

STAR TREK NIGHTFALL

SOMETHING IS STIRRING BEYOND THE FINAL FRONTIER...



GHOST IN THE MACHINE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR TREK: NIGHTFALL **GHOST IN THE MACHINE**

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The *USS Nightfall* is scheduled to take part in a war game intended to test Starfleet's readiness to respond to a Borg incursion into Federation space but when the *USS Brilliant* fails to take its place in the exercise some of the *Nightfall*'s crew find themselves trapped aboard a ship that seems intent on killing 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
8. Past Loyalties
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13. Cold War
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21. The Peacemaker
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Stardate 67522.4 Starship *USS Nightfall* NX-82008 holding position near the Romulan Neutral Zone to take on supplies and personnel in readiness for exercise mission 'Unimatrix'.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing Nikki?" MACO Captain Heart asked, looking at the young woman stood at the transporter control console.

"I'll be fine." Nikki replied, "I know how to handle a simple receive beaming."

"Good. Because if my new recruits end up inside out I'm telling your mother." Heart said, smiling and Nikki frowned. Nikki's mother, Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr was the first officer aboard the *USS Nightfall* while her daughter was just entering the operations phase of an internship program aboard the vessel during which she was spending a short time with each department.

Then the transporter console beeped.

"The *Williams* is signalling ready to send." Nikki said. The *USS Williams* was a Starfleet transport vessel that had rendezvoused with the *Nightfall* to transfer cargo and new personnel for the company of MACOs assigned to the Akira-class cruiser.

"Energise." Heart said and Nikki activated the transporter.

There were eight new arrivals for the MACO company and they materialised simultaneously on the transporter pad. From the markings on their uniforms it was obvious to Nikki that seven of them were enlisted soldiers while the eighth was a young woman with officer's markings that Nikki recognised.

"Rebecca." she said, smiling.

"Hi." the woman replied, waving at Nikki. Like Nikki, Rebecca Edwards was the daughter of one of the *Nightfall's* crew. In this case the ship's commanding officer captain David Edwards. Rebecca had joined the MACOs without her father's knowledge and qualified as an assault shuttle pilot. Now it appeared that she was being assigned to her father's ship.

"What are you doing here?" Nikki asked.

"It looks like she's our new pilot." Heart said before Rebecca could reply, "Now there'll be time for catching up later. MACOs fall in." and the eight new arrivals all made their way off the transporter pad and lined up in front of Heart, "Welcome to the *USS Nightfall*." he announced, "I hope none of you think that just because this is a typical luxurious Starfleet vessel that you're in for an easy ride. I expect you to actually work." and then he glanced at Rebecca, "That includes officers. We patrol the Romulan Neutral Zone to make sure that their civil war doesn't spill over into Federation territory and this is considered a combat posting. Slack off and I will have you sent back to earth in disgrace. Make a bad enough mistake and you will go back in a body bag. Do you understand me?" and there was a murmur from the MACOs, "Do you understand me?" Heart repeated louder.

"Yes sir!" the MACOs called out in unison.

"Good." Heart said, "Now your gear has been beamed to cargo bay two so we'll head there now to collect it. Then you'll be briefed on your duties by myself and Captain Shry of the Andorian Imperial Guard. Now move."

"Captain, the *Williams* is signalling that it has more personnel to beam over." Nikki commented and Heart glanced at his PADD.

"I've got the eight I was expecting." he told her, "They must be someone else's problem."

As Heart and the newly arrived MACOs were leaving the transporter room Nikki activated the transporter again and two more energy fields formed on the transporter pad, positioned so close to one another that they almost merged into one and for a moment Nikki was concerned that something had gone wrong with the transport. However, as the two individuals formed it became clear that they were simply standing very close to one another.

"Robert. T'Lan." Nikki said when she realised who these other new arrivals were, "I wasn't expecting you back so soon."

Lieutenant Commander Robert Cole was the *Nightfall's* second officer and also its chief of security and tactical officer while the Vulcan Lieutenant Commander T'Lan was its chief science officer and she looked straight at Nikki.

"You should not address Lieutenant Commander Cole by his first name while on duty Nikki." she said, "It is a breach of protocol."

"Sorry." Nikki replied, "But I wasn't expecting you back until tomorrow."

"Starfleet decided it wanted us back aboard for the start of the exercise." Cole explained as he and T'Lan stepped off the transporter pad, "So we had to cut our leave short."

"That doesn't seem fair. It's only an exercise, we're not really being invaded by the Borg." Nikki said.

"All Starfleet personnel are required to be available within twenty-four hours notice." T'Lan said, "There was nothing irregular about our recall and it did not prevent us from accomplishing everything we intended."
"So I take you had a good time visiting Vulcan and Earth to-" Nikki began before she noticed T'Lan's left hand. In particular the third finger where there was now a single gold band. Looking quickly at Cole's left hand she saw a matching one on his hand as well and she gasped, "You got married!" she exclaimed.
"Ah, yes." Cole replied, "It felt like the right time."
"We will gladly discuss this later Nikki. But right now we must report to the captain and ensure that we are prepared for the exercise." T'Lan said.
"Sure, I'll catch up with you later." Nikki responded and she watched as the two Starfleet officers exited the transporter room. Then as soon as they were gone she tapped the combadge on her chest, "Nikki Carr to Lieutenant Commander Carr, where are you?"
"In our quarters Nikki. Why?" her mother responded.
"Because you'll never guess what's happened."

"Come in." Edwards said as he opened up a box sat on his desk and the door to his ready room slid open to reveal Cole.
"Hello captain." he said.
"Ah, Mister T'Lan. Do come on in." Edwards replied with a smile and Cole sighed.
"Nikki." he muttered.
"Quite. If we could make starships that travelled as fast as gossip we could reach the Delta Quadrant in a day." Edwards said and he took a bottle of pale blue liquid from the box and set it down on the desk, "Now this calls for a drink."
"Your private stash of Romulan ale? How much of that have you got left?" Cole asked.
"Enough. Commander Kelak was quite generous in that respect." Edwards answered. Then he looked towards the replicator set into the wall of his ready room, "Computer I need eight drinking glasses."
"Eight. So this is a stag party then? I hope I'm not about to be left in a compromising position somewhere as a joke." Cole said as the drinking glasses materialised in the replicator.
"No, we've not had time to arrange that. Or a stripper to jump out of a cake for that matter." Edwards said, "Maybe another time."

