

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...

VIRTUAL WARFARE

BY STEPHEN J. DUTTON



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **VIRTUAL WARFARE**

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The advanced computers that control Starfleet vessels are updated regularly. However, when an enemy is able to use this system of updates to disable starships and starbases in a key sector it is up to the crew of the *USS Nightfall* to prevent disaster...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
7. Root of all Evil
8. Past Loyalties
9. Peace in Our Time
10. Coming of Age
11. Virtual Warfare
12. Echos Of the Distant Past
13. Cold War
14. Revelations
15. The day the Sky Fell
16. Dark Science
17. Ghost in the Machine
18. The Long Way Home
19. Proxy War
20. The Omega Stratagem
21. The Peacemaker
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Stardate 66191.4. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol near Romulan Neutral Zone. Three hours from Starbase Ten.

The briefing room was filled with personnel in a variety of different uniforms. Many wore standard Starfleet uniforms, mainly from the service division, but there were also just as many Earth MACOS and Andorian Imperial Guard present. At the front of the room was a podium and another row of seats that was mainly empty, just three men occupying these. One of these men, Captain Gary Heart, the commander of the *Nightfall's* MACO company got and took the podium while the Andorian Captain Shry and Lieutenant Bradley Hamilton, the *Nightfall's* chief helmsman remained seated.

"Thank you all for coming." he announced, "As you know this is a joint operation between the Imperial Guard, MACOs and Starfleet and participation is purely voluntary. It is also classified top secret and should not be discussed with anyone outside this room. Now if anyone wants to drop out they can leave before we continue." and Heart paused to see if anyone would get up. No-one did of course, he had not expected anyone to after coming this far but he knew that he had to ask, "Very good." he said, "Now I'll hand over to Lieutenant Hamilton who will brief you on our target." and he stepped back, allowing Hamilton to replace him at the podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is our target." Hamilton announced and behind him the large display screen changed from a basic image of the Federation flag to one showing various views of a recognisably Starfleet designed vessel from different angles, "The Ambassador class *USS Janus*. This vessel is currently docked at Starbase Ten and is scheduled to depart twelve minutes after we arrive. The target points are positioned on the upper and lower surfaces of the primary hull and either side of the secondary, highlighted here." and he pressed a button on the console built into the podium that highlighted parts of the diagram, "And now I will hand over to Captain Shry who will give you the specifics." Hamilton added and he swapped places with the Andorian.

"Thank you lieutenant." Shry said before addressing the gathered crowd, "The lieutenant will be at the helm when he arrive at Starbase Ten and upon entering the space dock he will guide the *Nightfall* to within two hundred metres of the Janus and it is by this time that each of our strike teams has to be in position on the outside of our hull. Then when Lieutenant Hamilton performs the manoeuvre each team will be propelled towards the Janus. Thrusters may be used for limited steering and deceleration but avoid them if possible since we don't want to show up on the space dock's sensors. Now you won't need to worry about the *Janus'* hull sensors because the ship will still be docked with the starbase so the umbilical connections will render them useless. This means that even if you miss the exact target zone you will be able to make your way across the hull and so long as you're not seen by anyone looking out of a window you shouldn't be detected. But you need to hurry. By this time you will have just over ten minutes in which to get to your targets with the equipment that we'll issue you." and at that point Shry reached down behind the podium and produced both a can on paint and a long handled brush, "At which point you will remove all trace of the letter 'J' from the ship's hull."

Hamilton took his place at the helm as the *Nightfall* approached Starbase Ten, fitting a headset to himself that gave him the option of a compact display right in front of his eye that only he could see and he adjusted this to give him a proximity reading that at present was blank due to the *Nightfall* still being in open space.

"Starbase Ten signalling clearance for final approach captain." the woman sat at the station to Hamilton's left announced. This was Lieutenant Jenna West, the *Nightfall's* chief operations officer.

"Thank you lieutenant." Captain Edwards, the ship's commanding officer replied.

"One quarter impulse power mister Hamilton." the lieutenant commander sat beside Captain Edwards said and Hamilton followed the first officer's order.

"Aye Commander Carr. Slowing to one quarter impulse power." he said.

"Captain." the female Vulcan at the science station said suddenly, "I am monitoring several abnormalities in our systems."

"Really T'Lan?" Edwards said, "Can you explain further?"

"It appears that several of our airlocks are being cycled." T'Lan said and Hamilton winced, his expression unseen by the other bridge officers. Then T'Lan looked towards the tactical station beside her where the *Nightfall's* second officer and chief of security Lieutenant Commander Cole sat, "Lieutenant commander, could some be trying to board the ship?"

"Are you picking up any vessels nearby?" Carr asked.

"No lieutenant commander. The nearest vessels are around Starbase Ten." T'Lan answered.

"Sneaking in through an airlock seems a bit old fashioned." Edwards commented, "Why not just beam aboard?"

"My security panel isn't showing anything." Cole said.

"Mine either." West added and Hamilton realised that those responsible for hiding the state of the airlocks that the boarding teams would be using had failed to take into account the possibility of the *Nightfall's* main sensors being used to detect the operation of the airlocks.

"Perhaps a glitch in the system." Cole suggested.

"Maybe we should ask Captains Heart and Shry to send some men to take a look." Hamilton commented, knowing that either of those two could get word to some of the other conspirators to override what T'Lan was seeing.

"Intruders are job for security, not ground troops unless we need extra manpower." Cole pointed out.

"It's probably nothing anyway." West said, "I mean who'd try and sneak aboard a ship about to dock at a starbase?"

"I agree." Edwards said, "If they were trying to get a weapon aboard then we'd detect its energy signature. Max can take a look at the system after we dock. Stay on course Mister Hamilton."

"Aye sir. Thirty seconds to space dock." Hamilton said as the familiar mushroom shape of the orbital space dock of Starbase Ten filled the main bridge viewscreen, "Reducing to docking speed. Engaging thrusters." as the *Nightfall* closed with the starbase Hamilton switched from the main sublight drive to its manoeuvring thrusters, the power of the impulse engines not required for use within the space dock and he carefully guided the ship in through the open space doors. At which point Hamilton fired the ship's rear thrusters.

"Our velocity is increasing." T'Lan noted.

"We're still well within port speed limits." Carr noted, using her own headset to double check T'Lan's readings.

"*Nightfall* this is space dock control. Proceed to docking port seven." a voice announced over the communication system.

"Understood space dock control." West replied and then she looked up at Hamilton, expecting him to alter the ship's heading. However, the *Nightfall* remained on its current course.

"Mister Hamilton you are aware that docking port seven is that way aren't you?" Carr said, pointing.

"Our heading is currently taking us towards docking port twelve." T'Lan commented, "Which is currently occupied by the *USS Janus*."

"We've loads of room yet." Hamilton replied.

"Distance seven hundred metres to *USS Janus*." T'Lan said.

"Lieutenant perhaps now would be a good time to steer." Edwards said.

"Right now in fact." Carr added.

"Space dock control is repeating its instruction for us to proceed to docking port seven." West said.

"That other ship is looking very close now." Cole said as the Ambassador-class starship almost filled the main display.

"Four hundred metres." T'Lan said.

"Bradley." West said, staring at the display, "Turn. Turn now."

"Almost." Hamilton replied.

"Good God." Edwards exclaimed and he hurriedly reached for the safety harness built into his chair,

"Lieutenant what the hell are you playing at?"

"Standing by to turn captain." Hamilton answered.

"Then do it Hamilton." Carr said as she too began to fasten her safety harness.

"Two hundred and fifty metres." T'Lan announced and the other bridge officers also reached for their harnesses.

"Firing thrusters." Hamilton announced suddenly and the ship lurched as its steering thrusters were fired at full power, diverting its course away from the starship ahead.

"Just how close did we come to smashing into that?" West asked.

"One hundred and ninety-eight point four metres at the closest points of our hulls." T'Lan replied.

"A hundred and ninety-eight metres?" Cole exclaimed.

"Point four." T'Lan added.

"Well that makes all the difference." Edwards commented.

"Does it?" T'Lan asked.

"How come he gets a bridge command rating and I don't?" West added.

"Just try and get us to docking port seven without any further drama Mister Hamilton." Edwards said, "We're just here for a few hours to refuel and resupply and then we can get going without any bother."

"I take it that the signal has arrived?"

Junior Lieutenant Nott spun around when he heard the voice, believing himself to be alone in the monitoring

centre of the Starfleet communications array.

"Where the hell did you come from?" he exclaimed, looking at the human girl now standing in the same room with him and she smiled.

"Oh come now lieutenant." The Girl answered, "I know that my associates have demonstrated some of our capabilities to you. Does it come as any surprise that we can acquire a vessel with a cloaking device that would allow me to get within beaming range without being detected."

"Yeah, about that." Nott responded, "It freaks me out taking orders from some kid who just pops up unexpectedly like you keep doing."

The Girl smiled again, exposing her teeth this time.

"You want me to call ahead? If it's not you that answers I can always leave a message with-"

"No!" Nott snapped and then he looked around to make sure that the other officer with whom he shared the assignment of maintaining the communications array was not within earshot. Then speaking softly he added, "Never send any signals to me here. Everything that comes through is logged."

"Then it becomes necessary for me to come here in person doesn't it?" The Girl asked, "Now has the message arrived yet?"

Nott sighed.

"Yes, it's being fed through the system now. I made sure that enough of the buffers were occupied with diagnostics that it's taken more than an hour to process the signal you're interested in." he told her.

"Good." The Girl answered and from in her pocket she produced an isolinear chip and handed it to Nott, "Copy this into the same buffer." she instructed him, "The contents will integrate themselves with the message automatically."

"Just what is this anyway?" Nott asked, "Anything you try and add to-"

"Never mind what it is." The Girl interrupted, "Just see to it that it is copied to the communication buffer."

"Sure." Nott said, "Just as soon as I get paid."

"And here I was thinking that the people of Earth were no longer interested in the accumulation of wealth." The Girl replied.

"Well I wasn't born on Earth and I'm planning a nice retirement as far from the Federation as I can get." Nott said.

"In that case your payment is right there." The Girl said and she pointed past Nott. Looking around he saw a small stack of bars of gold-pressed latinum.

"Do you think you're being clever?" Nott asked and he turned back towards The Girl only to find that she had vanished while his back was turned.

"Nott?" a voice called out from nearby on the array and he recognised it as belonging to the second Starfleet officer assigned to it, "Who are you talking to?"

"Myself." Nott replied darting to the shiny metal bars and as quickly as he could he started to hide them beneath the communication equipment that filled most of the room and as the other officer entered he positioned himself to block his comrades view of the remaining bars.

"Well do you know most of the system is jammed up carrying out diagnostics?" the other officer asked.

"That's why I'm here." Nott replied, "The diagnostic was supposed to be on just one of the buffer channels but it's affected almost all of them. I'm trying to trick the system into abandoning them."

"Well do it quickly. We've got important signals coming through and Starfleet will have our hides if it gets stuck here."

"David." a voice said as Captain Edwards sat at a table in a bar that overlooked the space dock's main hangar. From this vantage point he could see not only the *Nightfall* but also several other starships, including the Sovereign-class *Templar* and the Intrepid-class *Elemental* that were the ships captained by the two men who now sat down and joined him.

"Mark. Howard. I got drinks in." Edwards replied. Mark Dent captained the *Templar*, while the *Elemental* was commanded by Howard Patrick and the three men had known one another since before the war with the Dominion, "So how are things going on beyond the border?" While the *Nightfall* spent almost all of its time patrolling Federation territory along the Neutral Zone with what remained of the Romulan Star Empire the other two vessels were both exploratory ships and often strayed beyond Federation space.

"Ah, well you know how it is." Dent said as he picked up the drink Edwards had got for him, "The *Templar* is one of the most powerful ships in the fleet. I know Starfleet isn't supposed to be a military organisation but it's reassuring to know I don't need to worry about waiting for back up if I'm in a jam."

"And you should just try moving at the speeds the *Elemental* can reach David." Patrick added, "My ship flies from one star system to another so fast I barely have time to update my log on the journey."

"So what's that ship of yours like then David?" Dent asked.

"Yes, Akira-class isn't it?" Patrick said, smiling, "A good solid design for a patrol ship."

"My chair has a safety harness and cup holder." Edwards replied and both of the other captains looked at

one another. Then they turned back towards Edwards and leant closer.

"A safety harness?" Dent said, "My ship got hit by a subspace shock wave and broke my collar bone being hurled out of my seat."

"Keep your safety harness." Patrick added, "I juts wish my engineer could tear himself away from those bloody over complicated warp drives to give me a cup holder. Do you know what it's like trying to balance a cup of hot coffee on the little table I've got? One bump and it's spilled."

Edwards sat back and smiled. But before he could think of some way of further rubbing the other two captains' faces in how their efforts to try and make their vessels sound like better assignments than his own had failed they were interrupted by the arrival of Carr.

"Excuse me captain." she said, "I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Not at all." Edwards said, "Commander this is Captain Mark Dent of the *Templar* and Howard Patrick of the *Elemental*. Old friends of mine." then he looked at the other two captains, "Guys this is Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr, my first officer."

"Ah the infamous Lieutenant Commander Carr." Dent said, a smile returning to his face, "So she didn't take your name then after you both eloped."

"Bit of bad luck that." Patrick added, "Having a security team from your own ship burst in on you while you were trying to enjoy your honeymoon."

"Let's not forget spicing things up with-" Dent began.

"Okay guys that's enough." Edwards said, holding up his hand, "It wasn't like that at all."

"Are you saying it was an accident you both ended up chained together naked?" Patrick responded.

"I see I'm not going to get anywhere with this." Edwards said an he looked up at Carr, "Take a seat Grace, I think I need back up."

"Sorry I can't. I've got to get back and make sure Nikki is ready. She starts her internship today remember?"

"Oh yes of course. In engineering." Edwards replied, "So what brought you here then?"

"Just that word is going round that the system update package won't be delivered before we leave space dock." Carr said and all three of the captains at the table frowned briefly. Though Starfleet endeavoured to create computer operating systems and control software for their ships that was foolproof the realities of life in space where any ship could suddenly encounter some unknown phenomenon or have components upgraded from those originally installed when the vessel was launched causing issues that the programmers had not been able to anticipate. When this happened the crews of the starships themselves would produce a fix in the field and this would be passed back to Starfleet. In turn Starfleet would produce an update for every ship in the fleet that would enable them to deal with such situations without trouble. These updates were distributed by means of data packets sent from Starfleet to command to every starbase and from there to the ships operating out of them. It had been expected that the next such update scheduled would arrive at Starbase Ten while the *Nightfall* was docked there. But now it appeared that it had been delayed and the *Nightfall* would have to download it from the starbase via subspace rather than via a direct connection to its computer, meaning that the process would take significantly longer.

"Oh great, more updates." Patrick commented, "That means my engineering staff will have even more to complain about."

"I take it Max knows about this?" Edwards asked and Carr nodded.

"He does." she replied, "I think the starbase ensign who broke the news to him was left worrying that he was about to assimilated in revenge."

"Being a Borg does have its advantages when try to intimidate people. Even members of Starfleet." Edwards said, "Anyway, get back to the ship. I'll join you there later. Oh and wish Nikki luck on her first day for me."

"Yes captain." Carr replied, smiling before she glanced at the other two officers, "Captains." she added and then she turned around and walked away.

"Impressive." Dent said as he and Patrick watched Carr leaving.

"Indeed." Patrick agreed. Then he looked at Edwards and added, "I wouldn't mind having her under-"

"Be very careful what you say next Howard." Edwards interrupted.

"What?" Howard asked, pretending innocence and then he took another sip of his drink.



Nikki Carr looked at herself in the mirror. She had worn a Starfleet uniform before but that had always been for recreation or mischief, never because she was actually about to start a shift. Since she was not a cadet she did not wear the mainly grey uniform of the academy, instead her uniform was the mainly black type with grey shoulder pads for regular Starfleet crews. Her collar was the gold colour of the services branch but there was no rank pin. This was because although she would be working alongside both commissioned and enlisted Starfleet personnel she was neither. Instead she was about to undertake an internship that would allow her to experience what it was like to serve in various branches of Starfleet. Undertaking the internship had not been her idea though, she had no desire to follow her mother into Starfleet, but when the ship's counsellor had sent a statement to the universities she had applied to that suggested she was unfit to attend them Nikki had been forced to look for other opportunities. The hope was that she would perform well enough that she could use it as part of her application to universities in another year or two.

"Nervous?" Carr's voice asked from the doorway behind Nikki and she turned to face her mother.

"Why should I be?" Nikki replied, "It's not like I'm about to start my first shift knowing that out of about five hundred Starfleet personnel aboard this ship every single one of them outranks me is it? Oh wait, yes it is."

"At least you know your new boss. Max helped tutor you through high school." Carr pointed out.

"Yes and I learned that he expects perfection." Nikki replied.

"He's a Starfleet engineer. They all want that."

"Well I hope he understands that this is my first day." Nikki said, "I'm bound to make the odd mistake."

"Just don't make any mistakes with the warp cores okay honey?" Carr responded with a smile. Then she asked, "Would you like me to walk you down to engineering?"

"No!" Nikki exclaimed, "I'm not a four year old who needs walking to school. I'm eighteen."

"And you're going to be late." Carr commented and Nikki looked at the clock beside her bed.

"Oh no!" she cried out, rushing past her mother and out of the quarters they shared.

Previously Nikki had been restricted in which areas of the *Nightfall* she was supposed to be allowed into unescorted. But on this occasion she walked into the engineering without worrying about being caught alone.

"Miss Carr." a voice called out, "Your duty shift began at ten thirty hours. It is currently ten thirty two." and Nikki turned to see what appeared to be a Borg drone walking towards her. However, this particular Borg wore a Starfleet combadge on his chest.

