

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL

THE DAY THE SKY FELL

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

A distress call from a Federation colony summons the *USS Nightfall*. Upon arriving they find that the moon on which it is located has been struck by meteorites coming from the ring system of the nearby gas giant. However, they soon discover that the impacts are not just an unfortunate accident and there is a guiding hand behind them...

The complete *Nightfall* saga:

1. Maiden Voyage
2. Fleet of Ghosts
3. Consequences
4. A Beacon in the Darkness
5. A Conflict of Logic
6. Clouds in Blue Skies
7. Root of all Evil
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Stardate 67002.1. Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 on patrol along the Romulan Neutral Zone.

"Well this is embarrassing," Nikki Carr said as she emerged from her bedroom and saw her mother, the *Nightfall's* first officer reading a PADD while she ate breakfast, "we both wore the same outfit."

Both women wore standard Starfleet duty uniforms with collars and wristbands in command red. The only difference was that as an intern Nikki had no rank insignia on her neck whereas her mother had the two gold pins and one black of a lieutenant commander.

"Well don't count on me to change." her mother replied. Then she looked up and smiled, "So, ready to learn to fly?"

"Learn to crash more like." Nikki said, "Bradley's teaching me."

"Lieutenant Hamilton is a fully qualified instructor. In fact he's-"

"Yes, I know. He's one of only a handful of people in Starfleet who's qualified to act as an instructor for the *Nightfall's* manual flight interface. That's what I'm worried about. He's an advanced flight instructor, not basic. I'm probably going to plough my shuttle right into an asteroid. Just like Lieutenant West did when she flunked the command test the first time." Nikki said as she pinned a combadge to her uniform and then headed for the door from their quarters.

"Wait, aren't you going to have some breakfast?" Nikki's mother called out after her.

"No time. I'm already late." Nikki responded just before she left the room and her mother sighed.

"Can't be late everyday." she muttered.

Nikki made her way down to where the *Nightfall's* holodecks were located. Unlike on many other similar sized vessels the *Nightfall* had only limited holodeck space and they were generally reserved only for official training use rather than for recreation as they were often used on many ships. Nikki headed for the largest of the holodecks where she found another officer in a command division uniform waiting for her with a PADD in his hand.

"Intern Nikki Carr reporting for flight training sir." she said, standing straight up and saluting.

"Excellent." Hamilton replied with a smile, "Now is your life insurance up to date?"

"Life insurance? But this is just a simulation right?" Nikki said, frowning.

"Yeah." Hamilton said, "But I've heard far too many stories of holodecks going wrong and all the safeties failing and leaving the occupants in life threatening situations." and then he smiled, "Anyway, let's start shall we?" and he turned to enter the holodeck.

Nikki followed Hamilton inside and found that the holodeck was not yet active. Instead all of the emitters lining the walls that would generate the artificial environment of the simulation were still visible.

"So what are we going to do?" Nikki asked, "The Jupiter to Saturn run?"

"Actually no. I thought we'd start with something a little bigger." Hamilton said and Nikki winced.

"Here we go she muttered.

"Computer," Hamilton announced clearly, "activate *USS Nightfall* bridge simulation." and all of a sudden the empty room around them became an exact recreation of the bridge of the modified Akira-class cruiser, the only difference to the real thing being the lack of any crew at the duty stations, "Take your seat Miss Carr." he added, pointing to the helm station that was his normal position on the genuine bridge.

"Seriously? You're going to try and teach me to fly the *Nightfall*?" Nikki exclaimed, "But I've never even flown a shuttle."

"No, there is no try. Only do or do not." Hamilton said,

"That makes no sense." Nikki said.

"Of course it does. Anyway, to tell the truth it can be easier to fly a starship than a shuttlecraft." Hamilton told her as she darted to the helm station and sat down while he followed her, "On a shuttle you have to do a lot more yourself. A starship will pretty much fly itself if you let it. Plus it's a lot less sensitive. One slip in a shuttle and you'll find yourself spinning out of control. A starship requires more determination to get it to do anything."

"So where do we start?" Nikki asked as she placed her feet on the control pedals and took hold of the joysticks set into the arms of her chair after they adjusted their positions to suit her height.

"Not with the manual controls. Nothing I said about the ship flying itself counts with them. They make it handle more like a fighter." Hamilton answered and he reached down to the control panel in front of Nikki and deactivated the manual controls, prompting the panel to display a more conventional set of touch sensitive buttons, "Now everything's labelled with what it does so I want you to just get the feel for how the ship behaves when you trigger each one of them. Start with the thrusters."

"Sure." Nikki said and she looked at the control panel where there was a set of thruster controls, each one

labelled with its position on the *Nightfall's* hull. Reaching down she pressed the first of these and she felt a slight motion as the holodeck simulated the ship starting to spin and the display at the centre of her panel showed how the motion with a rotating image of it.

"Good. Now try and find the control to stop it." Hamilton said.

"Okay. So I'll try the opposite thruster." Nikki commented as she looked down the list and smiled when she found the one she thought would bring the simulated *USS Nightfall* to a stop. Once again she felt the motion of the simulated starship adjust as it slowed but just as the display indicated that it was coming to a dead stop a klaxon sounded, "Oh my God! What did I do?" she exclaimed.

"Nothing. Hamilton replied, "That's a genuine alarm."

"Yellow alert." the captain's voice announced over the intercom, "All hands yellow alert."

"Okay lesson's over." Hamilton said, "We need to get to the bridge."

"We?"

"Yes we. Don't you want to find out what's happening?"

Nikki paused as Hamilton hurried out of the turbolift onto the *Nightfall's* genuine bridge. Though she had been here before it felt strange this time given that she had just left one room that looked exactly like it to come to another. Unlike the holographic simulation however, this bridge was fully manned and as Hamilton approached the helm the officer who had been sitting there got up to allow him to take his place. As she sat down he put on a headset identical to those that were worn by the other bridge officers. These fitted over one ear and held a compact display screen in front of one eye, effectively giving them a direct feed from the *Nightfall's* computers wherever they looked.

"West what's happening?" Hamilton asked, looking at the nearby operations station where another lieutenant in a service division uniform sat.

"We've received a planetary distress signal." West told him, "From the Federation colony in the Brattan system."

"Shall I set a course captain?" Hamilton asked.

"Warp seven if you please Mister Hamilton." Captain Edwards replied. Then he looked towards the turbolift and saw Nikki standing beside it, "Are you going to sit down?" he asked and he pointed at the empty seat beside his.

"The captain asked you a question." Carr asked from the seat on the other side of the captain's.

"Sorry. I thought Nayal normally sat there." Nikki said, referring to the Romulan officer aboard the *Nightfall* to act as an advisor on issues relating to the ongoing civil war in the former Romulan Star Empire that had followed the destruction of their home world.

"Sublieutenant Nayal is not formally part of the crew and has no automatic right to a position on the bridge." the Vulcan woman at the science station said and Nikki smiled. Prior to starting her rotation in the command division, Nikki had spent several months with T'Lan's science department and that had included watching her here on the bridge. Additionally, before that the Vulcan had been one of her teachers during her high school education aboard the *Nightfall* and this made Nikki consider her a friend.

"Thanks." she said as she nervously made her way towards the chair and sat down beside Edwards.

"Coming to heading one one four mark three six. Warp seven." Hamilton announced, "Expected arrival at Brattan Six Tango in five hours and ten minutes."

"Excuse me, but do we know what's happening yet?" Nikki asked.

"No." Edwards replied, "Someone in their government put out an emergency signal but it was cut off moments later."

"Could it be a mistake?" Nikki said.

"That is what Lieutenant West is currently attempting to determine." T'Lan replied.

"Any luck with that yet lieutenant?" the *Nightfall's* tactical officer asked, looking towards West. Then he noticed her yawn and added, "Not keeping you awake are we?"

"What?" West said, "No. I'm fine. There's no word from the colony though. I can't even get an acknowledgement from their subspace communications array though. It's like it's not even there any more."

"Cole's right you know." Carr said, "That's the third time I've seen you yawning as well. Have you been staying up all night studying for that test?"

"I'm sorry commander." West replied, "I must have lost track of time."

"T'Lan can you pick up their subspace array on our sensors?" Edwards asked, glancing towards the science station and the Vulcan looked down at her console.

"Negative captain. I am detecting no subspace emissions of any kind from the Brattan system." she told him.

"I don't like this." Edwards said, "Mister Hamilton, bring us to warp nine. Lieutenant West, keep trying to hail them. If that doesn't work then see if there are any other vessels at all in the area that are closer than us. I don't care whether they're Starfleet or not. Maybe they can shed some more light on what's going on."

"Do you really think that will work captain?" Carr asked from beside him, "If there were other ships in the vicinity T'Lan would have detected them."

“Maybe. But right now it's all we can do.” Edwards replied.



The sixth planet of the Brattan system was a ringed gas giant with numerous moons orbiting it. Though it was far from its sun, the added heat from the gas giant itself allowed its largest moon to be warm enough to be considered Class M and worthy of settlement. The Federation had had a colony there for several decades and it was considered a relatively prosperous world. As would be expected with such a world Brattan Six Tango as it was known also had a permanent, if small, Starfleet presence in the form of an orbiting station that also served as the colony's primary subspace communications array. However, when the *USS Nightfall* dropped to impulse speeds just as it came over the gas giant's horizon and got its first direct view of the moon it became immediately apparent that something was very wrong.

"Good God." Edwards said, his eyes widening when he saw the tumbling wreck of the space station that had once watched over the colony. In addition the otherwise pale blue and green surface was marked by several large black craters too big to have been created by wreckage from the station surviving atmospheric entry and impacting on the surface, "Lieutenant T'Lan, can you tell what did this?"

"I am detecting no weapon signatures captain." she replied, "Nor are there any active or residual warp signatures that would indicate the presence of a vessel recently."

"We're pretty close to the Romulan Neutral Zone." Nikki suggested, "Could there be a cloaked ship nearby?" then all of a sudden she considered that for her to speak up may not have been the correct thing to do, "Sorry. I didn't mean to interfere." she added.

"That's quite alright." Edwards reassured her, "You're here to learn. Ask away."

"Perhaps we should get Nayal up here after all." Carr suggested and Edwards nodded before tapping his combadge.

"Bridge to Nayal." he said.

"Nayal here captain." she responded after a brief pause.

"Nayal, we're coming up on a Federation colony that looks to have been attacked." Edwards told her.

"And you think that my people could be responsible? I'm on my way up. Nayal out."

It did not take long for Nayal to arrive on the bridge and she smiled when she saw Nikki sat in her usual chair.

"No, don't get up." she said, "I'll manage." and she walked across the bridge to stand right behind Hamilton, reaching down to rest one hand on his shoulder, rubbing it slowly, "What did this?" she then asked as she looked at the image of the wrecked space station and impact craters on the bridge's main view screen.

"That's what we were hoping you could help us with." Carr said.

"Sorry." Nayal replied, "Haven't a clue. If it was a Romulan weapon then it's something I never saw."

"Lieutenant West, can you reach anyone yet?" Edwards asked.

"I'm not sure captain. I think there's something coming through but it's very faint. Radiation from the gas giant is interfering with it." West replied.

"T'Lan, can you clean it up?" Carr said.

"Our sensors are providing detailed readings of the emissions from the gas giant lieutenant commander. It should be possible to construct a signal filter from these." T'Lan said. Seconds later T'Lan's filter was ready and she played the resulting signal for everyone to hear.

"Approaching ship, this is Brattan Six Tango. We have suffered major impact events. All power and water supplies in the capital have failed. The orbiting platform is not responding. Can you help us?"

"Brattan Six Tango, this is the *USS Nightfall*." Edwards responded, "We are on approach and will enter orbit soon. Can you tell us what you need?"

"Approaching ship, this is Brattan Six Tango. We have suffered-"

"Captain I do not believe that they are able to receive our transmissions." T'Lan said.

"It could even be a repeating beacon." Carr pointed out.

"What are impact events?" Nikki asked.

"Meteorites." Cole answered, "The moon has been hit by a heavy meteor storm."

"The craters we have detected are consistent with such impacts." T'Lan added, "There is a slightly elevated level of radioactivity detectable than ought to come from such events but that could be explained if the meteorites originated within the gas giant's rings and had absorbed it over time from the planet itself."

"Do we have a lock on the source of the signal?" Edwards asked.

"Yes captain." West replied, "According to our scans its coming from a commercial aerospace port just outside the capital. It could be that they're using the communications array from a vessel there to make their broadcast."

"Okay we need to send a team down." Edwards said and he looked at his first officer, "Lieutenant Commander Carr, assemble an away team."

"Yes captain." Carr replied and in turn she looked at Cole, "Cole you're with me." she said.

"Actually I want Lieutenant Commander Cole to take another away team over to the space station." Edwards said, "There could be sensor logs still intact that will shed some more light on what's happened here."

"Captain if the government has lost control then our away team could be in danger if they beam down without a security team." Cole pointed out.

"Yes, I understand that. Commander Carr is free to add security personnel as she sees fit but not yourself. In addition I think that signal we picked up from the surface counts as a specific invitation to beam down. Don't you agree commander?" and he looked at Carr again.

"MACOs? Imperial Guard?" she said, smiling.

"They are trained in disaster relief." Edwards said and then he activated the intercom, "Captain Heart. Captain Shry. I want your men ready for surface deployment as soon as possible. All drop ships and shuttles are to be readied for immediate use as well. Brattan Six Tango has issued a request for aid."

There was an assortment of atmospheric craft as well as short ranged shuttles dotted around the landing area of the aerospace port when Carr and her away team materialised. The primary structure of the aerospace port had suffered damage and the control tower had collapsed. Perhaps because of this the large number of people present instead seemed to be gathered around the sturdier hangars lined up opposite the main building. Accompanying Carr were Doctor King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer, a pair of engineers and also a pair of security guards. Their arrival did not go unnoticed and as soon as they were seen there were shouts from the crowd of people visible.

"It's Starfleet!"

"Starfleet are here!" and the crowd began to move towards them.

"My name is Lieutenant Commander Carr." Carr called out, noticing that the two security guards now had their hands resting on their phasers, "There's a starship in orbit. Who sent the distress signal?"

"That way." one of the people closest to the away team replied and she pointed towards one of the hangars.

"Thank you." Carr said and she began to head towards the hangar.

"Perhaps I ought to see to these people's medical needs." King said as he looked around and saw numerous injuries in the crowd.

"Of course doctor. I'll call if we need you." Carr replied, nodding and King split off from the rest of the away team. The while Doctor King began to evaluate the medical needs of the crowd the others headed towards the hangar pointed out by the local woman. There was a guard stood outside who wore what appeared to be the uniform of a local police officer but he did not attempt to stop the Starfleet team from entering and Carr led her team inside.

The hangar was obviously still in the process of being converted into some sort of command centre and there were numerous people at work setting up computers and communication equipment. At the centre of this was a small shuttle that had all of its hatches open to reveal a group of people inside who were all working from PADDs. Carr immediately headed for this and when she reached the shuttle she knocked on the hull and leant through a hatch.

"Hello." she said, "I'm Lieutenant Commander Carr from the *USS Nightfall*. We picked up your distress signal."

"Commander, thank goodness you're here." one of the shuttle's occupants said as he got to his feet. The man wore what had once been a formal suit but it was now covered in dust and torn at the shoulders. For a split second Carr was sure that she knew the man's voice from somewhere and then she realised that it had been him speaking in the call for help that the *Nightfall* had picked up. A quick glance towards the front of the shuttle told Carr that its communication system was active and it became obvious that the shuttle was being used to transmit the distress signal over and over again, "I'm Daniel Howe, Minister of Agriculture. I'm in charge here." he continued and he held out his hand.

"Agriculture?" Carr commented as she shook it.

"Yes, I was here at the port when the meteorites hit. We don't know exactly what the damage is in the capital because there's no power or communications but everyone in government more senior than me is missing and I'm afraid that we have to assume that they're dead."

"Well we're here to help you now minister." Carr said, "If you can tell me what your immediate needs are we'll see that we can do to meet them."

