have an office we can talk in?"

"Of course, this way David, Lieutenant Commander." Green said and she waved the two Starfleet officers towards the door.

"Yes let's go David." Carr whispered to him as they began to follow the woman.

Stepping out of the door they found themselves outside and from here they could see that all of the surrounding buildings were modular prefabricated structures, designed to be replicated using a minimum of base materials and assembled in the shortest possible time. Such structures were generally considered disposable by the Federation, the effort of recovering them being greater than creating new ones. Between these figures that were clearly Romulan could be seen moving about. The Romulans were of both sexes and a wide range of ages. Many of them sporting the markings inked down the sides of their faces that represented loved ones lost in their war, but what made them appear strange was their clothing. Most of

them wore simple overalls that had obviously been produced by Federation replicators, with just a handful of them wearing anything resembling what the two Starfleet officers had come to expect Romulan fashions to look like. A few of them paused to look at the new arrivals, recognising Starfleet uniforms and taking note of the phasers both Carr and Edwards carried.

"As you can see we're pretty crowded." Green said.

"You said you're over your official capacity by about twenty five percent." Edwards responded.

"Fifty once the ship we've towed into orbit offloads all of its passengers." Carr added and Green nodded.

"I'd love to just expand the camp, but our replicators are running flat out just to provide enough food, water and clothing for them all." She said.

"Don't you have a built in reserve?" Edwards asked.

"We should. But one of the replicators went down. Now we're right on our limit." Green told him.

"Perhaps we could have our engineer take a look at it." Carr suggested but Green shook her head.

"My people have already declared it a write off." She said, "It wasn't just some random component failure. Someone damaged it."

"Who'd do a thing like that?" Edwards said, "Were they after extra rations or something?"

"Or something." Green replied, "I'm afraid to say that they were trying to reconfigure it to produce phasers."

"Phasers?" Edwards exclaimed.

"Yes, but the replicators we've been given have been created to specifically be incapable of producing weapons." Green told him, "So now we're down a replicator, plus I lost six people two weeks ago."

"Lost?" Carr commented, "I take it you don't mean they resigned and left."

"No." Green replied, shaking her head, "They were killed."

"Killed how?" Edwards asked, his hand briefly moving to his phaser as he looked around to determine any likely places for an ambush to be mounted from.

"Oh it was an accident." Green said, "But it cost me a good technician, a medic and all four of the Federal Marshals stationed here."

"What do you need Federal Marshals for?" Edwards asked.

"To keep the peace." Green said, "There have been some fights amongst the refugees. Thefts as well. Four marshals couldn't do much but they were better than nothing. Now I've just got the V'Shar agents the Vulcans sent to help vet the refugees to do the marshals' job." Then she paused for a moment, "Ah, here we are. This is my place." And she opened the door of a nearby building.

Inside the structure was revealed to be a mix of office and living quarters, with a simple bunk positioned opposite a desk equipped with a computer terminal and piled high with PADDs. Apart from the relative untidiness of the desk the room was neat and Green pointed Carr and Edwards to a small sofa positioned close by it.

"Take a seat." She said as she headed for the chair behind her desk, "I'll call up a list of what we need."

Numerous wheeled ground vehicles were lined up in the dedicated hold aboard the *USS Nightfall* and both MACOs and Imperial Guardsmen were working on them when Nikki peered through the door. Most of the vehicles were relatively lightweight utility vehicles capable of carrying only half a dozen people, however there were four larger eight-wheeled armoured vehicles mounting heavy weapons in turrets as well. Like many of the operational sections of the ship, this was somewhere that she was not supposed to be without an escort. However, with her mother on the surface of the planet below and most of the rest of the crew otherwise occupied she had made her way here alone anyway.

"Captain Heart!" she called out when she saw the MACOs' commanding officer and she waved to him.

"What are you doing here Nikki?" he asked as he strode over to her.

"I need a favour." She asked, "I heard you're going down to the surface."

"That's right." Heart replied, "I'm taking a couple of squads down to practice vehicle handling drills."

"Can I come too?" Nikki asked and Heart frowned.

"What are you up to?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing. Honest."

"Nikki, you and honesty aren't always best friends. Remember that little incident when you impersonated a Starfleet officer so you could sneak into a bar? Now tell me exactly why you want to go down to the surface."

Nikki held up a PADD.

"It's for school. See?" she said and Heart took the PADD from her to examine it.

"Geology." He said, "You want to collect some rocks?"

"I figured that you'd be going somewhere nice and quiet where there's bound to be loads of them. I'll pick a few up and then bring them back here to analyse them for my report."

Heart said nothing.

"Please Gary." She said, "A good grade would really get my mom off my back."

Heart sighed.

"We're beaming down in ten minutes." He told her, "Be here then or we go without you."

"Thanks Gary." Nikki replied with a smile and she rushed off to get what she needed.

"Wow, you weren't kidding about being overstretched." Carr said as she looked at the PADD, "I'm surprised you can keep anything running with this pressure on your power supply."

"Fortunately the camp's been situated in a temperate zone." Green replied, "Much hotter or colder and we'd have major issues with temperature regulation."

"A couple of portable fusion generators from the *Nightfall* should more than meet your needs for energy."

Edwards said, "And we can provide replicators as well."

"Max will have to reconfigure them." Carr added, "Ours will produce whatever someone asks for. Including weapons."

"How are you for the base foodstuffs?" Edwards asked Green as he nodded in agreement with his first officer.

"Oh fine." Green answered, "Providing we can get power we can run the recycling system and the Romulans themselves gather extra supplies. But if any of the recycling units packs up then we're looking at not only problems in supplying enough food but also major issues with public health and sanitation."

"Then I suggest that we pass these requirements along to our operations chief. She can—" Edwards began before a young man suddenly burst in.

"Miss Green!" he yelled, "Come quick, they've got another one."

"Oh no." Green responded, leaping to her feet, "Find Strall."

"Sonia, what's happening?" Edwards asked, standing up.

"It's the Romulans." She answered, "They're about to kill someone."

Following the young man, Carr, Edwards and Green burst out of her office and the difference in the camp was obvious. Despite being somewhat crowded the camp had been calm when they had walked to the office from the transporter, whereas now shouts and jeers could be heard from somewhere ahead.

Green led the way, heading towards the source of the disturbance and the two Starfleet officers followed her.

"Would you mind giving us an explanation?" Edwards asked, "Who are the Romulans about to kill and why?"

"They'll have found someone they think used to be part of the Tal'Shiar." Green replied. The Tal'Shiar had been the Romulan Star Empire's dreaded secret police, conducting covert operations against not only foreign powers like the Federation or Klingon Empire, but also against its own citizenry. With the destruction of Romulus most, but not all of its agents had been killed and many of the survivors found themselves hunted, "A lot of the people here suffered because of them and now that there's no empire to stop them, they're after revenge."

"Oh great. A lynching." Carr commented.

"Edwards to *Nightfall*." Edwards said, tapping his combadge, "I need a crowd control team down here now."

"This is *Nightfall*," Hamilton's voice replied, "Cole's still on the Var'Talla."

"What about Heart and Shry?" Edwards asked.

"Heart's already on the surface." Hamilton told him.

"How close?"

"At least thirty minutes out by surface. He's already started the exercise you authorised. But Shry's still up here. I'll have him get a team together."

"Just make it quick." Edwards replied before shutting off his combadge.

"There!" Green exclaimed as she pointed to a dense group of Romulans all facing away from them. The crowd was cheering, but from amongst the cheers came the unmistakable sound of a scream.

"Out of my way!" Green yelled as she tried to push through the crowd.

"Back off human! They deserve this." One of the Romulans replied, sneering at her.

"Get back!" Edwards yelled, drawing his phaser.

"Back!" Carr repeated, also drawing her weapon.

The trio forced their way through the crowd to where there was a clearing and here they saw what had drawn the crowd. A single male Romulan lay on the ground, bleeding from several cuts to his face. His clothing was torn and more injuries to his chest and abdomen were visible. In the front row of the crowd a female Romulan screamed as she struggled to try and break free of the grip of the two other Romulans

holding her still.

"Let him go!" she yelled, but the crowd ignored her.

"Get away from him!" Green shouted running to the Romulan standing over the man on the ground and placing herself between them.

"Step aside human." The Romulan told her, "This is our business, not yours."

"Well while you're here in my camp it is my business." Green replied and the Romulan snarled before grabbing hold of her by her shoulders.

"Don't!" Edwards snapped, pressing the muzzle of his phaser to the Romulan's neck.

"You won't fire." He said without looking around, "You're Starfleet."

"You should be with us on this." A member of the crowd yelled, "That man's a murderer."

"He's not!" the woman being held shouted, "He was just a file clerk."

"For the Tal'Shiar." Another Romulan hissed, "How many names did he provide to their field agents?"

"Everybody calm down." Edwards said, looking around at the crowd, "This man and that woman are coming with us."

"No they're not human." The Romulan beside him said and before Edwards could react he swung his arm, knocking the phaser from Edwards' grip and then punched him in the face with enough force to send the captain sprawling backwards in the dirt.

"No!" Green yelled as the Romulan then bent down and scooped up Edwards' phaser.

"Drop it!" Carr shouted, turning her weapon towards the Romulan but before she could fire several members of the crowd rushed at her from behind and tried to pull the phaser from her hand.

All of a sudden there was a loud rattling sound and the crowd looked around in surprise. There they saw a group of Andorians and humans, all wearing body armour and helmets and carrying rifles. The rifles were pointed upwards and as they fired there was the loud sound that generally accompanied projectile weapons fire.

"Clear the area!" Shry yelled, his voice amplified by his communicator and he levelled his rifle. Then there was a flash of red light as he fired the phaser mounted beneath the assault rifle's barrel at a Romulan who had stepped out of the crowd and raised a metal bar. Set on stun, the phaser blast incapacitated him in an instant and also demonstrated to the crowd that the troops were willing to fire.

Carr felt the hands that had been pulling at her and her phaser suddenly let go as the crowd decided to disperse rather than risk the wrath of the newly arrived troops.

Then there was a second phaser shot from one of the MACOs and the Romulan who had stolen Edwards' phaser was rendered instantly unconscious.

The Romulan woman who had been held by the crowd was released as her captors retreated and she instantly crawled to where the male lay on the ground and cradled his head.

"Captain." Carr said as she noticed Edwards still lying prone.

"David." Green added as both woman rushed to his side.

"What happened?" Edwards asked as he lifted his head, "Did anyone get the registration of that shuttle that hit me?"

"Better." Shry said as he walked up to them, "We got the pilot." And he looked at the Romulan who had just been shot.

"Get him up to the *Nightfall*." Edwards said as he stood up and recovered his phaser, "We'll hold him in our brig until—"

"That will not be necessary captain." A familiar voice called out and as Edwards looked around he saw Strall approaching in the company of four more V'Shar agents.

"Agent Strall." Green said, "Arriving just after the nick of time I see."

"There is no logic in rushing into a situation unprepared." Strall replied, "Nor is it logical to discharge projectile weapons in crowded areas. The risk of accidental injury is too high."

Shry removed the magazine from his rifle and held it out. Although it was almost empty the rounds remaining could be clearly seen. The cases held no actual bullet and were instead crimped closed at the tip to hold in the powder.

"Blanks. Lots of noise but no bullet to come back down and hit someone." Shry explained "So how logical is it to wait until the people you're supposed to be protecting have been beaten to death by a mob Vulcan?" he then asked but Strall ignored him. Instead he turned to his men.

"Take them to the infirmary." He ordered, indicating the two Romulans who had been the focus of the mob's anger.

"Perhaps you should get yourself looked at as well." Green said to Edwards, "That Romulan hit you pretty hard."

“Doctor King can take a look at me when I get back to the Nightfall.” Edwards replied, “Which we ought to be doing now.” Then he looked at Shry, “Captain perhaps you and your men could remain here until things have calmed down.”

“There is no need for that Captain Edwards.” Strall said, “My men are quite capable of dealing with the security situation here without your help.”

“Of course you are.” Edwards replied, rubbing his face where the Romulan had struck it.



The vehicle shook as Heart drove it over the rise at high speed. Beside him Nikki gasped and braced herself on the dashboard in front of her.

"You know it'll be easier for me to collect rocks if I've not been bounced to death before we get to somewhere I can pick them up from." She said.

"I think you're making the young lady nervous captain." One of the pair of MACOs sat in the back of the vehicle commented with a grin.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Nikki commented and then all of a sudden Heart braked sharply, bringing the vehicle to a sudden halt.

"We're here." Heart said, switching off the engine.

"Oh thank God." Nikki muttered as she opened the door and got out. Then as the MACO that had been sat behind her got out as well she turned to him and added, "Does he always drive like that?"

"Oh no, he normally goes a lot faster when we don't have a civilian aboard." He replied.

"Oh great." Nikki muttered before taking out a PADD and looking around at the somewhat barren and rocky terrain, "Okay I've got a list of what types of rocks I need to try and find." She added.

"Well there's plenty just lying about for the taking." Heart said, "But remember, if you find anything worth staking a claim over then I get a share for bringing you here."

"Agreed." Nikki replied, reaching into her bag and taking out a tricorder, "This should help." She said, opening up the device, "Assuming I can remember what T'Lan taught me about using it."

"So one of the people we're supposed to be here to help did this to you did he?" King asked as he ran a dermal regenerator over Edwards' face. A bruise was starting to develop but the doctor was taking steps to heal the damage in minutes rather than days.

"It seems that the Romulans here are bearing something of a grudge against anyone who used to work for the Tal'Shiar." Edwards replied.

"Well I can't necessarily say that I blame them." King commented as he inspected his work. Then he prodded the spot where the bruise had been.

"Ouch!" Edwards exclaimed.

"It'll be tender for a couple of hours." King said, picking up his tray of instruments and taking them to the correct storage shelf.

"Thanks." Edwards said sarcastically and then he looked at Carr who was stood smiling at him, "What?"

"Call me Sonia." She said. Then in a deeper voice she added, "Only if you call me David."

"I was being polite." Edwards said.

"Sure you were." Carr responded.

"Why Grace, are you jealous?" Edwards asked.

"No, of course not. But if you'd been seriously hurt I can bet that I'd have been the one to have to give you mouth to mouth. And I'm out of practice."

"Well if you think you need to brush up on your mouth to mouth skills perhaps we should arrange a refresher course." Edwards said and all of a sudden there was a loud, fake cough from the direction of the door to sickbay. Looking around Carr and Edwards saw Cole, Nayal and T'Lan standing there.

"Hope we weren't interrupting anything." Cole said.

"Damn it." Carr muttered.

"What's going on here?" King said as he returned.

"The captain left instructions for us to report to him as soon as we had completed the transfer of the Romulan refugees from the *Var'Talla* to the surface." T'Lan explained.

"Though I'm not sure what we walked in on." Cole added.

"I think I can guess." Nayal said.

"Well unless you're sick, injured or a doctor, get out of my sickbay." King said, "Now."

"I think that's our queue to leave." Edwards said as he got up off the biobed he had been sat on and headed for the door.

Followed by his officers, Edwards spoke to them in the corridor outside.

"There's more going here than just helping refugees escape a war zone." he said.

"What makes you think that?" Cole asked.

"Someone down there is trying to get hold of weapons." Carr said, "They destroyed a replicator trying to bypass its safety lockouts."

