

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



COLD WAR
BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **COLD WAR**

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

Captain Edwards finds himself walking into a trap when he receives information that an old friend believed killed during the Dominion War could still be alive and being held captive in Breen space.

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
22. To Storm the Gates of Heaven

All available online at:

<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

Copyright notice:

Star Trek is the intellectual property of CBS/Paramount. Star Trek: Nightfall is unofficial and has not been authorised or endorsed by the copyright holders in any way.

i.

Stardate 52905.87 just outside the Cardassian system.

The bridge of the *USS Rampage* shook violently as the ship suffered another hit and Captain Edwards clung onto the arms of his chair to avoid being thrown from it.

"Damage report!" he snapped.

"Phasers are off line." his tactical officer responded.

"Engineering this is the bridge." Edwards' first officer, Commander Carl Wright said as he activated the intercom, "We need phasers back on line."

"No can do commander." the engineer told him, "The core's becoming unstable. The more power that we try to draw from it the worse things will get. I need to take it off line and—"

"Mister Briggs." Edwards interrupted, "It may have escaped your attention but we have four Jem'Hadar attack ships on our tail and we need warp power."

"Sorry captain but there's just now way around it. That last hit has fried the injector control circuitry. If I give you phaser power we'll blow up before the Jem'Hadar do. You still have torpedoes though."

"Eighteen remaining in the magazine captain." the tactical officer said.

"Not enough." Wright commented.

"What about the *Rising Sun* and the *DeLancie*?" Edwards asked.

"Both under fire themselves captain." his operations chief answered.

"Looks like we're on our own captain." Wright commented.

"Okay we can still do this." Edwards said, "I haven't come through this war just to get killed on the last day of it. Helm stand by to make a full impulse turn. Let's see if we can get those Dominion ships to overshoot.

Tactical, prepare a full spread of torpedoes. We'll fire everything we've got into them and then try to pull back far enough to give us time to get our phasers back on line."

What Edwards was proposing was risky. The *Rampage* was an old ship of the Excelsior-class and the Dominion ships pursuing them had much better manoeuvring at sublight speeds. But with all four right behind the *Rampage*, Edwards had to try something fast or they would cut his ship to pieces in a matter of minutes.

"Ready captain." the helmsman announced.

"Torpedoes loaded." the tactical officer added.

"On my mark, full impulse to—" Edwards began but before he could finish his order there was the sound of a distant explosion and the *Rampage* shook violently.

"The starboard nacelle's gone!" the operations officer called out.

"Bridge this is engineering." A panicked sounding voice then said from the intercom. This was not the chief engineer though, instead it was one of his junior officers, "Engineer Booth is dead. Warp core breach in three minutes. There's nothing we can do about it now."

Edwards frowned briefly but he knew exactly what he needed to do.

"All hands abandon ship!" he yelled, "Everyone get out of here as fast as you can."

Though abandoning ship in the middle of a fight was not something that any of the *Rampage's* crew wanted to do, they all knew that it was preferable to being caught aboard the ship when its warp core exploded so the entire ship's compliment made their way for the quickest way off the ship. In most cases this meant boarding one of the many escape pods and lifeboats that the ship was equipped with, but in sickbay patients had to be beamed to shuttles that were being rapidly brought on line by the hangar crew.

For Edwards and his senior crew there was a cluster of lifeboats located close to the bridge specifically to allow them a reasonable chance of escape. The damage to the ship meant that the turbolifts were out of action but the crew had practised making their way to the lifeboats using the emergency ladder shafts on many occasions and it took them less than a minute to reach them.

"Come on people we don't have long." Edwards called out as he strode towards one of the lifeboats and stood beside its hatch. He refrained from entering just yet while he checked on the progress of the other crew members who were making their way here. Further down the corridor he saw that Wright was doing the same thing at the far end.

"I think that's it captain." Wright said, "Time for us to leave."

"See you back on *Deep Space Nine*." Edwards replied as he turned and ducked he stepped into the lifeboat beside him. He was just about to sit down when there was another explosion and a brief blast of heat before a rush of air trying to drag him back out of the lifeboat.

"The hull's breeched!" someone shouted as Edwards grabbed onto the outstretched hand of another of the lifeboat's occupants and looked around. Behind him he saw that the corridor was now blocked by debris and

both Wright and the lifeboat he had been about to board were no longer visible. Knowing that there was little time to lose, Edwards struck the control panel just inside the lifeboat's hatch and it dropped shut, bringing the rush of air to a halt as its own life support system kicked in.

"Hang on!" Edwards shouted as he scrambled into the nearest empty seat and pulled down the safety harness just moments before the lifeboat was propelled clear of the ship.

As soon as the force of the acceleration slackened off Edwards turned his head to look out through the viewport set into the hatch at the back of the lifeboat. Through that he could see the crippled *Rampage* burning in space and also the trails of other escape craft departing it. But of the lifeboat that Wright had been about to board just before the last hit there was no sign.

All of a sudden there was a brilliant flash of light as the *Rampage* was consumed in the explosion caused by the warp core breach allowing the ship's anti-matter fuel to mix uncontrollably with the matter around it.

"Not again." Edwards muttered to himself as he witnessed the destruction of his ship.

Stardate unknown. Location unknown.

Closing her eyes, the being that currently inhabited the body of a human girl exited the physical universe to instead enter a virtual one where she could commune directly with others of her kind. In this other universe she still retained her present physical appearance however, even though the others present remained invisible.

"You have information?" one of the others asked The Girl.

"I do." she replied, "Our agent has confirmed that it was the *USS Nightfall* that penetrated the Neutral Zone to visit Iconia. They deployed personnel to the surface and were able to study some of the technology there."

"So the Federation prepares to move against us?" another voice asked.

"That is the peculiar thing about this incident." The Girl said.

"We came here for facts, not irrelevant commentary. Explain the situation properly."

"The *Nightfall* was given orders to enter the Neutral Zone but the source of them remains unknown. It would seem that Starfleet itself was unaware that the ship was diverted from its normal patrol route along the Neutral Zone, even after the fact. As far as they were concerned it remained within Federation territory at all times."

"How is this possible? Who else can give orders to Starfleet vessels?"

"Obviously some group of whom we have been previously unaware." The Girl replied, "Perhaps an unofficial one."

"And what would you recommend we do to deal with such a group? If it is unofficial then infiltrating may be even more difficult than getting an agent into Starfleet has been."

"We may not be able to infiltrate whatever group is issuing these orders but we can act to remove the means by which they are executed." The Girl said, "Ever since it was launched the *USS Nightfall* has been a thorn in our sides. I recommend that we act to disable it as a factor in our operations."

"Your agent is aboard that ship. Would you sacrifice them to destroy it?"

"No and I do not believe that it will be necessary to destroy the ship at all. A ship's captain is key to its operation. If we can find a way to remove Captain Edwards from his position permanently then we will have the time it takes for his replacement to adjust to his new role to further our aims. All we need is a way to get off the ship where he is protected and to somewhere he will be more vulnerable."

Stardate 66794.1. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol near Romulan Neutral Zone.

"So what do we have?" Captain Edwards asked as he exited his ready room and returned to the bridge.

"Some sort of probe captain." his first officer, Lieutenant Commander Carr replied as she vacated the central seat and returned to the one she usually occupied beside it, "Not one of ours."

"And not one of my people's either." the Romulan woman sat on the other side of the captain's chair added as Edwards sat down.

"Are you certain about that Nayal?" Edwards said as he looked at the image on the main bridge view screen. The tiny craft had an irregular shape and bore no markings that were visible at this extreme range, "With all the different factions fighting in the civil war-"

"The probe is not using any known Romulan power source captain." The Vulcan woman at the science station interrupted.

"Okay T'Lan, you can tell me what it isn't. How about telling me what it is and why its heading into our territory out of the Neutral Zone?" Edwards said.

"I will inform you as soon as I am able to captain." T'Lan replied.

"Object is crossing into our territory now captain. Still travelling at impulse speed." Lieutenant West, the *Nightfall's* operations manager called out, looking up from her console briefly.

"Still out of weapons range." Lieutenant Commander Cole added from the tactical station immediately behind

Edwards.

"Lay in an intercept course Mister Hamilton." Edwards ordered and the helmsman nodded.

"Aye sir. Course laid in. ETA eight minutes at warp five." he said.

The probe did not react when the *Nightfall* first turned and started heading straight towards it. But as the starship got closer the lights on the mysterious craft suddenly went dim and its engines shut down.

"What just happened?" Carr asked, looking over her shoulder at T'Lan.

"Probe has lost all power lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.

"A coincidence? Or related to our approach?" Edwards said.

"The probe definitely detected us captain." West answered, "Though I doubt it got much information about us. The scan was very brief."

"We could bring it aboard now that it powered down and get a good look at it." NayaI suggested.

"Could be a trap." West commented.

"West is right." Cole agreed, "Rig the probe to power down as soon as a ship comes in close then trigger an explosive device as soon as anyone locks a tractor beam on it."

"The Maquis used that trick to disable Cardassian ships." West said, "Only we used shuttles. The Cardassians would pull alongside to board them and then get a hole in them big enough to stop them going to warp while we ambushed them."

"Looks like a job for our fighters then." Edwards said, "Have the ready fighters go in for a closer look and if they don't see anything wrong they can tow it back aboard."

The two Peregrine-class attack fighters accelerated as they emerged from the forward launch door of the *Nightfall's* massive hangar bay that ran the full length of its primary hull.

"Okay Quarterback," Lieutenant Commander William White, call signed 'Snowman' transmitted to his wingman, "Let's do this. Lock onto the target and follow me in. I'll run a visual inspection and I want you to let me know if it comes back to life."

"Copy that Snowman. I've got your back." the other pilot responded and the two small craft raced towards the probe.

Their first pass by the probe was done at a relatively high speed, carried out just to see whether it would react to their presence but it remained dark and lifeless.

"*Nightfall* this is Snowman." White signalled.

"Snowman this is *Nightfall*. Go ahead." West's voice replied.

"No signs of life, coming around for a closer pass."

"Understood Snowman. Stay in contact."

The two fighters turned and decelerated as they came around for their second pass. As White had said, this one was done at closer range and he studied the probe carefully as he flew towards it while his wingman held back and monitored the probe with his fighter's sensors.

"It's junk." White broadcast as he got a good look at the probe from close range. He could see that the surface was covered in seemingly random welded joins and littered with sudden irregularities where parts that did not fit neatly together on their own had been forced to. There was no uniformity in its colour either. Different parts of the probe's structure were coloured differently and in places it even changed mid surface when it reached one of the welds, "Quarterback are you reading anything?"

"Negative Snowman. No power signature anywhere inside."

"Okay then. I'm going to try locking onto it with a tractor beam. Quarterback, I want you to get clear. A thousand kilometres should do. But keep your sensors locked onto it. If I'm about to tether my plane to a bomb I want to know before it goes 'Kaboom.'"

White matched the course and speed of his fighter with the probe so that it was positioned behind him at the maximum range for capturing it with a tractor beam. His finger hovered over the tractor beam's activation button for a moment as he waited, half expecting his wingman to suddenly warn him that he had detected activity from within the probe. But when no such warning came he pressed the button and breathed a sigh of relief as the tractor beam caught hold of the probe. White then slowly accelerated his fighter, steering it back towards the waiting *Nightfall*. All the while that he headed towards the cruiser, his wingman maintained a constant gap between them and monitored the probe closely. But it showed no signs of activity and White flew all the way back into the hangar with it tethered to his fighter by the tractor beam.

As his ship entered the hangar through one of the rear facing landing doors, White saw a cluster of crewmen waiting for the probe. Most prominent among this mix of service and science division personnel was Lieutenant Maximillian, the *Nightfall's* chief engineer. A Borg drone who had been freed from the Collective, he had retained all of his implants and so was guaranteed to stand out in almost any crowd.

"Snowman to Max," White signalled, knowing that he was close enough to directly link to the engineer's combadge, "she's all yours."

"Thank you lieutenant commander." Max replied and he waved his team forwards as White's fighter came to a halt but remained hovering above the hangar deck rather than setting down. This meant that the probe also

remained hovering over the deck and engineers equipped with large scale portable antigrav units rushed towards it. They positioned these around the probe and activated them in unison before signalling to Max that they were operational. At which point Max tapped his combadge.

"Snowman, we have it. You may disengage your tractor beam."

"Confirmed Max. Disengaging." White replied and the tractor beam was shut off, leaving the probe still suspended in mid air but now supported by the linked network of portable antigravs.

"Now let's get this to cargo bay two." Max ordered, "We'll carry out a fully examination there."

Max followed as the engineers and science officers began to push the probe towards the exit from the hangar bay, all the while monitoring the probe. The Borg implants that replaced one of his eyes allowed him to monitor the probe for energy patterns or chemical reactions in the same way as the accompanying science officers were doing with tricorders and as far as any of them could tell it was now totally inert. The cargo bay had already been cleared to make room for the probe and the equipment necessary to examine it properly and the crew members guiding the strange device were able to move it into the centre of the room before reducing the power of the antigravs and lowering it to the deck.

"Max to bridge." Max said, not needing to tap the combadge built into his chest to activate it thanks to it being hard wired into his Borg implants, "The probe is in cargo bay two and I am commencing my examination. I will let you know as soon as I have anything."



Max was already waiting in the briefing room when the *Nightfall's* senior staff entered to hear the results of his study of the strange probe. As well as the Starfleet command staff there were two military officers included in this group. Captain Gary Heart commanded the MACO company stationed aboard the *Nightfall* while the Andorian Captain Shry was in command of the Imperial Guard company that made up the other half of the vessel's contingent of ground troops.

"So what have you found Max?" Edwards asked as he sat down.

"Have you identified who made the probe?" Carr added.

"Not exactly." Max said in reply to Carr's question, "My study of the probe's structure has revealed that no power in the Alpha or Beta Quadrants can be positively identified as the builders of the probe."

"Why not?" Cole asked, "Surely there must be some identifying components in there."

"Yes lieutenant commander, there are many." Max responded.

"So why can't you tell us who made it?" Edwards asked.

"Because there are components from half a dozen sources that I was able to identify captain. Observe." Max said and using his implants he activated the briefing room's main viewscreen to show a schematic of the probe, "This image shows the exterior of the probe." he added.

"Yeah, I saw that up close." White commented, "No markings at all."

"But obviously made from a variety of parts not normally associated together." Max said and he pointed to the nose of the probe, "The casing at the front of the probe is taken from a Romulan plasma torpedo." he said before moving his finger further back along the image, "While the main body is made up of plating from both Klingon and Cardassian vessels. Then we have the engine assembly which contains numerous parts taken from the impulse engine of an Ambassador-class starship."

"So someone's got access to a lot of scrap metal from a variety of sources." Hamilton said, "There's been a lot of that around since the end of the war with the Dominion."

"Indeed." Max said, "And the internal construction of the probe is also consistent with this. I found computer components from Federation, Breen and Romulan sources all connected together in a very haphazard manner."

"Sounds like we've just picked up some kid's science project." Heart said.

"This deep into space?" West asked, "That probe was moving at impulse speed when we spotted it. For it to get all the way out here would have taken years."

"Eight years, six months and fourteen days from the nearest star system." T'Lan said, "Though that would require its heading to have changed five years, nine months and-"

"We get the drift lieutenant." The *Nightfall's* chief medical officer, Commander Henry King interrupted, "It's been in space a long time."

"But why? What would anyone have to gain by sending that out into space?" Shry asked.

"I believe that the answer to that lies within the main computer core." Max replied, "A component apparently salvaged from a Federation shuttlecraft. Upon my examination of its contents I discovered a datafile in addition to the operating system and control subroutines."

"What sort of file?" Edwards said.

"Video." Max told him, "Observe." and he commanded the display to bring up the video file he had recovered from the probe's computer, "There is no sound." he said as the file began to play, "But it is clear to see what is happening."

The video had obviously been shot in some sort of quarry and members of several different species from the Alpha and Beta Quadrants could be seen working with hand tools to dig at the ground. The clothing that they wore also came from a variety of sources but for the most part reflected the uniforms of the various governments whose people were represented and all of them were somewhat tattered and patched with material that did not match. Watching over these workers were several armoured figures, their faces hidden behind their squared off helmets. These armoured suits were not identical, suggesting that the guards were not part of some military or law enforcement group but it was obvious from the general design just who they were.

Breen.

Despite keeping to themselves for the most part and spurning the majority of diplomatic contacts, the Breen had long been known to use slave labourers taken from those who were unfortunate to stumble into their territory or taken in raids against neighbouring systems. The Breen themselves came from a world believed to be extremely cold and the enclosed suits they wore were for refrigeration as well as physical protection. During the later stages of the Dominion War they had unexpectedly allied themselves with the Dominion rather than remaining neutral and following their defeat had retreated back into their own territory where they

had kept a low profile ever since.