T'Lan was unpacking items from a case when the intercom of the door to her and Cole's quarters chimed.
"Open." she said, looking towards the door as it slid open to reveal not only Nikki but also her mother and a woman in a Romulan military uniform.
"We brought champagne." Carr said as she entered the room, holding up a bottle and several narrow glasses.
"Nayal suggested Romulan ale but mom said no." Nikki added, looking at the Romulan woman.
"Obviously because of its effects on her." Nayal added, "One sip and she'd be throwing herself at Captain Edwards again."
"Never mind that." Carr said, frowning while setting down the glasses and handing the bottle to T'Lan, "Now would you like to do the honours?"
"If that is your wish lieutenant commander." T'Lan replied.
"This is a celebration. Call me Grace." Carr said, "Now open the bottle and let me see that ring. I want to know all about what happened. The proposal, the ceremony, everything."
"There is little to tell." T'Lan said as she carefully opened the bottle of champagne, avoiding the loud 'pop' that both Carr and Nikki had been hoping for before handing the bottle back to Carr to pour, "During the flight to Vulcan I set out the logical benefits of entering into a formal union."
"Wait, Robert didn't propose to you?" Nikki interrupted, smiling.
"No. Though for some reason he did insist on privately discussing the matter with my father prior to our announcing the engagement to our families." T'Lan said.
"That's brilliant cousin." Nayal said as she picked up a glass and took a drink, "Taking charge already."
"We are not related." T'Lan said, "I should not still have to remind you of this."
"So what about the ceremony itself? Did you get married on Vulcan or Earth?" Carr asked.
"The original ceremony was administered on Vulcan. However, Robert requested that we duplicate it on Earth so that his family could be present. My father considered it illogical but agreed to our request that he accompany us to, I believe the saying is 'give me away'.
"Are there pictures?" Nikki asked.
"There are." T'Lan replied and she picked up a PADD that she handed to Nikki while Carr and Nayal gathered around. Then T'Lan continued to unpack while they looked through the pictures showing T'Lan in traditional Vulcan robes on Vulcan and a white wedding dress on Earth while Cole wore a Starfleet white dress uniform in all of them.
"Oh my God that dress is beautiful." Nikki said.

"I bet getting it on short notice was difficult." Carr added.

"I had the assistance of Robert's sister." T'Lan explained, "She provided me with a publication intended to assist women with selecting such garments. It was most useful considering how impractical it is. As you can see." and then she reached for a larger flexible case that was draped over a couch and opened it to reveal the dress from the images. Seeing this Nikki handed the PADD to Nayal and she and Carr dashed to take a closer look.

"Jenna's going to be furious she missed this." Carr commented, referring to Lieutenant Jenna West, the *Nightfall's* chief of operations.

"Yeah, right." Nikki said, snorting.

"Is there a problem with Lieutenant West?" T'Lan asked, "Your tone of voice appears to suggest there is."

"If you ask me she's still sulking because you got promoted while she's failed that command test about a million times now." Nikki answered.

"Nikki, it is not possible to take the command officer's test that many times." T'Lan said and Nikki sighed.

"I was exaggerating." she said, "But after she lost it with you in the turbolift and apart from a short time being totally bad ass when fighting Remans she's been keeping to herself. I should know, I have to work with her."

"Cousin, what's this?" Nayal asked suddenly as she came to the end of the images on the PADD and found herself looking at a text document laid out as a list, "Number one. Wearing a-" and Nayal's eyes suddenly widened, "This is a list of sexual fantasies."

"That is private. Please return it." T'Lan said.

"Oh I can't believe this." Nayal said, ignoring the request as she scrolled down the document, "This is amazing."

Suddenly losing interest in the wedding dress Carr and Nikki hurried to see the list for themselves.

"T'Lan what on earth is this for?" Carr asked.

"The same publication that assisted me with the planning of the Earth ceremony also included an article detailing ways in which a couple could maintain an active sex life. It recommended honest discussion of what each individual wanted from the other. I thought it logical to document some ideas to be discussed with Robert at a suitable time." T'Lan explained.

"There are more than a hundred entries on this list." Carr commented.

"No pictures though." Nayal added.

"I want to try number four." Nikki said.

"Oh no you don't." Carr replied, glaring at her daughter.

"Please return my PADD." T'Lan asked again, holding out her hand and Nayal passed her the device.

Then Nayal glanced down into the open case on the table in front of her and noticed a container of pills inside it.

"Are you feeling okay cousin?" she asked, picking up the container and looking at the label. Then she frowned, "I don't know what these are." she added and she held out the container towards Carr.

"These are immune suppressants." Carr said.

"Why do you need those T'Lan?" Nikki asked.

"I know." Nayal said, smiling, "T'Lan here needs to suppress her immune system to prevent it from stopping her conceiving a child with her human husband."

"You're having a baby?" Nikki exclaimed.

"I have not yet conceived." T'Lan replied as she put down her PADD on the table and then reached out to take the container from Nayal, "But Robert and I have decided to start a family immediately. There was no logical reason to delay."

"I just remembered something." Nayal said suddenly, "I need to go so I'll just say congratulations on your wedding cousin and I hope you are very happy in your married life." then she picked up her glass again and quickly gulped down the remains of her drink.

"So tell us about your wedding ceremony T'Lan." Nikki said, "Both of them." and while T'Lan's attention was fixed on Nikki, Nayal subtly picked up her PADD and left the room with it.



The *Nightfall's* male senior officers all drank at the same time and all but Lieutenant Maximillian, the *Nightfall's* Borg chief engineer known commonly as Max gasped and winced.

"Wow that's strong." the Andorian Imperial Guard Captain Shry said.

"I think I've gone blind." Heart added.

"Open your damn eyes." Doctor King, the *Nightfall's* chief medical officer told him.

"So how did it go with T'Lan's family?" Lieutenant Commander White, the leader of the *Nightfall's* attached squadron of fighters asked.

"Yeah," the helmsman Lieutenant Hamilton added, "didn't you say that her father kind of threatened to come after you if you didn't treat T'Lan right?"

"Oh dinner with her father and brothers was just great." Cole replied, smiling, "I felt like I was being inducted into the Orion Syndicate or something. They don't talk while they eat so they were all staring at me in silence while we sat around the table. I'm telling you, I was half convinced I was going to wake up one morning and find a sehlat's head in my bed next to me." then he looked at Edwards, "So what's with this exercise then?"

"Operation Unimatrix?" Edwards said, "It's a war game to represent a Borg attack on the Federation. Our battle group will consist of the *Nightfall* as well as the *Umbra* and *Ek'Duv*. The *Pacific* will lead it."

"So all the ships of the *Nightfall* program together then." Cole said as he recognised not only the names of the two other modified Akira-class heavy cruisers but the Nebula-class *USS Pacific* that had served as the test bed for the mass accelerator cannons fitted to the later cruisers.

"It's a set up." Hamilton commented.

"What?" Cole said.

"It's a set up." Hamilton said again.

"It's true." White added, "We're being set up to fail."

"No we are not." Edwards replied, "Starfleet command just wants to be able to accurately compare the effectiveness of the *Nightfall* type ships against more conventional types."

"By keeping us out of the action as long as possible?" Shry commented.

"What's going on?" Cole asked.

"We're being held in reserve." Doctor King told him, "We'll muster ten light years behind the front line while a total of eight attack wings under Sovereign, Galaxy and more Nebula-class ships take the front line."

"The firepower being massed is considerable. More than enough to destroy a single cube, though loses will be heavy as I'm sure you can imagine." Max added, "Unless the marshals of the exercise introduce a second Borg cube that can bypass the Starfleet armada it is unlikely that we will play an active role in it at all."

"Do we know who's running it?" Cole said and Edwards nodded.

"Admiral Janeway's running it and playing the role of the Borg along with an ex-drone as advisor while Admiral Burrows is commanding the Starfleet defence." Edwards said.

"Burrows." Cole said, "What do we know about him?"

"About his opinions of the *Nightfall* program? Next to nothing." Edwards answered, "But I can tell you that he's had nothing but deep space exploration assignments ever since leaving the academy. As far I know he's never taken part in any full scale defensive operations, just the odd skirmish."

"So not the sort of officer likely to be friendly to the idea of creating ships like the *Nightfall* then." Cole said,

"What about the cube? How is that being handled?"

"There are a dozen Intrepid-class ships placed in different systems." Edwards told him, "When one is to take on the role of the Borg cube it will adjust its transponder accordingly."