"Plus the entire compliment of Federal Marshals was killed in one accident." Edwards added.

"You suspect it wasn't an accident?" Cole asked.

"Correct." Edwards answered, "Now the woman running things down there says that Strall and his V'Shar agents are acting to keep the peace now, but I don't think they can handle it."

"The V'Shar is one of the most efficient security services in the Alpha Quadrant." T'Lan commented and Nayal snorted.

"The death of a marshal is a Federation issue anyway, not a Vulcan one." Cole said, "I can look into it."

"Good." Edwards said, "And take T'Lan down there with you."

"T'Lan?" Cole responded.

"Yes. We were told that the marshals died in a landslide. T'Lan should be able to determine the cause." Edwards told him.

"The assignment is logical." T'Lan added.

"Do you have anything for me to do captain?" Nayal asked.

"Yes. There are ten thousand of your people down there." Edwards said, "Go and see how they feel about their situation. I've heard from the camp's administrator and I'd like to hear how the residents feel as well."

"Don't forget that Heart's already on the surface with a couple of platoons. If you need help he may be able to do something." Carr said.

"He's quite some way from the camp though." Edwards pointed out, "If it's an emergency then you may be better off signalling us."

"I'll bear that in mind." Cole replied and he looked at T'Lan, "Lieutenant, perhaps we should be beaming down."

Cole, Nayal and T'Lan emerged from the building holding the camp's transporter together.

"Well I suppose I ought to go and start asking about people's feelings." Nayal said and then frowning she added, "Because if there's one thing my people are known for it's sharing our feelings." And she began to walk away.

T'Lan turned to Cole, but before she could speak he looked around and spoke first.

"I'll head for the administrator's office." He said, "You go see Strall. Find out how far he's got with his investigation."

"Lieutenant commander, may I ask a question?" T'Lan said.

"Technically you just did." Cole said, "But I'll allow you another."

"Have I done something to offend you?" T'Lan asked and Cole's eyes widened momentarily, "I understand that my behaviour while I was intoxicated by the-

"No T'Lan." Cole interrupted, "You've done nothing to offend or annoy me."

"Then why do you appear so uncomfortable in working with me all of a sudden? I realise that I do not always interpret human feelings correctly but I-

"T'Lan you've done nothing wrong." Cole said, "I'm perfectly happy to be working with you. But I need information from Strall and I figured that being a fellow Vulcan you'd be able to get that information more efficiently."

T'Lan considered this for a moment.

"That is logical." She said, "I will go and speak with him now."

"Good. You do that lieutenant." Cole replied, "In the mean time I'll be in the administrator's office."

Nikki sealed her sixth rock sample in a plastic bag and stood up.

"Well that's all I need." She said to Heart who was stood close behind her.

"Good. Then we can get going." Heart replied and he waved to the other two MACOs who were stood waiting by the vehicle. Both men nodded in response and climbed back inside.

Heart and Nikki began to walk back towards the vehicle, but as Nikki started to head towards the passenger side Heart put a hand on her shoulder.

"Wrong side kid." He said to her and she frowned.

"But the passenger seat-" she began.

"You came down here to help with your education." Heart said, "So how'd you like to learn to drive?"

"Really?" Nikki exclaimed, "But I don't have a permit."

"Look around." Heart said, "There are no roads here. No roads means no traffic laws and you can't get a permit to drive where there are no traffic laws. Besides with no people or other vehicles around to crash into where could possibly be safer?"

Nikki just grinned and headed for the driver's seat. As she and Heart climbed aboard the vehicle the two MACOs in the back seat looked on puzzled.

"What's going on captain?" one asked.

"I'm teaching young Miss Carr to drive." Heart replied.

"Have you driven much before?" the MACO then asked Nikki.

"No." she replied, "This will be my first time."

The two MACOs exchanged glances nervously. Then both men looked upwards, touched their fingers to their foreheads and crossed themselves.

Strall did not look up from his computer when T'Lan entered his office.

"Investigator Strall I would like to ask you some questions about your investigation into the deaths of the Federal Marshals." She told him.

"There is no investigation." He replied, "They died in an accident. To investigate it further would be an illogical waste of resources."

"Captain Edwards has ordered Lieutenant Commander Cole and myself to investigate their deaths." T'Lan said.

"The captain is only human." Strall said, finally stopping what he was doing on his computer and looking directly at T'Lan, "They are not logical."

"I have found that they can be eminently logical at times." T'Lan said.

"And yet they waste their time investigating something that has already ruled to be a tragic accident."

"The lieutenant commander has requested that you turn over all information regarding the incident." T'Lan told him.

"If that is what he wishes." Strall said, turning back to his computer, "Hand me your tricorder, I will copy the files to its memory."

T'Lan passed Strall the tricorder and waited while he copied the files she had requested to it.

"Thank you." She said as he gave her the tricorder back.

"How do you stand the smell?" he asked suddenly, "Of the humans?"

"After a while one adjusts." T'Lan said, then she raised her hand in the traditional Vulcan greeting, "Live long and prosper." She said.

Strall got his feet and made the same gesture in return.

"Peace and long life." He replied. Then as T'Lan turned to leave he added, "You have grown your hair like so many of their females." A clear reference to the fact that she wore her hair long and tied back rather than adopting the close-cropped styles most Vulcan sported.

T'Lan looked back at him.

"Starfleet has regulations regarding the appearance of its officers." She said, "Mine is well within the limits these set."

"Yet you have chosen a more human appearance." Strall said, "Perhaps they are more of an influence on you than you are on them."

T'Lan was uncertain what to make of this. But Strall said nothing further, instead sitting down again and returning to the task he had been carrying out when she had first entered his office. T'Lan turned away again and left. From the V'Shar building she headed to Green's office where she expected to find him with the camp administrator. Sure enough he was sat in front of her desk as she pointed out details on her computer display.

"Ah T'Lan." Cole said when T'Lan entered the room, "Miss Green, sorry, Sonia was just explaining the process that the Romulans have to go through when they get here."

"Yes." Green agreed, "Most of them want to settle on a Vulcan world."

"That is logical." T'Lan said as she selected somewhere to sit, "Before their civil war the Romulan dissident movement held out the possibility of the reunification of our people as something to aim for."

"Well it's long way off." Green said, "You may have noticed a few Vulcan priests out there." Cole nodded.

"Those robes tend to stand out." He said.

"Well they're here to provide classes on Vulcan culture." Green said, "Particularly about the suppression of emotion and logical thinking. Unless someone can do well in those classes the priests recommend that they be denied permission to settle on Vulcan or any of its colonies."

"The inability of the Romulans to accept logic caused war on Vulcan." T'Lan said, "It is only logical that the Vulcan government would seek to avoid a repeat of that part of our history."

"In other words don't rock the boat." Cole said. Then he looked directly at Green, "So Sonia, what happens to all those that the Vulcans don't want?"

"That depends." Green answered, "Most will still be eligible for asylum elsewhere in the Federation. But there are other interested parties as well."

"I don't like the sound of that." Cole said.

"I can't see why not." Green said, "It's your lot that I'm talking about."

"My lot?" Cole asked.

"Starfleet. Specifically Starfleet Intelligence." Green said, "Anyone that may have information regarding what's going on with the military forces active in their civil war gets invited to Starfleet headquarters for a chat. My guess is that they get offered asylum in exchange for information."

"That would be a logical arrangement." T'Lan said, "It benefits both parties."

"You said that the Vulcan priests just made recommendations about asylum to Vulcan." Cole said, "Who makes the final decision?"

"Oh that would be Strall." Green replied, "Or at least one of his agents. If the V'Shar is satisfied that they don't pose a threat to Vulcan they grant them a refugee visa. But in the time I've been here fewer than a hundred have been issued. One of the marshals was concerned that the remaining Romulans may try and turn this camp into a permanent colony." She then explained, "Of course the Federation would never allow that. A Romulan colony within Federation space?"

"And with ten thousand or more inhabitants to be forcefully evicted." Cole added.

"Lieutenant commander, are you considering the possibility that some of the Romulans are seeking to arm themselves to prevent their being removed?" T'Lan asked.

"It's a possibility." Cole replied, "Do you have the files from Strall?"

"Right here." T'Lan said, handing him the tricorder. Cole took the device and opened it.

"Thank you." He said as he began to scroll through the information Strall had provided. The he paused, "The accident was well outside the camp." He said.

"Yes." Green said, "The marshals took a vehicle out and got caught up in a landslide. The road collapsed and they fell to their deaths."

"You brought the bodies back?" Cole asked, looking at Green.

"Of course we did. Though we've not got them any more. When it was ruled an accident they were repatriated to their next of kin. We still have the medical officer's report though."

"Good." Cole said, "I'll want them sending up to the *Nightfall* for Doctor King to take a look at. In the meantime T'Lan and I need to go."

"Go where lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked.

"To the scene of the accident of course." Cole told her.

Cautiously, Viktus made his way through the camp to a spot located between two of the large storage buildings used to store the base materials for the camp's replicator systems. Few people ever bothered coming here, but still he kept an eye out for any signs that he was being followed.

"You're late." A voice called out from behind a power distribution junction box.

"I couldn't help it." Viktus replied as a figure in a non-descript hooded robe stepped into view. There was Vulcan writing on the robe, but such clothing was common in the camp and the hood successfully concealed its wearer's features, "I've had Starfleet breathing down my neck for half a day now. When we got here they insisted on staying aboard my ship until all the refugees had disembarked. Even after that they wanted to send over an engineering team to help with repairs." Viktus explained.

"Damaged engines and refugees do not concern me." The hooded figure said, "Where are my weapons?"

"Don't worry you'll get them." Viktus replied.

"That was not what I asked." The other figure said.

"Well obviously I couldn't bring them with me here." Viktus said, "You just tell me where and when you want them delivered and I'll see to it that they're there waiting for you."

"Take them to these co-ordinates." The figure said, holding out a Romulan made PADD. Viktus looked at the screen and memorised the co-ordinates displayed, "In two hours."

Viktus shrugged.

"If that's what you want. I was expecting you to say sooner." He said.

"There is another issue to be dealt with first." The hooded figure replied.

"Fair enough. I'll get back to my ship and stand by to beam down your weapons." Viktus said, "Though I'd rather you turned around and left first."

The figure nodded and turned to walk away. Then after just a few steps it came to a halt and looked back towards Viktus, but the Romulan captain was nowhere to be seen.

5.

As she walked around the camp Noyal considered how close she had come to ending up in a place like this. Had Reman raiders under the command of a mysterious leader allied to an equally unusual Vorta with a force of freshly grown Jem'Hadar not diverted the convoy that fled her homeworld then she would most likely have never ended up on the *USS Nightfall*. Overall the camp did not appear to be such a bad place, the Federation was making a genuine effort to provide for its inhabitants but still the Romulans here did not see this camp as their final destination. Speaking with some of them she found out that most still held out the hope of settling on Vulcan, despite the cultural gulf that existed between them and the Vulcans. But Noyal was curious about something other than cultural differences, she wanted to know about the Romulan who had come close to being murdered and so as soon as she was able to find out where he and his wife had been living she went directly there. His residence looked identical to all of the others in the camp, built from prefabricated modules stuck together to create a basic, if clean and warm habitat. Wearing a military uniform Noyal stood out somewhat from most of the other Romulans in the camp and some eyed her suspiciously, wondering who she was. However, what really peaked their curiosity was when they noticed the Starfleet combadge on her chest and the phaser on her hip.

"Who are you?" a woman leaning out of the unit positioned next to the beaten man's asked.

"My name's Sublieutenant-" Noyal began, but the woman snorted.

"No ranks here any more." She said and she looked at the now empty hab unit next to hers and added, "He found that out."

"My name's Noyal." Noyal said, "Why was the man who lived next door to you attacked?"

"Because he was part of the Tal'Shiar." The woman replied.

"No other reason?" Noyal asked.

"Of course not. What other reason would we need?" the woman said, "Now you answer me a question Noyal. Why are you so interested in one of the Tal'Shiar? We all know that Starfleet's been giving some of them sanctuary and you're wearing a Starfleet combadge and carrying a Starfleet phaser. What did you do back in the Empire Noyal?"

Around her Noyal noticed that more of the camp's residents appeared to be starting to take an interest in her. Noyal had never been a part of the Tal'Shiar and had not even been called into military service until the civil war came to her homeworld.

"I think I'll be going." Noyal said.

"Not so fast." One of a trio of male Romulans said as they approached her, "I think you ought to answer the question."

"I was a civilian." Noyal said, "It was the civil war that forced me to fight to defend my home before I was forced to flee the same as you."

"Then it's a shame I don't believe you." The man said and from behind his back he produced a knife.

Noyal did not wait for him to strike, or even to take one step closer to him. Drawing her phaser she aimed straight at him and fired.

"Was that a phaser?" West asked when she heard the characteristic sound of the energy discharge.

"It did sound like one." Max replied. The pair were overseeing the beaming down of the fusion generators that would power the new equipment and habitation units that were still being organised about the *Nightfall* in orbit. Max turned to the engineers responsible for setting up the generators, "Stay here and continue with your task." He told them, "Lieutenant West and I are going to investigate."

They walked in the direction of the phaser fire, ready to draw their own weapons but refraining from doing so for now. As they got closer they began to hear shouts.

"She shot him!"

"She can't shoot us all. Take her down."

"Oh dear." Max said, "It appears that Noyal has run into difficulties."

West did not bother to ask how he knew it was Noyal, in the months since she had met the former Borg drone she had become more used to what the implants he had chosen to retain gave him the ability to do. Most significant of these was the ocular implant that gave him visual acuity that she could match only with a tricorder.

Then there was a second phaser shot, followed by a scream.

"Okay that's not good." West said, drawing her phaser.

"No it isn't." Max added as he too drew his weapon and they hurried forwards.

When West first saw Nayal the Romulan woman was being circled by a group of about a dozen other Romulans while several more looked on. Meanwhile two more Romulans lay on the ground where Nayal had stunned them.

"Look, I've nothing to do with the Tal'Shiar." Nayal told the crowd, "I'm just curious about the man who lived here."

"And we've already told you that we don't believe you." One of the circling Romulans said.

"She is telling the truth." Max called out and the Romulans looked around at him and West, "The sublieutenant was not a part of the Tal'Shiar prior to coming aboard our ship."

"Thanks Max." Nayal said but at the moment her attention was focused on him the closest Romulan to her leapt forwards and slammed into her. The blow knocked her down and as she fell her assailant pulled the phaser from her grip.

"Down!" West yelled when she saw this. But Max remained upright as the now armed Romulan whirled around and fired. The phaser beam struck Max in the chest, but on it's minimum setting the weapon had no effect on the Borg.

"West to Nightfall!" West exclaimed, tapping her combadge, "Emergency beam up. Recall all Starfleet personnel from the camp." And a moment later she, Max and Nayal all vanished in patterns of dancing lights.

Aboard the Reman warbird its commanding officer returned to his quarters to find that he was not alone.

"Hello Shintar." Viktus said.

"What do you think you're doing here?" Shintar hissed, closing the door before any of the Reman crew saw the Romulan man.

"I'm here to collect what you promised you could supply." Viktus said, "Unless you'd rather explain another failure to *her*."

Shintar snorted.