"Prisoners of war." King said, scowling, "Used as slave labour."

"It certainly looks that way doctor." Max agreed, "The mix of species suggests that most are captives taken during the Dominion War, though it is possible that some were obtained from other sources."

"The Breen don't waste the lives of their captives if they can help it." Nayal pointed out, "Those captives could still be alive."

"And they managed to build that probe as a call for help." Shry added.

"Then we have to go after them." Heart said, "Leave no man behind."

"Starfleet is unlikely to approve a mission into Breen territory on the basis of such an old recording." T'Lan replied.

"You know I'm not sure whose hearts are colder." Shry said, "Breen or Vulcan."

"I was not attempting to advocate abandoning the captives." T'Lan said, "I was merely pointing out that—"

"Stop!" Edwards snapped. Then he looked at T'Lan and added, "Sorry, not you. I meant the video." and as Max paused the playback Edwards got his feet and approached the display.

"Magnify this section." he said, pointing to a figure in the background that wore the remains of a Starfleet uniform.

"Yes captain." Max said, adjusting the picture so that the man's face filled most of the screen.

"Wright." Edwards said softly.

"Yes captain." Max said and the image began to move.

"No, not pan right, I mean Wright as in the name." Edwards told him.

"You know that man captain?" Carr asked.

"Yes I know that man. I served with him for most of the war. That is Commander Carl Wright, my first officer aboard the *Rampage*. I thought he was killed when the *Rampage* was destroyed at Cardassia."

"It would seem that he was able to survive long enough to be recovered by the Breen." T'Lan commented.

"I'm going after him." Edwards said.

"T'Lan's right captain." Carr said, "Starfleet will never let us take the *Nightfall* into Breen space on nothing more than this. They'll want up to date intelligence first."

"What about our friend Commander Jones?" Shry said, referring to the mysterious Starfleet officer who had come aboard the *Nightfall* with orders to take it into the Neutral Zone to Iconia. Only when the ship returned to Federation space had the crew discovered that there was no such officer had been sent and no such orders issued. However, by that time the commander had vanished from his quarters leaving only a note thanking the crew for their help.

"Even if I was willing to trust that man again I'd have no way of contacting him." Edwards said, "But it doesn't matter anyway. I'm not intending to take the *Nightfall* into Breen space at all. I'll take a runabout."

"A runabout?" King exclaimed, "You can't be serious."

"Deadly." Edwards replied.

"A runabout may be able to slip over the border unnoticed." White said, "Though you'll need an expert pilot. Good job you've got me here."

"As your chief of security I can't let you go without protection captain." Cole added, "I'll go along as well."

"You may also require scientific support to remain undetected captain." T'Lan said

"One bodyguard behind enemy lines?" Heart said, "I think perhaps I ought to join this little covert op. I've got experience in just this sort of mission."

"That makes five of you." Carr said, "A respectable force providing you don't run into too much opposition."

"Six." Nayal said, "You'll need me too captain. My people have had a lot of experience with the Breen and I studied some of the after action reports in training."

King sighed.

"You better squeeze in one more." he said, "No matter how those Breen may have tried to keep their captives alive, there are bound to be injuries. Don't think I'm overjoyed about going mind you, but it's not like I can send that damned EMH."

"That runabout's getting pretty crowded." Hamilton noted.

"It can handle it." White replied while West smiled.

"What's the matter Bradley?" she asked, "Thinking of going but worried about overcrowding?"

"Me? No. Snowman can handle a runabout better than I can. Plus this way if anything goes wrong and Lieutenant Commander Carr becomes captain, I get to be her first officer."

West's smile widened.

"Never going to happen Bradley." she said.

The mission into Breen space was to be a covert one so the first task was to disguise the runabout to be used for it. The *USS Thames* was a standard Danube-class vessel that could easily be identified from its markings as a Federation vessel. However, with just a few minor cosmetic adjustments these could be covered to give the ship the appearance of a surplus vessel operating independently. Of course this was of

use only if someone got close enough to carry out a visual inspection and the crew of the *Nightfall* hoped to avoid that. To help with this, Max and T'Lan co-operated to adjust the performance of the runabout's warp nacelles.

"So how does this work?" a young woman in a Starfleet uniform asked as she sat at one of the runabout's control stations. Her uniform had the standard blue collar of the science division but lacked any rank markings. Nikki Carr was the daughter of the *Nightfall's* first officer and thanks to a poor report made by the ship's counsellor had failed to gain admission to university. Instead she had remained aboard the *Nightfall* by joining an intern program operated by Starfleet. Having completed a period of service in engineering she had recently moved on to the science division part of her internship.

"The field produced by the engines will be modified using a series of energy spikes that will make it appear to be a Breen vessel on long range scans." T'Lan replied from the rear of the cockpit where she and Max had opened up an access panel in the floor, "Now what is the reading?"

"Twelve point four." Nikki said. Then she frowned, "But I thought that these engines were tuned to be as efficient as possible. Won't doing this slow them down?"

"Not if we do this correctly." Max told her, stepping away from the panel and walking over to the control station beside Nikki's and extended a pair of tubes from his hand to it, "The fuel consumption will be increased but maximum speed will be maintained."

"And what will I be doing while you're gone?" Nikki added, looking at T'Lan, "You said I was going to be able to shadow you on the bridge."

"That will be up to Lieutenant Perez." T'Lan answered, "He will be filling in during my absence."

"Which should only be for a couple of weeks at most." Max commented, "You have plenty of time with the science division to experience bridge duty."

"I guess so. I was just looking forward to it. Do you think I'd be able to sit in the captain's chair?" Nikki said.

"Unlikely." T'Lan replied.

"Especially if your mother is in command." Max added and Nikki's eyes widened.

"I'd forgotten she'd be there." she said.

"What is the reading now?" Max asked as he withdrew his hand.

"Fourteen point five." Nikki answered.

"That is sufficient." T'Lan said, "This vessel should now appear to be a Breen scout ship on long range sensors." and she began to replace the access panel.

"In that case my shift is over." Nikki said and she got out of her seat and headed for the hatch. But just as she was exiting the runabout she placed her hand against the frame and winced, "This paint is still wet." she said, pulling her hand away and looking at the dull grey now covering her palm.

"I think perhaps I ought to find a crewman to repaint that spot." Max said.

"And I need to get this gunk off my hand." Nikki added, curling her lip at the paint on her hand.

"I suggest you use the wash room aboard this vessel." T'Lan said, "It is-"

"Yeah, I know where the bathroom is." Nikki interrupted as she headed for the rear section of the runabout, holding her hand up so that it did not touch any surface that could get paint on it.

Meanwhile T'Lan and Max disembarked from the runabout and encountered two MACOs pushing an anti-gravity sled loaded with equipment containers.

"Weapons and armour for your mission lieutenant." one of them said to T'Lan.

"Good." she replied, "Load them aboard the runabout."

"Yes lieutenant." the MACO said and as the Starfleet officers walked away from the runabout the two soldiers picked the first of the crates off the sled and between them carried it into the runabout.

The bulk of the crates required them to be stowed in the rear section of the compact vessel and they carried the crate through the cockpit and into the narrow passageway that led towards it.

"There's a lot of gear to be loaded still." one of them said, "I doubt they'll be happy if we fill the lounge."

"Then we'll stack our stuff right here." the other replied and he nodded towards a small side corridor, "They can figure out where they want stuff moving to for the journey after all of it's aboard."

The two MACOs then manoeuvred the long equipment case until they were able to place it on the floor in the passage across a doorway before they headed back to the sled for more of the equipment.

Inside the runabout's spartan bathroom Nikki scrubbed at her hand. The cleanser dispensed from the nozzle over the sink was intended to remove dirt easily but the paint used on the hull of starships was intended to resist the harshest of environments and so removing required considerable effort even before it dried. Shaking her hands to remove excess water, Nikki glanced at herself in the mirror over the sink and noticed that at some point she had inadvertently managed to get paint on her combadge as well. Sighing she removed the device from her chest, squirted cleanser on it and immersed it in the water before rubbing the case to try and remove the paint. The casing of the combadge was designed to resist being immersed in water to a considerable depth. But as she tried rubbing at it she inadvertently flicked open the rear cover and there was a sudden flash.

"Oh no." she said, "Oh I hope that's not serious." Removing the components of the combadge from the basin she turned towards the door and opened it. Only to find herself staring at a stack of equipment cases piled up in the passageway outside, "Oh no." she said again. Then in a raised voice she added, "Hello? Is anyone out there?"

3.

"Enter." Edwards said when there was a chiming sound from the door to his quarters and it slid open to reveal Carr standing outside, "Ah Grace." he added as the door slid shut behind her, "How do I look?" "Dashing." she replied as she looked at him in the rugged civilian clothing he was wearing in place of the Starfleet uniform she was used to seeing him wear and he smiled.

"Are you sure you'll be able to handle Starfleet while I'm gone?" he asked.

"Easily." Carr said, "But are you sure about all this David? Sneaking into Breen space isn't my idea of a good time."

"Grace, I have to try." Edwards answered, "A captain's duty-

"Is to his ship and his crew. Yes I know. But you're talking about leading an unauthorised covert expedition into Breen territory. Something that as your first officer I ought to-

"Grace I know I'm asking a lot of you. But if there's even the slightest chance that Carl Wright is alive I have to go. I was his commanding officer and friend. I owe him this."

"Well just make sure you come back. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Take over as captain and make Lieutenant Hamilton your first officer?" Edwards said.

"Never going to happen." Carr replied. Then, smiling she added, "But I may just take the opportunity to go through your personal replicator files."

"Grace I am shocked at the thought you would take advantage of my demise to gain access to my recipe collection."

"They aren't your recipes though are they? You got them from a science officer at your last posting."

"And aren't you glad I did? I tell you what though, when I get back we'll have dinner and I'll see if I can find something special in the dessert section. Sound good?" but before Carr could reply the communication panel on the table beside Edwards chimed, "Go ahead." he said, activating the device.

"Captain it's Cole. Everyone's ready to leave."

"Good. I'm on my way." Edwards replied before shutting off the communicator, "So are you coming to see me off Grace?"

"I think I can manage that." she said as they headed for the door.

Making their way to the hangar, Carr and Edwards found the rest of the team waiting for them in the briefing room used by the fighter pilots. Like Edwards, all of them wore civilian clothing and had discarded their combadges.

"Thank you again for volunteering." Edwards said, "If any of you want to back out then now's your last chance."

"It would be illogical to change our minds after having prepared to leave captain." T'Lan replied.

"Then I suggest we get going." Edwards said, "I don't want to leave those captives in the hands of the Breen any longer than necessary."

"Just hurry back." Carr told him, "I want that special dessert you promised me." then she realised that most of the other team members were staring at her and Edwards, "Oh that's not what I meant!" she exclaimed.

"Of course not." Cole said as he walked past them.

"Never entered my mind." White added as he followed.

"Mine either." Heart agreed.

"Obviously innocent." King commented.

"Perfectly clear." Nayal said.

Then T'Lan stepped forwards.

"You are aware that your statement could be taken as meaning-" she began.

"Just go T'Lan." Carr interrupted.

"Yes lieutenant commander." the Vulcan replied.

Then Carr turned back towards Edwards.

"I meant it." she said, "Hurry back."

"Oh don't worry. I don't want to be in the Breen space any longer than necessary." he responded.

The cockpit of the Danube-class was only designed to seat four crew. So when Edwards and White took the forward positions and Cole and T'Lan the rear stations this left Heart, King and Nayal with nowhere to sit. Fortunately their skills would not be needed for this first part of the mission and they headed for the lounge in the rear section until they were needed.

"*Nightfall* this is *Thames*." White signalled as he powered up the runabout's engines, "All systems operating. Requesting permission to depart."

"Copy that *Thames*." West's voice replied from the bridge, "You are cleared for departure. Good hunting." Diverting power to the runabout's thrusters, White lifted the vessel off the deck and flew it out of the hangar into space.

"Okay T'Lan." he said, "I could do with a heading."

"For now come to zero four seven mark six four." T'Lan told him, "That will take us towards Breen space and I can give more accurate instructions as we get closer."

"You do know where we're going don't you lieutenant?" White asked.

"Of course." she answered, "The video file clearly indicated that we are looking for a class M planet in a system with a G-type star at a distance of between—"

"That's not important right now T'Lan." Edwards said before she could finish. Then he looked at White, "Just come to that heading and take us to warp commander."

"Aye captain. Coming about now." he replied as the runabout turned towards Breen space. Then moments later the stars outside blurred as the tiny vessel accelerated.

The three occupants of the lounge located at the back of the runabout saw this through the large viewports.

"So how long until we reach Breen space?" Heart asked.

"Don't you know?" Nayal responded.

"Hey, MACOs aren't known for venturing beyond the Sol system." Heart said, "At least not for the last couple of hundred years."

"About eighteen hours would be my guess." King commented.

"Well I'm not going to just sit here twiddling my fingers for that long." Heart said, "I'm going to check our gear." and he got up from the table and headed out of the lounge, proceeding as far as the side passage that was filled with MACO equipment cases. Lifting the uppermost case from the top of the stack he set it down on the deck with a 'clump' and was just about to open it when he heard a banging from behind the stack of cases and looked up.

"Hello?" a voice called out, "Is someone there?"

"Nikki?" Heart responded as he recognised the voice even through the door and the stack of equipment.

"Captain Heart? I'm stuck." Nikki said and Heart sighed.

"Hang on." he said, "I'll get you out of there."

"Captain I'm picking up significant subspace disturbance." T'Lan said, studying the runabout's sensors.

"In our path?" Edwards asked.

"Negative. The disturbance looks like the effects of the large scale use of high yield anti-matter weapons."

T'Lan explained, "The source is inside Romulan space so it is logical to assume that it is the result of an engagement in the Romulan Civil War."

"Or a raid by Breen pirates." Cole pointed out, "They could still be around."

"There's a nebula at three two four mark two seven." White said, "It could make spotting us more difficult."

"I would recommend against that captain." T'Lan said, looking at Edwards, "Diverting course now may attract attention. Unless they are able to get within close range the Breen will believe us to be one of their own vessels. However, any attempt to avoid detection will look suspicious to them."

"I agree." Edwards said, nodding, "Mister White, hold our course and speed."

"Yes captain." White replied before the intercom buzzed.

"Captain I think you should come back here." Heart said.

"Captain Heart? Is there a problem?" Edwards asked.

"Depends on how you define 'problem'." Heart responded.

"In other words yes there is." King's voice added, "We've got a stowaway."

"A stowaway? What do you mean?" Edwards said.

"It's easier if you just come back here." Heart said and Edwards sighed.

"I'm on my way." he said before getting out of his chair and exiting the cockpit. At which point Cole looked at White.

"And we're not even over the border yet." he said.

Edwards made his way directly to the lounge at the far end of the runabout, stepping over the equipment cases that ought to have been stacked neatly.

"Okay," he said as he entered the lounge, "what's all this about?" and then his jaw dropped when he saw who was sat at the far end of the table with Heart, King, and Nayal.

"Hi captain." Nikki said nervously.

"Nikki? What are you doing here?" Edwards asked.

"She got locked in the head." Heart said.

"It wasn't my fault." Nikki protested, "Someone piled boxes in front of the door and my combadge broke when it got wet."

"Combadges are waterproof young lady." King pointed out.

"It came open. I saw a flash." Nikki said.

"That was probably just a capacitor discharging." Edwards said, "Shake out the water and close it again and it'll work just fine."

"Okay, so now I know that." Nikki replied, "Captain, I'm really sorry about all this."

"Turning around is going to cost us time." Nayaal commented.

"Time we don't have." Edwards added, nodding, "Look Nikki, you're going to have to stay with us for the duration of this operation but I want you to stay aboard the runabout at all times. Understood?"

"Yes captain." she replied.

"Good. But just in case you need to get rid of that uniform and put on something more like what the rest of us are wearing. In the mean time I'm going to contact the *Nightfall* and let your mother know where you are. I'll bet she's worried sick." Edwards said before he turned around and headed back to the cockpit.

"So what's going on back there?" Cole asked when he reappeared but Edwards just returned to his seat and activated the runabout's long range communications.

"*Thames* to *Nightfall*." he said.

"*Nightfall* here. Go ahead captain." West responded.

"Is Lieutenant Commander Carr there?" Edwards asked.

"Right here Captain." Carr said.

"Ah, Grace." Edwards said as he tried to figure out the best way of breaking the news to her than he was about to take her daughter into Breen territory, "You can stop looking for Nikki."

"Nikki? Why would I be looking for her? She'll be asleep in our quarters by now."