"Intrepid-class ships were chosen because their speed allows them to most closely match a Borg vessel moving at warp speed." Max explained, "The use of trans-warp conduits will be simulated by switching the role of aggressor between vessels as needed."

"Very clever." Cole said before the door to Edwards' ready room suddenly slid open and Nayal entered with a broad smile on her face.

"Sorry to interrupt boys." she said as she approached Hamilton, "But I need Bradley to take me back to his quarters right now and do this to me." and then she held T'Lan's PADD right in front of Hamilton just as he was taking a drink. Seeing what was on the display his eyes suddenly widened and he spat out his drink, spraying it towards Edwards who scowled at him.

"Sorry captain." he gasped, coughing, "But—"

"Never mind now Bradley. I'm in a hurry." Nayal said, taking his glass and setting it down on the desk. Then she handed the PADD to Cole, "Here you go commander, could you give this back to T'Lan? I think you're getting lucky tonight and every night for the next five months or so I think." and then she pulled Hamilton out of the office while the remaining officers gathered around Cole and the PADD.

"I see why you married her." Heart said.

"As do I. I'd never have expected this from a Vulcan though." Shry added.

"Is number four actually physically possible?" Edward said and King nodded.

"Just about." he said, "But only in zero gravity. Oh and I'd recommend some sort of protective equipment for the fifth entry."

"Taking safe sex to a whole new level." White said with a smile and Cole suddenly lowered the PADD.

"Can we not discuss what is probably something very private to my new wife like this?" he said, "So captain, are you looking forward to having your daughter serve aboard the *Nightfall*?" and Edwards smiled.

"The odds of her being assigned here are pretty slim." he said and Cole and the two ground forces officers looked at one another.

"Oh really?" Cole said.

"Rebecca's here?" Edwards exclaimed.

"She came on the same transport as us." Cole told him.

"I thought you knew." Heart added, "I figured you'd arranged it." but before Edwards could respond the intercom sounded.

"Captain, I've got a signal coming through for you." West's voice said.

"Who is it?" Edwards asked as he took his seat.

"It's Captain Cameron from the *Pacific*." West answered.

"Put him through." Edwards said and the image of Captain Cameron appeared on the monitor in front of him.

"Have I caught you at a bad moment Captain Edwards?" Cameron asked and Edwards realised that he was still holding a glass of Romulan ale.

"Sorry. We were just celebrating my second officer's wedding." he replied, "Is this about the exercise?"

"Not exactly. One of the Intrepid-class ships assigned as an aggressor has failed to check in with the exercise marshals. It's the *Brilliant*."

"That's Captain Onaka's ship isn't it?" Edwards said and Cameron nodded.

"That's right. She was supposed to take the *Brilliant* to the Kollana system but as far as we can tell she never got there. Admiral Janeway wants someone to go and take a look before we get started with the exercise and the *Nightfall* is in the best position to go and take a look." he said.

"I understand." Edwards said, nodding, "We'll set off now and let you know what we find. *Nightfall* out." and he shut off the communicator. Then he activated the intercom, "Helm, lay in a course for the Kollana system. Warp eight." he said. Then he looked up at the others in his ready room, "Looks like we'll have to cut our celebrations short gentlemen. I want the ship ready to conduct rescue and recovery operations before we reach our destination."

When Edwards entered sick bay he found Hamilton lying face down on a biobed while King examined him.

"I just came to check on your preparations to receive casualties." Edwards said, "I didn't realise that you already had one."

"Ah yes, Mister Hamilton here is feeling the after effects of his nocturnal activities." King replied before poking Hamilton mid way down his spine and the prone officer let out a yelp, "I hardly touched you." King said.

"Well it felt like being hit by a bat." Hamilton responded, "Can't you just fix it?"

"Possibly." King said, "But I'm not going to."

"Why not?"

"Because it would take about four hours during which you'd be totally out of action. As it is you'll feel better in about eight hours and you're quite fit for work providing you don't need to do any heavy lifting. Now what have you learned from this lieutenant?"

"That it was totally worth it." Hamilton said, wincing as he slid himself off the biobed and steadied himself on it as he stood up, "Eight hours gives me chance to be ready for tonight." and then he began to limp past Edwards to the door out of sickbay. Meanwhile King sighed.

"I guess I'll be seeing him tomorrow as well no doubt." he said when the *Nightfall's* chief helmsman was gone, "And more besides since the sublieutenant decided to put the contents of that list on the ship's messaging system."

"Just as long as it doesn't stop anyone turning up for their shift I don't really care." Edwards said, "So how are your preparations going? If anything has happened to the *Brilliant* then we could have injured to deal with."

"Sick bay is ready captain. I've run a full inventory on our supplies and made sure there are enough trauma kits ready for the *Brilliant's* full crew complement. My staff are all scheduled to be on duty fifteen minutes before we reach the Kollana system and the EMH is functional." King said, "Now what of that couldn't have been done over the intercom or by reading my log? You're really here to ask about Rebecca aren't you?"

"You have to examine every new arrival on the ship." Edwards replied, "Have you seen her?"

"Yes. Haven't you?"

"No, not yet. Did she happen to mention why she was here?"

"No she did not and as chief medical officer it's not my job to find out. Might I suggest you try just asking her?" King said.

"Easier said than done doctor. I'd rather not just summon her to my ready room or quarters and I'd like to have the conversation privately." Edwards replied before his combadge activated.

"Captain we need you on the bridge." Carr's voice said, "We've just picked up the *Brilliant*."

"Already?" King commented when he heard this.

"But we're hours away from the Kollana system." Edwards pointed out.

"Yes captain, the *Brilliant* is adrift in interstellar space." Carr told him.

"Okay I'm on my way." Edwards said.

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As soon as he stepped out of the turbolift Edwards saw Carr get out of his seat and move to the vacant one beside it.

"Is the *Brilliant* in visual range yet?" he asked as he sat down.

"Just entering it now captain." West replied from the ops station.

"On screen." Edwards ordered and the large forward view screen was filled with an image of an Intrepid-class starship heading towards the *Nightfall* with its variable geometry warp nacelles raised into the vertical position they usually occupied while the ship was travelling at warp speed despite the fact that it was just coasting through space at significantly less than the speed of light, "Commander T'Lan, what can you tell me?" Edwards added.

"The vessel has power captain and it appears structurally intact." T'Lan answered, "However, I can detect no life signs. However, there is an unusual scattering effect on some of our scans. This could be hiding something."

"All the escape pods are in place." Hamilton commented.

"I take it that there's been no communication of any sort?" Edwards said.

"No captain." West replied, "The ship is acting as if she's running silent. There are no active emissions at all, not even a transponder to identify her presence to commercial shipping."

"The shuttle bay's open." Cole said as the *Nightfall's* angle of approach brought the large door to the Intrepid-class ship's stern into view.

"Captain there is no indication that the shuttle bay's force field is operational." T'Lan added, "Therefore, the shuttle bay is exposed to vacuum."

"That's odd." Carr commented.

"I think more than just the shuttle bay is in vacuum." West commented, "I think that the air locks are open as well. All of them as far as I can see."

"Confirmed captain." T'Lan added, "A spectral analysis of the ship suggests that there is no atmosphere inside."

"No wonder there are no life signs." Carr said, looking at Edwards and he nodded.

"Why would the crew open all of the air locks?" Nayaal asked.