"I have nothing to fear." He said, "I'm just a middle man here. This is your assignment."

"But if it fails because of you then I won't be the only one condemned to oblivion."

"There is no need to panic." Shintar reassured him, "My crew has seized all the weapons you need and more."

"Just the specified amount." Viktus replied, "If I offer more then my buyer may get suspicious and start asking questions about where they come from and neither of us wants to have to answer that question."

"They're in the hold." Shintar said, "The boxes are tagged."

"Good, in that case-" Viktus began but he was interrupted by the door to Shintar's quarters opening again.

"My Lord Shintar." Another Reman announced, "We have just had word from-" and then he noticed Viktus, "My Lord!" he exclaimed, reaching for his weapon. However Shintar reacted quickly and struck the Reman in his throat. Choking and now grasping at he neck as he struggled to breathe, the Reman staggered back towards the doorway. But again Shintar moved quickly, dragging the Reman back towards him and slamming his hand down on the control to seal the door. Then he picked up the Reman and hurled him across the room. There was a crash as the Reman landed on a table and it collapsed under him. Shintar then drew a knife and advanced on the now badly disorientated Reman before reaching down to slit his throat. Then came a hammering on the outside of the door.

"Lord Shintar! What is happening? Are you alright." A voice called out.

Shintar looked down at the Reman corpse and then at Viktus.

"Get out of here." He said, "Take your weapons and go. This assignment of yours has already cost me a useful assistant that will be difficult to replace. Now get out of here before the rest of my crew break down that door and find you here. My cover would not survive that."

"What will you tell them?" Viktus asked.

"That he tried to assassinate me and that I killed him for it." Shintar replied and Viktus nodded. Then he turned around and took a single step, but before his foot hit the deck he vanished into thin air.

The vehicle came to a halt and Nikki let out a brief laugh.

"That was awesome." She exclaimed.

"Not bad for a first effort either." Heart replied. Then he looked at the MACOs in the back seat, both of who were holding tightly onto the internal safety cage, "All right back there lads?" he asked with a grin and both men glared at him.

"So now I know how to drive, how about you show me how to use one of those as well?" Nikki then said and she tapped the rifle clamped to the dashboard in front of Heart and he frowned.

"It's not a toy you know." He said.

"Neither is this vehicle." Nikki replied, "Please Gary. It's not like you'll be letting me run wild with it."

"Go on then." Heart said and as he released the clamp on his rifle he looked at the other two MACOs, "Are you two coming?" he asked and both men shook their heads slowly, "Fair enough." Heart said before climbing out of the vehicle.

He led Nikki a short distance away and then held out the rifle, pulling the bolt back to expose the empty chamber.

"Only take a weapon like this from someone if you can see that it isn't loaded." He said.

"Sure." Nikki said, taking the rifle. Then she began to swing it around and Heart suddenly grabbed the barrel before it could point at him.

"And absolutely never point it at anything you don't want to shoot." He said, "Now take this." And he handed her a magazine of ammunition, "That's standard six millimetre duranium tipped armour piercing ammunition." He said, "Designed to take down Borg drones. Now insert it into the weapon."

"Like this?" Nikki asked as she pushed the magazine into the rifle.

"That's it."

Nikki then lifted the rifle to her shoulder and looked down the sight. Then she pulled the trigger and nothing happened.

"What did I do wrong?" she said, frowning.

"Two things." Heart replied, "First you forgot to chamber a round by pulling back on the cocking handle like I did when I handed you the weapon and secondly the selector's still in the safe position."

"Okay I get it." Nikki replied as she chambered a round and released the safety.

"Wait." Heart said, "That's full auto. Start with semi." And he changed the selector to semi-automatic, "Now aim at that rock over there. Just point the gun and squeeze the-" and then before he could finish there was a sudden sharp 'Crack!' as the rifle fired and Nikki squealed. Then she smiled.

"I hit it." She said, "This is easy."

"Try that one." Heart said, pointing to a rock significantly further away.

"That's even bigger." Nikki said, "That's no problem." And she fired again. This time however there was a plume of dirt as the bullet went slightly wide and hit the ground between her and the rock, "What happened?" she asked as she lowered the rifle, frowning.

"The bullet is a physical object." Heart pointed out, "So it follows physical rules. Gravity pulls it down and wind blows it aside. You didn't compensate for either. That's part of the reason why these things just aren't used by most modern fighting units. A phaser beam doesn't drop at range and doesn't get blown off target. Plus you get better hitting power and greater ammunition capacity."

"This is the phaser right?" Nikki asked, tapping the unit mounted beneath the rifle barrel and Heart smiled.

"Put the rifle back into position." He said, "I'll set the phaser."

The road was set into the side of a ravine and it was easy to see where the marshals had come off the road. Right in front of Cole and T'Lan was a hole that extended from the sharp drop to the bottom of the ravine on one side to the sheer cliff face on the other.

Cole peered over the edge.

"Well it certainly looks high enough to kill you if you fell from here." He said, "Even if you were wearing a safety harness and inside a vehicle."

"Indeed lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "Perhaps it was indeed an accident."

"I don't think so." Cole replied as he stepped back from the edge of the road, "Look around. This road is properly built, not just some dirt track. That means someone had to take a look at the ground they were building on. Plus there are no skid marks anywhere leading up to this hole. That means that the vehicle must have been right on top of the hole when it opened up. Do you know what the odds of that are?"

"Approximately one in-" T'Lan began.

"I didn't mean for you to answer that question lieutenant." Cole interrupted.

"I am sorry lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.

"Never mind. Let's look for a way down." Cole said as he began to walk back along the road.

"Why? What is down there?" T'Lan asked.

"Whatever used to be where that hole is now lieutenant." Cole said.

Cole and T'Lan found a narrow footpath, steep in places but still useable to get to the bottom of the ravine and from there they headed to where a pile of rubble marked out where the road above had collapsed.

However, there was more than just rubble here. The mangled vehicle that the marshals had been riding in was still here as well, mostly buried but enough of the rubble had been cleared to give the rescue team room to get to it and recover the bodies from inside.

"There's blood all over the inside of this." Cole said as he peered inside the vehicle. The fall from the road had inflicted catastrophic damage to it and there was no longer enough room for a person to sit comfortably inside. Whoever had been given the unfortunate job of removing the bodies would have had to crawl in and out of it.

"This proves that the marshals drove off the road." T'Lan said.

"Maybe." Cole replied, "But not why. Try scanning the rocks."

"Of course lieutenant commander." T'Lan said as she took out her tricorder and began to scan the rubble, "The vehicle is all here." She said, "It is damaged beyond repair but complete."

"I'm more interested in the rocks." Cole said, "See if you can pick up any signs of thermal shock or chemical residue."

"It would help if I knew what sort of chemicals you were searching for." T'Lan said.

"I can't be certain." Cole replied, "But it'll be an artificial compound that shows signs of combustion."

"You are searching for an explosive." T'Lan said, "Why did you not simply say so?"

"Because I'm not sure that that's how the road was made to conveniently collapse just as our Federal Marshals came driving along it."

T'Lan focused on the tricorder, sweeping the scanning field over the rubble.

"Lieutenant commander I cannot find any traces of any known military or commercial explosives." She said,

"But there does appear to be interference from a remote source."

"How remote?"

"Unknown. But it is located in a southwesterly direction." T'Lan said and Cole turned to look in that direction. Initially he saw nothing, but then there was a brief flash of light as the sun reflected off something positioned up on the cliff overlooking the ravine.

"Down!" he yelled, tackling T'Lan and pushing her to the ground just before there was another flash of light as a laser blast struck the rubble right behind where they had been standing.

"Lieutenant commander," T'Lan said, now lying beneath him and looking him in the eyes, "what is happening?"

"I'd say that we're coming under fire lieutenant." He replied, "Somebody up there has a laser rifle trained on us. I saw the reflection off their scope. Problem is whoever it is they're too far away for me to accurately target with my phaser." Then he tapped his combadge, "*Nightfall* this is Cole."

"Go ahead commander." Edwards' voice responded, though the signal was distorted somewhat.

"T'Lan and I are under fire captain. At least one assailant armed with a laser weapon. Can you beam us out?"

"Hang on Cole." Edwards said and there was a brief pause during which Cole could hear static on the channel, "Negative Cole." Edwards added, "There seems to be some sort of jamming field in operation. Can you withdraw?"

Cole lifted his head, searching for a way to escape, but he pulled it back down again moments before another laser blast passed narrowly overhead.

"No, we're pinned down." He said.

"Hang on Cole, I think Heart's got several units down there. I'll see how soon he can get to you. *Nightfall* out."

"Well T'Lan it looks like it's just the two of us." Cole then said to T'Lan.

"Perhaps we should seek cover while we wait for Captain Heart lieutenant commander." She replied.

"Where?" Cole asked, "If we get up we'll expose ourselves."

"Perhaps in there." T'Lan suggested, moving an arm out from underneath Cole and pointing to the hole that had been dug in the rubble.

"You mean we hide in the wreck?" Cole asked.

"It is the logical solution." T'Lan said.

"Okay then. I'll try and distract our gunman while you make for cover. Then I'll follow." Cole said and he rolled off T'Lan, drew his phaser and fired it in the direction of their attacker. Instantly T'Lan scrambled towards the wrecked vehicle, keeping low to present the smallest possible target. As he had expected, Cole's phaser fire did nothing to prevent the mystery sniper from firing again but it did make him target Cole instead of T'Lan and one of the rocks in the rubble shattered as a laser beam hit it. Seeing T'Lan disappear into the hole Cole then leapt to his feet and ran, firing his phaser continuously until he too reached the hole and slid down into the buried vehicle below. T'Lan let out a startled grunt as he landed on top of her for the second time in just a few minutes. Though the vehicle had remained largely in one piece it had been crushed by the impact of its fall and the weight of the rubble on top of it. Therefore the two officers now found themselves pressed against one another as they tried separate themselves.

"Sorry about that lieutenant." He said.

"There is no need to apologise lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "Slowing down to check that I was out of the way would likely have resulted in your being killed. Therefore it would not be logical."

"Thanks T'Lan." Cole said.

"Lieutenant commander does it sound to you like our assailant has increased his rate of fire?" T'Lan asked and Cole realised that she was right. However, it was not the sounds of the laser weapon being fired that he could hear but the sound of the shots striking the rocks above them.

"You're right." Cole said, "What is he playing at?" and then as if timed to answer his question there was the sound of falling rocks as the rubble covering much of the vehicle he and T'Lan were using for a hiding place gave way and buried it once more, sealing them both inside, "Oh this isn't good." Cole said as they were plunged into darkness. Then he felt T'Lan's hands moving between them, "Lieutenant, what are you doing?" he asked.

"I am searching for my tricorder." She replied and then the interior of the buried vehicle was illuminated dimly as she opened up the device and its display cast out its light.

"Good idea." Cole said, "At least we can see now."

6.

On the bridge of the Nightfall Edwards looked around as West exited the turbolift.

"Doctor King asked me to pass along a message captain." She said, "He wanted to know if he'd be treating the entire crew for getting punched in the face. He said if he is then he wants a raise and a promotion."

"I'll take it under consideration." Edwards replied, "Now we've got trouble on the surface."

"What is it?" West asked.

"It's the bit of the planet you walk on, but that's not important right now." Hamilton muttered from the helm position.

"There's a time and a place Mister Hamilton." Carr told him.

"Cole and T'Lan are under fire." Edwards said to West as she took her place at the operations position, "There's a dampening field in the area preventing us from helping them. What can you tell me about it?"

West looked at the sensor readout, noting the large distortion where detailed readings were unavailable. However, in the midst of this she could still pick up the combadges of Cole and T'Lan.

"I'm picking up the field captain." She said, "It's definitely too strong for us to establish a transporter lock through."

"Where are the units Captain Heart took down with him?" Carr asked.

"Most are about twenty kilometres away from Cole and T'Lan." West said, "But there's one vehicle a lot closer. Within the field. I think that it's Captain Heart himself."

"Then he can beat anyone else there." Edwards said, "Raise him."

Nikki braced the rifle against her shoulder and fired the underslung phaser again. The beam struck the rock it was aimed towards, but did no damage.

"Can't I try a higher setting?" she asked.

"No, I think level one is quite enough to get the feel for it." Heart replied.

"But-" Nikki began.

"*Nightfall* to Heart." Edwards' voice said, interrupting Nikki and Heart tapped his combadge.

"Heart here captain." He said.

"Cole and T'Lan have run into trouble." Edwards told him, "They're under fire about three kilometres from your position."

"Could you repeat that captain?" Heart asked, "There's some interference on the line."

"Yes, Cole and T'Lan are under fire. Whoever is firing at them is employing some sort of dampening field to prevent us beaming them out or help in. You're just within the radius of the field so you'll be able to get there quicker than anyone else."

Heart looked at Nikki.

"Captain I have Nikki with me." He said.

"Nikki?" Carr's voice asked, "What are you doing down there?"

"Collecting rocks." Nikki replied.

"I have to send them in." Edwards said to Carr, then he took a deep breath and addressed Heart again, "Take your men and relieve Lieutenant Commander Cole and Lieutenant T'Lan." He ordered, "We think there's only one gunman so you shouldn't have much trouble. But you are not put Nikki in any unnecessary danger. Understood?"

"Understood." Heart replied as he took his rifle back from Nikki, "We're on our way."

Back on the bridge Edwards noticed Carr glaring at him.

"I'm sorry Grace." He said, "I had to do it."

"I know." She replied, "Captain Heart and his men won't let anything happen to her. But you know what I want in return."

Edwards sighed.

"Very well. Dinner." He said.

"I'll bring the wine." Carr added, "I'd hate for you to serve up some of that Romulan ale you've got stashed away. You know what it does to me."

Heart drove the vehicle even faster than before.

"Somebody get on that phaser." He ordered and one of the MACOs in the rear of the vehicle undid his harness and lifted himself out of his seat. He pulled his scarf up over his nose and mouth and then lowered

his goggles to protect his eyes before undoing the rooftop hatch. He then pulled himself into a position behind the bulky energy weapon mounted on the roof of the vehicle. The MACO took hold of the weapon's controls and armed it.

"Phaser ready captain." He called out, "Auto-targeting appears offline."

"Must be the dampening field." Heart said, "You'll just have to aim manually. You know, point and shoot."

"Lookout!" Nikki screamed suddenly as she saw the sudden drop ahead.

"I see it." Heart replied as he braked sharply and brought the vehicle to a halt. Then he and the MACO still sitting behind him leapt out with their rifles in their hands.

"There's someone down there." The gunner on the roof said and Heart lifted his rifle so he could make use of its optical sight to get a better view.

The figure now moving calmly across the bottom of the ravine had the distinctive pointed ears of a Romulan and carried his weapon in a relaxed position.

"Looks like a commercial laser rifle." Heart said, "Probably a hunting weapon." then he looked up at the gunner, "Let him know we're here."

The gunner smiled and directed the mounted phaser down into the ravine, aiming wide of the man.

Squeezing the trigger briefly he unleashed a phaser blast that shattered a large rock about twenty metres from the figure. Immediately the man dropped to one knee and lifted his weapon to his shoulder. Like the MACOs, his laser was fitted with an optical sight and he directed it towards the top of the ravine where the phaser blast had come from.