"People." another of the shuttle's occupants said, "We need to evaluate the damage and treat the injured. All that needs manpower we just don't have."

"Well we ought to be able to help there." Carr said and she tapped her combadge, "Carr to *Nightfall*." she signalled.

"*Nightfall* here." Nikki's voice responded. Then in a whisper Carr heard her add, "Did I get that right?" and she smiled.

"*Nightfall* we have a request for extra manpower on the surface. Are Heart and Shry ready?" Carr asked.

"Yeah mom, I mean yes commander." Nikki said and Carr winced momentarily, "They are standing by for

beam own co-ordinates.”

“Send their command sections down to the same co-ordinates as my team.” Carr said, “They can get co-ordinates for the rest of their men from the local authorities. Carr out.” and she tapped her combadge again to deactivate it. Then she looked at Minister Howe again, “Minister, you may want to accompany me outside.” she said and she stepped back from the shuttle hatch to allow him to exit. Accompanied by Minister Howe and the others from the shuttle Carr returned to the door to the outside and pointed to where her away team had first materialised, “Any second now.” she said and then there was the glow of a Federation transporter signature before a group larger than her away team materialised. Despite having been beamed down from the orbiting *USS Nightfall* not one of the new arrivals wore a Starfleet uniform. Instead their clothing was noticeably military in purpose, being made from material coloured to enable them to blend into specific backgrounds. Made up of two different species, the human troops wore different uniforms to their Andorian colleagues but they were equipped in a similar manner.

“Those aren't Starfleet personnel.” one of the locals from the shuttle said.

“No.” Carr agreed, “The *Nightfall* carries a company each of MACOs and Imperial Guard. The idea is to test the effectiveness of-”

“Wait a moment.” one of the locals said suddenly, interrupting Carr, “I've heard of your ship. It's equipped for planetary bombardment isn't it?”

“Not quite.” Carr answered, “The mass accelerators it carries are-”

“Don't you see what's happening here minister?” the man said before Carr could finish, “Those weren't meteorites that struck us. It was her ship. They used mass drivers to do this so they could land an army and take over. That's how come they got here so fast and that'll be why the space station didn't protect us. They weren't going to fire on one of their own ships.”

“I assure you that is not what happened.” Carr said.

“Well I don't believe you.” the man replied angrily, “I'm not being a part of this.” and he pushed his PADD at Carr before turning away from her and storming off. Then to make matters worse two more of the people from the shuttle did the same, tossing their PADDs at Carr's feet as they left.

“What's going on?” the Andorian Captain Shry said as he and MACO Captain Heart walked up to Carr.

“It looks like some of the people here are blaming us for what's happened.” Carr replied.

“I'm sorry about Mister Teller.” Minister Howe said, “He doesn't work for my department and I don't think he trusts me to do the right thing.”

“Uh-oh.” Heart commented as he looked in the direction Teller and the others had gone and he saw them talking to a group of people and pointing back towards them, “I don't like the look of this.”

“Do you think they'll cause us trouble minister?” Carr asked.

“I don't think so. Teller may not like me or trust you but our people need your help.” Minister Howe replied, “Though I would ask that you make a point of deferring to my judgement in public.”

“I think we can handle that.” Carr said, “Now perhaps we can make a start on determining how we can best help you.”

3.

While Carr's team was on the surface determining the needs of the moon's inhabitants, Cole and his team were still aboard the *Nightfall* preparing to beam over to the wreckage of the space station. Given the amount of damage that had been inflicted on the orbiting facility spacesuits were being prepared for all but one of the away team. This final member could not survive in a vacuum indefinitely, but the team would be back aboard the *Nightfall* by the time it became a problem for him. Lieutenant Maximillian, known as Max to the crew, was the *USS Nightfall's* chief engineer and had been a key member of the design team. A former Borg drone, he still retained all of the cybernetic implants he had received while part of the collective and he made good use of them when needing to interface with the ship's systems.

"So what do you think we'll find over there Max?" Cole asked as he secured the gloves to his suit.

"The structure appears intact but I recommend allowing me to lead the way commander." Max replied, "I don't need to worry about tearing my suit if we run into something sharp.

"There may also be radiation hazards." T'Lan added, "We should not rely on our suits to provide full protection."

"Everybody got that?" Cole asked and he looked at the other three engineers that were to accompany them to the station and they nodded in acknowledgement.

Just then the door to the transporter room slid open and West entered with a PADD.

"Complete schematics of the station." she said, handing the device to Cole.

"Thanks." he said as he took it and pressed it against a magnetic clamp on the side of his suit and then he turned to take the helmet being offered by one of the crewmen helping the away team prepare.

"You know I could probably be more use if I beamed over with you." West commented, "It wouldn't take long for me to-"

"Lieutenant West," Cole interrupted as he spun around to face her, "you're obviously suffering from a lack of sleep and frankly in your current condition I'd be more worried that you'd be a liability rather than an asset." and West stepped back, obviously startled by his unexpectedly critical response, "I suggest you get yourself a good strong cup of coffee before you go back to the bridge and make sure you get a good night's sleep tonight. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes sir." West replied nervously.

"Good. Now let us get on with this would you?" Cole added and West turned to leave.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole," Max said when West was gone, "do you not think that was overly harsh? Lieutenant West was trying to be helpful."

"Well she can help by being suitably rested before turning up for shifts." Cole replied, "I can't be the only one who's noticed her half asleep more often. Am I?" and he looked at T'Lan.

"You are correct." she answered, "I have observed her condition to be less than desirable on a number of occasions now. Perhaps Lieutenant Mackey-"

"Oh our ship's counsellor is useless. You know that T'Lan." Cole exclaimed, "He's still got her seeing him twice a week as it is. I wouldn't be surprised if it was him upsetting her and causing all this in the first place." then he looked around at the away team who apart from their helmets appeared to be fully suited up, "So is everyone ready?" he asked and when there were no objections he added, "Then let's go."

The away team stepped up onto the transporter pad and turned to face the technician at the controls.

"I've got a lock on what I think was ops." the man said, "It looks clear but it is in vacuum."

"Understood." Cole responded and as a precaution he drew his phaser, "Energise."

West scowled as she headed back towards the bridge from the transporter room. She was well aware that she had suffered a number of lapses in concentration but she resented Cole's suggestion that they were making her unfit for duty.

"Ignore him. Ignore all of them."

West gasped when she heard the voice moments after the turbolift doors closed. It sounded exactly like her own but she knew that she had not spoken them.

"Bridge." she said and the turbolift started to move.

"They aren't your friends. I am."

West closed her eyes tight and rubbed her face, convinced that she was hearing things. Then she heard the 'hiss' of the turbolift doors opening and she opened them again to find herself looking out onto the bridge.

Acting as if nothing had happened, she stepped out of the turbolift and headed directly for the operations station and sat down.

Just as the transporter technician had promised, Cole's away team materialised in the space station's

operations centre and immediately it became apparent that the station's artificial gravity field was still functional in this section at least. The same could not be said for the lights though and they, as well as all of the computer displays were flickering off and on. Unlike aboard a starship where duty stations all faced forwards the consoles in here were set in a circular pattern that faced inwards to a main console around which the command staff would stand. Given that this room would have been kept permanently manned while the station was in operation it was not a surprise to the away team that they immediately encountered bodies and T'Lan opened her tricorder and began to scan the nearest one.

"This individual appears to have succumbed to the effects of exposure to vacuum." she said.

"Same here." Max added as he looked down at another body. Unlike T'Lan he had no need of a tricorder to tell him this, however. Instead the optical implant he possessed allowed him to conduct scans with a simple thought.

Cole looked around the operations centre. It was located at the top of the station where its mushroom shaped structure tapered and so this put it close to the outer hull. However, like all Starfleet vessels and space based facilities it was equipped with force field generators that should have created a barrier to plug any holes made by meteor impacts strong enough to penetrate the hull.

"Max, take your people down to engineering and see how much still works. We've got gravity so there must be some power left. See if you can't use it to get anything else working." Cole ordered and he handed the PADD containing the station schematics to Max.

"Yes commander." Max replied as he plugged himself into the PADD to download the schematics into his own memory before returning the device to Cole. Then he beckoned to his engineers to follow him, leaving Cole and T'Lan alone in the operations centre.

"Okay T'Lan," Cole said, "I'm counting on you now. Do you think you can get anything from these computers?"

"I shall endeavour to do so." T'Lan replied as she walked up to the nearest console and started to examine it, "I would hate to disappoint you."

"Hate' T'Lan? Doesn't sound very logical." Cole pointed out.

"Perhaps not Robert. But our relationship is not entirely logical is it?" T'Lan said as she continued to work at the console.

Leaving the science officer to get on with her work, Cole turned his attention to the bodies of the Starfleet officers who had died here. There were no signs of any injuries inflicted by anything other than sudden decompression, suggesting that all of them had died in a very short space of time when the hull was breached. According to the available information there had been a little over a hundred Starfleet personnel aboard the station and up to a quarter of these would have been inside operations during a yellow or red alert. However, as Cole gathered the bodies together and lined them up to be transported back to the *Nightfall* he found that there was less than half this number present. This suggested that whatever had happened here had happened too quickly for the crew to respond.

"This station had shields and phasers." he said, "How could this have happened?"

"The meteor strike must have been a surprise." T'Lan replied, "There is no explanation for how they could have penetrated the shields otherwise."

"How long would debris from the gas giant's rings take to get here T'Lan?" Cole asked.

"That would depend on its velocity relative to the orbital motion of Brattan Six Tango." T'Lan said. Then she looked up from the console she was studying, "I may have found something here lieutenant commander." she added.

"What?" Cole said as he hurried to her side. But all he saw was a flickering console display, "I don't see anything T'Lan."

"No, this console is receiving insufficient power to operate. There must be a fault in the power distribution system. However, it would appear that the non-volatile memory of this console has survived the disruption. My tricorder scans indicate no randomisation of the memory stacks. I recommend that we remove it and return it to the *Nightfall* for examination."

Both Cole and T'Lan then knelt down and detached the access panel concealed beneath the console to expose its innards. Amongst the processors and bundles of data carrying fibres there was a row of isolinear chips all plugged into sockets. T'Lan promptly reached inside and began plucking these from their sockets and handed them to Cole who in turn placed them inside a pocket on the leg of his suit.

"So what do you think is on these then T'Lan?" Cole asked.

"They ought to show the short range sensor logs for the station in the run up to its destruction." T'Lan told him, "Of course that depends on the sensors themselves having remained functional."

"You think they may not have?"

"It is a possibility. However, given that the planetary distress signal must have been sent from this station we know that it survived at least the initial impacts. Even if the signal "

"Max to Lieutenant Commander Cole." Max's voice suddenly announced.

"Go ahead Max." Cole responded, looking upwards as he replied to the disembodied voice.

"Lieutenant commander, we're on level seventeen. I think you and Lieutenant T'Lan should come down here and take a look at this." Max said.

"Why? What have you found Max?"

"It looks like the station was hit by some sort of energy blast. It tore right through the hull and completely destroyed the primary shield generator." Max explained briefly.

"Okay Max, stay right there." Cole said as he got to his feet and then helped T'Lan up as well, "We're on our way down to you now."

With the turbolifts inoperable, Cole and T'Lan had to use emergency ladder shafts to climb down the sixteen levels to where Max and his engineers were. As it happened that was as far as they could go in the shaft because of the twisted wreckage that blocked it at that point.

"This has been cut with a phaser." T'Lan noted as she and Cole squeezed their way out of the shaft.

"Recently as well." Cole added, "My guess is that Max did it so they could get out of there without tearing their suits on that wreckage."

"Correct lieutenant commander." Max said from the end of the corridor Cole and T'Lan now found themselves in, "If you would like to follow me then I will show you what we have found."

As Max led him and T'Lan through the corridors of the station Cole noticed that many of the bulkheads appeared warped. This was most noticeable around doorways where the frames had deformed to create gaps between them and the doors themselves or pulled the doors apart at odd angles. After a short time they reached an area that had once been made up of several different rooms and corridors that now had been merged into one by having the dividing walls ripped away by whatever had struck the station. This same attack had also destroyed the entire contents of this section, tearing apart furniture and ripping even the heaviest equipment out of its mounting. This included the station's shield generators and Cole saw that these were now missing entirely, what remained the reinforced mounting brackets were now bent away from the walls and floors. Cole could easily envision the generators smashing through the walls and contents of the other rooms as they were torn free and dragged out into space through the massive hole in the hull that was visible from this point. What he could not tell however, was whether the hole had existed prior to the shield generators being torn free or if they had created them as they burst through the hull.

"Well this explains a lot." Cole said, "No shield generators means nothing to stop a meteor smashing through the hull and nothing to create a force field to plug the gap afterwards."

"Lieutenant commander, I am not detecting any residual signs of a weapon discharge." T'Lan said as she made use of her tricorder to scan the area around where the shield generators ought to have been.

"No, I didn't either." Max added, "No radioactivity, no thermal distortion. It's as if everything was literally torn apart."

"A tractor beam could have moved the shield generators." Cole commented, "Though I don't see how it could have been used to target them this deep inside the station."

"It couldn't." Max replied, "Not without every obstacle in its path being cleared first and that is not how a tractor beam functions. Take a look at the outer hull." he continued and he walked towards the gaping hole that provided a clear view of the nearby gas giant and its rocky rings, "The tear is too neat to be the result of a tractor beam distorting the hull. To apply this much force with a tractor beam would have resulted in the entire station being pulled out of orbit."

"Whatever happened also had to happen fast enough that the crew had no chance to raise their shields."

T'Lan added, "Doing so would have protected them from a tractor beam as well as from the meteors that struck the station."

Well those shield generators didn't just vanish." Cole said, "Maybe there's some more physical evidence to be found yet." and he tapped his combadge, "Cole to *Nightfall*."

"*Nightfall* here commander." West's voice responded.

"*Nightfall* I need you to scan for any debris from the station. The shield generators are missing and I-" Cole said before he was interrupted.

"Hang on a minute Cole," Edwards said, "Did you just say that the shield generators are 'missing'? You meant they were destroyed?"

"No captain, I mean that they have been physically removed and it looks like it wasn't done by a team of qualified Starfleet engineers. I'm looking at the hole in the hull they left through. Neither Max nor T'Lan can find any explanation for how it was pulled off, if you'll forgive the pun, so I was hoping you could locate the shield generators themselves and that would give us some additional information to work with."

"Okay Cole, we'll see what we can find." Edwards said, "*Nightfall* out."



Back on the bridge of the *Nightfall*, Edwards considered his next move. Carr was still on the surface along with the command staff of the ship's attached infantry companies assessing the needs of the colony while Cole was aboard the wrecked space station trying to find out how the moon's defences had failed at such a critical time.

"Captain is something wrong?" Nikki asked from beside him.

"You mean aside from one of your colonies being attacked and a Starfleet base destroyed in the process?" Nyal asked from the other the seat on the other side of Edwards where Nikki's mother usually sat.

"We haven't confirmed it was an attack yet." West pointed out.

"Maybe not, but it's looking increasingly likely." Edwards said, "The problem is that there are just too many things we don't know yet." and then he got to his feet and started to walk towards the door to his ready room, "Mister Hamilton, you have the bridge." he said, "I want to see Lieutenant Commander White in my ready room as soon as possible." then just as he reached the door to his ready room and it slid open he paused and looked back towards the centre of the bridge where Hamilton had just sat down in the captain's chair, "Oh and Nikki I've got an important job for you." he said.

"What's that captain?" she asked with a smile.

"It's a task that is considered vital to the outcome of our mission. But that's not important right now." Hamilton commented.

"If Lieutenant Hamilton tries to impress anyone by ordering the ship to carry out any sudden manoeuvres I want you to stop him."

"How I am supposed to do that?" Nikki said, frowning.

"Scream really loud and I'll come back." Edwards said and then he vanished into his ready room.

A short time later there was a chiming sound from the door to his ready room and Edwards looked up.

"Come in." he said and the door opened to reveal a dark skinned man in a command division uniform with lieutenant commander's markings, "Ah Commander White, do sit down."

"Thank you captain. I was told you wanted to see me." White replied as he took a seat opposite Captain Edwards.