"Damage control." Hamilton responded, "If there was a serious fire that the internal fire suppression system couldn't handle then the crew would head to shelters and the atmosphere would be vented."

"There is no indication that there is anyone in any of the shelter areas Lieutenant Hamilton." T'Lan said.

"Are we picking up any sort of communication from the ship?" Edwards asked, "Even something automatic?"

"Negative captain." West replied, "If the crew did abandon ship then they didn't bother leaving a note to say why."

While most of the bridge crew was concentrating on the image of the *Brilliant* on the large main view screen at the front of the *Nightfall's* bridge, Hamilton was using the headset that he like all of the command crew wore to monitor space directly ahead of the *Nightfall* as he piloted it and so he was the only one to see the body of a man in a Starfleet uniform come speeding towards the ship out of the darkness of space.

"Crap!" Hamilton exclaimed as he suddenly pulled back on the manual flight controls, doing his best to try and turn the *Nightfall* out of the path of the body and the sudden lurch caused the rest of the bridge crew to grab hold of their chairs.

"What the hell are you doing?" Edwards snapped.

"I think we just ran someone over." Hamilton gasped.

"What do you mean 'we'?" Cole said.

"T'Lan can you tell me what's going on?" Edwards asked.

"We did strike an object captain. Though it does not appear to have survived the collision intact." T'Lan replied and several of the crew winced as they considered the effects of a starship with a mass of just over three million tonnes striking a human body.

"So 'splat'?" Nayaal said.

"Actually I believe that the body had been frozen solid from its time in space and simply shattered." T'Lan replied.

"Easier to clean off at least." Hamilton commented. Then as Edwards, Carr and Cole all glared at him he added, "Sorry. Bad taste."

"Yes it was." Carr said sternly.

"Take us in closer and match course and speed." Edwards ordered, "Oh and try not to collide with any more bodies." then he looked at Carr, "Commander I'll need you to take an away team over there. If there really is no atmosphere you'll need to suit up. I suggest taking an engineering team with you to see about restoring

life support.”

“Captain it is not possible to use the transporter to board the *Brilliant*.” T'Lan said, “Though its shields are lowered the unusual interference pattern coming from within the ship may scramble any transporter beam.”

“If it's coming from the shield emitters then maybe we can shut it down by remote.” Carr suggested.

“Good idea.” Edwards replied, “Lieutenant Commander T'Lan, could you please call up the *Brilliant*'s command codes as well as the prefix code and provide them to Lieutenant West?”

“Certainly captain. I have the codes now.” T'Lan responded as she accessed the command codes needed to send orders to the *Brilliant* remotely from the *Nightfall*.

“I've got them.” West said, “Establishing contact now captain.” and then she hesitated, frowning when she saw how the *Brilliant*'s computer responded to the sending of the prefix code that should have granted West access to its systems. Instead of a full list of command systems available to her or an outright rejection her console showed a swirling pattern of data that was almost organic in nature and looked somehow familiar to her.

“Is there a problem lieutenant?” Edwards asked, noticing the look on her face when he looked towards her to see what was causing the delay.

“You can't tell him Jenna.” the voice of the alien intelligence inside West's mind told her. The Controller was an Iconian personality that had commanded an outpost prior to its destruction, at which point it had sought sanctuary in the only available place – West's mind, “If they know that you know what that is then how do you think they'll react?”

“Yes captain.” West replied, “The *Brilliant*'s prefix code isn't working. I think it's been changed.”

“T'Lan will those emissions from the *Brilliant*'s shield emitters prevent a shuttle landing?” Carr asked, looking around at the science officer.

“I do not think so.” T'Lan replied, “However, they may interfere with proximity sensors and could result in a collision.”

“Do you have an alternative suggestion T'Lan?” Edwards asked.

“Yes captain. A shuttlecraft could still be used to take an away team close enough to the *Brilliant* to allow them to get aboard by performing an EVA from the shuttlecraft to one of the open airlocks.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Carr said, “If anyone misses then we can beam them back aboard the *Nightfall* as soon as they're beyond the range of the interference.”

“Very well, that's what we'll do.” Edwards said, “Assemble your away team commander.”

Carr had her away team meet in the *Nightfall*'s massive hangar where one of the type-nine shuttles carried by the cruiser was being prepared for launch. In addition to herself Carr had selected Max, T'Lan and Doctor King to join her along with a team of three engineering crewmen. In addition to this she had requested that the regular shuttle pilot be replaced by White who as a fighter pilot was far more experienced with making tight course corrections in a small volume of space. Aside from Max who could survive for a prolonged time in the vacuum of space, the rest of the team were dressed in space suits while they waited for Doctor King to arrive. However, when a member of the *Nightfall*'s medical staff did arrive in the hangar it was not Doctor King himself but the ship's Emergency Medical Hologram operating a body of synthetic flesh that had been constructed as an experiment with the substance. The creation of the body by Max and T'Lan had been unauthorised but it had been retained for use when having the EMH available outside sickbay was advantageous. However, given the ability of the highly adaptive programs to become self aware if provided with too much stimulus outside their specialist field the use of the synthetic body was kept to a minimum. Like Max she did not need a space suit to make the crossing from the shuttle to the *Brilliant* and wore a standard science division uniform while carrying a medical pack over her shoulder.

“Emma? Where's Doctor King?” Carr asked, using the nickname for the EMH that had been come up with by Nikki and later adopted by the rest of the crew.

“Oh he's not coming.” the EMH replied, smiling, “He said that since everyone over there is dead there's no point in sending a living doctor, pointing out that he is a doctor and not an undertaker. He also suggested that if you complained about him making the substitution that I should remind you that as a full commander not only does he technically outrank you, but also that as the *Nightfall*'s chief medical officer he is fully responsible for the health and welfare of more than seven hundred people.”

“Get on board.” Carr said, scowling and the smiling EMH walked up the ramp into the shuttle.

“Everyone in?” White asked from the pilot's seat when Carr sat down beside him and she looked behind her. Ordinarily a type-nine shuttle would hold only six people including the pilot but since they had only to cover short distance to the *Brilliant* it had been possible to squeeze in the extra two passengers.

“Everyone's in.” she said and White reached to power up the shuttle's engines.

“Shuttle one to flight control, requesting permission to depart.” he signalled.

“Shuttle one, you are cleared for launch.” the flight controller replied and White fired the shuttle's thrusters, lifting it off the hangar deck and turning it to face the large forward launch doors. Then the shuttle accelerated forwards and flew out into space.

The shape of the *Brilliant* was visible almost immediately and White steered the shuttle towards the ship, diverting more power to its impulse engines. As he closed on the ship he steered again, veering away from the *Brilliant* slightly so that he could position the shuttle alongside it.

"Proximity sensors say range of sixty metres." White said.

"It looks closer than that." Carr commented as she looked through the shuttle's canopy.

"It is." White agreed, "Glad we're not trying to dock. We'd be being scrapped off the *Brilliant*'s hull."

"Looks like you were right about that interference T'Lan." Carr said as she reached for the helmet to her space suit, "Okay everyone, let's get our helmets on and step outside." she added.

Only when all of the space suited personnel had their helmets on did White de-pressurise the interior of the shuttle and release its rear hatch. Standing at the opening into space, the *Brilliant* appeared stationary against the star field behind it thanks to White having matched the shuttle's course and speed with it exactly.

"I should go first commander." Max said, his lips not moving as he simply transmitted his words directly to Carr's suit via his combadge and she nodded. Then she watched as the former Borg drone suddenly leapt from the open ramp at the rear of the shuttle towards the nearby *Brilliant*.