"Sorry Max. How about I stay late to make up the time?" Nikki replied.

"That will be acceptable." Max said as he stood in front of her, "However, while you are on duty you should refer to me by my rank."

"Yes lieutenant." Nikki said.

"Very good. Now here is a combadge, it has been configured for your personal use so do not lose it." Max told her and he handed Nikki an ordinary looking Starfleet combadge that she promptly stuck to her chest.

"Okay, so where do we start lieutenant?" Nikki asked.

"Follow me." Max replied and he began to walk towards the four warp cores that gave the *Nightfall* most of its power while Nikki followed, smiling at the thought of helping Max with the main engines, "As you know we monitor and maintain all of the *Nightfall's* key systems from here." Max explained as Nikki looked up at a pulsing warp core as they passed it.

"Like the warp drives?" Nikki said.

"Indeed. But a ship like the *Nightfall* requires many different systems to work in conjunction with one another and if any malfunctions then the entire ship can be adversely affected."

"So what are we going to fix today?" Nikki asked, guessing by now that it would not be the warp drive.

"During the past twenty four hours there have been problems with the waste reprocessing system." Max said, "I need you to monitor what is happening in person." and then Max came to a halt beside a hatch in the floor that led down to a small compartment on the level below.

"Waste reprocessing?" Nikki said, her eyes widening, "You mean like-"

"Correct." Max interrupted, "Now please climb down this ladder."

"Talk about starting from the bottom." Nikki muttered as she climbed down through the hatch and into the lower compartment. Inside she found a single computer console set into one wall while there was a pipe about half a metre in diameter running across the far side of the room. A section of this pipe had been removed and a force field set up to replace it while still allowed the inside of the pipe to be seen, "Okay I'm down, so what do I do now?" Nikki called out.

"Just watch the section of pipe that had been replaced by the force field." Max responded as he walked towards a nearby control panel, "I will shortly engage the pumping system to transfer the waste into the reprocessing plant and I need you to tell me if the flow appears erratic or is interrupted. But do not try looking

into the pipe. That will interrupt the force field and the effect could be unpleasant.”

“Unpleasant. Right.” Nikki said softly. Then in a louder voice she replied, “Okay, go ahead Lieutenant Max sir.”

While Nikki waited in the compartment below Max began to configure the pumping system. As he did so one of his engineers walked up to him and handed him a PADD.

“Ah thank you ensign.” Max said as he accepted the PADD and began to review its contents.

Meanwhile Nikki was becoming impatient.

“What’s taking so long?” she called out, “Nothing’s happening down here.”

“Engaging system.” Max responded, reaching out for the nearby console and activating the pumping mechanism on a low setting.

In the compartment below Nikki continued to wait as nothing happened to begin with. Then she heard a rumbling sound from deep within the pipe as the pump built up power but nothing else happened.

“I don’t think this is working.” she called out as she leant forwards, penetrated the low energy force field and peered into the pipe.

In main engineering Max and the other engineers heard a sudden scream along with a splashing sound. Max looked up from the PADD and turned to the other engineers who had all halted what they were doing.

“Does that sound like she looked into the pipe?” he asked and the engineers nodded, “Then perhaps one of you would be good enough to replicate the largest mop we have in the replicator databanks and provide it to young Miss Carr so that she may clean up the mess.”

Nott inserted the isolinear chip into a port on the console in front of him. He was just about to use the computer’s file navigation system to investigate the contents of the chip when all of a sudden it engaged itself and the contents began copying themselves to the array’s buffer. This was not how The Girl had described what the chip would do, having indicated that it would be up to Nott to integrate the data on the chip with that of the message. As he watched the computer automatically accessed the message and began modifying it in accordance with whatever was on the chip. But that was not the only effect that the isolinear chip was having. As well as accessing data with the communications buffer it was also targeting the communication array’s primary systems.

“No!” he exclaimed loudly.

“Nott?” the other officer assigned to the array called out from another room, “What’s going on? The reactor output’s fluctuating.”

“Damn it.” Nott hissed as he realised that he had been double crossed. Then he reached down to pull the isolinear chip from the port he had inserted it into but to his horror the process of the changes being made to the computer continued. Clearly whatever had been on the ship had transferred itself entirely to the array’s computer and was now unpacking itself as it worked its way into the systems.

All of a sudden the array rocked.

“Stabilisers have failed!” Nott’s co-worker called out and Nott himself jumped out of his chair and began to run, steadying himself against whatever he could grab hold of as the array continued to shift randomly,

“Where are you going?” the other officer called out after him.

“My quarters.” Nott replied, “There’s something there I need.”

“You need? We need to get the station working again.” his co-worker responded but Nott ignored him and while the other officer tried in vain to determine what was happening to the array’s systems Nott hurried back to his quarters where he grabbed hold of a bag he had placed the bars of gold pressed latinum inside and left just as quickly as he had entered. From his quarters, Nott headed as quickly as he could for the hangar bay where he boarded the array’s sole shuttlecraft. This was a class-2 shuttle, compact and with a maximum speed of only warp four. But it would be enough to get him to a nearby star system from where he could change to a faster mode of transportation to get him out of Federation space.

Bringing the shuttle’s systems on line Nott instructed the hangar bay computer to open the outer doors but nothing happened. Panicking he jabbed his finger at the button on the control panel that was supposed to open the door but still nothing happened. Then through the forward viewport he saw his co-worker rushing into the hangar.

“Nott!” the man cried out, “Let me in. Life support’s failing.” but Nott ignored him right up until the point where the man hammered on the viewport with his fists, “Let me in!”

All of a sudden the outer hangar door opened. Normally when this happened a force field would engage to contain the atmosphere in the hangar but with systems all across the array now failing this did not happen and the air in the hangar was instantly blown out into space, taking along with it Nott’s fellow officer.

Quickly, Nott engaged the shuttle’s thrusters and flew the small craft out of the hangar before the door could slide shut again and trap him inside. As soon as the shuttle was in open space Nott switched over to the impulse drive to put as much distance between himself and the array as he could. As it happened he did this only just in time as from behind the shuttle came a brilliant flash of light from an explosion caused by the total

catastrophic failure of the array's fusion reactor core.

Pausing for just a seconds to process what had just happened Nott proceeded to lay in a course for the nearest inhabited planet, still several days away at maximum warp and then he engaged the shuttle's warp drive.

Meanwhile a subspace transmission that was completed just moments before the communication array's destruction headed in a different direction, towards Starbase Ten where it would be distributed to the starships stationed there.

The Girl opened her eyes onto a virtual world where her body was merely an image she chose to portray.

"It is done." she said, "The virus has been deployed and should be disseminated across the Starfleet vessels along the Neutral Zone within a single span."

"Excellent." the voice of another responded, "And no evidence has been left?"

"No. My coders were instructed to ensure that the virus would remove all trace of its passing as it spread.

The original infection point has been destroyed along with its occupants."

"Starfleet will investigate the loss of the communications array."

"And they will find that it was destroyed as a result of a reactor core breach, nothing more." The Girl replied,

"You may inform our fleet commanders that all opposition will shortly be removed and with the Federation's starbases along the Neutral Zone destroyed the entire region will collapse into chaos."

3.

The *Nightfall* had gone into warp a few minutes earlier and Carr was preparing for her shift to begin. Just as she was closing the door to her closet she suddenly heard the familiar sound of a transporter in operation and looking around towards the source of the sound she saw a light coming from within the bathroom. Quickly she opened the drawer where she kept her issued phaser and disengaged the safety. Then she crept towards the bathroom door.

"Whoever's there I'm armed and-" Carr began before she was hit by the overwhelming stench and she clamped her free hand over her nose and mouth.

"Mom it's me." Nikki said, standing in the middle of the bathroom covered from head to toe in the contents of the waste disposal pipe, "I"

"I get it." Carr interrupted as she backed away, "You looked into the pipe."

"I looked into the pipe." Nikki repeated, nodding, "Then after I'd cleaned it up Max used a site to site transporter program to send me here so I'd didn't have to walk all the way back to get changed."

"Well just stay right there." Carr said, "I'll get you something to put those clothes in and then after you showered you can replicate another uniform."

"Thanks mom." Nikki replied.

"Don't mention it." Carr said, "I just wish we could open a window to get rid of the smell."

When Carr made it to the bridge to begin her shift she found all of the other command crew there. In addition there was a Romulan woman sat in the seat on the opposite side of Captain Edwards to the one that Carr herself sat down in. This was Sublieutenant Nayal who had been a member of one of the factions fighting in the Romulan civil war before coming aboard the *Nightfall* during its maiden flight and remaining on the ship to act as an advisor on Romulan matters.

"Anything interesting going on?" Carr asked as she sat down and placed her headset over her ear.

"Nothing." Edwards replied, "Not even any signs of fighting on the other side of the Neutral Zone."

Meanwhile Nayal sniffed the air.

"What's that smell?" she asked.

"What smell?" Cole asked in reply.

"It smells rotten." Nayal said.

"I don't smell anything." Edwards said.

"There is an unusual odour present captain." T'Lan added, "Perhaps only detectable to those of us with a superior sense of smell."

"I first smelt it when Commander Carr arrived." Nayal said and everyone on the bridge paused and looked at Carr.

"It's Nikki." she said, "She looked into the pipe." and everyone except T'Lan cringed, "It must be clinging to me."

"Well just stay over there on the other side of Captain Edwards." Nayal said as she took hold of her own nose and squeezed it shut. Then looking at T'Lan she added, "Sorry cousin."

Before T'Lan could respond with her usual request for Nayal to cease calling her 'cousin' West spoke up.

"Captain, I have Captain O'Donnell of the *USS Janus* calling."

"The *Janus*?" Carr responded, "What is it?"

"It's an Ambassador-class cruiser, but that's not important right now." Hamilton muttered and Nayal smiled.

On the other hand both Carr and Edwards glared sternly at the helmsman.

"Put him on the main screen." Edwards said and the main bridge view screen changed from an image of the space in front of the *Nightfall* to the bridge of the *USS Janus* with an angry looking Captain O'Donnell sat in the centre.

"Captain O'Donnell." Edwards said, "What can I-"

"For God's sake Edwards!" O'Donnell barked, "I know it was you. Is this supposed to be funny?" and the received image split into two. On one side the image of Captain O'Donnell remained while on the other a set of still images taken of the hull of the *USS Janus* where the ship's name was usually stencilled on it.

However, in each case the first letter of the ship's name had been obscured.

At the front of the bridge Hamilton suddenly looked downwards, glad of his headset to allow him to continue piloting the ship. On the other hand at the rear of the bridge Cole suddenly snorted, clamping a hand over his mouth to stop himself from simply laughing out loud.

"No." West said in amazement while Carr and Edwards just stared in disbelief at the image.

"I don't get it." Nayal said, "Why would someone paint out the first letter? What does that word mean?"

"It is a formal term used to refer to the-" T'Lan began.

"Not now T'Lan." Carr said.

"Look captain," Edwards said, "I can assure you that I don't know anything about-"

"Rubbish!" O'Donnell snapped, "Edwards my ship was vandalised in space dock right about the time yours turned up."

"Captain O'Donnell." Edwards said, trying to calm his fellow starship commander down, "I can see that you're upset about being made the butt of-" and then he paused and winced as Cole, Hamilton and West all stifled laughter.

"Oh now I get it!" Nayal exclaimed and she smiled.

"This is not a joke!" O'Donnell yelled before the transmission went hazy for a moment and his words were drowned out by static.

"I'm sorry could you say that again?" Edwards said, "You broke up a bit there."

"Who's responsible for this Edwards? I swear that if I find out that you had anything to do with it I'll take it to the Admiralty."

"Captain I'm sure there's no need to-" Carr began before O'Donnell's image glared at her.

"Do you think this act of vandalism is acceptable lieutenant commander?" he demanded.

"No sir I do not." Carr replied, shaking her head, "And I will give this my whole attention-"

"Hole. Ha! I get that one." Nayal exclaimed and O'Donnell snarled. At the same time his image pixilated slightly before returning to normal.

"That does it!" he yelled, "Lieutenant Commander Carr I'm reporting you for-"

"Now wait one damned minute!" Edwards yelled suddenly, getting out of his chair and walking towards the view screen, pausing about half way between his chair and the helm station, "Captain O'Donnell if any member of my crew has played any part in this act then I will find out who it was. But I am in command of this ship and I will decide what action is to be taken against them. Not you. *Nightfall* out." and then he looked at West, "Lieutenant end transmission." he ordered and the screen returned to the view of space in front of the ship.

"Well that went well." Carr commented. Then she looked at Edwards, "So what are you planning to do about that captain?" she asked him, "You know he'll be calling Starfleet command right now."

"No he won't." Edwards replied, "He'll want it kept as quiet as possible. The last thing he needs is to not be able to walk into a Starfleet bar without being taunted about how his ship was effectively boarded while in space dock and his crew didn't notice until more than three hours after they'd left. He wants me to deal with the culprits and then keep quiet as well. It was technically vandalism so it doesn't make us look any good either."

"So the only way anyone comes out of this with any dignity is for everyone to pretend it didn't happen?" Nayal asked.

"Exactly." Cole replied.

"But you do intend to find out who was responsible don't you?" Carr asked, "We can't just ignore what they did."

"Lieutenant Commander Carr, would you mind taking the helm for a while?" Edwards asked and Hamilton winced.

"But Lieutenant Hamilton is assigned to helm." T'Lan pointed out, "Why would-"

"Mister Hamilton and I need to have a word in private." Edwards interrupted and he began to walk towards his ready room, halting after a couple of steps, "Lieutenant West, could you also ask Captain Heart and Captain Shry to join us?" and then he began to walk again.

Meanwhile Carr got out of her chair and walked over to the helm station to take Hamilton's place. In addition to the usual console controls, the *Nightfall* could be piloted by means of a pair of joysticks set into the arms of the helm station chair and Carr was one of only a handful of members of Starfleet qualified to pilot the vessel in this manner. Getting out of his seat to allow Carr to take his place, Hamilton then followed and as he passed West's operations station she smiled at him.

"Busted Bradley." she said.

"We'll see." Hamilton replied quietly before he entered the captain's ready room as well.

Inside the ready room Edwards sat at his desk and gestured for Hamilton to take a seat as well. Then they waited until the door from the bridge slid open again and Heart and Shry entered.

"You asked to see us captain?" Shry said as the door closed behind them.

"Yes take a seat." Edwards replied and when the two soldiers sat down he leant forwards, supporting himself on the desk, "What the hell are you three playing at?" he asked.

"I'm sorry captain." Heart said, "I don't know what you-"

"Oh don't give me that." Edwards interrupted, "Look, you three promised me that you wouldn't get caught but O'Donnell's figured out exactly who was responsible." then he stared at Hamilton, "Most likely thanks to that damned fool stunt flying in space dock of yours." he added.

"We couldn't figure out another way to get the teams close enough in the time available." Hamilton explained.

Then after a moment's pause he added, "So are you going to tell Captain O'Donnell it was us?"

"Of course not." Edwards replied.

"But if he knows," Heart began "then he'll be expecting you to give him a name."

"And normally I'd serve the three of you up to him." Edwards said, "But the moment he bypassed me and threatened Carr he lost any right to get anything from me. So you're off the hook gentlemen. This time. But from now on any prank you pull cannot lead back to this ship under any circumstances. Understood?" and the three men agreed, "Good." Edwards said, "Now there's just one last thing. When O'Donnell doesn't get a name I'd expect someone from his crew to try and get their own back somehow. So from now on I want MACO and Imperial Guard personnel double checking our security."

"But what about Lieutenant Commander Cole?" Shry asked.

"I'll square things with him. But I want the men who took part in the prank to be responsible for looking out for their revenge." Edwards said. Then his intercom activated.

"Captain could you come back to the bridge please, there is something I need to show you." T'Lan.

"Sure T'Lan. We're finished here." Edwards said and he got up to return to the bridge, accompanied by the other three men. Then as Edwards headed for the science station, Hamilton returned to his post at helm while Heart and Shry made their way to the turbolift. Once inside Heart looked at Shry and smiled.

"I still say Operation Bum Hole was a success." he said.

"Agreed." Shry replied.

Back on the bridge, Edwards stood behind T'Lan and looked down at her.

"So what do you have lieutenant?" he asked.

It concerns the transmission we received from Captain O'Donnell of the *Janus*." she replied.

"What about it?" Edwards said.

"I observed that on occasion both the audio and video components of the signal became distorted." T'Lan explained, "So I checked the log to see if there was a fault in our communications."

"The system is fine." West said from the far side of the bridge.

"Indeed it is." T'Lan added, "The source of the signal degradation came from outside the ship."

"Are there any natural phenomena that could be causing it?" Edwards enquired.

"The degradation was a result of simple attenuation due to distance captain." T'Lan told him and Edwards frowned.

"Distance?" he said, "But the *Janus* was heading deeper into Federation space, not away from it. The subspace network should have boosted it."

"Precisely captain. It would appear that the subspace communication array that ought to have routed the signal to us and boosted its strength is not currently functioning." T'Lan said, "The array is located here." she added and on her console she called up a star chart on which she highlighted the position of the array that unknown to them had been destroyed by the computer virus introduced to its systems by Lieutenant Nott.

"Well that's way outside of our patrol route." Edwards said, "Just let Starbase Ten know that there may be a problem and let them assign a ship to investigate."

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied and Edwards began to head back to his own seat. But before he could get there the intercom activated.

"Max to bridge. Captain Edwards are you there?" Max's voice asked.

"Right here Max." Edwards said just as he began to sit down.