"Yes, I wanted to discuss our tactical situation with you." Edwards said. Operating under the call sign 'Snowman' White commanded the squadron of twelve Peregrine-class attack fighters that were carried aboard the *Nightfall*, effectively turning the ship into a task force all of its own.

"I've been looking at it myself." White replied.

"And what do you think?" Edwards asked.

"To be blunt I'm not sure it could be much worse. Not only do we have emissions from Brattan Six itself interfering, disrupting some of our sensors but the simple fact that we're within a dense subsystem of moons means that there are any number of approaches that a ship could take to reach us without being noticed. Plus there's the issue of the amount of debris in orbit from the station. I doubt our lidar would be much good at spotting cloaked ships sneaking up on us."

"No, I didn't think there was much point in ordering any sweeps. But I was considering a rotating combat air patrol to limit the number of blind spots we've got." Edwards said and White nodded.

"It ought to work." he said, "We can put the runabouts in polar orbits so they have a clear view of the entire orbital plane while a pair of fighters patrol between the moons with a second pair in the hangar ready for launch. We'll work on a two-two-twenty rotation. Two hours on standby, two out and the rest as downtime for the pilot and servicing for the fighters."

"How long will that take to organise?" Edwards asked.

"About half an hour. The fighters are ready to go, I just need to brief my pilots and sort out a rota." White told him and Edwards nodded.

"I'll see to it that the runabouts are crewed and ready for launch at the same time." he said before they were interrupted by the intercom.

"Captain, I think you ought to see this." West's voice said, "We're picking up a signal from the surface."

"Put it through to me." Edwards said and he adjusted the display on his desk so that both he and White could see it clearly.

The emblem of the *USS Nightfall* that the crew also sported on their uniforms promptly vanished as West forwarded the signal she was picking up from Brattan Six Tango to the captain's terminal. The signal was video footage that showed a group of people standing in a badly damaged square, gathered around a raised platform on which a man was using a loud speaker system to address them.

"We all know what happened." he said, "Our world was struck from space and the space station supposed to protect us was destroyed. But this was no random act of chance. It is no coincidence that the first Starfleet

vessel to respond was one of the Akira-class variants created to fight the Borg. The ship now orbiting our world is armed with mass accelerators that are capable of inflicting the exact damage we have witnessed inflicted on our home. Now they are landing soldiers, yes soldiers, from the core worlds of the Federation to take control completely.”

“Captain I've got Lieutenant Commander Carr for you.” West's voice then announced and Edwards sighed before turning off the display.

“Go make the arrangements for the patrol.” he told White. Then as the fighter pilot was leaving he addressed West over the intercom, “Put her through lieutenant.”

“Captain we may have a problem here.” Carr's voice said as soon as the channel was opened, “There's just been a local news broadcast that-”

“Yes I've seen it.” Edwards said before she could finish, “How are the local population reacting?”

“We'll here at the space port it's not so bad. We've got what's left of the local government still visibly in charge but the police in the capital are informing us that there's widespread anger. Captain this is going to seriously hamper our relief effort. Heart and Shry don't want to risk their men in search and rescue operations in a hostile environment but issuing rifles and body armour is going to make them look like an occupying force.”

“In that case we'll have to limit their deployment and keep them outside the population centres. Tell Heart and Shry to draw up plans for their men to act as drivers and search and rescue pilots only. Apart from that they'll have to establish a field headquarters somewhere out of the way while local volunteers take care of all the heavy work.”

“What about us captain?” Carr asked, “We're Starfleet.”

“Yes and that idiot making his speech has just labelled us as being responsible for what happened here. So until we can set the record straight I want your team back up here as soon as possible commander and that includes Doctor King. We'll make our sickbay available to any of the locals too badly injured to be treated by whatever's left of their medical resources but I don't want to risk our people any more than Heart and Shry want to risk theirs.”

Leaving Max and his engineers to determine what systems could still be reactivated aboard the space station Cole and T'Lan returned to the operations centre and from there located one of the locations where the station had been struck by a meteor where they found another large hole in the hull, though this one was nowhere near as large as the one that the shield generators had been pulled through.

“Careful T'Lan.” Cole said as the Vulcan knelt beside the opening in the station's hull, “I don't want to have to call the Nightfall and ask them to beam you aboard because you fell through that hole.”

“Your concern is appreciated lieutenant commander.” she replied, “But I am in no danger of falling and I wish to examine the impact point for residue. In fact I may have found some.” and she reached out with her finger and thumb to take hold of a small chip of rock that was caught in the ragged edge of the hole.

However, at just that moment Cole saw a large piece of tumbling wreckage through the hole that he recognised as what had been a reserve fuel tank for the station's fusion reactors. The externally mounted tank had obviously been torn off by a meteor impact and now the gravitational pull of the station was keeping it close.

Too close.

Drawn back towards the space station, the fuel tank slammed into the side of the structure, causing the entire thing to shake and T'Lan was hurled through the hole into space.

“T'Lan!” Cole exclaimed as he saw her fall and he rushed to the hole and looked out to see her now tumbling through space, “T'Lan can you hear me?” he asked.

“I can. I am uninjured.” T'Lan responded, “However, I am unable to control my trajectory.”

“I'm coming over.” Cole said, backing up before he charged towards the hole and leapt through it, aiming himself toward T'Lan.

Moving at a greater speed than T'Lan, Cole closed with her rapidly and as soon as he came within arm's reach she held out her hand for him to grab hold of.

“I've got you.” he said as he took hold of her hand and pulled her close.

“That may be lieutenant commander.” she replied, wrapping her arms around him as he did the same to her, “But who has you?”

Cole tapped his combadge.

“*Nightfall* can you hear me?” he transmitted.

“Loud and clear commander.” West replied.

“West, T'Lan and I need a pick up. Quickly if you don't mind. There's a lot of debris out here and it'll only take one hit to finish the pair of us.” Cole said.

“Understood. Standby for transport.” West told him and moments later Cole and T'Lan felt the sensation of being caught up in a transporter beam

Going from drifting through space to being in the transporter room meant that both Cole and T'Lan

materialised just above the transporter pad in a roughly horizontal position before dropping onto it.

"Transporter room two to bridge," the transporter technician said as soon as they had materialised,

"Lieutenant Commander Cole and Lieutenant T'Lan are both safe."

"It was not logical for you to put yourself at risk lieutenant commander." T'Lan said as she and Cole both got back to their feet and started to release the seals on their helmets.

"T'Lan, you can't think I'd just leave you falling through space like that do you?" Cole responded.

"I could have requested to be beamed back just as easily on my own." she said, "However, the sentiment of trying to help me was appreciated." then she held up what she was holding, "Fortunately I was able to retain this when I fell."

"What is it?" Cole asked.

"I believe that it is a fragment of one of the objects that struck the space station." T'Lan answered and Cole smiled.

"The captain's going to want to see that." he said as they stepped off the transporter pad and headed for the exit.

"Indeed." T'Lan replied.

"Okay, we'll take it to him as soon as I've showered." Cole said, "A couple of hours in one of these suits and I'm sweating."

I had noticed." T'Lan commented. Then she looked over her shoulder to confirm that they were alone in the corridor, "However, logic would suggest that since we are both intending to shower we could conserve the ship's resources by doing so together. It would also ensure that we are both able to take our findings to the captain together more easily. Neither of us would have to wait for-

"T'Lan," Cole said as he placed an arm around her, "you had me at the word 'together'."

The *Nightfall's* sickbay was filled with injured people from Brattan Six Tango when West entered and she noticed that Doctor King had activated the ship's emergency medical hologram to assist his team. But it was Doctor King himself that West wanted to see and she found him in his office adjoining sickbay.

"Lieutenant," he said when he saw her, "I take it you have an update for me from the surface?"

"Not this time doctor." she answered, "I'm here for myself."

"Feeling unwell?"

"Sort of. Tired. I'm having trouble sleeping and wondered if you give me something for it."

"A sedative?" King replied and he picked up a medical tricorder and got out of his chair, "That's something of a last resort." he added before he began to scan West's skull, "This has been going on for some time hasn't it?" he asked and West nodded.

"Before I just felt sleepy but earlier in the turbolift I'm not sure if I was talking to myself or if I actually was hearing voices."

"Hmm." King said, "I can't find anything wrong with your scan. Your trouble sleeping is most likely a result of anxiety." and West groaned.

"You won't tell Mackey that will you?" she asked, "He still has me seeing him regularly even after being here for more than two years."

"I have to enter it into my records that I'm giving you something to help you sleep lieutenant." King said, folding up his tricorder and walking over to a nearby replicator, "But I doubt that our ship's councillor is going to break the habit of a lifetime and actually read them for himself. Has he mentioned those panic attacks you had a while back?"

West shook her head.

"No, he doesn't know about them." she said.

"Then you should be fine." King said as the replicator produced a small bottle. Removing it from the device King turned around and tossed them towards West who just missed catching them and had to bend down to pick them up off the floor, "Now go." he told her, "I've got people outside with bigger problems than you."

"Thanks. I'll get out of your way." West replied and she headed out of sickbay, returning directly to her quarters.

Once there she made her way to the replicator.

"Water." she said and while she was opening the bottle King had given to her a glass of water appeared in the machine. She took one of the pills from the bottle and washed it down with the water before getting ready for bed. However, before she turned in for the night she wanted to put the bottle of pills where they would not be noticeable should anyone, the ship's councillor in particular, come by. She decided that the best place for them was in the drawers where she kept her clothing and she walked over to them. However, as she was bent over to put the bottle away she noticed that her reflection in the mirror above the drawers was not looking down at all. Instead it was looking straight at her and smiling.

"Don't worry, I'll let you get a good night's sleep tonight. I just have one little thing I need to do." the reflection said and West stumbled backwards in surprise. But when she looked at the mirror again the reflection was normal and she shook her head.

"Oh I really need some sleep." she said to herself, convinced that she had just experienced another hallucination.

Edwards had just prepared a meal when he heard the intercom to the door of his quarters chime.

"Come in." he said with his back to the door, "Grace why don't-"

"Captain?" T'Lan's voice said and Edwards suddenly turned around in surprise.

"T'Lan." he said, "Cole. I was expecting Lieutenant Commander Carr to bring me a report."

"Of course sir." Cole replied, grinning.

"What can I do for you both?" Edwards asked.

"We have come to brief you on what we found on the space station." T'Lan told him and she held out a PADD. Edwards took the device and looked down at it.

"Isolinear chips from the sensor system and a fragment of rock." he said, "There's not exactly much here."

"We've not run any analysis on them yet." Cole explained, "We're hoping that the isolinear chips will tell us what the station's sensors picked up right before they failed."

"And the rock fragment will allow us to confirm whether the meteors that inflicted the damage did indeed come from the rings of Brattan Six." T'Lan added.

"Good." Edwards replied with a nod and he handed the PADD back to T'Lan, "I want you to copy the contents of the isolinear chips to protect the originals and then have Nikki run the checks on their contents. It'll be

good experience for her. In the meantime I assume that I can rely on you to compare that rock fragment to the gas giant's rings?"

"Yes captain." T'Lan replied.

"Good. Is there anything else?"

"No captain, we'll get out of your way before Lieutenant Commander Carr comes by to give you her report." Cole said and then he and T'Lan headed back towards the door out of Edwards' quarters. But just as the door slid open to allow them to leave it revealed Carr standing in the corridor outside and her eyes widened suddenly in surprise.

"Cole. T'Lan. I was just-" she began.

Lieutenant commander, the captain has already informed us that you have a report for him." T'Lan said and Carr exhaled deeply.

"Of course." she said, smiling and allowing the other two officers to leave Edwards' quarters.

When West was woken by her alarm the next morning she was confused to find herself sat at her desk with her terminal active and glancing at the file that had been last accessed she saw that it was a copy of the news broadcast in which the local agitator placed the blame for what had happened on Brattan Six Tango squarely on Starfleet in general and the *USS Nightfall* in particular. However, she felt perfectly refreshed after a good night's sleep and so she put this down to just not remembering sitting down at her desk before the sedative kicked in unexpectedly. The alarm gave her plenty of time to get ready for her shift and she headed for the bridge with plenty of time to spare. This put her in a good mood but her face fell as soon as the turbolift door opened and she saw what was happening on the bridge.

The main viewscreen was split into two unequal parts. One part was just large enough to show the image of a Starfleet admiral who had an angry expression on his face. But more significant was the larger image beside it. Playing on the main view screen was the footage of the *Nightfall* being blamed for the attack on Brattan Six Tango.

"So what do you have to say for yourself Captain Edwards?" the admiral asked, "This is playing across five sectors."

"Admiral I've no idea how this got out." Edwards replied, "As far as we knew there were no long range communications left on Brattan Six Tango. Only a minority of the population here are even listening to this man."

"What's going on?" West whispered to Cole when she headed for the tactical station instead of directly to her own.

"Somehow this footage got broadcast and made it onto the news networks. Now there's uproar all over the place." Cole replied softly and West remembered the file that had been accessed on her computer,

"Something wrong?" Cole asked.

"No. Just wondering how that's possible," West replied and then she made her way to her duty station and exchanged places with the ensign whose shift was just ending.

"Well a lot more are listening in other systems captain. We've got protests being organised all over. One of our ships was even rammed by some fool in a shuttle trying to prevent it entering orbit over their world." the admiral said, "Now what do you have that I can take to the Federation News Service to assure them that Starfleet is not in the habit of attacking our own colonies?"

"We've got three different avenues of investigation at this time admiral." Edwards replied, "We're looking at the sensor logs from our space station, we have a sample of one of the meteors used in the attack and our chief engineer is examining damage inflicted on the space station by an unknown type of weapon."

"Unknown?" the admiral commented.

"Yes sir, I'm sorry I can't say more than that but the technology is like nothing we've encountered before." Edwards said.

"Very well, I'll let Starfleet command know. But we need results on this fast captain. Calls for secession of worlds in frontier regions were starting to die down and now all this has brought them back to the forefront of discussion. Any answer that takes too long may do us no more use than no answer at all."

"Understood admiral." Edwards said before the view screen changed back to the usual view of space around Brattan Six Tango.

"Commander Carr you have the conn." Edwards said as he got to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Carr asked.

"Engineering." Edwards replied, "I need to find out whether Max has made any progress yet and I want to do it in person."

When Edwards entered the *Nightfall's* engineering section Max was nowhere to be seen but there were plenty of more junior officers and enlisted engineers to ask and the first of them that Edwards spoke to directed him to one of the smaller workshops.

"Ah captain." Max said when Edwards stepped through the doorway into the workshop, "I take it that you are

here for an update on my progress.”

“I am. Look Max, I've got Starfleet breathing down my neck on this, they want answers quickly.”

“Are other colonies at risk of attack?” Max asked.

“I don't think so. But someone aboard has leaked the footage accusing us of being responsible and now there are protests breaking out all over the place.”

“Strange.” Max said, “To the best of my knowledge our subspace communications have not been used for anything other than authorised signals. Would you like me to investigate further?”

“Not yet. The investigation into the attack has to take precedence over finding the leak. Now do you have anything for me?” Edwards said.

“As a matter of fact I do.” Max answered, “I think I have identified the weapon used to destroy the space station's defences. It may also explain how the meteorites were directed towards Brattan Six Tango.”

“How?” Edwards asked.

“In fact it is Federation technology captain.” Max replied.

“Federation technology? But how is that possible? You and T'Lan couldn't identify the weapon yesterday when you were aboard the station.”

“That is because I was not aware of it until I researched it further captain.” Max explained, “However, if you would like to observe the experiment I have set up here then perhaps I can demonstrate how the attack was carried out.”

Edwards then turned his attention to the equipment Max had set up in the workshop. At one end of the room there was an energy emitter of some form that reminded Edwards of a smaller scale tractor beam outside of its usual casing and with some additional parts added. Meanwhile at the other end of the room were two different and far more mundane objects on stands. The first of these was a standard issue ration can that was filled with a high protein paste intended to be mixed with various flavourings that were infamous for tasting more like the foil packaging they were shipped in than what they were supposed to while on the second stand there was a pumpkin.

