

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



CLOUDS IN BLUE SKIES

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **CLOUDS IN BLUE SKIES**

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

A fire at a research station casues major damage. But it soon emerges that the blaze was no accident and there is a saboteur on board. The crew of the *USS Nightfall* find themselves trying to discover not only the identity of the culprit, but also why they would want to destroy the station.

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
7. Root of all Evil
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i.

Stardate 65104.5 Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 en route to Science Station *Magellan*.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." the *Nightfall's* emergency medical hologram, known informally to the crew as 'Emma' said when she opened her eyes. But before the individuals who had activated her program could answer, Emma realised that something was wrong, "This is not sickbay." she said as she looked up at the ceiling of the strange place. Some vessels had been constructed with holo-emitters throughout their structure, but the *Nightfall* retained the basic EMH system of most Akira-class vessels that limited its use to sickbay and the holodecks. Then it occurred to her that rather than being in the usual upright position that she normally appeared in when first activated she was lay down and that there was a sheet pulled up to her shoulders. Emma lifted this sheet and peered beneath it. Then she let out a sigh, "I'm naked." she said, "Has someone been tampering with my program again?"

"There has been no tampering with your core program." a female voice said and as Emma turned her head she saw a female Vulcan in a Starfleet science division uniform standing close by. Then a more unusual figure came into view. This one also had a Starfleet combadge on his chest but he wore no uniform over the cybernetic parts grafted into his body. To even a casual observer it was obvious that he was a Borg, though his behaviour indicated that he was not still a part of the collective.

"Lieutenant T'Lan, Lieutenant Maximillian." Emma said to the *Nightfall's* chief science officer and chief engineer, "What is happening." and she lifted her arm and frowned, "Why does my arm feel so - so heavy?" she asked.

"Can you sit up?" Maximillian asked and Emma tried to lift herself into a sitting position.

"That is very strange." she said, "There appears to be a fault with the projection circuitry in this room. There is some sort of force pulling me back down when I try to get up." then she looked around again, "Where am I?" she asked.

"You are in engineering." T'Lan answered, "In one of the workshops."

"I was not informed that holo-emitters were being installed here." Emma said.

"They have not." Maximillian replied.

"Then how can I be here?" Emma asked.

"Because we have built you a physical body." Maximillian told her, "The difficulties you are encountering movement are down to your having to overcome inertia and gravity for the first time."

"How is this possible?" Emma asked, "I was under the impression that my program is far too complicated to be stored in any device compact enough to be placed inside a humanoid body."

"It is." Maximillian answered, "Your core program remains in the *Nightfall's* main computer. Your body is linked to this via a high speed communication link, relaying sensory data to the computer and receiving motor control commands in return."

"What if the link is broken?" Emma said.

"Then your body would cease to function." Maximillian said, "Though there would be no lasting damage to either it or your program. You may also sever the link voluntarily at any time you wish."

"Try sitting up again." T'Lan said and slowly Emma sat up and swung her legs off the edge of the platform, holding the sheet covering her across her chest.

"Good." Maximillian said and he looked at T'Lan, "We should try having her walk around."

"I agree." T'Lan replied, "I suggest escorting her to sickbay so that she can compare her physical body to her usual holographic one in her normal working environment."

"I may not be an expert on these matters," Emma commented, "but would having me walk around the ship naked attract attention?"

"We have procured you a uniform." Maximillian replied and he reached to a workbench where a science division uniform was neatly folded with a pair of boots beside it.

Somewhat unsteady on her feet, Emma walked between Maximillian and T'Lan and rested a hand on each of their shoulders as they headed from engineering to sickbay. Starting as soon as they exited the workshop almost every other member of the *Nightfall's* crew that they encountered turned to stare at Emma. The chief engineer and science officer had kept their project secret and thus no one else was aware that the EMH now had the capability to leave sickbay. So when they saw her walking through other areas of the ship they could not help but stop and stare.

When they arrived at sickbay they found the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer reviewing patient records while his nursing staff were inspecting equipment. The nurses looked around and watched, puzzled as Maximillian and T'Lan walked with Emma to the chief medical officer's office. They assumed that the EMH had been

activated but had not heard anyone issue the command.

"Commander King." T'Lan said from the doorway to the office and King looked up from his desk.

"Who activated the EMH?" he said when he saw Emma, "And why is she hanging on to you two like that?" "Because I'm still a bit wobbly." Emma replied as she released her grip on Maximillian and T'Lan and took a few careful steps towards him.

"Oh great, it's screwed up again." King said, "Computer deactivate EMH."

"The emergency medical hologram is not running." the computer's voice replied and King glared at Maximillian and T'Lan.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"I've got a body. A real body." Emma told him, smiling, "Isn't it great? It looks just like me I think." she added as she looked at her reflection in a nearby display screen.

"Care to explain why you're tampering with my EMH?" King asked, looking back and forth between Maximillian and T'Lan.

"We have been studying the samples of synthetic flesh that we have come into possession of over the previous year." Maximillian answered.

"And we determined that we could use the ship's replicators to reproduce it in its muscular form." T'Lan added, "By combining it with some standard duotronic control units we were able to produce a viable physical body that can be remotely operated by the EMH."

"And you never thought to ask me first?" King responded, frowning.

"We did not believe that it would present any problem doctor." T'Lan replied, "The stability of the program was never put at risk."

"Its an adaptive program." King said sternly, "You expose it to situations outside of its usual area of expertise and it starts to learn."

"Do you always talk about people as if they're not in the room when they're standing right in front of you?"

Emma asked and King scowled at Maximillian and T'Lan.

"Computer where is the captain?" he asked.

"Captain Edwards is in his ready room."

"Excellent." King said, getting to his feet and adjusting his tunic, "Come on all of you. You two clowns can explain what you've done to the captain." then he looked at Emma, "You too." he added, "I think the captain is going to have to see this for himself."

"Does this mean I get to see the bridge?" Emma asked.

In addition to being the *USS Nightfall's* chief of security and tactical officer, Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole was also its second officer and he occupied the central command chair on the bridge when the door to the turbolift opened to allow King to stride out of it, followed first by Emma and then Maximillian and T'Lan.

"Is the captain still in there?" King asked as Cole turned his chair to look at him.

"Yes, he's with Commander-" Cole replied before he noticed Emma, "What the hell?" he added and this prompted other bridge officers to also look around and there were gasps.

Meanwhile King had walked to the door to the captain's ready room and pressed the intercom.

"Captain I need to speak with you urgently." he said.

"Come in doctor." Edwards replied and the door slid open, revealing the captain sat behind his desk while Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr was sat opposite him holding a PADD. Like the bridge crew both Carr and Edwards stared when they saw Emma walk through the doorway after King. Once Maximillian and T'Lan were also inside the ready room the door to the bridge slid shut after them.

Outside on the bridge the officers on duty exchanged glances.

"I don't know what's going on," Cole said, "but I can't see it being anything good."

Meanwhile in his ready room Edwards looked directly at King.

"Doctor would you mind explaining what's going on? How is the EMH in here?" he asked.

"Isn't it wonderful captain?" Emma responded as she stepped forwards, "I have a real body." but all of a sudden she overbalanced and fell forwards, striking her head on the edge of the captain's desk.

"Are you okay?" Carr exclaimed, reaching out to help Emma back to her feet.

"I'm fine." Emma said, "I'm fine. But I've got a strange sensation on my face."

"You're injured." Carr said, frowning, "I think."

"If I may." Maximillian said, stepping forwards to inspect Emma's face. Sure enough there was a small cut on her bottom lip, though no blood was flowing. Instead beneath the skin a layer of milky white tissue was visible, "The synthetic coating has been damaged but I detect no damage to the underlying tissue." he added.

"Is someone going to explain what is going on?" Edwards asked.

"These two clowns decided to build a physical body for the EMH." King replied, "Without asking me I might add." and Edwards looked at his engineering and science chiefs.

"You did instruct us to study the synthetic flesh used by the aliens we have been encountering captain."

T'Lan said.

"Yes, study." Edwards said, "I gave no orders regarding making bodies out of it."

"It seemed a logical step." T'Lan replied.

"How did you even get enough information to do this?" Carr asked as she studied Emma, "I mean all you had were a few inert samples."

"Not quite commander." Maximillian said, "If you recall, when the ship was boarded by the creatures that we have been referring to as golems I was able to disable one of them by injecting it with nanites that attacked it internally and forced it to withdraw. However, right up to the point where it left the ship the nanites were sending me data regarding the golem's body structure and functionality. Scans of the inert material provided enough information to allow us to replicate more while the data from the golem was sufficient to enable us to configure it to function as artificial body tissue."

"So the EMH is in there no?" Edwards asked, pointing at Emma's head.

"Isn't it supposed to be rude to point?" Emma commented.

"She's still in the computer." King said in reply to Edwards' question, "Max says that there are standard electronic systems driving the body."

"And to talk about people like they aren't there even when standing right in front of you?" Emma added.

Edwards sighed.

"Doctor, would you mind taking Emma to see Lieutenant Mackey?" Edwards said.

"Mackey?" King replied, wincing.

"He is our counsellor." Carr commented, "He's the only one qualified to administer a Turing test."

"We need a baseline." Edwards added.

"Yeah, I get it." King said and he turned to Emma and held out his hand, "Okay come along, we're off to see the greatest berk ever have put on a blue uniform."

Taking King's hand for stability Emma then accompanied King out of the ready room while Edwards waited until the door closed before turning his attention back to the two officers standing on the other side of his desk.

"Just what are you two playing at?" he demanded and Maximillian and T'Lan exchanged glances.

"Following your orders captain." T'Lan replied.

"I said nothing about interfering with the EMH." Edwards said.

"You two of all people should know how risky what you've done is." Carr added.

"There was no significant risk of damage to the EMH program commander." Maximillian responded.

"Less than one tenth of one percent." T'Lan said in agreement.

"That's not what we mean." Edwards said, "An EMH is an adaptive system. Put it in an unexpected environment and it starts to learn and evolve. Then the next thing you know the damn thing has become self aware. Do you two have any idea how complicated things get then? I'd have the Judge Advocate General's office and God knows how many sentient rights lawyers hammering down my door."

"We required an artificial intelligence to act as a control mechanism captain." T'Lan said.

"Didn't either of you consider using a one time training program from the holodeck library system?" Carr asked.

"Such programs are limited in their scope." Maximillian replied, "The EMH-"

"The EMH is an important piece of equipment." Edwards interrupted, "And what you've done risks it becoming unusable. Even if we scrub all of this from its memory files we'll be left with a base system without any of the experience that our unit has gathered." then he paused, "Now-" but before he could continued the communicator built into his desk activated.

"Captain?" the voice of the ship's operations manager, Lieutenant Jenna West said.

"Yes lieutenant?" Edwards asked.

"Captain we've just received a transmission from Science Station *Magellan*. They're declaring an emergency. Apparently they have a fire." West answered.

"Bring us to warp eight." Edwards ordered, "And sound yellow alert. I'll be right there." and he shut off the communicator and got to his feet. Looking at Maximillian and T'Lan once more Edwards added, "And you two can get back to your stations."



Science Station *Magellan* was not a single space station but a cluster of seven. Each individual station bore the hallmarks of Federation design, possessing a mushroom-like structure featuring a conical or domed head section and a central core extending down from the centre. The stations were arranged with the largest at the centre and the six smaller stations spread out around it in a circular pattern. As the *Nightfall* approached *Magellan* these outer stations were in motion, making use of their manoeuvring thrusters to increase the distance between them and the larger central station and the reason for this became apparent as the *Nightfall* drew closer and dropped to impulse speed.

"Now that's something you don't see every day." the ship's helmsman, Lieutenant Hamilton commented as he saw a magnified image of the central station through his personal heads up display rather than as just part of the image on the main view screen that showed the entire cluster of space stations.

"Zoom in on the primary station." Edwards ordered.

"Aye sir. Increasing magnification." West replied and the image on the main screen changed to show just the central station as well. The space station was still intact, but where normally there would be pinpricks of white light showing through the viewports many of them instead flickered orange as a result of the flames inside.

"How much is on fire?" Carr asked in amazement.

"From our sensor readings it appears that almost thirty percent of the station is on fire." T'Lan answered from the science station behind Carr.

At this point a Romulan woman in the uniform of her own military looked at Captain Edwards from the seat next to his.

"I thought all your ships used automated fire suppression." she said.

"They do Nayal." Edwards responded.

"See if you can find out what's going on over there lieutenant." Carr told West.

"Science Station *Magellan* is hailing us now." West replied.

"On screen." Carr ordered and the viewscreen changed again, now showing the face of a middle aged human with streaks of soot smeared across his face.

"*Nightfall*, thank goodness you're here." he exclaimed, "We can't last much longer."

"*Magellan*, can you explain what's happening?" Edwards asked.

"The fire's out of control." the man on the view screen replied, "It started in one of the labs and spread. I don't know what's gone wrong with the fire suppression system but it failed to trigger. What's worse is that the system failure spread to environmental controls. The bulkheads aren't responding properly either so we couldn't contain the fire until it had spread. I've got people trying to fight it with handheld extinguishers but its no good. *Nightfall*, we estimate that the flames will reach the fusion reactors in under an hour."

Edwards looked at Hamilton.

"What's our ETA?" he asked.

"Three minutes at full impulse." Hamilton replied.

"Did you get that?" Edwards then asked the man on the screen and he nodded.

"We'll be awaiting your arrival. But be aware, our transporters are not functioning, the fire has already disabled them."

"Understood. *Nightfall* out." Edwards replied. Then he looked at West, "Signal the hangar. Tell Snowman to launch."

"Yes sir." West replied.

In the *Nightfall's* vast hangar bay two Peregrine-class attack fighters waited pointing towards the forwards launch door. This was wide open, the atmosphere contained within the hangar by a forcefield.

"Snowman, scramble, scramble, scramble." West's voice said over the intercom and the pilot of the lead fighter, Lieutenant Commander William 'Snowman' White smiled.

"Okay Quarterback," he signalled his wingman, "we're up." and he pushed his foot down on the throttle pedal, sending his fighter racing out of the hangar.

The two small attack craft were highly manoeuvrable and as they flew in close to the burning station they banked sharply, veering off to fly in a circular pattern around it so that the two pilots could visually inspect all sides of it.

"They're not kidding *Nightfall*." Snowman signalled, "This place is lit up like a phaser range."

Edwards looked at Carr.

"Go." he said and she nodded back at him as she got to her feet.

"Cole with me." she said before tapping her combadge, "Doctor King, Max, meet me in transporter room one and tell your people to get ready to follow us over there."
"Lieutenant commander." T'Lan said as Carr and Cole approached the turbolift, "Captain Heart's record indicates that he has firefighting experience."
"Captain Heart?" Carr said, tapping her combadge again.
"Yes commander?" a man's voice replied.
"T'Lan tells me you have experience dealing with fires."
"Four years volunteering with Australian Outback blazes and two with California brush fires." he told her and she smiled.
"Meet me in transporter room one in ten minutes captain." Carr said.
"I thought you'd never ask." Heart replied.

Although combat was extremely unlikely to occur, regulations required that members of the away team be armed when they beamed over to the station. Therefore on her way to the transporter room Carr headed for her quarters first to retrieve her issue phaser.
"Mom, what's going?" the teenage girl waiting in her quarters asked as Carr rushed in.
"I'm beaming over to the station." Carr answered, "I need my phaser." and she dashed to the locked drawer in her bedroom where she kept the weapon.
"But its on fire." Nikki exclaimed as she followed her mother.
"I know honey that's why we're here." Carr said, holstering the weapon. Then she turned to look directly at her daughter, "Look, Lieutenant West knows to put your father straight through to you if he calls while I'm gone."
"So he is calling then?" Nikki responded.
"It's your birthday. Of course he will." Carr said, "Oh and the captain's made you a cake. He'll drop it by later. Now I must be going." and with that she hurried from her quarters to the transporter room.