"She's here." Edwards said suddenly and both Cole and White turned their heads towards him in surprise.

"What?" Carr exclaimed, "How?"

"Well, it seems she managed to get locked in the bathroom and was not familiar enough with her combadge to be able to signal for someone to let her out."

"I don't believe this." Carr said, "How could she be so foolish?"

"Grace we can't turn around." Edwards said, "Our cover relies on us not doing anything to draw suspicion. But I promise you that we'll do everything to keep her safe."

"Oh right now I think she's far safer heading into Breen space with you than she is back here with me." Carr said, "*Nightfall* out." and then the channel went silent.

"Well she took that better than I thought she would." Edwards said.

On the *Nightfall's* bridge the officers on duty waited silently as Carr stared straight ahead from the captain's chair.

"You know commander," Hamilton began, leaning over from where he sat beside her as he performed the role of first officer in the absence of Cole, "we could intercept the *Thames* in less than—"

"We will maintain our course lieutenant." Carr said without looking at him. Then she took a deep breath and got to her feet, "You have the bridge Mister Hamilton." she said and she marched into the captain's ready room. Then just after the door slid shut she cried out, "Oh what will it take to get that girl to be responsible?" a shout that was not quite completely muffled by the door or wall separating the ready room from the bridge. "You know something tells me that she's not as calm as she tried to let the captain think she was." Hamilton commented.

Two figures in armoured suits with snouted helmets watched the sensor display carefully. A single small vessel was heading towards the border and making no effort to conceal its approach. According to the warp signature it was a Breen scout ship, identical to the many sent to evaluate potential threats or targets in what had been the Romulan Star Empire before the destruction of Romulus had caused it to collapse into civil war. One of the figures spoke, producing a burst of electronic sounding noise that seemed completely random to anyone listening without the benefit of one of the few models of universal translator programmed to be able to convert it.

Or alternatively one of the even rarer individuals who were able to understand it without the need for such devices.

"Yes I see it." The Girl said as she watched from behind the two armoured Breen and the other one let out another burst of sound, "No I don't want you to notify any other outposts."

The first Breen then turned towards The Girl and spoke again.

"Because if they detect whatever ship is sent to intercept them they'll just pull back and we'll lose them." she replied, "As long as they're in space there's the chance that they could escape. We need to wait for them to touch down, then we'll have them all right where we need them to be."

The other Breen then said something else.

"I want you to track that ship. Make certain that it remains unmolested by border patrols but don't have any of them make any suspicious moves. At least one needs to hail the ship but remain outside of visual scanning range. Captain Edwards deserves to think that his cunning ruse has succeeded until he gets here."

There was another burst of sound from the Breen.

“Yes he needs to get all the way here. And when he does we need to make sure that he finds exactly what he expects to. Tell the others that we are about to have visitors. This is exactly what we've been hoping for. I'll leave you to handle things from here.” and with that The Girl turned around and simply vanished into thin air.



"Breen cruiser approaching captain." White announced.

"They're hailing us." Cole added, "Shall I raise shields?"

"Not yet." Edwards replied and he looked at T'Lan, "T'Lan is your universal translator ready?"

"It is captain." she replied.

"Then there's no time like the present to try it out." Edwards said, "Open hailing frequencies."

"Yes captain." T'Lan said and there was a burst of sound as the untranslated Breen transmission was played,

"They are requesting that we identify ourselves and state our purpose for being in this area of space." she added after studying the text of the translation.

"Then I suggest that you tell them lieutenant." Edwards told her.

"Yes captain." she responded before switching the translator into transmit mode, "This is the scout ship *Glacier*. We are returning from target evaluation in the Romulan Empire. Our destination is the Leventus system."

"Now we wait and see how they react." Edwards commented, "Commander Cole stand by on those shields. Commander White be ready to get us out of here at maximum warp if they don't go for it."

At that moment there was another burst of sound from the communication system.

"They have accepted our investigation captain." T'Lan reported, "They are warning us to take care of an ion storm three light years outside Leventus."

"They're pulling away." Cole added.

"Well done lieutenant." Edwards said, "Now what can you tell me about where we're heading?"

"I have located four systems that have the correct type of star, appear to be orbited by a class-M planet and are a suitable distance from where we encountered the probe captain. Unfortunately they are scattered across more than eight light years and searching them all for the correct planet will be time consuming."

"Not if you get it right first time cousin." Noyal commented as she appeared at the rear of the cockpit.

"Please do not call me that." T'Lan said, referring to Noyal's continued use of the word 'cousin'.

"Is there something wrong back there Noyal?" Cole asked.

"Apart from unexpected passengers." White added without taking his eyes off the runabout's flight controls.

"I just wanted to see whether you needed my help dealing with any Breen border patrols." she replied.

"As a matter of fact we have already dealt with a patrol ship without the need for your assistance." T'Lan responded, "There is no logical reason for you to remain here."

"Really? And here was me thinking that you'd jump at the chance for a logical excuse to have to surrender that seat and sit on Robert's lap for the rest of the trip cousin." Noyal commented and she glanced at Cole,

"Oh well, I can tell when I'm not wanted."

"That is not my experience." T'Lan said

"Was that a joke cousin?"

"Vulcans do not joke. It was an observation."

Noyal snarled briefly before exiting the cockpit and returning to the lounge where she found the rest of the team along with Nikki sat around the table playing cards.

"Want us to deal you in?" King asked as she sat down.

"What are you playing?" Noyal asked in reply, "Is it the game Bradley taught me? The one where we take some of our clothes off after each hand?"

"No." King said sternly.

Aboard the *USS Nightfall*, the crudely constructed probe was being dismantled. Any components deemed to be of practical use or intelligence value would be placed in storage while the remainder would be recycled, the raw materials added to the stock for the ship's replicator system.

What remained of the probe's fuel for its impulse engine had been removed and so Max was able to open this up without risking an explosion inside the *Nightfall*. Inside he found the same odd assortment of parts he had encountered in every other section of the probe, though as Max had indicated during his briefing to the other senior officers, most came from a Federation Ambassador-class cruiser.

One such part was a fuel injector valve. This was a common part used on many Starfleet vessels and was among those that Max considered worth retaining. However, before taking the chance on using it to replace any component aboard the *Nightfall* or any of its attached auxiliary craft he knew that the device needed a proper inspection and he started by reading off the serial number he found etched on the side and entering it into the *Nightfall's* computer using a PADD. This automatically sent the details of the part to the closest Starbase where its entire history up to the point where it was seized by the Breen could be obtained.

As he waited for the response to this request, Max turned back to the probe but it was only a matter of

seconds before the PADD beeped to indicate a response from Starbase Ten and Max picked it up and read the information returned about the part.

"Max to bridge." he said, activating his combadge, "We have a problem."

Exiting the turbolift onto the bridge, Max walked up to Carr and handed her the PADD that showed the results of the fuel injector part number search.

"What am I looking at?" she asked.

"A PADD." Hamilton commented, "It's like a computer terminal but it-" but he stopped when Carr glared at him.

"This is the result of the search I carried out on a fuel injector I removed from the probe commander." Max explained.

"I can see that. But what's the issue?" Carr responded.

"Observe the last stardate listed." Max told her, "And the entry beside it."

"Stardate six-four-eight-nine-one point four. Unit disposed of as surplus." Carr said, "So the Breen got hold of a surplus injector."

"Didn't T'Lan say that the probe would have to have been in space for about eight years to get where we found it?" West commented from her station.

"Precisely." Max agreed, "Which means that it would not be possible for this injector to have been included."

"So if its no more than two years old then how did it get so far into space?" Carr asked.

"I would suggest that it did not commander." Max replied, "It is my opinion that the probe was deposited just outside our territory for us to find. The *Nightfall* specifically."

"But why?" Carr said.

"To get the captain into a runabout in Breen territory perhaps?" Hamilton said, "Whoever it was obviously knew a lot about him. In fact, I'd say that they'd been studying up on him in detail. Too much detail if you ask me."

"The spy." Carr said softly and Hamilton nodded. It had come to the attention of the *Nightfall's* command staff that someone aboard their ship was feeding information to the mysterious alien species that had been opposing them since their maiden voyage. Now it seemed likely that this agent had provided their enemy with a complete profile of Captain Edwards. Carr then looked at West, "Lieutenant, where's the *Thames* now?"

"They left sensor range about three hours ago commander." she answered.

"Helm, come about. We need to warn them." Carr ordered.

"Err, that may not be so easy commander." West said, "The *Thames* was modified to mask its warp signature. It'll look like a Breen scout ship to our sensors as well as the Breen's."

"But don't we have a heading for them?" Hamilton said, looking at Carr.

"Only an approximate one. They'll have changed course as soon as Lieutenant T'Lan picked up any systems that matched the profile she put together from that video." Max said.

"So they could be almost anywhere." Carr said, before adding, "And Nikki with them."

"Commander we could use our fighters to extend our search range." Shry suggested from tactical.

"No, we need something with a bit more duration." Carr said.

"And something that's better able to hold its own against a Breen warship than a single fighter." Hamilton added.

"Give me a tactical readout of the border zone." Carr ordered and the bridge's main viewscreen changed to show a map of the Romulan and Breen borders with the positions of all Starfleet vessels within five light years of them. Carr smiled when she saw a familiar name among them, "Get me the *USS Pacific*." she said, "I need to speak with Captain Cameron."

The *USS Pacific* was a Nebula-class starship and during the development stage of the program that led to the launch of the *USS Nightfall* its interchangeable upper equipment module had been used to test many of the technologies used on the Akira-class variant. This included the large mass accelerators that ran for much of the length of the *Nightfall* and the *Pacific* still carried a single prototype of the weapon in its upper hull following an attack by a Borg cube on an outer colony that had proven the value of such weapons against them.

"Putting you through now commander." West said and the viewscreen changed again to show the bridge of the *USS Pacific* with Captain Cameron sat central while his Caitian first officer Commander S'Kora sat beside him.

"Grace." Cameron said, "Where's Captain Edwards?"

"That's the issue sir." Carr responded, "I think he's heading into a trap."

"A trap? What is it?" Cameron asked.

"It's where someone tricks you into doing something that will end up harming you. But that's not important right now." Hamilton said before Carr could reply and she winced.

"Not now." she hissed as S'Kora's furred brow bunched up in a scowl, only the fact that Hamilton was not

under his direct command preventing him from speaking out. Then Carr turned her attention back to the viewscreen, "We intercepted a probe entering Federation space that looked to have been sent out as a call for help from captives being held as slaves in Breen territory." she explained, "Captain Edwards took a team in a runabout to investigate but Max has since come up with more information that indicates that the probe may have been planted for us to find on purpose."

"What for?" S'Kora asked.

"We think that the deception was specifically targeted against the captain." Carr replied, "Also that it may be related to the same alien force we've been having trouble with for the past couple of years."

"You think that they're active within the Breen Confederacy?" Cameron said and Carr nodded.

"It looks that way, yes sir. Let's face it, the Breen have been keeping a low profile since the war and they didn't exactly welcome visitors before it. Who knows what's going on inside their borders?"

"So what do you need from us?" Cameron asked.

"We have only a vague idea of where the captain's gone sir." Carr replied, "So searching for him with just one ship would probably take too long to stop him from walking right into whatever trap is being set for him. We'd like you to help us search."

"That means leaving Federation space and violating Breen space." S'Kora pointed out.

"I'm aware of that commander." Carr said, "But with two ships-

"We'd have a better shot at holding off any Breen response." Cameron interrupted, nodding, "Okay, we can be at the Breen border in fourteen hours. We'll meet you there and we can decide how to proceed from there on. *Pacific* out." and the screen shifted back to the tactical display that had been showed prior to the bridge of the *Pacific*.

"Helm." Hamilton called out without waiting for Carr to issue an order, "Set course two five seven mark three six. Warp nine."

The planet orbited its star at the outer edge of the region where it received enough energy to allow it to maintain a class-M environment and from space the colouration appeared to match the vegetation that had been visible in the video that had brought the team aboard the *Thames* here.

"Well?" Edwards said.

"No signs of Breen vessels captain." Cole replied.

"But there are energy signatures of artificial origin on the surface." T'Lan added, "They are coming from the continent in the northern hemisphere."

"A mining camp?" Cole asked.

"Possibly." T'Lan said, "The energy is insufficient to be a full settlement, just enough for a handful of buildings and some equipment."

"And how easy will our approach be?" Edwards said, looking at White.

"Easy captain." the fighter pilot replied, "There's a comet moving through the system that we can use to mask our approach up until we are eclipsed behind the planet's moons. Then we dart out and settle into orbit before going dark."

"Then that's what we'll do." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Commander Cole, I want you, Captain Heart and Nayal to beam down to the surface with me. We'll scout out the location of the emissions while Lieutenant Commander White commands the runabout and waits for us. We'll check in at six hour intervals. If we're overdue by more than an hour your orders are to withdraw and let Starfleet know where we are."

"Yes captain."

"Captain perhaps I should join you-" T'Lan began but Edwards shook his head.

"I want you to try and keep a lock on us from orbit lieutenant." he told her. "If we get into trouble we may need an emergency beam out."

The away team assembled in the cockpit, each member armed with both a hand phaser and phaser rifles as well as wearing a MACO issue armoured vest. All of this equipment had been stripped of all identifying marks so that it could not be tied to the *USS Nightfall*, Starfleet or the Federation if any of it was discovered by the Breen.

"I have isolated the co-ordinates of the energy emissions from the surface." T'Lan said, "The transporter will set you down about three thousand metres away."

"That should be far enough for us to avoid being spotted by the Breen." Heart said, nodding as he checked his rifle. Aboard the *USS Nightfall* the ground forces were normally equipped with projectile firing assault rifles designed to be effective against Borg drones, but all were fully trained in the use of more modern weaponry as well.

"Unless they've got patrols." Nayal pointed out.

"The four of us ought to be able to handle a small Breen patrol." Cole said and he looked at Heart, "Right?"

"Right." Heart responded, "Though I'd still be happier taking a few grenades along as well."

"This is just a scouting mission for now." Edwards said, "With any luck we'll be able to just beam the captives out and get away without having to engage the Breen at all." then as the away team members finished checking their equipment he looked at T'Lan and nodded, "Energise." he told her.

The away team materialised in an area of woodland. But whereas the video clip they had seen had shown slave labourers digging in the ground surrounded by vegetation, now there was a covering of snow on the ground and the trees were largely devoid of leaves.

"She could have warned us about the cold!" Nayal exclaimed as she shivered.

"This is nothing." Heart said, raising his rifle and turning around as he made sure that the landing zone was secure, "It's just a bit of a winter chill. If you've picked a half way decent jacket then it should protect you against it."

Meanwhile Edwards reached into his jacket and took out a communicator. Given that Starfleet combadges would immediately identify them, the away team had equipped itself with older hand-held devices to keep in touch with the runabout.

"Down and safe." he signalled, "Next check in in six hours at the latest. Edwards out." and then without waiting for a response from the runabout he shut off the communicator and put it back in his pocket.

"I'm picking up the energy emissions T'Lan detected." Cole announced as he looked at the tricorder he had brought with him and he pointed his rifle in the direction of the emissions.

"Then let's move out." Edwards said, "Shut off the tricorder. I don't want the Breen detecting it. We'll just use it when we need to." then he looked at Heart, "Perhaps you should lead the way captain."

"Will do." Heart replied, "Everyone fall in. If T'Lan got us down where she said then we ought to be able to

make it to the Breen position in about an hour or two.”

The away team then started to move, picking their way through the woodland. The snow on the ground meant that they were unable to disguise the fact of their presence due to the tracks that they left in it, but at the same time the lack of any Breen tracks suggested that no patrols had come this way recently either. Heart kept the team on as straight a line as he could and this took them towards the sound of running water. All of a sudden the MACO dropped to his knees and raised a hand.

“What does that mean?” Nayal asked.

“Stop I think.” Edwards told her.

“It's stop.” Cole agreed, “He must have seen something.”

Keeping low the other three members of the away team crept towards where Heart had come to a halt.

“What have you found captain?” Edwards asked.

“There's something just upstream by the bank.” Heart replied softly, “Something that shouldn't be there.” and he raised his phaser rifle, looking down the optical sight for a better view, “Uh-oh.” he added.

“What's wrong?” Edwards said, lifting his own rifle scope to his eye, “Is that a body?”

“I think so.” Heart said, “And not a Breen one either.”

“Then let's go take a look.” Edwards said.

“Right then, we move in pairs.” Heart said, “Captain, you and Nayal should advance as far as those rocks and then cover Lieutenant Commander Cole and I while we get to the body itself. Then we'll cover you the rest of the way.”