Reaching out his arms, Max took hold of the *Brilliant*'s hull close to one of the open air locks and that proceeded to stand upright on the surface of the hull.

"I am in position commander." he signalled, "I will catch you as you cross."

"Okay, here I come." Carr replied before she too jumped into space, pushing herself off the ramp and towards the *Brilliant* where Max literally waited with open arms that caught her as soon as she came within reach.

One by one the rest of the away team followed Carr and Max across the gap between the shuttlecraft and the *Brilliant*, attaching themselves to the hull until they were all safely across.

"Okay we're done." Carr signalled, waving at the shuttle.

"Copy that commander." White responded as he closed the shuttle's ramp, "Heading back to the *Nightfall* now." and the shuttle began to pull away, turning back towards the *Nightfall*. Carr then looked around, focusing on the nearby air lock that stood open.

"Right then," she said, "let's get inside and see if we can figure out what happened here."

Inside the *Brilliant* was still fully lit and the ship's artificial gravity appeared fully functional but as expected there was no atmosphere and no signs of life. There were however, plenty of signs of what had happened to the crew. Walking through the interior of the *Brilliant* the away team found the bodies of the crew scattered around, some in corridors and others still at duty stations and all wore similar expressions of terror on their faces.

"Asphyxiation caused by exposure to vacuum." Emma said, her lips moving despite her words being transmitted from her brain to her combadge as she examined one of the corpses.

"So someone opened all the doors and the air rushed out into space." one of the engineers commented.

"That's how it looks to me." Carr replied, nodding in agreement.

"Lieutenant commander, in order to achieve what Crewmen Tanner has described would require command level authority to override the independent safety systems present on each air lock, the shuttle hangar and every internal door and forcefield projector." T'Lan pointed out.

"Then perhaps we should try and locate the captain." Max suggested, "Wherever her body is it may yield more clues as to what happened here."

"In that case we should start with the bridge." Carr said before tapping her combadge, "*Nightfall* this is Carr." she signalled.

"Go ahead Carr." Edwards' voice replied.

"Captain, it's a graveyard over here. T'Lan's initial scans were correct and the entire crew is dead. It looks like someone overrode all the safety systems and just vented the entire ship's air into space. We're heading for the bridge now. Hopefully we'll be able to locate the body of Captain Onaka and figure out what she was doing."

"Understood commander. Stay in touch. *Nightfall* out." Edwards said.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr," Max said, "perhaps we should split into two groups. While you take T'Lan and the EMH to the bridge, I should take my engineers to main engineering and assess the situation. Re-establishing life support may be easier from there."

"Do it." Carr replied, "But just one engineer. I want the other with us just in case we need any systems overriding."

"Yes commander." Max said, nodding once and the away team promptly split up.

The *Brilliant*'s turbolifts were inactive and so getting to the ship's bridge meant climbing through Jefferies tubes to move between decks and Carr's team found that all of the hatches used to isolate sections of these were locked open, resisting attempts to close them. Considered cramped at the best of times, the situation was made worse by the bulk of the helmets worn by the away team and it took some time for them to reach the *Brilliant*'s bridge. But when they did they found that the scene there was similar to the other public areas

of the ship that they had seen with officers lying dead at or near their posts and all looking as if they had known that they were about die.

"I do not see Captain Onaka." T'Lan commented, noticing that the only human bodies wearing command division uniforms were male.

Though there appeared to be power flowing to all of the bridge's control stations none of them were active, not even the main viewscreen that dominated the front of the bridge. Instead every console and monitor flickered with a strange pattern of swirling colours.

"Perhaps we should try the captain's ready room." Carr suggested and she started to walk towards the open door to the captain's ready room. But she halted when she saw the body of the *Brilliant's* captain slumped across her desk, "She didn't even have chance to get up." she commented.

"Perhaps there would be something to be gained by inspecting her computer." T'Lan suggested, "There must have been a reason why Captain Onaka was in her ready room rather than on the bridge."

Inside her helmet Carr nodded.

"Check the bridge control systems." she told the engineering crewman, "And Emma you check the bodies. See if any of them died of something other than having all the air emptied out of their lungs. T'Lan, you're with me."

Entering the captain's ready room Carr and T'Lan carefully lifted the body of Captain Onaka, conducting a brief examination for any signs of injury. But as far as they could tell she had suffocated along with her crew while still sat at her desk.

"Her computer is on." Carr said, looking at the screen and its seemingly random swirling pattern of colour, "Can you get this thing to make any sense?"

"One moment captain." T'Lan replied, taking out her tricorder and holding it close to the computer, "That is strange." she added.

"What is?" Carr asked.

"The wireless connection link of this terminal is functional but I cannot access the *Brilliant's* computer network with my tricorder. Instead I am just receiving a stream of incoherent data. It is most illogical. Corruption of the network ought to prevent connection being achieved as well."

"So what would cause this?" Carr said.

"The network is active and data is flowing but the usual exchange information is not taking place due to some other signal taking precedence." T'Lan explained.

Carr then noticed a PADD lying on the floor where it had fallen after being blown off the captain's desk when the ship was suddenly de-pressurised.

"Here, try this." she said, picking up the PADD and T'Lan took it from her. Like the desktop terminal, the PADD displayed a swirling pattern of colour. But unlike the fixed terminal T'Lan was easily able to disconnect the device from the ship's network before resetting it., at which point it came back on normally.

"Interesting." T'Lan said, "The data is not held in non-volatile memory. Rebooting the system will clear it."

"That's all I needed to hear." Carr said and she pressed her combadge, "Max are you in engineering yet?"

"Yes commander. Though none of the consoles are functioning. All of them appear to be suffering from an overload of data that is causing memory overflows and processing failures." Max responded.

"I think that's what we're seeing here as well." Carr said, "Look Max, T'Lan says that the data that's jamming the network up isn't held in non-volatile memory. Can you just do a full reboot and purge the system?"

"That ought to be possible lieutenant commander. But I cannot guarantee that the reboot will be successful. Some systems may remain shut down without a command override to bring them back on line. Those relating to the captain's orders and ship security for example."

"Try it anyway Max. Right now we've got no access to anything anyway." Carr said.

"Yes lieutenant commander. I shall head to the main computer core and initiate a full reboot." Max said.

"Lieutenant Commander Carr, perhaps I should accompany Lieutenant Maximillian." T'Lan suggested and Carr nodded in agreement.

"Go." she said.

4.

Max and T'Lan met outside the *Brilliant's* computer core and entered the room together. Inside they found the computer physically intact though every screen showed the same pattern of random colours as had been witnessed throughout the rest of the ship.

"There ought to be a master reset over here." Max said as he walked around the central core until he found a small access panel clearly marked with black and yellow diagonal stripes. This was not locked and Max opened it to reveal the lever behind it.

"Stand by." he broadcast to the rest of the away team, "I am about to reset the main computer. All ship's functions may cease for a short time, including artificial gravity and inertial compensation. I recommend activating magnetic boots and bracing for sudden alterations to velocity." Max then took hold of the lever and waited for a short time to give the other members of the away team to secure themselves before in one swift motion he pulled it downwards as far as it would go and the entire ship was plunged into darkness and the artificial gravity cut out.

Max released the lever and it immediately sprung back into its vertical position, at which point the *Brilliant's* computer restarted.