With the *Magellan's* transporter system not functioning the *Nightfall's* transporter chief instead targeted the space station's command deck when beaming the away team over and the five members of the *Nightfall's* crew materialised in a scene of chaos and panic. Such was the level of confusion amongst the station's command crew that they barely noticed the fact that a Borg had just appeared in their midst.
"I'm Lieutenant Commander Carr." Carr said when she recognised the man she had seen on the *Nightfall's* view screen.
"Administrator Thom." he replied.
"This Lieutenant Commander Cole, tactical and security, Doctor King, Lieutenant Max and MACO Captain Heart." Carr added, pointing out each of her team in turn.
"A Borg?" Thom responded as Maximillian's presence finally sunk in, "And a MACO?" MACOs were the military forces of Earth and not part of Starfleet, so their presence aboard a starship was definitely out of the ordinary.
"The *Nightfall's* a very special ship." Carr said.
"How about we explain that later and get to why we're here." King added.
"Of course, this way please." Thom said and he led the away team to the centre of the command deck where a large console showed the layout of the space station, with the areas ablaze flashing red.
"I see what you mean about this being bad." Carr said and Thom nodded.
"The reactors are here." he said, pointing to one of the decks shown on the display that for now at least were not marked in red.
"That is only four decks away from the fire at the closest point." Max commented.
"And getting closer every minute." Thom said.
"What about casualties?" King asked.
"At least sixty so far." Thom told him, "But right now we're cut off from the lower section of the station and communication is unreliable."
"Cut off?" Cole asked and Thom nodded.
"The turbolifts are all down." he replied, "The fire spread through the shafts and we were lucky to be able to manually seal them off before they got to here and the reactor. Our sickbay is overflowing and from what I understand there are more injured in engineering."
"Then perhaps I ought to get going." King said, holding up his medical kit and tapping the side of it.
"Yes, go." Carr replied.
Thom looked around and waved another of the science station's crew closer.
"Escort the doctor to sickbay." he told the man.
"The fire is not spreading upwards." Max noted as King was leaving.
"No, we've got all the bulkheads sealed on this side, but if we seal the lower levels then the fire will continue to burn and we'll lose the station anyway when the heat starts cooking off some of the more volatile

substances in the labs." Thom said.

"What about venting the atmosphere?" Cole asked, "You've an airlock here and a shuttle bay here." and he pointed to the deck plan, indicating two points on decks shown to be on fire. But Thom shook his head.

"We've no control over them." he replied, "The fire knocked out the hard lines between here and there."

"The *Nightfall's* phasers could put a hole in the hull." Carr said, but now it was Cole that shook his head.

"Firing a particle beam at the hull would risk igniting whatever substances the administrator is concerned about." he said, "And the mass accelerators would rip this place apart."

"So you're saying we need something that can punch a hole in the hull without increasing the heat levels inside the station or smashing its way right through the superstructure?" Heart asked, standing up straight and folding his arms.

"That's right." Cole said and Hearts smiled then activated his combadge.

"Heart to *Nightfall*," he said, "I need to speak with Captain Shry."

The MACOs were not the only ground troops stationed aboard the *USS Nightfall*. In addition to the company of troops from Earth there was a company of Andorian Imperial Guard and it was a group of these led by their commanding officer Captain Shry that burst onto the hangar deck and ran towards the launch door.

"Okay let's do this." Shry barked at his men as a padded mat was unrolled and lay out on the deck before one of the other Andorians lay down on it on his stomach, put on a set of ear defenders and brought a rifle to his shoulder. This weapon was not a standard Federation phaser, in fact it was not a phaser at all. The weapon was an assault rifle designed to fire solid rounds at a target. It, like many of the systems aboard the *Nightfall* was intended to combat the Borg. Borg drones had never demonstrated any ability to adapt to physical impacts and when loaded with duranium tipped armour-piercing ammunition the assault rifles had been demonstrated to be capable of disabling them before they could get close enough to assimilate someone. The drawback of such a weapon was that using such ammunition aboard a starship risked rupturing the hull and so normally when the rifles were issued to troops aboard the *Nightfall* they were instead loaded with ammunition designed to fragment on impact.

Not on this occasion however.

"Armour piercing." Shry said as he handed a magazine of ammunition to the marksman now set up beside him. The Imperial Guardsman he had selected for this assignment had consistently scored the highest out of both the Imperial Guard and MACOs for marksmanship with the relatively archaic weapon.

"Weapon's hot." the marksman replied as he slammed the magazine into his weapon and chambered a round.

"Shry to bridge. Weapon is hot." Shry signalled.

On the bridge Hamilton watched the image through his headset carefully. The device he wore gave him precise information regarding the facing of the *Nightfall* as he turned the five hundred metre long starship to face directly towards the central space station of *Magellan* and brought it to within five hundred metres, the distance regarded as the maximum effective range for the assault rifles.

"In position now captain." he said as he brought the ship to a relative halt compared to the burning space station.

"Captain Shry," Edwards said into the intercom, "you may fire at will."

"Ears." Shry announced and the small group of Andorians gathered around him put on ear defenders identical to those worn by the marksman and then Shry raised a set of binoculars to his eyes and trained them on the space station that was visible through the forcefield right in front of the Andorians," Then he simply added, "Fire at will."

The marksman took a single breath before exhaling and then squeezing the trigger. There was a sharp 'Crack!' as the bullet broke the sound barrier before passing through the forcefield unimpeded. The energy barrier was designed only to resist the continuous pressure of the air inside the hangar and the concentrated kinetic energy of a bullet was enough to pierce it. Fortunately for the Andorians and the deck crew working behind them it left no hole that would de-pressurise the hangar though.

Watching through his binoculars Shry saw the impact of the bullet on the space station, creating a small hole not far from a viewport. However, despite having penetrated the outer hull layer the bullet failed to properly puncture it.

"High. One point five metres." Shry said, "Don't forget, there's no gravity to make the round drop. Try again."

There was a second 'Crack!' as the marksman fired another shot and this time Shry saw the viewport he was focused on splinter before a jet of vapour began to shoot through the tiny hole, "Hit. Just a puncture though."

he said and with a flick of his thumb the marksman set his rifle to fire limited bursts rather than single shots.

Three rounds fired in rapid succession with a single pull of the trigger struck the viewport in a tightly clustered group. Each bullet easily punched through the transparent material, creating three fresh holes. But more significantly the transparent aluminium alloy began to split, with cracks appearing between the latest three

holes. All of a sudden the viewport exploded outwards, shattering and exposing the compartment beyond as well as all those connected to it to the vacuum of space.

At this point the Andorian marksman ejected the magazine from his rifle and then removed the final round from its chamber.

"Clear." he said.

From the cockpit of his fighter White watched as the air evacuated from the space station, producing a column of flame surrounded by a cloud of vapour and debris outside the destroyed viewport. Then he looked at another of the viewports that only moments earlier he had been able to see flame through and now he watched as the flames were slowly starved of oxygen. The lighting systems inside had already been destroyed by the fire and now that the flames died the viewports became dark.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman. Mission accomplished, the flames are going out."

"Copy that Snowman." West's voice replied, "Return to base."

3.

Aboard the *Magellan* the away team from the *USS Nightfall* watched the display as one section after another changed from red to blue to indicate that the fire that had been raging through the affected areas of the station had been extinguished.

"Remarkable." Thom said, astounded.

"You still have a blown out viewport that's going to need sealing before anyone can go back into those sections to check them out." Cole pointed out.

"At least the station's not at risk of exploding any more." Heart added and Cole nodded in agreement.

"Commander I am capable of withstanding vacuum." Max said, "Perhaps it would be useful if I were to begin investigating the damaged areas of the station while the administrator is arranging for the viewport to be sealed."

"It would guarantee that the scene had not been tampered with."

"I'm sorry? Investigate?" Thom asked.

"You've just had a serious fire that involved the failure of several supposedly foolproof safety systems administrator." Cole said, "The most likely answer for how this has happened is sabotage. I'm afraid that until the exact cause of the fire can be determined those decks are a crime scene."

"The fire's been dealt with captain." Carr reported, "But we're still in the dark about how bad the damage is."

"Understood commander." Edwards replied from the bridge of the *Nightfall*, "The damage control teams are standing by to beam over and join you."

"I'd like to hold off on sending them over for the time being captain." Cole said, "I want to be able to carry out a preliminary investigation into the cause of the fire before dozens of people start moving things around down there. It's going to be hard enough given the disturbance that explosive decompression will have caused without adding anyone deliberately moving everything about."

"I will enter the damaged sections alone to carry out an initial survey captain." Max explained, "That will hopefully give the station personnel to restore environmental controls to normal."

"You suspect sabotage then?" Edwards asked.

"Given what I've seen here, yes." Cole answered, "Captain too many systems had to fail at the same time. Someone wanted the *Magellan* taken out and they came too close for comfort to doing just that."

"Okay. Keep me informed." Edwards said, "Oh but Commander Carr, are you likely to be delayed?"

"Don't worry captain. I haven't forgotten about tonight. I'm looking forwards to that dessert." Carr responded and when both she and Edwards noticed the other crew members looking at them in surprise she swiftly added, "The cake. I mean the birthday cake of course."

"Of course she does." Heart muttered and Cole grinned. In response Carr just glared at them both.

"I'll let you know of any developments." she signalled, "Carr out." then she turned her attention to Cole and Heart, "Oh stop it. The pair of you." she snapped.

"I said nothing." Cole protested.

"Ah, you're awake again." a female voice said and Doctor Philip Hunt of *Science Station Magellan* turned his head to see a girl standing on the far side of the featureless room.

"And confused." Hunt said as he began to sit up, but he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder as a muscular milky white humanoid figure held him down.

"That's alright." The Girl said to the figure and it let go of Hunt and stepped back from him.

"So why send me back again?" Hunt asked as he got to his feet, "I've not finished my report to the others yet."

"They can wait." The Girl said, "Right now I need you to complete your assignment for me."

Hunt frowned.

"My mission is complete. The Federation's research into-"

"The fire was extinguished Doctor Hunt." The Girl interrupted him, her voice remaining calm, "A starship arrived to intervene before the fire could claim the laboratories and computer core."

Hunt frowned.

"I couldn't possibly have foreseen-"

"Of course you couldn't." The Girl said, interrupting him again "And I don't hold this delay against you.

However, I do expect that this time you will do your job properly. If not, then your return here may not be quite so - pleasant." and as she smiled Hunt's face fell.

"You know sending a squad of fleshforms back with me would pretty much guarantee the result you want." he said, looking back at the muscular figure.

"I think not." The Girl replied, "I'd rather not alert Starfleet to our involvement here and I particularly don't want them to know what it is that that we need to keep hidden from them."

"Okay. I'll go back right away." Hunt said.

"One moment." The Girl told him, "I'm afraid that your return to the *Magellan* will have to be handled carefully and it's not going to be very comfortable."

"So what is it you do here anyway administrator? The station as whole, not you personally." Carr asked.

"We specialise in blue sky research." Thom replied.

"Weather control?" Heart commented with a puzzled expression and Thom snorted.

"He means that the research is carried out for its own sake." Cole told him, "Without a specific goal in mind."

"Indeed." Thom said, "Some of this is purely original unproven theories, but we also undertake the reverse engineering of alien technologies that others can then attempt to adapt for the Federation's own use."

"Alien technologies?" Cole said, "Could someone have come looking for something that belongs to them?"

"No." Thom replied, shaking his head, "We don't do espionage here. The technologies we're trying to replicate are those recovered by archaeological teams from worlds long dead. The owners are just as dead as well."

At that point Carr's combadge activated.

"Commander, it's Doctor King." the doctor's voice said.

"Go ahead doctor." Carr replied.

"Commander we're swamped down here. It looks like a lot of the *Magellan*'s medical personnel are among the wounded. I need help from the *Nightfall*. I hate to admit it, but I'm going to need that damned EMH."

Thom's eyes widened when he overheard this last comment.

"Our sickbay is not equipped to handle an EMH." he said, "You don't have mobile emitter technology do you?"

"No." Carr told him, "But some of our officers decided to create an alternative method for her to get out and about."

"Their own bit of blue sky research if you will." Cole added.

4.

Carefully, Max made his way through one of the ruined laboratory decks. All of the decks affected by fire were still exposed to vacuum while the *Magellan's* own engineering staff worked to patch the destroyed viewport. Some areas had suffered damage to the artificial gravity system, leaving them in weightless conditions. Fortunately Max's Borg cybernetically enhanced physiology enabled him to maintain his footing using electromagnets built into the soles of his feet. However, the debris that had not been blown into space when the viewport was shot out now drifted in these areas and Max carefully brushed them aside as he went.

He was searching for some sign that would point to the original ignition point and from what sensor data had been available it was somewhere on this deck. The fire had first been detected by a thermal sensor in the corridor that Max was now walking down but from what he had seen of the station's records there had been nothing present in the corridor that would have caused it. Therefore the fire had to have started in one of the laboratories on this level and so these were where Max focused his search. Once again his Borg implants proved to be an advantage. The implant that had replaced one of his eyes was the equal of a Starfleet tricorder that had the benefit of not needing any hands to use it. But the spectral analysis he was able to carry out using this gave him the same result in each lab he entered, the fire had spread into them from the corridor.

However, as he stepped into a laboratory that from its appearance and the details held on the station's deck plan was no different to any other he had encountered he found something different. Thanks to the failure of environmental controls and exposure to vacuum, most remaining objects and surfaces had cooled down sufficiently that as Max scanned through the infra red spectrum they radiated little or no heat. But from the far end of this laboratory there was a definite, if weak heat source. Curious, Max headed towards the heat source. He expected to find some piece of self powered scientific equipment that had been protected from the flames that had engulfed this deck, presumably some sort of probe meant for use in a hostile environment. However, as he drew closer the outline of the thermal signature became clearer and it did not look like a probe of any kind. It looked like a person.

The heat signature was not within the laboratory itself but was instead on the far side of a bulkhead and their body temperature was causing a heating effect on this bulkhead that Max could just about detect. A sealed doorway connected the laboratory and the compartment on the far side of the bulkhead and Max walked up to this and struck it with his fist once, leaving his fist in contact with the door. Immediately the figure visible to Max only as a thermal outline leapt to its feet and rushed to the door. Then Max felt the impact of a blow to the far side of the door just as he saw the outline strike it and he smiled.

"Max can you hear me?" Carr's voice said suddenly.

Max had not 'heard' the message in the literal sense. Surrounded by vacuum the sound could not travel from his combadge to his ears. But since his hearing, like his vision, was cybernetically enhanced he had linked his combadge to his audio receptors and the message was relayed as pure digital data that was then transferred to the nerves that carried sound to the brain.

"Yes, I can hear you." he replied, not bothering to properly explain the precise way in which he was actually receiving the message. This reply was delivered in the same way as he had received Carr's signal as well. With no air to force past his vocal chords Max simply sent a digital audio file directly to his combadge to be transmitted back to his superior.

"Stand by Max." Carr said, "Administrator Thom's EVA crew have sealed the viewport that got blown out. We're about to start trying to get the environmental systems back on line."

"I suggest you hurry lieutenant commander." Max said, "I have located a survivor."

"A survivor? How is that possible?" Carr asked.

"It appears that whoever it is they sealed themselves inside a closet. However, I doubt that they have an indefinite supply of oxygen so restoring life support so that they can be let out should be of prime importance."

"Copy that Max." Carr said, "We'll keep you informed."

"Ready?" Cole asked, looking at Heart and the MACO nodded as they both pressed their hands up against the double doors, taking a door each.

"Whenever you are." Heart replied and Cole looked back over his shoulder.

Behind him Carr stood with her tricorder in her hand while King stood beside her with his medical kit. Carr tapped her combadge.

"Administrator, we're in position." she signalled.

"Copy that commander. We're starting now." Thom responded.

Then from beyond the doorway there was a muffled hissing sound as the *Magellan's* atmospheric control systems were brought back on line and the damaged areas were re-pressurised.

"Okay that's it." Carr said as her tricorder indicated that the pressure had reached a safe level to allow the away team to proceed without environmental protection.

Simultaneously Cole and Heart pulled the two halves of the door apart as Carr held up a palm beacon, activating the compact flash light and directing its powerful beam into the corridor beyond the door.

"This place is a wreck." Cole commented as he and Heart reached for their own palm beacons. Though the damaged sections now possessed a breathable atmosphere the lighting had been destroyed by the fire so the away team would have to carry their own illumination.

"So which way is Max?" King asked as he led the way into the damaged section, holding up a palm beacon of his own.

"Three decks down." Carr replied, "We'll have to climb down the turbolift shaft."

"Just point the way." King said.

"Careful doctor." Heart cautioned him, "It's possible that there could be toxic residue in some places."

"Don't worry, I'll let you know if I pick anything up." Carr added, raising her tricorder.

"You better had." King replied as he continued onwards, "Because if any of you lot get poisoned you'll need me about to cure you."

Making use of the emergency handholds in the turbolift shaft, the four away team members descended to the deck Max was on and headed towards his position.

"Careful." Carr warned King as he continued to take the lead despite her being the one with the tricorder, "The gravity plating is malfunctioning along here."

"I see it." King replied and he shone his palm beacon down the corridor where it picked up clouds of debris floating in the air at certain points. Then he inspected the walls along each side, "The walls look stable enough." he said, "We ought to be able to use them to get a grip where the gravity gives out." and he continued to advance.

When they reached the laboratory where Max waited they found him still alone.

"I thought you said there was a survivor down here." King said, "So where are they?"

"In there doctor." Max replied, pointing to the sealed door.

"You mean you left them locked in?" Heart asked.

"I considered it the wisest course of action to take." Max answered, "I doubt that whoever is in there would react very well to having survived a fire by hiding in a closet only for the first person they encounter when the door opens again to be a Borg."