Edwards nodded and then he and Nayal dashed forwards, heading for a small cluster of rock that offered just enough cover for the pair of them. As they halted behind these and steadied their rifles on them, Cole and Heart broke from cover and ran past Edwards and Nayal as they ran the rest of the way to the body by the edge of the water before Edwards and Nayal joined them.

“Well he's definitely dead.” Nayal said as Cole rolled the body over. It was a human male in clothing that had once been a Starfleet service division uniform but had been patched with a variety of other fabrics. There was no obvious cause of death but scars on his face and flesh exposed through tears in his clothing suggested that he had been beaten on multiple occasions.

“We need to get this guy back up to the *Thames* for Doctor King to examine.” Edwards said as he took his communicator from his pocket again, “Edwards to *Thames*.” he said, activating the device.

“*Thames* here captain.” Nikki's voice replied.

“Nikki we've found a body that looks like one of the prisoners.” Edwards explained, “I'm going to place my communicator on top of the corpse and I want you to get T'Lan to beam it up so that Doctor King can examine it. Do you understand?”

“Yes captain. I'll let them know.” Nikki said and Edwards set his communicator down on the chest of the corpse and stood back. Moments later the communicator and corpse both sparkled as they were beamed aboard the orbiting runabout.

“We need to keep going.” Edwards said, “Captain Heart, how much further do you estimate we have to go?”

“I'd say just over a kilometre.” Heart answered, “Once we get over that hill there we ought to have a clear view of the Breen camp.”

Nikki stared at the body that materialised aboard the runabout and winced.

“Okay, let's get this into the back and I'll take a look at it.” King said, “Nikki, will you give me a hand?”

“Me?” Nikki exclaimed.

“Commander White has to fly the ship and T'Lan has to monitor the sensors.” King told her, “That leaves you young lady. Now pick up his feet.”

King and Nikki picked up the body between them and were carrying it into the runabout's rear section when T'Lan turned around and looked at White.

“Lieutenant commander, I am picking up several vessels dropping out of warp at the edge of the system.” she said.

“Can you identify them?” White asked.

“They appear to be Breen vessels.” T'Lan told him, “One cruiser plus several smaller vessels.”

“Have they seen us?” White said.

“It does not appear so. Though I cannot guarantee how long that will continue to be the case and without the modified warp engines running it is unlikely that we will be able to fool their sensors.”

“Then we need to set down.” White said as he started making preparations to enter the planet's atmosphere, “Hold on back there everyone.” he announced over the intercom, “We've got incoming Breen ships. I'm putting us down on the surface.”

“The surface?” Nikki said as she and King set the body down on the table in the lounge, “What for?”

“Probably to hide us.” King replied, “Which means that there must be Breen ships in the area.”

“But will they see us?” Nikki asked.

“You'll know if they do.” King answered.

"How?"

"Because they'll either shoot us down or beam aboard and use us to replace this poor fellow. Now Hang on. If commander White's history as a fighter pilot is anything to go by then we're in for a bumpy ride."

Sure enough the runabout lurched as White engaged its thrusters, propelling the ship towards the atmosphere of the planet below before the approaching Breen ships could notice their presence.

"Are such violent manoeuvres really necessary?" T'Lan asked when she was forced to grab hold of the arm of her chair to steady herself.

"I need to get us behind the planet's moon before I can risk taking us into the atmosphere." White responded while still focusing on the flight controls in front of him, "Otherwise the heat we create passing through the air will be like sending up a flare if they're still in the system when it reaches them in a couple of hours time."

"I understand. Though perhaps you could keep the manoeuvres to a minimum and warn me prior to making them?" T'Lan said.

"I'm promising nothing Missy." White said just before he turned the ship sharply once more.

The next sudden lurch came when he angled the runabout's nose downwards and fired its thrusters to take them into the atmosphere, followed by a shaking as it entered the upper reaches. Meanwhile outside the air began to glow red as it passed over the hull of the runabout, a glow visible to all of the occupants.

"Is this normal?" Nikki asked as she and King tried to prevent the body from sliding off the table and being thrown around the room, "I don't remember anything this bad on my last shuttle ride."

"Perhaps because you didn't have a lunatic pilot at the helm who's forgotten that a runabout is not a fighter and shouldn't be handled like one." King replied, "Though if the alternative is taking a hit from a Breen torpedo then I'll stick with the lunatic. That red glow's only a real problem if it ends up inside."

White fired the thrusters again as the runabout continued to descend, slowing the ship down as rapidly as possible so that it would produce the least possible visible trail that could give them away to observers on the surface.

"Okay so where do you want me to set down?" he asked T'Lan as the glow outside began to subside and full visibility through the viewports was restored.

"I would recommend placing us as close to the co-ordinates that Captain Edwards and the away team beamed down to." she replied.

"Okay. That will mean taking us in low to avoid being spotted from the Breen camp but it ought to be possible." White said, "You might want to hang on because it'll also mean a few more sharp turns."

White then put the runabout into a steep dive that took it almost straight down to treetop level and only the internal artificial gravity field prevented its occupants and contents from all being hurled towards the front of the ship. At the last moment he pulled up and the inertial dampeners failed to completely nullify this sudden change in direction, pushing everything down and towards the back of the runabout. But this lasted only a few moments before White completed the levelling out manoeuvre and flew at just above treetop height towards the landing co-ordinates. Hovering for a short time, white studied the local geography until he spotted a clearing in the trees big enough to take the runabout and carefully positioned the vessel above it before setting it down and shutting off the engines.

"Okay that's it." he announced, "We're down and safe. I'm going to take a quick look around outside. T'Lan, can you let the captain and the others know where we are?"

"Yes lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded while White got out of his chair and headed out of the cockpit to collect weapons, armour and communicator.

"Lieutenant Commander White felt it prudent to land the runabout to avoid detection captain." T'Lan said as Edwards listened using Cole's communicator, "It is also my opinion that this was the logical course of action given the circumstances."

"So you're close to where we set down?" Edwards asked.

"Correct. Approximately seventy metres south of that position."

"Very well. We're almost at the camp. We'll check in as soon as we have something to report. Edwards out." and then he handed the communicator back to Cole.

"Captain." Heart hissed from close by and he waved towards the other members of the away team. The MACO was positioned at the top of a shallow rise, crouched behind a tree while looking over to the other side.

"Yes, what is it?" Edwards replied as he, Cole and Nayal headed to join him.

"Down there." Heart said, now pointing over the top of the rise, "It's the camp."

Edwards hurried to position himself beside Heart and looked for himself. Sure enough on the other side of the rise he saw the ground slope away gently until it reached an area level enough that the Breen had been able to erect numerous prefabricated structures and also land a small transport vessel, not much larger than the runabout that had brought the team from the *Nightfall*.

The ground to one side of the cluster of buildings had been dug up, with numerous wide trenches running for about a hundred metres and slave workers of many species could be seen digging with hand tools while armoured Breen watched over them. Despite the snow on the ground the Breen guards still wore their enclosing refrigeration suits, suggesting that the planet was still significantly warmer than they were used to.

"Okay this is a problem." Cole commented.

"Why?" Nayal asked, "I only see a dozen or so guards. There are eight of us so—"

"Seven." Edwards interrupted, "There's no way that I'm taking Nikki into battle. Even if she wasn't Grace's daughter she's still only an intern with no combat training."

"Well that's not entirely true." Heart said and when the others looked at him he added, "I taught her how to shoot. Though I still wouldn't regard her as ready to go into battle."

"And since we need someone to watch over her that reduces us to six." Edwards went on.

"Plus those dozen are only the ones we can see." Heart added.

"But the Breen aren't the main issue here." Edwards said, "The prisoners are."

"How so?" Nayal responded.

"Because we'd never fit them all aboard the runabout." Cole pointed out, "That means just beaming them all out isn't an option."

"What about that Breen ship down there?" Heart suggested, "It looks large enough to take those we can't."

"We'd probably need White and T'Lan to get it going." Cole said.

"Yes and Doctor King needs to be able to inspect all of the prisoners before we can just send them on their way." Edwards added. Then he looked at Cole, "That means I'll need you back on the runabout commander."

"Why him?" Nayal asked, "If we're going to go down there and shoot the place up then isn't Lieutenant Commander Cole one of the best qualified?"

"Oh undoubtedly." Edwards replied, "But I need Doctor King, T'Lan and Commander White for their specialised skills and you can't fly the runabout. That leaves just myself and Cole as potential pilots if we need air support and there's no way I'm sending everyone else into battle to risk their lives while I sit safely in the runabout after coming all this way."

Cole nodded.

"I'll head back now." he said, "I ought to be able to cover the ground in just over an hour."

"Say another hour or hour and a half for the others to get back here and that will probably put us at just before sundown captain. Judging by the way the sun's moved while we've been here." Heart commented, looking up into the sky.

"That's good." Edwards replied, "Then provisionally we'll time our strike for sundown. We'll separate the prisoners from the guards and make sure to keep the Breen away from that ship of theirs long enough to seize it. The environmental controls will require modification but that shouldn't be much of a problem for T'Lan to manage. After that we'll get out of here as quick as we can and high tail it back to Federation space. Commander Cole, start back to runabout now. We'll keep watch on the camp and refine the plan based on our observations. Make sure that the runabout is ready for immediate launch."

King was bent over the body inspecting it carefully while Nikki stood as far from it as she could.

"So what's wrong with him?" Nikki asked.

"I think," King said while continuing to inspect the body, "that from my initial observation I'd say he was dead." then he looked up, "Also that you could do with phrasing your questions better young lady. However, if you're asking how he died then I still can't give you an accurate answer. My guess would be exposure but I really need to cut him open to confirm that and I'm reluctant to do that here. Knowing exactly how this poor fellow met his end can wait until we get back to the *Nightfall* and I have access to the equipment in sick bay."

Just then the door slid open and White entered the room, still wearing his armoured vest.

"Okay doctor, get ready to move." he said.

"Where?" King asked.

"We're heading for the Breen camp. Captain Edwards wants you to come with me and T'Lan to check out the other prisoners." White told him.

"I'll fetch my medkit." King replied.

"You'll need a phaser and body armour as well." White added.

"What about me?" Nikki asked and she looked at the table, "You're not leaving me alone with him are you?"

"No. Lieutenant Commander Cole is on his way back. As soon as he gets here we'll leave and he'll wait aboard the runabout just in case the captain calls for air support."

"But wouldn't you be better qualified for that?" King said.

"Sure." White answered, "But T'Lan and I are needed to jump start a Breen ship for the prisoners we don't have room for."

"I suppose I better grab a phaser then." King said.

It took King a few minutes to put on the MACO armour and properly adjust it to his size but he along with T'Lan and White were still ready well before Cole returned to serve as pilot for the runabout while the rest of the team carried out the attack on the Breen camp.

"The captain will give you your final orders when you get there." Cole explained, "When I left he was planning an assault at dusk but that may have changed depending on what they've seen since I left. I'll prepare the runabout for take off and be standing by if you need me."

"In that case we'll be off." King replied, "That body you found is in the back but I don't think there's anything else you need to know." then he looked at White and nodded, giving him a signal that he was ready to depart. The three of them then left the runabout and started walking off in the direction Cole had approached from, using his tracks to guide their path towards the Breen camp.

"So what do we do now?" Nikki asked as she sat down in the runabout's pilot's seat.

"For starters you get out of my seat." Cole told her and she got up and moved to the co-pilot's station, "In fact I'm not so sure that you ought to be up here at all." he added as he headed for the door at the back of the cockpit so he could return his armour and rifle to the cases they had been stored in.

"Why not?" Nikki called out after him, "I'm an official intern and there's no way that I'm staying in the lounge with that dead guy on the table. It's just creepy."

"Creepy it may be." Cole replied, peering through the open door to the lounge at the body on the table, "But it's not as if he can hurt you."

"In any case you owe me." Nikki said.

"How do you figure that?" Cole asked as he placed his rifle back in its case and closed it.

"I got you and T'Lan together."

"You did not." Cole said while he removed his armour, "I picked up on her feelings from a mind meld."

"Yes but she may not have stayed interested in you for as long as she did without me advising her on how to attract you."

"Oh very well." Cole said as he put his armour away, "I'll let you stay in the cockpit. I doubt that our passenger is going to need any watching anyhow." and he returned to the cockpit, closing the door behind him.

But as if it had been waiting for the sound of the closing door, it was at that moment that the body in the lounge suddenly sat up and looked around.

"The *Pacific* is hailing us commander." West announced as the Nebula-class starship dropped out of warp in close proximity to the *Nightfall*.

"Put them through." Carr replied and the bridge of the *Pacific* appeared on the main viewscreen again.

"Commander Carr." Captain Cameron announced, "I hope we haven't kept you waiting."

"Not at all captain." Carr said, "We've been scanning the Breen side of the border."

"And have you found anything?" S'Kora asked.

"Nothing of note." Carr answered, "I've discussed this with Lieutenant Maximillian and he thinks that it's best for us to move into Breen space at a low warp speed and launch probes towards all of the systems that T'Lan identified as likely candidates for having launched the fake probe we found."

"Sounds sensible." Cameron said, "How many systems are we taking about?"

"Only four. But they're pretty scattered. We can take two each but it will mean splitting up. I'll send you the locations of all four systems as well as the profile that T'Lan drew up."

"I take it that you haven't picked up the warp trail of the runabout." S'Kora said.

"No, that's not possible. Ironically the captain had the runabout's warp drives modified so that the Breen wouldn't be able to detect them. Now that same modification is preventing us from following them to their destination." Carr said.

"Very well." Cameron replied, "Send us what you've got and we'll take two systems each. I take it that you want whatever ship finds your runabout first to make for it at best speed while the other catches up?"

"That's what I had in mind. Though if there's a significant Breen force in the area we can delay and go in together." Carr said.

"That sounds good to me." Cameron said, "Transmit the data and tell us which systems you want us to take. *Pacific* out."

7.

Nikki watched as Cole brought the runabout's systems online. This could have been achieved more rapidly if he had not been concerned about creating an energy pulse that would have given away the presence of the vessel. Since landing and shutting down their sensors, the Starfleet team had lost track of the Breen vessels in the system and had no way of knowing whether they were still present and their locations if they were. So by working slower than normal Cole was hoping that any emissions picked up by the Breen would be considered too trivial to be worth diverting a squadron of ships to investigate.

"So speaking of how I helped get you and T'Lan together, how are things going between you?" Nikki said suddenly and Cole paused in his work.

"I am kind of busy here." he said.

"Yes, but the others won't be in position for almost an hour yet at least and I know how long it takes to start a runabout up from my engineering rotation."

"In that case things are going very well."

"Well enough that I might be asked to be a bridesmaid soon? Maybe maid of honour?"

"I think you may some competition there." Cole replied, "Not that I'm suggesting you should be expecting any announcements soon mind you."

"Competition? Who from?"

"Well I think Nayal may-"

"Oh T'Lan would never ask Nayal."

"Maybe not. But I think Nayal is the sort of person who would make yours and T'Lan's lives more difficult if she wasn't offered a central role. Beware Romulans bearing gifts and all."

"Especially when its wrapped in pretty paper with a bow?" Nikki asked.

"Oh especially-" Cole began before he was interrupted by an unexpected 'clump' from the rear of the runabout.

"What was that?" Nikki said as they both looked around.

"Sounds like something's come loose." Cole said and he got out of the pilot's seat, "I better go fix it down before we take off. The last thing we need is something unsecured flying around and smashing into everything." then he walked over to the door at the rear of the cockpit and opened it.

At which point a hand unexpectedly pushed him backwards.

Nikki screamed as Cole fell, striking his head against one side of the transporter and she saw the previously dead body now striding into the cockpit. Though dazed, Cole still remembered that he still had a hand phaser holstered at his waist and he reached for it. The now reanimated corpse turned towards him as he drew the weapon and was unable to react before he fired. The bright red beam struck Cole's assailant in his chest but had no effect whatsoever. For safety reasons, phasers were set on 'stun' while in storage and Cole had not adjusted this before drawing it. Realising that this setting was insufficient, Cole went to adjust it but before he could take aim again the figure stepped forwards and swung an arm at him, knocking the phaser from his grip and sending it flying towards the front of the cockpit. The man then opened his mouth widely, far more widely than any human ought to have been able to manage and with a heavy exhale of breath he sprayed some sort of fluid towards Cole. The fluid had an acrid smell and Cole coughed and wretched as it overwhelmed him. Meanwhile Nikki turned her head to where the phaser had landed and dived to pick it up. "Stay back!" she shouted out across the cockpit as she got back to her feet again and pointed the weapon at the previously dead man. Though she had very little experience in the use of weapons and none with this particular model she was certain that she could manage to hit a man sized target as such close range. Especially with Cole lay on the floor and out of her line of fire.