"Captain I'd like to see you in engineering." Max said, "Lieutenant T'Lan as well."

"What for exactly?" Edwards asked.

"It's complicated captain. Much easier if you both just come down and see for yourself."

"Oh I hope Nikki's not broken anything important." Carr muttered.

"Everyone wants to see me today." Edwards said. Then he added, "We'll be with you as soon as we can Max."

"Thank you captain." Max replied before the intercom shut off.

"Well let's go and see what he wants lieutenant." Edwards told T'Lan, "Commander Carr, you have the conn."



When Edwards and T'Lan reached main engineering they found Max at a computer console away from the areas where the rest of his team were working.

"Ah captain, thank you for coming so quickly." he said when he noticed them approaching.

"So what's so complicated that you couldn't just tell me over the intercom Max?" Edwards replied.

"This." Max said and he pointed to the display in front of him. On it was a long series of numbers, zeroes ones and twos and they were scrolling down the screen continuously.

"So what's that?" Edwards said, "I'm guessing that it's ternary computer code but I can't tell what it does."

"You are correct that is computer code captain." Max told him, "To be precise this is the data packet we received from Starbase Ten containing the updates for our computer represented as plain text."

"What about this requires our presence?" T'Lan asked as she studied the scrolling numbers carefully.

"There are millions of digits in this stream." Max said, "All supposedly conforming to basic ternary mathematics."

"Supposedly?" Edwards commented.

"Yes captain." Max said and then he looked around, checking where the rest of the engineering personnel were at that moment. Then when he was satisfied that none of them were in a position to overlook the display he stopped the scrolling and moved to a specific point in the data, "Here." he said and he pointed to one of the digits now on the screen in front of them.

It was a '3'.

"How is that possible?" T'Lan asked.

"Corruption in the signal maybe?" Edwards suggested, "With that array down-"

"No captain." Max interrupted, "This text has been generated from the data sent. Each numeral represents one tristate level bit and cannot take any form other than a zero, one or two. Any corruption of the signal that would result in a different value being shown would still have to display one of the valid levels."

"What about the check key value?" T'Lan asked. The self check key was a set of numbers added to any data file to be transmitted from one computer to another and was generated by running the values in the rest of the file through a complicated mathematical function. A receiving computer could then run the same algorithm and compare the result to the key value. If they differed then it proved that the file had been corrupted at some point.

"It detects no errors." Max replied.

"That's damned odd." Edwards said, "Max what do you think is going on here?"

"I cannot say for certain captain. But if I had to guess then I would say that the erroneous number three we are seeing is a result of tampering with the data to conceal additional information within it." Max answered.

"In the same way that pixels of an image are sometimes used to conceal further images?" T'Lan asked.

"Exactly." Max replied, "Captain I asked you and T'Lan to come to see that rather than telling you over the intercom because of the likelihood that we may have an enemy agent aboard the ship. This could be a message meant for them buried within our update."

Edwards stared at the screen as he took this in. Ever since the launch of the *Nightfall* the crew had found themselves encountering the agents of an unknown power who manifested as reanimated corpses enhanced with a form of synthetic flesh. The ability of these agents to come and go suggested that they had been able to acquire travel technology similar to that used by the long dead Iconian civilisation. To make matters worse an intrusion of the *USS Nightfall* by one of these agents suggested that the purpose had been to locate another agent already aboard who had somehow able to avoid the medical tests that would expose them.

"If that's the case then running it may tell us who they are." Edwards said.

"There is a certain degree of logic to that suggestion captain." T'Lan responded, "But we cannot know the effect that this code will have on our systems. Rather than delivering a message straight to the spy it could be designed to sabotage a system that the spy would be assigned to repair. Then they could collect the message from the damaged system."

"So we need to run it in a controlled environment." Edwards said and he looked at Max, "A shuttle?"

"That would be my preference captain." he replied, "Even creating an isolated computer network aboard the *Nightfall* itself would be no guarantee of containing an alien computer program."

"The self diagnostic systems aboard a class two shuttle may not be sufficient to adequately track the progress of the code captain." T'Lan pointed out, "It will be necessary to use the *Nightfall's* main lateral sensors to monitor the exact status of the shuttle's systems."

"And to do that properly will take both of us." Max added.

"Which means that we need a pilot we can trust." Edwards said and he scowled, "Damn. I should be able to trust every last man and woman aboard this ship."

"I would suggest Lieutenant Commander White as pilot." T'Lan said. Lieutenant Commander William White, call signed 'Snowman', was the leader of the squadron of fighters assigned to the *Nightfall* and was outside the vessel's normal chain of command, making him an unlikely spy.

"We will also need someone to assist him in monitoring systems aboard the shuttle." Max said.

"But who?" Edwards said, "If we put another senior officer aboard that ship then it'll attract attention. But the seniors officers are the ones we know we can trust."

"There is another alternative captain." Max said, "An individual that we know is not an enemy agent." and then he glanced across engineering at where Nikki had just entered and proceeded directly to a group of engineers and civilian contractors who began to issue her with instructions.

"She is the one responsible for us knowing that there may be an enemy agent aboard." T'Lan agreed, "The choice is logical."

"Maybe so." Edwards added, "But how do I tell her mother I'm sending her only child out in a shuttle that we're going to deliberately infect with an alien computer virus?"

"Lieutenant Commander Carr agreed to her daughter enrolling on the Starfleet intern program captain." T'Lan pointed out, "It would be illogical for her to object to Nikki performing the duties required of her."

"I would also advise the presence of a medical officer to ensure that neither Commander White nor Miss Carr come to harm." Max said.

Edwards sighed.

"You're going to suggest using the EMH aren't you?" he said.

"It is logical captain." T'Lan replied, "The physical form created for the Emergency Medical Hologram can function in the shuttle without the need for holoemitters while still being completely isolated from the shuttlecraft's systems."

"The King is not going to be amused." Edwards said, "Max, you go ask Nikki if she'll volunteer for this. T'Lan can ask Commander White and I'll go and speak to Doctor King about using the EMH."

"A shuttle?" Commander Henry King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer said when Edwards explained their plan to him, "You want to stick the EMH in physical form aboard a shuttle and then have her monitor two poor fools who will be expected to infect it with a computer virus just so you can see what happens?"

"Pretty much doctor, yes." Edwards replied and King shook his head in disbelief, "You know this is just the sort of thing that could end with the EMH becoming self aware don't you? We're exposing it to situations outside of its core programming."

"Yes, I realise that doctor. But on this occasion it is the best solution." Edwards said.

"Very well then." King responded as he got to his feet, "Let's go wake it up."

The two men made their way across sickbay to the morgue and went inside. In here they opened up one of the drawers normally used for storing corpses until they could be transferred off the ship. Within this lay what appeared to be the body of a woman in a Starfleet uniform with the same blue collar as Doctor King. But unlike his uniform hers bore no rank markings. This body had been constructed using material copied from the synthetic flesh used by the mysterious alien force and could be operated remotely by the *Nightfall's* Emergency Medical Holographic Program. Despite neither Captain Edwards nor Doctor King having approved of the highly unorthodox experiment the body had been retained, allowing the EMH to function outside of sickbay and even away from the *Nightfall* providing the subspace control link remained functional.

"Computer." King said, "Activate Emergency Medical Hologram physical interface."

Immediately the eyes of the woman laid out in front of the other two officers opened.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." she said.

"Emma, are you coming as well?" Nikki asked when she saw the EMH approaching with Captain Edwards and Doctor King. 'Emma' was a nickname for the EMH that Nikki had originally come up with and it had caught on with most of the rest of the crew. Now the EMH responded to it as well.

"The captain thinks it would be beneficial to have me along to monitor the health of yourself and Lieutenant Commander King." the EMH replied. Then she frowned, "Why are you wearing a Starfleet uniform?" she asked.

"Because I'm interning with Starfleet." Nikki replied, "I couldn't get into university and this was my best option left."

"Basically she's the only crew member who doesn't outrank you." King told the EMH.

"So I outrank her then?" Emma asked.

"No. You're both right there at the bottom." King said.

"In which case I'm ordering the pair of you to get a move on." White called out from the shuttle hatchway, "I want to get this over with."

Edwards walked over to the hatch with Emma and Nikki to speak with White.

"Quarterback will be running escort." he said and White glanced across the *Nightfall's* expansive hangar to

where one of the Peregrine-class fighters was being prepared for launch as well.

"Yeah, I've already spoken with him." White replied quietly, "But does he know what we're really doing?"

"I haven't told him." Edwards said, "The official line is that Max wants this shuttle testing for control errors." and White nodded.

"Got it. I'll make sure nothing is said over comms that could give away what we're really up to." he responded.

"Okay. We'll be monitoring from the bridge and we'll keep an active transporter lock on you. Hopefully it won't be necessary but-" Edwards said.

"But it's better to be prepared." White interrupted, "Thanks captain. Nice to know someone has our backs." and then as Edwards stepped back from the shuttle White went inside and sat in the pilot's seat, "Flown in a shuttle before?" he asked Nikki.

"Yeah. Just for fun though." she replied.

"I haven't." Emma added, "At least not one of this type. It seems very cramped if you ask me."

"Well I'm used to a fighter's cockpit." White said, "To me this is spacious." then when he saw the fighter piloted by Quarterback accelerate out of the main launch doors he added, "Okay that's our queue. Here we go." and he engaged the shuttle's thrusters, lifting it off the deck and flying out of the forward hangar door after the fighter.

When Edwards and King reached the bridge they found only the command crew along with Max and Nayal present. All other crew members had been cleared while the test was being carried out. The former Borg drone was stood behind T'Lan, observing her console as she monitored the shuttle closely. King headed to join them while Edwards instead walked towards his seat as Carr got up and moved

"Status?" Edwards asked as he sat down.

"The shuttle is approaching the test location now captain." West replied, "One thousand kilometres directly ahead."

"How do they look?" Edwards added, looking around at the science station.

"All systems are stable and functioning within acceptable limits captain." T'Lan answered.

"Then get me the shuttle." Edwards said and West activated the *Nightfall's* communications.

"Hailing frequency open captain." she said.

"Nightfall to shuttle." Edwards said.

"Shuttle here captain." Nikki's voice replied.

"Looks like you're in position. Are you ready to go?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain." Nikki said, "And Snowman says Quarterback is circling at a hundred kilometre radius."

"Understood. Execute when ready. *Nightfall* out." Edwards said and then he looked at Carr, "Seems Nikki is settling in fine." he added softly and Carr smiled.

"Finally something she might be good at other than getting into trouble." she replied.

In the shuttle both Nikki and White were watching their consoles closely while Emma sat behind them with a medical tricorder in her hand.

"Both your heart rates are increasing." she said.

"You do know what we're about to do here don't you?" White asked, looking around from the pilot's seat, "I'd be more worried if our heart rates weren't increasing."

"So should I do it?" Nikki asked and White nodded.

"No time like the present." he replied.

"Accessing update file." Nikki said and she tapped a button on her console that had been set up specifically to run the corrupted update file. Immediately the console in front of her changed, shifting rapidly with progress bars as the updated computer code installed itself aboard the shuttle. Normally the program would be executed aboard the *Nightfall* and then the *Nightfall's* computer would copy just the relevant subroutines to the fighters, runabouts and shuttles carried by the ship. But for the purposes of this test every single bit of code was being installed on the shuttle's own flight computer and given the amount of data this involved compared to the relatively slow performance of the shuttle's computer compared to the two massive cores aboard the *Nightfall*, each one bigger than the entire shuttle, the process took several minutes to complete.

"Is that it?" Emma asked when the installation was done.

"Looks like it." Nikki said, "Installation complete."

"Notice anything odd?" White asked and Nikki shook her head.

"Nope. Nothing." she replied and White sighed.

"Okay let's call this in." he said.

"Shuttle's systems remaining stable captain." T'Lan announced.

"It could be that whatever the virus is intended to do will not take effect immediately." Max pointed out.

"Maybe it doesn't do anything." Carr suggested, "It could just store a message somewhere."

"They're hailing us now." West added.

"Put them through." Edwards replied.

"Aye sir." West said but as she attempted to open the standard hailing frequency there was a buzzing from her console.

"Having difficulty lieutenant?" Edwards asked when she frowned.

"Yes sir." West answered, "The channel won't open."

"I thought the virus was supposed to infect the shuttle, not us." Nayal commented.

"It was." Carr replied.

"It did." Max said, "The virus is now in the shuttle's computer, including its communication system. That is what is causing the communication difficulties. Our own counter-virus system is blocking the infected transmission."

"So we can't communicate with them?" Carr exclaimed, suddenly worried about her daughter.

"Fortunately given that the escorting fighter is circling at a range of hundred kilometres. Well within range for communication via standard combadges." Max said.

"Do it." Edwards ordered.

"*Nightfall* to shuttle." Edwards' voice sounded inside the shuttle from White's combadge.

"Captain? We've been trying to hail you." White replied, "The virus must have affected our communications." "It has lieutenant commander. And it is trying to spread." T'Lan told him, "It has embedded itself on a sub-carrier that has triggered the *Nightfall's* anti-virus defences. We are only able to communicate with you via your combadge, relayed by the escort fighter."

"So what does that mean?" Nikki asked. But before anyone could respond there was a chirping sound from Emma's tricorder.

"The CO-two level in the cabin is rising." she said, "I think that the air scrubbers have shut down."

"Okay I'm taking us back to the *Nightfall*." White said, "Max and his people can tear this ship apart to-" but then he stopped speaking suddenly and stared at the shuttle's controls.

"What's wrong?" Nikki asked.

"I've got no control." White replied, "Thrusters, impulse engine, even warp drive. They're all off line."

"Captain power is failing aboard the shuttle." Max announced.

"It appears that all major systems are shutting down." T'Lan added.

"Shuttle we're seeing widespread system failures over here." Edwards signalled.

"Copy that captain, we see them clearly in here as well." White replied, "I'm trying to-" but then the message ended unexpectedly as there was a sudden 'Whoosh!'

"The hatch has blown." Max exclaimed.

"Transporter room emergency beam out. Send the shuttle occupants straight to sickbay." Edwards ordered. Then he turned to King, "You too doctor." he added.

"I'm on my way." King replied as he rushed towards the nearest turbolift.

"Captain I-" Carr began before Edwards cut her off.

"Grace, go." he said and she hurried after the doctor.

"Captain the escort fighter is hailing us." West said.

"Put him through." Edwards ordered.

"*Nightfall* this is Quarterback. Shuttle is now adrift and without power." the fighter pilot said, "I have no life readings aboard but did detect a beam out. Requesting instructions."

"Captain we could learn a lot by studying that shuttle." Max said.

"The escort fighter could tractor it back into-" T'Lan began before Edwards interrupted.

"No." he said, "I'm not having that shuttle brought aboard where it could infect the ship. I'm afraid that if you can't figure out what happened from remote scans then you'll just have to take another shuttle out there and perform an EVA."

In a nondescript office building that was typical of those in the city around it two figures walked towards a turbolift. Both human, one was male and the other female and neither wore any sort of uniform that would serve to identify the fact that both were Starfleet officers with the rank of commander. The man was just about to reach out to press the button to summon the turbolift when the door slid open anyway to reveal an older man already inside.

"Admiral Schmidt." the woman said, nodding.

"Commander Brown." he replied and then looking at the man he added, "Commander Jones."

"Here late aren't you admiral?" Jones asked, "We were just on our way out."

"So I see commander." Admiral Schmidt replied, "But I'm afraid that I must ask you to stay late tonight. An important issue has arisen."

"Important?" Brown said, "Everything our section does is important."

"This is more important than most. As far as we can tell, every single starship and space station along the Romulan Neutral Zone has been disabled leaving us defenceless."

Jones sighed.

"Back to work." he said.

Max checked T'Lan's spacesuit was fitted and sealed correctly. He knew that the Vulcan science officer was unlikely to have made any mistakes but regulations called for such an action to be taken before a spacewalk. On the other hand T'Lan did not need to inspect Max. His Borg implants allowed him to seal off his respiratory system and function in hard vacuum for several hours on an internal oxygen reserve. What he lacked however, was any means of controlling their travel from their own shuttle to the inactive one drifting close by and that was where the thruster pack mounted on the back of T'Lan's suit came in.

"Your suit is secure." Max told T'Lan, "Beginning decompression procedure."

There was a hissing sound as the air was removed from the shuttle's cabin, the sound fading away as the last of it was pumped out and only then did Max open the hatch at the rear of the shuttle to allow T'Lan and himself to exit the tiny vessel.

"Secure yourself to me." T'Lan told him, her words transmitted by her combadge to Max's and he first connected a line about a metre long between them before grabbing hold of her arm. Then together they both stepped out of the shuttle into space.

In short bursts T'Lan fired her thruster pack, taking note of how Max's added mass to one side of her affected the steering. After a handful of bursts she had set them on course for the disabled shuttlecraft while the *Nightfall* remained at a safe distance. Patient as always, Max and T'Lan waited as they crossed the gap between the shuttles rather than having T'Lan fire her thruster pack further to increase their speed. It took just over two minutes to cross the short distance and as they arrived they were able to just extend their legs in the right direction and land on the hull of the other shuttle without needing to use the thruster pack again to decelerate.

"Gravity boots engaged." T'Lan announced as her feet adhered to the hull.

"Confirmed." Max responded. Of course he did not wear gravity boots like those built into T'Lan's space suit, instead relying on more Borg implants to allow him to walk across the hull of the shuttle.

Though the shuttle's hatch had become unsealed when the computer virus took effect it was open only by barely more than a centimetre, enough for the atmosphere inside to escape but insufficient for either of the Starfleet officers to enter through.

"Lieutenant Maximillian, can you use your nanites to open the hatch wide enough for us to gain entry?" T'Lan asked.