"Yeah, it would kind of put a downer on not burning to death." Cole commented as he walked over to the door and banged on it, "Starfleet security!" he yelled, "Stand back from the door!" and he drew his phaser and took a step back himself. Setting the phaser to produce a beam of intense heat, Cole aimed it at the side of the door where he guessed the locking mechanism was likely to be and fired. Keeping his finger pressed on the trigger button he promptly sliced a small section out of the door. Then as soon as he ceased fire Max stepped forwards and put his hand into the hole before pulling the door open.

"Oh thank goodness you found me!" Hunt exclaimed as he stumbled out of the closet, "I was starting to think that I'd suffocate in there."

"Doctor." Carr said, "Would you like to-"

"No." Hunt interrupted, "I assure you I'm fine. I know enough about the effects of smoke inhalation and asphyxiation to be able to know if I need medical attention and I can assure you that I don't."

"I just need to make sure." King said, taking out his medical tricorder, "Now let's start with your name."

"It's Doctor Hunt and I said no." Hunt replied sternly and he pushed past the away team to look around at the damage done to the laboratory, "Look at this place!" he exclaimed, "Everything's ruined. I need to try and figure out where to start repairs, not waste my time with a pointless medical examination."

"Actually I'm going to have to ask you to evacuate this section doctor." Cole said.

"Evacuate? But my work is all here. Or at least it was." Hunt protested.

"And it's my responsibility to determine how this happened." Cole told him, "Now you have the right to refuse the offer of medical help if you want to, but if you try to remain here then I can and will remove you by force."

"You wouldn't dare. I'll have your commission." Hunt said.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Cole's superior Doctor Hunt." Carr said, standing beside Cole, "And he is quite correct when he tells you that we can use force to assure your compliance in a situation like this." and to reinforce her point she move her hand to the phaser holstered at her waist.

Hunt scowled.

"I'm leaving." he said.

"I'll escort you out." Max said, "The route is somewhat treacherous and I am best able to assist you safely through. Then I shall evaluate the repairs required to the station."

"I better get back to sickbay." King added as he watched Hunt and Max leave the room, "That Emma may have the technical skill she needs, but I'm still worried about letting her out of our own sickbay." and he too

turned to leave

"There's nothing more for me to be doing here." Heart said, "So I may as well be getting back to the *Nightfall*."

"I'll head back to the ship as well." Carr responded, "There needs to be a motive for someone to have started the fire and it's probably related to the research being done here. I'll download a full list and see if anything springs out." then she looked at Cole, "Will you be okay on your own?" she asked him.

"Perhaps Lieutenant T'Lan could beam over to assist him." Heart said and he smiled at Cole briefly who just sighed.

"Is there a problem between you and Lieutenant T'Lan I should aware of Robert?" Carr asked, looking at Cole.

"No ma'am." he replied.

"Nothing between them at all." Heart added.

"Okay, there's obviously some joke going on here that I'm not aware of." Carr said, "Just make sure that it doesn't interfere with your work okay? I'll tell T'Lan you need her over here."

Carr was surprised to see Nikki still in their quarters when she returned to them, reading from a PADD.

"I thought you'd have beamed over to the station." she said.

"You mean the one that caught fire?" Nikki responded.

"There are six other space stations in the complex Nikki. Only the central one caught fire, the rest are perfectly safe." Carr told her as she went into her bedroom to return her phaser to the drawer where she kept it, "And there are kids your own age on one of them. They have an entertainment centre that I'm sure you'd enjoy. It is your birthday after all. Just make sure you're back for dinner."

"I better not." Nikki said, "I need to be here for when dad calls."

"So take your communicator. I can have it patched through to you."

"No, I'd rather be here."

"Suit yourself." Carr said, returning to the living room and sitting down at her desk, "But I've got work to do so please try not to disturb me."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I need to review all of the research projects being carried out on the *Magellan*'s main station to see if any of them point to a motive." Carr replied, activating her computer and calling up the list of projects.

"Shouldn't Robert be doing that?" Nikki asked and Carr sighed.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole is conducting a physical inspection of the section of the station affected by the fire." she said, "Lieutenant T'Lan has gone over to assist him."

"What? So its just the two of them over there together then?" Nikki said and Carr noticed the hint of a smile on her face.

"You know you're the second person to have reacted like that." she said, "Is there a problem between Cole and T'Lan? Because if there is then I need to know."

"No. There's no problem at all." Nikki said and then she frowned, "Wait. The second person? Who was the first?"

"Not that its any of your business but Captain Heart seemed to find it amusing as well when he suggested it."

"So Gary suggested it?" Nikki said.

"Captain Heart. Yes. Nikki, you really should remember that officers aboard this ship should be addressed properly."

"Yeah, sure. I'll just go and apologise to him." Nikki replied and she got up and darted out of the room.

Carr sighed and turned back to her computer.

"I wish could figure out what was going through her head sometimes." she said.

"When will we have access to our labs again administrator?" Hunt asked. He was only one of more than a dozen researchers who had surprised Administrator Thom in his office while he was trying to process the damage reports he had received.

"That's up to Starfleet." he replied.

"Starfleet?" Hunt responded, "This isn't a Starfleet station. They have no authority here. Look, I need to get back to my lab and determine how much work has been lost. I'd use the computer to try and figure it out but it seems that we don't have access to that either."

"No." Thom said, "There was damage to the memory core in the fire and that Borg engineer is trying to organise replacement parts. But right now there are more important systems that he wants to work on."

"Starfleet? Borg? Do you hear yourself Thom? Who runs this place? You or them?" Hunt said angrily and the other researchers nodded and murmured in agreement. It was obvious to Thom that Hunt had spoken to them before leading them to his office and got them all riled up about what was happening.

"Look, I'll ask Captain Edwards about how long the investigation is going to take. But Starfleet think that the fire was started deliberately. So until it can be shown otherwise they have the authority to investigate and from what I understand there are two of their officers down there now trying to figure out where the fire started. If you really want to get back to your labs quickly then I suggest that you all go away and think about anything that you may have noticed that would help them."

"Mark my works administrator," Hunt said, looking back over his shoulder from the doorway, "Starfleet are going to keep throwing their weight around and unless you get a grip we'll all end up answering to them permanently."

"He does like her!" Nikki snapped, startling Heart.

The MACO was in one of the loading bays next to the hangar watching as both his own men and Shry's prepared equipment for damage control operations. The fact that the fire aboard the *Magellan* had been put out had not stopped them from wanting to be ready just in case they were called upon to assist in putting out another. Especially given the likelihood of it having been started deliberately. If another fire was started Heart and Shry intended to be ready.

"What? The captain and your mother? Everyone knows that they-"

"Yuck, gross." Nikki interrupted and she pulled Heart aside. Then in a quiet voice she continued, "No, I mean Robert likes T'Lan doesn't he? Come on, you've as good as admitted it before now. That's why you suggested that she go over there and help him. You're trying to get them together aren't you?"

"Nikki what I'm doing is winding up Cole over something stupid he said a few months back. Nothing more." Heart replied, "Though if you were admitting that T'Lan-"

"No." Nikki said, interrupting him again, "I'm not admitting anything and if you're not going to tell me anything useful I may as well be heading back to my quarters. My dad is due to call soon and I need to be there when he does."

"Oh yeah, happy birthday. But no, I'm not replicating any beer for you to celebrate with." Heart said and Nikki frowned before turning around and striding out of the loading bay.

"What was that all about?" Shry asked as he then approached Heart.

"Oh nothing much." Heart replied, "But do you think that Vulcans ever have dirty dreams?"

Shry frowned.

"You're asking me about Vulcans?" he responded, "They're an even bigger mystery to me than you pink skins can be sometimes."

Max knew that he was being stared at. In the years since he began working with Starfleet it had happened rather a lot and he found it understandable. The Borg Collective was one of the most severe threats that the Federation had faced in its more than two hundred year history, so for people to see someone who appeared to be a part of the Collective walking about could often come as a shock. However, here on the *Magellan* things were different and Max had found out that many of the crew were more interested in the technology that went into his implants than in him.

"Do you require assistance?" he asked, turned around from the computer console he was accessing in the *Magellan*'s main computer core. The damage in here had been only slight, but Max knew that there must have been failings in the computer for the fire to have taken hold as seriously as it did and he wanted to know what these failings were.

"I'm sorry." the woman now standing in front of him said, "But I was just thinking about how you could advance our technology."

"I am a Starfleet engineer who has worked on the designs for seven classes of starship. Advancing technology is what I do." Max replied.

"Actually I was thinking about the projects undertaken here on the Magellan." she said, "Your Borg nanoprobes could-"

"I must stop your there miss – Miss, I do not know your name." Max said.

"Weller. Doctor Weller."

"Well then Doctor Weller I ought to remind you that Borg nanoprobes are considered a highly restricted technology by the Federation Council and Starfleet. The danger of them contaminating and assimilating anything around them is too great to allow them to be distributed."

"Yes, but the staff here are used to handling dangerous substances."

"Your claim is mute Doctor Weller." Max said before she could continue, "Even if you were able to demonstrate that you could handle nanoprobes safely I would not be legally allowed to supply you with them. Even if I did have any to offer."

"You mean you don't-"

"The nanites I carry within me are a product of Federation technology. Though they can reproduce many of the functions of Borg nanoprobes they are not an exact copy and their hive mind is regarded as a sentient life form so trading them is covered under Federation anti-slavery laws." Max interrupted, "Now if you don't mind I need to return to my work."

"Of course. I'll let you get on." Weller said and Max watched as she walked away before turning back to the console.

Max had isolated the control functions for each of the safety and damage control systems that ought to have responded to the fire and either contained or extinguished it. Each of these would have begun as a standard, off the shelf module that would then have been modified over time as the Magellan's personnel adapted it to their precise needs. Any changes to them or any other part of the Magellan's systems should have been tested to make sure that the alterations did not compromise the effectiveness of any other system, but Max knew that sometimes such tests would be overlooked or carried out improperly.

But as far as Max could tell each update to the control systems had been properly tested and logged. But then he accessed the files of control code themselves and what he found startled him.

"Lieutenant commander, I do not believe that the fire began in here either." T'Lan said as she swept her tricorder around the room, "There are no chemical residues that would indicate an accelerant or equipment that could have-"

"I know that T'Lan." Cole replied, "And this isn't exactly helped by the fact that when that Andorian shot out the viewport everything that wasn't fixed down got dragged towards the hole before all the air was evacuated."

"Explosive decompression was the logical solution lieutenant commander."

"Oh I know that T'Lan." Cole replied, wincing, "But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"I have offended you. I apologise."

Cole sighed.

"No you haven't. I'm just irritated that we've already been through half a dozen labs and we're still no closer to finding out which of them the fire started in." he said.

"Lieutenant commander, irritation is an emotional response. If you would like assistance in controlling your emotions then I am always available to help you." T'Lan replied, "Eliminating the labs-"

"I don't think that will be necessary." Cole interrupted. Then he suddenly paused.

"Lieutenant commander, is something the matter?" she asked.

"T'Lan I could kiss you." he exclaimed, "Though if I did I'd never hear the last of it."

"I fail to understand." T'Lan said.

"The fire didn't start in a lab T'Lan." Cole told her, "Whoever started the fire couldn't have started it in their own lab because that would lead us right to them and they wouldn't have had access to any of the other labs. So we need to focus on the other places affected by the fire. In particular those that would spread it as far and as fast as possible."

"The logical answer would be the turbolift shaft." T'Lan said and Cole grinned.

"My thought's exactly." he told her, "Come on, let's go check it out."

The pair hurried to the nearby turbolift shaft where they found the door wide open, exactly as it had been when both of them had climbed down it. T'Lan unfolded her tricorder again and leaned into the shaft.

"Here." Cole said, "I'll hold onto you." and he reached out and placed his hands on the sides of her waist.

"Thank you lieutenant commander. T'Lan replied, "But if you are attempted to prevent me from falling down the shaft then a tighter grip is advised. I suggest wrapping your arms around me entirely."

"Okay. But don't tell anyone I did this okay?" Cole said as he wrapped his arms around her, linking them together.

"If you wish." T'Lan replied and she bent forwards and held out her tricorder and began to scan.

"Well?" Cole asked, "Found anything?"

"I think I may have." T'Lan said, "There are traces of a chemical gel smeared on the far side of the turbolift shaft. Just beside the emergency handholds."

"So someone climbed up or down the shaft and painted the stuff on." Cole said, "Can you identify the compound?"

"It appears to be a chemical incendiary gel used by the Klingon Defence Forces." T'Lan said, "It is a type considered too bulky for use in weapons intended for use in oxygenated environments though, since it includes a high quantity of oxygen in its own chemical make up."

"So it doesn't actually need air to burn?" Cole asked as T'Lan straightened up.

"Precisely lieutenant commander. Its uses include forced entry into starships and undersea demolition. Had explosive decompression been tried while there was still a significant amount of the gel remaining to be burned then the fire would not have been extinguished."

"Robert if you're trying to get court martialled for sexual harassment then at least grope her somewhere worth it." King's voice suddenly called out from further up the shaft and as Cole and T'Lan both looked upwards they fell backwards and landed in a heap on the deck.

In the shaft King looked up at where Max was following him down.

"Think I startled them?" he asked.

"It appears so commander." Max replied and then both continued to descend the ladder.

"How about not doing stuff like that when T'Lan and I are in a position where we can plummet to our deaths?"

Cole said as he and T'Lan untangled themselves and got back to their feet.

"You wouldn't have fallen to your deaths." King replied.

"Oh and how do you know?" Cole called up the shaft.

"Max, care to explain?" King said, looking up at the Borg.

"Of course doctor. The artificial gravity is not yet functional in the shaft on the levels below where you are now." Max responded, "Air resistance would have slowed your descent adequately that even if you did impact the bottom it would have been at a slow enough velocity that your injuries would have been non-fatal."

"Non-fatal huh?" Cole said, "That does not sound encouraging Max."

"Why not lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked, "If your concern was about falling to our deaths then the knowledge that we could not have done so ought to be good news."

"Never mind T'Lan." Cole said, shaking his head.

Reaching the same level as Cole and T'Lan, King and Max stepped out of the shaft.

"So what do you have?" King asked.

"Our culprit appears to have access to military explosives." Cole answered and King frowned.

"What? In the turbolift shaft? So how come the entire side of the station didn't get blown out?" he then asked.

"The explosive compound used appears to have been an incendiary of Klingon origin." T'Lan replied.

"What about you two?" Cole asked, "What brings you down here to mess up my investigation?"

"Investigation? Is that what you kids are calling it nowadays?" King commented. Then in a more serious tone he added, "The emergency patients have been dealt with. Some have been transferred over to the *Nightfall* while the rest are still in the *Magellan's* sickbay. Our Emma is watching over them. Frankly I had to get away from her."

"Is there a problem with the EMH doctor?" T'Lan asked.

"Oh she's doing her job just fine." King told her, "But she appears to be developing the habit of humming opera to herself while she works. So I hope you two are pleased with yourselves." and he looked back and forth between Max and T'Lan.

"What about you?" Cole said, turning to Max, "Who are you avoiding?"

"No one commander." Max said, "But I have information that may be relevant to your investigation and I thought it wise to bring it to you directly."

"Go one then, let's hear it." Cole said.

"I was inspecting the *Magellan's* computer core to determine why the safety systems all failed so completely." Max replied.

"And why did they?" Cole asked.

"Because the subroutines controlling them all were deleted en masse right before the fire probably started."

Max answered and Cole's eyes widened.

"That should not be possible." T'Lan said.

"Anything's possible if you've got the right level of access." King pointed out.

"Yes and there's only one person aboard this station that ought to have that level of access." Cole said,

"Administrator Thom."



The away team returned to the *Nightfall* with Thom and found Captain Edwards waiting for them in the transporter room.

"Captain I must protest at this heavy handed treatment!" Thom snapped as he tried to tug his arms free of the grip Cole and Max had on them, "How dare you arrest me?"

"Mister Cole?" Edwards said, "Care to explain?"

"We didn't actually intend to arrest him captain." Cole answered, "We just asked him to accompany us back here to assist us with our enquiries."

"It was thought that he may be in danger if he remained on the *Magellan*." Max added.

"Danger? What utter nonsense. From who?" Thom demanded

"Whoever tried to destroy your space station." King said, "Commander Cole explained it all quite clearly in your office."

"He accused me of sabotaging my own space station!" Thom snapped.

"That is incorrect captain." T'Lan said, "The lieutenant commander merely informed the administrator that the damage inflicted on the *Magellan's* computer system could only have been carried out by someone with his level of access."

"I was assaulted." Thom said and he glared at T'Lan, "By her."

Edwards looked at T'Lan. Vulcans were known for their physical strength but it was still difficult to believe that T'Lan, who stood almost a quarter of a metre shorter than the administrator would have assaulted him. Not to mention the fact that as a Vulcan she was not prone to such outbursts of violence.

"The administrator pushed her." Cole said.

"At which point Lieutenant Commander Cole stepped in to try and rescue her." King added, "And he got pushed as well."