"I am establishing a connection to the network." T'Lan announced as the lights throughout the ship came back on and once again there was a downward pull of gravity that meant the away team did not have to rely on their magnetic boots to remain standing upright on the deck. At the same time the doors around the ship slid shut, re-establishing an air tight seal though doing nothing about the vacuum that already existed within the ship, "The flow of data is within expected parameters."

"Attention all away team members, the reboot is complete and appears to have been successful. Please report system status." Max broadcast to the rest of the away team.

"Engineering systems on line." the crewman Max had left in engineering reported, "Warp core has retained stability through the reboot but the shield emitters are still producing a fluctuating output that will block transporter functions."

"Flight systems appear to have gone into standby." the crewman on the bridge added, "But no indications of damage."

"Onaka's computer has restarted." Carr said as she looked at the computer screen and she reached out to test the command interface only for the computer to refuse to respond, "But I've got no functionality."

"It is as I feared captain." Max said, "The reboot has taken all of the command systems off line. We will need command level authorisation to bring them back on line."

"Oh great." Carr said and she took a deep breath before tapping her combadge again, "Carr to *Nightfall*." she said.

"*Nightfall* here. Go ahead commander." Edwards responded.

"Captain, Max has had to restart the *Brilliant's* main computer but now the command systems have gone off line." Carr explained and aboard the *Nightfall* Edwards smiled.

"Ah, so you need me and my command codes to bring everything back on line right?"

"Yes captain." Carr answered.

"Very well commander, I'll be with you as soon as I can suit up and take a shuttle. *Nightfall* out."

"West, inform the hangar that I need a shuttle to take me across to the *Brilliant*." Edwards said.

"Yes captain." West replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole would you join me in my ready room?" Edwards added, glancing over his shoulder as he got out of his seat and the two officers made their way from the bridge into Edwards' ready room.

"I don't suppose pointing out that regulations say a ship's captain shouldn't be going on a potentially dangerous away mission would affect your decision would it?" Cole commented as the door slid shut.

"No it wouldn't." Edwards replied, "Normally I wouldn't go but this time I'm the only one aboard who can solve our problem."

"Max could probably bypass the security system." Cole pointed out.

"Yes and he could destroy evidence in the process." Edwards said, "No, it has to be me I'm afraid. You'll have command while Carr and I are off the ship of course and in T'Lan's absence I'd like you to use West as your first officer."

"West?" Cole replied, surprised, "But Hamilton—"

"Hamilton can stay at helm." Edwards interrupted, "Look Robert, Jenna's been trying to pass that command test for well over a year now and I think her repeated failure is causing her problems. I want you to try and coach her and I think that putting her in a command position even temporarily would be a good way to get

her thinking like a commanding officer and calm her down somewhat. She's been snapping at a lot of people for the past few weeks and if things keep on this way then she's running the risk of facing charges."

"Very well captain, if those are your orders I'll do it." Cole said.

The two men then exited Edwards' ready room, returning to the bridge where Cole made his way to the captain's chair and sitting down just as Edwards was stepping into the turbolift.

"Lieutenant West," he announced, "would you kindly summon Miss Carr to the bridge to take over from you at ops?"

West looked at him and frowned.

"My shift isn't over for-" she began before Cole cut her off.

"This is a simple mission lieutenant. Miss Carr could do with the practice." he said.

"So you're just removing me from my post?" West said.

"I'm having you relieved so you can act as first officer lieutenant." Cole replied, "Though if you don't feel you're up to the task then I can always find someone who is."

"Of course commander." West said.

"Oh and have Captain Shry come here to take over at tactical." Cole added, "He can handle the ship's defences quite adequately."

Edwards held the helmet to his space suit under his arm as he walked into the hangar, expecting to find White or one of his squadron's fighter pilots at the controls of shuttlecraft waiting to take him across to the *Brilliant*. Instead he found one of the ground forces' assault shuttles in the launch position with its pilot already aboard.

"An assault shuttle?" he said to one of the hangar ground crew.

"Yes captain. It was Captain Heart's request. He wanted to give one of his pilots some more hours. She's ready to take you now."

"Okay thanks." Edwards replied before boarding the assault shuttle. Being a much larger craft than a type-nine shuttle the cockpit of the assault shuttle was separate from the rear troop carrying compartment and after boarding Edwards made his way to the cockpit where he got his first look at the pilot.

"I should have known." he said, "Hello Rebecca."

"Hi dad." his daughter replied, smiling up at him. Then she frowned, "Am I supposed to call you that?" she asked.

"Technically no." Edwards said as he sat down in the co-pilot's seat, "While on duty I should be addressed as 'Captain'. Now how about you show off the piloting skills you learned thanks to my idea of you learning to fly a shuttle while at university? I'll just be sat here judging you on everything you do like any good parent."

"Yes captain." Rebecca replied and then she activated the assault shuttle's communications, "*Nightfall* this is MACO assault shuttle one. Requesting permission to depart hangar."

"Permission granted." the reply came and Rebecca powered up the assault shuttle's engines.

Beside her Edwards smiled as the shuttle lifted smoothly off the deck and turned to exit the hangar into space. Then when it was clear of the *Nightfall*, Rebecca engaged the shuttle's impulse drive to take it towards the coasting *Brilliant*.

"I had nothing to do with your being posted to the *Nightfall* by the way." he said as Rebecca relaxed while the shuttle's computer took over most of the tasks involved in flying.

"I know." she replied, "When I graduated as a pilot I asked to be posted somewhere exotic. I thought maybe I could get a posting at the Pearl Harbour base but someone who knew who I was and who you were decided it would be funny to have me sent all the way out here."

"So how come you didn't come and see me?" Edwards asked and his daughter sighed.

"Because I want to be more than just the captain's daughter so I spent my first night aboard ship getting to know the other MACOs and the Imperial Guard as well. There were a number of Andorians at the MACO academy giving lectures so I already know a fair amount about how they work. Oh, plus of course this morning I helped carry a couple of guys to sick bay."

"There's not some bug going around that I need to know about is there?" Edwards asked.

"No, nothing like that. But someone's put some list of sex fantasies on the ship's messaging system and some people decided to try it out with some unfortunate results in some cases. Guys are putting their backs out of joint." Rebecca said. Then when she saw the shocked look on her father's face she smiled and added, "Not me though of course. I was tucked up in bed all alone with a glass of warm milk by ten."

"Yes, unfortunately I am aware of the list." Edwards replied, "Oh and you should have said midnight. I would have believed that."

Looking at the *Brilliant*, Rebecca saw a figure standing on the hull and waving.

"Looks like your Borg engineer is waiting to catch you." she said and then she smiled, "Funny, I'd have thought it would be Lieutenant Commander Carr." and Edwards scowled briefly.

"I better get going." he said, getting out of his seat and heading into the back of the assault shuttle. Putting on his helmet he double checked the seals before signalling to Rebecca, "Okay I'm set. You can decompress

and open the hatch.”

“Affirmative. Initiating decompression procedures.” Rebecca replied and Edwards heard the hiss of air being pumped out of the compartment. Then a red light appeared above one of the hatches and it slid open, revealing the *Brilliant* alongside the assault shuttle. Edwards stood in the open hatchway and steadied himself on the edges.

“Okay I’m ready.” he broadcast so that both Max and Rebecca would pick up his signal, “Here goes.” and he pushed himself through the hatch.