“Going to make a jack o'lantern Max?” Edwards asked, “Halloween isn't for four months yet.”

“The pumpkin will represent Brattan Six Tango in my second test captain.” Max replied, “But first I need to test the mechanism by which the space station's shield generators were destroyed. Observe.” and Max then activated the energy emitter with a simple thought relayed to it wirelessly by his implants. Edwards saw the pale green beam that looked remarkably like a tractor beam leap from the emitter at the can and there was a sudden sharp 'Crack!' as a hole was punched into the metal. But what startled Edwards was when the paste that the can contained suddenly came shooting back out of this hole while the can itself remained stationary on the stand.

“How the hell did you do that?” Edwards asked as Max now shut off the beam and he went up to the stand to see if the now half empty can was fixed down in some way. But Edwards found that he could simply reach out and pick it up. He did however, keep it at arm's length as it continued to drip paste through the hole Max had made. Then all of a sudden he noticed that the edges of the hole were bent outwards suggesting that the can had been ruptured from the inside rather than punctured from the outside, “Now that's damned peculiar.” he commented.

“The weapon is called a heavy graviton beam captain. Max told him, “It was a weapon intended to provide a defence against the Borg.”

“Actually I think I heard about it somewhere.” Edwards replied, “Nothing specific mind you. But I thought that the prototypes proved ineffective and the project was abandoned in favour of enhanced quantum torpedo development.”

“It was.” Max said, “However, it would seem that someone has been able to get the technology working to an acceptable degree. Certainly at a greater level of effectiveness than dragging protein paste from cans.”

“You said that this could also explain the attack on the colony?” Edwards said and Max nodded.

“Yes captain. Observe.” he said and then he placed a small glass sphere in front of the energy emitter before standing back, “As a safety precaution in this experiment I have set up a force field to protect us.” Max added and there was a flash of light in front of them as a force field separating the two officers from the experimental equipment was activated. Then Max triggered the energy emitter again.

This time rather than anything coming hurtling towards the emitter the glass sphere was suddenly propelled away from it at such a high speed that it punched right through the pumpkin before it struck the wall behind it and shattered into hundreds of pieces whilst the flesh of the pumpkin was sprayed over a wide area of the wall as well.

“Good God Max!” Edwards exclaimed, “What was that?”

“The heavy graviton beam focuses gravitational fields with much greater efficiency than an ordinary tractor beam captain. Whereas that device will exert a steady push or pull on an object the heavy graviton beam is capable of emitting rapid pulses that are far stronger and also of focusing these on much smaller target areas while leaving the rest of it untouched.”

“Max, how do we defend ourselves against a weapon like this?” Edwards asked.

"I cannot be certain without examining the weapon itself captain." Max admitted, "There are too many variables."

"Your best guess then Max."

"Our shields ought to provide full protection. They are graviton based and so will disrupt the beam regardless of frequency settings. This may have been another reason why development of the weapon was discontinued by Starfleet. It would have been useless against anything other than the Borg, if it could even be made to work against them." Max said. Then after a brief pause he added, "However, I feel that I should warn you that if the beam was to hit us while our shields were down then the effects could be catastrophic. Especially if it was directed at engineering." and Edwards' eyes widened in horror as he pictured the effect of one of the *Nightfall's* four warp cores being dragged out of position and he struck his combadge.

"Edwards to bridge, shields up. Shields up now!"

"Captain what's wrong?" Carr asked, "There's nothing on our scans. We're all alone out here."

"Just get the shields up. I don't have time to explain. Tell the runabouts and our fighters to do the same as well. Every ship needs to be running with shields up round the clock." Edwards said.

"Captain, we won't be able to launch or recover fighters with our shields raised." Cole then pointed out.

"I know that." Edwards replied, "We'll have to deploy our fighters to the surface instead. They can operate from the space port."

"Yes captain." Cole said, "Raising shields."



"Captain Sanchez I don't like the look of this. Their shields just went up. Same goes for those two fighters and I'll bet the runabouts in polar orbits just did the same as well."

The man stood at the back of the small transport's bridge turned towards the man at the operations console. "Are they turning this way?" Sanchez asked.

"No sir. But there's no reason for them to have raised their shields."

"Okay let's start figuring out a way to get out of here." Sanchez said and he hurried towards the helm station. "Or maybe you should just stay put." a young girl who had not been on the bridge moments earlier said from behind Sanchez.

"You!" he hissed as he turned to face her, "What do you want now?"

"I want you to stay right here. Starfleet hadn't detected you when our agent last contacted us and it's doubtful that they've found you so quickly." she told him.

"We can't take that chance. Your weapon isn't powerful enough for us to be able to take on a Starfleet heavy cruiser." Sanchez replied.

"That ship carries a dozen fighters." The Girl said, "How many are out there?"

"Two." Sanchez said.

"And are they coming this way?"

"No."

"No, they aren't. Now ask yourself father, does that sound like a warship preparing for battle?"

"I'm not your father." Sanchez hissed, "My daughter's dead. You killed her."

"Then why not plunge a dagger into my heart then?" The Girl said, smiling, "Oh yes that's right, my dear mother already tried that didn't she? And you saw what I did to her in return didn't you?"

"We could escape." Sanchez said, "We could slip out on the far side of the planet and be at warp before they could-"

"Starfleet must not find you." The Girl interrupted, "As it turns out this mission has had an effect even more drastic than we'd hoped. Dozens of Federation systems are in turmoil and if we can play this right then that turmoil could become open revolt. But for any of that to happen it is essential that no-one knows you were here. Now maybe you can slip past that cruiser and its fighters but you can't do it without being seen and they'll track you all the way across the quadrant if they have to. Now are you going to do as you are told or do I need to kill everyone aboard this ship instead?"

Sanchez scowled.

"You're a monster." he said softly.

"I love you too daddy." The Girl said before she turned around and simply vanished.

"So what do we do captain?" the operations officer asked nervously and Sanchez sighed as he sat down at the helm.

"Nothing." he replied, "You heard that thing. We're to stay put."

Edwards' next point of call was the science lab where T'Lan and Nikki were examining the rock fragment and isolinear chips. The analysis of the isolinear chips could have been carried out at any computer terminal aboard the *Nightfall* but it had been decided that it would be best for Nikki to be working where T'Lan could offer immediate help if it was needed.

"Captain." T'Lan said as Edwards entered the lab, "I was not expecting you to visit us personally."

"I was on my way from seeing Max in engineering." Edwards replied, "Have either of you found anything yet?"

"I have matched the chemical composition of this fragment of rock to that commonly found within the rings of Brattan Six captain." T'Lan told him, "However, the precise way it was knocked out of position remains a mystery."

"Perhaps not. Max has an interesting theory about that." Edwards said, "One that scares the hell out of me to be honest." then he looked at Nikki, "And how about you?" he asked her.

"T'Lan suggested that I started with the last entry on the sensor logs and work backwards from there. But the problem is that not all of the sensors went down at the same time so I'm trying to pick out data from an incomplete record at the moment." Nikki said.

"Have you got the logs for the station's internal sensors there?" Edwards said.

"Err, yes I think so. But I was looking at the external ones. Is that wrong?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with that but after speaking to Max I want to check on something. Just open them would you?" Edwards said as he walked up and stood behind Nikki as she worked.

"Okay. What am I looking for?" Nikki replied.

"A sudden imbalance in the station's local gravity. Centred on the deck where the shield generators were located." Edwards told her and Nikki frowned.

"Okay, how do I do that?" she asked.

"Filter by variance and sort by magnitude." T'Lan told her and the Vulcan got up to join the captain in standing behind Nikki.

"There, is that it?" Nikki said when she had carried out T'Lan's instructions.

"It certainly looks that way." Edwards answered.

"Captain I do not understand these readings." T'Lan said when she saw the columns of numbers on the screen in front of her, "For these to be correct gravity would have to be manipulated on an enormous scale and yet be largely contained within a very narrow volume."

"Max thinks it's a heavy graviton beam." Edwards said, "He gave me a demonstration with leftovers from the kitchen I think."

"What's a heavy graviton beam?" Nikki asked.

"A type of weapon that is still considered too impractical to be of use." T'Lan told her.

"Tell that to the pumpkin." Edwards commented.

"What pumpkin?" Nikki said.

"I do not understand the reference either captain." T'Lan added.

"Max demonstrated the concept to me by firing a glass bead through a pumpkin. Basically he created a mass accelerator that didn't need a four hundred metre long barrel." Edwards said.

"That would be advantageous." T'Lan said, "Theoretically any object in space could be used as a projectile simply by positioning a ship equipped with such a weapon on the opposite side of that object and firing the beam at it. However, that would not explain the damage inflicted on the space station's shield generators."

"Max also demonstrated how as well as imparting a pushing force on an object the beam could be used to drag something out of a container. In our case the shield generators were pulled out of the space station without disturbing the station's position at all."

"Why not use the beam to destroy the station? You know, just pull it apart?" Nikki asked.

"The entire attack was carried out to make it appear the result of meteor impacts. There had to be impact damage to the station." T'Lan explained.

"But the space station's shield generators needed to be taken out first. Otherwise it would have probably survived the attack and used its phasers to deal with the meteors aimed at the colony." Edwards added.

"Does Max have an opinion on the effectiveness of our shields against such a weapon?" T'Lan asked and Edwards nodded.

"He seems to think that the beam would be effectively blocked by our shields so I've ordered them raised. I know it will disrupt some of our operations but we're going to have to live with that. It's preferable to having the entire ship opened up like a can of protein paste after all." he said.

"So now that we know how the attack was carried out what are we going to do next?" Nikki asked.

"We're looking for a ship armed with a gravity based weapon." Edwards told her, "That means you're looking for gravitational anomalies and warp signatures."

"Captain, there are methods of masking warp signatures that Nikki will not be aware of." T'Lan pointed out, "Perhaps I ought to-"

"Yes T'Lan, I'm aware that my chief science officer knows more than an intern does. But I'm calling a meeting of senior staff to discuss our situation and that means I want you there with the results of your rock analysis. You can review what Nikki finds afterwards, but Starfleet is looking for answers quickly. I don't know if you're aware or not but someone leaked the footage of a local rabble rouser blaming this ship for the attack and nearby systems are up in arms about it. Quite literally if we don't find out what really happened it seems."

"Yes captain." T'Lan said, "I will be there when ordered."

7.

Calling a full meeting of the *Nightfall's* senior staff meant having to bring White, Heart and Shry back up from the surface of Brattan Six Tango and this meant having to lower the ship's shields momentarily to allow the transporter to function. But the window of vulnerability was judged to be too small for an enemy to take advantage of and so Edwards gave the order for it to be done. The ship's senior command staff gathered in the *Nightfall's* briefing room, sitting around the table. Though she was not a Starfleet officer and only present aboard the *Nightfall* as an advisor Edwards decided to include Nayal in the meeting as well. With no proof of who had launched the attack he could not entirely discount that it had been a Romulan ship. Indeed, he had no information yet on whether the limitations that applied to the weapon systems ordinarily deployed by the Romulans and Remans regarding firing while cloaked would also apply to the use of a heavy graviton beam. "How are things on the surface?" Carr asked as the two military officers entered the room.

"Oh we had some excitement last night." Shry replied, "Of the explosive kind."

"You were attacked?" West exclaimed.

"Some locals decided to hurl a home made bomb at the hangar we're using as a headquarters." Heart told her, "Fortunately no-one was hurt. Those hangars were reinforced early during the war with the Dominion on the off chance that the Romulans would try to take advantage of the Federation's weakness and launch raids. The hangars would have housed attack fighters if they proved necessary. The Romulans may not have attacked but at least we were left with structures designed to withstand anything up to a type six phaser or a photon torpedo detonation at anything over five hundred metres. Compared to that a bit of fertiliser is nothing."

"You hear that Nayal?" King commented, "Your people made a positive contribution to our situation." and she snarled at him.

"If we can get to the matter at hand." Edwards said and everyone else in the room looked towards him,

"Thank you. Now I've gathered you together to let you know where we are up to with the investigation."

"It was Professor Plum in engineering with the conduit pipe." Hamilton said.

"You've made that joke before pink skin." Shry commented.

"And it wasn't funny then either." Carr added sternly before looking at Edwards, "Do go on captain." she said.

"We now have an idea of how the colony was attacked and how its defences were overcome." Edwards told the gathered officers, "But I'll let Max explain this to you in more detail since he's the one that figured it out.

Over to you lieutenant."

"Of course captain." Max replied. Out of everyone in the room he was the only one not to have sat down, his Borg implants making it unnecessary and he walked over to the briefing room's main display screen and without needed to make use of its built in touch panel he called up a video file, "This is footage of a test carried out by a Starfleet contractor on a heavy graviton beam." he said as the screen showed a set of mannequins being lined up along a wall before the engineers withdrew behind a line marked out on the floor. After this one of them activated the equipment they had set up on the line itself and all of the mannequins were dragged a metre or so from the wall and pulled over onto the floor, "The original intention of the beam was for it to be used to massively increase the artificial gravity present aboard a vessel to incapacitate the crew. Specifically a Borg crew to render them unable to operate their vessel and control its ability to regenerate while it was engaged using more conventional weaponry. However, this was as far as the testing ever got. Subsequent tests revealed flaws in the technology that was never overcome. At least not by the Federation."

"You're saying someone's managed to get hold of a working one of these heavy graviton beams?" Cole asked.

"Yes lieutenant commander, I am." Max replied,

"I don't get it." Nayal said, "What's happened here is a lot more serious than just knocking over a few dummies."

"Quite." Max acknowledged, "But by modifying a smaller scale version of the prototype I was able to reproduce the effects we have seen here perfectly. On the one hand I was able to replicate the removal of the shield generators from the Starfleet space station that served as the colony's sole defensive facility and also use the device as a form of mass accelerator that was capable of using another object as a projectile."

"Is there any way to tell where this technology originated?" Hamilton said, leaning forwards, "I mean are we looking for someone who could have ripped off the prototype and worked out the bugs in the design? Or has another government come up with this all on their own?"

"Like all weapon designs programs, whether successful or not, the design schematics and all remaining prototypes are kept under maximum security." Max said, "It is unlikely that anyone could access them without Starfleet Security becoming aware of it during the time it would take to develop the design to the level that

the weapon used here must have been.”

“So what would this weapon look like then?” Heart asked, “How would we recognise it?”

“As you saw in the record of the experiment, the prototype resembled a tractor beam emitter. It was also the same with the version I constructed. It would by necessity be significantly larger however, since it is required to deliver a great deal more power and that would limit how it could be deployed. Such power could only come from a large source such as the impulse or warp drive of a starship if it was mounted aboard a space vessel or alternatively from a fusion plant on the surface of a planet.”

“I hadn't considered the possibility that the attack could have been carried out from the surface.” Edwards commented.

“Hopefully we will gain a greater insight when Nikki Carr has completed her review of the isolinear ships we recovered from the space station.” T'Lan said.

“And what if we don't?” White asked, “Captain my squadron can conduct a full aerial survey of every moon in this subsystem for any signs that someone's set one of these things up but it will mean pulling them off the patrol you've got them flying now.”

“T'Lan is there a way that we can narrow down the area that a ground based system would have to be placed in to have done what's been done here?” Edwards said.

“Only in a limited fashion captain. We know the exact time that the space station was first attacked but at that moment there were fourteen moons other than Brattan Six Tango that had a line of sight to it. Even limiting our search to the hemisphere of each moon facing the station we would still have a considerable area to search.”

“So what are these isolinear chips supposed to tell us that we don't already know?” Shry asked.

“They ought to allow us to map the velocity and trajectory of the objects used to bombard Brattan Six Tango and the orbiting Starfleet space station.” T'Lan told him, “That in turn will tell us where and when they were knocked out of position from in the gas giant's rings. If we are dealing with a surface based installation then that will give us a further list of possible locations that it could be mounted. Comparing that with our existing data will allow us to narrow down the area that must be searched.”

“And if it's a ship?” Heart asked.

“A warp signature.” Carr answered, “There are no in system vessels here that could have powered a weapon like that. All that's on Brattan Six Tango are an assortment of shuttles.”