"That was when T'Lan restrained him with a nerve pinch long enough for Max and I to get hold of him." Cole said.

Edwards turned to the security guard standing by the transporter room door.

"Crewman, please escort administrator Thom to guest quarters and see that he remains there." he ordered.

Without speaking the crewman nodded and stepped forwards to take Thom from Cole and Max and escorted him from the room. Then Edwards looked back at the away team.

"So what do we know?" he asked.

"The fire was started in the turbolift shaft captain." Cole told him.

"And the safety system subroutines were all wiped from the main computer just before it started." Max added.

"How much of this have you discussed with the administrator?" Edwards asked.

"Almost nothing." Cole replied, "He knows that the computer was sabotaged, but that's about it. We thought that maybe if we brought Thom over here we could make use of his knowledge of the station, its crew and its systems without anyone else over there finding out what we were up to."

"Captain we need to try and determine whether any Klingon vessels may have been in the vicinity recently." T'Lan said.

"Klingons? We're a long way from Klingon space lieutenant." Edwards replied.

"I am aware of that captain. But the chemical residue I detected in the turbolift shaft could only have come from a Klingon explosive." T'Lan said and she held up her tricorder, "I have the evidence here."

"Yes I'm sure you do lieutenant." Edwards said, "Go to the bridge and liaise with West. Access the Federation navigational database and see how many Klingon ships you can locate."

"Don't forget that the *Magellan* has four runabouts assigned to it." Cole pointed out, "The Klingons didn't necessarily have to come and deliver the explosives in person."

"I will enquire as to whether any of the runabouts have been used recently." T'Lan said.

"Good. In the meantime I'll check in with Commander Carr regarding her search for a motive and I'd like Doctor King to review the casualty data to see if our arsonist managed to injure themselves. Then we'll all meet up in the observation room in thirty minutes. Any questions?"

"The away team has returned from the *Magellan* and I've sent repair teams over to start the clean up operation." Edwards said when he entered Carr's quarters.

"Have they found much?" Carr asked in reply.

"They've confirmed that the fire was started deliberately, identified the explosive used and determined that someone wiped all of the safety subroutines." Edwards told her.

"More than I've found then." Carr responded as they both walked over to the desk she had been working at.

"So these are the projects that the Magellan's research staff are working on then?" Edwards said as he read the list.

"These are the ones being worked on in the main station, yes." Carr answered, "There are more in the variously secondary stations but since none of them have been sabotaged yet I've been concentrating on these."

"And none of them look like targets for sabotage?"

"None captain. This really is research just for the sake of expanding our knowledge. There's nothing here that anyone could consider a threat. I mean would you be worried if someone else was working on ancient Iconian gateway technology while you were busy trying to understand transwarp beaming or Metalunan interocitor design?"

Edwards passed his hand above his head.

"I'm not even sure I understand any of what you just said." he replied and Carr frowned.

"I'm not sure I do either and that's what makes this so hard." she said, "I think that Max and T'Lan would be better suited to this. At least they'll understand more than one word in four. The only idea I can come up with is the possibility that maybe more than one researcher could have been up for the same research award and someone wanted to remove a rival."

Edwards frowned.

"Jealously seems like a somewhat outdated motive." he said, "Particularly given the people we're dealing with here."

"Maybe, but given the lack of any practical applications that someone may wish to sabotage for, that's all I could come with so far."

"Okay. Well I'm calling a staff meeting for us all to discuss what we've found. Maybe things will become clearer when we've got the whole picture and after that I'll be about having T'Lan take over from you and you can do something else."

"You know me captain, you can ask me to do anything." Carr said.

"Yuck. Child present." Nikki commented as she emerged from her bedroom.

"Having fun cousin?" Noyal asked as she joined T'Lan in standing by the operations console manned by West.

"Must I remind you not to refer to me as your cousin?" T'Lan responded, "We are not related and I am not as you put it here to have 'fun'."

"Of course not." Noyal said, "You only relax when you've been drugged." then she looked at West instead, "So what are you doing?"

"Tracking Klingon ships." West answered.

"Klingons? Why would those savages want to sabotage a research station?" Noyal asked.

"We don't think they did." West told her, "But they supplied the explosives."

"Explosives?" Noyal commented.

"I discovered traces of an incendiary gel in the turbolift shaft." T'Lan explained, "It is of Klingon origin."

"You do know that Klingon weapons are being supplied to groups in the Romulan civil war don't you?" Noyal said, folding her arms, "And what's left of my people's empire is much closer than the Klingons are."

"I thought the Klingons were keeping out of the Romulan civil war." West said.

"They are." T'Lan agreed.

"Officially maybe, but there are still some Klingon houses willing to help Romulans kill one another. Not to mention the weapons being supplied via intermediaries such as the Ferengi or the Orions."

"So we need to be looking for pretty much any non-Federation starship that's come within five light years of the station in the last month?" West said.

"Pretty much." Noyal replied.

Hunt looked around the *Magellan's* hangar bay where there were several small shuttlepods and three of the station's four runabouts docked. The fire had not spread as far as this hangar and it remained undamaged. With the main station's transporters off line because of the fire this was now the main hub for transit between it and the six outlying stations. For this task the smaller shuttlepods were being favoured since they were much easier to operate and required less maintenance than the warp capable runabouts. From Hunt's point of view this was a good thing because his plan required the use of a runabout and he could not afford to be interrupted before he was ready to launch.

One of the Magellan's support staff appeared from behind the closest runabout and a smile appeared on Hunt's face. Another important part of his plan was finding someone to pin the blame on and this man would do just nicely. Checking once more to see if anyone else was in a position to watch, Hunt darted across the hangar towards the runabout.

The crewman was standing in the open doorway, inspecting something just within the cockpit when Hunt rushed up behind him, grabbed hold of him and shoved him sideways, slamming him into the side of the

runabout with enough force that the impact of his head produced an audible 'Crack!' and he went instantly limp in Hunt's arms. Lowering the man to the deck of the runabout, Hunt checked that he was still breathing and that he had a pulse. A dead man was of no use to Hunt.

He dragged the unconscious man to one of the pilot's seats and sat him in it before locating an emergency survival kit that contained a reel of tape that he used to bind the man to the seat. Then from in his pocket Hunt took a small reel of optical fibre cable that terminated in a tiny clamp at one end and a sharp point at the other. Opening up an access panel under the flight control console Hunt used the clamp to connect the cable to a control line and then thrust the point into his own arm.

Then he grinned as one of the inactive consoles suddenly came to life and displayed the simple message 'CONFIGURING AUTOPILOT.'

The *Nightfall's* investigators, Captain Edwards, Carr, Cole, King, T'Lan, Max and West gathered in the observation room as agreed and they were joined by Nayal.

"If I may recap," Edwards began, "we know the fire was started deliberately and we know what sort of explosives were used. Now I've spoken with Lieutenant Commander Carr and she has been unable to find a motive from the list of research projects so I'd like to hear from the rest of you. Lieutenant T'Lan, please start."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied, getting to her feet and she approached the wall mounted display with a PADD and she used the device to bring up an image of a complex molecular structure, "This is the explosive compound used to start the fire." she said, "It is manufactured by the Klingons and it appears to be widely distributed."

"We are dealing with intelligent and well resourced people on the *Magellan*." Carr pointed out, "Is it possible that someone aboard the station made the explosives themselves?"

"No lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded, "Just like most major governments the Klingons include chemical tags that are designed to remain after the explosive has been used to allow the explosive to be traced should it fall into the wrong hands. This tag was present in the sample I detected, proving that the explosive was manufactured within the Klingon Empire."

"And how did it get aboard the *Magellan*?" Carr asked.

"We don't seem to be able to find that out," West said, "No ships have come close enough to the *Magellan* to transport the explosives aboard within the last three months and the station's runabouts haven't been used to ferry anyone beyond sensor range. Not much good for making a covert rendezvous."

"What about a cloaked ship?" King suggested.

"We're more than twenty light years into Federation space." Carr replied, "Even a cloaked ship would have difficulty penetrating this deep into our defences."

"So then West, you were in the Maquis. How would you have brought the explosive aboard?" Edwards asked.

"On one of the regular supply ships." West replied, "Bribe, intimidate or recruit one of the crew to the cause and have the explosives added to an otherwise innocent shipment that an agent aboard knew to expect."

"Thank you lieutenant." Edwards then said to T'Lan and he turned to Max, "What can you tell us about the sabotage of the safety systems."

"Approximately fourteen hours ago someone accessed the main computer core and erased every subroutine relating to damage control." Max replied, "I have attempted to determine who did this and from where, but the logs do not include any user or terminal ID."

"Could they have been spoofed?" Cole asked.

"No lieutenant commander, I think you misunderstand me." Max said, "There is no user or terminal ID at all and there never was."

"How is that possible?" Carr asked.

"It is not." T'Lan replied.

"I could perhaps manage it by direct injection of nanites into the computer to locate and physically erase the exact memory sectors of the hard drive." Max said, "But that would leave a distinct physical trace. What has happened in this case is that the data was erased normally, it still exists on the drive but is no longer addressed by the computer. It sees these sectors as empty."

"Did you repair the damage?" Edwards asked.

"No captain. I left that in the hands of the station staff." Max replied.

"You trust them to carry it out after what's happened?" Nayal asked.

"If the individual responsible for erasing the data wished to do so again I don't think that having Max carry out the reinstall would make any difference." Cole said.

"What about casualties?" Edwards asked, looking at King.

"More than two hundred in total." King answered, "That breaks down as forty-two dead and one hundred and ninety two injured. Most of these are from smoke inhalation, but there are a fair number of burn cases and some injuries sustained from secondary blasts and structural collapse. The worst of them are in the care of

our EMH but I was able to move some to our sickbay to spread the load. There are also a number of the *Magellan's* crew unaccounted for. I'm currently working on the assumption that they were trapped by the fire and we just haven't found their bodies yet."

At that point the intercom activated.

"Captain," Hamilton's voice said from the bridge, "someone is stealing a runabout from the *Magellan*."

"Red alert!" Edwards snapped, "Sound action stations."

7.

Rushing back onto the bridge, the *Nightfall's* command staff took their positions.

"Report." Carr said.

"A runabout left the *Magellan's* main hangar without permission and went straight to warp." Hamilton replied, "*Magellan's* traffic control indicates that it did not have clearance to launch and is not responding to hails."

"Why didn't you try and get it in a tractor beam?" Cole asked.

"No time." Hamilton responded, "It was away before the *Magellan* even reported the unauthorised launch."

"What's our status?" Edwards asked.

"Engineering reports warp drives ready in ninety seconds and hangar reports Charger and Drummer are ready to launch now." West replied.

"Launch them." Edwards ordered, "Have the rest of the squadron follow when ready."

"A full squadron of fighters to follow one runabout?" Carr asked.

"The runabout is limited to warp five. The fighters will be able to catch it easily." Edwards said, "But I'm keeping the *Nightfall* itself right here just in case its a ploy to divert us away from the *Magellan*. I want you to take one of our runabouts after it. Make sure your team is equipped for a boarding action."

"Yes captain." Carr replied and as she got up she looked at Cole, "Cole, you're with me." she added.

The first two Peregrine-class fighters rapidly caught up with the fleeing runabout and the pilots scanned their target.

"This is Charger. I have a positive identification on target. Vessel is travelling a steady warp four point nine and not attempting any action against us, though it is running with shields up."

"Try hailing it Charger." White ordered from the cockpit of his own rapidly closing fighter.

"Copy that Snowman." Charger responded and then White heard the hail that the other pilot broadcast,

"Attention pilot of runabout on my port side, you are in possession of a stolen craft and in violation of Federation shipping laws. Drop to impulse power and prepare to be boarded."

Snowman waited for a reply, though he suspected that there would be none. The pilot had not replied to the *Magellan's* hails so it was only to be expected that they would maintain their silence.

"Snowman he's not answering." Charger signalled.

"I'm in firing position and I have a lock.." Drummer added, "Do I have permission to engage?"

"Negative Drummer. Do not fire unless fired upon. Standard rules of engagement apply." White replied and he quickly considered his options. His fighters were under orders to intercept the runabout but not destroy it.

The presence of a dozen attack fighters easily capable of following the runabout wherever it went should have been enough to convince the pilot that they were not going to be able to escape but they seemed to be ignoring the fighters' presence entirely. Then as White's fighter closed in on the runabout and he began to lower his velocity to match his target's he had an idea.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman." he transmitted, "Standing by for tactical contact."

On the bridge of the *Nightfall* Nayal looked at Edwards.

"Tactical contact?" she asked, "What' does that mean?"

"It means that Lieutenant Commander White is insane." West commented.

"What? You mean none of your Maquis buddies ever tried it?" Hamilton asked her.

"No. They wanted to live." West replied.

"I still don't get it." Nayal said.

"Commander White is going to fly his fighter close enough to the runabout that their warp fields will converge." Edwards explained, "But because he has to close in on the runabout from behind he'll need to be moving faster than it in order to catch up."

Nayal's eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

"But if two unmatched warp fields come into contact they'll both fall apart." she said.

"And the warp drives of both ships will stall." Hamilton said, "Forcing both to sublight speed."

"And if the fighter remains at warp even a fraction of a second longer than the runabout then they'll smash right into one another." West said, "Destroying both and killing everyone on board."

"You were right." Nayal said to West, "He is insane. No wonder my people never conquered yours. Any Romulan pilot who attempted such a thing would be put to death for risking his ship like that."

"We only execute them if they fail." Hamilton said with a smile.

"An illogical and inaccurate statement Lieutenant Hamilton." T'Lan said from the science station, "The Federation does not operate the death penalty in peacetime and in this case the pilot involved would be dead."

"It was a joke T'Lan." Hamilton said.

"Oh." T'Lan said, "I did not realise."

"Don't worry T'Lan. It wasn't funny." West added.

T'Lan considered this for a moment.

"What would be the point of a joke if it was not funny?" she asked, "I do not understand you humans sometimes. You are quite illogical."

"Collision warning! Collision warning!" the computer of White's fighter warned as he neared the runabout. He was less than two hundred metres away now and at any moment the two vessels' warp fields would intersect one another with potentially disastrous consequences if he had miscalculated any of this manoeuvre.

Then his fighter suddenly lurched and almost every readout in the cockpit went red as the fighter's warp engines stalled. White found himself pushed back into the padding of his seat as the artificial gravity and inertial dampening systems failed to be able to match the tumbling of the fighter. White did not try to fight it at first, just letting his ship spin out of control. He knew that the other ships of his squadron would be maintaining a safe distance as they decelerated normally and that if he was going to collide with the runabout then it would already have happened so he simply waited while the warp field collapsed and the streaks visible outside his cockpit coalesced back into stars before he took hold of the controls again.

"Damage report." he said.

"Warp drive emergency shutdown completed." the computer told him, "Core integrity intact. Impulse drive and thrusters operational. Life support operational. Tactical systems operational."

"Okay." White said to himself, "Now let's see where that runabout's ended up."

Like White's fighter the runabout had tumbled as it dropped out of warp and it was still tumbling. A scan of the ship indicated that its warp drive had stalled and shut down just as the one one White's fighter had. But unlike White, the pilot of the runabout had done nothing to bring his craft under control or even brought his impulse drive on line. Cautiously, White closed in on the runabout to perform a closer inspection.

White's sensors told him almost the exact same things about the runabout that they had when it had been travelling at warp. There was a single occupant and the ship's shields were raised. The only change was that the runabout's warp core had performed an emergency shutdown and needed to be restarted. Getting closer to the runabout White was able to get a glimpse in through the cockpit viewports and he saw that the lights were still on but there were no signs of movement.

"Snowman to *Mersey*." White transmitted to the *Nightfall*'s runabout, "I have a visual on the stolen runabout's cockpit. There is no movement and I think that the pilot has been incapacitated."

"Understood Snowman. Our ETA is four minutes." Carr replied from the runabout.

"Be advised, target's shields are still raised." White added.

"Copy that Snowman. *Nightfall*, we'll need the code." Carr said.

Aboard the runabout *Mersey* Carr and Cole waited while the crew of the *Nightfall* requested the prefix codes from the *Magellan* that would allow them to remotely disable the other runabout's shields.

"*Mersey* this is *Nightfall*," West signalled to them, "I'm sending you the prefix codes now."

"Copy that *Nightfall*." Carr replied as she looked at the display in front of her and saw a list of command codes for the tumbling runabout.

"Can you get the thrusters on line?" Cole asked while Carr input the command codes so that she could control the other runabout using her console.

"I think so." she said and she looked out of the viewport at the other runabout just as there was a flare of light from one of its thrusters and Carr smiled, "There we go." she added and she fired the thrusters again, ending its uncontrolled spin.

"Great." Cole said, getting out of his seat, "Now just lower its shields and we'll beam over." and he joined the security guard waiting on the transporter pad at the back of the cockpit, drawing his phaser.

"Okay the shields are down and I've locked on to the other transporter pad." Carr told him.