But the man reacted quicker than she had been expecting, turning his head towards her suddenly and unleashing another spray of the foul smelling fluid that engulfed Nikki, causing her to flinch as she tried to keep it away from her face. While she was distracted the man charged towards her and once again lashed out to knock the phaser away. Though still overcome by the smell of the liquid Cole tried to assist Nikki by kicking at the back of the man's knee, hoping to knock his leg out from under him. But the blow was off target and instead only struck the back of his shin. It did briefly distract him however, prompting him to turn away from Nikki to spray Cole with more of the fluid. Cole brought his arms up and rolled aside to protect his face from this but it still soaked into the side and chest of his jacket before the man turned his attention back to Nikki again.

Reaching out, he grabbed hold of her by the collar and pulled her towards him. Spinning her around he sprayed more of the fluid at her to try and subdue her before he pushed her towards where Cole lay, still coughing. Nikki landed on top of Cole, the side of her face against his chest and when she tried to lift herself back up she found that her hair was now caught, matted in amongst the fluid that was starting to solidify.

Their assailant charged back across the cockpit and reached down. But rather than striking at either Cole or Nikki he instead just pushed down on Nikki's back, pressing them together while the fluid set and effectively glued them together to incapacitate them both.

"Nikki are you hurt?" Cole gasped, the stench of the fluid subsiding now that it had dried off and hardened. "You mean apart from having my head glued to your chest? Just fine." she replied, "What the hell is going on anyway? I thought that guy was dead."

"I know." Cole said, "And given what we know about dead people coming back to life to cause trouble I'm starting to think that this isn't any normal Breen outpost."

"You mean those zombies again?" Nikki said, referring to the mysterious force that the crew of the *Nightfall* had encountered many times since the launch of their vessel. 'Zombie' had become the favoured term for describing their agents that took the form of dead people reanimated through the use of a synthetic flesh. In response Cole tried to nod but found that his hair was now stuck to the transporter behind his head and he winced.

"The very same." he said instead while the man now turned away from them, approached the pilot's seat and sat down. However, he made no attempt to ready the runabout for launch, instead just sitting motionless as if waiting to be told what to do next.

The presence of three more Breen had been confirmed when movement from behind the group watching over their camp made all three turn and aim their phasers through the trees.

"It's just us." King said quietly, "We brought you this." and he handed Edwards' communicator back to him.

"And right on time as well doctor." Edwards responded as he took the device and put it in his pocket, "We don't have long before the sun sets."

"Movement." Heart said suddenly and Edwards turned his attention back towards the camp to see a group of four armed Breen walking away from the structures and towards the edge of the forest.

"Could they be looking for us?" King asked as the other joined Edwards, Heart and Nayal at the top of the rise.

"They aren't heading this way." Nayal pointed out.

"Not yet anyway." Heart commented, "If they knew we were here then coming charging straight at us would be the last thing that they'd do. They'd have to cross all that open ground between us and the outpost. We'd cut them to pieces."

"But if they knew we were here then why only send five?" Nayal asked.

"There were only three of you until just now." T'Lan pointed out, "They would have had a numerical advantage."

"They should still have sent more." Heart replied, "I would."

"A random patrol then?" White suggested.

"Possibly." Heart answered, "Or maybe a hunting party. We've seen signs of some large animal life forms around."

"I know." King said, "I almost trod right in one of those signs."

"Plus there could be runaway prisoners to be found." Heart added.

"This gives us an opportunity." Edwards said, "Lieutenant Commander White, I want you to take T'Lan and Nayal and skirt around the camp until you get as close to that transport ship as you can without breaking cover. Meanwhile I'll take Doctor King and Captain Heart after that patrol. We'll take it out as quickly as we can and then sneak into the camp. When the action starts you need to get to that ship and get it on line." then he looked around, "Any questions?" he asked, but all he got in reply was shaking heads, "In that case let's get going."

The group split into two equally sized smaller units and headed in opposite directions. White, T'Lan and Nayal circled around the camp towards where the Breen transport ship had been landed. The problem with getting so close to the vessel was that it obscured their line of sight, preventing them from directly seeing what was going on in the camp. But as they came to a halt and White and Nayal aimed their phasers towards the ship T'Lan took out her tricorder and began to conduct basic low-energy scans that she hoped would go undetected by the Breen.

"Strange." she said as she studied the results of the scan.

"What is cousin?" Nayal asked.

"The mineral composition of the rocks in this area appears to be mundane. I am picking up no indication that there is anything of value to be mined."

"And you didn't think to check that before we beamed down to the surface?" Nayal asked.

"I did not believe it to be an issue at the time." T'Lan answered.

"Well the Breen appear to disagree." White said, "Perhaps it's something that your tricorder can't pick up on a basic scan."

"That is a possibility." T'Lan admitted, "Any substance with resistance to detection would be inherently valuable."

"We can find out what the Breen are digging for after we're done here." White then added, "I'd think that the prisoners must know and once we get them out of here they're sure to be willing to tell us."

At the same time that White's group was taking up a position that would allow them to rapidly assault the Breen transport ship, Edwards' team was making its way around to intercept the Breen patrol. Given his vastly greater experience at conducting ground combat operations, Edwards had Heart lead the way and the two Starfleet officers found themselves being led further and further away from the Breen camp.

"Aren't we getting a little far away from our objective?" King asked.

"I'm trying to figure out whether these guys are after anything specific." Heart replied, "If they are then we may be able to use that to our advantage."

"You mean by attacking when they're distracted?" Edwards said and Heart nodded.

"Exactly. Though if they don't seem to be looking for something we can use against them then at least waiting for them to get as far from the camp as possible will lessen the odds of our being detected when we launch our ambush."

The Breen patrol continued to head away from the camp before making a sudden turn and Heart came to a halt.

"Okay this is it." he hissed, "They aren't after anything in particular and they don't look like they'll be getting any further away from their camp. Now we need to do this quickly, before any of them can raise the alarm."

"So basically we all fire together?" Edwards said.

"That's right." he replied, "We need to spread out. Captain, you go over there to that fallen tree and when I open fire you do the same."

"What about me?" King asked.

"Assuming you're alright with using that phaser doctor then I want you to position yourself over there by that gully. When the captain and I draw the Breen's attention you can help us catch them in a cross fire."

"Very well." King said and he set off towards the gully.

"Just give me a minute or so to get into position and then we can do this." Edwards added before he darted towards the fallen tree and took cover.

Heart then lined up his phaser on the Breen. Looking down the sights he tried to identify a leader amongst them, hoping that in taking him out he would throw the rest of the patrol into confusion. However, nothing about the way that the masked and armoured figures moved or acted stood out to indicate such an individual so instead Heart just lined up his weapon on the Breen moving at the front of the patrol and squeezed the trigger. The beam of bright red energy struck the lead Breen and he topped backwards, his weapon flying from his hands as he fell. In response the other four Breen returned fire with bursts of rapid disruptor pulses that forced Heart to duck and crawl away as the rock that he had been using for cover was taken apart piece by piece. One of the pulses struck Heart in his side, but the armoured vest he wore was sufficient to stop the attack and although he winced as he felt the heat of the blast even through his armour he was able to keep moving.

It was then that Edwards emerged and fired two rapid blasts into another of the Breen. The first struck the alien's shoulder and spun him around while the second was a clean hit to the centre of his chest and he fell forwards. Then while the Breen were turning towards Edwards, Heart re-emerged from behind a tree and fired again to down a third alien.

Down to only two members of their patrol, the remaining Breen began spraying disruptor blasts into the trees where Edwards and Heart were hiding. But in doing so they unknowingly turned their backs on where King was still concealed and he stood up and opened fire. Unlike Edwards or Heart, he still had his rifle set to stun but it was still enough that the beam that struck one of the Breen between his shoulders simply doubled over and landed in a heap on the ground.

Startled by this unexpected attack from behind the last remaining Breen dived for cover. But this meant that he was forced to cease fire and seeing their chance both Edwards and Heart struck again. Both men fired short burst of fire as they broke from cover and rushed forwards and when the Breen exposed himself to try to return fire Heart shot him down before he could aim his weapon properly.

"Clear!" Heart called out as he kicked the dead Breen's weapon away just in case his armoured suit had been enough to protect him just as Heart's vest had done.

"You're hit." King commented as he approached Heart.

"It's not bad." he replied, "The vest stopped it."

"Well let me take a quick look at it." King said, "If the burn is bad enough to have broken the skin then it could get infected."

"Okay, but we need to get moving quickly." Heart said, "I don't think any of these guys got off a signal but there's no telling how long they were supposed to be away from the camp for."

"What about making use of some of these suits to disguise ourselves?" King suggested as Heart removed his armoured vest and lifted his jacket so that he could inspect the wound underneath.

"Fine in theory. Bad idea in practice doctor." Heart said, shaking his head, "We'd waste time getting into

those suits and we don't know whether there was some specific way that they were supposed to approach the camp when they returned."

"So we're better off just sneaking in then?" Edwards asked.

"That's right." Heart said and then he looked back at King, "So how does it look doc?"

"What this tiny burn? Fine. A dermal regenerator will fix that perfectly. Though its not urgent to get it seen to."

"In that case we should get moving." Heart said as he lowered his jacket again and reached down for his body armour that he quickly donned once more before the three men started to head back towards the Breen camp.

When they were no longer within sight of the bodies of the Breen patrol they had ambushed the Breen that King had stunned suddenly sat upright and looked in the direction the three humans had left in as he got to his feet. Standing motionless for a while he let out a short burst of electronic noise before retrieving his weapon and following the humans at a distance.

The Girl appeared behind the commander of the Breen camp as he studied a map of the local area.

"They're here." she said when he turned around and he responded with a brief burst of noise.

"They ambushed a patrol?" she said, "How many did you lose?" then she waited for the reply before adding,

"Well just make sure that the rest of your men know to do their best to take them alive. Especially Captain Edwards."

The Breen looked at her and emitted more sounds.

"Yes, we're certain that he's leading the team personally. But there has been one slight complication. Two Federation starships have appeared on the edge of Breen space. One of them is the *Nightfall*. It looks like they've coming searching for Captain Edwards so take care, his team must not be allowed to contact their ship or all of this will become far more difficult."

The Breen command spoke again and The Girl smiled.

"Excellent." she said, "Seizing their runabout will make it far harder for them to get word out. Now I'm trusting you to look after things here. I'm going to go and see what I can do about those two starships. If they enter Breen space then just maybe I'll be able to muster a force to take out the other ship that has joined the *Nightfall*."

The Breen spoke again.

"No, I don't intend to destroy the *Nightfall* as well. I'm hoping that the destruction of the other vessel will convince them to retreat." The Girl told the Breen. Then after another short burst of sound from him she added, "Never mind why. Just do your job commander." and then she turned around and vanished, leaving the Breen commander alone again.

a.

Heart halted just within the treeline. The lack of foliage meant that there was less cover than he would have liked as he carried out his final evaluation of the camp but he was still able to stay out of sight as he watched the captives being led away from the trenches that they had been working in and towards some of the camp's structures.

"Looks like the Breen don't work their prisoners through the night." he commented as Edwards and King joined him.

"Good." King responded, "That means they'll be out of the way when the shooting starts."

"If we time it right we may be able to avoid any shooting as well." Edwards added.

"You're thinking of waiting until the Breen turn in as well captain?" Heart asked and Edwards nodded.

"With them in their huts we'll just be facing a few sentries." he said, "Think you can handle that captain?"

"I should be able to." Heart answered and he smiled as he slid his knife from its scabbard.

"In that case captain I'll cover the Breen barracks while you take out the sentries. Doctor King, I want you to release the prisoners. We'll signal the other team to take the transport as soon as the sentries are taken care of. Everyone understand?" and both Heart and King nodded, "Good. Then let's do this."

The three men waited until the captives had been sealed inside the structures serving as their barracks and watched as most of the Breen guards then headed for other structures. Only four Breen remained outside and began to patrol singly, spacing themselves out around the perimeter of the camp. This meant that they were able to cover the maximum area possible at once and limited the gaps that Heart had available as he darted out of the woods and took cover behind a portable fusion generator that looked to be of Romulan manufacture.

He waited here quietly until the next Breen sentry approached and watched as the armoured figure walked past. Then with his knife in his hand he rushed up behind the alien and wrapped his free arm around his neck, dragging the guard backwards before thrusting the knife up under the front of his helmet. The biology of Breen had no blood so there was no sudden spurt of the fluid as the knife went in. But tissue fluid still leaked out through the wound, vaporising and creating a cloud in front of the Breen's head as it boiled away now that it was removed from the artificially cooled environment inside the suit.

Heart left the knife sticking out of the Breen as he let go of the handle to grab hold of the Breen's disruptor before it could hit the ground and make a noise that would attract the other guards. Then he dragged the body of the guard behind the generator and laid it down on the ground before finally retrieving his knife and looking around for the next sentry.

"He's good." Nayal commented as she, T'Lan and White watched from their hiding place as Heart stabbed another sentry through a gap between two armour plates, twisting the blade to open up the wound and creating a large cloud of vaporising tissue fluid. Then he began concealing the body under the transport ship that was to be the prisoners' way off the planet.

"Captain Heart is well trained and has more than a decade of experience." T'Lan said, "His proficiency is to be expected."

"You're just upset that your boyfriend is too busy babysitting to be helping him cousin." Nayal replied.

"I do not get upset." T'Lan responded, "And please refrain from calling me 'cousin'. I have asked you not to do so on multiple occasions."

"Ladies please." White said, "If you're going to have a cat fight at least wait until we're somewhere warmer. Right now I think that Heart's about to give us the clear run at that transport we need." and he pointed to where Heart was using his knife to take out a third sentry.

As soon as the body of this guard was on the ground Heart began to move quickly towards the final one, leaving his latest kill where it fell.

"Okay that's our cue. Let's go." White said and he began to sprint towards the transport with Nayal and T'Lan followed behind him.

At the same time as White's team broke from cover Edwards nodded.

"Now's your chance doctor." he said and King began to move towards the camp as well. He could not move as quickly as the other members of the team but remaining unnoticed concerned him more than how quickly he could reach his destination did.

Then came a flash from across the camp and for a moment King thought that he was under fire but upon looking around he instead saw that it was Heart using his phaser to eliminate the final guard now that there were no others to see the phaser beam that stuck out prominently in the darkness.

King came to a halt beside the door of the closest of the prisoners' barracks and studied the lock. This was a

device mounted externally rather than an integral part of the door or frame and King aimed his rifle at it, adjusting the setting to a more damaging one than the stun it was currently tuned to before firing a short blast that blew the lock off the door.

Pulling the door open he hurried inside, lighting the powerful lamp mounted on his rifle as he stepped inside. "I'm a Starfleet officer." he announced, "I've come to get you out of here."

Taking in the interior of the barracks, King saw that there were rows of bunks running along each side of the room and that in each bunk there was a prisoner. These prisoners now all looked at King silently while remaining exactly where they were. King assumed that this was a result of poor treatment over a prolonged period of time, now that rescue had arrived they were unable to believe that it was happening. Keeping the lamp on his rifle active, King slung the weapon over his shoulder and took out his tricorder as he made his way towards the nearest prisoner. But he came to a sudden halt as he activated the device and saw the results of the initial scan.

"Necrotic tissue." he said to himself and as he realised what this meant he dropped the tricorder and reached for the rifle once more. But before he could raise the phaser a prisoner suddenly leapt off one of the nearby upper bunks and landed on top of King, knocking him over and causing him to drop the rifle. King tried to throw the prisoner off, delivering two rapid blows to the man's face but they had no noticeable effect and more prisoners now began to climb off their bunks and advance towards King.

Outside in the woods Edwards saw King disappear inside the barracks and waited for the doctor to reappear with a group of prisoners behind him. But as he waited he heard the sound of movement from behind him and he turned to see a single Breen advancing out of the darkness. Without waiting to shout a warning Edwards fired his phaser rifle and the beam struck the Breen at the elbow, severing the limb at that point. But the Breen kept coming while vapour leaked out from the stump of his wound while he raised his disruptor towards Edwards. Then a second phaser beam struck the Breen on the side of his head, cleaving off most of the back of his skull and when Edwards looked in the direction that the beam had come from he saw Heart aiming his phaser towards the alien.

"Lookout!" Edwards yelled in warning as the door to one of the Breen structures opened and an armed Breen emerged and began firing. In response Heart dived for cover and returned fire but the Breen was not alone and a second alien appeared behind the first, the disruptor fire from both of them keeping Heart pinned down.