"No." Max replied, "The shuttle appears entirely devoid of power to operate the hatch. However, there is a more direct option open to us." and then, still attached to the hull of the shuttle Max inserted his hands into the gap between the hatch and the surrounding hull before applying all of his strength to pull them apart. His muscles enhanced by Borg implants the hatch slowly opened ever wider until there was a gap of about a half metre between it and the hull at the top, easily enough for him to squeeze through and for T'Lan as well providing she detached her thruster pack first. Since the thruster pack would make moving about inside the shuttle far more difficult this was exactly what she did, allowing the cumbersome thruster pack to drift away while she crawled through the gap as Max held it open. Once inside the shuttle T'Lan unfolded her tricorder and began to scan.

"T'Lan to *Nightfall*." she signalled, tapping her combadge to activate it, "The shuttle is entirely shut down. I am monitoring no energy sources at all, not even from the personal equipment plugged into charging ports."

"Understood lieutenant." Edwards replied, "Do you consider it safe to continue?"

"Yes captain. There is no indication that we are in any danger."

"I concur captain." Max added, "Without power to the computer the virus cannot spread."

"Acknowledged. But at the first sign of trouble signal for a beam out and we'll get you out of there. *Nightfall* out."

Max turned to T'Lan.

"Where do you want to start?" he asked.

"With the computer core itself." she replied and Max stepped towards an access panel located in the floor between the two flight stations at the front of the shuttle that he simply reached out for and pulled free before leaving it to drift around the shuttle interior. Behind the panel was the core of the shuttle's computer, entirely powered down like the rest of the compact vessel. T'Lan pointed her tricorder towards the computer core and then nodded at Max, "I am ready." she told him.

Max held out one of his arms towards the exposed computer, his fingers clenched into a fist and from between the knuckles of his fingers two tubes extended to make contact with the computer core.

"Injecting nanites." he said as he allowed thousands of microscopic machines to flow into the computer.

These were small enough to be able to physically enter the computer and make their way into the hard drive. Once there they could analyse each bit of memory individually without needing to bring the computer back on line, broadcasting what they found so that the tricorder T'Lan held could examine the results. Connected via a wireless link to the computer core of the other shuttle, T'Lan was able to cross check the state of the hard drive, searching for the sections of memory that had been altered by the virus.

This approach took time, however and while T'Lan was studying the feed from the nanites Max began removing more access panels so that he could carry out a physical inspection of the disabled shuttle to see if the virus had affected only the control systems or actually caused physical damage to it as well.

"There appears to have been changes made to almost every section of the hard drive." T'Lan said, "Including the boot sector. Whoever created this virus intended for it to be persistent even after a full system reset."

"There are signs of damage to several temperature sensitive components as well." Max responded, "I'd say that they were pushed to full power and the thermal cut outs overridden by the virus."

"Interesting." T'Lan added.

"What is?" Max asked.

"I have isolated several strands of modified code in the computer that matches the error in the update file you discovered. I believe that these could be fragments of the virus left behind after it corrupted the shuttle's flight systems."

"Let me see." Max replied standing beside T'Lan and looking down at her tricorder. There he saw a representation of part of the computer's hard drive. As would be expected for a computer that used a ternary based operating system the data bits were zero, one or two. But here and there were bits that had been given a value of three by the interpretation program T'Lan was running on her tricorder, "I think you've found what we need." he said, "We can examine those fragments back on the *Nightfall*."

"You want to bring the virus back here?" Carr asked, glancing at Edwards when Max and T'Lan reported back with what they had discovered in the shuttle's computer.

"That doesn't sound safe to me." West commented.

"Max are you sure that it's safe to bring it back here?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain." Max answered, "We already have the update file containing the raw virus aboard but unless it is placed into active memory and executed it is harmless. All we are suggesting we bring back some of the individual instructions that the virus creates so we can attempt to decompile them for study. Without running the primary virus program they cannot be called by our computer."

"Very well." Edwards said, "I'll have you beamed back and Quarterback can tractor your shuttle back in. what about the disabled shuttle though? Can you remove the virus from it?"

"Not yet captain. It appears to have been created to make removal difficult to achieve." Max said.

"It may however yet prove a useful test bed for any counter virus program we are able to create." T'Lan added.

"So having Quarterback destroy it probably isn't the best move then." Cole commented from the tactical station.

"Okay we'll leave it adrift." Edwards said, "But before anything from that shuttle is loaded into our computer I want a full explanation of what you're planning from you in person. *Nightfall* out."

In the *Nightfall's* main briefing room Edwards and Cole met with Max and T'Lan to hear them explain their findings from the shuttle and their plan of action based on these. Edwards included Cole in the briefing because he saw the virus as a security issue so as T'Lan had pointed out it was logical to have the chief of security present. Having come directly from the transporter room, T'Lan still wore her space suit though she had removed the helmet and life support pack.

"As you can see the virus produces code with the same abnormal pattern as was detected in the update file itself." Max explained, pointing out several instances of the number three on the room's main display, "It is the opinion of Lieutenant T'Lan and myself that these unpack each time they are accessed to create the damaging instructions."

"So how you intend to use these?" Edwards asked.

"The instructions will rely on knowing the locations in the memory of the systems they are intended to disrupt." T'Lan answered, "No matter how they function this is a simple logical fact."

"Therefore," Max continued, "if we place the code fragments in locations known to us we can then write a simple program to point to that location and trigger the unpacking process."

"And what if you shut down something important in the process?" Edwards responded.

"Like a warp core say." Cole added.

"That is highly unlikely lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "We will be placing the virus fragments into a vastly different system to the one they were originally installed in with an addressing system designed for a much greater amount of data."

"Basically the virus will have nowhere to go." Max added.

"How can you be certain of that?" Edwards said, "What if it's programmed to adapt?"

"The *Nightfall's* nanite hive can be used to create a physical barrier around the code." Max told him. One of the upgrades made to the *Nightfall* was the inclusion of a hive of intelligent nanites identical to those that Max now carried within him instead of normal Borg nanoprobes. The original intention of this hive, like most of the *Nightfall's* unique systems was to act as a defence against the Borg. Any drone that attempted to assimilate part of the ship would find its nanoprobes overwhelmed by the nanite hive and could even be disabled by counter attacking nanites flooding into the drone using the same mechanism that it had used to inject nanoprobes into the *Nightfall*. But the nanites were useful for far more than just defending against the Borg. They could also effect repairs and monitor parts of the ship in detail not possible for the crew without first taking systems off line to conduct a high level diagnostic scan.

"Lieutenant Maximillian is correct captain." T'Lan agreed, "The nanites will be able to contain the virus within

the *Nightfall's* active volatile memory sectors. If there is any sign that it is migrating towards non-volatile sectors then they can wipe the code physically.”

“And what do you hope to find?” Cole asked.

“Seeing how the code unpacks could give us clues as to who programmed it.” Max said, “Right now all we have are suspicions.”

“Studying the exact contents of the unpacked code will also tell us what it is supposed to do by comparing the memory addresses it is seeking to access with the known structure of the shuttlecraft computer.” T'Lan added.

“Very well.” Edwards said, nodding, “Max, how long will it take you to set up a secure test environment for this?”

“Writing the necessary code should not take longer than an hour captain.” Max replied, “But establishing an area of secured memory and testing it will take about three hours.”

“In that case T'Lan I suggest you get some rest for the next four hours. Then work with Max to see what this virus is.” Edwards said.

“Captain there's another issue we've overlooked so far.” Cole commented and the other officers present all turned towards him, “We assumed that the anomaly in the update file was intended to be delivered to someone on this ship alone. But it looks like it's intended to shut down an entire vessel.”

“I would agree with that assessment.” Max added.

“So how many ships have received the same file we did?” Cole asked.

“Captain this could be a major problem.” Max said when he heard this, “My Borg enhanced physiology enables me to easily review the update files before running them, but other Starfleet engineers are more likely to just accept the file as secure and run it immediately.”

“Oh no.” Edwards said, wiping a hand across his forehead, “That means there could be dozens or even hundreds of ships affected.”

“In the worst case all of Starfleet could be disabled captain.” T'Lan pointed out.

“Okay I'll get West warning everyone not to run the program.” Edwards replied, getting out of his chair, “The rest of you are dismissed.”

Cole stepped into the turbolift with T'Lan.

“Are you not going to assist in warning Starfleet about the virus lieutenant commander?” she asked as the door slid shut and the turbolift began to move.

“No. My shift is over and if we're all that's left then I need to be alert when we plan our next actions.” Cole replied.

“Turbolift halt.” T'Lan said and when the turbolift came to a halt she looked directly at Cole, “In that case I would like to ask for your assistance. Though I am quite capable of changing from this space suit into my uniform by myself the process would be far more efficient if you would agree to assist me.”

Cole smiled.

“That does sound logical.” he replied.

“And in return I shall invite you to stay for dinner.” T'Lan added.

“Thank you, that sounds nice.” Cole said and T'Lan turned to face forwards again.

“Turbolift continue.” she said and as the turbolift began to move once more she slid her hand into Cole's and added, “Thank you Robert.”

"Lieutenant what have we got?" Edwards asked.

"I can't raise anyone so far sir." West replied, "No starships, outposts or starbases."

"There must be someone in range." Carr said.

"I'm picking up several ships operating within sensor range." West said, "But none of it's Starfleet traffic. It's a as if-" then she paused.

"Lieutenant?" Edwards said.

"Captain sensors just detected a large explosion. Sir it looks like a warp core breach." West replied.

"Run the location against what we have about Starfleet patrol routes." Carr ordered and West compared the sensor readings against her database of Starfleet activity.

"The location is an approximate match for the scheduled position of the *USS Citizenry* as of three hours ago." West said.

"Try a direct hail." Edwards ordered.

"*USS Citizenry* this is the *USS Nightfall*. Respond please." West transmitted, The *Nightfall*'s subspace antenna aligned to send the signal towards the other Starfleet vessel but there was no response.

"How far away was the *Citizenry*?" Carr asked.

"Two hours at warp nine." West replied.

"Lay in a course Mister Hamilton." Edwards ordered, "Maximum speed. And Lieutenant West, keep trying to raise someone."

"Captain that does mean abandoning the virus infected shuttle." Carr pointed out.

"I'm aware of that." Edwards replied. Then he added, "Deploy a beacon to warn people away from the shuttle then get us out of here."

"Bearing one four six mark twelve." Hamilton responded, "Engaging at warp nine point eight."

It did not take long for the *Nightfall* to get close enough to the position of the *USS Citizenry* that West was able to place a visual image of the vessel on the bridge's main display screen. Or rather an image of the debris field that was all that remained of the *Citizenry*.

"Good heavens." Carr said as she looked at the cloud of wreckage. Then she looked at West and added, "I don't suppose there are any life readings out there?"

"No commander." West replied, "Whatever happened the crew were unable to abandon ship."

"How many people were aboard that ship?" Noyal asked.

"Standard complement for a New Orleans-class starship is approximately five hundred and fifty." Edwards answered.

"Captain if this is a result of the computer virus then the potential for casualties is horrific." Carr added.

"Not to mention how my people would react to finding out that every Starfleet ship along this side of the Neutral Zone had been destroyed." Noyal added.

"Lieutenant West alert Starfleet command." Edwards ordered, "Tell them that the border defences may have been compromised."

"You're assuming that this virus hasn't hit the entire fleet." Carr said, "For all we know even Earth's defences are disabled."

"We can only hope that the sabotage is confined to this sector." Edwards replied.

"Captain I'm detecting another vessel at zero nine four mark three eight." West announced, "It appears to be without power and adrift."

"But intact?" Edwards asked.

"Yes sir." West answered.

"Hamilton, get us there. Maximum warp. Push the safety margins as much as you have to but I want rendezvous with that ship before they end up like this." Edwards said and he pointed to the wreckage on the display.

"Aye sir, coming about." Hamilton replied and he briefly dropped the *Nightfall* out of warp to manoeuvre the ship towards the new group of contacts before accelerating back to warp speed.

The Starfleet vessel detected by West turned out to be a squadron of four Steamrunner-class frigates that had been operating in close formation when the virus overwhelmed their systems and left them dead in space. Tumbling out of control, the starships' own mass had acted to draw them closer together with the result that two of them had collided and now appeared locked together.

"Report lieutenant." Edwards ordered.

"Life support has failed on all four ships captain." West replied, "But I'm reading life signs on all of them." then Edwards activated the *Nightfall*'s public address system.

"Yellow alert. Stand by for rescue operations. I want engineering and medical teams in transporter rooms in

five minutes. All ground forces to assemble on the hangar and prepare for deployment.”

“Captain I should join those teams.” Carr said and Edwards nodded.

“Go.” he said.

When Carr reached the transporter room she was surprised to find Nikki there as part of the rescue team about to beam over to one of the frigates.

“Nikki? What are you doing here?” Carr asked, “You should be in sickbay.”

“Oh come off it mom. The shuttle never reached vacuum and Doctor King cleared both me and Snowman for duty.” Nikki replied, “He also said that sickbay was likely to be flooded with people who really needed his help and that if we didn't get out he'd have us removed by security.”

“I'm getting Max to assign a replacement.” Carr said.

“Max is busy.” Nikki said, “And this internship was your idea. How am I supposed to get a good report at the end if I stay cooped up in our quarters the whole time?”

Carr sighed.

“Well just stay close to me.” she responded as she stepped onto the transporter pad and Nikki smiled as she joined her mother.

“Put us on the bridge of one of those ships.” Carr ordered and the transporter operator nodded before Carr added, “Energise.”

The moment the team materialised on the bridge they found themselves in pitch darkness and they could feel the cold on their skin.

“Who's there?” a voice called out of the darkness, the bridge crew having seen the brief light of the transporter as the team beamed in.

“Lieutenant Commander Carr. *USS Nightfall*.” Carr responded as she fumbled for her palm beacon. But it was Nikki who got to hers first and the handheld light illuminated the bridge, revealing several crew members huddled together in the darkness for warmth and the two medical officers that had beamed over as part of the rescue team rushed to assist them, “Where's your captain?” Carr asked, noticing that none of the crew present bore a captain's rank on their uniforms.

“We don't know.” one of the bridge crew answered, “Nothing's working. Not even our combadges.”

“The virus must have spread to every device aboard the ship.” Nikki commented.

“Virus? What virus?” the crewman said.

“The ships of your squadron have been affected by a computer virus lieutenant.” Carr told him and then she tapped her combadge, “Carr to Nightfall.”

“Go ahead commander.” Edwards responded.

“Captain we have survivors on the bridge but absolutely nothing is functional here. The virus appears to have corrupted the crew's combadges as well.”

“In that case do absolutely nothing to bring any systems back on line.” Edwards ordered, “Have the crew remove their combadges and set up pattern enhancers so we can get a lock on them and beam them out. I've got Heart and Shry organising the set up of emergency bunks now. *Nightfall* out.”

“Okay you heard the captain.” Carr said out loud to her engineers, “Get those pattern enhancers set up. Then when we've cleared the bridge we'll force open the jefferies tubes and see who else we can find onboard.”

Back on the *Nightfall*, Edwards switched from external communications to the ship's intercom.

“Bridge to engineering. Max are you there?” he asked.

“Right here captain.” Max replied, “I was just about to call you. I have completed testing of the viral containment system and am about to place the code fragments within it.”

“Excellent.” Edwards said, “I'm busy dealing with the evacuation of the frigates. Have you informed T'Lan yet?”

“Yes captain. She is on her way with Lieutenant Commander Cole.” Max said.

“Good. Get started as soon as they arrive and let me know what you find. Bridge out.” Edwards told him.

Max looked up from his console as Cole and T'Lan hurried into engineering.

“Over here.” he called out to them and he waved them towards him.

“Okay Max what do you have?” Cole asked as he and T'Lan approached.

“I have isolated this console from the *Nightfall*'s network using nanites.” Max explained, “And I was just about to introduce the viral code fragments that T'Lan discovered aboard the shuttle.” and he held up the tricorder T'Lan had used to study the shuttle.

“You have removed the wireless interface from that tricorder.” she observed.

“Yes, I didn't want to take the chance that the viral fragments could access them and transfer themselves to our network.” Max replied and then he prised open the back of the tricorder and removed the isolinear chip

that functioned as its internal drive, "Now I shall plug this directly into the console." he added, inserting the chip into a slot in the console. Then using the normal interface he removed the recovered code fragments from the isolinear chip and moved them to specific locations on the computer in front of him.

"Do we need to do anything else to keep this terminal secure?" Cole asked.

"No lieutenant commander." Max answered, "However, I would recommend that this be physically destroyed and disposed of rather than recycled." and he removed the isolinear chip and held it out towards Cole.

"I'll see to it later." Cole said, taking the chip, "But for now I want to see what you called us both down here for."

"Then I shall begin." Max said and he pressed one of a set of buttons he had set up on the touch screen to stimulate the memory sector where one of the viral fragments was stored.

"Impressive." T'Lan said as she and Max watched the reaction of the code fragment on the computer display.

"Okay you're going to have to help me here." Cole said as he too looked at the display and saw numbers being shuffled around.

"The virus is effectively growing out of the single corrupted sector." Max explained, displacing the contents of sectors around it.

"So what does that do?" Cole asked.

"It completely destroys the ability of the computer to find data." T'Lan told him, "Every computer subroutine carried out by a computer requires inputs in known locations and other specific locations in which to store outputs. When these cannot be found the system grinds to a halt."

"Meanwhile the virus is able seize control of systems away from the operating system because they are not only unable to override the commands it gives but because the monitoring subroutines are no longer receiving data from those systems that are looking for them elsewhere in memory."