"Energise." Cole said and Carr activated the transporter.

Cole and the security guard materialised on the transporter pad of the other runabout and both turned towards the pilot's seat, aiming their phasers at the occupant. But it was clear to see that the unconscious man had not been in control of the craft. Slumped forwards, only the tape wrapped around his torso that held him to the seat prevented him from falling from it. Holstering his phaser, Cole rushed forwards to check on the man.

"He's still breathing." Cole said, before tapping his combadge, "Cole to *Mersey*, medical emergency. I think we've been sent on a wild goose chase." and then he began to rip the tape away from the man.

"What's going on over there?" Carr asked.

"The pilot is a decoy." Cole told her, "He's out cold and taped to his seat. I'd say that whoever did this was hoping that we'd end up chasing the ship across the sector."

Back aboard the *Mersey*, Carr groaned and reached for the communications control.

"*Nightfall*, this is *Mersey*." she transmitted, "Things, err, things haven't gone quite to plan."

Hunt looked out of a viewport at where the *USS Nightfall* was still located close to the *Magellan*'s main station. He had hoped that the Starfleet cruiser would have set off in pursuit of the runabout taking Administrator Thom with it. That would have given him the opportunity to carry out the sabotage mission he had been assigned without needing to worry about either Starfleet or the one man who knew the station's systems better than anyone else. But Hunt had not considered the possibility that the *Nightfall* would be carrying a squadron of fighters. The small, heavily armed craft were normally based on planets or space stations but Akira-class cruisers were designed with large hangars precisely so they could operate as fighter carriers to boost their effectiveness as border patrol ships and it had bitterly disappointed Hunt when he had seen the fighter squadron scramble to go after the fleeing runabout and leave the *Nightfall* right where it was. All of a sudden Hunt became aware of a reflection in the viewport that appeared out of nowhere.

"Have I caught you on a lunch break?" The Girl asked.

"What are you doing here?" Hunt responded, looking back and forth to make sure that there was no one else around to witness her sudden arrival.

"I came to see how your mission was progressing." The Girl told him, "Might I remind you that it is of vital importance to us? The research being carried out here could allow the Federation to expose us."

"I know."

"Then why are you wasting time staring out of a window?" The Girl asked.

"I was waiting to see if that damned starship was going to leave." Hunt replied, "I rigged a runabout to look like someone was trying to get away from here."

"And you thought that Starfleet would just pack up and go running after it?"

"I hoped-" Hunt began, but he stopped mid sentence when The Girl suddenly slapped him and he stepped back in surprise, pressing a hand to his face where she had struck him.

"What sort of idiot are you?" she snapped and she turned to look out of the viewport, "I've encountered that ship before." she added, "It's crew have disrupted our operations on too many occasions. They aren't the sort to fall for stupid tricks like a runaway shuttle." then she turned back to face Hunt again, "Trust me, I meant it when I said that you ought not to fail me again. I vouched for you with the others but unless you bring me concrete results soon then I'll assign someone more competent to eliminate this station." and then she turned and began to walk away. However, after taking just three steps she looked back over her shoulder, "And you." she added and as she took another step The Girl simply vanished into thin air.

"He's what?" Edwards asked as he rubbed his forehead with his hand.

"He was tied to the seat with tape captain." Cole replied, "We've checked the rest of the ship and confirmed there's no one else aboard. He was definitely bound before the runabout launched and was probably unconscious before then."

"And what's his condition now?" Edwards said.

"He's alive but unconscious." Carr told him, "We've moved him back to the *Mersey* and we're about to take his runabout under tow. We should be back with you in about an hour."

"Very well." Edwards responded, "I'll alert Doctor King to prepare to receive another casualty and Max to be ready to check out that runabout. *Nightfall* out." then after shutting off the communication channel he looked at West, "Lieutenant, you're with me." he said, "I think it's about time that we spoke with Administrator Thom. Mister Hamilton, you have the bridge."

West followed Edwards to the turbolift and they headed straight for the quarters that had been assigned to the administrator. Outside the door stood a single security guard, his phaser holstered.

"Has he given you any trouble?" Edwards asked.

"No sir." the guard answered, "I haven't heard a thing from him."

"Very good." Edwards said, "Open the door please." and the guard opened the door.

"Captain Edwards?" Thom said, getting to his feet as the two Starfleet officers entered his quarters, "I was wondering how long I was going to be held here."

"Administrator Thom, it really is for your own safety." Edwards replied.

"Oh don't give me that nonsense. I'm starting to think that Doctor Hunt was right." Thom hissed.

"Right about what exactly administrator?" Edwards asked.

"Starfleet wants control of Science Station *Magellan* doesn't it? Just because we're a long way from the central worlds don't think that we haven't heard about how the outer colonies are being ignored."

West snorted.

"Trust me administrator, I've seen what happens when the Federation turns its back on its citizens and that's not what's going on now." she said.

"Oh and how would you know that young woman?" Thom asked.

"I was in the *Maquis*." West replied.

"The *Maquis* were wiped out before the war with the Dominion. You're far too young to have been a

member.” Thom said.

“A decade or so spent in cryogenic suspension tends to keep you looking youthful.” West replied.

“Administrator,” Edwards said, jumping in before he could be delayed further, “while you’ve been here one of your crewmen was assaulted and a runabout launched without permission. I think that someone was trying to lure us away from the *Magellan*. Can you think of anyone who would be able to override the lockouts on a runabout and launch it?”

“And wipe all of the damage control subroutines from your computer?” West added.

Thom sighed and sat back down, leaning back on the couch.

“Captain, the *Magellan* houses more than four hundred of the best and brightest scientific minds from across the Federation and almost all of them could probably manage what you’re suggesting. Plus there are a few youngsters amongst the scientists’ families who would delight in such mischief.”

“We’re looking at more than just a childish prank here administrator.” Edwards said, “Your station-”

“Yes, I realise that my station came close to being destroyed.” Thom replied, “That was why before your people brought me here I was collating the transit logs.”

“Transit logs?” Edwards commented.

“They’re the records of who moved between the *Magellan*’s different stations.” West said softly.

“Yes I know what they are.” Edwards responded, frowning.

“It occurred to me that whoever started the fire would want to make themselves scarce before the station’s fusion reactors exploded.” Thom explained, “So I was drawing up a list of everyone that either beamed off the station or took a shuttle in the hours before it started. Something your away team didn’t seem too bothered about in their haste to bring me here.”

“Administrator we’ve identified the explosive compound used to start the fire.” Edwards said, changing the subject, “It’s a Klingon type.”

“Klingon? But what explosives we have are all obtained through standard Federation channels.” Thom responded.

“I doubt that you’d have ordered any of this stuff anyway.” West said, “It’s not dual use. It’s only purpose is military demolition so no good for planetary surveys.”

“We need to know how it got aboard.” Edwards went on, “We’re guessing that it came in aboard a supply ship but we can’t say for certain which one.”

“Well I can’t help you with that from here.” Thom replied, “I need access to station records.”

“I’m willing to let you return to your station administrator.” Edwards said, “But I must insist that you take Lieutenant West and a security detail back with you. Whoever assaulted your crewman is still at large and you’re bound to be a target when they realise that you’re helping us.” then he looked at West, “Lieutenant, I want you to go over the station records with the administrator.”

“Am I looking for anything in particular captain?” she asked.

“How the explosives got aboard would be a good start.” Edwards said, “Check out the resupply records for anything that looks suspicious or names you recognise from your days in the Maquis.”

“Using a terrorist to catch a terrorist captain?” Thom asked and West scowled, but the angry response that Edwards feared she would deliver did not come.

a.

As the *Mersey* and White's fighter squadron entered the hangar through the doors to the rear of the *Nightfall's* saucer section Max waited close to the main launch door at the front and watched as the *Magellan's* runabout was brought into the hangar using the *Nightfall's* own tractor beam. According to Cole's report the runabout's systems appeared functional but bringing the ship back under its own power would have risked destroying any evidence left behind by whoever was responsible for its launch.

A pair of crewmen used hand signals to direct the hangar control staff located in a control room that overlooked the hangar until it was positioned just where Max wanted it and then after the runabout was lowered down to the deck the ceiling mounted tractor beam was shut off.

"No one is to approach this vessel until I give the all clear." Max announced as he approached the runabout and then he activated his combadge, "Hangar control this is chief engineer Maximilian. Be prepared to eject the runabout if I determine that it is a threat to the *Nightfall*. Do you understand?"

"Yes lieutenant. We'll keep the tractor beam on standby to deliver a negative pulse on your command." one of the control staff replied and then Max opened the hatch and stepped aboard the runabout.

The first thing that his Borg-enhanced vision noticed was the blood splatter on the door frame of the main hatch and a quick high resolution scan proved that it was human. Max guessed that the *Magellan's* crewman had been attacked in the doorway and that the blood belonged to him, but made a mental note to have the DNA of the blood checked to confirm this. Then he turned his attention to the pilot's station. The chair here still had large amounts of the tape used to bind the crewman stuck to it and hanging loose. But this did not interest Max – he wanted to inspect the control systems. At present the consoles were all blank, their ICARS displays inactive and according to Cole this was just how they had appeared when he had beamed aboard the runabout. Scanning the control surface with his enhanced vision Max saw numerous fingerprints on the touch panel but nothing to suggest that any particular print belonged to the culprit so he then took the decision to interface with the control system directly and he held out his arm in front of him, his hand clenched into a fist. From between his fingers a pair of flexible tubes suddenly emerged and attached themselves to the blank console. Using these tubes Max injected thousands of microscopic nanites into the runabout. Travelling physically through the runabout's flight systems these tiny machines scanned the state of every component, transmitting the results back to Max and allowing him to build a virtual model of the runabout in his mind, right down to the contents of the computer memory and it was here that he found what he was looking for.

The runabout's autopilot had been programmed recently, unsurprising given that the sole occupant when Cole had beamed aboard could not possibly have been in actual control of it. But there was more to how the runabout had behaved than a simple configuration of the autopilot. Someone had interfaced directly with the system just as someone had interfaced directly with the *Magellan's* computer to delete the damage control subroutines. This time however rather than remove control subroutines, commands had been added and this would leave a trail that Max could follow. Under normal circumstances the autopilot would have brought the runabout to a halt and lowered its shields when challenged by both the *Magellan's* flight controllers and White's fighter squadron so someone had to have overridden this feature.

As he had expected the requirement for the autopilot to halt when challenged had been removed and in its place was a subroutine that would keep the runabout flying without it. But this was not the only alteration that Max detected. Every legitimate change to the flight system was time stamped by the computer, but the change Max had just discovered lacked any data stamp at all and it was not the only subroutine to bear such an unstamped modification. More changes had been made to the navigational safety subroutines. These were a set of commands that studied the input from a variety of internal and external sensors and were intended to prevent the runabout from continuing to operate in conditions that threatened the survival of the ship or crew. The autopilot required a positive input from all of these to confirm that safe flight was possible and whoever had modified the system had clearly wanted the runabout to fly somewhere that would threaten its own or its occupant's survival and fortunately for Max the answer to where this was could still be found within the autopilot. The autopilot had been programmed to fly in a straight course at full speed as far as the nearest star system with a class M planet orbiting it. The runabout would then drop out of warp as close to the planet as possible and manoeuvre as if intending to land on the planet's surface. But at the critical moment during atmospheric entry the runabout's impulse engine would fire to accelerate it downwards. Even if the shields were able to withstand the heat generated by the friction between the runabout and the atmosphere they would be totally inadequate when it ploughed into the ground travelling at many thousands of kilometres per hour. To an observer it would appear that the pilot had attempted a risky manoeuvre to try and escape capture that had gone tragically wrong when in fact the autopilot had in effect destroyed the runabout deliberately.

The number of systems in place to prevent this from happening, meant that numerous control subroutines needed to be entirely rewritten and as Max inspected these he found yet more evidence of tampering that lacked the usual time and date stamps. But what was most telling was what the modified subroutines now actually did. Every single one of them had been replaced by instructions for the computer to call an entirely new set of subroutines that were capable of forcing it to carry out actions beyond its normal remit. This new code was a single block that had the look of having been uploaded all in one go and Max realised that the structure of this code was identical to code that he had seen before right here on the *Nightfall*.

"Max to Captain Edwards." he said as he disengaged from the computer and activated his combadge again, "I need to speak with you immediately. We have a major problem."

"What is it Max?" Edwards asked from the bridge.

"It's when something's about to go really wrong. But that's not important right now." Hamilton muttered.

"Not over a communication channel." Max replied, "I can't be one hundred percent certain that the system has not been compromised."

Cole frowned when he heard this.

"How could our communications have been compromised?" he asked.

"I am not saying that they necessarily have been." Max responded, "But I cannot discount the possibility. Therefore I suggest that all senior officers gather in the observation lounge in ten minutes."

"Oh very well." Edwards said, "But West is on the Magellan and I don't want to interrupt her."

"That should not be a problem captain. I will meet you in ten minutes." Max said and then the channel went dead.

At this point Hamilton looked round from the helm station.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said.

Doctor King was the last of the *Nightfall's* command staff to arrive in the observation room to hear Max deliver his findings.

"Is this going to take long?" he asked.

"Probably not." Max replied, "But I need to ask everyone to deactivate their combadges."

"Max are you serious?" Carr asked.

"Even to me it sounds paranoid." Noyal added, referring to the well known Romulan trait of near universal suspicion.

"It would ensure that no one can listen in on this briefing." Max replied, "I have already determined that there are no active communication devices in this room other than those we have brought with us."

"So what if someone needs to contact us?" Shry asked.

"The nanite hive will inform me of any attempt to communicate with us." Max answered.

"Do as he asks." Edwards said, removing his combadge and deactivating it. Then one by one the other officers gathered together did the same.

"So what's wrong Max?" Heart asked.

"I have identified our foe." Max announced and the others just stared at him, "Not an individual mind you," he continued, "but I have been able to identify their allegiance conclusively."

"How have you achieved this?" T'Lan asked, "Until recently we had no evidence at all."

"The modifications to the runabout from the Magellan were coded in a very peculiar fashion." Max explained, "One that I have seen before."

"You mean it's Starfleet?" Hamilton asked, "Do you suspect one of our own crew?"

"No Mister Hamilton." Max replied, "But my previous encounter with code of this style was here on the *Nightfall*. It was uploaded to our computer by Sonia Green." and there were gasps from around the table.

"You mean that damned walking corpse?" King said with a scowl.

Sonia Green had masqueraded as a representative of the Federation helping to process Romulan refugees fleeing from their civil war. In truth she had been an agent of an unknown power that apparently used reanimated corpses enhanced with the same synthetic flesh that Max and T'Lan had used to create a physical body for Emma. When she had come aboard the *Nightfall* she had attempted to sabotage the ship from within both by infecting its computer system with a virus and also by launching a physical assault with a small unit of fleshforms.

"Correct doctor." Max replied, "This may explain why no user or terminal ID was stored in the *Magellan's* computer when the damage control routines were deleted. We have witnessed these agents attempt to interface their bodies with our technology before."

"That Romulan in engineering." Edwards commented, recalling their first encounter with this mysterious force.

"As I remember captain, he just appeared on the ship." Carr pointed out.

"Yes he did." Edwards replied and he looked at Cole, "Mister Cole, I'll need you to organise regular security sweeps. Captain Heart, Captain Shry, if you don't mind I'd like your men to join the security patrols."

Both Heart and Shry nodded.

"You can count on us captain." Shry said.

"Just in case the ship has already been infiltrated and our systems sabotaged I have instructed the nanite hive to undertake a full investigation of every piece of equipment they are connected to." Max added.

"How long will that take?" Nayal asked.

"A full search will take approximately two hours." Max answered.

"Doesn't seem like long to me. After all, that's a lot of equipment to review." King commented.

"Indeed doctor, but bear in mind that unlike a normal computer self diagnostic we are using tens of millions of nanites to check everything at once." T'Lan explained and King nodded.

"I see." he said.

"Of course this makes the search more complicated." Edwards said, "West and Administrator Thom are searching the station records now for evidence of anyone who wanted to get away from the central station in a hurry right before the fire and may have been able to smuggle explosives aboard. Now we know that we're dealing with these – these, what are we calling them anyway?"

"Zombies?" Hamilton suggested.

"Oh we are not calling them zombies." Carr said.

"Why not?" Hamilton asked, "They're the walking dead from what we can tell."

"But there's no evidence that you'll turn into one if they bite you." Cole responded.

"Has anyone been bitten by one yet for us to tell?" White asked.

"We are not calling them zombies." Edwards said sternly, "That's a command decision. Now as I as saying, knowing what we are facing means we have to accept that whoever started the fire could have simply transported themselves off the station without requiring the use of either its transporter system or a shuttle. Since we've no idea how far they can transport themselves it also means that our culprit could also have potentially transported themselves to somewhere that they could obtain the explosives from without needing a starship to deliver them to the *Magellan*."