“I don't suppose that there are any other starships close by that could help us are there?” King suggested.

“No.” West replied, shaking her head, “The nearest ship is four days away at maximum warp.” and King smiled.

“Well I'm impressed you can recall that so easily.” he said.

“So am I lieutenant.” Edwards added and West just smiled politely, not wanting to admit that she couldn't remember having committed details of Starfleet deployment along the Neutral Zone to memory.

“So we know about the weapon.” Cole said, “What about the meteorites?”

“Their composition matches exactly the debris that makes up the rings around Brattan Six.” T'Lan said, “It is found nowhere else in this system. Aside from that we must wait to see what Nikki's analysis of the isolinear chips reveals. We can make guesses regarding the range of sizes but cannot be exact.”

“What if we sent someone to take a look at one of the impact sites?” Heart suggested, “A platoon could easily secure one of the ones outside the capital and gather samples from the crater.”

“That could be of benefit captain.” T'Lan said, “Although we currently believe that the meteorites were propelled using a heavy graviton beam we cannot discount the possibility that thruster assemblies were placed on them to assist in guiding them to their targets. Any physical evidence of this that survived the impact could provide us with more of an insight. Even residue from unused fuel would advance our investigation.”

“I'm, not sure about this.” Edwards said, “The locals may not like it. Could we ask them to send someone instead?”

“Captain the locals are swamped.” Shry pointed out, “They need more manpower just to conduct search and rescue operations in the capital.”

“What if the team wore plain clothes?” Cole suggested, “It's not a combat operation after all.”

“The team would have to limit its weaponry.” Shry pointed out, assault rifles would be a dead giveaway.”

“Hand phasers then.” Cole said, “But in that case I'd suggest using a Starfleet team. They can beam down somewhere close by and make their way to the crater under cover of darkness.”

“That is logical captain.” T'Lan added, “A Starfleet science team would know better what to look for.”

“Okay then, that's what we'll do.” Edwards said, “Lieutenant T'Lan, while we wait to see what new light those isolinear chips can shed on this I want you to put together an away team to investigate one of the impact craters. Everyone else get back to your usual duties and remember how urgent this is. If we fail here the entire sector could be destabilised for months. You're dismissed.” then as the other officers present began to get out of their seats and head for the exit he looked at Cole and added, “Not you commander, I want to discuss something else with you.”

"Yes captain." Cole replied as he sat back down again and Edwards waited until everyone else was out of the room before he spoke again.

"It's about the spy." he said. Ever since the *Nightfall* had been launched there had been instances of a mysterious alien force acting to destabilise all of the major powers of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. This had been revealed more recently as a surviving element of the ancient Iconian civilisation but there were no signs of them ceasing their activities. Worse still evidence had been obtained from an Iconian agent who had attempted to infiltrate the *Nightfall* in the guise of a human girl that one of them was aboard the ship.

"You think that the Iconians are behind this attack?" Cole asked.

"It's a possibility we can't ignore," Edwards replied, "but for now we shouldn't jump to that conclusion. However, I am more convinced that it was the Iconian spy who leaked the footage of us being accused of staging the attack so that we could occupy Brattan Six Tango with our ground troops."

"You want to know how far I've progressed with finding out who it is?" Cole said and Edwards nodded.

"We can't hope to stop these attacks if the enemy knows every move we make." he said.

"I'm sorry captain, but I have nothing to report." Cole said.

"Nothing? Nothing at all?"

"No sir. I've worked with Max to keep tabs on long range communication usage but no-one's using more than they ought to be and I haven't been able to find any instances of signals being sent that shouldn't have been. The logs are clear." Cole explained and Edwards sighed.

"Obviously the spy is too smart to send any signals that can be directly linked to them." he said, "Whoever it is they must be either piggybacking their reports to regular transmissions or they're waiting until they're off the ship to make contact with their handlers."

"And the problem with being on a regular patrol route is that it makes us easy to find most of the time." Cole pointed out, "Enemy agents could be waiting at any colony we visit. I'd like permission to start accessing personal computer records. Starting with the command crew and working down."

"You suspect that the spy is one of the senior staff?" Edwards said in a mix of amazement and horror at the thought of a trusted officer being a traitor.

"There's nothing to suggest it captain, but it would look better if we could point to having already vetted and cleared ourselves." Cole answered.

"I can't justify a blanket search like that though." Edwards said, "Besides, we'd be announcing to everyone that there's a spy on board the ship and we'd have everyone looking over their shoulders trying to figure out who it is. Right now only the senior staff and the spy themselves know that the enemy has an agent aboard and I'd like to keep it that way. Plus I'd rather not alert the spy to the fact that we know they exist."

"That is a good point." Cole said, "If the spy realises that we know about them then they'll go to ground and frankly we need them to keep on betraying us so we can try and track them down."

"Work with Max some more. See if you can at least figure out how the spy is leaking this information. The news broadcast can only have been sent from this ship so go through every last transmission we made last night to try and find it."



The away team that T'Lan assembled to investigate one of the impact sites consisted of half a dozen members. She included one other senior officer in this, Lieutenant West, plus one of her own science officers. The three remaining members of the team were all enlisted crew members, one engineer and a pair of security guards whose job it would be to keep watch for any locals and warn the rest of the team if they came close.

The impact crater that the team beamed down to was outside the capital at what had been a small settlement centred on a power station. Fusion based, the power station had been completely destroyed by the impact and all of the hydrogen fuel burned off by the fireball created. However, despite the force of the impact much of the reinforced structure had survived the force of the impact and the heat of the subsequent flames to leave an empty shell of a building just under a kilometre from the edge of the crater. All of the other nearby structures had been destroyed or buried and now the area was an uneven wasteland where parts of ruined buildings could be seen scattered around where they protruded through the debris that had been thrown into the air by the meteorite before falling back to the ground to bury them.

As soon as the away team materialised on the rim of the crater T'Lan took out her tricorder and began to scan the area.

"There are no signs of any form of life within five hundred metres other than ourselves." she said.

"The blast must have killed everything. Even the microbes in the soil." West commented as she looked around.

"That is likely. There is also a slightly elevated level of radioactivity. It is not dangerous but we should be aware of it." T'Lan replied, "Lieutenant West, would you mind establishing a perimeter?"

"Sure." West said, nodding and she looked at the two security guards, "Straker, Myles, with me." she told them before she led them away from the crater.

With West and the security guards gone T'Lan and the remaining team members carefully made their way into the crater itself. The sloping sides were made up of loose material and they could move only slowly just in case the ground suddenly gave way beneath them. As soon as they reached the bottom of the crater the engineer set down the equipment case he was carrying and opened it to remove the contents.

"Get the drill set up crewman." T'Lan told him, "We will need core samples down to ten metres." then she looked at the other science officer, "We will conduct surface scans. Flag any signs of machinery that may have been attached to the meteorite or abnormal metal content."

While T'Lan's group was investigating the crater itself West and the security guards moved further away. West led them across the uneven ground around the crater until they reached a point that was characterised by another slope all around it. This marked the point where the force of the impact had not been strong enough to completely destroy the surrounding buildings and their remains still existed beneath the surface where the flying debris had buried them.

"Okay this will do." West said, "We'll patrol around the inside of this rim and watch for anyone approaching. You two head that way and I'll go the other. Check in with me every ten minutes. If you can't raise me then alert Lieutenant T'Lan. I'll do the same if I lose contact with you. Understand?"

"Yes lieutenant." one of the guards replied with a nod and West nodded back.

"Okay then, let's go. I'll meet you on the far side." she said and she turned her back on the two guards and started to walk away from them. Following the line of the rise denoting the perimeter, West's route brought her towards the ruins of the power station itself and here she slowed down more carefully inspect the structure that lay just beyond the rise she was walking. With no signs of anyone else around West took the risk of lighting her palm beacon and directing the powerful beam towards the power station, shining it into the interior areas to try and see how much damage had been done to them. In the quiet of the night it was easy to pick up on almost any sound so when she heard the sound of something suddenly falling she shone her light in its direction. However, nothing showed up in the beam and she was about to continue on her way when she saw a brief flash of light coming back at her from inside the structure and she immediately reached for her phaser and ducked, using the top of the rise as cover as she shut off her palm beacon and returned it to her belt.

"West to T'Lan." she said softly as she tapped her combadge, "I'm at what's left of the power station and I can see a light. I'm going to check it out."

"Understood lieutenant. Keep me informed." T'Lan responded and West scabbled forwards over the top of the rise before dashing towards the power station.

Despite the darkness inside she did not make further use of her palm beacon, instead West used the light coming from within as a guide while she made her way towards it. As she got closer to the source of the light West began to hear a 'fizz' sound and she realised that the source of the light was most likely a burning flare,

possibly out of an emergency survival kit. However, why it would be inside the power station was a mystery to her. It was not difficult to track the light to its source and West leapt through what had been a wide doorway into the ruined chamber where the flare burned on the floor with her phaser held out in front of her and she immediately took aim at the human girl standing beside the burning flare.

"What once was ours." The Girl said with a smile.

"I know you." West replied, "Your that Iconian agent. Get your hands up now." and The Girl's face fell.

"Oh dear." she said, "I'm terribly sorry Jenna but it wasn't you I wanted to speak to at all. I want The Controller, not the host."

All of a sudden something large struck out at West from right behind her, knocking her phaser from her hand while The Girl just looked on. Before West could even turn to face her attacker, the fleshform wrapped one of its milky white arms around her neck and tightened its hold at the same time as it clamped a large hand over her nose and mouth. West tried to lash out at the fleshform but it was too strong for any of the self defence techniques taught by Starfleet to be of any use. In desperation she tried to activate her combadge, hoping that just turning it on would alert someone to her plight. But instead of pressing the front face to turn the device on she accidentally flicked the combadge from the side and it fell from her uniform and landed on the floor where the fleshform promptly crushed it underfoot.

"I won't ask you to stop struggling," The Girl said, "because struggling will make you run out of oxygen and pass out sooner."

Sure enough, West's vision began to blur as she ran out of air and her eyes flickered open and closed before she passed out and went limp. It was at this point that the fleshform let go of West and allowed her to fall towards the floor. However, before she could land her eyes suddenly opened wide again and she reached out to break her fall with her hands.

"Will be ours again." The Controller said as she stood back up and The Girl smiled once more.

"So how are things going aboard the *Nightfall*?" The Girl asked.

"They know about the heavy graviton beam. Though they think that it could be surfaced based." The Controller replied, "I'm surprised you deployed a ship here though."

"We didn't. We gave the beam to a human in our service." The Girl said, "Don't worry, we can count on him to follow orders, Daddy dearest just can't seem to let his little girl go despite what he says about her now."

"Well I hope you can rely on him to destroy it before Starfleet get hold of it. They need it to calm things down now that the *Nightfall* itself is getting blamed for the bombardment."

"Yes, nice work with that by the way, I wish I'd thought of it. The others are impressed."

"So what do you want me to do next?" The Controller asked.

"Observe. Report. If you see an opportunity to disrupt Starfleet operations then do so. But above all else you must remain anonymous. We still haven't been able to get anyone else into Starfleet so you're our only asset inside it." The Girl told her before adding, "Have you found a way to bypass that detection system they have in place to stop us transporting in undetected?"

"No." The Controller answered, "That Borg engineer has made sure that the system is totally secure. He's got it linked in with that nanite hive that runs everywhere. If it weren't for that I'd already have total control of the ship. Is there anything I can do to complete this mission?"

"No, I don't think so." The Girl replied, "Our human agent's ship is still in the system though. We need to know as soon as possible if the *Nightfall* is able to locate it."

"That could be difficult." The Controller said, "I can't just communicate with you freely. My host may not understand what's happening to her but she still has control of her own body most of the time. I'm limited to the odd small intervention, preventing her pushing a button or such but nothing major like leaving her post to get to the terminal in her quarters I use to make my reports."

"If you can prevent her from pushing a button, can you prompt her into pushing one?" The Girl asked.

"Probably. Why?" The Controller responded.

"Because that could be our signal." The Girl said, "If you could trigger an unusual emission from the *Nightfall* then I could warn our agent to be on the lookout for it."

"Interesting." The Controller said, "It would have to be something innocuous that the rest of the bridge crew won't question." then she smiled, "Like adjusting the shield frequency. The *Nightfall* is running with its shields up almost constantly right now to make sure that they can't be hit by the heavy graviton beam or any meteors your agent tries to send their way."

"As well they should." The Girl said, "So what can you do without alerting any attention to yourself?"

"Any attention? Nothing. But adjusting the shield frequency produced a measurable pulse so if I could adjust the rate at which the frequency switches to a much faster rate with a single button press your agent should be able to pick up the change in the pattern."

"Very well." The Girl said, "I'll let our agent know to watch-" but then they were interrupted by the sound of movement elsewhere in the building and the fleshform that had been waiting silently suddenly turned around to face the direction that West had approached from and adopted a stance that made it clear that the creature was ready to strike.

"No." The Girl hissed. Then she looked at The Controller and added, "They've come to find out what happened to your host. We have to leave and you have to be ready." then she took one step and disappeared into thin air.

Turning around The Controller saw that the fleshform had also withdrawn to their home realm and she was now alone and she sighed.

"Oh well Jenna," she said to herself, "time to go to sleep again." and she suddenly collapsed on the spot.

A bottle rested on the floor beside Sanchez's seat on the bridge and he had a glass in his hand when The Girl materialised behind him.

"Drinking and piloting father?" she said as the other crew members present instinctively backed away from her, "You aren't setting your crew a very good example. Or your daughter."

"You'd drink too in my position." Sanchez said, snarling before he took another sip from the glass.

"Your position? Your position is stronger than you think." The Girl said.

"Hah! There's a Starfleet cruiser sat less than a million kilometres from here and for all I know they're just plotting how they're going to seize my ship. Unless you intend to send any of those albino monsters of yours to stop them."

"Oh there's no need for that father. I happen to know that the *USS Nightfall* hasn't found you yet. In fact they aren't even certain that you exist." The Girl said and then she looked towards the crewman standing by the ship's sensors. Though they were nowhere near as advanced and capable as those aboard the *Nightfall*, The Girl knew enough about them to know that they could easily detect the shift in shield frequency of the Federation heavy cruiser, "You." she said, "Watch for the *Nightfall*'s shields to shift frequencies."

"I don't understand." the man replied, "We can't detect what their shield frequencies are. No-one can do that."

"Of course they can't." Sanchez added while still looking forwards at the image of the *Nightfall* on the bridge's main view screen. The image was hazy and occasional bursts of static made it difficult to pick out precise details about the Akira-class vessel but the image provided enough information for the crew of the transport to monitor the starship's movement, "If you could measure a shield frequency remotely it would make them useless. An enemy would just tune their weapons accordingly."

"Is everyone aboard this ship a fool?" The Girl said, scowling, "I didn't say measure the shield frequency, I just said watch for the change in frequency. The pulse it creates ought to be easy even for the likes of you to detect. You need to build up a pattern of changes. If the *Nightfall* detects you that pattern will be changed to a much faster rate as a warning."

Sanchez laughed.

"You've got an agent aboard a Starfleet vessel?" he said and The Girl smiled at him.

"We have agents everywhere, you know that." she said, "There is no escaping us." and then she took one step and vanished.

3.

"Lieutenant!" King yelled and West's eyes suddenly opened to find him leaning over her in the *Nightfall's* sickbay in almost the same way as the very first time she had been brought aboard the ship, "There," the doctor added as he straightened up and looked around to where Edwards, Cole and T'Lan were stood, "I told you that would work."

"What happened?" West asked as she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her voice was rasping and she found it painful to speak so she raised a hand to her throat and rubbed it gently.

"You passed out" Cole replied, "and according to the doctor here it wasn't because of fatigue this time."

"Bruising around her neck indicates she was choked." King said.

"We found you unconscious in the ruins of the power station and so had you brought straight back to the *Nightfall*." T'Lan told her.

"We were hoping you tell us what happened before that." Edwards added and west frowned.

"That girl." West croaked.

"Girl?" Edwards replied and West nodded.