"So who writes code like this?" Cole said, looking back and forth between Max and T'Lan, who in turn both glanced at one another.

"No one does." T'Lan replied.

"Not now, no." Max added, "But they did once, a long time ago."

"Oh let me guess." Cole said, "This is another example of plundered Iconian technology."

"Correct." Max said, "The Galaxy-class *USS Yamato* was affected by something similar. As was the *USS Enterprise D* when the *Yamato* shared its logs with them."

Cole winced.

"Max, you just listed two ships that aren't in service any more. Both were destroyed. Are you going to tell me that this virus was responsible?" he said.

"No commander. The *Yamato* was destroyed as a consequence of being exposed to an Iconian computer program but the *Enterprise* was able to purge its system of the corruption."

"Well how?" Cole asked.

"By rebooting their entire system and purging their volatile active memory." Max replied.

"That will not work in this case though." T'Lan added, "The code fragments we discovered were located in non-volatile memory and would survive a system reboot."

"Perhaps because the program that destroyed the *Yamato* and came close to also destroying the *Enterprise* is not believed to have been a true virus, but a communication program that was incompatible with Federation computer technology. Causing it to inadvertently become destructive."

"So could someone have adapted it into a weapon?" Cole said.

"That is possible." Max said, "Though whoever did so would have to obtain a copy of the program and be able to decipher it. Something likely to require the discovery of an intact Iconian facility."

"Like that one we found on Lasner Two?" Cole suggested.

"Possibly." Max replied.

"And how do we purge it?" Cole asked.

"That may be difficult lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "We do not know how the virus functions so cannot design a counter program to watch for its effects and block them before it reaches non-volatile memory."

"On the other hand we do know how to find it once it is in non-volatile memory." Max pointed out, "The virus may reside in a single memory sector but needs to expand in order to function and this creates the unusual bit state errors."

"But how can we be certain that we are purging the entire computer of the virus?" T'Lan asked, "As soon as any program hunting for these errors cleared a sector then any instance of the virus remaining in active memory could reinfect it."

"Not if we close the network down first to purge active memory." Max said, "Then we introduce nanites with the instruction to search every sector of non-volatile memory and physically destroy the infected ones."

"Define 'physically destroy' for me." Cole said.

"It means just that lieutenant commander." Max replied, "The nanites can take action to render the memory

sector unusable.”

“Won't that stop the computer working?” Cole asked.

“No.” T'Lan answered, “A computer can function with many millions of memory sectors inoperative. However, given the amount of non-volatile memory aboard even a shuttlecraft the process would be time consuming.”

“Injecting nanites into only the computer core of a ship the size of the *Nightfall* would take approximately eighteen hours to complete the checking and removal process.” Max added, “Of course the *Nightfall* itself could be cleared in a matter of minutes thanks to the nanite hive already present in our computer.”

Cole took a deep breath.

“Well at least it's something.” he said, “Now tell me how soon you can be ready to test this idea and I'll let Captain Edwards know.”

“I am ready now.” Max replied, “As I understand it, there are currently four starships adrift within transporter range that have been infected with the virus. I can beam over to any of them and deploy nanites into the computer core.”

Cole nodded.

“Hold that thought.” he said, “I'm guessing the captain won't have a problem with that but we better find out first.”

7.

"He wants to beam over to an infected ship and access the computer core?" Edwards said when Cole explained Max's plan to test his solution to the virus to him in his ready room.

"Apparently that's the most direct way of clearing the system sir." Cole replied.

"Then I don't suppose we have much choice do we?" Edwards said, "Eighteen hours though? I was hoping that he'd come up with something that would act a bit faster than that."

Just then his door sounded.

"Captain it's West." West's voice said from outside.

"Come in." Edwards replied and the door slid open to allow West to enter, "Yes lieutenant, how may I help you?" he asked.

"Captain I've been continuing to try contacting other Starfleet ships and I've been able to get through to some at last."

"You have? That's excellent." Edwards said, "Did you warn them not to install the update file?"

"That's just it sir, all of the ship's I contacted already had installed it. In fact most of them already had the updates installed before they were even downloaded into our computer. I have warned them about coming into contact with infected ships though."

"The delay in transmission." Cole said, "It could have been caused by someone adding the virus to the update."

"That's something else I've found out sir." West added, "Remember the communications relay station that went of line?"

"Yes, what about it?" Edwards asked in reply.

"Well it was the one that forwarded the update file to Starbase Ten." West said, "And it's been destroyed. I spoke to someone on the *USS Cavalry* and they said that from the amount of damage it looks like a reactor overload."

"Damn." Edwards said.

"Captain we need to go and take a look at that relay station." Cole said.

"I know." Edwards replied, "It could give us a hint as to who sabotaged the update file and allow us to track them. Then maybe we can get some answers about why they did this. Problem is we also need to start distributing nanites to disabled ships. Plus we've got almost eight hundred people aboard from those four Steamrunners."

"I could take a runabout to the location of the relay station." Cole suggested, "Me and a small team to investigate what happened and look for signs of the virus in whatever's left of the array computer."

"Who would you need?" Edwards asked.

"T'Lan and Doctor King to help me with the investigative work." Cole said, "Though having Hamilton along as a pilot would help. If anyone can get us to the location of the array in good time it's Bradley."

"Take Nayal as well." Edwards said.

"Nayal? Why?" Cole asked him.

"Because it now appears that only Starfleet vessels and facilities along the Neutral Zone were affected by this. With any luck she'll be able to point out signs of Romulan or Reman involvement."

"Very well sir. I'll have us ready to go within the hour." Cole replied.

The Danube-class runabout *Thames* flew from the *Nightfall's* hangar and immediately Hamilton steered it towards the heart of Federation space, a heading that would take them towards the destroyed antenna array. "Sublieutenant, do you really think you need that phaser?" King asked, looking at Nayal as she checked the phaser she brought with her.

"Yeah, it'll be fine in the arms locker with the rest." Cole added.

"Yeah right." Nayal responded, "Remember last time you brought us out in a runabout? We ended up being kidnapped by Nausicaan pirates who then handed us over to those spineless Ferengi. I'll keep this with me if you don't mind." then as she holstered the phaser she looked around at the other occupants of the runabout, "So how far is this array and how long until we get there?"

"It's a couple of days at warp five." Hamilton told her.

"Two days?" Nayal repeated, "So what are we going to do until we get there?"

"Sit quietly and let me read hopefully." King commented.

"I have observed that on long journeys many humans indulge in conversation regarding shared interests and experiences." T'Lan added.

"Yes let's do that." Nayal said excitedly.

"No let's not." King replied, frowning.

"Oh come on, surely there must be something that brings us all together. Something all five of us have in common. Now let's think what it could be." Nayal said and there was quiet until all of a sudden T'Lan looked at Nayal and made a suggestion.

"Everyone in this runabout has seen you naked." she said and Nayal's eyes widened.

"What?" she asked as the shuttle's other occupants turned to look at her and T'Lan.

"Both Lieutenant Commander Cole and I were present when our Ferengi captors took our clothing." T'Lan explained, "Doctor King was required to carry out a full medical examination of you when you came aboard the *Nightfall* and you have been indulging in a sexual relationship with Lieutenant Hamilton for just over eight months now."

"Hey, we are not in a relationship." Nayal protested, "We just sleep together sometimes."

"But T'Lan is correct when she says that Bradley's seen you naked." Cole commented.

"Lots of times." Bradley added, smiling.

"You ought to be defending me." Nayal told him.

"Why?" King asked, "Didn't you just say that you two weren't in a relationship?"

"You look really good naked." Bradley said, "That's defending you isn't it?"

"Certainly better than that duck covered onesie." King added.

Nayal sighed and looked at T'Lan.

"You did this deliberately didn't you cousin?" she asked.

"I just made an observation in response to your request." T'Lan replied, "I cannot help it if the only truthful answer is not to your liking."

"Oh this is going to be a long trip." Nayal said, sighing and shaking her head.

"Forty-six point four hours." T'Lan said.

Max stood looking at the computer core of one of the Steamrunner-class frigates. Twelve hours earlier he had inserted a large quantity of nanites into the core and left them to sweep through the ship's computer network and seek out every instance of the alien computer virus. According to his calculations there should have been ample time for the tiny machines to have completed their task on the frigate by now and so he prepared to reactivate the ship's computer. But first he patched into the nanites' hive mind, examining the communications between them. These appeared minimal, the machines had completed the task given to them before migrating back into the computer core and powering down until they either received new orders or found something to do of their own accord.

"Max to *Nightfall*." Max signalled, "I am about to reactivate the core."

"Understood Max." Edwards replied, "Be advised we are backing off to twenty thousand kilometres but we'll keep a transporter lock on your position just in case you need to evacuate."

"Acknowledged *Nightfall*. Max out." Max said. Then he reached out and pulled a large lever set into the side of the computer core. At first nothing happened but then lights started to come on in the core, first on various computer displays as the core began to restart itself and then the main overhead lighting engaged. Max stayed where he was, watching the nearest core display as it showed the progress of the restart procedure and the results of the self checking subroutines that were run automatically on start up. The large display in front of Max switched to show a schematic of the vessel, indicating the progress of the restart procedure. All across the ship systems reactivated after being forcibly shut down. Thanks to the corruption caused by the virus many of them had errors in their control firmware and the restart was delayed as fresh code was obtained from the backups in the computer core and loaded into the local systems. But less than five minutes after Max had pulled the lever the ship appeared to be up and running once more. More importantly there was no sign of the virus and Max smiled.

"Max to *Nightfall*." he signalled once more, "The restart is complete and there are no signs of the virus. Tell the crew that they can have their ship back."

"Excellent work Max." Edwards responded, "Get back over here and report to me immediately."

"So what's our status now then?" Edwards asked when Max was stood in front of him in his ready room while Carr sat on the other side of the desk.

"The *USS Iron Sky* appears to be fully functional captain." Max answered, "A number of perishable items it was carrying have been spoiled but the ship is intact and space worthy. I have instructed engineering teams to deploy nanites aboard the *Templar*, *Millennium* and *Collector*. However, both the *Millennium* and *Templar* will require further structural repair work to undo the damage done when they collided with one another. I do not recommend this is attempted until the computer network has been brought back online though."

"So what sort of time scale are we looking at?" Carr asked.

"Another twelve hours before the computer networks are purged of the virus and rebooted. Then another six to ten hours for the *Millennium* and *Templar* to be made warp capable." Max said.

"Does having us here speed things up at all?" Edwards asked.

"No captain." Max answered.

"In that case I'm going to suggest that we keep the injured from all four ships aboard the *Nightfall* and beam everyone else we evacuated over to the *Iron Sky*." Edwards said, "The ship should be able to hold them all while the *Collector* is brought back on line and then they can co-ordinate repairs on the the other two ships before splitting up to spread nanites to other disabled ships."

"And what will we be doing in the meantime?" Carr said, turning to look at Edwards.

"I intend to take the *Nightfall* to Starbase Ten." he replied, "This whole problem seems to be related to the update file that the Starbase received and distributed so I expect that the starbase itself has been disabled along with all of the ships docked there." then he looked at Max, "Max, I'm going to need you to prepare as many nanites as you can. Somehow I don't think just injecting a few million into the computer core at a starbase is going to do much good. We'll need to inject them all over if we're going to get the job done fast enough."

"Fast enough for what?" Carr asked.

"Fast enough to be able to deal with whatever's heading our way to take advantage of our current situation."

The Girl looked through a viewport into an enormous hangar. Within this hangar were several massive starships, each one cylindrical in shape with the surface of their outer hulls broken only by various weapon and sensor mountings. There were thrusters and impulse engines to allow the massive vessels to manoeuvre at sublight speeds but no signs of the warp nacelles needed for interstellar travel as practised by the Federation and other similar civilisations.

"How much longer?" The Girl asked out loud.

"Soon now." a voice replied from nowhere.

"Soon?" The Girl said, "Soon is not an answer. I have done my part now is it really too much for the military to be ready to do its as well?"

"You have moved faster than our fleet commanders expected." the voice replied, "Their requests for me to reactivate these ships came only recently. Perhaps had you made clear your plans longer ago then I could have reactivated them sooner. As it is I am doing my best to make ready vessels that have not flown for millennia while their crews must refresh themselves on skills that they have not had to put to the test for a similar amount of time."

The Girl sighed and shook her head.

"What skill is there is shooting a defenceless target?" she asked, "Trust me dock master, if your tardiness costs us this operation then I shall see to it that your successor is chosen for their ability to be punctual. Do you understand?"

"Given your reputation, how could I not?" the dock master responded.

"Good. Then get me my ships before the Federation can reinforce their border and all this is for nothing."

a.

The orbital part of Starbase Ten was dark and lifeless when the *Nightfall* arrived and all of West's efforts to communicate with it were fruitless. The same was also true of the starships drifting close by that had succumbed to the virus either as they approached the starbase or just as they left. However, it turned out to be quite straight forward to make contact with the government of the planet below and they were able to bring in the admiral who commanded the starbase.

"We still don't now exactly what happened." the Bolian admiral said, "Systems just started shutting down without any hint of trouble. Shuttles, starships even the space dock itself and all of our ground installations suddenly became lifeless lumps of junk. Thankfully the local government was able to organise a rescue operation using defence force and civilian craft, otherwise I'd still be trapped up there along with more than fifty thousand others. Not to mention the damage that could have been done if they hadn't been able to tow the disabled ships into more stable orbits before they crashed into the planet. Do you have any idea what happened?"

"Yes admiral." Edwards replied, "The update package was corrupted, I believe when it came through the communications array that was destroyed recently. This virus was based around Iconian technology and was able to scramble our networks from within. The damage affects not only active memory but also the non-volatile code stored on our computers so a plain reboot won't have any effect."

"How is your ship still functioning?" the admiral asked.

"My engineer was able to detect the presence of an anomaly within the update and upon investigation we found out what it did before installing it aboard our ship." Edwards explained, "As it happens the *Nightfall* may be immune in any case. The nanites in our network would have been able to override the virus. Fortunately we've also been able to repair the damage done to other vessels using our nanites as well. They can be used to physically destroy the virus while it lies dormant in an inactive computer network. The problem is that it takes time and I don't think that's something we have a lot of. I'd like to send an engineering team over to the space dock to begin purging the virus from it and all of the ships docked there. At the same time my chief engineer can provide replicator patterns for the nanites needed to repair the damage and that can be passed on to other planets with Starfleet facilities that could have been affected."

"And what about tracking down the source of this virus Captain Edwards? Do you have a plan for that?" the Bolian admiral asked.

"Yes sir, my people are on it now." Edwards answered, "Have you been able to contact Starfleet command?"

"Yes, according to them the entire border along the Neutral Zone has gone dark, only civilian and local authority signals are getting out. They're preparing forces to move in to investigate but without knowing the source the reinforcements are holding further back from the border."

The Centaur-class destroyer *USS Cavalry* was still in the process of gathering evidence from the debris that was all that remained of the communications array when the *Thames* arrived.

"Hail them." Cole ordered.

"USS Cavalry this is the USS Thames." Hamilton signalled.

"Hello *Thames*, this is the *Cavalry*." the larger vessel responded, "What brings you here?"

"We've come to investigate how the destruction of the array fits in with the computer virus that's affected our ships and outposts along the Romulan Neutral Zone." Cole answered, "Can we beam over to discuss it?"

"Confirmed *Thames*. The captain will see you in the briefing room. *Cavalry* out."

Cole smiled.

"Looks we're invited over." he said.

After beaming across to the *USS Cavalry*, Cole and the rest of his team were shown to the ship's briefing room where Captain Dollis was waiting for them. As they were being escorted through the corridors of the destroyer there were several odd glances from members of the crew when they saw Nayal in her Romulan uniform aboard their ship as a guest.

"Good job we didn't bring Max along." Hamilton commented, thinking of the reaction most people had to seeing a Borg drone in person, "They'd have really freaked out."

"Not as much as if Nayal had turned up in that onesie." King added and both he and Cole smirked.

Dollis was a Suliban and he stood up and smiled at his guests as they entered.

"Welcome." he said, "Please sit down. Then tell me all about this virus and how it links in with the array."

"Where to start?" Cole commented as he sat down.

"The beginning." T'Lan added and King smiled.

"Of course." Cole said. Then he looked at Dollis, "Captain I'm sure that you're aware by now that almost all Starfleet's forces along the Neutral Zone have been disabled."

"Yes, we've been put on standby to reinforce the area." Dollis replied.

"Well that is a result of a computer virus that was spread through the Starfleet update files that was distributed recently." Cole continued and Dollis frowned.

"But we installed that update aboard the *Cavalry*." he said, "And as you can see this ship hasn't been affected by any computer virus."

"It is our belief that the virus was introduced when it arrived at the array." T'Lan explained, "Therefore, only vessels that received the update after passing through here were affected."

"We're hoping that there would be some evidence left in the wreckage." Hamilton added.

"What sort of evidence?" Dollis asked.

"T'Lan?" Cole said, looking at the Vulcan woman.

"Ideally physical fragments of computer hard drives." she said, "Though I should caution you that these should not be connected to your network. The standard Starfleet anti-virus systems are ineffective against the virus used."

"Well you're welcome to study what we've got." Dollis said, "But there's not much to go on. We've not found anything that wasn't smashed beyond use. The one body we recovered had been exposed to vacuum for some time."

"A body?" King said, "That sounds like something I should take a look at."

"Our own medical officer scanned it." Dollis said, "She said that the cause of death was asphyxiation due to exposure to vacuum. The fragmentation damage was post mortem and likely to be a result of the body being hit by debris from the array when it exploded."

"I'm more interested in what may have been inside the body beforehand." King said.

"You think it's one of the alien agents?" Nayal asked.