"Are we assuming that we're only after a single individual?" Shry asked.

"There's no way of knowing." Carr pointed out, "We've encountered small groups of them co-ordinating actions before now."

"Plus if they can come and go at will then we've no way of knowing where their cover identity is based." Cole commented, "It could be a cook on one of the smaller stations just as easily as a researcher or engineer on the main one."

"On the other hand there is now a scientific method for detecting them." T'Lan added.

"Necrotic tissue." King added with a grin, "Every single sample we've taken from a recovered body has shown signs of decay."

"Conducting medical examinations on thousands of scientists doesn't sound terribly efficient to me." Heart said.

"I don't need to test the entire crew." King replied, "If I can get access to the *Magellan's* medical records I can check up on who hasn't been examined by their medical staff recently. I'll start with them to try to find our zombie." and Hamilton smiled.

"Doctor, the captain indicated that we are not to refer to them as zombies." T'Lan commented.

"That was a command decision lieutenant." King replied, "So in the absence of a superior term I'm taking the medical decision to use the term 'zombie'."

"Unfortunately as chief medical officer he has that right." Carr said, sighing.

"Very well." Edwards said, "Commander Cole will co-ordinate with Captains Heart and Shry to arrange anti-intruder patrols. But I also want a security detail ready to beam across to the *Magellan* with Doctor King. If our culprit gets wind of what we're up to then its likely that they'll target him. For now we'll leave Lieutenant West checking station records, but we need to let her know about our new information just in case she comes across anything. Remember though, don't use any communication network until it's been confirmed as secure. That means that for now we'll be relying messages directly. Any questions? No, good. Then let's get to work."

Carr was about to call out to her daughter upon entering their quarters when she noticed that the computer terminal had an open communication window on it.

"Nikki? Nikki are you here?" she called out.

"Here." Nikki replied as she appeared in the doorway to her bedroom.

"Why is the communicator on?" Carr asked, pointing to the device.

"Dad still hasn't called so I figured I try calling him." Nikki replied.

"Nikki you know you ought to ask before opening up a subspace link."

"It doesn't matter anyway. He's not answering. It's like he doesn't care."

"Oh now don't say that." Carr said, despite thinking the exact same thing herself, "Look, your father's probably just got the time difference between him and us wrong. He'll call." and then she headed for the

drawer containing her phaser again, "I need to head back over to the Magellan." she added, "And I need you to promise me that you'll stay put. Don't leave our quarters. Understand?"

"Why not mom?" Nikki asked, "A while ago you wanted me to beam over to the space station."

"Well something's come up and now I need to know that you're safe."

"Safe? Is the ship in danger?" Nikki exclaimed.

"Maybe. I don't know. Look, just stay here and I'll be back as soon as I can be." Carr replied as she holstered her phaser at her waist. Then she turned to leave, pausing on her way out to deactivate the communicator and turning to Nikki one last time, "And no more making use of the subspace communication system without permission." she added.

3.

There were PADDs scatter around Administrator Thom's office when Carr arrived there with a pair of security guards from the *Nightfall*.

"Commander, is there a problem?" West asked as she looked up from one of the PADDs.

"A big one." Carr responded, closing the door leading back to the command centre. Then she looked at

Thom, "Administrator," she continued, "We have reason to believe that one of your crew is an imposter."

"An imposter? But every one of my researchers has the best possible credentials." he replied, shocked.

"Credentials can be forged." West pointed out.

"And people can be impersonated." Carr added, "Administrator, over the last year the *Nightfall* has encountered agents of an unknown group that have demonstrated the ability to infiltrate almost any facility undetected. We've even found them impersonating Federation officials."

"Oh no." West interrupted, "Not them again." and Carr nodded.

"I'm afraid so." she said as West drew her phaser, adjusted the setting to a lethal level and then returned it to her holster.

"What's that for?" Thom said, straightening up in his chair when he saw what she did.

"Stun settings don't work on who we're dealing with administrator." West answered and then she looked at Carr "How come no-one told me before now?" she asked.

"Max was concerned that our communications could have been compromised." Carr told her, "So the captain sent me to tell you in person. He also sent me to ask for your help administrator."

"What do I need to do now?" Thom replied.

"Oh nothing much." Carr said, "But our medical officers need to conduct an examination of all of your crew."

"But that's thousands of people." Thom exclaimed.

"It's just a simple tissue test." Carr said, "It won't take long to conduct each one and the sooner they can start the sooner we'll be done."

"How am I supposed to explain it?" Thom then asked, "Won't whoever you're after know that you're on to them?"

"Possibly." Carr replied, "I can let Doctor King come up with a cover story. All I need from you is permission to carry out the tests."

Thom sighed.

"Oh very well." he said.

"Thank you administrator." Carr said. Then she looked at West again, "In the mean time you need to expand your search to cover anything that may relate to the activity of one of these agents." she told her.

"Oh great." West responded, frowning, "That just means I need to figure out how one of them would behave."

King laid out the instruments needed for the test. In theory it was simple, a surface scrapping would be taken from inside the subject's mouth and the cells scanned for signs of necrosis, that is to check whether they were living cells or had been reanimated. The test required only two pieces of equipment, one to painlessly take the sample and the other to scan it. As he laid out the equipment his medical staff gathered around him.

"I trust you all know what you're doing?" he said, glancing around and he noticed that while his staff were nodding back at him in confirmation that they did know, Emma had raised her hand and was waving it around, "You don't need to make such a song and dance out of it." King said.

"Out of what?" Emma asked.

"Attracting my attention." King answered, "I can see you perfectly well. Starfleet may have brought me out of retirement to take up my post, but I'm neither blind nor senile yet."

"I wasn't singing or dancing commander." Emma replied, "I'm just still trying out my new body that's all."

"Well don't." King said sternly, "The last thing I need you doing is messing about while you ought to be working. Now do you know what you're doing?"

"No commander. I have not been briefed on this procedure yet." Emma replied.

"Fine." King said and he held up one of each of the instruments he had brought with him, "Take a sample from inside the subject's mouth with this and test it with this." he said, "Then if you get a positive result, necrotic tissue in this case, copy the results back to the *Nightfall*. But for God's sake don't let on to the subject about what you've found. Just let them go and leave it to security and the ground troops to deal with. We're doctors not police."

"Excuse me doctor," one of the nurses present said, "but why not have security accompany us."

"Because if this looks like a security operation then whoever we're after is going to escape. Oh and another thing, none of you use your combadges for anything other than basic communication. Lieutenant Maximillian hasn't verified that they are secure yet." King replied, "Now all of you should have your lists of who to test

and where they ought to be.”

“What do we say is the reason for this test if asked commander?” Emma asked.

“Our cover story is that the fire damaged the replicator system and that there could be chemical contamination of the drinking water.” King answered.

It was then that Carr arrived in the *Magellan's* sickbay.

“Okay doctor, you're on.” she said.

“So the administrator agreed?” King replied and Carr nodded.

“He's putting the word out now,” Carr said, “and the computer will update you all on the locations of your test subjects. So if they do a sudden disappearing act, you'll know about it.”

Hunt sat at his computer, alone in his quarters. He had no real need to use the primitive interface that the original Doctor Philip Hunt had been forced to by the limitations imposed on him by his crude physiology but to make use of his ability to directly connect himself to the computer would raise far too many questions should he be discovered. Therefore, security took priority over efficiency. Hunt's aim was simple, he needed to know just how extensive the damage the fire had caused was. The *Magellan* remained intact and Hunt knew that the researchers he was targeting remained alive, but many of the labs had been gutted by fire and if the relevant lab had already been destroyed then his job would get a whole lot easier.

The problem was that the Starfleet engineers from the *USS Nightfall* were taking the lead in the repair operation and they were not bothering to update the *Magellan's* computer on their findings as they happened. However, there were still ways that Hunt could estimate the damage by viewing some of the other station systems. The equipment being used by the Starfleet repair teams still required power and Hunt was able to access the power distribution net to see where that power had been going. The more power going to a particular section of the station, the more damage needed to be repaired. So far the laboratory that Hunt had been trying to destroy had required no more power than any inactive area of the station would consume. But all this meant was that the repair teams had not yet reached it to begin their repairs. The idea that it was totally undamaged was too far fetched to be considered.

A chiming sound alerted Hunt to someone at the door to his quarters and he quickly turned off the computer display. Just because he was using the computer in a mundane manner did not mean that he wanted anyone to see what he was actually using it for after all.

“One moment.” he called out before adding, “Who is it?”

“I am from the *USS Nightfall's* medical staff.” Emma's voice replied from the other side of the door, “I need to check you for the effects of contaminated water.”

“Contaminated water? I don't understand.” Hunt responded.

“The replicator system was damaged by fire. We believe that the station's water supply has been affected as a result.” Emma explained from the corridor, “Station Administrator Thom is supposed to have informed everyone that they are to be tested.”

Hunt turned back to his computer and reactivate the display. In the corner he saw a note informing him that he had received a message that he had not bothered checking while he was busy with his mission. Quickly he opened up the messaging system and saw that it was indeed from the administrator and had the subject 'Medical examination of crew.'

“I'm coming,” he said as he turned off the display again and went to open the door, prepared to react if it turned out to be a trap. However, when the door opened it revealed only Emma standing in the corridor alone, clutching her medical kit.

“May I come in?” she asked.

“Of course.” Hunt replied.

“Thank you. Please take a seat, This won't take very long.” Emma said and as Hunt sat down she placed her medical kit on a nearby table, accidentally knocking over a glass as she did so, “Oh clumsy me.” she said, “Let me just clean this up.” and she began to pick up some of the larger pieces with her hands.

“Actually I'm rather busy.” Hunt said impatiently, “I need to find out how much of my work has been lost so its probably best if you just carry out your test and I'll clean that up after you've gone.”

“What? Oh very well then.” Emma replied, “Now open your mouth. This won't hurt a bit. Or so I'm told anyway.” and she held out the probe to take the tissue sample.

Hunt opened his mouth and leant his head back. The idea of allowing this woman from Starfleet, he had no idea of her true identity, concerned him somewhat but at the same time refusing to follow her instructions was quite possibly the easiest way to attract unwanted attention. Then he saw something that made him change his mind. When Emma had started to clear away the broken glass from the table she had accidentally cut the side of her hand and the skin there was split open. But rather than the crimson blood humans had running through their veins that ought to have been leaking out through the wound there was nothing and the tissue visible was a familiar milky white colour.

“So your the more efficient version I was warned to expect then are you?” he asked, referring to The Girl's threat to replace him when Emma withdrew the probe and she smiled.

"Why yes I am." she replied, "How did you know?"

"Your hand." Hunt told her, pointing to the wound, "I'd cover that up if I were you."

"What? Oh yes. I thought I noticed something odd." Emma said, looking at the wound closely, "I'm still not used to this body. I suppose it's only to be expected though when you've got used to being nothing but a virtual intelligence."

"Tell me about it." Hunt commented, "But tell me one thing. How did you manage to get into Starfleet. I thought their security was too stringent for us to penetrate."

Emma frowned.

"I don't know what you mean." she replied.

"Who sent you here?" Hunt asked, "Who are you?"

"Doctor King ordered me here." Emma replied, "Surely you know that. I'm the *Nightfall's* EMH. People call me Emma."

"An EMH?" Hunt exclaimed as he began to realise that he had just made a terrible and potentially fatal mistake, "But there are no holoemitters in here."

"Of course not. The *Nightfall's* chief engineer and science officer made me this body. Isn't it amazing?" Emma said and that was when Hunt struck.

He lashed out at Emma's throat, delivering a blow that would have briefly knocked the windpipe of a humanoid out of place. But in his haste he had overlooked the fact that Emma did not share a human's internal physiology. Fortunately for Hunt though, Emma was so startled at being attacked that she did not respond before he was able to reach out and grab hold of a heavy scientific probe that he had left next to his computer terminal and swung it at Emma's head.

There was a dull 'thunk' as the probe struck her on the side of her head and Emma staggered sideways as she tried to process the unfamiliar information that was being relayed from her physical body back to the computer in the *Nightfall's* sickbay where her program was stored.

Finally Emma reacted, reaching out to try and take hold of Hunt's improvised weapon. Her programming included sections on dealing with violent patients and disarming them was a key part of this. But in focusing on the probe Emma left herself exposed to attack and Hunt kicked at her leg. Hitting Emma's knee from the side, the EMH suddenly felt her leg collapse beneath her. Still not used to being housed in a physical body, Emma was unable to stop herself falling backwards, however she kept hold of Hunt's wrist and dragged him down with her.

Releasing his grip on the probe with one hand, Hunt then elbowed Emma under her jaw. Once again the blow was based around what he knew of the vulnerabilities of organic bodies but the blow made Emma's head jerk backwards and strike the floor of Hunt's quarters. The impact struck the point where the antenna linking Emma's body with the *Nightfall's* computer reached the surface of her head, pushing it back into her skull. The force of this cracked the component internally and the data feed from her body became disrupted. Instead of a continuous flow of information, now Emma's program received only bursts of incomplete data and it became much harder for her to follow what was happening around her.

She tried throwing a punch back at Hunt, but the communication disruption worked both ways and it took longer than it ought to have to set up the blow, a delay in which Hunt was able to roll aside, using his weight to rip the probe free of Emma's grip as she punched thin air beside his head. Hunt then brought the probe down, hitting Emma's forehead and slamming the back of her head against the deck once more. The already cracked antenna now split entirely, reducing the rate of data transfer even further to the point where Emma could barely perceive what was going on or move in reaction to this.

Snarling, Hunt swung the probe in a sideways arc, striking the side of Emma's head and there was a 'Crack!' as the bundle of data lines that ran down her artificially constructed spine were severed. Gathered together with the information carrying optical fibres necessary for Emma to control her body were the wires that carried the power from her internal energy cells to the data link inside her skull and it shut down. The connection to the *Nightfall's* EMH program abruptly severed, Emma's body went limp and lay still.

Now Hunt had another problem. Though Emma had never been truly alive, her inactive body was as much evidence of his guilt as a flesh and blood corpse would have been and he needed to find a way of disposing of it quickly.

"Anything to report doctor?" Carr asked when King returned to the *Magellan's* command centre. She was leant over the same control console that had earlier shown the progress of the fire through the station but that was now being used to monitor the progress of the repair teams.

"Nothing." King replied, glancing around to ensure that none of the *Magellan's* control staff were in ear shot before he continued. The staff on duty had already been tested to ensure that they were who they were supposed to be and cleared, but Administrator Thom was the only member of the station's crew that had been trusted with information about why the medical tests were really being carried out. Making the information more widely available not only risked alerting the enemy agent that the Starfleet crew was on to them but could also cause a panic amongst the crew, "All my tests revealed was that the crew members on

my list were perfectly human, Vulcan, Andorian or whatever. Plus some bad halitosis in a few cases.” and he waved his hand in front of his face and smiled.

“Well so far none of your staff have found anything suspicious either.” Carr said, “And by my reckoning you're due a break.”

“You are as well.” King replied, “Perhaps I ought to order you back to the *Nightfall*. Both as someone who outranks you and as chief medical officer.”

“Frankly I'd rather stay here. It's less daunting.” Carr said.

“Something bothering you lieutenant commander? Because I can replicate a bottle of whisky for us to share if you want. I'm sure you'd rather share a bottle of Romulan ale with the captain of course but-” King said, halting when Carr looked up and scowled at him, “Okay, only offering to help.” he said, raising his hands defensively.

“Just do me a favour and ask whoever's filling in for West at ops whether they've put a call through to Nikki would you?” Carr asked.

“To Nikki?” King asked and Carr sighed.

“Stuart is supposed to be calling to wish her a happy birthday. ”

“Stuart? Oh, Nikki's father. Your ex.”

“Exactly. But the selfish bastard seems to have forgotten.” Carr said, frowning again, “I swear sometimes its like he's decided to forget she exists and I don't need the hassle. Especially not today when I'm up to my neck in trouble without him.”

“I'll see if anything's happened.” King said, smiling in a friendly manner and then he tapped his combadge, “King to *Nightfall*, one to beam over.” he said and just seconds later he was transported away.

At that moment the door to the administrator's office opened and both he and West emerged.

“Any news on the search?” West asked as she approached Carr and stood on the opposite side of the console.

“None.” Carr replied, shaking her head, “I've just sent Doctor King back to the ship.”

“Is that wise?” Thom asked quietly, looking around the command centre, “Surely he ought to be helping with the testing.”

“He's finished testing everyone on his list administrator.” Carr said, “I'd rather have him rested if there's an emergency than dead on his feet because I made him do the work of someone else as well.”

“So how many are left to be tested?” West asked and Carr picked up a PADD that was resting on the console.

“Looks like most of the medical staff have almost finished.” she said and then she frowned.

“What's wrong?” West said when she noticed the change in Carr's expression.

“According to this list Emma hasn't run a single test in more than twenty minutes.” Carr answered, “But according to Doctor King those tests take no more than five or ten at the most.”