"He's seen us." Heart said, watching through his own sight and then there was a flash of laser fire and he heard a frightened squeal from behind him, "Nikki get down!" Heart yelled, looking over his shoulder at her. The shot from the laser rifle had struck the armoured windshield of the vehicle with enough power to scorch the outer protective layer and create a crack running diagonally across it. Heart knew that another hit like that could penetrate the windshield, "Let's take him down." Heart then said and he fired his own phaser at the man below.

The shot struck the man at the base of his neck and he fell backwards, the laser rifle flying from his grasp. Heart doubted that he would get back up again, but he waited just in case to see if there were any signs that the man had somehow survived.

"Think maybe you should have just stunned him instead?" the nearby MACO asked as he too studied the corpse.

"At this range?" Heart replied, "Too much chance of just clipping him and giving him the chance to shoot at us again. We've got a civilian to protect remember? Now let's get down there and figure out where those two Starfleet officers have gone to."

The storage compartment at the back of the vehicle held half a dozen sets of body armour and helmets. These included rigid plates capable of dissipating even the energy of a phaser shot providing the setting was not too high and Heart and his two MACOs each donned a set. Then, leaving their vehicle parked where it was they and Nikki located a pathway down into the ravine and followed it. Nikki noticed that despite having already dealt with the Romulan gunman the soldiers still held their weapons at the ready as if they expected more armed Romulans to suddenly appear and start shooting at them and when she began to move further ahead Heart waved her back.

"Keep behind us." He told her, "Remember our armour will stop a laser better than your body."

"So why didn't you give me a set to wear?" Nikki asked.

"Wrong size. The weight would slow you down and make you an easy target. Just stay back and stay low. If anyone starts shooting then dive for the ground and let us handle it."

Upon reaching the bottom of the ravine the MACOs' first target was the body of the Romulan and they dashed to where he lay sprawled across the ground, his lifeless eyes staring up into the sky. As Heart knelt by the body to examine it one of the other MACOs retrieved the laser rifle while the other maintained watch, still alert for an ambush.

"No ink." Heart commented.

"What?" Nikki asked.

"This guy's face." Heart replied, "There's no writing down the sides. Didn't you see the markings on Nyal's face when she first came aboard?"

"I haven't really spoken to her." Nikki said.

"Well she had writing down each side of her face." Heart said, running a finger down one side of his own face to demonstrate, "They indicate that a Romulan is in mourning for someone. When the ink fades their mourning period is over. This guy doesn't have any."

"So he doesn't know anyone who's died recently then?" Nikki asked

"There isn't a Romulan left who hasn't lost someone." Heart said, "But if he's been here a while then his ink could have faded by now. Nayal's has."

"You were right about the weapon sir." The MACO who now held the laser rifle said and he removed its power pack before passing it to Heart, "It's a commercial model. Same with the sight. With the right permit you can get a weapon like this on any one of over a hundred Federation planets."

"The key part of that phrase being 'Federation'." Heart said as he inspected the rifle, "Somehow I don't see the camp administration allowing the import of weapons."

"Could he have brought it with him from the Romulan Empire?" Nikki asked, "I've heard mom talking about Ferengi selling weapons to the Romulans."

"It's possible." Heart said, slinging the laser rifle over his shoulders and then looking around, "Now where are Cole and T'Lan?" he added.

"Hiding?" a MACO suggested.

"They'd have come out when we shot this guy." Heart replied, shaking his head.

"Wait, I know what to do." Nikki said and she reached into her bag for the tricorder she had brought along. But when she opened it up she just frowned, "It's not working." She said, "Mom's going to kill me if I've broken it."

"Don't worry." Heart said to reassure her, "There's a low level dampening field still operating. That's what's jamming the signal. Hopefully it's not strong enough to block this though." And he tapped his communicator, "Lieutenant Commander Cole, Lieutenant T'Lan, this is Captain Heart. The Romulan is down and we are in the ravine. What is your position?"

"Heart? Is that really you?" Cole's voice responded, the signal distorted slightly by the dampening field.

"There is no logic in believing that it is not him lieutenant commander." T'Lan's voice then added.

"It's just an expression lieutenant." Cole said. "Then he added, "Captain, we're trapped in the vehicle from the refugee camp. It's buried under the rubble from the landslide."

"Okay, I see it." Heart said, "We'll be with you in a couple of minutes. Heart out."

The MACOs and Nikki sprinted across the ravine to where the rubble completely covered the vehicle Cole and T'Lan had used as a hiding place.

"Set phasers to level four." Heart ordered, adjusting the setting of his own weapon, "We'll blast them out. But remember to keep your bursts short, we don't want to roast them alive in there." The MACOs then raised their weapons in unison, all with their hands on the triggers for the phasers mounted beneath their rifle barrels, "Okay fire." Heart said and all at once they fired at the rubble.

In Federation-issued phasers a setting of level four produced a thermal effect that was enough to cause extensive damage to a humanoid life form or even kill if the duration of the exposure was long enough. However, when applied in short bursts to the rubble the phaser beams set up a cycle of expansion followed by contraction when the beams were cut off and after a few bursts the lumps of rock making up the rubble simply began to shatter, triggering a rock slide.

"Back!" Heart yelled as he heard the sound of the first rocks began to slide and the MACOs ceased fire as they withdrew to a safer distance. Then as the dust settled they saw that the slide had exposed the side of the buried vehicle, "Commander! Are you okay in there?" he called out.

"Err, I think so." Cole shouted back from within the vehicle, "But it's a bit warm in here."

Heart and the MACOs advanced on the vehicle again to assist the two Starfleet officers in exiting it, but they were already climbing out by themselves when the MACOs got there. Cole emerged first and turned to offer T'Lan his hand in help.

"Thank you lieutenant commander." She said as she accepted it.

"T'Lan are you alright?" Nikki asked when the Vulcan was outside the vehicle.

"I am uninjured." She replied, approaching Nikki as she spoke, "Lieutenant Commander Cole was able to move me out of the way of the laser beam."

"So," Heart whispered to Cole when T'Lan was no longer standing right beside them, "did you get very far in there? Just the two of you trapped together and you having just saved her life." but Cole just scowled.

"We need to take some of this rubble back to the *Nightfall*." Cole said, "I'm even more certain now that the landslide that killed the marshals wasn't an accident."

"Lieutenant commander, I believe that the dampening field is still active." T'Lan said, "It will not be possible to beam any rock samples up to the ship."

"Not a problem. Our vehicle is parked just up there." Heart said, pointing back up to where they had left their vehicle, "We can load it up and get you, your rocks and that dead Romulan back up to the ship before it gets dark."

"The dampening field will need dealing with as well." Cole added.

"Lieutenant commander, the most logical course of action would be to use the *Nightfall's* sensors to determine the centre of the field and deploy an away team via runabout." T'Lan said.

"Okay the dampening field can wait. Let's get finished here." Cole replied, nodding in agreement and then he and T'Lan began to collect samples from the rubble left on top of the buried vehicle.

Meanwhile Nikki approached Heart and stood right beside him.

"What did you say to Cole?" she asked softly, "I saw his reaction."

Heart grinned.

"Oh just winding him up about T'Lan." Heart answered.

"Wait, does he like T'Lan?" Nikki asked.

Heart was about to reply when he stopped himself.

"Are you saying that pointy eared pixie likes him?" he asked in return.

"I'm not saying anything. Are you?" Nikki replied.

"No more than you are." Heart said and they both stared at one another suspiciously.

7.

Edwards was in his ready room when West contacted him.

"Captain I've got Strall on the line for you." She said.

"Put him through." Edwards replied and an image of the Vulcan appeared on his desk top monitor, "Ah, Agent Strall." He said, "To what do I—"

"There is no need for any human pleasantries captain." Strall interrupted, "I am calling about the body your crew brought back to your ship."

"Ah yes, the Romulan gunman. Doctor King is carrying out a post mortem as we speak."

"You must beam it down to us immediately." Strall said.

"Why?" Edwards asked.

"The Romulan inhabitants of the camp are agitated enough as it is due to the actions of your crew." Strall explained, "By returning the body for them to dispose according to their own customs may calm them. I expect it to be delivered within the hour." And then the screen went blank.

"Well that was odd." Edwards said and he got up and returned to the bridge, stepping onto it close to West's console, "Lieutenant is there anything wrong with our communications?"

"No sir." West replied and she glanced at the communications system readout, "The signal from Strall was deliberately cut off from his end."

"Having problems with Vulcans captain?" Carr asked. As the senior officer on the bridge she was sat in the captain's chair with Nayal sat beside her.

"Oh humans have been having problems understanding Vulcans since twenty sixty-three commander." Edwards replied, "Though this one confounds me more than most. Have you much experience in dealing with the V'Shar? Are they all like Strall."

"I've met plenty of them." Carr answered, "Remember the project that led to the *Nightfall* was supposed to consist of eighteen Akira-class ships and apart from ours two others were near completion at Beta Antares. The second ship had an all Vulcan crew and the V'Shar contributed the ground troops for it. In fact the captain of that vessel tried to poach T'Lan from us, but she chose to stay aboard the *Nightfall*. Said it was logical to continue with her assignment until it was properly concluded. But in answer to your question, no they are not all like Strall."

"So it's just my bad luck to have to deal with him."

"What does he want?" Hamilton asked.

"The body." Edwards answered, "So that he can use it to calm down the Romulans."

"Captain, simply handing over a body is not going to pacify the refugees that I encountered." Nayal said, "They either believe you are harbouring a member of the Tal'Shiar or they don't. A funeral won't change that."

"So what can he really be after?" Edwards said before tapping his combadge, "Edwards to sickbay." He said.

"Sickbay, King here."

"Doctor, how is the examination of the body going?" Edwards asked.

"Actually I was about to call you about that. I've completed my analysis and I'd like to see you down here as soon as possible. I think Carr, Cole and Nayal should see this as well." King replied.

Edwards looked at Carr and Nayal.

"I don't like the sound of this." Carr said.

"Me either." Edwards said, "But we better go and see what he's found. Mister Hamilton, the bridge is yours."

"I think I like the sound of that even less." West commented, smirking at Hamilton as he got up from the helm position.

Cole was the last to reach sickbay and was flattening his hair as he entered the room.

"You caught me in the sonic shower." He said, "I swear I've still got dust down the back of my neck."

"Just don't get any of it on my sickbay floor." King responded, "Now come and take a look at this." And he led the others over to one of the biobeds where the body lay beneath a sheet that King pulled back as far as its abdomen.

"That's the Romulan that shot at us then is it?" Cole asked, "I didn't get a very good look at him while he was alive."

"This isn't an identification." King responded sternly, "I don't care what you saw. But you're wrong anyway."

"Doctor, are you saying that this isn't the body of the Romulan that attacked Cole and T'Lan?" Edwards asked.

"No, I'm telling you that he isn't a Romulan." King answered, "Our dead gunman is, or rather was a Vulcan."

"How can you tell doctor?" Nayal asked, "The differences between our peoples are subtle even when we are still alive. Once deceased there aren't even the slight variations in respiration and brainwaves."

"No, but there are other signs. Watch." King said and he picked up a medical probe. First he passed it slowly over the location of the dead Vulcan's stomach and an image appeared on the display over the biobed, "These are stomach contents," King explained, "and they tell us that this man had followed a vegetarian diet for some time. There's no trace of any undigested meat anywhere in his system."

"That is unusual for one of us." Nayal said.

"But not impossible," Carr said.

"Especially if he was trying to get asylum on Vulcan." Edwards added, "Following a Vulcan diet could help convince them that he'd fit in."

"Apart from following through on the occasional urge to shoot at people with a laser rifle." Cole pointed out.

"Oh he's already been there." King said, "To Vulcan. Look at this." And he moved the probe upwards to the corpse's ribcage, "There, see that?" he asked.

"What the heck is that?" Edwards asked as he saw something wrapped around one of the corpse's ribs on the display above the biobed.

"It's a metal plate around one of his ribs." King said, "I'm guessing that he broke it and his doctors fitted the plate to make up for part of the bone that had to be removed. There's evidence of scar tissue beneath the skin, but nothing visible."

"And you can link that plate to Vulcan?" Carr asked.

"Of course I can." King replied and he reached up to the display, tracing a line around the plate with his finger so that the image zoomed in on it, "There." He added, "A maker's mark and it's written in Vulcan."

"This would also explain the laser rifle captain." Cole said, "It's Federation made so he probably just obtained it on Vulcan."

"The question is why did he bother to bring it here and fire it at you?" Edwards asked.

"There's clearly something more than just processing claims for asylum going on here captain." Carr said.

"I think it has something to do with the Tal'Shiar." Nayal said, "Or rather former agents of the Tal'Shiar."

"What makes you think that Nayal?" Edwards asked.

"The mob that attacked me thought I was a Tal'Shiar agent and the man beaten when you first beamed down worked for them."

"So the refugees are holding a grudge." King commented, "I hate to break it to you Nayal, but your people do have a reputation for settling scores."

"That could be why someone tried to replicate a weapon." Cole added, "Either someone wanted to protect themselves or thought it'd be easier to kill someone with a modern weapon than their bare hands."

"I am aware of my people's reputation." Nayal said in response to King's comment, "And so is every surviving Tal'Shiar agent. They won't reveal who they used to be unless they are certain that they are safe."

"You mean like the guy that was working for you old superior?" Cole asked.

"Exactly. Commander Kelak made sure that potential rivals knew he had access to information held by the Tal'Shiar." Nayal said, "That way they could never be sure how much he knew about them."

"Are you saying that someone is deliberately leaking the names of former Tal'Shiar agents?" Carr asked.

"I think so commander." Nayal replied.

"But why?" King asked, "If our boy here is Vulcan rather than Romulan then that suggests that the Vulcans are involved and why would they care about ex-Tal'Shiar agents?"

"It's not like any of them are going to get asylum on Vulcan." Edwards added.

"How would they know who used to be in the Tal'Shiar anyway?" Carr asked.

"They wouldn't." Cole said, "But the Federal Marshals assigned here would have been able to figure it out. Particularly if Starfleet Intelligence was feeding them information so they could cherry pick them."

"And when the marshals all died their files got passed to the V'Shar agents here." Edwards said.

"That means that one of Strall's people is behind this." Carr added.

Edwards looked down at the body.

"I think I need to go and see Miss Green again." He said and then he looked up at Nayal and added, "And you go and pay a visit to that Tal'Shiar agent in the hospital. Find out if he knows anything."

Green was about to get ready for bed when there was a knock at her door.