Suddenly weightless, Edwards smiled as he drifted through space, no longer attached to a starship of any kind. This was a rare feeling and one that he could never quite forget. However, it did not last long as the *Brilliant*’s hull loomed in front of him and then just before he collided with the vessel Max reached out to grab hold of him.

“Thanks.” Edwards said.

“My pleasure captain. Welcome to the *USS Brilliant*. Shall we proceed inside? I believe that Lieutenant Commander Carr is expecting you.” Max replied as he set Edwards down.

“After you.” Edwards said and the Borg climbed in through the open air lock hatch.

Inside the air lock, the inner hatch was closed and it was not until the outer one was closed that Max could open it.

“So the doors work again?” Edwards commented.

“Yes captain. Though I have been unable to restore life support without main computer function.”

“Do we have any idea of what happened to the computer yet?”

“No captain. Though six personnel is hardly enough to search an entire ship with. Even a smaller vessel such as the *Brilliant*. So far all we have investigated are the bridge, engineering and main computer core. I suggest that as soon as we have dealt with the interference being generated by the shield emitters we should consider beaming over a larger force to search the entire ship.”

“Agreed.” Edwards said, “I’ll have Captain’s Heart and Shry assemble their men. But first let’s see about getting the ship’s systems back on line shall we? Maybe the ship’s logs will tell us more.”

The *Brilliant*’s turbolifts were still not functioning so Max had to lead Edwards through the ship’s Jefferies tubes to the ready room where Carr was waiting for him and she smiled as soon as he entered the room.

“Captain.” she said, “Thank you for coming over here.”

“No problem. Now let’s see what I can do about this computer.”

“Perhaps I ought to return to engineering.” Max suggested, “If there is any system damage then I ought to be able to pick up on it from there.”

“Go.” Edwards replied with a nod and Max turned to leave the ready room.

“So do you have any theories about what happened to them?” Edwards said, looking at where Captain Onaka’s body had been laid out on the floor of her ready room until it could be removed properly and he made a mental note to make sure that enough people were included in the search party to remove all of the bodies as well.

“All that Emma’s been able to tell us so far is that everyone suffocated when the air was blown out into space.” Carr answered, “But we still don’t know why all of the doors were opened at they same time or how the safety systems were overridden.”

“That information must be in the ship’s computer somewhere.” Edwards said as he sat down behind the desk and looked at the computer screen to see the terminal waiting for his input, “An operation that important can’t be hidden.”

“That’s what I’m hoping captain.” Carr replied.

When Max reached engineering he found T'Lan and both of his crewmen waiting for him, all three of them attempting to get information out of the computers but without success.

"There has been no change in the system status." T'Lan told him, "Until the captain is able reinitialise it, we will have no access to any of the ship's records."

"Captain I have reached engineering." Max signalled, "Please enter your security code now."

"Copy that Max." Edwards responded as he started to manually input his Starfleet security clearance code into the computer on the desk in Captain Onaka's ready room. The computer quickly recognised this as a captain's security code and the screen changed to show the emblem of Starfleet with the words *USS Brilliant* NCC-74657 beneath it.

"Initiating full restart." the computer's voice said and Edwards smiled.

"Now let's see what we can learn." he said, looking at Carr.

Meanwhile in engineering the Starfleet crew there watched as one by one the *Brilliant's* systems came back on line and the engineering computers began to report on the status of each.

"Life support remains in stand by." T'Lan said.

"Let me see." Max replied, looking at the console in front of her, "Yes, I see. The required atmospheric mix has been overwritten somehow. All the components are set to zero. I shall adjust it and see what happens." and he began to change the settings for the atmospheric gas mix of the ship's life support.

Initially there was no perceivable effect of doing this but then a soft hissing sound became audible, confirming that an atmosphere was indeed now forming aboard the *Brilliant* and T'Lan studied her tricorder before tapping her combadge.

"Captain, my scans suggest that Max has successfully reset the *Brilliant's* life support. Atmospheric pressure currently stands at five percent of standard and should reach a safe level in four minutes. I recommend keeping your space suit sealed until then." she transmitted.

"Understood T'Lan." Edwards replied, "We'll wait to hear from you." then he looked at Carr, "Perhaps we should relocate to the bridge." he suggested.

"Good idea. We need to make sure that we have the ship under control after all." Carr replied and the pair returned to the bridge where the EMH was still waiting. At the front of the bridge the main viewscreen showed an image of the empty space in front of the *Brilliant* but the picture was not clear, instead blurring at random.

"Is the screen supposed to do that?" Emma asked.

"No it's not." Edwards replied, "What's causing that?"

"I'll check with ops." Carr said, walking to the operations console and attempting to call up a diagnostic report on the main screen. But when she tried to access the computer diagnostics the data shown on the screen in front of her changed to a swirling pattern of colours, "Uh-oh. This doesn't look good." she said.

"What's wrong?" Edwards asked.

"I've got that same weird interference that was filling every screen." Carr replied and then she tapped her combadge, "Carr to Max. Can you tell me what's wrong with the main viewscreen on the bridge? I'm at ops and the system still looks corrupted."

"One moment lieutenant commander." Max replied, "I will attempt to interface directly with the network and find out." and he held out his fist towards the console he was looking at. A pair of tubes suddenly extended from between the base of his fingers and extended to the console itself, allowing Max to use his Borg implants to make a direct neural connection with the computer, "Interesting." he said, "For a system largely inactive there is a large amount of data traffic present though most of it is not of a format used by Starfleet. In fact it appears that there is-" but before he could finish his sentence Max suddenly began to shake violently as a sudden surge of power passed into him and there were sparks from some of his implants as they overloaded.

"Lieutenant!" T'Lan exclaimed and she dived towards him, knocking him away from the console and breaking the connection allowing the power to enter his body.

All of a sudden there was a humming from the *Brilliant's* warp core that grew in volume as the core itself began to glow brightly before a slight shudder indicated that the ship had just jumped to warp speed.

At the same time as the *Brilliant* made its jump to warp speed all of the equipment in one of the ship's workshops that had previously been dark and lifeless activated. The first thing that happened was that the replicators energised, creating basic mechanical limbs that thrashed about until they fell from the replicators onto the floor where they continued to move about seemingly at random at first. But as more components and items of Starfleet issue equipment were replicated without there being anyone in the room to direct the

operation these separate parts began to pull themselves closer together.

Aboard the *Nightfall*, the bridge crew watched the *Brilliant* vanish in a sudden flash of light.

"What the hell just happened?" Cole asked.

"The *Brilliant* just went to warp." Nikki replied from the ops console, "Warp six. Warp seven. Warp eight."

"Helm, follow them." West said before Cole could give the order.

"Err, we can't keep up with an Intrepid-class starship at full speed." Hamilton pointed out.

"No but we can hope that something happens to force them back to impulse power or at least limits how fast they can go." Cole said, "Now they've already got a head start of a few million kilometres so get us after them lieutenant."

"Yes sir. Pursuit course locked in. Taking us to warp nine point eight." Hamilton said before engaging the *Nightfall's* own warp drive.

"Miss Carr, try raising the *Brilliant*." West said and Nikki activated the *Nightfall's* subspace communications.

"*USS Brilliant* this is *USS Nightfall*. Do you read me?" she transmitted but there was no response from the fleeing starship.

"Lieutenant West I'd like to speak with you in the ready room." Cole said, getting up from the captain's chair

"He's angry about you giving orders." the voice of The Controller told West, "He doesn't value you." and West glared at Cole for a moment before following him into the captain's ready room.