“Do you think something's happened to her?” West said.

“I hope not.” Carr said, “But I suppose I ought to find out what's going on.” and she tapped her combadge, “Carr to Emma, report your status.”

“-Report your status.”

Hunt heard the transmission just as he was dragging Emma's artificial body across the corridor to where he had been able to trick the door to a set of quarters that had belonged to a researcher Hunt knew had perished in the fire into opening. He intended to abandon Emma's body there before overloading the locking mechanism on the door to prevent it from being opening again. The problem was that Emma's combadge would allow the *Nightfall*'s crew to track her location and they would quickly discover the body, if not Hunt himself if they acted quickly.

Picking up speed, Hunt dragged the body out of the corridor and then closed the door behind him before turning his attention to the combadge.

“Emma this is Lieutenant Commander Carr. Respond.” Carr's voice said from the combadge as Hunt plucked it from Emma's chest and tossed it onto the deck. Then before Carr could try to make contact with her again he brought his heel down on the device as hard as he could, repeating the motion until the combadge was completely smashed.

Then he returned to the door. The panel beside it had already been removed from the wall to expose the circuitry behind and Hunt reached in and touched two control lines together to open the door. Then using his foot as a block, he touched another two lines together and the door tried to slid shut but stopping when it hit Hunt's foot. Only when Hunt dived through the doorway, removing his foot as he did so could the door finally close and Hunt smiled as he heard the reassuring ‘fizz’ of overloading electronics.

Returning briefly to his own quarters across the corridor he opened up a drawer to reveal a Klingon manufactured disruptor pistol that he removed and tucked under his shirt before leaving again.

"Oh this is useless." Carr said in frustration before tapping her combadge once again, "*Nightfall*, this is Lieutenant Commander Carr. I need to speak with T'Lan."

"T'Lan here lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.

"T'Lan, do you have any idea how long the power cell inside that body you and Max made for Emma will last?" Carr asked.

"You think her battery just died?" West said.

"It's a possibility." Carr replied.

"Lieutenant Maximillian and I have not had the opportunity to test the exact interval between chargings lieutenant commander. But we did make some preliminary calculations based on the known efficiencies of the purely Federation technologies used in the body's construction."

"Okay, so how long?" Carr asked.

"I must remind you that this is only a-

"Just give me your best guess T'Lan." Carr interrupted.

"Sixty-eight hours, fourteen minutes and twenty-seven seconds." T'Lan answered.

"That's approximate?" West said.

"At least she didn't include any milliseconds." Carr commented. Then she returned her attention to the still open communication channel, "T'Lan is there any chance that Emma's power cell could have run out by now?"

"No lieutenant commander. For the body to have depleted its energy reserves since being first activated it would have to have suffered severe damage to either the energy cell itself or one of the larger electrical systems." T'Lan told her.

"Then we've got trouble." Carr said.

"What sort of trouble Grace?" Edwards asked from the *Nightfall*, accidentally using Carr's first name.

"I can't raise her sir." Carr replied, "And according to the test results I'm getting over here she stopped carrying out her share some time ago."

"Captain perhaps if I were to beam over to the *Magellan* I could help locate her." T'Lan said to Edwards, "I am familiar with the materials used to construct the body after all."

"Okay go." Edwards replied, "But take Cole with you. If anything has happened to the EMH's body then I don't want the same thing happening to you."

"Of course not captain, your suggestion is logical." T'Lan said. Then as she and Cole left the bridge Edwards addressed Carr again.

"Okay commander, T'Lan and Cole are on their way. You keep searching for the agent and they'll track down the EMH. In the mean time I'll warn Doctor King that she's missing. *Nightfall* out."

"Henry put that camera down." the woman stood beside the table filled with food said.

"Why?" King's voice asked from behind the camera.

"Because all you're doing is filming us all." the woman replied and the camera turned to show a group of small children playing in a nearby sandpit while an older child just looked on while eating an ice cream.

"Well since Starfleet has decided to send me to the other side of the Federation I want something to remind me of you all." King said.

"You didn't have to sign up again dad." another voice said from off camera, "Now come and have something to eat and I'll take some pictures of you and mum together."

King paused the playback of the hologram that floated in the air of his quarters when his combadge activated.

"King here." he said.

"Doctor, Edwards voice said, "we may have an issue with the EMH."

King frowned and sighed.

"I knew it." he said, "I knew that those two building her a body would go wrong. Has she freaked out or something? Because I'd rather not have that idiot Mackey anywhere near her."

"No one knows where she is doctor." Edwards said and King's eyes widened.

"What?" he exclaimed.

"Carr says that the EMH hasn't checked in and has apparently stopped carrying out her share of the tissue tests. I've sent T'Lan and Cole over to the *Magellan* to try and find her.

"Hold on a moment captain." King said as he got to his feet, "I need to check something in sickbay. I'll call you back as soon as I'm done." and he tapped his combadge to deactivate it before rushing from his

quarters.

King ran all the way to sickbay, startling the single nurse on duty as he burst in through the doorway.

"Doctor King," she exclaimed, "What's the matter?" but King just held up his hand for her to be quiet.

"Computer!" he snapped between deep breaths, "Activate the emergency medical hologram."

"Please state the medical emergency." Emma said as she appeared in the middle of sickbay, once again in holographic form. Then she frowned, "He hit me." she said, "He used that probe to beat me until I – I – What's the equivalent of losing consciousness for me?"

King smiled and activated his combadge.

"King to bridge. I think I've just solved your mystery. The EMH is right here with me in sickbay."

"Doctor Hunt? I don't believe it." Administrator Thom said when the news was transmitted to the *Magellan*, "I've known the man for years."

"How well?" Carr asked.

"Well, just professionally actually. He never really mixed much, but that's not too uncommon around here." Thom answered.

"It's possible he was human when he first arrived here and was only replaced more recently." West said.

"Computer locate Doctor Philip Hunt." Carr said.

"Personnel location function is off line due to system damage." the *Magellan's* computer responded.

"Oh great. That means we need to do this the old fashioned way." Carr said, drawing her phaser and she looked around at West and the two security guards still standing close by, "With me." she told them, "We're going on a manhunt."

"So we're looking for Doctor Hunt?" Cole said when Carr contacted him, "Isn't he the guy we pulled out of the closet?"

"I know, we could have had him right then." Carr replied, "It likely explains why he didn't want Doctor King examining him."

"Okay, T'Lan and I will head towards command to—" Cole began before Carr interrupted him.

"No." she said, "Keep looking for Emma's body. We'll take care of Hunt. Carr out."

"Lieutenant commander," T'Lan then said to Cole, "I suggest we begin by searching the area surrounding Doctor Hunt's quarters. It is logical to assume that after disabling the EMH's body, he would have attempted to dispose of it close by."

"Okay, but stay behind me T'Lan." Cole replied, drawing his phaser, "The good doctor could be lying in wait to ambush us and I'd rather nothing bad happened to you."

"Why is that lieutenant commander?" T'Lan asked "I have never noticed you prevent your own subordinates from entering dangerous situations. What makes me so different."

"Just stay behind me okay?" Cole repeated, "I can make it an order if you want lieutenant."

"No lieutenant commander, that will not be necessary." T'Lan answered.

Hunt was not in his quarters as the Starfleet officers closed in on them. In fact he had been able to bypass both Cole and T'Lan and also Carr, West and the two security guards to make his way all the way to the *Magellan's* command centre and as the doors opened he stepped inside and drew his disruptor.

The first blast he fired was aimed not at any of the startled station command staff present but instead at the control panel for the only other door providing an exit from the command centre, not counting the one that led only to the administrator's office. As this exploded, sealing the door shut he turned his weapon back towards the doorway he had just come through and fired again to seal the only remaining escape route and only then did he start to fire on the command staff.

Had this been a Starfleet vessel or space station there would have been security staff armed with phasers on hand to resist Hunt's unexpected assault. But as it was not one of his victims was armed with any sort of weapon and with their only escape routes already cut off all that was left to them to do was cower behind their duty stations in the hope that Hunt would not notice them as he walked around and calmly fired on everyone present.

"Hunt! What are you doing?" Thom called out, but all that Hunt did in reply was turn the disruptor on the station administrator, killing him instantly.

One of the command staff ran to the communications console, where the operator was already dead and slumped forwards across the panel. But as she pulled the body aside Hunt saw what she was trying to do and targeted her. The first shot hit the side of the woman's head but Hunt did not stop firing, instead firing the disruptor at the console as well to prevent any other surviving crew from trying to raise the alarm. Any of the other consoles could be altered to carry out a communication function, but this would take enough time that Hunt would be able to deal with anyone trying it.

Out of desperation the final two members of the command staff ran for one of the exits, hoping that they would be able to override the damaged mechanism and escape. But Hunt turned towards them quickly and

cut down the first of them while he was still dashing across the open while the second made it as far as the door only to be shot while trying to determine how bad the damage was.

Hunt then paused, looking around the command centre with his disruptor still in his hand as he searched for any signs of life. Then once he was satisfied that he was now alone in the command centre he tucked the disruptor into his belt and then walked over to the tactical console.

Though not intended as a military starbase, Science Station *Magellan* was equipped to defend itself and possessed not only deflector shields but also several phaser arrays. There were also several weapon systems mounted on some of the smaller stations that were part of various experiments, but these were controlled separately and so Hunt would have to make do with just the primary defences. Access to these systems was typically restricted but to Hunt this meant nothing as he produced the interface cable he had used to connect to the runabout and hooked it and himself up to the tactical console. The security lockouts were easily bypassed and the console indicated that all of the *Magellan's* defensive systems were now available at Hunt's command. He had no need of this console however, preferring to maintain control over the defences using his direct interface. Despite the fire earlier, the *Magellan's* shields and phasers were all fully functional and Hunt began bringing them on line. The targeting of the phasers was done automatically, but Hunt knew that the change in sensor output while conducting a targeting sweep would be easily detectable to the *USS Nightfall's* crew and so Hunt instead opted to aim them manually. The drawback to this was that they would not track the Starfleet cruiser as it moved relative to the station and so would require constant updates, but by making use of his direct interface rather than the tactical console Hunt could perform these updates in a fraction of the time.

Finally when he had all of the *Magellan's* phasers trained on the *Nightfall*, Hunt turned his attention to the deflector shields.

ii.

"Captain the *Magellan's* shields are going up." the ensign at ops said, "And they're powering phasers."
"Raise shields!" Edwards yelled, "And somebody open a channel to-" but before he could finish the entire ship rocked as it was struck by a barrage of phaser fire.

Unlike other Starfleet vessels, the *USS Nightfall* was equipped with safety harnesses for the bridge crew so that they would not be hurled from their posts if the ship took a hit during battle and this meant that the bridge crew were able to respond immediately.

"Damage report." Edwards called out.

"Light captain." the stand in for Cole at tactical replied, "Our shields weren't fully up but they did bear the brunt of the attack. Added to which the *Magellan's* phasers aren't as powerful as ours."

"A good job." Hamilton added, "If they were we probably wouldn't still be here."

"We've still got power disruptions across the board captain." the ops ensign said, "Transporter functions are down and there's damage to lighting control systems." and at this point the bridge lights suddenly went out, leaving only the light cast by the LCARS displays around the bridge as well as the main viewscreen to provide illumination.

"Well at least the damage report systems are accurate." Hamilton commented.

The *Nightfall* then rocked again as the rotating *Magellan* was able to bring more of its weapons to bear on the cruiser.

"Captain shall I return fire?" the tactical officer asked.

"Can you target their phaser arrays only?" Edwards asked.

"Err, I don't think so captain. That last hit disrupted our targeting."

"Mister Hamilton, think you can do any better?" Edwards the asked, looking at the helm station. The *Nightfall* was armed with two massive linear accelerator weapons that fired directly ahead of the ship and it often made sense for the helmsman to control these, aiming through his HUD headset firing them using the physical triggers built into the joysticks used to steer the ship. However, though intended to be used with the linear accelerators the system could be used to give the helmsman direct control over any of the *Nightfall's* weapons.

"Sorry captain. The direct targeting system wasn't designed for picking off specific points on a target." Hamilton replied.

"Well we can't fire while our people are aboard that station." Edwards said before looking at the ops station, "What's the status of our hangar bay?" he asked.

"The last shot knocked out the lifts to the storage hangars."

"So we can't get any fighters out there?" Edwards said.

"No sir. The estimated repair time is thirty minutes."

"I need to speak with the away team." Edwards said.

"Lieutenant Command Carr, this is the *Nightfall*. Do you read me?" Edwards voice asked and Carr and West came to a halt.

"Carr here captain. Go ahead." Carr responded.

"Commander we're taking fire." Edwards said and Carr and West looked at one another, concerned.

"From where?" Carr asked.

"From the *Magellan*." Edwards told her, "Someone's taken control of its weapons and raised its shields. We can't target the weapons arrays without risking the rest of the station."

"Hunt must be in the command centre." Carr said.

"But we've seen people like him try to interface with computers directly." West pointed out, "Couldn't he be accessing the system from somewhere else?"

"No." Carr replied, "If he tried that then the command crew could override him and take the weapons off line. He must have taken control of the command centre." then she turned her attention back to the *Nightfall*,

"Okay captain, we'll sort things out from here. Carr out."

"We'll sort things out?" West asked, "How?"

"We're going to have to retake the command centre." Carr replied and then she tapped her combadge again,

"Carr to Cole, come in please."

"Cole here."

"Cole we've got a situation. Hunt's taken over the command centre and is firing on the *Nightfall*. They can't take out the *Magellan's* weapons without risking the station and they can't send us any reinforcements either."

"Understood commander." Cole replied, "So it's going to be up to us to retake the command centre then I

take it?"

"Correct commander. Your thoughts?"

"There are two entrances to the command centre." Cole said, "One directly from a turbolift and the other from the corridor that heads to their astrometrics section. I recommend that T'Lan and I take the turbolift and you go with West and the security team to the other one. We'll use the distraction of your entry to break in ourselves and we should be able to catch Hunt between us."

"I agree commander." Carr said, "We're heading back now. We'll let you know when we're in position."

Carr led her team back up to the level of the command centre and approached it via the astrometrics section, coming to a halt outside the large door to the command centre.

"Okay set phasers to kill." Carr instructed, "A stun setting is ineffective on our target. But make sure your line of fire is clear of friendlies. For all we know Hunt has the entire command staff in there as hostages." Then she activated her combadge, "Cole, we're all set." she said.

"T'Lan and I are at the turbolift now." Cole responded, "You can move in whenever you're ready."

Carr nodded and her team spread out around the door, each of them holding a phaser and Carr reached out for the door control panel. However, when she tried to open the door there was instead just a buzzing sound and the panel flashed red to indicate a problem.

"What the hell?" Carr muttered as she pressed the control again, jabbing it repeatedly with her finger. But each time there was nothing but a buzzing and another flash of red.

"He must have disabled the mechanism." West said.

"Yes and this door's too heavily armoured for our phasers to just blast through." Carr responded, looking at the structure of the door itself. Then she reached for her combadge again, "Lieutenant Commander Cole, do you read me? Do not begin your assault. I say again do not begin your assault. We have been unable to make entry into the command centre."

"Commander what's wrong?" Cole asked.

"Hunt's jammed the door." Carr told him, "My guess is that he'll have done the same to the turbolift access as well."

"Most likely yes." Cole said, "We'll meet you in astrometrics."

"So this is your grand plan is it?" The Girl asked as she appeared in the command centre accompanied by a pair of her fleshform bodyguards. The two muscular milky white figures followed behind her silently as she calmly walked towards where Hunt was still plugged into the tactical station, "Fire a few low grade energy weapons at the enemy ship?"

"They'll be forced to return fire." Hunt responded, "Their shields won't hold out forever and they'll have to destroy this station to stop me."

"An ingenious idea." The Girl commented flatly, "Or at least it would be if you hadn't overlooked the presence of so many Starfleet officers aboard this station. Not to mention the crew you haven't already dealt with."

"They can't get in." Hunt replied, "I've seen to that."

"They will eventually." The Girl replied, "And that Starfleet cruiser won't dare destroy the station with them on board. You need to come up with a new solution and don't forget, you are on a clock here."

Hunt looked around.

"The fusion generators." he said, smiling, "My intention with the fire was to allow it to spread to the reactors to destroy the entire station. But from here I can set them to overload."

"Not bad." The Girl said, "Though if Starfleet figures out what you're up to then they'll try and stop you."

"But like I said, they can't get in."

"Maybe not. But just in case I'll leave them with you." The Girl said, looking around at the fleshforms. Then, addressing them she added, "Remain here and hold this location. And if he tries to leave before the station's destruction is inevitable," and she glanced back at Hunt, "then kill him." and she took a single step and vanished into thin air.

By the time that Cole and T'Lan arrived in astrometrics Carr had already configured the main display screen to show a deck plan of the station, focusing mainly on the area around the command centre.

"So how are the six of us going to do this then?" West asked.