"One moment." She called out and she darted to the door and opened it, "David. What are you doing here so late?" she asked when she saw Edwards and a pair of the Nightfall's security guards standing outside. "Sonia, I need to ask you some questions." Edwards replied, "May we come in?" "Of course." She said, stepping out of the way, "What's with the security detail?" "Oh just being cautious." Edwards said, "Or rather my tactical officer is being cautious. He seems to think that just because I got punched in the face last time I was here it could happen again." "Your people do seem to have been at the centre of a few disruptions today." Green said as she sat down and looked up at Edwards, "So what do you want to know?" she then asked and Edwards activated the PADD he had brought with him, holding it out so she could see the display. "Do you recognise this man?" he asked. "No." Green said, shaking her head, "But David, we do have more than ten thousand Romulans here. I can't be expected to know them all by-" "He isn't a Romulan." Edwards interrupted, "Or rather he wasn't. My chief medical officer says that he was a Vulcan right up until one of my officers shot him with a phaser." "Well there I can help you." Green said and she got up and headed for her computer, "I don't know all of the Vulcans to look at either, they tend to keep to themselves most of the time. But I do have files on all of them, the priests and the V'Shar agents." "Can you give me access to your system?" Edwards asked and Green nodded, setting her computer's wireless connection to allow his PADD to interface with it directly. Edwards immediately connected to the camp's personnel files and began to sort through for the Vulcan profiles. Then he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to *Nightfall*." He said. "Go ahead captain." Carr replied. "I'm sending you the personnel files on all of the Vulcans here in the camp. Have T'Lan run a facial recognition program on them and see if we can match our dead guy to one of them." "Yes captain." Carr said, "Oh and there's news about the dampening field." "What?" Edwards asked. "The field shut down just after you left the ship captain." West's voice replied, "Captain Shry already had a squad of men ready to go so we've beamed them down to see what they can find and Captain Heart has a platoon ready to go in assault shuttles just in case the field comes back on." "Okay, let's hope they come up with something useful." Edwards said, "In the mean time let me know as soon as you've got a result from the facial recognition." "Yes captain." Carr responded before Edwards tapped his combadge again to shut it off.

Nayal was also accompanied by a pair of security guards when she entered the camp's hospital building. The medical staff was a mix of Federation and Romulan medics and it was one of the Romulans that Nayal approached. From the markings on his clothing she saw that he was a doctor. "I'm looking for the man who was beaten earlier today." She said, "I was told he was brought here." "Ah, the Tal'Shiar thug." The Romulan doctor replied and Nayal frowned, "Don't worry." He added when he saw her reaction, "We haven't finished him off here. He's under guard and only the Federation doctors are allowed in to see him." "Well I need to see him." Nayal said, "So where is he?" "That way." The doctor answered, pointing down a corridor, "Just look for the armed Vulcans outside his room. I don't see why he deserves the treatment he's getting. How many deaths is he responsible for?" "Probably not as many as a lot of people like you doctor." Nayal hissed and the doctor's jaw dropped, "Oh come now doctor, are you seriously telling me that not once during your career have you decided that the Empire's resources were better used elsewhere and allowed a patient to die? Maybe helped them along? That sort of decision kills just as well as a Tal'Shiar firing squad." Then she looked around at the security guards behind her, "Come on," she told them, "we've got his location." And she stormed past the doctor, deliberately bashing into him with her shoulder as she went. The room where the former Tal'Shiar agent was being treated was easy to find. The Romulan doctor had told the truth about which corridor to follow and there were indeed two Vulcans armed with phasers sat outside to prevent anyone going in without the proper authorisation. Unfortunately as they saw it that included Nayal. "Admittance is restricted to authorised medical personnel only." One of them said flatly as they both stood up to block the path of Nayal and the security guards. "Well my captain ordered me to come and talk to him." Nayal replied, "That's all the authorisation I need." The Vulcans exchanged glances briefly. "Your argument is logical. Your captain has the authority to issue such an order. You may enter." The

Vulcan who had already spoken said and they both stepped aside to allow Naya and the two security guards past them.

Inside the room the beaten Romulan was lay in one bed, seemingly unconscious while the female who had been with him was sat on the edge of a second one beside it. As soon as Naya entered she looked around and her eyes widened as she recognised the Romulan military uniform.

"There are guards outside." She said, "All I have to do is scream."

"Don't worry." Naya reassured her, "I'm not here to hurt either of you. I'm from the Starfleet ship in orbit."

"Then what do you want?" the woman asked.

"I just need to ask you a few questions." Naya replied, pulling a chair close to her bed and sitting down,

"Now I assume that you're his wife, yes?"

"Yes."

"And you knew he worked for the Tal'Shiar?"

"Yes, of course. Though he didn't-"

"I'm not interested in what his role was." Naya interrupted, "I just want to know how many others you told."

"Just the Federation agents." The woman answered, "I don't know how they knew, but they figured it out somehow."

"And what did they have to say about it?" Naya asked.

"Not much. They said that Starfleet Intelligence would want to debrief him and that after that we'd be free to settle almost anywhere in the Federation. They'd even craft new identities for us. New names, false histories and even resequenced DNA to prevent anyone finding out who we really were." The woman explained, but then she smiled, "But now we don't even need to do that."

"What do you mean?" Naya responded, confused.

"He doesn't need to give Starfleet any information about what he used to do or who he used to work with. We're going to live on Vulcan."

Naya and the two guards accompanying her hurried across the camp to Green's quarters where Naya banged on the door. No one inside called out but one of the guards who had beamed down with Edwards opened the door, his hand resting on his phaser.

"Is the captain still here?" Naya asked and the guard nodded and stepped aside, allowing her to rush past him, "Captain!" she exclaimed, "I think we've got a big problem here."

"A problem? What is it?" Green asked, looking back and forth between Edwards and Naya.

"It's an obstacle that needs to be overcome. But that's not important right now." Naya responded and Edwards sighed.

"Please don't spend as much time around Bradley." He told her.

"Sorry captain." Naya said. Then she explained what she had discovered in her conversation with the Tal'Shiar agent's wife, "Ex-Tal'Shiar agents are being given asylum on Vulcan." She said.

"That's not possible." Green said, shaking her head, "The Vulcan government has been adamant that it doesn't want anyone who may have played a role in oppressing the Romulan people setting foot on their planet. That's why Starfleet's been able to recruit them. No one else in the Federation will have them."

"Sonia, do you get copies of who gets issued with visas to go to Vulcan?" Edwards asked.

"Of course. Otherwise my people wouldn't know who we have left to try and find new homes for." Green answered.

"But you don't know who was in the Tal'Shiar do you?" Naya pointed out.

"No. The Federal Marshals kept that information to themselves right up until a Starfleet transport would arrive to take them and their families away." Green said.

"But after the marshals were killed that information was passed to Strall and his V'Shar agents." Edwards said, "And they're the ones who make the final recommendation about who gets asylum on Vulcan."

"Are you saying someone on Vulcan wants as many former members of the Tal'Shiar going there as they can get their hands on?" Green asked.

"And that there's a V'Shar agent here helping them out? I hope so." Edwards replied.

"Why? What could be worse than that?" Green then asked.

"Someone could be looking for a very specific set of Tal'Shiar agents." Naya answered.

"I need to see a list of every Romulan who's been given asylum on Vulcan and I need to know if the decision was made after the marshals were murdered." Edwards told Green.

"Yes, of course." She replied. Then she paused, "Wait, did you say murdered?"

Edwards and Naya exchanged glances.

"Yes." He said, "We think that the Federal Marshals were deliberately lured into an ambush and killed by the same Vulcan that was shot by MACO Captain Heart."

Green just stared at him for a moment before she rushed back to her computer.

"I'm calling up the list of every Romulan given asylum on Vulcan since the camp was set up." She said, "I'll transfer it to your PADD and you can take it with you." Then she looked up from the terminal and frowned, "But if one of the V'Shar agents is involved and they're willing to go as far as killing someone, what am I to do if they find out I've been helping you?"

"If you're worried you can come back up to the *Nightfall* with us." Edwards offered and she smiled.

"Thank you David. You're very kind."

B.

"I hear that one of your men got himself shot by Starfleet." Viktus said as the hooded figure arrived.

"He was shot by a human MACO. There is a difference." The figure replied.

"Of course there is. Now do you have my latinum?"

"Do you have my weapons?"

"Just as soon as you give me the co-ordinates they can be delivered."

The hooded figure removed the bag that he had slung over his shoulder and held it out. Viktus took the bag and opened it. Then he frowned.

"This is barely a tenth of what we agreed upon." He said.

"And we agreed that you would deliver me arms." The hooded figure replied, "Consider that a down payment until I have what you promised me. You will get the rest when I have my weapons."

"Very well." Viktus said as he closed the bag again, "I'll trust you. Now your weapons are ready so you just give me a time and a place and they'll be there."

"Here." The hooded figure said and from under his robe he produced a PADD of Vulcan manufacture and held it out for Viktus. The Romulan glanced at the display and then turned away, "Aren't you going to take it?" the figure asked.

"No." Viktus answered, "I've memorised the co-ordinates and time details and now I need to arrange the transfer." Then he began to walk away. The hooded figure waited until he was out of sight before he too turned to leave.

"Well this is what he gave me." Viktus said, tossing the bag at a young human girl. But before the bag of metal bars could strike her one of the hulking milky-white humanoid figures standing beside her reached out and plucked it from the air. The girl did not even flinch.

Around them were stacked boxes containing the weapons provided by Shintar. Each one now accompanied by several spare power packs and the tools necessary to maintain them properly.

"I see you've created the extra ammunition and kits I suggested." Viktus said, "But I still don't get why we didn't just create the weapons ourselves as well. We could have delivered them straight to Vulcan."

"Because some will undoubtedly fall into the hands of the Federation." The Girl replied, "And we want every one of them to be traceable back to the Romulan Empire. It will serve to reduce trust between the Federation and any of the Romulan factions." Then she looked into the bag, "I thought the arrangement was for far more than this." She added and Viktus shrugged.

"We get the rest when the Vulcans get their weapons." he said.

"No matter." The Girl replied, waving at the humanoid beside her to take the bag away, "It's all worthless to us."

"Welcome aboard the *USS Nightfall*." Edwards told Green when she materialised along with his and Nayal's teams in one of its transporter rooms. Then he turned towards West who was stood waiting, "This is Lieutenant West." He said, "She'll arrange for somewhere for you to stay."

"Lieutenant West?" Green repeated.

"That's me. Chief of operations." West replied, "You can call me Jenna if you'd rather."

"Thank you. And you can call me Sonia." Green said as she stepped off the transporter pad.

"Well if you'd like to come with me, we'll see what we can find." West said and she escorted Green out of the room.

"Have you been aboard this ship long Jenna?" Green asked when they were alone in the corridor.

"A little under a year now." West answered. Then she turned her focus to the quarters she was assigning to Green, "I'm afraid our facilities are a bit limited compared to some Starfleet ships." She explained, "We've only three holodecks and they're reserved for training and operational use most of the time. Though our recreational library is just as good as any in the fleet." Then she handed Green the small PADD she had been carrying, "Here, this will provide you with all the information you need. It's also been configured to identify you to the ship's systems so I'd make sure you have it with you if you leave your quarters."

Green looked at the PADD and found that by default the display was showing a map centred on her current position.

"I see we're heading into the secondary section of the ship." she said and West nodded.

"That's right. The guest quarters extend back into the two secondary hull arms. Most of the officers' quarters are on this deck as well."

"What about the captain?" Green asked.

"Oh, he's up on deck two with the rest of the senior staff." West answered, "Though if you want to see him I'd suggest arranging to meet in his ready room on deck one."

"Where the bridge is?"

"Yes. Of course the bridge is restricted without an escort. But that PADD will let you know where those places are." West told her before halting, "Ah, here we are." She said as she reached out to open the door now in front of her and it opened to reveal the guest quarters she had assigned to Green, "I hope these are alright."

"They look fine." Green replied, walking past West into the room, "But then I have spent more than a year living in the same prefabricated hut I have my office in." then as she ran her fingers across a table surface she added, "What once was ours."

"Excuse me?" West asked.

"Oh nothing." Green replied, "I was just thinking of something I read once and trying to remember what the title was."

West smiled.

"Well I'll let you settle in. If you need anything just check the PADD or give me a call." She said before stepping back from the doorway and allowing it to close.

Green then looked around her quarters. They were positioned along the outer hull of the *Nightfall* and so there were windows along one wall and after setting the PADD down on the table she wandered over to these to look outside. From the orbital position occupied by the *Nightfall* she could see the two Vulcan ships as well as several of the Romulan transports also orbiting Kywin Four. Suddenly she smiled.

"Just check the PADD." She said to herself, rushing back to where she had left the device.

Standing at the back of the bridge where he could see both the tactical and science stations, Edwards reviewed the results of his officers' facial recognition search.

"So you've found nothing then?" Edwards asked Cole and T'Lan.

"I'm afraid not captain." Cole responded.

"The individual that Captain Heart shot was not one of the Vulcans assigned here by the Vulcan government." T'Lan added, "However, we have sent a copy of our data to Vulcan. It is possible that the V'Shar's central records will be able to shed more light on the issue. However, I do not anticipate a response in the next few hours due to the time taken for subspace transmissions to travel the distance between here and Vulcan."

Edwards looked from T'Lan to Cole.

"Please tell me that when you submitted your request to the V'Shar you didn't send it via the office they have here." He said.

"No captain." Cole replied, shaking his head slowly, "We sent the message direct to Vulcan."

"In that case all we can do is wait for their response." Edwards said, "But in the mean time I'm going to go through the records Miss Green has provided us with. Sublieutenant Nayal, with me."

The crates of weapons and ammunition appeared without warning on the surface of the planet, simply popping into existence without the energy discharge common to transporter operation and Viktus who had arrived with them looked around. There was no sign of his Vulcan buyer but that was as he had intended. He had deliberately arrived early with the weapons so that there was no danger of the Vulcans witnessing his arrival. His superiors had made their position quite clear, the Vulcans were not to know exactly how the weapons had been brought to them. They were instead to be led to believe that they had been smuggled across the Neutral Zone in refugee transports.

Despite it being dark Viktus sat on one of the crates and waited alone for the Vulcans to arrive, which they did just over an hour later. This was more than an hour before they were supposed to arrive, but since Viktus had chosen to gain the initiative by arriving early he could not fault them for attempting the same. The Vulcans arrived in a small anti-gravity vehicle, barely large enough to hold the four of them and leaving no room for even a single crate. All four wore hooded robes marked with identical Vulcan writing and Viktus was unable to pick out which of them was the individual he had been dealing with.

"In a hurry?" Viktus asked, ignoring the size of their vehicle and instead focusing on the fact that all four of the Vulcans were armed. Each one carried an energy weapon of some description in a holster at their waist but no two were the same. This apparently random array of weapons did not surprise Viktus though, they would not have been trying to buy weapons from the Romulans if they already had a steady supply on Vulcan.

"There was no logic in delaying our arrival once we were prepared." One of the Vulcans replied and Viktus recognised the voice of the man he had been dealing with previously.

"And what if I hadn't been early as well?"

"Then we would have waited." The Vulcan answered.

"Well wait no longer." Viktus exclaimed, leaping to his feet and he turned around and opened the crate he had been sat on. Inside were four Romulan-made disruptor rifles and several power packs for each, "Take a look." Viktus said as he removed one of the rifles and held it out to his buyer, "You don't get better than this. Sure Starfleet weapons have more settings and Klingon and Cardassian weapons are more rugged but unless you're using them as clubs what you really need a good user-friendly weapon like this." Then he grinned and added, "Well they're far more friendly to their users than whoever's on the receiving end if you take my drift."

"You are making an attempt at humour." The Vulcan said as he inspected the weapon.

"I am."

"It is illogical."

"It wouldn't be humour if it wasn't." Viktus replied. Then as his buyer handed the disruptor rifle to another of the hooded Vulcans he added, "If you need any instruction on care and use then-" but the Vulcan interrupted him.

"We have procured trained personnel to provide instruction." He said, "Once we have taken delivery your involvement in this endeavour is over."