"The virus had to come from somewhere." King pointed out.

"It is logical to assume that one of the crew of the array was responsible for the virus being added to the update." T'Lan added.

"Just one minute." Dollis said, "What's this about an alien agent?"

"Over the past couple of years we've been encountering agents of an alien power." Cole told him, "They can be human, Vulcan, Romulan, any species at all. They look and act perfectly normal but their bodies have been enhanced with some sort of synthetic flesh that can mimic any sort of body tissue and also act as a data storage medium."

"That doesn't sound good." Dollis said, "Trust me, my people have far too much experience of bodily enhancement to be willing to ignore something like this. I'll have you given access to the body immediately."

"Thanks." Cole replied, "And while Doctor King is performing an examination the rest of us will take a closer look at the debris."

Other than parts of the numerous subspace antennas that had been hurled free when the reactor had exploded there were few pieces of the array that were still recognisable, most being too badly scorched and deformed for their original purpose to be easily determined. But despite this T'Lan still used the runabout's sensors to scan and catalogue each individual piece of wreckage, making use of the preliminary sweep carried out by the crew of the *Cavalry* to identify those fragments that were still vaguely recognisable in an attempt to figure out what had gone where.

"Well I'm not seeing anything that looks like the residue from Romulan explosives." Nayal said as she studied another console, "So if the reactor blew up then it wasn't because of a Romulan bomb."

"There are no other explosive residues present either." T'Lan added.

So we're going with the theory that the virus caused the destruction of the array then?" Hamilton asked.

"So far we've seen only one ship actually destroyed by it." Cole pointed out.

"Blowing things up attracts a lot of attention." Nayal commented, "Just turning them off is sneakier."

"More Romulan?" T'Lan asked and Nayal smiled.

"Quite so cousin." she replied.

"Please refrain from calling me cousin." T'Lan said, "We are not-" and then she suddenly broke off.

"What's wrong?" Cole asked.

"There was a vessel present when the array exploded." T'Lan answered.

"How can you tell?" Nayal asked, "Any warp trails would have dissipated by now."

"Maybe not if someone was using an older warp drive that doesn't stabilise the subspace barrier as it passes." Hamilton pointed out.

"Nobody uses engines like that any more." Cole said.

"I am not detecting a warp signature." T'Lan said.

"Then how can you tell that there was another ship present?" Cole asked, "If it blew up too then surely the crew of the *Cavalry* would have found some trace of it by now."

"It was not destroyed." T'Lan said, "It was protected by its shields."

"Okay, I give up." Nayal said, "How do you know that there was another ship here cousin?"

"Because the debris that struck the shield is still present." T'Lan answered.

"Go on." Cole said.

"A deflector shield is a shell of gravitons around a vessel." T'Lan began, "Thus when objects such as the debris from the array strike this they are briefly subjected to intense gravitational forces and are distorted by them. I have discovered numerous fragments that have been subject to such forces on the outer edge of the debris field here." and she pointed to her sensor display, indicating a particular area of the debris cloud, "Form the amount of distortion I can estimate how far the debris had travelled from its point of origin before striking the shield."

"What good does that do?" Hamilton asked.

"Because then we can track it back to where the ship was and the way that the debris spread out will tell us how big the ship it struck was." Cole answered and looking at T'Lan he added, "Right?"

"Correct lieutenant commander." she said.

"Wow." Nayal commented, "She's going to have to be extra nice to him in bed tonight for figuring that out."

Ignoring this, Cole leant over T'Lan's shoulder and looked at her console.

"So how big are we talking about?" he asked.

"It appears to have been very small lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "Perhaps just two or three metres square."

"That's not just small, that's tiny." Hamilton said, "A shuttle."

Cole frowned.

"T'Lan have you detected any signs of the array's shuttle amongst this wreckage?" he asked.

"Wouldn't it be made of the same material as the array?" Nayal said.

"The hull would be yes. But there would be things that the array itself wouldn't have." Cole replied.

"Like an impulse and warp drive." Hamilton said.

"And phasers." Cole added, "Any of which should be fairly easy to find even amongst this." and he waved at the viewport at the debris outside the runabout.

"There are no indications of the shuttle lieutenant commander." T'Lan said after running another scan of the area.

"So how come that wasn't noticed sooner?" Nayal asked.

"Because in cases like this everybody looks for what is there, not what isn't." Cole told her, "At least not until you know what you're looking for."

"But one of those aliens wouldn't need a shuttle to escape." Hamilton said, "We've all witnessed them pull their disappearing act."

"Maybe that has a maximum range after all." Nayal suggested, "The array could be too deep in Federation space for it to work properly."

"If that technology is based on Iconian gateway tech then it should be able to cross the galaxy." Cole said, "I think that we're not dealing with an alien here. I think it's a traitor inside Starfleet."

"That would be a logical deduction." T'Lan added, "A traitor could pass the medical examinations that reveal the enemy's presence."

"All except the spy we think is aboard the *Nightfall*." Nayal said.

"Maybe that's a traitor as well." Hamilton said.

"Let's forget about our suspicions that there's a spy aboard the *Nightfall* for now." Cole said, holding up a hand, "I just want to find whoever is responsible for this. T'Lan, can you tell which way the shuttle went?"

"Unfortunately not lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded, "As has already been pointed out there is no warp trail to follow."

"So where is the logical place to head for?" Cole asked.

"The nearest inhabited system." Hamilton answered before T'Lan could, "We are talking about a Class Two shuttle aren't we?"

"That is the type of shuttle typically assigned to facilities such as this array." T'Lan said.

"Then whoever's riding in it would start suffering class two claustrophobia after a while," Hamilton said, "and they'd want to get out as soon as they could."

"That's right." Cole agreed, "T'Lan what is the closest inhabited system to here?"

"The Culrani system." T'Lan answered, "Two point four light years away at two four six mark eight one."

"At warp four that's about a ten day journey." Hamilton said.

"Eight point five." T'Lan corrected him.

"Eight point five then." Hamilton said, "Either way it won't have reached it yet."

"But it will reach the system before we can catch it at our top speed." T'Lan pointed out, "And the USS *Cavalry* is needed here to set up an emergency relay."

"In that case we need to get Doctor King back from the *Cavalry* and get after that shuttle." Cole said, "He already has a head start on us and he's getting further away with every passing minute."

“Approximately one point eight billion kilometres every minute at warp four.” T'Lan said.
“I'm guessing we won't be pulling over for bathroom breaks then.” Hamilton said.

3.

Piloting a Starfleet vessel, even just a shuttle, meant that Nott was able to bypass most space traffic control and land away from settled areas. There were still some questions asked of him but by invoking the right of Starfleet to visit any Federation world unannounced Nott was able to deflect all of these. If the locals did decide to pass on a complaint to Starfleet Command it would be some time before anyone came to investigate and by that time Nott would have moved on.

Before the Dominion War Nott had been a member of the Maquis, being arrested and imprisoned by Starfleet just a few months after joining the Maquis, only to be released and pardoned at the start of the war on the condition he signed up to fight. But during the short time he had been fighting with the Maquis he had been made aware of the Culrani system as one stage in the supply line of weapons coming from sympathisers in the core of Federation space towards the demilitarised zone and it was Nott's hope that at least some of the individuals who had helped smuggle the weapons would still be present and willing to help him.

Nott set the shuttle down in a crater left behind by a long defunct mining operation. When he had last been to this world the crater and the cluster of disused buildings around it had been used as part of the smuggling operation, providing somewhere for ships to land and be loaded or unloaded discretely. The shuttle that Nott had flown here included a basic replicator and he used this to create a set of civilian clothing for himself, durable and practical to wear. He also made sure that it was cut so that he could conceal a phaser beneath it, just in case the locals decided to turn him in rather than help him. Then after stuffing some rations and a few of his bars of latinum into a bag he exited the shuttle and sealed the hatch behind him, not wanting anyone who happened along to be able to get inside and take either the rest of his latinum or the shuttle itself.

Nott then looked around to get his bearings. From the air he had spotted several settlements in the area, the closest of which was still about ten kilometres distant. But with nothing else to be doing and unwilling to risk flying the shuttle right up to an inhabited area he started to walk.

"I have the information you requested lieutenant commander." T'Lan said as the runabout approached the third planet of the Culrani system. After leaving the site of the destroyed array Cole had instructed to T'Lan to communicate with Starfleet to request details of the personnel assigned to it. As expected the array had been crewed by two officers and King was able to identify one of them as the deceased man blown into space, which meant that the pilot of the missing shuttle could only be the other.

"Go on." King said as everyone gathered around T'Lan's console to look at the image of Nott, "Let's hear who we're after."

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Martin Nott." T'Lan said, "A Starfleet officer who deserted his first assignment following graduation from the academy to join the Maquis. He was arrested and charged less than three months later, being sentenced to eighteen years in a Federation rehabilitation colony. However, at the outbreak of the Dominion War he was among those offered a pardon in exchange for his re-enlistment in either Starfleet or any Federation member world's military. He opted to rejoin Starfleet and served for the entire war without distinction. After the war he remained in Starfleet where he has received one barely passable performance review after another."

"Hence his failure to progress past junior grade lieutenant." King commented.

"Exactly." T'Lan said, "His file indicates that he has not even attempted to gain promotion for six years and that his poor attitude to his duties resulted in his being transferred away from a starship posting to the communications relay array where he continued to receive barely passable performance reviews."

"The very epitome of a disgruntled employee." King commented.

"Yeah," Hamilton added, "that guy's one bad day away from climbing to the top of a tower with a phaser rifle." and he mimed fired a weapon, prompting a frown from Cole.

"I have heard humans refer to unhappy people as disgruntled." Noyal said, "Does that mean being happy makes you 'gruntled'?"

"No. No it doesn't." Cole said.

"Your language is weird." Noyal replied.

"Vulcan is certainly more-" T'Lan began.

"Logical?" King interrupted.

"If we could stick to the matter at hand?" Cole said. Then he looked at Hamilton, "Perhaps you could take us in. Contact traffic control and see whether they've seen our missing shuttle."

"Why wouldn't they have?" Noyal asked.

"Because we're just assuming that Mister Nott came here." King replied, "He could have gone to a different

system or be hiding elsewhere in this one. Perhaps waiting to see whether anyone comes after him.”

Taking his seat at the front of the runabout Hamilton activated the communication system.

“This is the *USS Thames* calling Culrani traffic control on all hailing frequencies. Respond please.” he signalled.

“*USS Thames* this is Culrani traffic control. Please state your destination.”

“Culrani traffic control we are here in pursuit of a Type Nine shuttlecraft. Have you seen any come by in the past few days?” Hamilton asked.

“One moment *Thames*.” the traffic controller replied and the channel went silent. Then a short time later the traffic controller returned, “Confirmed *Thames*. A Type Nine shuttle arrived approximately forty hours ago. It claimed Starfleet privilege and landed away from any of our space ports. Co-ordinates are following on a sub channel.”

Cole looked at T'Lan who nodded back at him when she saw the data being sent by the Culrani traffic control service.

“Okay we've got it.” Cole told Hamilton, “Lay in a course.”

“Thank you Culrani traffic control.” Hamilton signalled, “We have the information. *Thames* out.”

“Come to heading zero one three mark four.” T'Lan told him and Hamilton nodded as he steered the *Thames* towards the area where Nott had landed. A course that took the runabout towards the part of the planet that was currently shrouded in darkness.

“I'm not picking up anything on sensors.” he said as the runabout cleared the upper atmosphere and found itself flying through clouds that served to obscure their view even further than the darkness.

“T'Lan, what can you make out?” Cole asked, knowing that the Vulcan science officer's ability to obtain usable information from the sensors was superior to Hamilton's.

“This area has seen considerable mining activity in the past lieutenant commander.” she said as she studied her initial scan results, “This means that there is a considerable scattering of left over minerals in the upper layers of the soil.”

“Shouldn't the mining corporations have cleaned all that up?” King asked.

“Only if the presence of the minerals is considered hazardous.” T'Lan replied, “But the minerals in question are not dangerous to any indigenous or imported life forms.”

“So they just sweep new top soil over them and leave them in place.” Cole added, “Making the whole area a sensor black spot for anyone careful enough to limit their energy emissions. It's an old Maquis trick.”

“Perhaps we should have brought Jenna along with us.” Hamilton said.

“Lieutenant West's Maquis experience would not help us detect the shuttle Lieutenant Hamilton.” T'Lan replied.

“So what will cousin?” Nayal asked.

“Please do not call me 'cousin'.” T'Lan said, “But in answer to your question I believe that it may be possible to trick the shuttle itself into revealing it's location.”

“How can you do that?” King asked.

“Assuming that the shuttlecraft has been placed into a low power mode to avoid detection while at the same time preserving power to security systems and enabled a rapid start up sequence should the need arise for a quick getaway I can force the computer to switch on.” T'Lan explained.

“Mind telling us how you'd do that?” Nayal asked.

“Certainly.” T'Lan responded as she entered a series of instructions into her console, “The shuttlecraft's computer will be set to activate should any one of a series of predetermined conditions apply, including an attempt to break into the shuttlecraft, physical damage to any part of it or upon receipt of an appropriate signal.”

“You mean like a remote call?” Cole asked.

“That is one possibility.” T'Lan answered.

“But we don't know how Nott's configured the parameters for such a call do we?” King said.

“Indeed we do not. But there are other signals that would automatically wake up the computer.” T'Lan said, “Such as a distress signal.”

“Whoa!” Cole exclaimed, “T'Lan there are regulations about sending false distress signals. Trigger one off here and we'll have local law enforcement demanding our heads.”

“Not to mention that Nott could pick up the signal as well.” Hamilton added, “He's going to know that a Starfleet vessel coming here would be looking for him even if it was calling for help.”

“Both of those points are valid.” T'Lan said, “Which is why I propose to broadcast a signal with the format of a distress call but in a directional mode rather than a wide broadcast. I would also leave out all of the identifying and status information. Only the priority header would remain.”

“So it's not an actual distress call, but any receiver aligned to it would think it was?” Nayal said.

“Just long enough to activate a computer in standby mode.” T'Lan responded.

“That's being awfully literal with the regulations about distress signals lieutenant.” King said sternly and he

turned to Cole, "Are you going to go along with this?" he asked.

"I don't see that we have any choice." Cole replied, "That shuttle's here somewhere and we need to find it. Hopefully there won't be any other receivers out here to pick up our signal." then looking at T'Lan he added, "Begin transmission as soon as you're ready T'Lan."

"Confirmed lieutenant commander, commencing transmission." T'Lan replied and she activated the runabout's transmitter.

"So do you have a particular course I should follow?" Hamilton asked.

"Just avoid settlements that could have receivers in them that will pick up our signal and alert the authorities." Cole replied.

"Understood." Hamilton said, "If I keep us low it will limit how far the signal can spread, then I'll gain altitude more when we get further away from habitation for better coverage."

Just then T'Lan's console chirped.

"Got something already T'Lan?" Cole asked.

"It would appear so lieutenant commander." she replied, "Our signal was received by something located at bearing three two eight. Distance seven point four kilometres."

"I don't see much out there." Hamilton said as he looked out of the runabout's forward viewport, "It's all too dark."

"Then take us in for a closer look. But no spotlights, just our running lights will do. I don't want to give away that we're looking for something if there's anyone down there." Cole ordered, "And T'Lan, cease transmitting while we investigate."

"Affirmative lieutenant commander, ceasing transmission." T'Lan replied. Then she added, "Activating passive light amplification detection." On the display in front of her T'Lan brought up the feed from a camera mounted in the nose of the runabout. Equipped with the best light amplification equipment available this showed her the area beneath the vessel in perfect detail as if it was daylight outside and as the runabout flew over the crater where Nott had landed she saw the shuttle from the array come into view, "Target identified." she announced, "No signs of movement in the area though."

"Okay this is it." Cole said, "Hamilton set us down about a thousand metres away. Then we'll go in on foot. Everybody grab a phaser just in case but keep it set to stun."

"A stun setting won't work if we encounter any of those zombies or those things they call fleshforms."

Hamilton pointed out. 'Zombies' was an informal term applied by many of the *Nightfall's* crew to the alien agents because of their habit of using reanimated corpses, while the fleshforms were constructs made entirely out of the synthetic flesh they used to enhance their agent's bodies in a similar way to how Emma's physical body had been constructed.

"There is no evidence that one of the aliens themselves is present here." T'Lan said, "It is highly likely that we are looking for an individual who is collaborating with them instead."

"So phasers on stun." Cole added, "I don't want anyone accidentally vaporising someone's home."

"As you wish." Hamilton replied, "Taking us down now."

Hamilton set the runabout down just as Cole had ordered and Cole began to hand out phasers to everyone but Nayal who still had one holstered at her waist.

"Everyone take a palm beacon as well." he said, "But keep them switched off for now. T'Lan, I want you to guide us in with your tricorder."

"Affirmative lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "I have the co-ordinates for the shuttle locked in."

Cole was the first to disembark from the shuttle, followed by T'Lan. Then before any of the others could leave King stepped closer to them.

"I take it you two have your phasers set to kill?" he asked quietly and Hamilton and Nayal exchanged glances before looking back at him.

"Just in case." Hamilton said.

"Good. Me too." King replied, "If anyone asks just tell them I ordered you to do it." and he tapped the row of three gold dots on his collar.

"Yes sir commander." Hamilton responded, saluting before they exited the shuttle.