"We could boost our numbers from the repair teams and medical officers still aboard." T'Lan suggested.

"They aren't armed." Cole pointed out.

"And the only small arms locker I've seen since arriving here has been in the command centre itself." Carr added.

"Wait a minute." West said, suddenly smiling, "Administrator Thom mentioned that there were explosives kept aboard the *Magellan*."

"Most likely for issuing to geological survey teams." T'Lan said, "They would be commercial rather than military grade."

"Back in the Maquis we sued commercial stuff all the time." West pointed out, "All that means is that you

need to use a bit more than normal.”

“You know how much to use to blow a door?” Cole asked.

“Sure. I mean I think so. I've seen it done plenty of times.” West said.

“But you've never actually done it yourself?” Carr asked.

“I never needed to. But I paid attention when others did, just in case.”

“Just in case they blew themselves up?” Cole asked and West frowned at him. Then he looked at Carr, “It does sound like the best plan we've got.” he said, “We blow both doors together and go in shooting. If there are any hostages then the blast ought to force them down, but from what we know about the guy we're after I'd say that he'll stay on his feet.”

Just then Carr's combadge activated.

“Lieutenant commander, its Lieutenant Baxter.” a voice said. Lieutenant Baxter was a member of the *Nightfall's* engineering staff and had been sent over to the *Magellan* to supervise the repair effort.

“Go ahead lieutenant.” Carr responded.

“Commander I'm in the *Magellan's* engineering section and the engineers down here say that the reactors are behaving oddly.”

“Oh that doesn't sound very good.” West said.

“Let me guess,” Carr replied to the lieutenant, “they're going to overload and destroy the station.”

“They're under control for now.” Baxter said, “But they are jammed on and it looks like someone is hacking the safety system. If they gain control of them then-”

“Yes I get it lieutenant.” Carr said, “Just try and keep everything under control for now okay? And if at all possible try to disable the feed to the tactical systems. Shutting down either shields or weapons will do. Carr out.” then she looked around at the rest of the team in astrometrics, “Okay people, let's move like we've got a job to do.”

“We do.” T'Lan commented.

Edwards looked up at the ceiling as the bridge lights came back on.

“Well at least I don't need to worry about tripping over anything in the dark.” he said, “What about targeting and hangar lifts?”

“Still off line captain.” the tactical officer replied, “Shields are holding for now though.”

Edwards sighed.

“Carr come in please.” he said, activating the *Nightfall's* communications.

“Carr here captain.”

“Commander what's your status?” Edwards asked.

“Looks like Hunt's trying to blow up the station by overloading reactors captain. I've got Baxter working with the station's crew to try and prevent that and Cole and I are working on a plan to deal with Hunt himself.”

“Understood commander. We'll alert the other stations just in case Baxter can't prevent an overload. *Nightfall* out.”

This time the turbolift halted on the level below the command centre and Cole opened the hatch set into the roof of the turbolift car and climbed out.

“Okay hand me the charge.” he said, reaching back down into the turbolift and T'Lan placed an explosive in his hand. The charge had been made using the explosive compound taken from several standard survey charges and combined to produce a bomb powerful enough to blow open the armoured doors separating the turbolift shaft from the command centre. Or at least that was the theory.

“Lieutenant commander, do not forget to activate the detonator.” T'Lan said, watching Cole through the hatch as he pressed the explosive against the door.

“Thanks, I've got it.” Cole replied and he activated the detonator, flicking the switch that enabled the wireless receiver. With this active only the correctly coded signal on the chosen frequency was now needed to trigger the explosive. The encoding was vital, preventing any stray wireless signal from triggering the charge prematurely. Cole then climbed back down into the turbolift car and closed the hatch behind him, “Now all we need to do is wait.” he added.

The two security officers accompanying Carr and West stood back and aimed their phasers at the sealed door to the command centre while West put the charge in place, using her fingers to spread the explosive along the split between the two halves of the door. Meanwhile Carr stood just behind her with a tricorder.

“I'm only picking up one life form.” Carr said, “I guess Hunt doesn't have any hostages after all.”

“Good.” West said, “I'd hate to think of what could go wrong if this charge took out any of them. Okay I'm done.” she then added before dashing back down the corridor with Carr and joined the security officers in taking cover, “Everyone take cover.”

Carr tapped her combadge.

“Cole this is Carr. What's your status?”

"Ready and waiting commander." Cole replied.

"Good. Stand by for detonation." Carr said and she looked at West and nodded.

"Okay, cover your ears and open your mouths." West said and she held up the trigger unit for the explosives. Both charges had been configured to detonate upon receiving identical commands. To allow West to place both hands over her ears to protect her hearing from the shock wave that would accompany the detonations the detonators would not be triggered immediately upon receipt of the signal. Instead the signal would trigger a five second countdown.

West took a deep breath and sent the signal. Then she just dropped the control unit and clamped her hands over her ears and opened her mouth.

Five seconds later there was a flash of light and a sudden wave of heat that was followed by the booming sound of the explosive detonating.

"Okay let's go!" Carr snapped as the blast subsided, removing her hands from over her ears and drawing her phaser.

Hunt was finding his efforts to cause an overload in the station's reactors to be more troublesome than he had hoped. Though now that the *Nightfall* was aware that he had control of the *Magellan's* weapons he had been able to set them to fire on the Starfleet vessel automatically while he focused on the reactors he still had to contend with the engineers from both the science station and starship who were acting to thwart him. Already several possible options for overriding the reactor safety systems had been cut off either by changes to the control software or even the removal of physical components. However, he knew that the engineers could not keep this up forever. Eventually they would be unable to remove any further components without compromising the operation of the reactors and Hunt could make changes to program code much faster than they could thanks to his direct interface with the computer.

But what he was not prepared for was not one but two sudden and simultaneous explosions that blew open the doors to the command centre and filled it with . The door to the turbolift simply shattered from the force of the explosion, spraying fragments into the command centre and leaving a jagged rim of metal around the door frame while the blast that came from the larger double doors that led to the astrometrics section was centred around the join between the two halves and this caused both to fold inwards, tearing them out of place and hurling them almost intact into command centre. This second charge caused one of the two halves of the door to fly right into the fleshform standing guard just inside and the figure was hurled backwards along with it. As well as shrapnel, the two explosions created clouds of smoke that began to fill the command centre and alarms began to sound.

Hunt recoiled at the blast, inadvertently ripping the interface cable out of his arm and leaving it dangling from the console. Looking around he saw that both entrances to the command centre had been blown wide open and he was just in time to see a Starfleet security officer appear through the smoke in one doorway with his phaser in his hand.

Hunt reached for his disruptor, planning to shoot the security officer but before he could even draw the weapon the fleshform that had been struck by the door pushed the heavy object from on top of its chest and flipped it over towards the man. Startled by this the officer dived out of the way but this gave the fleshform enough time to reach out and take hold of his ankle, dragging him closer. Then it lifted the man off the deck and simply snapped his neck before tossing him towards the three other Starfleet officers now charging into the room.

While the two fleshforms and Hunt were focused on the team rushing them from the direction of astrometrics Cole and T'Lan climbed up out of the turbolift car and drew their phasers. The gap between the roof of the turbolift and the bottom of the hole blown in the door to the command centre was about a metre in height. Not enough to prevent either officer from climbing through but enough to slow them down.

"Okay I'll go first." Cole said, "Cover me." and T'Lan nodded.

Climbing through the hole, Cole fired at the fleshform he could see blocking the path of the other team but the smoke refracted the phaser beam just enough that it went wide and instead of the fleshform it struck the wall on the far side of the command centre, shattering a display screen.

"Robert look out!" T'Lan cried out and Cole spun around just as the second fleshform came towards him, knocking his phaser from his grip as he tried to aim it at this new target. Then the fleshform lashed out, intending to strike Cole with its fist. But before the blow could be landed T'Lan dived into Cole and knocked him out of the way. The pair rolled across the floor, coming to a halt with T'Lan on top of Cole and both looked towards the fleshform that was now turning towards them. T'Lan pointed her phaser at the figure and fired, the bright red beam slicing off one of the fleshform's legs and it collapsed in a heap. But while this sort of hit would have rendered any normal humanoid, even a large one, incapable of further action the fleshform appeared unconcerned by the loss of one of its limbs and it began dragging itself across the deck towards the pair of Starfleet officers, its featureless face pointing right at them.

"Shoot it again!" Cole snapped and T'Lan pointed her phaser at the crawling figure. This time the beam struck the fleshform about where its forehead ought to be. The beam burned down through its head and along the length of its body, vaporising all of the synthetic flesh it came into contact with and by the time the beam erupted out of the base of the fleshform's spine there was no longer enough material left for it keep functioning and what was left simply collapsed onto the deck and smouldered.

"Nice work T'Lan." Cole said.

"Thank you lieutenant commander." she replied.

Meanwhile the fleshform on the far side of the room was seeking to capitalise on its killing of the security officer by attacking West, pushing her phaser aside before she could fire into its chest at point blank range. In response West ducked from the fleshform's other fist and tried to kick its legs out from underneath it with a blow aimed at one of its knees. The kick connected exactly where she had wanted it to but the structure of

the fleshform was sufficiently durable that it remained standing.

"Lieutenant get down!" the other security officer called out as he took aim, unwilling to fire while West was in the way.

But the fleshform heard this shouted warning as well and shoved West hard enough to send her flying backwards into the security officer, knocking him over before she in turn hit the deck and continued to slide across it.

The security officer dropped his phaser as he fell but was able to relocate it quickly. But as he reached out to reclaim the weapon the fleshform brought down its foot on his hand and he cried out in pain. Then the fleshform bent over and punched him in the face, delivering a blow powerful enough to force the side of his head down into the deck with a sudden 'Crack!' and the security officer lay still as blood began to pool around his head.

Recovering from being thrown across the room and having kept hold of her phaser West now used the weapon, holding her finger down on the trigger to fire a sustained beam at the fleshform. The beam struck the figure just above its left hip and as West lifted the phaser higher it sliced away much of the side of the fleshform's torso, including its arm and leaving it dangling beside the figure with the arm now flailing wildly as the fleshform tried to re-establish control over the limb. West fired again, this time a much shorter duration beam that struck the fleshform where its neck connected with its body and the figure's head simply toppled from its shoulders, hitting the deck just as the now headless body was falling backwards.

While his fleshform troops were being destroyed Hunt kept low and moved carefully through the command centre with his disruptor in his hand. The bright red beams of phaser fire were easily visible through the smoke and they told him that he was facing attack from two directions simultaneously. There seemed to have been less phaserfire from the direction of the turbolift and so Hunt headed in that direction, hoping to thin out the numbers of his enemies and force what he believed to be the larger group to split up into smaller ones to cover the entire command centre.

T'Lan was still lying on top of Cole when Hunt located them by the flash of phaserfire that destroyed the crawling fleshform and he crept closer before leaping up to look over the console they were behind and aiming his disruptor down at them.

"Time to end this." he said to them, snarling as he prepared to fire.

But Hunt was not the only who had been moving stealthily through the smoke filled command centre. While the rest of her team had been dealing with the fleshform guarding the door, Carr had been able to slip past it quietly in search of an alternative target. Hunt himself.

"Why Doctor Hunt, I totally agree." she said as she pressed the muzzle of her phaser to the side of his head and smiled. Then she added, "So tell me doctor, if I fire right now will there be enough left of you to do one of the disappearing acts your people are so infamous for?"

Hunt whirled around, knocking Carr's phaser from her grip to clatter to the deck somewhere out of sight.

Hunt then brought up his disruptor but before he could bring it to bear on Carr she lashed out and struck his wrist hard enough that he too was disarmed. In response Hunt head butted Carr and she staggered backward, temporarily dazed by the blow and Hunt advanced on her.

"I don't need a weapon to deal with you." he said before a phaser beam narrowly missed his head and he turned to see West pointing her weapon towards him through the smoke. Hunt smiled at her, took one step and vanished, leaving the smoke that had been in the air around him swirling as it was sucked into the space he had occupied.

"I hate it when they do that." Carr said, rubbing her forehead as she recovered from Hunt's attack.

"Commander perhaps we ought to shut down the Magellan's defences." West suggested.

"Yes of course. Good idea." Carr replied and then she looked down at Cole and T'Lan, "And you two either get up or get a room. I don't which right now though, I've got a bit of a headache."

Edwards was in the transporter room to meet Carr when she beamed back to the *Nightfall* with Cole, T'Lan and West. They also brought with them Emma's body that they had located in the quarters opposite Hunt's. Carr began to walk back towards her quarters and Edwards went with her.

"So Hunt escaped then?" he asked.

"Yes captain, I'm afraid so. He just vanished right as I was about to shoot him. I'm afraid that I hesitated to gloat."

"Ah well Grace, we all make mistakes. At least you were able to prevent him from destroying the station."

"But we still don't have any idea why he wanted to. What's so important about the Magellan that whoever these people are they wanted to destroy it?" Carr responded.

"Actually I've been thinking about that." Edwards replied, "You know that list of ancient alien technologies that the researchers were trying to reverse engineer?"

"The long list filled with technical terms no-one not directly involved in the projects understands?" Carr asked.

"That's right." Edwards replied, "Well now that we know who was behind the sabotage I took another look at it and I spotted something interesting."

"Really? What?" Carr said.

"Well this is just a hunch okay?" he said and Carr nodded, then gasped and clamped a hand to her forehead.

"Oh I shouldn't have done that." she said, "But do go on."

"Well all of these reanimated corpses we've encountered and the large golem-like figures have demonstrated the ability to move between remote points at will yes?"

"Yes and its very, very annoying." Carr said.

"Well it occurred to me just how much like the gateway technology of the Iconians that sounds like and-" Edwards began.

"And I saw Iconian gateway technology on the list of research projects." Carr said, interrupting.

"Exactly." Edwards replied with a grin, "Grace, I think that someone out there has managed to get hold of a fully functional Iconian gateway and figured out how to use it."

"Captain if that's true then we've no defence against them. They could deploy an army on earth itself right now."

"Yes they could. So I think that we really ought to suggest to Starfleet that they start planning for sudden and unexpected attacks anywhere in the Federation." Edwards replied just as they reached the door to Carr's quarters, "Well, here we are." he added. Then as Carr stepped closer he placed a hand on her shoulder before the door opened for her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Grace, it's about your ex, Stuart." Edwards said and Carr sighed.

"Let me guess, he didn't call." she said and Edwards shook his head, "Oh well," Carr went on as she turned back towards the door, "I suppose I better go and sort out the mess he's left. Again."

Entering her quarters Carr saw Nikki lay on the sofa and a half eaten cake on the table.

"I'm sorry Nikki." she said as she approached her daughter and Nikki sat up to let her mother sit beside her.

"Why didn't he call?" Nikki asked as Carr put her around her shoulders.

"I don't know. I'll try and find out." she replied, "But I promise you'll always have me Nikki. You'll always be my beautiful daughter no matter what." then she looked at the cake, "So who came round to celebrate with you?" she asked.

"No one." Nikki replied, "Everyone's been busy with whatever's been happening on the *Magellan*."

"But half the cake's gone."

"I ate it."

"You ate half a cake yourself?" Carr asked and Nikki nodded.

"I think I'm going to be sick." she replied and Carr sighed.

"Another mess to clean up." she muttered.

In her holographic form Emma watched as the artificial body built for her was moved into the ship's morgue.

"Can't it be repaired?" she asked King, "I was just getting used to it."

"I'm a doctor not a mechanic." he replied, "I had nothing to do with that body."

"But you will ask Max and T'Lan?" Emma asked.

"You're going to keep on pestering me about it aren't you?" King responded and Emma smiled, "Well in that case you leave me no option." King said and he looked upwards, "Computer deactivate Emergency Medical Holographic program." and just as Emma's mouth opened to complain she vanished, "Finally some peace and quiet." King said to himself.

When Hunt appeared he found himself surrounded by fleshforms and unable to leave his physical body.

"What's going on?" he demanded, expecting some explanation both for the reception committee and the fact that he was trapped. But instead all that happened was that a pair of the fleshforms stepped forwards and grabbed hold of his arms, pulling them out beside him. Then a hole opened up in one of the room's featureless walls, exposing a corridor beyond it that the fleshforms dragged Hunt along.

"No!" he yelled, "No, it wasn't my fault. You can't do this to me."

Reaching a doorway that opened up automatically the fleshforms dragged Hunt into a room where there was a chair fitted with restraints and a small table located beside it that had an array of long, narrow silver coloured spikes laid out on it. The Girl and what looked to be a pair of Klingons stood beside this and watched as the fleshforms secured Hunt to the chair.

"It wasn't my fault." Hunt repeated, "Just give me another chance."

"It's too late for that I'm afraid." The Girl said, "I did warn you not to fail me again and now you need to pay the price." and she picked up one of the spikes and held it right in front of Hunt's eyes, "So, where shall we begin?" she asked.

In the corridor outside the room a sudden shriek was heard from within it.