"You mean you don't want more?" Viktus asked, "I mean these weapons are fine for a few small skirmishes, but if you come up against anyone with more firepower than a Starfleet ground combat team you'll need something with a little more hitting power. How about a few starship mounted disruptor banks?" While Viktus spoke the Vulcan waved at two of his companions and they returned to their vehicle and returned with a pair of large holdalls.

"The rest of your latinum." He said, "You may count it if you wish."

"I'll trust you." Viktus replied, "After all, Vulcans don't lie do they? Now about some heavier weapons-"

"We are only interested in these for now." The Vulcan said, interrupting again, "If they prove of acceptable quality then we may choose to repeat our business."

"Fair enough." Viktus said.

Moving on foot Captain Shry's squad of Imperial Guard searched for the source of the dampening field. Data from the *Nightfall's* orbital scans had given an approximate location for the centre of the field, but there were numerous geological and atmospheric effects that could distort its shape to conceal the exact point from where it originated. In the low light conditions the Andorian troops made use of passive sensor goggles mounted to the fronts of their helmets that could not only amplify the amount of light available to see by but also pick up on several other types of energy emission.

"Over here!" one of the Andorians shouted, raising her arm to attract the attention of the rest of the squad and they came running to see what she had found.

"What is it trooper?" Shry asked.

"Some sort of electronic device captain." She replied and she pointed into a shallow hole in the ground. At the bottom of this was a cylindrical device about the size of a humanoid limb. The device looked inert, but Shry was not about to take any chances.

"Everyone get back." He ordered, "Thallan, check it for booby traps."

"Yes sir." Another of the Andorians replied as he slung his rifle over his shoulders and got down on the ground to crawl towards the device. There he examined it carefully, drawing his knife to gently scrape around the edge, "It looks clean." He said, "There's an access panel. Do you want me to try opening it?"

"If you can. But be careful." Shry said and then he activated his communicator, "Shry to *Nightfall*." He said.

"*Nightfall* here captain." Carr's voice replied, "Have you found anything?"

"We think so." Shry said, nodding even though Carr could not see him, "Thallan's checking it out now but I want a transporter lock on all of my men just in case it's wired."

"Copy that captain." Carr said, "Keep this channel open and we'll beam you all out of there if there's any trouble."

"Thanks commander." Shry said. Then, leaving his communicator active he looked back at Thallan, "Well?"

"I've removed the fasteners and there's no sign of the cover being a pressure trigger." Thallan answered and then he slowly removed the cover to expose the device's inner workings, "Its clear." He added, standing up and stepping back, "Looks like a transmitter to me. Simple electromagnetic broadcast unit made from spare parts."

"Federation or Romulan spare parts?" Shry asked.

"A mixture. Federation electronics, but the batteries look Romulan."

"Okay then. Let's get this thing back up to-" Shry began.

"Contact!" one of the other Andorians suddenly snapped and he dropped to one knee and raised his rifle. Shry and the other Andorians rushed to his side, all aiming their weapons in the same direction.

"I don't"- Shry began before his goggles picked up a heat signature in the distance, "Nightfall this is Shry, can you see a group about five thousand metres south east of our position? It looks like they could have a vehicle with them."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* Carr looked at West.

"I've got them commander." West said, "Four, no wait five humanoids plus one light skimmer." Then she frowned, "I'm getting some odd readings from nearby as well." She added, "It looks like a large number of energy sources."

"T'Lan?" Carr asked, looking around at the science station.

"Scanning lieutenant commander." T'Lan said. Then following a short delay while she studied the readings from the *Nightfall*'s sensors she looked up and added, "They appear to be high energy storage cells. More than four hundred of them."

"Oh that doesn't sound good." Hamilton commented.

"No it doesn't." Cole added, "Shall I lock phasers?"

"Not yet." Carr said before she turned her attention to the open communication channel, "Captain Shry, have your men move in for a closer inspection."

Viktus took one last look at the crates.

"Well, I have my money and you have your weapons. I think we can both be on our way." He said and he began to drag the holdalls away. Meanwhile the Vulcan produced a communicator from beneath his robe and activated it.

"Target the crates marked by my communicator and engage transport in sixty seconds." He said before setting the communicator down on the nearest crate. Then he stood back and waited, he and the other Vulcans all watching the crates rather than Viktus.

"What the hell?" Shry said as one of the five figures suddenly vanished, "*Nightfall* did one of the subjects just beam out?"

"Negative captain." West answered, "No transporter signature detected, wait no, I'm picking one up now." And then through their goggles the Andorians saw the transporter field enveloping the crates before they too vanished leaving behind just four figures and their vehicle.

"*Nightfall* did you just get that?" Shry asked.

"Yes commander." Carr replied, "Standby." Then she activated the intercom, "Bridge to launch bay, launch the alert fighters. Home in on Captain Shry's communicator."

"Copy that bridge." White's voice replied, "Snowman ready to launch."

"Captain Heart, have your platoon follow him down." Carr added, "Collect Captain Shry's men and pursue the vehicle now leaving the area they are in."

"Understood commander, we're going in."

In his ready room Captain Edwards was scrolling through the data provided by Green while sat opposite him Nayal did the same using the same PADD that the files had been used to bring them aboard.

"The Vulcans don't seem to have been offering very many visas at all." Edwards commented.

"There's a noticeable spike after the V'Shar got hold of the marshals' files though." Nayal responded, "Look at this one." And she turned the PADD so that Edwards could see it. But the moment he looked at the device its screen went black, "That's odd." Nayal said.

"Show me on my computer." Edwards replied and Nayal rounded his desk to find the file she had been looking at. But just as she called it up on the screen it too went black. Then the lights in the ready room began to flicker.

3.

“Quarterback this is Snowman, immediate launch.” White said, addressing his wingman. The second fighter was positioned just behind his in the hangar and the two would be launched together. However, just as the ground crew disconnected the umbilical cord that connected the fighter to the power and data systems of the *Nightfall* the hangar was plunged into chaos.

The massive doors at the front and rear of the hangar were protected by a low level force field that was strong enough to keep the atmosphere inside as well as prevent anything that exerted only a minor push from passing through. But just as White and his wingman were getting ready to launch their fighters the force fields suddenly shut down and the rush of air escaping filled the hangar.

Equipment, cargo and crew were hurled towards the now open doorways into space and some were blown out into space before the *Nightfall's* automatic safety systems could activate and the heavy physical doors slammed shut.

“What the hell is going on?” Carr exclaimed as she saw crewmen tumbling through space on the main bridge view screen.

“Force field failure on hangar deck.” West replied.

“Well beam those people back in. Now.” Carr ordered and she activated the intercom, “Bridge to sickbay. Medical emergency. Standby to receive decompression injuries.”

“Targeting is offline.” Cole called out, “We’ve lost weapons, tractor beams and transporter functions.” And then the bridge displays all began to flicker. In response to this the bridge crew reached for the headsets they wore. These included a compact display that could be unfolded over one eye and for now at least they were still functional.

“Hamilton, hold us steady!” Carr snapped as the *Nightfall* suddenly lurched to one side and the bridge crew began to fasten the safety harnesses built into their seats.

“We’re in a stable orbit commander.” He replied.

“Then what—” Carr began.

“Inertial dampeners and artificial gravity fluctuating lieutenant commander.” T’Lan interrupted.

“I’m monitoring system failures all across the ship.” West added, “Commander, I’d say we’ve been sabotaged.”

The door to Edwards ready room slid open just part way and he had to force it open wide enough for he and Nyal to return to the bridge.

“What’s happening to my starship?” he demanded.

“Widespread system failures captain.” Carr replied, “We’ve lost crew from the hangar.”

“Sound red alert.” Edwards ordered as he headed towards the captain’s chair. Carr released her harness and got up to make way for him but just as he neared her the *Nightfall* seemed to lurch again and the pair of them collapsed, landing in a heap on the floor with Carr on top of Edwards.

“Sorry captain.” She said.

“Oh don’t mention it.” Edwards croaked.

In the *Nightfall's* engineering section engineers rushed about wildly as one system after another reported failure.

“Isolate the warp cores.” Max ordered, “If they breach we’re done for.” Unlike his staff Max was barely affected by the sudden changes in the ship’s gravity field. Borg drones were equipped for operation outside of a starship and that meant being fitted with magnetic clamps in his feet that allowed him to remain upright. As his engineers rushed to make sure that the forcefields around the *Nightfall's* four warp cores remained stable he headed for the nearest doorway.

“Sir, where are you going?” an engineer called out.

“There is something wrong with the *Nightfall's* computer system.” Max replied without looking around, “I am going to our computer core to find out why.”

Carr and Edwards supported one another as they got back to their feet and then both sat down in their respective chairs.

“You can let go now commander.” Edwards said.

“What?” Carr asked and then she realised that she was still holding his hand, “Oh, of course. Sorry.” And she let go. Then both officers fastened their harnesses.

"Can someone explain what's happening?" Edwards asked.

"Systems are failing all across the ship captain." West replied.

"Captain if we remain here we are in danger of colliding with some of the other orbiting ships." T'Lan warned him.

"Mister Hamilton, break orbit." Carr ordered.

"I'll try." Hamilton replied.

"Just do it Hamilton." Edwards added and he gripped the arms of his chair as he felt the *Nightfall* shifting. Putting on his own headset he activated the display, setting it to show the space ahead of the ship and he saw that Hamilton was being successful in repositioning it. At least until the display in his headset suddenly went black, "What happened?" Edwards asked, "Did the headsets just fail as well?"

"I don't believe so captain." T'Lan replied, "I believe that the fault is in the *Nightfall's* link to the headsets."

"Coming to dead stop." Hamilton said, "I can't fly if I can't see."

"Good idea." Edwards said.

"Max to Captain Edwards." Max's voice announced via the captain's combadge.

"Edwards here. Max can you tell me what's going on?" Edwards asked.

"Captain a computer virus has been uploaded into our network." Max replied.

"How did it get past our firewall?" Carr asked and she looked at both T'Lan and West.

"I've not seen any attempts at intrusion." West said, shaking her head.

"The attack originated from inside our system captain." Max said, "Though it has yet to migrate to any equipment not hardwired into it."

"What about the PADD?" Nayaal said, "That failed before the ship."

"And the ship only began to fail when we looked at the same file that you were looking at when the PADD crashed." Edwards said sternly, "Max I think we've identified the source of the infection." Then he looked at T'Lan, "Lieutenant T'Lan there's a PADD in my ready room that you need to take a look at." He told her, "Nayaal will show you."

"Captain, I think it may be possible to regain control of the ship without having to isolate and purge the virus." Max then said.

"How?" Carr asked.

"By using the nanites." Max replied. The *Nightfall* featured an integral hive of millions of microscopic machines that when acting together possessed intelligence. It was intended that these would act both as an automated repair system and also as a defensive measure against assimilation by the Borg.

"How would that work?" Edwards asked.

"The virus is attacking the communications between different systems captain." Max replied, "If the nanites can interface directly with those systems then we can tie their own communications net into your control headsets. That will give the bridge crew and myself a measure of control." Max explained. He of course did not have a control headset; instead relying on his own Borg implants to communicate directly with the nanites.

"Could we use PADDs to give more people control?" Carr asked.

"Possibly. But it will take longer." Max replied.

"Just get the headsets up and running for now then." Edwards ordered before he turned to Cole, "And send someone to find Miss Green." He added, "I want to know just how much she knows about those files she gave us."

"*Nightfall*. *Nightfall* are you reading me?" Shry asked when the link to the orbiting starship was suddenly broken. Then he looked around at his men, "Can anyone get eyes on the ship?" he asked.

The Imperial Guard troops turned their attention skywards, making use of their goggles to magnify their view of the stars. Meanwhile Shry raised his goggles and instead produced a set of high-powered binoculars that possessed superior magnification and used them to search the sky. The assorted Romulan transport ships in low orbit were just about visible to the Andorians, but of the *USS Nightfall* there was no sign.

"Could they have left orbit?" one of the Andorians asked out loud.

"There's no engine flare from the impulse drives," Shry said, "and they can't have got far enough away from the planet to go to warp."

"Then they're around the other side of the planet." Another Andorian suggested.

"Possibly. Though I doubt that they'd-" Shry began. Then he halted and smiled as he found the *Nightfall*,

"No wait, there she is. But what's wrong with her?"

"What do you mean captain?"

"They've increased their orbital altitude," Shry explained, "and the lights in the windows appear to be flickering. The warp drive looks stable though."

"Captain that skimmer is getting away." Another of the Imperial Guard pointed out, looking towards the vehicle heading away from their position.

"We'll never catch them on foot." Another Andorian added.

Shry turned to look at the skimmer as well.

"Well if the *Nightfall's* not sending any help we'll just have to look for it elsewhere." He said and he activated his communicator, "*Rel'Shek* this is Imperial Guard Captain Shry, do you read me?" he transmitted.

As the *Nightfall* shuddered Green looked up from the PADD that West had given her.

"That didn't feel right." She said as she looked out of a window and saw that the sudden motion did not appear to be matched by a change in the *Nightfall's* position, now significantly further from the planet below than it had been when she had first looked out of them.

"Yes, you'd almost think that someone connected something to their computer that they shouldn't have." A voice replied and Green looked round to see the Girl stood gripping the back of a chair for support.

"What are you doing here?" Green asked in surprise.

"I just came to see how well you were doing." The Girl answered.

"What if the crew detected your arrival?"

"Even if they had the capability to detect our movement I think that they've got more important things on their minds right now. Like stopping their ship from being blown to pieces by a warp core failure." The Girl replied.

"Perhaps we ought to be leaving before the virus reaches their warp core then." Green said.

"Oh I doubt the crew will allow the virus to spread to a critical system like that." The Girl responded, "It entered their system from a specific point and has to spread from there. From what we know of their starships, Federation crews are good enough to contain and purge the virus once they've isolated it. No, if you're going to take out this ship then you're going to have to do so by more direct means." And she raised a hand to point towards an empty area of the room. Right on queue four milky white humanoids stepped into existence out of nowhere.

"These fleshforms will assist you." The Girl said before a chiming sound from the door attracted the attention of both her and Green

"Miss Green, this is security." a voice called out from beyond the door, "We need to escort you to a safe location."

"A safe location indeed?" the Girl said, "As if anywhere on this ship is safe right now. I'll leave you to it." And then she took a single step and vanished.

Green looked at the four silent figures just as there was another chiming sound from the door.

"Miss Green? Are you alright?" the voice called out.

"I'll be right there." Green replied. Then in a quieter voice she addressed the four humanoids in the room with her, "Deal with them." She ordered.

Waiting in the corridor outside the two security guards sent by Cole glanced at one another.

"This is taking too long." the one who had called out said and he drew his phaser. The second guard drew her own weapon while the first tapped his combadge, "Security override, release door-" but then he was interrupted by the door sliding open of its own accord and the two security guards suddenly found themselves confronted by one of the white figures referred to as fleshforms by the Girl.

The male guard gasped a moment before the fleshform swung its arm, striking the side of his head with the back of its hand. The blow was strong enough to lift the guard off the deck and hurl him down the corridor.

The second guard raise her phaser and fired from point blank range, hut the energy blast had no effect.