Cole continued to lead the way towards the shuttle while T'Lan stayed close behind him to point out the way. There were few clouds that night and Culrani's moons reflected more than enough light to see by without the use of the palm beacons. Although this made the away team's advance easier with obstacles being visible before tripping anyone it also meant that they had to be more cautious about being observed. Normally T'Lan's tricorder could have been used to detect an observer at a distance beyond what visibility was provided by the moonlight, however if Nott had a tricorder of his own operating in a passive mode then the scan would be easily detectable and so T'Lan was unable to conduct any active scans. This meant that despite the relatively short distance that needed to be covered it still took more than an hour to reach the crater where Nott had landed the shuttle.

"Looks dead." King commented when he saw the darkened shuttle at the bottom of the crater.

"My tricorder indicates no sign of activity from within the shuttlecraft." T'Lan added, "Though the hull itself will shield most low level activity from a passive scan."

"We can't risk anything more." Cole said.

"I suppose all that's left is to go and take a look in person then." Hamilton said and Cole nodded.

"Okay we spread out." he ordered, "Hamilton will stay here with me while the rest of you space yourselves out evenly. Then Hamilton and I will head straight down there."

Cole and Hamilton then waited as the others split up and moved around the edge of the crater, positioning themselves at roughly equal distances around it and taking aim with their phasers before signalling their readiness.

"Okay let's go." Cole said and both he and Hamilton vaulted over the rim of the crater and hurried down the slope towards the shuttle. The ground was loose under their feet and despite their eagerness to reach the bottom quickly both men had to take care that they did so under controlled conditions.

"So far so good." Hamilton said when he and Cole reached the shuttle and pressed themselves up against the hull either side of the hatch, "Shall we knock?"

"Why bother?" Cole responded, "It's a Starfleet shuttle and we're Starfleet officers. Let's just go right in." and he moved his hand to the hatch control. However, when he attempted to open the hatch it remained sealed and there was just a buzzing sound from the panel.

"That's not very welcoming is it?" Hamilton said.

"No it's not." Cole agreed and he tapped his combadge, "T'Lan we need you down here to override the lock. Doctor King and Nayal, you just keep watch. We may have alerted Nott to our presence by trying to open the hatch."

"On my way lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded and the Vulcan was soon moving down the slope towards the shuttle as well, "I will need to patch in wirelessly." she said when she reached the shuttle and she held up her tricorder towards it.

"Do it." Cole said, "If anyone's going to pick it up I think they'll already know that we're here."

Despite it being in a low power mode, T'Lan was rapidly able to connect with the shuttle's computer and she began the procedure of fooling it into releasing the security seal on the hatch. Nott had put the seal in place in something of a hurry rather than taking the time to change the settings away from those in place by default and so it took only a short time for T'Lan to convince the computer that the trio of Starfleet officers standing outside were authorised to enter.

There was a sudden hiss as the hatch began to open and both Cole and Hamilton jumped back, pointing their phasers into the shuttle just in case Nott had been hiding inside all along. However, they found the shuttle to be empty and Cole took the opportunity to activate his palm beacon, directing the light into the shuttle. The first thing that he and the other two officers behind him noticed was the Starfleet service division uniform tossed over one of the seats but then the beam of light picked out something stuffed under one as well.

"I wonder what's in there?" Cole said as he crept forwards and holstered his phaser so that he could grab hold of the bag, "Wow this is heavy." he added as he pulled it out from under the pilot's seat and as he lifted it up the bag fell open and a single bar of gold pressed latinum fell to the floor of the shuttle.

"Is that what I think it is?" Hamilton asked.

"Latinum." Cole replied, "The bag's full of it."

"A Starfleet officer is unlikely to have acquired so much honestly." T'Lan commented as Cole began emptying the bag out onto one of the shuttle's seats, "It is logical to assume that this represents a bribe given to Junior Lieutenant Nott in exchange for his agreeing to distribute the virus."

"And since he left it here then that means he'll be back for it." Hamilton said.

"Maybe, but we can't be sure how long that will be." Cole pointed out, "If we just sit and wait we could be

here a long time.”

“We also have no way of knowing if this represents all of the lieutenant's pay off or just a small fraction he left behind.” T'Lan added, “If he has sufficient resources with him he could opt to bribe his way out of Federation territory and abandon this bag.”

“That's still a lot of latinum.” Hamilton said.

“Indeed, but there is no logic in returning here only to be arrested lieutenant. He would be unable to spend any of it.” T'Lan said.

“So that brings us back to having to track down wherever he went to arrest him.” Cole said.

“What if he beamed away?” Hamilton asked.

“Then why leave the latinum and his uniform?” Cole responded, “No, he left on foot and he wanted to blend in. We need to look for a settlement, somewhere where he could find people willing to help him for the right price.”

Nott had left his combadge in the shuttle with his uniform to guarantee that it could not be used to track him. But he had brought along a compact PADD and as soon as T'Lan overrode the seal on the shuttle's hatch the PADD alerted him.

“Oh not now.” Nott hissed as he pulled the PADD from his pocket and looked at it discretely. Then he looked around the bar he had spent most of the last two days in, hoping to find someone who could either take him off world or alternately point him towards someone else who could. But so far his efforts had been met with failure. Though the Maquis had used Culrani as a transfer point for arms they had enjoyed no popular support this far from the DMZ and there was little in the way of a criminal underworld that Nott could make use of and it was looking increasingly likely that he would have to move to a larger settlement where it was far more likely that local law enforcement would have been alerted to watch for him. But a video feed from the shuttle's cockpit flight recording system showed a team of Starfleet officers entering it and it would now be only a matter of time before they tracked him here.

There was one plus point to the situation though. The arrival of a Starfleet starship in orbit would have attracted attention and there would be reports of it somewhere in the local media. But using his PADD to access the local news feeds came up with nothing which told Nott that he did not need to worry about hundreds of Starfleet personnel and a starship that could hunt him all across the quadrant if needed, instead only a small team had arrived to search for him and their vessel would be equally as small. Most likely a long range shuttle or runabout and either of these was a ship that Nott could use to escape Federation space without needing to rely on anyone else's help.

Smiling, Nott put the PADD away and downed what remained of his drink. Then he got up and left the bar, sliding his hand inside his jacket to where he had his phaser concealed just in case Starfleet were close at hand.

Many of the buildings in the settlement had the appearance of having been assembled from modular pre-fabricated components but there were others among them that had been built in other styles and from other materials as the settlement expanded. The roads between the buildings were wide enough to take vehicles travelling in opposite directions while raised walkways offered pedestrians alternative routes across the settlement.

“There are approximately two thousand individuals in the settlement.” T'Lan said as she scanned it with her tricorder, “Of a mix of species.”

“So we won't be picking him out from a long distance scan then.” Nayal said.

“What about scanning for something he may have with him?” Hamilton suggested and the others looked at him.

“What were you considering lieutenant?” T'Lan asked.

“Well he may have latinum with him.” Hamilton said, “More than most people here are likely to have.”

“A phaser.” King added and when the rest of the away team looked in his direction he added, “Well you don't think that a traitor on the run is likely to have come here unarmed do you?”

“Good point.” Cole replied, “T'Lan-”

“I am already scanning lieutenant commander.” she said, holding up her tricorder. Then after a short time she added, “I am detecting several compact high energy sources suggestive of the presence of weapons such as phasers, disruptors, pulse guns or lasers. However, without any of them being discharged within the scan field I cannot identify them more precisely.”

“In that case we'll head into town and start asking around.” Cole said, “We'll try and find where someone would go to acquire temporary lodgings and cross reference them with the results of T'Lan's scan.” then he began to walk towards the settlement with the rest of his team following close behind.

Nott had been able to obtain a hooded jacket that allowed him to move about the settlement discretely and

right now he used the anonymity it provided to climb up to the elevated walkways and make his way to a vantage point that offered a good view of the countryside just beyond the settlement in the direction of where he had landed the shuttle. Therefore, when the Starfleet away team came walking towards the settlement he saw them coming before they spotted him and under his hood he smiled.
"I have you now." he muttered to himself.

There was a small sheriff's station in the settlement that had a single bored looking deputy sat behind a desk when the Starfleet team entered the building. Frowning, the deputy got to her feet.

"Can I help you?" she asked, curious as to why four Starfleet officers and a Romulan would be walking into the station unannounced.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole." Cole announced, "*USS Nightfall*."

"Deputy Easy." the woman responded, "I wasn't aware that there were any starships in the system."

"There aren't." Cole replied, "We came by runabout. It's landed out by some old mine workings."

"And what brings you to this corner of nowhere?" Easy asked, "With a Romulan officer in tow as well no less. We don't see many Romulan refugees this deep into Federation space."

"Sublieutenant Nayal serves aboard the *Nightfall* as an advisor." Cole said, "We're here looking for this man." and he held out a PADD with Nott's face and profile shown on it. But Easy shook her head.

"Can't say I've seen him." she said, "But if it's alright I'll take a copy of this and distribute it to the rest of the deputies. Even if there are only four of us here in town."

"That's fine." Cole replied, "The file isn't secured. But we were hoping to be able to find him quickly."

"Why?" Easy asked as she plugged the PADD into her computer, "What's he supposed to have done?"

"Junior Lieutenant Nott is a suspect in multiple counts of damage to Federation property, destruction of Federation property, theft of Federation property, desertion, espionage, murder and treason." T'Lan said and Easy dropped the PADD.

"Holy crap!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening, "And you think he's here?"

"We found his shuttle at the mine and this is the closest settlement." Hamilton said.

"He'd have got here up to a couple of days ago." King added.

"Probably looking for a way to get off world." Cole added.

"Well he won't have much luck with that around here." Easy said, "No one in this town has anything capable of breaking orbit."

"That just means he's still here." Nayal said, smiling, "Just waiting for us to find him."

"Where would someone go for lodgings in this town?" Cole asked as Easy handed him his PADD back.

"There are several places." she replied, "Try looking over to the west of town. But I suggest you start with a place called 'Lucky Joe's'. The place is as basic as they come so the staff don't ask any questions. It's on Third Street."

"Got it." Cole said, "Thanks for your help."

When the team from the *Nightfall* left the sheriff's station Nott was still watching from the walkway. He had hoped that they would split up to search the town for him but he saw them all turn and head in the same direction, towards the area of town where he had found a room. But he followed them nonetheless, keeping to the elevated walkways for a better view.

"Lieutenant commander." T'Lan said as the team continued to walk through the streets of the town.

"Yes T'Lan?" Cole responded.

"I believe we are being followed." T'Lan told him.

"What make you say that cousin?" Nayal asked.

"I have been scanning for energy sources that suggest the presence of weapons nearby." T'Lan answered, "And amongst those I have discovered that have remained motionless as we have passed by them there has been one that has been maintaining an almost constant distance since we exited the sheriff's station."

"I'm guessing it's not that deputy following to help." King said as he looked around.

"I doubt it." Cole said, "She could have called out to us at any moment. So where's our man T'Lan?"

"Located on an upper level about twenty to twenty-five metres behind us." T'Lan said.

"The walkways." Hamilton said, glancing upwards momentarily.

"Okay we need to split up." Cole said, "T'Lan you're with me. The rest of you head right at the end of the street and double back. I'll signal you to let you know which group he's following. Then on my command we find access points to the walkways and head up and surround him."

"Got it." Hamilton replied.

"Oh and one more thing." Cole added.

"What?" Hamilton asked.

"All three of you set those phasers on stun. I don't want you taking out the entire walkway by accident. We

need this guy alive." Cole said.

Nott could not help but smile when he saw the Starfleet team split into two groups. Both groups still outnumbered him individually but he considered himself to have the advantage of surprise, being unaware that T'Lan's tricorder scans had been tracking him since he had first started following them. Believing himself to have the advantage he started to follow Cole and T'Lan, already planning his attack. Cole was obviously not only the leader of the away team but also as a security officer would be the most proficient in combat, with the possible exception of Nayaal who was something of an unknown quantity. But with Cole out of the way Nott would be free to fire on T'Lan while she was alone, ideally before she could alert the second team. Then Nott planned to withdraw and see how the second group would react. Hopefully by observing their reactions he would be able to determine which of them was the most dangerous before striking again. Then with the entire team out of the way he would be free to locate their ship and steal it.

ii.

"The contact is following us lieutenant commander." T'Lan said.

"Good, I hoped he would." Cole responded, "That's why I made sure we were the smaller group."

"You are using us as bait?" T'Lan asked.

"Kind of." Cole answered, "I hope that doesn't worry you."

"There is no logic in worrying. If this is Nott following us then he is alone and is behaving according to your plan."

"Just make sure that you stay down when the shooting starts T'Lan. I don't want you getting hurt because of me."

"Your concern for me is appreciated. But I am ready to do what I must to ensure that Nott is apprehended."

"T'Lan it's more of a personal request. I'd-" Cole began before T'Lan suddenly dived into him.

"Robert! Get down!" she exclaimed as a phaser beam shot over their heads from the walkway. The beam would have struck Cole in his back had T'Lan not pushed him clear and instead it struck a concrete wall on the far side of him, the sudden thermal disruption caused blasting a large chunk from it and showering both Cole and T'Lan with tiny fragments.

"Damn! I didn't expect him to make his move so quickly." Cole said, drawing his phaser and at the same time he tapped his combadge, "Cole to Hamilton, we're under fire. Get your team up onto the walkway now and move in."

"Understood commander." Hamilton's voice responded before Cole aimed his phaser in roughly the right direction and let off two quick shots. Both blasts went wide of their intended target but they did succeed in giving Nott cause to retreat away from the edge of the walkway to reconsider his strategy. His ambush had failed and now he had given himself away. To make matters worse he could hear the sound of rapid footsteps echoing on the walkway and he knew this meant that the other group was coming up after him. Sure enough Hamilton soon appeared on the walkway, emerging from between two buildings. Quickly Nott fired again but once more he missed, this time because of his inadequate aim. Then he looked back towards where Cole and T'Lan had fallen and to his horror he saw that they were no longer there, which could only mean that they were coming up onto the walkway after him as well.

"Nott!" Cole called out as he and T'Lan appeared on the walkway, trapping him between them and Hamilton's group, "You are under arrest. Stand down and surrender."

"Never!" Nott yelled and turning around suddenly he fired his phaser again. But this time he did not aim at either Cole or T'Lan but at the lightweight alloy of the walkway itself where it crossed a street underneath and it broke in two where the beam struck it. The walkway shook under the combined weight of Cole and T'Lan and there was a groaning sound from the hand rails that were all that now held it up

"T'Lan get back!" Cole exclaimed and both he and T'Lan backed away, hoping to reach the nearest point where the walkway was supported from below before it could collapse. But they were not quite quick enough and although T'Lan made it over a supporting bracket that held the walkway to the wall of an adjacent building Cole suddenly felt it disappear from beneath his feet and he fell with it.

Letting go of his phaser and letting it drop to the street below, Cole grabbed hold of the walkway as it dropped downwards in an arc, coming to a sudden rest when the point hit by Nott's phaser struck the ground and left the damaged walkway leant diagonally against the supporting brace.

"Robert. Take my hand." T'Lan said, dropping down onto the walkway and reaching out to Cole. But as she struggled to reach him and pull him up towards her Nott was taking aim again.

"Put it down!" King shouted, pointing his phaser towards Nott but holding his fire while Hamilton and Noyal dashed along the walkway in an attempt to get to a more advantageous position. But Nott ignored the warning and instead leapt up and ran, firing several quick shots that made both Hamilton and Noyal dive for cover.

Meanwhile T'Lan was able to drag Cole back up onto the walkway with her.

"Give me your phaser." he said and she nodded before handing over her weapon. Then he turned around and took aim, "Give it up Nott!" he yelled, "You're outnumbered and surrounded. Surrender and maybe we can make a deal."

"A deal?" Nott shouted back as he took cover and fired at King, forcing the medical officer to retreat as well, "You don't have the slightest idea who you're dealing with do you? You either do what they want or you're dead."

"Yeah, because you've done so well out of helping them haven't you?" Noyal called out then Hamilton pulled her down just before Nott could fire at them again.

"Better than you." Nott responded, "I'd like to see how pleased you are with yourselves when all those starbases along the Neutral Zone are trashed." and then he began to look around for an escape route.

"There's no way out other than through us Nott." King said just before he burst out of his hiding place and dashed forwards, firing short blasts on the move that kept Nott pinned down. Panicking as he realised the Starfleet team was closing in on him, Nott looked around for an escape route. The problem was that out of the three paths leading away from his location on the walkway two were blocked by members of the away team and he had destroyed the third himself. But there was still one other alternative if he was willing to take the risk.

Nott began to climb up onto the nearest safety rail.

"Don't do it!" King called out as he looked down at the two storey drop beneath Nott. He knew that it was perfectly conceivable that Nott could survive the fall if he managed it right, but it was far more likely that he would either injure or kill himself in the process. But Nott just looked towards King and smiled before leaping from the walkway.

"He jumped!" Naya exclaimed as she Hamilton rushed to the side of the walkway and looked down.

In the street below they saw Nott getting back to his feet, the expression on his face suggesting that he was in pain from the fall but he was obviously still able to move about on his own. Then he began to hobble away, the level of injury inflicted more obvious now.

"He's still alive." Hamilton said, activating his combadge to broadcast to the entire team, "We need to get down there after him."

"Go." Cole responded, "T'Lan and I will catch up."

Hamilton and Naya turned and ran back towards the stairs they had used to access the walkway. Being closer than either of them King got there first and hurried down to the street. But even he was too slow to get there in time to stop Nott from vanishing into an alleyway. Fortunately King was in time to see which alleyway Nott had used to try and escape and he headed after him.

Rather than just rush down the alleyway after Nott however, King came to a halt at the entrance and pressed himself up against a wall just in case the fugitive was waiting to ambush anyone who tried following him. He was just about to peer around the corner to see if it was safe to enter the alleyway when all of a sudden he heard the sound of phaser fire and he ducked back. But despite the sound and the flash of light from within the alleyway there was no beam to accompany the shot, suggesting that Nott had fired in the opposite direction. But when King subsequently looked around the corner he saw Nott lay in a heap on the ground.