"The Iconian, the one that came aboard with those fleshform things that attacked you." she said.

"Oh." Edwards said, frowning as he remembered being attacked by one of the fleshforms in Carr's quarters, "Her."

"Well she was in the power station with another of them. It attacked me from behind while she just stood there and watched." West explained.

"I see no logical reason for her to have been present." T'Lan said, "The power station is ruined. There is nothing there worth taking or damaging."

"I think she was waiting for a person." West said, "She said something about me not being the person she wanted to talk to." then she frowned, "The Controller. Yes, that's what she said, she wanted to speak to the controller."

"A local agent perhaps"? T'Lan suggested.

"Or maybe the spy they have aboard the *Nightfall*." Cole said, looking at Edwards.

"Check the transporter logs." Edwards replied, "Make sure that no-one else took advantage of the shields being lowered when the away team beamed down to do the same themselves."

"Yes captain." Cole replied.

"Oh and contact Captains Heart and Shry. Ask them to see if they can confirm the whereabouts of all of their people as well. The agent could have been on the surface all along."

"Yes captain, I'll get right on it." Cole said and as he departed sickbay Edwards looked at King.

"So how badly injured is Jenna?" he asked.

"I've got a really sore throat." she commented.

"There's no permanent damage. Though speaking will be painful for a while." King said. Then he smiled and added, "In fact I'm going to have to recommend that she skip her next few meetings with Mackey until she feels better."

"Very well. Lieutenant, I'll be on the bridge if you remember anything else." Edwards said and he too turned to leave, accompanied by T'Lan.

"I will join you shortly captain." she said as they stepped into the corridor, "I wish to check on Nikki's progress."

Meanwhile back in sickbay King stared at West.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Exactly." King replied, "All that's up with you is a sore throat. Now I've got you out of a week's worth of meeting with that idiot Mackey so how about you get out of here and make room for someone who's really sick? Come on, the king has spoken."

Nikki looked around when the door opened and T'Lan walked in.

"So how was your field trip?" she asked, "Find anything interesting?"

"Nothing unexpected." T'Lan replied, "However, Lieutenant West was attacked."

"Attacked? Well is she okay?"

"She was not badly hurt. Though she was rendered unconscious and we were forced to return to the ship early to seek medical treatment for her."

"I thought you were supposed to be setting guards to stop any local mobs from attacking you." Nikki said.

"Lieutenant West was not attacked by a local mob. She was assaulted by an Iconian fleshform acting under instructions from the same female agent who was able to deceive you into smuggling her aboard the *USS Nightfall*." T'Lan told her and Nikki's eyes widened.

"So did you get her? The Girl I mean, is she dead now?"

"No. Unfortunately she and the fleshform had fled before we located Lieutenant West. We only know what happened from the lieutenant herself. Now how is your task proceeding?"

"Well I've found several odd spikes in both gravity and subspace emissions but I couldn't tell you what any of them were."

"Let me see. Perhaps I can better discern the meaning of the data than you can." T'Lan said.

"I'd hope so." Nikki commented, "I'm only an intern."

"I was attempting to be polite." T'Lan commented.

"Oh. Okay, thanks." Nikki said as T'Lan lent over her shoulder and started to scroll through the list of anomalous readings she had compiled.

"You are correct. These readings do not fit the expected profile for the Brattan Six subsystem." T'Lan said. Then all of a sudden she stopped scrolling down the lists of numbers that indicated the readings from each particular sensor type at a particular time and stared at the screen.

"What is it?" Nikki asked when she noticed this happen.

"This time index represents the moment that the heavy graviton beam was used to removed the shield generators from the space station." T'Lan answered, "If you then look at the other columns associated with this time index you see a noticeable spike in external gravity on one side of the station only, along with a burst of subspace consistent with a functional warp field. Both of which appear to come from within the rings of Brattan Six themselves."

"What does that mean?" Nikki asked.

"Like any directed energy weapon, a heavy graviton beam will require a significant power source to coherently direct its beam over the distances involved. On a starship we supply this power directly from the engines, in the case of our phasers the warp drive. Assuming that the heavy graviton beam used to attack the space station has at least equal power requirements then it is logical to assume that if mounted aboard a spacecraft then it too would draw power from the warp drive and when fired there would a corresponding spike in subspace energy readings."

"So you're saying that we've just found evidence of a ship mounting this gravity beam?"

"Heavy graviton beam, yes that is correct. We must inform the captain immediately. Well done Nikki, your work has provided us with useful data." T'Lan said, "Now come with me to see the captain."

Carr occupied the captain's seat when T'Lan and Nikki stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge.

"Lieutenant commander, where is the captain?" T'Lan asked.

"In his ready room." Carr replied.

"Explaining to Starfleet why we haven't figured out what's going on yet." Hamilton added.

"In that case it is even more urgent that we see him. Nikki's research may have provided us with the answers we seek." T'Lan said as she and Nikki walked towards the door to Edwards' ready room where T'Lan pressed the intercom button.

"Come in." Edwards voice said after a brief pause and the door slid open to allow her and Nikki to enter.

When the door subsequently slid shut after them Cole peered over his console at where Carr was sat.

"Looks like that internship is paying off." he said and she smiled in response.

"Hey, let's not forget who's mentoring her at the moment." Hamilton commented.

"Bradley, you've given her one piloting lesson." West replied, "T'Lan taught her all of the scientific analysis methods." then all of a sudden she noticed that her right hand was hovering over an area of her console that she had not previously realised had been customised to adjust the rate at which the *Nightfall's* shield frequencies were rotated.

Meanwhile inside Edwards' office the captain looked up from the computer display on his desk at T'Lan and Nikki and smiled at them

"Admiral," he said to the officer pictured on the screen, "I need to go now, my science officer is here and I'm hoping that she's got good news. *Nightfall* out." and he shut off the display before looked back up at T'Lan and Nikki, "You do have good news, don't you lieutenant?" he asked.

"Logic suggests you will take the information I have to present you with positively." T'Lan replied as she and Nikki sat down opposite Edwards< "Nikki, would you like to inform the captain of your discovery?"

"My discovery?" Nikki commented, surprised to be given the credit for finding out about the starship that was responsible for the attack on Brattan Six Tango and its orbiting space station, "Oh, right."

"Come on Nikki." Edwards said, "I've got Starfleet riding me for results. Tell me what you've found."

"Well, err, there was a warp signature I think. Some sort of subspace disturbance anyway and T'Lan thinks that it means that the weapon used to attack the space station and send those meteorites at the moon was mounted aboard a starship. They used their warp drive to power it." Nikki explained as best she could.

"A ship? Could you identify it? Even knowing who built it would be a major boost." Edwards replied.

"Err." Nikki said, turning to look at T'Lan.

"The warp signature was within the rings of Brattan Six captain." the Vulcan said, "The background radiation

from the gas giant had a scattering effect that prevented a positive identification of the vessel's point of manufacture. All it allowed was the detection of the increased energy consumption required to power their heavy graviton beam."

"But they could be long gone and we couldn't identify them even if we flew right up to them." Edwards commented.

"That is correct a correct evaluation but based on an illogical premise captain." T'Lan said and Edwards frowned.

"How so?" he asked.

"Logic suggests that the starship will still be present within the Brattan system." T'Lan answered, "We detected no warp trails when we entered the system mere hours after receiving the planetary distress signal. Therefore the ship responsible cannot have engaged its warp drive to escape before we arrived and if it had done so after our arrival we would have seen it. Nor have we observed any of the energy signatures observed when Iconian vessels have engaged their primary propulsion systems to escape."

"So where is it now?" Edwards said, "We've not seen any signs of any other shipping. The Brattan system isn't exactly heavily travelled."

"Indeed captain." T'Lan agreed, "There are several different options, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Firstly the vessel could still be hidden within the rings of Brattan Six, running silent and taking advantage of the elevated radiation levels to conceal themselves. However, this would still leave them vulnerable to a visual scan and it would be illogical for the crew to rely on the relative small size of their vessel compared to the volume of the rings in order to escape detection. Secondly they could have landed their vessel on Brattan Six Tango itself and concealed on the surface. However, to do so would leave a thermal trail through the atmosphere and a heating effect at the landing site that could be identified and followed. Alternatively one of the other moons of Brattan Six could have provided a landing site. But again even though none of the other moons have an atmosphere landing a spacecraft on one of them would have a heating effect on the surface itself that we have not detected. They could attempt to leave the Brattan Six subsystem entirely, but to do so at impulse speeds would have left them exposed when we arrived."

"No matter which of those choices they made we'd have found them by now." Nikki commented, "So where could they be hiding?"

"The most logical location would be within the atmosphere of Brattan six itself." T'Lan replied, "It would limit their ability to observe much beyond their hiding place but the dense atmosphere combined with the high levels of electrical activity and radiation would shield them from our sensors providing they limited their power consumption."

"I think we need some more technical advice about this." Edwards said and he tapped his combadge, "Edwards to Max." he signalled.

"Max here captain. How may I help you?"

"Max I need to see you in my ready room immediately." Edwards told him.

"Certainly captain. I will be there shortly." Max replied before the channel was shut off and Edwards then looked at Nikki.

"Okay Nikki I don't think we need detain you any further, I suggest you return to the bridge. But I'd like you to keep quiet about this for now until we have a better idea of how to handle things."

"Yes captain." Nikki said as she got up to leave and just as she stepped onto the bridge she saw Max exiting the turbolift and so she stood by the doorway with her hand against the frame to hold the door open for him.

"Thank you." he said in acknowledgement as he entered the captain's ready room.

Unlike T'Lan or Nikki, Max remained standing when the door slid shut behind him.

"You wished to see me captain?" he said.

"Yes Max, thank you for coming so quickly. It seems that Nikki's review of the space station's sensor logs has revealed the presence of a starship carrying out the attack and T'Lan has a theory about where it could have got to." Edwards said and he looked at T'Lan and added, "T'Lan?"

"The vessel is hiding within the atmosphere of Brattan Six." she said.

"That would make sense." Max replied, "I take it that you would like me to provide a means of detecting the ship?"

"That's right." Edwards said, nodding, "What would the Borg Collective do in a situation like this?"

"Magnetometric guided charges could be fired into the atmosphere. These would automatically home in on the nearest metallic mass, the ship in this case."

"Those aren't exactly standard Starfleet equipment Max. How long would it take your people to rig some of them?" Edwards asked.

"At least six hours captain. However, I should caution you that a direct hit could cripple the target vessel and it would be drawn deeper down through the atmosphere until it was crushed by the extreme pressure." Max explained and Edwards sighed.

"I was hoping for something faster anyway." he said, "But it's essential that we capture the ship intact enough to prove that it was responsible for the attack."

"In that case I recommend we use a quantum torpedo captain." Max said and Edwards frowned.

"I just said I want to capture the ship. Not demolish it." he said.

"You misunderstand me captain. I do not suggest that we fire the torpedo at the target vessel, merely into the upper atmosphere where it will create a shock wave that another vessel within the atmosphere could monitor." Max explained and Edwards smiled.

"And when the shock wave meets our mystery vessel it'll create a detectable pattern." he said.

"Correct captain." Max said.

"To be successful this plan will require considerable co-ordination between vessels captain." T'Lan commented.

"Yes I realise that." Edwards replied, "The *Nightfall* will have to stay here to avoid giving our plan away while we insert fighters and an assault shuttle into the atmosphere to react to the torpedo detonation. I'm guessing that transporters will be useless in the atmosphere right?"

"Correct captain. The background radioactivity and frequent electrical disturbances would scatter a transporter beam." Max replied.

"I thought so. That means we'll need to disable the ship's warp drive from close range and then put a boarding party aboard the old fashioned way, by docking the assault shuttle to its hull and blasting our way inside."

In the hangar on the surface of Brattan Six Tango, White, Heart and Shry were gathered around a table that had been set up in the command post the ground forces and fighter pilots were sharing. A large map of the area surrounding the aerospace port was laid out over the table and there were several PADDs scattered around as well. But the three officers were currently all focused on a large display screen that had been set up close by that currently showed an image of Captain Edwards, Max and T'Lan where they were gathered around the computer terminal in the captain's ready room aboard the orbiting *Nightfall*.

"So we've got a ship of unknown class and crew complement hidden somewhere in the atmosphere of a gas giant?" Heart asked.

"That conclusion is accurate." Max replied.

"And you need us to seize it and its crew before they can realise we even know that they are there?" Shry asked.

"Pretty much." Edwards said, "Can you do it?"

"Phasers won't lock on target properly inside the gas giant. But shields won't function either so if we can make visual contact then we ought to be able to take out its warp drive with just a couple of shots." White said.

"Well that'll certainly stop them getting very far." Shry said.

"Importantly it will also prevent the crew from making use of their heavy graviton beam." T'Lan added.

"That's a good point." Edwards commented, "That weapon could be devastating if it was used against an unshielded vessel."

"Vessels like the assault shuttle and my fighters?" White said.

"I'm afraid so, yes." Edwards responded.

"Then we'll just have to make certain we shoot before they do." White said.

"Do you think you can get into the atmosphere of the gas giant without being seen?" Edwards asked.

"You say that the target vessel is probably on the near side of the planet?" White then asked in reply.

"That would be logical." T'Lan answered, "That is the only position that would allow the crew to observe us. They will also need to be relatively close to the edge of the atmosphere in order for their sensors to be able to detect anything outside."

"Then we go deep." White said, "With no shields we can crank up the power to our structural integrity fields to stop us being crushed like tin cans."

"I'm sure that Captain Shry and I can put together a team from the personnel we have down here captain," Heart said, "but we're going to need you to send us a shuttle. How will you do that without it looking suspicious?"

"I'm hoping that it'll look like nothing more than a supply drop." Edwards said, "The shuttle will land with whatever equipment you request aboard and then you can use it to get to the target vessel."

"Sounds good to me." Shry said, "A standard platoon load out ought to do."

"Just make sure that the rifles are loaded with fragmenting rounds rather than armour piercing." Heart added, "I'd hate to put a hole in the hull that can't be patched by a forcefield while we're still in the atmosphere." then he looked at White, "So what's your plan for getting us into the gas giant's atmosphere undetected?" he asked.

"Easy. We fly at low level around the moon until we're in eclipse from the gas giant. Then we leap frog from one moon to another, always staying out of sight of the gas giant until we're around the far side. After that it's just a quick dash into the atmosphere. We'll signal when we come back over the horizon and the *Nightfall* can fire its torpedoes then."

"Torpedoes aimed in our direction while we've got no shields." Shry pointed out.

"Your signal will allow us to determine your exact location." T'Lan replied, "The torpedoes can then be guided to give you a wide safety margin. If one happened to go off course towards you we would have plenty of time to abort it."

"Relying on the safety features of a torpedo that's already proven faulty isn't my idea of reassurance Vulcan." Shry replied.

"Nevertheless it's all we can promise." Edwards said, "If you'd rather not-"

"Oh hey now, I never said my men wouldn't go." Shry interrupted, "But I just want it known that if we die a fiery death caught in the explosion of a quantum torpedo at the centre of a gas giant then it's all the Vulcan's fault."

"I will only admit culpability if it is shown that-" T'Lan began.

"That's alright T'Lan." Edwards said, "I think we all know where we stand." then he leant back in his chair and added, "Okay then, an assault shuttle will be loaded with breaching equipment plus a standard infantry

platoon's armament and sent down to you in half an hour. Make sure that you're ready by then."

"Understood captain." Heart replied.

"I'll start seeing to my fighters now." White added.

"Good. *Nightfall* out." Edwards said and he shut off the communication channel.

"Something's happening captain." one of Sanchez's bridge officers said as Sanchez returned to the bridge.

"Show me." he ordered and he looked at the main view screen just as the image of the *Nightfall* was shown once more, "Looks the same as last time." he commented.

"Here." the other crewman said and he zoomed in to the lower portion of the screen where a smaller craft was visible and Sanchez frowned.

"An aeroshuttle?" he said.

"It looks like one. The cruiser dropped its shields just long enough to launch it before raising them again."

"And that's why you brought me back here?" Sanchez asked, "One lousy shuttle launch? Isn't it obvious that they're making a supply drop?"