The fleshform reached out and wrapped its hand around both the phaser and the guard's hand. Then it squeezed and the guard screamed as the bones in her hand were crushed. Then the figure formed its other hand into a fist and brought it crashing down on the guard's skull.

Green stepped out of her quarters just as the female guard's corpse was released by the bulky humanoid and fell to floor. Green bent down to pick up the ruined phaser and examined what remained of it.

"Set to stun." She said, shaking her head, "My dear I'm afraid that just doesn't work on us." Then she dropped the damaged phaser and instead picked up the undamaged one belonging to the male guard, adjusting its output to a lethal setting.

In the main computer core Max worked to deploy elements of the nanite hive to key points in the *Nightfall's* systems while shutting down elements of the computer to limit the spread of the alien virus. All of a sudden he stopped and tapped his combadge.

"Max to bridge." He said, "The nanites report phaser fire on deck three."

On the bridge Edwards looked around at Cole.

"Cole to Ensign Ash." Cole said as he tapped his own combadge in an attempt to contact the security team. Then he just looked back towards Edwards.

"Go." The captain said and looking at West he added, "Go with him."

"Yes captain." West replied.

Cole and West hurried from the bridge. Not trusting the turbolifts at this point they exited via an emergency door that led to a ladder leading downwards and began to climb. Meanwhile Edwards activated his combadge.

"Edwards to Heart."

"Heart here captain."

"Captain Heart, how soon can you deploy your men to deal with intruders? They're on deck three now, but I can't say how long they'll stay there."

"My platoon is ready to go captain. We can be there in five minutes. I'll alert the rest of mine and Shry's men to mobilise as well."

"Good." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Commander Cole and Lieutenant West are already on their way. Be advised that the ship's communication system has been compromised. Use personal communicators only."

"Understood captain. Heart out."

Aboard the *Rel'Shek* Navus was waiting for Shry's squad as they were beamed aboard and when they materialised he took a few moments to study them closely. This was the first time he had encountered Federation troops that were not a part of Starfleet and a part of him was concerned about how they would act aboard his ship.

"Thank you for bringing us aboard captain." Shry said as he stepped off the transporter pad.

"Just returning the favour." Navus replied, "Your ship was there to help us."

"Well I need more than just your ship's transporters." Shry said, "How good are your sensors?"

"They're not military specification, but they're adequate for my needs." Navus told him.

"Can they track a vehicle on the surface?" Shry asked.

"Yes. But why?" Navus asked in reply.

"Never mind. Just show me." Shry told him.

Navus escorted the Imperial Guardsmen to the bridge, drawing nervous glances from the Romulan crew at the sight of the fully armed and armoured Andorian troops. Entering the bridge, Navus showed them to a console.

"Here." He said to Shry, "This is the operations console."

"Direct your sensors to the location you beamed us up from." Shry replied, removing his helmet and Navus nodded as he complied.

"There's a vehicle down there." Navus said when he saw the sensor readings.

"I know, that's what we're tracking." Shry said, "Unfortunately it had a head start on us even before we lost contact with the *Nightfall* and its not easy keeping up with a skimmer on foot."

"It looks like it's heading for the refugee camp." Navus said, "Perhaps it's one of the vehicles assigned to it."

"That sounds likely." Shry replied, nodding, "Can you put us down in the camp? Ideally somewhere nice and quiet. I'd rather not be seen."

Navus redirected the *Rel'Shek's* sensors towards the refugee camp and an aerial image of it appeared on the bridge's main view screen.

"There." Navus said, pointing to a cluster of long narrow buildings, "Those look like there's no-one around." Shry nodded.

"The stores for the replicators." He said, "They'll do." And he put his helmet on again.

The first sound that Cole and West heard when they emerged from the ladder shaft onto deck three was a scream.

"This way." Cole said, pointing down the corridor.

"Oh great." West replied as she drew her phaser, "A blood curdling cry and we run towards whatever caused it."

Running down the corridor the two officers rounded a corner and found themselves confronted by one of the bulky white humanoids as it stood over the body of a crewman.

"What's that?" West exclaimed as the figure turned towards them.

"Not something I want aboard." Cole replied and he fired his phaser. The beam struck the fleshform in the chest and for a moment it paused. But then it stepped forwards and began to advance on the two Starfleet officers, "So much for the stun setting." Cole said and he and West adjusted their phasers.

West was ready first and she fired just as the fleshform broke into a run. The shot hit it in the shoulder and its arm was blown free, landing a short distance away. But the figure kept on coming, apparently unaffected by the loss of its limb. Then Cole fired, hitting the fleshform's chest for a second time only this time the phaser beam burned a hole right through it.

"Fall back." Cole said as the fleshform kept on coming despite its injuries.

"Good idea." West said and they both turned and ran.

"Cole to bridge." Cole said, activating his combadge as he ran, "Intruder on deck three, section four. Can you help us out with a force field?"

"Hold on commander." Carr replied, "Hamilton's working on it now."

"Bradley?" West commented, "Oh wonderful. Now we're really in trouble."

Then moments later there was a flash of light just behind them as a security force field activated and Cole and West ground to a halt and turned to face their pursuer.

"Got you now." Cole said as the fleshform ran right into the force field and found its way blocked. But then the figure took a step backwards and vanished.

"Uh-oh." West said, "We've seen that before."

"I think we'd better get-" Cole began before the figure reappeared behind them, stepping out of thin air and trapping them between it and the force field.

With nowhere to go, Cole and West resorted to their phasers again and because of the hole through the fleshform's chest they both aimed higher this time. The two beams hit it in its neck and once again burned right through. This time the fleshform's head was severed and it toppled towards the floor, vanishing into thin air before it landed on the deck. Then the rest of the now lifeless figure slumped forwards and Cole and West leapt aside before it could collide with them as it fell.

"That was weird." West said and Cole nodded.

"I think we better call this in." he replied.

Now accompanied by just two of the fleshforms the Girl had provided to her for this mission, Green followed the directions in the PADD to lead her towards the Nightfall's engineering section. Contact had been lost with the figure sent to attack the ship's bridge, but the final one that had been despatched towards the computer core was still on its way.

A security guard appeared around a corner ahead and fired his phaser, narrowly missing one of the fleshforms accompanying Green. On the other hand her return fire hit the guard and sent him sprawling across the deck, dead.

"The engineering section should be right up ahead." She said as she stepped over the body of the guard, but then she heard the sound of something bouncing off the wall at the end of the corridor and she looked down to see a cylinder about the size of a fist rolling towards her.

She was just about to shout a warning when the grenade exploded.

Using a photon grenade set to a high yield aboard a starship was generally considered a bad idea. The heat and electromagnetic pulse effect of the detonation could cause severe damage. However, if one of the variable yield weapons was used on a minimum setting it would produce little more than a sudden intense flash of light and a loud 'bang' that was enough to incapacitate most humanoids.

On Green and the two fleshforms accompanying her the effect was somewhat lessened, but not entirely mitigated and they were left momentarily disorientated. This was all the opportunity that the MACOs and Imperial Guard around the corner needed and they sprang out of hiding and opened fire. Most favoured the phasers beneath their rifles, blasting chunks of milky white matter away from the two large figures but one of the MACOs instead opted to use his assault rifle.

As with grenades the standard six-millimetre duranium tipped round that was designed to penetrate the body armour of a Borg drone was ill suited to use aboard a starship where it could easily pierce a bulkhead or worse yet rupture the outer hull and cause a decompression. But fortunately those responsible for designing the rifle had taken that into consideration and the soldiers' weapons were loaded with rounds that fragmented on impact. These had no ability to penetrate bulkheads or body armour, but against the unarmoured fleshforms in front of the MACO they proved quite effective. Warned to aim high the MACO sent a burst of fire at the head of one of the figures before it could recover from the detonation of the grenade and several of the rounds found their target, tearing holes in its head and neck. No blood or similar fluid came spilling out of these holes, but the fragments from at least one round tore through something vital and the fleshform collapsed in a heap.

The weapons fire was concentrated at the two large white figures and Green found herself being ignored by the soldiers. But that did not last for long as she recovered her senses and opened fire. She swept the phaser across the width of the corridor and although the armoured vests they wore were designed to reflect the energy of weapons such as phasers as well as projectiles and shell fragments the setting of the phaser was high enough that enough energy still penetrated their armour to inflict fatal injuries and the surviving soldiers ducked back around the corner to regroup.

"Report!" Heart called out as he came rushing towards the group.

"Two targets left sir." One of the MACOs answered, "The woman and one of those other things. We hit that thing a few times but it's still active."

Heart rushed up to the junction where the soldiers were hiding.

"Give it up Green!" he yelled out, "There are too many of us for you and your pet to handle." But there was no response.

Heart held up his hand with three fingers extended and around him the soldiers prepared to move. Heart counted down with his fingers and the moment the last one was retracted the MACOs and Imperial Guard

burst around the corner again, only to find the corridor completely empty. Heart activated his communicator.

"Heart to bridge." He said, "Green and one of those white things just did a disappearing act on us. We're close to engineering though, so I think that's where they're trying to get to. We'll see if we can cut them off."

Max smiled as a test signal sent from one of his cortical implants made contact with clusters of nanites now interfacing directly with most of the systems essential to keep the *Nightfall* from crashing into the planet below. Warp drive and tactical systems remained inoperable, but those were of secondary importance. Then he received another signal from the nanites that made him turn towards the door behind him. The nanites were spread throughout the ship and had a general awareness of what was happening in many of the more public areas. Right now they were telling him that an unusual figure was approaching the computer core, one that did not match the profile of any of the species serving aboard the *Nightfall*.

"Bridge this is Max." he said as he pressed his combadge, "You should have flight control returned to you via your HUDs. However, it seems that I am about to have company."

"Copy that Max." Edwards replied, "Mister Hamilton confirms that he has control. I'm informing Commander Cole that you need backup, someone should be with you shortly."

Then channel was then closed down and Max headed for the door, sealing it shut just as the data being fed to him from the nanites informed him that the intruder was right outside.

There was a sudden banging sound as the figure began to pound on the other side of the door to the computer core and large dents appeared where each blow struck. The door was rapidly deformed to the extent that it would not open normally without becoming stuck but Max calculated that the strength of the blows was enough that it would soon be broken down.

Max then moved to one side of the door and pressed himself up against the bulkhead, clenching one fist. He had no phaser, but that did not mean that he was defenceless. As a former Borg drone he was far from it.

The door flew inwards with a 'Crash!' and the bulky white figure stepped into the computer core, looking around. Just as it turned towards Max he extended his fist out towards the fleshform. Expecting the Borg to try and punch it, the fleshform made no effort to avoid the attack and was somewhat puzzled when he instead brought his fist to a halt about ten centimetres away. Then a pair of narrow tubes suddenly extended out from between Max's fingers and punched their way into the fleshform's torso. In an instant the area around the tubes began to change colour, becoming darker and patchy in appearance. Then the fleshform shuddered and staggered backwards.

"Resistance is futile." Max said calmly as the discolouration began to spread.

The fleshform looked towards Max just as the discolouration reached its head and all of a sudden it just disappeared.

"What happened?" Cole's voice asked from the doorway as he and West arrived, weapons in hand.

"The intruder just stepped out for a while." Max responded, "Though to where I am uncertain."

Green and her remaining companion reappeared further back along their path, materialising somewhere they were vaguely familiar with to minimise the risk of an accident. The problem was that this meant they were now further away from their target. In addition it seemed likely that the crew of the *Nightfall* was expecting them to attack the engineering section. Communication with the rest of the fleshforms given to her by the Girl had been cut off when they withdrew due to excessive damage and now she and her companion represented the last chance to destroy the Federation starship.

She heard shouts from behind and turned to see a pair of security guards armed with phaser rifles appear. Green fired first and the beam from her phaser sent one guard falling into the other before a second shot despatched the other guard as well. Green briefly considered taking one of the rifles from the dead guards, but the sound of more approaching troops put a stop to that train of thought.

"Let's go." She told the fleshform, "Even if their sensors didn't pick up the phaser fire whoever's coming is going to report in those bodies." And she and the fleshform continued on their way towards engineering.

ii.

The skimmer headed directly for the area of the camp where its vehicles were parked in neat rows and pulled into the gap left when it had departed earlier. As soon as the engine was shut down the four hooded occupants began to disembark and that was when Shry's men revealed themselves.

"Stay where you are!" Shry yelled as flashlights mounted to weapons were suddenly activated to let the Vulcans know that they were surrounded.

One of the figures produced a weapon from under his cloak and there was a flash of phaser fire as several Andorians reacted before he could fire on them. Multiple beams struck the Vulcan and he collapsed in a heap where he stood.

"Take cover!" another of the Vulcans shouted as he ducked behind the skimmer and also drew his weapon. Then he briefly reappeared to fire a sustained beam towards the main concentration of the Imperial Guard troops.

Shry fired his own phaser, striking the skimmer's engine cover before a shot from another Vulcan forced him to take cover again.

"Keep at them." Shry broadcast to his men, "I'm going to try and get closer." Then he looked at the two soldiers closest to him and added, "You two, with me."

Keeping low, Shry and his two men used the other vehicles in the parking lot for cover as they made their way closer. As they moved Shry kept checking on how the phaser fight seemed to be going and he noticed that the origin of the Vulcans' weapon fire seemed to be shifting towards the inhabited area of the camp.

"Looks like they're trying to withdraw." He commented, "If they get among the refugees we'll have a hell of a time trying to find them."

Then a hooded figure appeared ahead of his group and Shry fired, missing him only narrowly. The Vulcan returned fire, also missing, but he was forced to retreat behind a vehicle now that his path was cut off. The Vulcan extended his arm around the side of the vehicle and fired repeatedly without aiming. The shots were too inaccurate to hit the Andorians, but they meant that Shry and his men could not continue to advance for fear of being hit by chance.

The metal of the skimmer between him and the Vulcan meant that Shry could not shoot him with a phaser unless it was set to a much higher level than he wanted to use, but he had another weapon as well and lifting it to his shoulder Shry placed his finger on the trigger for the assault rifle. A short burst of automatic fire echoed out in the darkness as Shry fired. Unlike the troops fighting aboard the *Nightfall*, his rifle was loaded with the standard armour piercing ammunition and the rounds easily punched right through the lightweight plating and came out the other side right into the Vulcan hiding there. Shry then grinned as the phaser fire ceased.

"Come on." He told the other two Andorians with him, "Let's go."

Reaching the vehicle and the dead Vulcan, Shry kicked the body to make certain that he really was dead and as the corpse rolled over its cloak fell open to reveal a V'Shar uniform beneath.

"Oh great." He said, "I think I just ended two hundred years of peace with Vulcan."

"Captain." T'Lan's voice said through Edwards' combadge.

"Go ahead lieutenant." He replied.

"Sublieutenant Nayal and myself have isolated the virus in the PADD." She told him.

"Excellent news. Now can you fix it?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain. In fact the procedure appears to rather simple. The virus depends on running in active memory on whatever computer it has spread to. So by shutting down the computer network entirely and restarting it we should free ourselves of the virus' effects." T'Lan explained.

"Max did you get that?" Carr asked.

"Yes commander." Max replied, "I am beginning the reboot procedure now. Standby."

Green and the fleshform hurried down the corridor leading to engineering, the sound of footfalls from pursuing ship's security and ground combat personnel behind them. All of a sudden the lights in the corridor went out completely and the artificial gravity began to lessen.