It was then that Edwards intervened, returning the favour that Heart had done him only moments earlier and he fired his phaser into one of the Breen. He maintained the beam for long enough that it bored a hole right through the Breen but the alien was still able to take two more steps before finally collapsing in a heap. While Heart then took the opportunity to return fire on the second Breen, Edwards focused his attention on the doorway they had both emerged from and fired several short burst of phaser fire through the open doorway into the building to try and dissuade any more Breen from exiting it.

But while the Breen were being kept inside their own barracks the first of the prisoners now made an appearance from inside theirs as a small group of them stepped out into the night. At first Edwards thought nothing of this but then he realised that King was not with them. Steadying his rifle against a tree trunk he continued to fire at the doorway while he took out his communicator.

"Doctor King can you read me?" he signalled and then when there was no answer he added, "Doctor King, report." With no reply forthcoming Edwards then switched to trying to contact Heart, "Captain Heart, do you have eyes on Doctor King?"

"Negative captain. I don't know where he is." Heart replied, "Hasn't he come out with those prisoners?"

"No, I can't see him and I can't raise him either. Can you go and check on him?"

"On it captain. Heart out." and as he shut off his communicator Heart began to head for the prisoners' barracks.

On the other side of the camp, away from the firing and prisoners White reached the hatch of the Breen transport only to find it sealed.

"T'Lan," he hissed, "can you get this open?"

"Perhaps lieutenant commander." she replied, "Though I cannot offer any guarantees of how long it will take."

"Then just do your best." White told her, "Nayal and I will cover you."

"Yes lieutenant commander." T'Lan said and she leant her rifle against the side of the transport while she took out her tricorder and attempted to use it to interface with the transport's control systems.

"Movement." Nayal then called out and White turned to face the same direction as her. But he lowered his weapon when he saw two figures that were definitely not Breen guards. One was a male human while the other was a Romulan woman and both were advancing towards the group beside the hatch to the transport.

"It's alright." White said, lowering his phaser, "In fact maybe they can help get into the ship. Maybe they've seen the code that the Breen used." then he waved at the pair and called out to them, "Hey! Over here."

Both prisoners then began to walk towards the transport, though at a pace that suggested they were not in a hurry.

"What are they waiting for?" Nayal asked.

"Wait here." White responded, "I'll go and see what the problem is." and he got up and ran towards the two figures, "Come on." he told them, "We're here to rescue you." but at that moment the human suddenly reached out and took hold of White's rifle by its barrel and tried to pull it away from him, "What the?" he exclaimed before the Romulan woman then unexpectedly swung a fist at White while he was distracted and punched him in the face.

"Oh this is bad." Nayal said as she took aim.

"Wait." T'Lan said, "We do not know why they are acting this way. You should avoid the use of lethal force."

"Got it." Nayal replied, switching the rifle to 'stun' and then firing at the human who now held White's phaser. The beam from her rifle hit the man centrally but even as she held it on target he remained unaffected, "Oh this is bad." Nayal added as she ceased fire and then more of the prisoners appeared behind the first two, "This is very bad."

"I think it is even worse." T'Lan commented when she then saw another group of prisoners appear from the other direction, "Perhaps we should consider withdrawing to a safer position. We can return for Lieutenant Commander White when we have had the chance to study the situation more logically." and she swapped her tricorder for her phaser rifle again.

"Cousin on this occasion I like your logic." Nayal replied, "Now let's move!" and she leapt to her feet, grabbing hold of T'Lan and pulling the Vulcan along with her.

Meanwhile White struggled to get clear of the prisoners now crowding around him. Reaching to his waist he drew his hand phaser and started to take aim. But the prisoners were already crowding around him and several grabbed his arm, pointing it straight up so that the phaser pointed harmlessly away from them all before another pulled the weapon from his grasp. As a group of the prisoners restrained White the others turned their attention towards the fleeing T'Lan and Nayal.

Approaching the prisoners' barracks, Heart saw King being brought out of the building, held between several of the prisoners themselves. One of these now held King's phaser rifle while a second had armed herself with his hand phaser. It was obvious to Heart that he was being held against his will and so Heart took aim with his rifle. The problem was that with King so close he could not fire without risking hitting the doctor and so he held his fire and started running towards them instead. Closing to within arms' length he swung the butt of his rifle like a club, striking the first of the prisoners to challenge him.

"Captain!" King snapped, "They aren't alive! They're just more of those reanimated corpses." but his warning came too late as more of the prisoners started to swarm around Heart, clawing at him and pulling him to the ground and disarming him.

Edwards saw Heart disappear in a crowd of bodies and turned his rifle towards them, hoping for a clear shot at some. But by turning aside from the structure he had been covering he gave the Breen inside the opportunity to get out and as they exited it they began firing their disruptors towards him. The fire was aimed high and Edwards ducked to avoid it, activating his communicator again.

"Cole we need immediate air support." he exclaimed but there was no response, "Cole? Cole are you there?"

"Captain help us!" Nikki screamed when she heard Edwards' voice over the communication channel and Cole flinched. The sudden outburst caused the man now sat at the helm station to move for the first time since sitting down. Turning the chair around he got to his feet and strode across the cockpit towards his two captives, reaching down to grab hold of Cole's ankle before dragging them both towards the door at the rear of the cockpit. Continuing to drag them towards the rear of the runabout the man took them as far as the lounge before letting go of them. Then before he left the room he walked over to the single LCARS panel set into the wall and punched it hard enough to smash the screen, rendering it useless.

Hearing the cry for help from Nikki, Edwards knew that there was no air support coming and he looked around for a way out. He still had no knowledge of what had happened to White's team but he could not afford to remain where he was while he tried to find out. But as he tried to come up with an escape plan a shadow fell over him and he looked up to see an armoured Breen standing right in front of him, the alien having been able to get close while he was distracted trying to contact the runabout for help. Edwards dropped the communicator and raised his rifle, shooting the Breen before he could use his own weapon. However, even as the Breen in front of Edwards was falling backwards another leapt towards him from the side and thrust a neural truncheon into his ribs. Edwards just gasped as the electricity from the weapon spread through his body and he collapsed, dazed and disorientated. Then he became aware of two Breen picking him up between them and dragging him through their camp. He was just regaining his senses when he found himself forced into a kneeling position in a line with Heart, King and White while all their hands were bound in front of them.

3.

T'Lan and Nayal knew that they were being followed but whether it was by Breen, prisoners or a mix of the two remained unknown as they continued to flee through the woods. Ahead of them they heard the sound of running water.

"We must get to the river." T'Lan said, "We can lose them there."

"How?" Nayal asked.

"Just follow me." T'Lan told her she started heading towards the source of the sound.

The river was not particularly wide or deep at the point where the two women reached it and without stopping they started to wade through the water.

"This isn't going to stop anyone coming after us cousin." Nayal said from behind T'Lan.

"It will. Providing we can make it all the way across before those chasing us can get here." T'Lan replied, ignoring Nayal's use of the word 'cousin' on this occasion.

Emerging from the water on the far side of the river the two women hurried up the bank towards the start of the woods. Nayal's route up the bank took her through a patch of ground much softer than most of the rest and she lost her footing, falling to land face down in it.

"Hurry." T'Lan said, turning back towards the river and raising her phaser rifle just as the first of their pursuers appeared on the opposite bank. Before they could attempt to follow T'Lan and Nayal across the river though, she opened fire. However, instead of targeting any of their pursuers T'Lan aimed her phaser at the water itself and maintained the beam. With the weapon set to produce a high thermal heating effect the effect was immediate and dramatic. The water between the two women and their pursuers simply boiled away to produce a thick cloud of steam that shielded T'Lan and Nayal from view as well as preventing their pursuers from attempting to cross the river themselves. T'Lan continued firing until the cloud of steam made it impossible to see any of the far side of the river.

"Quickly." T'Lan said when she ceased firing the phaser, "We must be out of sight before the cloud clears." and she got up and started to run into the woods.

"Hey wait for me cousin." Nayal called out as she picked herself and her rifle up and started to run after T'Lan.

"We are not related." T'Lan responded without bothering to turn around.

Without any place in particular chosen as a destination the two women continued to run through the woods, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the river before T'Lan spotted a hollow in the ground among the roots of a particularly large tree.

"There." she said, "We can rest while we decide what our next course of action should be."

Nayal followed T'Lan to the tree and both of them sat down.

"Frankly I don't care what we do next." Nayal said, "Just as long as I can get all this mud off me." then she sniffed, "Hang on." she added and she lifted one of her hands to her face and sniffed it. Then her eyes widened, "This isn't mud!" she exclaimed, "This isn't mud! Get it off me!" and she began to pull off her jacket.

"Stop." T'Lan said, "You will freeze."

"But I'm covered in-" Nayal in.

"I am aware of that." T'Lan interrupted, "In this temperature ordinary mud would have frozen. Only the excrement of one of the native life forms would have retained such a consistency. It was most likely deposited by one of them when they stopped to drink from the river."

"I don't care what they were doing." Nayal replied, "All I care is about where it came from and getting it off me as soon as I can. Now how about we call the runabout."

"Determining the resources available to us is a logical suggestion." T'Lan said, taking out her communicator and activating it, "T'Lan to anyone within range. Nayal and I have evaded pursuit. I request that anyone else who has done so identify themselves immediately." but there was no reply, "T'Lan to *Thames*, Lieutenant Commander Cole do you read me?" she then signalled but again there was no reply. Then she shut off the communicator and as she was putting it away she turned back to Nayal, "It appears that we are the only ones to have evaded capture." she said, "We should begin planning to stage a rescue."

"What do you think he's going to do with us?" Nikki asked quietly, hoping to avoid the attention of their captor if he was close by. She and Cole were still lay on the floor of the runabout's lounge, stuck together by the adhesive fluid. However, Cole did not respond and instinctively she tried to lift her head away from his chest, only to gasp as the fluid pulled at her hair where it was tangled up and stuck Cole's jacket.

"Are you okay?" Cole said when he heard this, trying to look down far enough to see her face.

"Fine. I didn't mean to disturb you. You're planning an escape aren't you?"

"Yes. Yes I am." Cole replied, "But that's not going to be easy with the pair of us stuck together like this."

"How would you rather we be stuck together?" Nikki said and Cole frowned.
"You've been spending too much time around Bradley." he said.
"Sorry." she replied, "It just came out."
"Well for now there's not much we can do. I doubt our captor is planning on leaving us like this indefinitely so we'll just have to try and overpower him when he separates us." Cole said. Then he added, "Though hopefully we'll have better luck next time."

"Commander Carr, results from the second probe are coming in now." West's voice said over the intercom and Carr hurried back to the bridge to get a full report.
"Okay so what do we have?" she asked as Hamilton vacated the captain's chair for her.
"Looks like a promising lead commander." Perez, the officer manning the science station told her.
"I want proof, not leads." Carr replied.
"The rebels are there and Skywalker is with them." Hamilton said before cupping his hands over his mouth and breathing heavily into them.
Carr glared at him while West groaned.
"The planet is class M and the vegetation appears to be a match for what we saw in the video." West then began to explain, "Also there are the residual traces of warp signatures."
"Breen?" Carr said, looking back at Perez.
"I think so captain." he replied, "Though there are several different traces and they are interfering with one another, making identification difficult."
"Any signs of active Breen vessels in the area?" Hamilton said.
"Several of them between the system and here." West answered, "And that's not including any that may be beyond the system, outside of the probe's sensor range."
Carr nodded,
"Get me the *Pacific*." she said and moments later Captain Cameron appeared on the viewscreen.
"Commander." he said, "We've just had the results of our second probe and we're drawing a blank. Neither of the systems we've searched is a match for the criteria you sent us. We were just about to set a course to rendezvous with you."
"You may want to hold off on that captain." Carr responded, "We've got a possible hit from our second probe. There are Breen ships in the area so we could do with your support but I'm about to take us into Breen space to investigate."
"Can you send us the co-ordinates?" Cameron asked and Carr looked at West and nodded.
"You should be getting them any minute now." she said.
"Nothing yet." Cameron replied as he looked down at the display built into the arm of his chair.
"Lieutenant?" Carr said, looking at West.
"On it right now commander." West said as she stared at her console, her finger hovering over the button to forward the data to the *USS Pacific*. However, for some reason she could not explain she found herself focused on the adjacent button that would clear the transmission buffer and delete the data instead,
"Transmission sent." she said suddenly as she forced herself to bring her finger down on the transmit button.
"Okay we've got it." Cameron said, "At maximum warp we can be there in about fourteen hours."
"We'll be there a couple of hours ahead of that." Carr replied, "We'll see you there captain. *Nightfall* out.
Then the viewscreen switched back to an image of space in front of the *Nightfall*, Hamilton looked at the helm officer.
"Helm. Lay in a course and engage at warp nine point eight." he ordered.

It was an odd mix of supposed prisoners and Breen guards that were gathered together as the four crew of the *Nightfall* that they had captured in their camp took them inside one of the prefabricated structures. Plain on the outside, the building was just as featureless on the inside was with just several hooks hanging from reels of chain mounted to the ceiling. Each of the prisoners was taken to one of these hooks and it was passed between their bound wrists. Then there was the sound of motors and the chains retracted, lifting all four men off the floor and suspending them in mid air. Then all but one of the Breen guards left the building.
"I take it that this isn't part of your plan?" King said, looking at Edwards.
"Not exactly no." Edwards replied, "I tried contacting the runabout right before I was captured and I heard Nikki calling out for help. Whatever's happened back there can't be good. What about T'Lan and Nayal?" and he looked at White.
"The last I saw of them they were running for the woods as quick as they could." he answered.
"They'll be caught soon enough." The Girl said as she appeared behind the four captives and then walked in front of them. Then looking along the line she addressed each one in turn, "Commander Henry King, chief medical officer. MACO Captain Gary Heart, ground forces commander. Lieutenant Commander William 'Snowman' White, fighter squadron leader." then she paused before adding, "And of course Captain David Edwards, formerly commanding officer of the *USS Rampage* and now commanding officer of the *USS*

Nightfall."

"Someone gave you our service records then?" Heart asked and The Girl smiled.

"Something like that." she said, "How else could we craft this little ruse to draw in the good captain. The rest of you are just a bonus really. Especially you doctor."

"Me? I'm flattered." King said, "Actually wait, no I'm not."

"You should be." The Girl said, "Originally our plan was just to capture the good Captain Edwards here and find out exactly what he knows about us. But with you here as well we can replace you both and seize control of the *Nightfall*. No one will question the possibility that its captain has become one of us when you clear him doctor. Admittedly we'll need to either capture or eliminate the members of your party that have escaped to prevent them from raising the alarm but that's only a matter of time. Just think about how the Federation's outer colonies will react when your ship fires on some of them after we whip up some discord. Your Federation will tear itself apart and what was once ours shall be ours again."

"And how do you propose to take control of my ship?" Edwards said, "It's light years away."

"Actually it appears that the *Nightfall* is heading this way right now. As is a second starship. When they get here you will tell them that the probe you found was a fake and the prisoners all long dead. We can even provide you with bodies, including that of a certain Commander Carl Wright." The Girl told him.

"What did you do to him?" Edwards demanded.

"Oh we did nothing." The Girl replied, "I believe you were there when he died at the end of that little skirmish you had with the Dominion. We created a facsimile to attract your attention and you fell for it perfectly. Just like we created all the other prisoners and their guards. You four we won't need to recreate. Once we're finished here you'll be executed and become flesh hosts. It'll all be quite painless for most of you. Not you though Captain Edwards. After what you've put me through I think some petty revenge is in order." and she walked over to the Breen guard. As she approached him he took a neural truncheon from his belt and handed it to The Girl. Then she calmly walked back over to where Edwards was hung from the ceiling and thrust the tip of the truncheon into his side.

"We should light a fire to keep us warm." Nayal suggested. She and T'Lan were still hidden beside the large tree, T'Lan studying her tricorder as she watched for any signs of continuing pursuit.

"A fire would give away our location." T'Lan pointed out.

"Then perhaps we should sit closer together cousin." Nayal said, "Share our body heat."

"The temperature is tolerable." T'Lan replied, "On the other hand the smell that you are giving off is less tolerable and I prefer to keep it at a distance."

Nayal snarled.

"You're just upset because we don't know what's happened to your boyfriend." she said.

"The fate of our entire team is at risk. Not just that of Lieutenant Commander Cole." T'Lan responded.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole? Really? Can't bring yourself to just call him Robert when it's just the two of us cousin? We're not even in a real relationship and I'll still call Bradley by his given name."

"How you conduct your sexual affairs is your own business. But-" T'Lan said before suddenly stopping in mid sentence.

"What's wrong? Are they here?" Nayal said and she turned to face around the tree and steadied her phaser rifle.

"No." T'Lan told her, "I am detecting the sensor emissions from a class eight probe orbiting this world."

"We didn't bring any of those with us did we?" Nayal asked.