"Then why not use their transporters?" another crewman asked.

"Time. They obviously think that they can launch a shuttle faster than they can beam down everything they have to." Sanchez said, "Besides, it's heading away from us, just like all those fighter patrols. Now apart from the shields being dropped has there been any change in that starship's shields?"

"No captain." the sensor operator admitted.

"Then there you have it." Sanchez said, "That little freak told us that her people have an agent aboard that ship who'll warn us if we've been detected."

"And you believe her?"

"Believe what? That she's got our best interests at heart? Not a chance. She'd skin us all alive if she felt like it. But we're an asset. That's why she's done everything she can to keep us under her control and if she says that there's an agent aboard that ship then there's an agent aboard that ship. Now don't bother me again unless it's something important." Sanchez said and then he turned around and stormed off the bridge.

Returning to his somewhat cramped quarters, the first thing he did was pour himself a drink. But before drinking any of it he instead walked over to a locker on the other side of the room and opened it. Reaching inside he removed a leather belt that had a holster on it and from this he drew a battered looking pulse pistol. Flicking the safety off he checked that the indicator showed a charge before he returned it to the holster and wrapped the belt around his waist.

Then he returned to his drink and picked it up before sitting down on his bunk and picking up a nearby PADD that he activated. As soon as the device powered up the device showed an image of himself standing on the bridge of his ship, smiling. In the image he had one arm around a woman a similar age to him who was also smiling while the other was wrapped around *The Girl*.

The mixed force of MACOs and Andorian Imperial Guard was waiting for the assault shuttle as it touched down. Designed to rapidly deploy a platoon sized force of troops into battle and stay on station to provide them with aerial cover the vessel's design was based on Starfleet's aeroshuttle but in place of that craft's warp drives the assault shuttle instead mounted a weapons pod in each wing.

As promised, the shuttle contained a full set of equipment for the chosen force that included body armour and assault rifles with underslung phaser units. Most of the ammunition provided for the projectile weapons was designed to fragment on impact with a target but a single case of magazines filled with armour piercing ammunition had also been included.

"Okay one magazine of AP each." Heart said as he tucked one into his own webbing, "But make sure you know where it is before you accidentally put a hole in something you shouldn't."

With armour donned and weapons loaded the troops embarked onto the assault shuttle and Heart and Shry made their way to the compact cockpit where the two man crew was located.

"Okay we're fully loaded." Shry told them, "Take off whenever you're ready."

The assault shuttle and a pair of the *Nightfall*'s fighters rose into the air together before speeding away from the aerospace port. Operating on thrusters only they kept their altitude low and avoided flying over any populated areas as they made their way around the moon until the gas giant Brattan Six no longer appeared in the sky above them.

"Snowman to flight," White broadcast, "this is it, we're in eclipse. Now engage impulse engines and follow me." then pulling back on his control column he sent his fighter shooting up out of the atmosphere.

"Lieutenant Commander White's flight has engaged their impulse engines captain." T'Lan announced when she picked up the heat signature of the impulse engines being engaged.

"Any signs of the target having detected them as well?" Carr asked.

"Negative." T'Lan answered, "There are no anomalous readings from Brattan Six."

"What's the status on our torpedoes?" Edwards asked.

"Full spread loaded in tube one captain." Cole replied, "Set to detonate in the upper atmosphere at minimum yield. Should create one hell of a flash and a bang but won't do any damage unless we happen to score a direct hit by accident." and Edwards smiled.

"Then let us hope that on this occasion your aim is off commander." he said.

"Just how long are we supposed to wait now?" Nayal asked from her seat beside Edwards.

"T'Lan?" Edwards said, looking at his science officer.

"Given the roundabout nature of the flightpath that Lieutenant Commander White's force must follow to enter the atmosphere of Brattan Six undetected it will take them six point two hours." she answered.

"And until then all we can do is wait." Carr commented.

"Anyone fancy a game of I spy?" Hamilton added, looking around to where both Edwards and Carr glared at him, "I'll take that as a no." he muttered as he turned to look forwards again.

Meanwhile sat at her usual position at ops, West noticed that subconsciously she had moved her hand over the controls to the shield frequency that she could neither remember configuring nor bring herself to remove it from her console.

ii.

From the moment that they left the atmosphere of Brattan Six Tango, the two fighters and assault shuttle from the *Nightfall* maintained a strict communications blackout. This meant that the second fighter and assault shuttle had to observe White's manoeuvres carefully and duplicate them at the appropriate time as they wound their way between various moons orbiting the gas giant so that they never had a clear view of it. Forced to wait for these natural obstacles to be in the right place to provide them with cover, this continued for several hours until they finally found themselves on the far side of Brattan Six and White activated his communications again.

"This is it." he announced, making sure that his signal was being sent on a narrow beam directed away from Brattan Six rather than broadcast all around, "Full impulse on my mark and straight into the atmosphere."

"Copy that Snowman, right behind you." he wingman responded.

"Understood Snowman, full impulse on your mark." the pilot of the assault shuttle added and White smiled.

"Okay here goes. Full impulse in three. Two. One. Mark."

In unison the three tiny craft fired their impulse engines at full power and accelerated rapidly towards Brattan Six. The pilots of all three vessels checked the status of their structural integrity fields as they headed for the gas giant, knowing that the atmospheric pressure inside would climb rapidly as they got deeper into the atmosphere. But worse than the incredible pressure pressing down on their vessels would be the violent atmospheric buffeting that they would have to overcome while the sudden and random electrical discharges rendered both their active sensors and shields ineffective.

White felt his fighter shake as it entered the atmosphere of Brattan Six, dropping back onto thrusters only and almost immediately became caught up in the violent storm activity within it and he had to keep a firm grip on his control column to keep on course as he dove deeper down until the stars became obscured. The gas giant possessed a powerful magnetic field that, while disrupting some of the Starfleet vessels' sensors also provided them with a means of accurate navigation that was essential with no fixed point of reference visible through the thick clouds of gas all around them.

"Status." White transmitted to the other two vessels of his flight. He could just about make out their shapes through the clouds around him but he wanted to confirm that they were able to continue with the mission before it was too late to abort without giving themselves away to the target ship.

"No response from shields or active sensors Snowman. Other than that we're in the pipe, five by five." the pilot of the assault shuttle responded first.

"Quarterback to Snowman, I'm on your wing commander." the second fighter pilot added.

"Good. Maintain visual contact with my ship at all times and under no circumstances make any transmissions on open channels. Snowman out." Snowman ordered before deactivating his communications. After that it was just an issue of having to fly around the gas giant before sending a tight beam pulse to the *Nightfall* so that the crew would know exactly when to fire the waiting quantum torpedoes. On impulse power that would have taken just a matter of minutes. But using the powerful sublight drives here ran the risk of igniting the vast pockets of hydrogen gas that made up a large portion of Brattan Six's atmosphere and not only risking giving away their presence but also of damaging the ships themselves. Therefore, the three vessels remained on thruster power only while using what little sensor capability remained to them to steer a course around the densest concentrations of the volatile gas.

A wait of six hours meant that most of the *Nightfall's* crew had the chance to get some rest before the signal confirming that White's flight was in position and West was no exception. But when she returned to her quarters she found herself oddly restless, as if there was something she was meant to be doing. To try and take her mind off this she decided to use the time studying for the bridge command officer's test. This test, designed to assess an individual's ability to take the decisions necessary for commanding a starship was essential for promotion to senior ranks and West saw it as a way of demonstrating that she was serious about a career in Starfleet after having left it many years ago to join the Maquis only to be captured by the Cardassians soon after and held in cryogenic storage for more than a decade. Unfortunately, despite having sat the test more than once already she had failed it each time. Each failure had been focused on by the *Nightfall's* counsellor during the regular meetings West was still forced to endure with the widely disliked man. West now found herself stuck between a rock and a hard place concerning the tests, each repeated failure would be more ammunition for Lieutenant Mackey in his apparent quest to get her to resign her commission again whereas she knew that giving up would also be twisted by the man to be a sign that she was not committed to a life in Starfleet. The only way out of this circle was clear however, West needed to pass the test.

The *Nightfall's* computer library contained many study guides that she could call up on her PADD and West

had been through a great many of them already but she was always on the lookout for more. The test was changed often to prevent someone from simply copying what someone else had done before them but there were recurring themes that were played out and West was keen to try and find signs of the ones she had faced in the accounts of others so she could try and find out where she had gone wrong each time.

But whereas no matter what subject she tried to enter as a search parameter she always found herself looking at a document relating to a starship's shields.

"All you need to do is adjust the frequency rotation."

West leapt to her feet and turned around when she heard the voice that sounded like her own, searching for the source. Then she frowned.

"God damn it Bradley!" she shouted, "I know it's you. Stop messing with me right now!" but there was only silence. Sighing she went to sit back down and picked up her PADD again, but as she looked down at the display she found that it had become configured as a remote access for the *Nightfall's* shields.

She put the PADD down again and rushed to her bathroom where she ran cold water from the wash basin tap to splash on her face. She looked down into the basin and took several deep breaths before slowly raising her head again so that she was looking into the mirror mounted on the wall above the basin. But the reflection looking back at her had an evil grin on its face rather than her own neutral expression and she gasped as she recoiled away from the mirror. As she stepped back however, West slipped on the water that she had inadvertently spilled onto the floor when she threw it into her own face and there was a sharp 'Crack!' as her head struck the wall behind her.

Wincing as she got back to her feet, West pressed a hand over the point where she had struck her head and immediately felt the blood there.

"Oh great." she said, frowning, "The King will not be impressed."

"You slipped in your bathroom?" Doctor King said as he gently passed a dermal regenerator over the wound to the top of her head, "How did you manage that exactly?"

"I just got a bit of a shock, that's all." West replied.

"A shock?" King said, frowning, "Not electrical I hope."

"No, I just thought I saw something in the mirror that-"

"You jumped at your own reflection?" King interrupted, smiling.

"Go on, laugh at me all you want." West said.

"No, I'll wait until you've left if you don't mind." King said, "So I take it that you were having trouble sleeping again?" he asked and West nodded.

"I thought I'd grab a couple of hours while we're all just waiting to hear from Snowman and his flight but couldn't relax. So I tried studying for the test instead but I couldn't concentrate on that either and though it would be a good idea to splash some water on my face."

"Jenna, if you feel tired you need to sleep. Trying to do something else will only prevent you relaxing enough to make that happen. Do you have leave due?"

"Lots. Why?"

"Take it. Find somewhere peaceful away from the ship and just rest."

West sighed.

"Where would I go?" she asked, "I lost more than a decade frozen and the galaxy went on without me."

"Anywhere. Some people go to Risa to relax, though from what I've heard relaxing is the last thing on some people's minds there." King said.

"I don't know." West said.

"Two or three weeks without Mackey asking you about your feelings." King said, making air quotes as he said the word 'feelings'.

"I'll do it." West said suddenly, "I don't care where I go. The ruins of Romulus will do so long as he's not there."

"That's my girl." King said with a smile, "Now I have something else here for you." he added and he disappeared into his office.

"Pain killers?" West asked, "Because it's really not that-"

"No." King said as he reappeared with one hand behind his back, "A lollipop." and he produced a small bright red lollipop that he held out towards West, "I figured since you came in here with an injury I'd normal see in a child I ought to reward you like I would a child that sat still while I worked. Now get the hell out of my sickbay."

"Gee thanks doc." West said with a frownd. Then all of a sudden she snatched the lollipop from his grasp, "But I'm taking this." she added before she thrust it into her mouth.

"Some of them are powerful laxatives." King called out after West as she left sickbay.

"No they aren't." she replied just before the doors slid shut.

"I really need to get some laxative lollipops." King then said to himself.

West stepped into the turbolift and was about to tell it to take her back to her quarters when all of a sudden an alarm sounded.

"Red alert." Captain Edwards' voice announced, "All crew to action stations."

"Bridge." West said instead of giving the level and section number of her quarters and the turbolift sprang into motion, taking her directly to the *Nightfall's* bridge.

"Did you bring enough for everyone lieutenant?" Edwards commented when West stepped onto the bridge with the lollipop still in her mouth.

"Sorry captain, I came straight from sickbay." she replied.

"Just get rid of it." Carr commented and West reluctantly tossed the lollipop into the trash recycler located at the side of the bridge on her way to her console.

Meanwhile Edwards returned his attention to what T'Lan was telling him.

"The signal was an encoded data burst captain." she said.

"From Snowman?" Carr asked.

"It is the transponder code of his fighter." T'Lan answered, "Logic suggests that this is his signal that his flight is now in position. This type of signal would be harder for the target vessel to detect than a conventional transmission."

"Okay we'll go with it being his signal to proceed." Edwards said, "Mister Cole, you may fire when ready."

"Yes captain." Cole replied, "Firing quantum torpedoes."

"What's going on?" Sanchez demanded as he entered the bridge at the exact moment that the ship rocked for a third time in the space of a minute.

"Starfleet are firing torpedoes at us captain." one of his crew told him.

"Has the cruiser's shield rotation changed to a higher frequency?" Sanchez asked.

"No captain, holding steady."

"Then they can't be shooting at us." Sanchez said.

"Their aim is off anyway." another crew member commented, "That spread detonated all over the place above us."

"Above us?" Sanchez commented, "Explain." and the crewman shrugged.

"I don't know. That Starfleet ship suddenly launched a volley of ten quantum torpedoes and every last one exploded in the upper limits of the atmosphere."

"They were set for a low yield as well." another crewman added, "It would have taken a direct hit even to—"

"Never mind that now." Sanchez said, "Why would they fire torpedoes into the atmosphere unless—" and then he trailed off.

"Unless what captain?" a crewman asked just as Sanchez realised what was happening.

"They know we're in here!" he exclaimed as he dashed for the helm station, "They're using the shock waves to pinpoint our location."

"But that agent aboard the Starfleet ship was supposed to warn us."

"Well they obviously haven't, have they?" Sanchez snapped, "Now bring the warp drive back on line because we need to get out of here right now."

"Snowman I have a contact bearing three four seven mark eight."

"Copy that Quarterback, I see him too. Lay in an intercept course and ready phasers. We're going in."

The two fighters pulled ahead of the assault shuttle as all three craft ascended through the gas giant's thick atmosphere and in just a few seconds the dark outline of a transport ship came into view directly ahead of them.

"I have visual contact." White signalled to the other pilots, "Looks like an Antares-class freighter. I'm starting my run now."

Slowly the freighter began to build up speed, heading out of the atmosphere and the passive sensors of White's fighter monitored an increasing level of power that suggested its impulse and warp drives were being brought online. White chanced a phaser shot from extreme range. He doubted that he would hit the freighter's warp drive from here but there was at least a chance that the shot would catch the attention of the freighter's crew and persuade them to stop long enough for the assault shuttle to catch up. However, the beam passed through a pocket of hydrogen that White had not detected and there was a sudden brilliant flash followed by a shock wave that made White's fighter shake.

When the blast wave cleared the freighter was still accelerating but it had yet to build up enough speed to be able to increase the distance between it and the Federation fighters. Knowing that the phaser blast had cleared the hydrogen from in front of his fighter White increased the power to his thrusters and the gap between the small craft and the freighter began closing even faster than it had been.

The gap narrowed to less than a thousand metres and White was preparing to fire again when he noticed a bright point of light ahead and he realised that it was a star.

"He's almost out of the atmosphere." White broadcast, "*Nightfall* if you can hear me you need to get in

position to block him.”

“Understood Snowman.” West's voice responded, the signal filled with static caused by atmospheric disruption, “We're breaking orbit now and heading for the gas giant.”

Despite knowing that the *Nightfall* would soon be in position to intercept the freighter White had no intention of risking it escaping before its warp engines could be disabled and he fired his phasers again. This time the bright red beam struck the side of the freighter at an angle and cut a deep gouge along it. This was accompanied by a second explosion, this one coming from within the freighter as one of its warp nacelles was penetrated and the plasma held within it burst out.

“The warp drive's been hit!” one of Sanchez's crew called out as their ship shook from the explosion.