"Do you have him?" Hamilton asked as he and Naya came rushing up behind King.

"Sort of." King answered, stepping into the alleyway with his phaser raised as he searched for Nott's assailant, "But I doubt Cole will be too pleased with this."

"He's dead Cole." King said. The team was gathered around Nott's body and King was knelt beside it.

"What was the cause of death?" T'Lan asked.

"Well obviously an autopsy would give more information but I think the massive hole burned in his chest with a phaser was a contributing cause." King responded and he rolled the body over so that Nott's lifeless eyes stared up into the night sky and the wound to his chest was exposed.

"So who shot him?" Naya asked, "Did you see?"

"No." King said, "When I heard the shot I assumed that it was aimed at me and took cover."

"Possible a co-conspirator who came to pick him up and killed him when it looked like Nott would give them away as well." Hamilton said.

"Let's not jump to any conclusions hey?" Cole said.

"Why not?" Naya asked.

"The lieutenant commander has extensive training in criminal investigation." T'Lan said.

"Sticking up for your boyfriend cousin?" Naya said in reply.

"I am merely pointing out that Lieutenant Commander Cole was required to complete numerous simulations of criminal investigations including murder as part of his academy training." T'Lan answered.

"Let me guess." King commented as he stood up, "It was Colonel Mustard in the kitchen with the lead pipe."

"Or in this case with the phaser in the alleyway." Hamilton added, "Case closed."

"Lieutenant, I believe that-" T'Lan began before Cole interrupted her.

"I'm sorry T'Lan but we don't have time for this." and looking down at Nott's body he added, "Any of this. We'll have to leave the investigation in the hands of the local authorities."

"But surely Nott was killed to keep him quiet." Naya said, "If we can find out who killed him then-"

"Then we solve the murder of one man sublieutenant." King said.

"On the other hand if we leave now we have a better chance of making it back to the *Nightfall* in time to help stop the attacks on the starbases Nott was threatening." Cole added.

"So you think he was being honest about that?" Hamilton asked.

"Why bother lying?" Cole responded, "As far as he was concerned all our border defences were disabled."

"They may still be." King pointed out.

"All the more reason for Captain Edwards to get his senior officers back." Cole said, "We'll let Deputy easy

know about this and then as soon as the sheriff's office have taken control we'll head back to the runabout."

"Captain, Lieutenant Commander Cole is hailing us from the *Thames*." West said.

"Put him on." Edwards replied and the cockpit of the *Thames* appeared on the bridge viewscreen,

"Lieutenant commander, do you have good news?" Edwards asked.

"Partially sir." Cole answered.

"What do you mean partially?" Carr asked.

"We determined that the destruction of the array was likely down to the actions of one of the crew who we believed was working in conjunction with the aliens. This individual, a Junior Lieutenant Nott was able to escape via shuttlecraft and made his way to the nearby Culrani system. We tracked him there but were unable to detain him before someone else shot him with a phaser."

"I'm not hearing much in the way of good news there." Edwards commented.

"We got a deathbed confession of sorts." Cole said, "When challenged to surrender he implied that our starbases along the Neutral Zone would shortly be destroyed."

"By the virus?" Carr said, looking at Edwards, "But it's only really destroyed one ship."

"Logic suggests that the enemy intends to follow the release of the virus up with a more direct attack." T'Lan said, "Though under normal circumstances a starbase is a powerful fortress that is heavily armed and shielded and housing numerous attack fighters and starships the virus would render them as vulnerable to attack as a freighter."

"But what about the source of this attack?" Edwards said.

"I think you could do worse than look to the other side of the Neutral Zone for that." Nayal said, "There are plenty of Romulan factions that would love to take out the Federation's defences. With no starships to respond to cloaked vessels passing through the tachyon detection grid they could fly right up to a starbase unmolested. They wouldn't even need that many ships. One per starbase would be enough in their current condition."

"Maybe not sublieutenant." Edwards replied, "You lot aren't the only ones who have been busy."

"It is done." the dock master's disembodied voice told The Girl, "The vessels are ready for launch and operators have been transferred into their core control systems."

"About time too." she replied, "Our agents haven't reported any move by Starfleet to reinforce the border but it was only a matter of time before their patience ran out. Now give the launch order."

"The order is given." the dock master said.

The Girl then watched as one by one the massive cylindrical vessels in the hangar on the other side of the viewport departed. But they did not simply manoeuvre using thrusters to leave through an exterior space door as would any Federation vessel in a similar situation. Instead the vessels just released the physical mooring connections that kept them in place so that they floated free with the weightless environment of the hangar before vanishing into nothingness.

The transit of the alien starships from their home port to the star systems where the Federation had established its starbases along the Romulan Neutral Zone was instantaneous for them all, despite the systems being spread over many light years. This was a consequence of the method they used for interstellar travel that, like the aliens' agents made use of the gateway technology of the ancient Iconians. One starship had been assigned to each starbase along the zone, considered more than sufficient to deal with a helpless target. Though when the starships appeared in their target systems they found that the starbases all had their shields raised as if in anticipation of an attack instead of them being the drifting powerless hulks expected.

The guiding intelligence aboard each of the vessels reported its status and the fact that the starbases' shields were raised but given that the condition of every starbase was the same it was decided that some unexpected quirk of the virus had raised the shields of each starbase. Given the firepower that each ship possessed this was not considered a major obstacle however, the virus would still have disabled the control systems of the starbases and so none of them would be in a position to fight back and the alien starships moved in for the kill.

"Would you look at the size of that thing." Cole commented from the *Nightfall's* tactical station as the crew watched the image on the main viewscreen. The *Nightfall*, like the other Starfleet vessels concealed behind the planet that Starbase Ten orbited did not have a direct line of sight to the alien starship but a series of probes relayed information around the planet to them.

"Enemy vessel is three thousand and fourteen metres in length." T'Lan said.

"Captain I'm not reading any lifeforms aboard that ship." West added.

"Could they be remotely controlled?" Carr suggested.

"I think not lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied, "Despite the lack of physical life readings I am detecting energy patterns within the vessel akin to brainwave patterns. Though of a type previously unencountered."

"So they placed their personalities into their starships like they do with the bodies of the dead that they reanimate." Edwards said.

"Maybe they don't have physical bodies of their own." Carr said.

"While there is some logic to that suggestion, most of the non-corporeal species encountered by the Federation have no need of physical interfaces." T'Lan responded.

"That's not important right now." Edwards said, "Helm stand by for impulse thrust. Tactical, stand by on weapons and raise shields."

"Shields up." Cole responded, "Phasers armed and quantum torpedoes loaded for full spread. Do you want me to arm the mass accelerators as well?"

"No." Edwards replied, "Unless it seems likely that that ship will be moving slow enough without shields to make a firing solution practical and effective hold off on them." then he looked at West, "What's the status of our fighters?" he asked.

"Bridge to hangar, report status." West said, activating the intercom.

"Snowman here. All birds ready for launch. Just give us the word bridge." White's voice replied.

"Standby Snowman." West said before turning back towards Edwards, "All fighters ready to launch on your command sir." she told him.

"Starbase Ten to all ships." a voice suddenly announced over the common hailing frequency that all of the starships hiding behind the planet were monitoring, "Break cover and engage."

"Full impulse." Edwards ordered, "Launch fighters."

"Bridge to hangar. Scramble, Scramble. Scramble." West signalled and on the viewscreen at the front of the bridge the *Nightfall's* fighters became visible as they launched in pairs and sped ahead of the *Nightfall*. From the point of view of the alien starship two things happened in rapid succession. First of all Starbase Ten suddenly locked weapons onto the ship and a volley of photon torpedoes and phaser blasts erupted from weapon hard points. Secondly there were flares of energy from the far side of the nearby planet and a force of several dozen Starfleet vessels, ranging in size from attack fighters up to a Sovereign-class explorer merged from eclipse, all heading directly towards the intruder.

But the enemy was not so disheartened by the revelation that not only was the Starbase far from helpless but that the force of starships docked there were also operational and it reacted in kind. What looked like lightning erupted from the prow of the massive cylindrical vessel, leaping towards the starbase and before the photon torpedoes fired at the alien starship could strike their target the lightning struck them, leaping from one torpedo to the next and detonating them prematurely. Meanwhile the powerful phasers that the Starbase was armed with struck a shield that surrounded the alien starship and inflicted no damage to their target.

Then the approaching fleet opened fire, employing both phasers and torpedoes just as the starbase had done. But once more the alien vessel was able to defend itself using the lightning-like projected energy weapon while its shields absorbed the phaser energy.

"Weapons are having no effect captain." T'Lan announced, looking up from her console.

"Bridge to engineering." Edwards signalled via the intercom, "Max, I take it you're watching what's going on?"

"Affirmative captain." Max responded.

"Well do you have any of that Borg adaptive skill that we can put to use to try and put a dent into that thing?"

"Not at this time captain." Max answered, "Though I recommend that we maintain firing."

"Why? It's not doing us any good." Carr said.

"On the contrary lieutenant commander, it would seem that the enemy vessel is equipped with a weapons array that they are currently using to intercept our torpedoes. This suggests concern that our weapons are sufficiently powerful enough to inflict serious damage upon their vessel and as long as they are forced to use the weapon in this way they cannot use it to attack either our fleet or Starbase Ten."

"Huh. Maybe they're just waiting for us to run out of ammunition before switching to a more offensive stance." Carr commented.

"Understood Max, we'll pass the word." Edwards said and he nodded to West who nodded back in acknowledgement. Then as West passed Max's suggestion along to the other ships defending Starbase ten a thought occurred to Edwards and he smiled, "I've got an idea." he said, "Get me Snowman."

"Snowman this is *Nightfall*." West transmitted.

"Snowman here." White replied, "Go ahead *Nightfall*."

"Snowman I want your squadron to cease fire and circle around that ship." Edwards ordered.

"Say again *Nightfall*. We were just instructed to maintain firing." White said.

"I know that Snowman." Edwards said, "But I want you to position your squadron on the opposite side of the enemy vessel and come about to engage at the same time as us."

"Interesting." T'Lan commented, "We are approaching the enemy ship from behind Starbase Ten so it needs only focus its fire in one direction looking at Edwards, "You are hoping that it cannot fire in two directions at once and a simultaneous attack will leave it vulnerable in one of them."

"Precisely." Edwards said, "My guess is that they'll ignore the fighters in favour of protecting themselves against us and Starbase Ten. But if this works then the fleet can peel off and we can hit them from one direction while the starbase continues to fire from its location."

"Orders understood *Nightfall*." White signalled, "We're going in."

In the cockpit of his fighter White studied the firing pattern of the enemy ship. He did not want to take an excessively wide path around the alien vessel but at the same time it would not do for his entire squadron to be wiped out in one swoop if Edwards' assumption that it could only fire in one direction at once proved to be incorrect and the lightning weapon was used against the fighters.

"Attention *Nightfall* squadron. Steer zero one five mark zero zero two. Full impulse." White broadcast to his squadron and the twelve fighters accelerated, speeding past the three kilometre long cylinder while remaining beyond the distance it had shown itself preferring to engage targets at "That is one big ship."

White said to himself as he looked out of his cockpit while flying past the enemy vessel. Then when he found himself looking at empty space again he opened a frequency to his squadron, "Hard about! Lock weapons and fire at will."

"Captain, our fighter squadron has cleared the enemy vessel and is coming about for their attack run." West announced when she saw the fighters perform an abrupt about turn.

"Open fire." Edwards ordered, "All phasers, all torpedo tubes."

Lightning burst from the alien starship almost as soon as the *Nightfall* fired its quantum torpedoes, triggering them early along with more fired by other starships and Starbase Ten itself.

But at the same time a flurry of photon torpedoes was launched by the twelve fighters of Lieutenant Commander White's squadron from the far end of the alien starship and these slammed into its shield, accompanied by a volley of phaser fire. The simultaneous strikes proved to be too much for the alien vessel's shields to handle and there were explosions from the hull where the torpedoes that did not detonate on impact with the shield found their target at last.

"Snowman to *Nightfall*. Target is hit. I repeat, target is hit. Let's bring this bad boy down." White transmitted excitedly.

"West give me a channel to the fleet and Starbase Ten." Edwards ordered and then he added, "This is Captain Edwards of the *USS Nightfall*. We need to hit the enemy ship from more than one direction at once. I suggest the fleet comes to zero one zero mark zero and we launch torpedoes as we pass."

"Confirmed *Nightfall*." the Bolian admiral in command of Starbase Ten responded, "All ships change course." The Starfleet vessels adjusted their heading to one that would take them right past the alien starship and

while Starbase Ten continued to fire at the intruder head on they fired as they passed, torpedo impacts flaring all along the length of its hull.

How to bypass the alien defences was passed from Starbase Ten to all of the other starbases under attack and soon all of the massive starships were reporting damage to their superiors at their home base.

"I offered you an easy target." The Girl said as she observed the reports coming in from along the Neutral Zone. None of the ships sent to destroy the Federation's starbases had been crippled or destroyed, but that situation could not last indefinitely.

"Your virus was supposed to disable their defences." a voice replied.

"I warned you that the Federation could potentially find a way to resolve the situation." The Girl pointed out, "Had the attack been launched sooner then they would not have had the opportunity to repair their defences. Now unless you want Starfleet pouring all over the wreckage of our ships and figuring out how they work then I suggest you recall them all immediately."

"Enemy vessel is turning." West announced.

"Towards us?" Carr asked.

"Negative commander." West replied, "The enemy is turning away from us."

"Away?" Hamilton repeated.

"They appear to be withdrawing." T'Lan said.

"Keep firing." Edwards said, "See if we can damage whatever they're using instead of a warp drive."

"You wish to continue engaging them even when they are beaten and area attempting to withdraw?" T'Lan asked.

"I want to get a look at how their technology works." Edwards replied, "Something that will be far easier if we have physical samples to study."

However, before Cole could attempt to disable the enemy vessel's engines the massive cylindrical ship suddenly disappeared.

"Did they just cloak?" Noyal asked when she saw the ship disappear.

"Lidar." Edwards ordered, "Focus on the enemy's last known position."

In addition to the usual array of subspace sensors, the *USS Nightfall* was fitted with a pair of more primitive laser based detection and ranging systems mounted in turrets above and below the saucer section. Rather than using these turrets to emit pulses of laser energy that would be reflected off solid objects it was possible to use them to emit continuous beams. If directed at the hull of another vessel these beams would pick up the vibrations in the hull caused by sound inside the ship, allowing the *Nightfall* to listen in on what was happening internally. Given that a cloaked vessel could not stop its hull from vibrating the beams could also be used to pinpoint cloaked ships providing they were close enough to the *Nightfall* to fly through the beams. Extending from the saucer section, the two laser turrets began to emit their beams, sweeping through the volume of space where the enemy ship had been until just a few moments earlier.

"Scans negative captain." T'Lan announced, "The enemy vessel has withdrawn from battle."

The ship attacking Starbase Ten was not the only alien vessel to have suddenly withdrawn. As Edwards sat in his ready room and studied the after action reports from each of the engagements he saw that the enemy had retreated at every location almost simultaneously.

Then the intercom at his door chimed.

"Come in." he called out and the door slid open to allow Max and T'Lan to enter, "Yes, how may I help you?" he asked them.

"Captain we have been studying all of the sensor logs recorded just before and during the engagement by ourselves and also Starbase Ten." Max said.

"You've found something." Edwards said, "Have you identified who we're dealing with?"

"No captain." T'Lan replied, "But we were able to isolate an unusual gravimetric disturbance at the moment when the enemy ship appeared and disappeared."

"I believe that it is a consequence of a mass being added or subtracted to our space time within a gravitational field, even the weak one as far from the planet as the enemy ship was." Max explained.

"And what does this tell us?" Edwards asked.

"On its own nothing captain." T'Lan replied, "But it is our opinion that now we know what to look for we can do so on a much smaller scale as well."

"Meaning that although we can't stop them yet, we can at least track where and when the enemy's agents are appearing and disappearing." Max added and Edwards leant back in his chair and smiled.

Deputy Easy thought she was alone in the sheriff's station when she heard a sound behind her and turned around suddenly, reaching for her phaser.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, frowning.

"I came to thank you for a job well done." The Girl said, "If not for your quick thinking Nott could have told Starfleet everything he knew."

"I had hoped to make it look like Starfleet gunned him down in the street." Easy replied, "You know, drum up some anti-Starfleet and anti-Federation sentiment among the locals."

"Nevertheless," The Girl said, "you plugged a potential security leak and in doing so proved yourself of far more use than certain members of our military who thought that our intelligence work meant they could take things easy."

"Yes, I heard that the attacks all failed." Easy said.

"Never mind that for now." The Girl said, "Thanks to the destruction of the Starfleet communications array we have been able to disrupt Federation communications between the core of the Federation and the sectors along the Romulan Neutral Zone and that can only help our cause. Now I must be getting back. The others are trying to decide who to blame for what went wrong and I need to be there to make sure that blame falls in the right place." and then the The Girl turned around and was gone.

"You've seen these I take it?" Admiral Schmidt asked Commanders Brown and Jones as he held out a PADD with the after action reports on it.

"Yes, a close run thing." Jones said.

"Captain Edwards and his people seem to have saved the day again." Brown added.

"Yes they did and there's no denying that these aliens present a danger to the Federation now." Schmidt said, "I think we need to start looking for ways that our section can assist Captain Edwards in doing more to combat them, bending or breaking a few rules if necessary."

"Well, that is what we do." Jones replied.