"They've shut down their computer." Green told the fleshform, "The virus will be purged. We don't have much time."

Then light appeared in the corridor once more, but not from the overhead lights. Instead this came from handheld lights possessed by the troops chasing after Green and the fleshform. Looking round she noticed an open doorway leading into a small storage compartment.

"Hide in there." She ordered the fleshform, "Hopefully they'll run right past you in the dark and you can ambush them from behind."

The fleshform nodded in reply and headed into the storage compartment, leaving Green to continue towards engineering.

As Green had hoped the small group pursuing her failed to notice the figure lurking beyond open doorway as they hurried down the corridor and as soon as the last of them drew level with it the fleshform reached out from inside and grabbed hold of him, smashing him against the wall before hurling him at his comrades. Further along the corridor Green kept moving as she heard the phaser fire behind her.

The door leading to engineering was closed and Green had to tuck her phaser into her clothing while she made use of the manual override to open it far enough for her to squeeze through. Then just as she drew her stolen phaser again all of the lights came back on.

"Nice of you to join us." Heart called out as Green found herself surrounded by MACOs and Imperial Guardsmen, all aiming rifles directly at her. Behind them she saw security officers and engineers though those who were armed had their weapons holstered. Clearly the thought of discharging a phaser in the same room as the ship's warp cores did not appeal to them. Of course the assault rifles held by the ground troops could be fired in here with impunity, their fragmenting ammunition would not disrupt the magnetic fields containing the warp cores' antimatter at all.

Green glanced down at her own phaser, wondering if she would have long enough to be able to aim and fire the weapon at the closest warp core before being gunned down.

"Don't do it!" Heart shouted.

Green smiled.

"I wouldn't think of it." She said, letting the phaser drop to the floor. Then she raised her hands, clamping them together behind her head before stepping back from the phaser and simply vanishing.

A phaser shot came out of the darkness and struck one of the Imperial Guardsmen accompanying Shry on the side of his head. The Andorian recoiled, crouching down and pulling the helmet from his head as it smoked from the energy blast. Shry looked at the other Andorian who just nodded to confirm that he was not seriously injured before Shry returned fire. His shot struck the Vulcan who had just fired as he and his comrade were starting to withdraw again and he fell forwards into the other one, sending both of them sprawling across the ground.

"Move!" Shry snapped to his uninjured trooper and the pair of Andorians rushed forwards, aiming their weapons at the last of the Vulcans as he was crawling out from under the body of his comrade, "Stay where you are!" Shry yelled at him and the Vulcan looked around. His hood had fallen and only now did Shry get a good look at his face.

"Vulcan will be free of the Federation." Strall said, "Logic dictates that we cannot be opposed forever." And he began to reach under his cloak.

"Don't do it!" Shry yelled, expecting Strall to produce a weapon. But instead he took out a communicator. "Energise." He said and before the Andorians could react Strall was beamed away.

Green appeared to find herself surrounded once more only this time by fleshforms with weapons grafted into them.

"Sorry about the welcoming committee." The Girl said as she stepped out from between two of them, "But we had something of a problem with that one when he returned." And she looked towards the remains of the fleshform that Max had injected with nanites, "He was infested with some sort of nanotechnology that almost prevented him from returning."

"And the consciousness?" Green asked.

"Oh he left the body as soon as he got back safely enough, but dealing with the nanites took some doing. Now we're making sure that no one else brings any back." The Girl replied, "Now what about the *USS Nightfall*?"

"Still intact." Green replied, frowning and the Girl sighed.

"Well I suppose that can't be helped." She said, "Still at least Viktus was able to get the weapons to the Vulcan isolationists. Hopefully they'll be able to stir up some trouble right in the heart of the Federation."

"And what about me?" Green asked.

"What about you?" the Girl replied.

"My cover is blown. Starfleet knows I'm not who I was pretending to be now."

"That doesn't matter, we don't need Sonia Green's body any more. Leave her and return to the others." The Girl said.

"Of course." Green said and she closed her eyes briefly before opening them again, "Oh there is just one more thing," she said, "I can't be certain of course but I think that I've seen one of the *Nightfall's* crew somewhere before." Then she closed eyes again before promptly collapsing with a sudden gasp.

"Get rid of that." The Girl said to the nearest fleshform, pointing at what had been Green, "Oh and that too." She added looking at the remains of the nanite-infected fleshform.

Cole and West rushed back onto the bridge and took their stations.

"All systems coming back on line captain." West reported.

"Main engineering reports that Green has left the ship sir." Cole added.

"Left?" Carr asked.

"I'm guessing that she was another of those reanimated corpses we've been seeing over the last year." Edwards replied.

"That would seem logical." T'Lan said.

"Can you make contact with Captain Shry?" Carr asked.

"I'll try." West said, then she frowned, "I've got the captain's unit on my readout commander." she said, "It looks like he's back at the refugee camp."

"How did he get there so quickly?" Cole commented.

"Perhaps the captain himself will be able to enlighten you." T'Lan suggested.

"Putting him through now sir." West said.

"*Nightfall*, this is Shry. What happened there? We lost you completely." Shry said.

"We had some computer trouble captain." Edwards replied, "What's your situation?"

"Back at the refugee camp. Captain Navus was kind enough to offer us transport when we lost contact with you." Shry explained, "But captain we have to locate Strall. We intercepted the skimmer and killed three of the occupants; all of them are V'Shar agents. Strall beamed away but we don't now where to."

"Lieutenant?" Carr said, looking at West. But the operations manager shook her head.

"I can't find any residual transporter traces commander." She said.

"T'Lan?" Carr asked, turning to look at her.

"Unfortunately I am in agreement with Lieutenant West lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "There are no residual traces of transporter activity on the surface."

"Apollo-class freighter powering up." West suddenly announced.

"On screen." Edwards ordered and the main display shifted from a general view of the cluster of starships in orbit around Kywin Four to focus on the Vulcan transport ship.

"Can we lock a tractor beam on them?" Carr asked.

"Negative commander." Cole replied, "There are too many other ships in the way. We'd need to get closer."

"I don't have impulse power yet captain." Hamilton reported.

"Bridge to engineering." Edwards called out, activating the intercom, "Max I need the engines on line ASAP."

"I can give you impulse power in five minutes captain." Max responded, "Warp drive will take longer thanks to the manual disconnection of our cores."

"What about phasers?" Edwards asked.

"Offline without warp power captain." Cole said, "But we have torpedoes and the mass accelerators."

"We want to disable that ship, not vaporise it." Carr said.

"Snowman report." Edwards said.

"Quarterback and I are ready to launch captain." The fighter pilot replied, "The hangar crew have the bay doors open again."

"We need to stop that Apollo-class transport from leaving. The *Nightfall* can't manoeuvre to intercept it." Edwards told him.

"Copy that captain. They won't get away." White replied and Edwards smiled.

"Good hunting commander." He said.

Still sat in the cockpit of his fighter White grasped its controls and braced himself. Then he felt himself pressed back into his seat as his fighter accelerated out of the hangar, followed close behind by his wingman.

As soon as he was clear of the *Nightfall*, White checked his sensors to determine the exact position of the Vulcan ship.

“I’ve got the transport at one four six mark eight four.” He broadcast to both his wingman and the *Nightfall*, “She’s already in motion and accelerating. Quarterback, power phasers and follow me in.”



Aboard the Vulcan ship Strall entered the bridge and gave the traditional Vulcan salute to its captain.

"I come to serve." He said.

"Your service honours us Strall." The captain responded, turning his chair to face him and returning the salute, "We have the weapons and enough Tal'Shiar agents to provide instruction in their use. Our mission here is complete."

The one of the bridge crew turned.

"Captain, the Starfleet vessel has launched two smaller craft. Scans identify them as Peregrine-class fighters."

"Raise shields." The Vulcan captain ordered, "Helm, take us to full impulse as soon as we are clear of the Romulan vessels. Then go to warp as soon as we are out of the orbital plane. The fighters will not follow us without their base ship."

"Yes captain." The helmsman answered.

White and his wingman wove in between the Romulan vessels as they attempted to intercept the Vulcan freighter. Had it not been for the presence of the Romulan ships the Starfleet fighters would have been able to gain a weapons lock and open fire almost as soon as they had launched. But the multitude of conflicting energy sources as well as the physical presence of the Romulans disrupted the fighters' targeting.

However, the two small craft were agile and while the larger freighter had to seek out wide gaps as it withdrew the fighters could easily slip between the narrowest of gaps until they found the Apollo-class ship lying directly ahead of them.

"I've got a lock." White announced, his communication channel open to both his wingman and the *Nightfall*, "Firing phasers."

There was a flash of red as White fired his fighter's phasers and they struck the freighter's shields. Then as White banked away Quarterback repeated his attack and there was a second flash, this time of white as the freighter's shields collapsed and the remaining phaser energy struck its hull.

"Target their engines." White ordered, swinging his fighter around in the tightest turn he could and as he flew along the length of the freighter he fired his phasers towards its aft section.

The concentrated fire from both fighters struck the freighter repeatedly, blasting through its hull around its impulse drives and there was an explosion as one of the drive units' fusion generators ruptured.

"Damage report." The Vulcan captain said, his voice containing no emotion or urgency.

"One of our impulse units has been completely destroyed captain."

"How much longer until we can get to warp?" the captain asked.

"At least nine minutes." The helmsman answered.

"Divert auxiliary power to shields." The captain ordered, "They need to hold until we can get to warp."

"Impulse engines online captain." Max's voice exclaimed over the intercom and Edwards' head turned towards Hamilton.

"Confirmed captain, I have full impulse power available." Hamilton said, "Everybody hang on."

The *Nightfall* lurched again, only this time it was not as a result of a virus-triggered malfunction but the lag between Hamilton performing a sudden high-G manoeuvre and the ship's inertial dampeners catching up. Fortunately the entire bridge crew had been ready for this and all had the safety harnesses that most Starfleet vessels lacked fastened.

Turning the *Nightfall* rapidly to face the fleeing Vulcan vessel, Hamilton then transferred as much power to the ship's impulse drives as he dared. Technically the *USS Nightfall*, like all ships of the Akira-class was rated for sublight acceleration in excess of a thousand gees, but with the gravity well of Kywin Four as well as the swarm of Romulan vessels close by limited how quickly the ship could realistically change its speed. The Apollo-class transport was easy to pick out among the Romulan vessels, even without the distinctive wrap-around warp drive used by Vulcan ships the freighter was trailing fire from its burning impulse engine while Lieutenant Commander White and his wingman continued firing their phasers at it. So far though, it looked as if the Vulcan ship's shields were holding.

"Mister Cole, prepare your team." Edwards ordered and Cole nodded once before releasing his harness and getting up to leave the bridge. Then Edwards turned towards West, "Lieutenant, can you get a lock for the tractor beam yet?" he asked.

"Thirty seconds till we get a lock captain." West replied, "But their shields are still raised."
"I am aware of that lieutenant." Edwards said.

"Captain the Starfleet vessel is moving to intercept us." A Vulcan crewman said.
The Vulcan captain focused on the main display when he heard this and he saw the *Nightfall* now in motion.

"What is their status?" he asked.

"Still running with shields down and weapons unpowered." He was told.

"They intend to use a tractor beam." Strall said, "Then they will attempt to board us."

"Starfleet vessel is in range." The crewman added, "Their sensors indicate that they are locking on."

"Evasive action." The captain ordered.

White saw the freighter begin to roll, attempting to put a nearby Romulan vessel between it and the *Nightfall*.

"Okay Quarterback, now's our chance." He transmitted and he turned his fighter for another run on the larger ship. The additional power needed to turn the freighter had to come from somewhere and with its impulse drives already damaged that meant drawing on the same auxiliary power that was being used to reinforce the shields.

White and then his wingman made another pass along the length of the ship, starting from the rear. Its shields absorbed their first volleys of phaser fire before they could inflict any further damage to the impulse system. But after a few seconds of suffering continual hits the freighter's shields finally weakened enough that one of White's shots was able to penetrate and it struck the ship's warp drive.

"Their shields are collapsing captain." West reported.

"Do you have a lock?" Edwards asked her in response.

"Yes sir." She answered.

"Then engage tractor beam." Edwards ordered.

"Commander Cole, stand by to beam aboard." Carr said out loud, using the intercom to communicate with the transporter room where Cole and his security team were waiting.

"Report!" the Vulcan captain snapped, his sense of urgency overcoming his normal logical demeanour.

"Shields down captain and the Starfleet vessel is-" a crewman responded, but before he could finish the freighter shuddered as its forward momentum was halted by the *Nightfall's* tractor beam.

There was a glow from the rear of the bridge and all of a sudden Lieutenant Commander Cole and five of his security guards materialised. All of them had phasers at the ready, including two who held rifles.

"Don't do it!" Cole yelled as he saw Strall reaching for his sidearm. But the renegade security agent continued to try and draw his weapon and Cole fired. His phaser was set to a heavy stun and when the beam struck Strall he collapsed in a heap, his weapon clattering across the deck, "I suggest nobody moves." Cole said as he walked over to the dropped weapon and picked it up, "Oh and captain, you and your crew may consider yourselves under arrest."

"It's the same captain." King said as Edwards and Carr entered sickbay. The remains of the fleshforms used in the attack on the *Nightfall* were laid out on biobeds where both Doctor King and T'Lan were examining them, "The same synthetic flesh we've seen used to reanimate humanoid corpses. Only this time someone decided to create an entire body out of it. Much like the golems out of ancient stories."

"Well from the way Green acted it looks as if she was one of them as well." Carr said and Edwards nodded in agreement.

"Yes," he said, "whoever these people are they seem to have an interest in stirring up trouble in the Federation. Until now they were just using agents to affect colony worlds in border regions but now-" and he paused, looking down at the bodies of the fleshforms, "They seem to have escalated things somewhat. Using these - these whatever they are and targeting Vulcan, one of the key worlds of the Federation."

The door to sickbay opened again and Cole and Noyal entered.

"Well we've spoken to the Romulans we found aboard the Vulcan ship captain." Cole announced.

"And what did they have to say for themselves?" Edwards asked.

"Apparently they were all approached by Vulcans offering them asylum in exchange for their expertise in low level combat tactics and organising covert operations." Noyal answered, "Those that refused suddenly found that their previous occupations had become public knowledge and their only way out was to agree to the Vulcans' terms."

"Neat." Carr said, "Using the skills the isolationists were after as the leverage they needed to get them."
"The hold was packed with weapons captain." Cole went on, "Enough to equip more than a hundred soldiers. More if creating small weapons caches that could be accessed by multiple individuals as they needed them."

"Contact Vulcan." Edwards said, "Tell the V'Shar everything we know. Then arrange to have our prisoners turned over to them. They'll need to interrogate them to find out if they've got any more isolationists amongst them and who else is involved."

"Captain," T'Lan said, "there is also the matter of what to do with these remains."

"Starfleet Intelligence will want to see them." Carr replied.

"Indeed. But Captain Edwards has previously requested myself and Lieutenant Maximillian to study this material and retaining one of the bodies for our own study could be of great benefit."

"Very well." Edwards said, "You can keep one aboard. But make sure it's kept in a secure location. Liase with Commander Cole to arrange for it to be under round the clock guard. The last thing I want is it coming back to life again."