"No we did not." T'Lan agreed, "Which means it must have been launched by another Federation vessel and it is logical to assume that it is the *USS Nightfall* attempting to locate us. This gives us an opportunity."

"How?" Nayal said.

"Because it may be possible to access the probe's subspace communications link and use it to relay a signal to the *Nightfall* itself." T'Lan said as she started to tap the keys of her tricorder in an effort to establish the link that she had just described to Nayal.

"Send for help you mean?"

"Correct." T'Lan said. Then she added, "The link is complete. Now I can attempt to contact the *Nightfall*."

"Commander we've got a signal coming in." West announced uncertainly, "I think it's T'Lan."

"What do you mean 'you think' it's T'Lan?" Carr asked.

"The signal isn't coming from the Thames commander." West explained, "It appears to be coming from the feed we're getting from the probe orbiting our destination."

"Can you put her through?" Hamilton said.

"I think so." West answered and moments later T'Lan's voice was heard.

"...calling the *USS Nightfall*. Do you read me? This is Lieutenant T'Lan calling the-

"Yes we hear you T'Lan." Carr said and she waited to see if her response would reach the Vulcan woman.

"Commander, the probe was a trap." T'Lan replied, "It appears to have been set by the same force we have encountered since the *Nightfall's* maiden flight. The camp was occupied by a large number of their agents."

"Yes, we found out that the probe could not have been in space as long as you said it would have to have been." Carr said, "What's your status?"

"Only Nayal and I are still at liberty." T'Lan said, "Captain Edwards, Commander King, Lieutenant Commander White and Captain Heart were captured during our attack on the Breen camp and we have lost contact with Lieutenant Commander Cole and Nikki aboard the runabout."

When Carr's daughter was mentioned the other bridge officers glanced in her direction to observe her reaction but she kept her composure.

"Is your position secure?" she said.

"Uncertain. We have evaded pursuit for the time being but the enemy are aware of our presence on the planet and it is logical to assume that they are conducting a search for us." T'Lan said.

"We're seven hours out from you." Carr replied, "The most helpful thing you could do is scout out the enemy positions. Transmit the data to us if you can but alternately we'll check in with you when we arrive."

"Understood lieutenant commander." T'Lan said, "We will contact you as soon as we have further information. T'Lan out."

When the signal was cut off Carr looked around at the tactical station where Captain Shry was sat. His experience with the weapon systems of Imperial Guard assault ships made him perfectly qualified to fill in for Cole while he was off the ship.

"Captain it sounds like we'll need to stage a rescue." she said and he smiled.

"I think I can arrange that commander." he said.

"You have six hours captain." she told him, "See to it."

"With pleasure commander."

"We must go." T'Lan told Nayal.

"Go where?" Nayal asked in reply.

"We must return to the Breen camp and determine the level of protection around Captain Edwards and the others. Then if time allows we should return to the runabout and survey it before the arrival of the *Nightfall*."

"You realise that means heading back through all those supposed prisoners and their Breen guards don't you?" Nayal said.

"I do. That is why we must move quickly. The longer we stay in one place the more likely it is that they will discover us." T'Lan said as she got to her feet and picked up her rifle, slinging it over her shoulder while keeping hold of her tricorder, "I will scan for the presence of enemy forces." she said, "I will need you to be ready to act should any evade my scans long enough to get within striking range."

"Oh don't worry cousin." Nayal said as she got to her feet as well and held her phaser rifle at the ready, "I won't hesitate to use this."

Guided by T'Lan the two women made their way back towards the river. Along the way they saw signs of search parties having crossed it after them but T'Lan's scans failed to pick up any close by. The river itself posed a problem for the pair however, crossing it required them to leave the limited cover of the woods and move out into the open. Any enemy forces positioned along either bank would then be able to see them even given the current darkness.

"I will cross first." T'Lan announced, "I will position myself on the opposite bank and cover you while you follow."

"If you say so cousin." Nayal replied and she looked up and down the river.

T'Lan then made her way over the river bank and to the water. The ground had been soaked with water when the cloud of steam the T'Lan had created with her phaser had cooled enough for it condense back into a liquid and with each step T'Lan took there was a 'squelch' as her feet began to sink into the mud. Once at the water's edge she began to wade out, taking advantage of the shallow water once more. Then when she

reached the far bank she hurried back up it, once again struggling with the mud until she reached the tree line where she dropped into a crouching position and swapped her tricorder for her rifle.

"I am across." she called out, "You may now follow."

"Be right there cousin." Nayal responded and she emerged from the trees to follow T'Lan across the river. Having seen T'Lan struggle with the mud, Nayal chose a different route down to the river itself. But as she watched from the opposite bank T'Lan noticed that the path Nayal was taking took her across the same section of the bank that she had slipped in earlier.

"Sublieutenant!" she called out, "Perhaps you ought to reconsider your route."

"You take yours cousin," Nayal replied, "and I'll take-" but before she could finish she lost her footing once more and fell forwards, landing face down for a second time. Reacting with horror as she realised her mistake, Nayal lifted herself up and wiped her face, trying desperately to clear the filth from it, "You knew!" she shouted at T'Lan, "I blame you for this cousin."

"I did try to warn you." T'Lan replied, "And might I suggest you would be better off making as little noise as possible."

Nayal snarled then continued to walk down the bank and then wade across the river. Part way across she considered making use of the flowing water to clean herself but the only way of drying her clothes off afterwards seemed to be by using her phaser and she did not relish having to remove them in order to accomplish this so instead she just scowled at T'Lan again and continued on her way. Finally reaching the far bank, she hurried towards T'Lan and glared at her.

"Mark my words cousin, I'll find a way to get even with you for this." she said.

"Given that nothing that has happened to you can be attributed to either negligence or malicious intent on my part that would be most illogical." T'Lan replied. Then after a moment's pause she added, "Though I have observed that logic rarely factors into your actions."

"Oh just tell me which way we're going. The sooner this is over the sooner I can wash all this off me." Nayal said.

The pair then returned to their previous tactic of having T'Lan scan the area around her with her tricorder while Nayal covered them both. Once again though there were no signs of enemy patrols and now that they had crossed the river once more the only signs of pursuit they found were the tracks left along their previous route from where they had been chased from the camp.

All of a sudden T'Lan came to a halt without warning and Nayal almost walked right into her.

"Cousin, what's wrong?" Nayal asked.

"The Breen camp is not far ahead." T'Lan replied, closing her tricorder and putting it away, "Given that the enemy is aware of our presence in the area they may be watching for signs of tricorder scans. From here on we will have to rely on our own senses." then she sniffed and glanced at Nayal again, "Which hopefully will not require smell."

"Was that a joke cousin?"

"Merely a statement of fact." T'Lan said and she unslung her rifle, "Now stay close to me. I will focus on the ground to our right, you cover the left."

Nayal just nodded and the two women started to advance towards the camp with their weapons at the ready. Whereas the first time they had approached the camp it had been operating as if it was a slave labour camp, now that pretence had been dropped and both former prisoners and their guards now formed a perimeter around it. The Breen were all armed while a handful of their former prisoners now carried either Breen disruptors or Federation phasers that looked to have been taken from the team members now held captive somewhere within the camp.

"So where do you think they're being held?" Nayal whispered before the sound of a scream was heard from inside one of the buildings.

"Logic suggests that at least one of the captives is being held in that structure." T'Lan answered.

"And this place looks pretty well defended as well." Nayal commented, "Unless the *Nightfall* can just beam them out its going to take a major assault to reach them."

"Then it is fortunate that the *Nightfall* carries a significant force of professional ground combat troops." T'Lan replied.

"Now when you say 'professional', you mean soldiers that aren't part of Starfleet cousin?"

"That is the case for most. Though the *Nightfall's* security department are also trained in hostage rescue tactics."

"That was a joke cousin." Nayal said, "Now if we're finished here, shall we go and check out the runabout?"

"I would like to conduct more reconnaissance of this location first." T'Lan replied, "Obtaining a more precise fix on the structure where the others are being held would be beneficial."

"How will you do that without your tricorder?"

T'Lan looked around the camp again.

"There are several items of equipment that will produce significant detectable emissions." she explained, "By using them as points of reference and giving bearings from each I can triangulate the exact location of the

structure where the others are being held.” and at that moment there was another scream from inside the building.

“I think we should hurry.” Nayal said.

“Agreed.” T'Lan added and she started to circle the camp, pausing each time her line of sight placed a piece of equipment such as a generator or transmitter array directly between her and the building where the other team members were being held. Then she took out a compact PADD and called up a map of the area based off orbital scans taken from the *Thames* before it landed that she marked bearings she took using local terrain features for reference. When she had done this three times she put the PADD away and turned to Nayal, “That should be sufficient.” she said, “Now we can investigate the *Thames*.”

“What do you mean they can't be found?” The Girl demanded as one of the Breen guards gave her an update on their search for T'Lan and Nayal.

“I think it means that our crew mates are smarter than your zombie hoard.” White commented from where he was still suspended from the ceiling. He had not understood what the Breen had said but The Girl's response had given him an idea of what it had been.

“It's a temporary setback.” The Girl responded, “One that will be remedied far more easily if Captain Edwards would just be more co-operative.” and she walked back over to where Edwards was suspended. Having had the neural truncheon used repeatedly on him, Edwards' head was slumped forwards and he appeared to no longer be aware of what was going on around him. But as soon as the tip of the weapon was jabbed into his ribs again he lifted his head and let out another scream.

“Stop it!” King yelled, “You'll kill him.”

“Yes doctor. Eventually I will.” The Girl replied, “All of you will be killed so that more of my people can take your places. But I could make it easier if Captain Edwards would tell me how to find the two members of your crew still at large. I'm sure your plan included a fall back position should things go wrong. I had thought that it would be the ship that brought you here but my agent there has seen no sign of them.”

“I don't know if you've noticed,” Heart commented, “but all your torture has achieved is to render Captain Edwards incapable of answering any questions at all.”

“Then it is up to the rest of you to provide me with the answers I need.” The Girl replied and she thrust the neural truncheon into Edwards' side again, producing another scream, “Unless you enjoy seeing him suffer.”

ii.

"Full impulse." Carr ordered as the *Nightfall* dropped out of warp upon entering the system, "Yellow alert. Shields up, ready weapons. Any contacts on sensors?"

"There are several energy signatures that could be ships hiding behind the target planet's moons." West replied and she copied the image shown on her console to the headsets that Carr and Hamilton were wearing. These featured a compact heads up display and motion sensors that allowed them to mimic the function of any control console aboard the *USS Nightfall*. The other bridge officers wore them also but West did not share the data with any of them so as not to distract them from their own tasks.

"We can't have them making an attack run while we're trying to deploy troops to the surface." Carr said, looking at Hamilton and he nodded in agreement.

"Helm lay in an intercept course." he said, "Scramble fighters."

The *Nightfall* veered towards the planet's two moons that at that moment were both positioned on the same side of the planet and from its hangar the attack fighters it carried sped out into space. Together with its attached squadron of attack fighters the *USS Nightfall* represented a powerful foe that was quite capable of holding its own against most other classes of vessel in service with any of the known powers of the Alpha, Beta or Gamma Quadrants. The fighters split into three groups, two of four and one of three thanks to Lieutenant Commander White not being available to pilot his fighter. In turn these groups then formed a 'V' formation around the *Nightfall* so that one group moved ahead of the cruiser while the others were positioned behind to port and starboard to either accelerate forwards in support of the lead flight or prevent any vessels attempting to surprise the *Nightfall* from the sides or rear.

The *Nightfall* made no attempt to conceal its approach towards the planet and its moons but the Breen ships did not come out to meet the starship, instead remaining hidden.

"It's a trap." Hamilton said as he stared at the main viewscreen.

"Agreed." Carr replied and she activated the *Nightfall's* communication link to its fighter squadron, "All fighters break formation." she told them, "Flush those Breen out."

"Copy that *Nightfall*." the pilot leading the squadron in White's absence, "All craft accelerate and follow me in."

Still maintaining their three flight formation the fighters raced ahead of the *Nightfall* and flew around one side of the closest moon and as soon as the first of the tiny craft disappeared from the *Nightfall's* view West reacted.

"Energy spike!" she exclaimed.

"Quarterback to *Nightfall*, we are under fire. Multiple Breen vessels." the lead pilot signalled hurriedly.

"Take us in." Carr ordered and the *Nightfall* accelerated forwards as well, "Captain Shry, you may fire on targets as they come to bear." she added and the Andorian grinned.

Rounding the moon, the crew of the *Nightfall* saw the Breen force that had been attempting to hide behind it. There were four ships in total, each one slightly smaller than the *Nightfall* and possessing fewer weapons. But between them they were still a match for the Federation vessel and its fighters. So far only one of the fighters had been destroyed but the remaining ones were caught in a maelstrom of disruptor blasts from the four warships.

"Firing phasers." Shry announced and a beam of bright red energy leapt across the space between the *Nightfall* and the closest Breen vessel, producing a greenish glow where it interacted with the Breen shields.

"Quantum torpedoes." Hamilton said, "Hit the same target while their shields are weakened."

Shry did as Hamilton suggested and three glowing balls of light shot towards the Breen warship and impacted against its shields around the point where the phaser beam had struck in rapid succession. The first hit was enough to overload the shield temporarily and allow the second and third torpedoes to pass through before striking the ship's hull. These produced two large explosions and the Breen ship began to veer off as its crew fought to control the fires they started.

But the Breen ships now began to react to the presence of the *Nightfall*, turning their fire away from the fighters and towards the cruiser instead. Mainly this consisted of more disruptor fire but as one of the Breen ships turned towards the *Nightfall* there was a brilliant white flash from its nose and when the blast struck the *Nightfall* lightning danced across its shields.

"Max to bridge!" Max's voice sounded over the intercom, "The Breen are attempting to use their energy dampening weapon against us. If our shields fall below twenty percent then we will be vulnerable."

The Breen energy dampening weapon had first been encountered at the second battle of Chintoka during the Dominion war where it had caused havoc when it demonstrated the ability to penetrate Federation, Klingon and Romulan shields to leave the ships without power and helpless. Countermeasures had been developed a few months later but the weapon was still feared for its potential to knock out a starship's

systems with just one blast.

"Understood Max." Carr replied, "Do whatever you have to to keep our shields up. Take power from any other system including life support if its needed."

"Yes commander." Max said before shutting off the channel.

"Commander I suggest using the mass accelerators." Hamilton suggested and Carr frowned.

"Lieutenant, you know those weapons aren't suitable for use against shielded and manoeuvrable starships." she said.

"Yes but if we aim a burst right between the two lead ships then they may break their formation and expose a flank."

Carr nodded.

"Good idea. Captain Shry-"

"I'm on it." he said before she could finish and there was a dull pounding as a dozen duranium projectiles burst out of the launchers that ran most of the length of the *Nightfall's* twin secondary hulls. Unguided and inert they posed little threat to a starship that could simply move out of the way, having been designed to be used against the far more ponderous Borg cubes but the fact that they began by speeding straight towards the Breen ships forced them to take evasive action and just as Hamilton had said this meant that one of them suddenly presented its flank to the *Nightfall*.

Shry was quick to take advantage of this, firing blasts from the *Nightfall's* phasers that were enough to collapse the Breen shields and slice a large gouge into the ship's hull to produce a sudden cloud of vapour as the atmosphere inside began venting.

At the same time the *Nightfall's* fighters finished regrouping a swooped down on the rearmost Breen ship. Making high speed passes at point blank range, the fighters blasted the Breen ship with phasers and photon torpedoes. Unable to either avoid the fighters or achieve a target lock on them in the time available the crew of the Breen ship could only hope that their shields and hull would hold up for as long as it took the squadron to complete its run.

Three of the four Breen warships had now suffered damage but none of them were out of the fight yet and they began to reorganise themselves while the *Nightfall* turned towards the fourth ship.

"Incoming!" West called out as she detected a volley of torpedoes heading towards the ship. But they did not come from any of the Breen ships that the *Nightfall* was currently engaged against. Instead they came from a new group of three warships that had been hiding behind the other moon and were now coming to help out their comrades.

The *Nightfall* rocked under the impacts.

"Shields at ninety percent commander." Perez reported.

"Aft torpedoes." Hamilton ordered and a volley of quantum torpedoes erupted from the *Nightfall's* rear weapons pod and sped towards the approaching Breen ships. At this range the small number of torpedoes had little hope of inflicting significant damage to any of the Breen ships but they did give them something else to worry about rather than the *Nightfall* and its fighters.

"Commander I have another warp signature incoming." West announced.

"More Breen?" Carr responded, "How many ships do they think they need to take us out?"

"Commander this warp signature isn't Breen." West told her, "It's Federation."

"The *Pacific*." Hamilton said, smiling.