“I can see that.” Sanchez hissed, “Do we still have power for the heavy graviton beam?”

“Maybe.” his weapons officer replied, “But we can't target those Federation ships in here and when we leave the atmosphere they'll be able to raise their shields.”

“I don't want to target them.” Sanchez said, “I want to target the rings. Grab as much mass as is possible and pull it back down around us.” then he snarled as he added, “I want to make it rain.”

“Direct hit!” White broadcast, “Target's warp drive is offline. Assault shuttle, this is your show now.”

“Understood Snowman, we're moving into position now.” the pilot of the assault shuttle responded before he activated the intercom, “Standby, standby. Hard contact in sixty seconds.”

“Okay this is it. Stand to.” Heart called out around the passenger compartment as he released his safety harness and got to his feet.

“An Antares-class generally has about a dozen crew onboard.” Shry added as he also stood up, “But that's not to say that there won't be any extra muscle aboard. Set phasers on stun and use lethal fire only as a last resort.”

“And don't forget about what we've said about using armour piercing rounds near the hull.” Heart said, “Anyone who puts a hole in the hull of that ship unnecessarily will find themselves floating back to the *Nightfall*.”

Just then the assault shuttle shuddered and there was a dull 'clump' sound as it latched onto the fleeing freighter just before it was able to exit the atmosphere. Shry immediately stepped up to a hatch set into the floor and activated his communicator as he aimed his rifle down at it.

“In position.” he said.

“Detonating.” the shuttle's co-pilot responded and there was the muffled sound of an explosion as the hull breaching charge set into the underside of the assault shuttle detonated, cutting a neat circular hole through the freighter's hull. A sensor on the outside of the hatch then confirmed that the atmosphere within the freighter was breathable and it slid open automatically.

“Go! Go! Go!” Shry yelled and he jumped down through the hole.

“We've been hit again.” one of the bridge crew cried out, “We need to abandon ship.”

“We can't abandon ship in here.” another pointed out, “An escape pod will just fall into the core and be crushed.”

“That wasn't a phaser blast.” Sanchez said, “Something hit us.”

Just then the intercom came to life and a panicked voice called out for help.

“Engineering to bridge! Intruders in-” and then he was cut off by the sound of a phaser being fired.

“We're being boarded.” Sanchez said, “Everyone get down to engineering to fight them back. I'll stay here and try to get us out of here in one piece.”

Reluctantly in some cases, Sanchez's crew then all exited the bridge and left him there alone. The door slid shut behind the last man and as soon as he heard it close Sanchez sealed it, preventing anyone from getting onto the bridge while he concentrated on flying the ship.

As soon as he dropped through the hole in the freighter's hull Shry saw that he was in the vessels engineering section. Movement from the far side of the compartment caught his eye just as a pair of MACOs were dropping through the hole after him. Chasing after the crewman, Shry saw him rush up to an intercom panel and activate it to warn the bridge about their presence. Shry was not in time to prevent him issuing the warning but he was able to limit the amount of information that he could give away by shooting the man in the back. With his phaser set to stun, Shry only incapacitated the man rather than killing him and he rushed forwards to use a set of plastic handcuff ties to secure his hands behind his back just in case he regained consciousness unexpectedly.

"Spread out!" Heart ordered as he came through the hole leading to the shuttle above them, "I want this section securing right away."

The cloudy skies of the gas giant finally gave way to the blackness of space as the freighter emerged from the gas giant with the assault shuttle still clamped to its upper hull and the two Peregrine-class fighters in close pursuit. With his entire crew focused on trying to repel the boarding party that had managed to sneak up on his ship, Sanchez could not use the heavy graviton beam to hurl debris from Brattan Six's rings into the path of the fighters before they could raise their shields but he could at least try and evade them long enough for his crew to regain control of his ship.

As expected given the presence of a boarding party on the freighter, the fighters made no further effort to attack given the risk to their own comrades but Sanchez raised the freighter's shields anyway. As it happened this was just in the nick of time as directly ahead of the freighter he saw the *Nightfall* approaching over the gas giant's rings. Moments later an alarm sounded as the *Nightfall* attempted to lock a tractor beam onto the freighter only for the beam to be scattered by the freighter's shields.

"Tractor beam won't lock captain." Cole announced.

"It would appear that the target has been able to raise its shields." T'Lan added.

"That is our drop ship on its back though isn't it cousin?" Nayal asked, looking at T'Lan.

"It is. Though I will ask again for you to cease calling me cousin. It is especially inappropriate on the bridge."

T'Lan replied and Nayal snorted.

"So we can safely assume that our troops are aboard." Edwards said, "Mister Hamilton stay with him. Cole, I don't want him heading back into the atmosphere. Use phasers as needed to try and prevent him."

"Yes captain." Cole said as on the main viewscreen the freighter headed into the innermost of Brattan Six's rings.

Making the most of the manual controls and the heads up display built into the headset that he wore Hamilton followed the freighter, weaving between the orbiting lumps of rock and ice. The Akira-class cruiser had a much more powerful drive system than the ageing freighter and its controls were far more responsive. But it was also significantly larger than the freighter and inevitably some of the debris that made up the rings struck the *Nightfall's* shields producing powerful vibrations throughout the ship despite its inertial dampeners.

"Mister Hamilton, if you could avoid hitting every lump of rock in front of us I would appreciate it." Edwards commented as he checked his safety harness.

"Plus if there's any damage to the hull I'll expect you to hammer it out and paint over it." Carr added.

"Lieutenant commander there is unlikely to be any damage to the *Nightfall*. Our shields are functioning at optimal efficiency." T'Lan said.

"Never mind T'Lan." Carr muttered.

On a small portion of the view screen in front of him Sanchez watched as the *Nightfall* smashed its way through the rings behind him while he had to weave between the debris that they were made up of. He tried dipping the nose of his ship to take him back down into the atmosphere where the larger Starfleet vessel would be unable to follow but almost as soon as he began the manoeuvre there was a blast from the *Nightfall's* phasers that passed under the freighter and Sanchez instinctively pulled back up to avoid it. This sudden change of heading inadvertently took the freighter into the path of a spinning lump of ice about ten metres across that exploded as it struck the ship's forward shields and caused it to shake violently. The two fighters that had attacked Sanchez's ship within the gas giant then zoomed past in front of the freighter, passing so close by that he flinched when they suddenly appeared on the view screen in front of him.

"Well you don't seem to have handled things as well as I trusted you to father." The Girl said as she unexpectedly appeared beside Sanchez.

"If you aren't going to help then get off my ship." he hissed.

"Help? I've already given you enough help father."

"Newsflash, your agent didn't come through. Starfleet knew we were here."

"Who was it that paid to keep your ship running when it should have been scrapped?" The Girl said sternly, "Who gave you the advanced technology that kept you ahead of your competitors? Am I expected to deal with your failure to notice when Starfleet sneaks up behind you as well?"

"You could at least get us out of here." Sanchez said.

"Oh I'm sorry father but you're damaged goods now. Even if I could transport your entire vessel away from here I wouldn't. Now that Starfleet will be able to identify it, it and you really aren't that much use to us any more."

"So why come at all?" Sanchez asked as he performed another sharp turn intended to try and confuse his pursuers only for the *Nightfall* to use its phasers to blast the debris in its path into smaller pieces that were deflected harmlessly off its shields.

"Perhaps I'm sentimental and wanted one last chance to say goodbye." The Girl replied and Sanchez snorted.

"Not likely." he said.

"True. But I thought it impolite not to thank you for your years of loyal service before Starfleet captures your vessel. The problem is that we can't allow our technology to fall into their hands so I brought along some friends to take back what is ours."

Two of the freighter's crewmen fell back under the onslaught of the MACO squad pursuing them. Armed with phasers intended specifically for the civilian market and with limited power output, the men had been shocked to find themselves confronted by troops protected by body armour that was proving itself quite capable of absorbing the energy of their attacks. What was worse was the amount of firepower that the MACOs could call upon. Their phasers were set on stun but in addition to these weapons they were not being shy about firing sustained bursts of projectiles that forced the crewmen to remain in cover while the MACOs advanced.

The crewmen fell back towards the compartment where the heavy graviton beam was located, hoping to be able to make a stand in the heavily armoured section. But as they opened the door to the compartment they found themselves suddenly confronted by a large muscular humanoid figure, total white in colour and lacking any facial features. Grabbing the first of the crewmen by the neck, the Iconian fleshform lifted him and hurled him back before swinging a fist down onto the second man so hard that it smashed open his skull.

Just at that moment the first of the MACOs appeared at the end of the corridor and he gasped when he saw the fleshform in front of him. Instinctively he fired his phaser at the figure, forgetting that it was still set to stun and the beam had no effect when it struck its target.

"Golem!" the MACO called out, using the nickname that the crew of the *Nightfall* often used for the fleshforms and as the figure started to charge at him he fired again with the assault rifle portion of his weapon.

Unlike the phaser the fragmenting projectiles proved to be very effective against the fleshform, tearing chunks of its synthetic flesh away from its body until it collapsed and suddenly vanished as it transported itself back to its home realm rather than be destroyed.

Heart and his section had just driven three more of the crew back from a hastily erected barricade consisting of packing cases and coolant containers when he received the warning from one of his squad leaders.

"We have golems in the lower forward sections. Urgent support required."

Heart scowled. Antares-class freighters were common enough that he knew the layout of them exactly and he knew that his fire team was almost at the bridge. Seizing that would give the *Nightfall's* troops control of every major system aboard and end the battle. However, if it became necessary to divert away from the bridge then the fighting would inevitably be prolonged and with it came the increased risk that the freighter's crew would be able to make use of some element of the freighter's design that the boarding party was unaware of to drive them from the vessel. So instead he activated his communicator.

"Shry can you hear me?" he asked.

"Right here Heart."

"Can you get someone to the lower forward section? I've got men under attack from golems but going to help them myself would pull me away from the bridge."

"We're engaging some of the crew in the cargo hold." Shry replied, "But I could pull my section out to support your men."

"Do it. If the Iconians have fleshforms aboard then there must be something important there."

"The graviton beam?" Shry suggested, "I can see that they wouldn't want us to have that. I'm on my way now."

In the cargo hold Shry beckoned for his section to break off while the other squad of Imperial Guardsmen present continued to sweep through the compartment, clearing it bit by bit. Shry and his men hurried along

the length of the freighter, drawn towards the forward section by the sound of gunfire. The ground forces stationed aboard the *Nightfall* had experience in fighting fleshforms and the MACOs were engaging them exclusively with their assault rifles rather than their phasers. A phaser set to a lethal level was quite capable of inflicting severe damage to a fleshform but the MACOs were unwilling to change from the stun settings they were under orders to use on the freighter's crew.

Rounding a corner, Shry was just in time to see a fleshform lumbering past the end of the corridor ahead of him and he brought up his rifle before firing a single bullet into the figure's head. The fragmenting round broke up exactly as it was supposed to do and although none of the fragments came out of the other side of the fleshform's head they caused enough damage to its artificial brain that it just collapsed in a heap, the first of them on the freighter not to be able to retreat before being disabled.

But there were more of the Iconian fleshforms remaining and now aware that they were under attack from two directions at once they changed their tactics. Whereas before they had been content to simply chase after the retreating MACOs they now made use of their built in gateway style transportation systems to simply step from one place on the ship to another and outflank their attackers. The first hint that they were doing so was when one appeared right behind Shry and struck him over the back of his head. The helmet the Andorian wore protected his skull but as he fell one of his antenna smashed against a nearby wall and he screamed in pain as it snapped. The fleshform that had attacked him raised a fist to strike again but there was a burst of fire from another Andorian and Shry found himself being sprayed with chunks of synthetic flesh before the fleshform vanished as it withdrew.

"They're using their transporters!" Shry snapped, activated his communicator, "Watch your flanks."

He then tried to rise to his feet but failed, having to be caught by one of his men as he collapsed again thanks to the lack of balance caused by the loss of his antenna, "Thanks." he said, "Go on without me. I'll cover your rear."

The freighter emerged from the rings of Brattan Six with the *Nightfall* still right behind it and now it appeared that the cruiser had been joined not only by the two runabouts orbiting the gas giant but also the rest of the squadron of fighters, all of which now swarmed around the ship as it limped onwards.

"Happy now?" he said, looking over his shoulder at The Girl.

"My people have removed the heavy graviton beam," she replied, "so I am satisfied that Starfleet won't be getting their hands on it. Though I must say I do regret that our association has to end like this."

"Do you really mean that?" Sanchez asked.

"Of course. I am capable of regret." The Girl answered.

"No, I mean am I finally free of you?" Sanchez replied and The Girl scowled at him just as there was the sound of something banging against the outside of the door to the bridge.

"Goodbye father." she hissed, "Good luck dealing with those soldiers at your door." and then she turned around and vanished.

Sanchez gazed at the main viewscreen, taking his hands away from the flight control console and allowing the ship to just carry on along its current heading as it continued to be buzzed by Federation attack fighters. Behind him the sound of banging suddenly ceased and instead there was a series of more mechanical 'clunks' as Heart and his MACOs tried to override the door seal. Sanchez sighed and reached out his hand to his console where he released the door seal and heard the 'hiss' as it slid open to allow the MACOs onto the bridge.

"Don't move!" Heart yelled as he and his men rushed in and spread out.

Sanchez remained in his chair, staring at the viewscreen as Heart circled around the bridge to point his rifle at the freighter's captain. Sanchez looked up at him when he saw the assault rifle pointing at him.

"Do you really think you've won? There is no winning against them." he said and then before Heart could respond or do anything to stop him, Sanchez suddenly produced his pulse pistol from beneath his console, pressed it up under his own jaw and pulled the trigger.

Heart lowered his rifle and turned away from the headless corpse sat in the chair in front of him before activating his communicator.

"Heart to *Nightfall*." he signalled, "Bridge secure."

Edwards entered sickbay to find Shry sat on a biobed while King examined his forehead where he had lost an antenna.

"How are you feeling captain?" he asked.

"Dizzy." Shry replied.

"You'll be fine." King said, "You'll be off your feet for a week or so but after that you should be able to walk about unaided and one of the good things about that synthetic flesh those Iconians are made of it that it doesn't cause infection when it gets into a wound so there's no need to worry about all of the stuff you got covered in.

"So what's being done with the crew of that freighter?" Shry asked, looking at Edwards.

"The locals want them handed over to face charges over the attack." Edwards replied, "Problem is that while they want to lock them up and throw away the key Starfleet Intelligence is keen to talk to them as well and getting any information out of them is likely to mean offering them a deal the locals won't like."

"Glad I don't have to deal with any of that." King commented.

"I glad it's out of my hands as well." Edwards said, "We've already handed them over to the locals and it's for Starfleet Intelligence and the JAG officers on Starbase one-twenty-three to sort out now. Cole and Max are going over that ship with a fine tooth comb though. If anything was left behind then they'll find it."

"What about that heavy graviton beam?" Shry asked.

"It looks like those fleshforms you encountered were sent to retrieve it when you boarded the ship. The Iconians obviously didn't want us getting our hands on that technology." Edwards said.

Just then the doors to sickbay slid open and Cole walked in.

"Commander, what are you doing back here?" Edwards asked.

"Yeah, aren't you supposed to be searching that freighter?" Shry added.

"I was." Cole replied, "My men found this and I thought you ought to see it right away." and he handed a PADD to Edwards.

"A PADD? What's so special about this?" Edwards said as he took the device.

"Look at the image." Cole said and Edwards looked down at the display and gasped.

"Is that who I think it is?" he said and Cole nodded.

"That girl who infiltrated the ship? Yes it is and from the looks of it the captain of that ship who blew his own head off rather than let Captain Heart arrest him was her father. Or at least he was the father of the original girl before the Iconians got hold of her. According to Federation records that ship is a licensed salvage vessel and according to its logs it spent a lot of time along the Romulan border just after Romulus was destroyed and their civil war broke out."

"So at some point while they were picking through the debris of the war they came across the Iconians."

Edwards said and he smiled, "This is good work lieutenant commander. We have a name and an approximate time that she became an enemy agent. Maybe now we can start to track this girl down and deal with her once and for all."