"*Pacific* to *Nightfall*. Can we be of assistance?" Captain Cameron's voice suddenly announced as his ship hailed the *Nightfall*.

"Your timing is perfect captain." Carr answered, "If you could do something to slow down those three ships heading towards us that would be appreciated."

"We're on it." Cameron told her, "What about your people on the surface?"

"We haven't been able to break through to them yet." Carr said, "We need an opening long enough to be able to beam our strike force down."

"Commander that may not be necessary." Shry said, "My platoon can begin the operation using insertion pods."

Insertion pods were designed to deliver a single trooper to the surface of a planet from long range.

Constructed to be compatible with standard Starfleet torpedo launchers, they also had the advantage of being usable while a vessel's shields were raised.

"How long will it take you to prepare?" Carr asked.

"Give me five minutes." Shry replied.

"Go." Carr said, "Lieutenant Pace, take over at tactical."

After returning to the *Thames* and finding the only sign of life to be what looked to be the supposedly dead man that they had taken back to the runabout sat inside the cockpit T'Lan and Naya found somewhere close by from where they could observe the runabout when flashes in the sky overhead attract their attention.

"The *Nightfall* must have arrived." T'Lan said.

"And it's under attack." Naya added before T'Lan's communicator beeped to indicate an incoming transmission.

"Lieutenant T'Lan do you read me?" Carr asked when T'Lan activated the device.

"I read you commander." T'Lan replied, "We are located approximately fifty metres from the *Thames*."

"Excellent." Carr said, "Stand by for reinforcements. Captain Shry is on his way down with a platoon now."

"Are you able to lower the *Nightfall*'s shields for transport?" T'Lan asked, "I can give you the co-ordinates where the captain and the others are being held. Only Cole and Nikki's locations are currently unknown but I suspect that they are being held inside the *Thames*."

"We're under heavy fire from multiple Breen vessels." Carr told her, "We can't lower shields at all. Captain Shry's troops are coming down in insertion pods. Watch for them and give them all the information you can. But transfer the captain's co-ordinates to us just in case we get a chance to beam them out. *Nightfall* out." Putting her communicator away again, T'Lan looked skywards and hunted for the signs of insertion pods entering the atmosphere.

"There." she said, pointing to where several trails were visible coming through the clouds.

"They're coming down to the east." Naya said, "Let's go." and the two women set off.

The landing site for the pods was not far from their current location but given that they were on foot the pods had already fired breaking thrusters, deployed their parachutes and touched down by the time they reached the landing zone.

"Lieutenant." Shry called out when he saw T'Lan, "Everyone's down safely. What can you tell me?"

"The *Thames* is being held by at least one enemy agent." T'Lan told him, "Any others have remained out of sight. There is also no clear indication where Lieutenant Commander Cole and Nikki are being held."

Shry nodded. Then he frowned and sniffed the air near Naya.

"What the hell are you covered in?" he asked and Naya frowned.

"Never mind what. Can you just get this done with so I can clean it off?" she replied abruptly.

"Okay, just point the way. My men can handle this." he said.

Guided by T'Lan and Naya the platoon of Andorians made their way through the forest. Coming from a frozen world themselves, the cold and snow did not bother the Imperial Guardsmen and they made good time before arriving at the runabout just a few minutes later.

"Okay I'll take a squad in." Shry said to T'Lan softly, "When I signal you can you override the hatch remotely?"

"Yes captain. I can use my tricorder to interface with the control mechanism."

"Good. That's what I want you to do. Now you suspect that the enemy is one of these reanimated corpses, right?"

"Well he was dead when we first found him." Naya commented.

"Okay, then a phaser stun is out of the question." Shry said and he reached for the magazine on his weapon.

The Andorians carried the projectile firing assault rifles that were standard for the *Nightfall*'s ground forces and it was the magazine of duranium tipped armour piercing bullets that Shry now removed only to replace it with one loaded with rounds designed to fragment on impact instead, "Switch to frangible loads." he announced to his men, "We don't want to put any holes in our ride back to the *Nightfall*."

With their rifles reloaded, a single squad of Imperial Guard led by Shry darted towards the runabout's hatch while the others spread out to form a perimeter around it. When they were in position the squad by the hatch Shry nodded towards T'Lan who sat watching with her tricorder in her hand and she triggered the hatch opening mechanism. Without him needed to issue a verbal order, Shry immediately leapt through the hatch and his men followed him.

The alien agent was still sat motionless in the pilot's seat and when he heard the hatch opening he turned around to see the runabout being stormed by the heavily armed and armoured Andorians. His jaw dropped and he exhaled suddenly, projecting a cloud of fluid towards the hatch, but the Andorian standing there ducked back to avoid it while Shry raised his rifle and without warning he opened fire.

The noise of the automatic fire echoed around the cockpit and the man sat in the pilot's seat jerked as each one hit him and broke apart as it cut through his body. The rifle climbed as Shry continued to fire and one of the rounds struck the side of the man's skull and blew it off before he slumped forwards and landed face down on the floor.

The sound of gunfire also passed through the open doorway at the rear of the cockpit and down the corridor to the lounge.

"Hey!" Cole shouted when he heard this, "We're in here!"

"Help!" Nikki added and moments later the door slid open to reveal Shry and another Andorian in full battle armour aiming their rifles into the room.

Upon seeing the pair lay on the floor and stuck together Shry smiled.

"You know lieutenant commander," he said, "if you want us to give you some privacy for a while that's fine. But buying my silence with Lieutenant T'Lan and Lieutenant Commander Carr is going to cost you."

Then before Cole could reply T'Lan and Nayal also appeared in the doorway.

"T'Lan you are a sight for sore eyes." Cole said, "But could you at least help us up?"

"Yeah," Nikki added, "This floor is cold."

"This whole planet's cold." Nayal muttered as she and T'Lan went to help Cole and Nikki up.

"It's some sort of glue." Cole explained, "That dead guy spat it from his mouth."

"Well his spitting days are over." Nayal replied while she helped T'Lan get Cole and Nikki to a nearby seat where he was able to sit down with Nikki in his lap. Then Nikki sniffed.

"Nayal," she said, "you smell like-"

"Yes." Nayal interrupted, "Everyone knows what I smell like."

One of the Breen warships engaging the *USS Nightfall* came apart in a massive blast that hurled debris in all directions. But there were still three more vessels to be dealt with and although the *Nightfall* was still largely undamaged its fighter squadron was now down to eight craft remaining.

"How's the *Pacific* doing?" Carr asked.

"Holding her own for now it appears." West replied.

"Good. Now how about finding us a route through to the planet so we can beam our people up." Carr said before the *Nightfall* shook under another torpedo hit.

"Shields at fifty-six percent commander." Pace announced.

"Much more of this and the Breen will be able to shut us down." Hamilton commented, "I suggest we focus everything on that ship there." and he pointed at one of the Breen ships on the viewscreen.

"Why that one?" Carr asked but Hamilton just shrugged.

"Random." he said, "But we do a full impulse run at it while our fighters strafe it as well. Maybe they'll blink and we'll get through."

"And leave our flanks and rear exposed." West pointed out.

"Our fighters can cover us." Carr said and she activated the *Nightfall's* communications to speak with the entire fighter squadron at once, "All fighters stand by to hit the Breen vessel at three zero six mark fourteen. Engage with phasers and torpedoes."

"Copy that *Nightfall*." the pilot call signed Quarterback responded, "Will commence run on your mark."

Carr smiled and watched the Breen ship that was to be their target. Then she began to count down.

"In three. Two. One. Mark."

All at once the fighters broke off from their current targets and along with the *Nightfall* charged headlong towards the same Breen warship, firing all their forward weapons as they went. The Breen warship did its best to defend itself against the unexpected onslaught but with so many targets to engage at once and with the *Nightfall* acting to shoot down the two torpedoes it was able to launch towards the fighters none of the Starfleet vessels suffered any significant damage before its shields collapsed completely and a phaser blast from the *Nightfall* sliced along the entire length of its hull sending it spiralling out of control.

"We're through." West exclaimed.

"*Nightfall* to fighters." Carr signalled, "Keep those two other warships off our backs while we try and get a lock on our people on the surface."

"We're getting interference from the enemy camp commander." West said, "The Breen must be operating transport inhibitors."

"Get me the *Thames*." Carr replied.

Aboard the runabout T'Lan had sat in the pilot's seat without even bothering to clean the blood off it first and was double checking that the console was still functional after Captain Shry had fired his rifle in the cockpit. Fortunately the frangible rounds he had used had behaved exactly as they were supposed to and they had broken up as they hit anything hard rather than punching right through so the limit of the damage was a few scratches.

"*Nightfall* to *Thames*." Carr's voice said suddenly.

"*Thames* here lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded, "The *Thames* is secure and both Lieutenant Commander Cole and Nikki are safe."

"That's excellent news T'Lan. We're in position to try and beam the captain and the others up but the enemy is operating a transport inhibitor. We can't target it and I can't send any fighters down to deal with it without

losing our screen against the Breen.”

“I understand lieutenant commander.” T'Lan replied, “We will try to take out the inhibitor for you.”

“Thanks T'Lan. *Nightfall* out.” Carr said. Then she switched to the intercom, “Max are you there?”

“Right here.” he replied.

“Max, T'Lan is going to try and take out the inhibitor preventing us from beaming up the captain. Can you meet me in transporter room one? There's no-one I trust more than you to get them out as soon as the inhibitor's dealt with.”

“Understood. I will be there momentarily.”

Carr then looked at Hamilton.

“The ship's your' lieutenant.” she said as she got up.

“What about you commander?” West asked.

“I need to be in that transporter room.” Carr answered as she hurried towards the turbolift without explaining any further. Meanwhile Hamilton smiled as he took the captain's chair again.

The runabout was somewhat crowded now that there was an entire platoon of Imperial Guard crammed aboard it but T'Lan had no difficulty in lifting off from the surface and piloting the craft at just above treetop height.

“Can you detect the inhibitor Captain?” she said to Shry. The Andorian was sat in the co-pilot's seat to act as gunner and was studying the targeting system carefully.

“Yes.” he replied, “It's right ahead. With the amount of energy it's putting out I can hardly miss it. Phasers locked on target.”

“Then you may fire when ready captain.” T'Lan told him.

The runabout flew straight towards the camp and as soon as he had a clear shot Shry fired its phasers. The beam hit the transport inhibitor directly and the hydrogen fuel it contained for its internal fusion generator exploded, sending a ball of flame into the air that T'Lan banked sharply to avoid. Then they pulled up, flying the runabout up out of the atmosphere and into space.

“In a hurry?” Shry commented as the sky outside turned to black.

“If I can time this correctly then the *Nightfall* will only have to lower its shields once.” T'Lan replied, “We will be able to dock at the same time as they beam the other aboard.”

“That's going to take some very precise timing cousin.” Noyal commented from the seat behind T'Lan.

“Then perhaps you should stop distracting me and calling me 'cousin'.” T'Lan replied.

The Girl turned at the sound of the explosion.

“Go and find out what's happening.” she told the Breen guard and he responded with a short burst of noise before leaving the building.

“That plan of yours not going too well?” Heart asked, grinning.

“You would do well not to annoy me.” The Girl replied, “When I am finished with Captain Edwards I could decide to give another of you my personal attention.”

“Commander the *Thames* is approaching rapidly.” West said over the intercom as Carr stood watching Max work at the transporter controls.

“How long Max?” Carr asked.

“Almost there commander.” he replied, “Though it would help if control of the shields could be routed to me.”

“Bridge I want shield control transferred to transporter room one and let the Thames know that they'll be clear to dock very soon.”

“Understood commander. Transferring shield control to you now.” Hamilton replied.

“Transfer confirmed.” Max said, “I have the building but there are five lifeforms present rather than four and there is still too much residual interference to determine which are our crew.”

Carr nodded and tapped her combadge.

“Security to transporter room one immediately.” she said. Then she looked at Max again, “Just bring them all up as soon as security get here.” she told him.

A pair of security guards arrived a few moments later and Carr pointed towards the transporter pad.

“Be ready.” she told them, “We may be about to beam a hostile aboard.”

“Yes commander.” one of the guards replied as both drew their phasers and took up positions either side of the transporter.

Then Carr looked at Max.

“Ready?” she asked him.

“Ready commander.” he replied.

“Good. Energise.”

"The *Nightfall* has lowered its shields." T'Lan announced and she quickly fired the runabout's thrusters at full power, taking it towards the ship. Under ordinary circumstances vessels intending to dock would approach the rear doors of the hangar only while the larger forward door was reserved for departing craft. However, given the need to land at a higher speed than normal and knowing that no other craft would be being launched or landing at the same time T'Lan headed for the forward door.

The runabout sped into the hangar and T'Lan fired its thrusters again to bring it to a complete halt before setting it down on the deck.

"Could you do that again?" Shry asked, "It was all a bit fast for me."

"Are you trying to scare me little girl?" Heart asked, "Because from where I'm watching it looks like your plan is falling apart around you."

The Girl smiled.

"Well we'll have to see about that won't we?" she said and she started to walk towards Heart, brandishing the neural truncheon. But she came to a sudden halt and her smile vanished as she sensed the start of a transporter sequence, "No!" she yelled.

Five figures started to materialise on the transporter pad and the security guards raised their weapons. The five patterns of lights then coalesced into Edwards, Heart, King and White. Given that none of them had been standing on the floor of their prison cell when they had dematerialised they were not positioned to be able to remain standing when they materialised aboard the *Nightfall* and all four collapsed as soon as they did. On the other hand The Girl remained standing and she turned and glared at the Starfleet crew present.

"You!" Carr snapped when she recognised The Girl from an earlier encounter.

"Your weapon has been deactivated by the transporter." Max added.

"Arrest her." Carr told the two guards and they both stepped towards the transporter pad.

"Oh I don't think so Lieutenant Commander Carr." The Girl responded and she stepped forwards and simply vanished.

Only then did Carr notice Edwards still lay on the transporter pad while the others were picking themselves up.

"David!" she exclaimed and she rushed forwards and knelt beside him, cradling his head in her hands.

"Grace." he gasped, "I knew I could count on you."

Meanwhile Max activated the intercom.

"Transporter room to bridge. We have them. Shields are back up." he said.

On the bridge Hamilton activated the *Nightfall's* external communications.

"All ships disengage." he announced, "Head back for the border. Warp seven."

On Hamilton's word both the *Nightfall* and *Pacific* came about and went to warp along with the *Nightfall's* remaining fighters, all heading for the border of Breen space as fast as they could. All of the Breen vessels had suffered damage to some extent and rather than risk pursuing the Federation ships they opted to remain where they were to lick their wounds.

"Are we clear yet?" Hamilton asked when the Breen ships no longer appeared on the viewscreen.

"Yes sir." Perez replied, "No enemy ships in pursuit and none in position to intercept us before we leave Breen space."

"In that case drop to impulse and let's bring our fighters home." Hamilton ordered, "Then take us home."

Most of the crew members rescued from the planet were soon released from sick bay when it was determined that they had no serious injuries. Captain Edwards was kept there longer while the damage inflicted by the neural truncheon was evaluated by the *Nightfall's* Emergency Medical Hologram.

"You do not need to remain here lieutenant commander." the EMH said, looking up at Carr, "I can inform you if there is any change in his status."

"I'd rather wait Emma." Carr replied using the nickname that had been given to the EMH by her daughter and at that moment Edwards grained.

"It appears that he is regaining consciousness." Emma said and Carr smiled as he opened his eyes.

"Captain." she said.

"Lieutenant commander." Edwards replied and he looked around, "I'm back aboard the *Nightfall*?"

"Safe and sound." she replied.

"And how am I?" Edwards asked, looking at the EMH.

"You will make a full recovery captain." she answered, "Though I recommend resting for at least forty-eight hours."

"And what's our status?" Edwards said, looking back at Carr.

"The others have already been sent back to their quarters." Carr told him, "Though I think Bradley has his hands full scrubbing Nayal."

At that point the door to sick bay opened and Max entered.

"Captain, lieutenant commander." he said, "May I speak with you privately?"

"Computer deactivate emergency medical hologram." Carr said and the EMH vanished before she could protest.

"Okay so what's so important that you come into sickbay to see us?" Carr asked.

"It concerns the enemy agent that inhabits the body of a young human female." Max replied and both Edwards and Carr frowned.

"Oh. Her." Carr said.

"The one that tortured me." Edwards added, "What about her."

"Though she was able to escape it does not change the fact that we brought her aboard using our transporter rather than her using her own system to board the ship." Max said and a smile spread across Edwards' face.

"You have a transporter signature." he said.

"Yes captain." Max responded, "This may be the first step in trying to identify who she was and how she became host to an alien consciousness."