"Is this about me telling Bradley and Nikki what to do?" she said, scowling as soon as the door slid shut behind her, "Why the hell make me your first officer if I'm not to-"

"Actually no. Everything you did was exactly what I'd expect from a first officer. Even one I've only got because Captain Edwards ordered me to use you. You really need to lighten up lieutenant. No-one here is out to get you."

"Then why drag me in here?" West asked.

"Because I wanted to ask whether you thought Nikki is capable enough to remain at ops or if we should get another of your staff up here and I thought it would be better to ask that in private than in front of her."

"Oh." West said.

"Oh indeed. Now can Nikki be relied on and can I rely on you to stop thinking I'm trying to trip you up?"

"Yes sir." West replied, "And I think Nikki will manage just fine. She's already done her science and helm division rotations so she's used to bridge duties."

Just then Cole's combadge activated.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole," King's voice said, "it's Doctor King."

"Yes doctor. How can I help you?"

"I think you should get down here to sick bay." King told him and Cole sighed.

"Can this wait? We're really busy up here right now." he said.

"Chasing after the *Brilliant* I presume." King said, "In which case you may want to speak with someone who was on board when it went to warp."

Cole and West looked at one another.

"Emma." West said.

"Of course, the link between the EMH program in our computer and the physical body." Cole added, "It would have been severed as soon as the *Brilliant* got out of range. Come on lieutenant, let's go find out what happened over there."

Stepping into sick bay, Cole and West found that King had activated the EMH and the female appearing hologram was stood beside him.

"I got a notification of a fault in the EMH when the *Brilliant* went to warp." King said, "So I tried activating it and she appeared right in front of me."

"Emma, can you tell us what happened?" West asked.

"I was on the bridge of the *Brilliant* and then I was here." Emma replied.

"But do you know what happened to cause that?" Cole said.

"No. The captain had arrived to use his access code to restart the computer system and that seemed to work. But I remember there was something wrong with the main view screen." the EMH explained.

"How could the main view screen make the ship go to warp?" King said, frowning.

"It can't." West told him, "But a single computer fault could affect two different systems. Emma, what was wrong with the view screen?"

"The image was wobbling. Lieutenant Carr tried investigating but she just got a strange pattern that had been on all the screens when we first went on board so the captain had Lieutenant Maximillian investigate as well. He said he was plugging himself into the computer in engineering and then I was here." West froze, remembering the pattern she had seen when she had attempted to use the *Brilliant's* command codes to take control of the ship.

"Tell them now and they'll want to know why you hid the information from them." the voice in her head said.

"So Max must have tripped something hidden in the computer." Cole said. The he looked at West, "We should get back to the bridge." he told her, "Maybe there's more information available now."

"What the hell is going on down there?" Edwards demanded, "We've gone to warp and the EMH just collapsed."

"So has Lieutenant Maximillian captain." T'Lan responded, "It appears that he triggered some sort of power surge that has incapacitated him."

"Get him to sick bay." Edwards ordered, "We'll meet you there."

"Yes captain." T'Lan said. Then she looked at the two engineering crewmen, "Assist me." she told them before they picked up the inert Borg and started to carry him to sick bay.

With the computer fully restarted, the *Brilliant's* turbolifts were now fully functional once more and both the team in engineering and the team from the bridge reached sick bay at about the same time, each one bearing a body between them.

"I'm guessing that the EMH lost her connection as soon as we passed out of range of the *Nightfall*." Carr said as she and Edwards lifted the synthetic body onto a biobed.

"That is likely lieutenant commander." T'Lan responded while she and the two engineers also placed Max on one.

"What's the atmosphere like now?" Edwards asked and T'Lan quickly checked her tricorder.

"Breathable for now." she answered, "We may remove our helmets if you wish."

"What do you mean 'for now'?" Carr said as she took off her helmet.

"I mean that whatever situation occurred that caused the air inside the *Brilliant* to be vented into space could possibly occur again." T'Lan explained.

"Okay everyone can remove their helmets if they wish to." Edwards said, "After all we only have twenty four hours life support in each one and that may need to be preserved. But make sure you keep your helmet with you at all times just in case there's another loss of pressure." then as soon as he had removed his helmet he added, "Activate emergency medical hologram."

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." the *Brilliant's* EMH said as it materialised in the centre of sickbay. Unlike Emma, who was a mark VII EMH, the *Brilliant* used an older mark VI version that used a male avatar and this looked at the *Nightfall's* crew with a confused look on his face, "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Captain David Edwards from the *USS Nightfall*," Edwards answered, "and these are some of my crew. We came aboard to investigate why contact with your vessel was lost and now our engineer is injured."

"He appeared to be electrocuted." T'Lan added.

"Then step aside and let me treat him." the EMH said and he walked towards the biobed. But when the crew of the *Nightfall* stepped aside he came to a halt, "Has anyone told you that your engineer is a Borg?" he exclaimed, "Why is there a Borg aboard the *Brilliant*? Do security know?"

"Max is no longer part of the collective," Carr replied, "and the crew of your ship are all dead as far as we know."

"Can you tell us what happened to them?" Edwards asked.

"What do I look like to you? An emergency secretarial hologram? I'm programmed to be a doctor, not a record keeper. Now let me treat this patient. Assuming that I can of course. If there's anything wrong with his cybernetic implants then they're outside the area of my programmed expertise."

The Starfleet officers stood back to allow the EMH to examine Max with a medical tricorder.

"Can you tell what's wrong with him?" Carr asked.

"It's like she said." the EMH replied, glancing at T'Lan, "He was electrocuted. A major power surge has disabled most of the nanoprobe inside his body and damaged several critical components. As a result of this his body has entered a form of self imposed stasis until the number of nanoprobe rebuilds itself to a point where they can regenerate his damaged systems."

"How long will that take?" Edwards asked.

"I estimate that he will be back on his feet in eight to twelve hours." the EMH answered, "Though I cannot guarantee that. There is something wrong with the remaining nanoprobe. They do not register as Starfleet records indicate they should."

"That is because Lieutenant Maximillian's body does not contain Borg nanoprobe." T'Lan said, "Instead it contains nanites of Federation origin."

"Really? Why is that?" the EMH asked.

"Because we use them on our ship." Edwards said, "Now can you tell us what happened to this ship?"

"I would suggest that you ask one of the crew." the EMH replied, "I hadn't been activated for six weeks before you brought me on line now and-" and then the hologram itself of the EMH began to discolour and flicker,

"Wait, what's happening? Why am I-" and then the hologram vanished.

"What's going on?" Carr said as T'Lan hurried to the nearest computer console.

"I cannot see any obvious damage to the EMH system." she said, "However, an outside application is using

up its processing power and memory capacity.”

“Can you track it to its source T'Lan?” Edwards asked.

“No captain. In fact I cannot even perform a network connection test. It appears that the bandwidth is being used up by something far bigger than any program I would expect to find within a ship's computer.”

“Then we need to search the entire ship.” Edwards said.

“We also need to make sure that nothing happens to decompress the ship again.” Carr added and Edwards nodded.

“Welding the doors should do that.” one of the two engineering crewmen suggested, “A brief spot weld on every external hatch and pulling the power from the motors will make it impossible for them to be opened whether you want to or not.”

“Okay Mayer, get to it.” Edwards told him, “Grab whatever equipment you need from engineering and get started on it. Lieutenant Commander Carr and I will start at the prow and we'll meet in the middle. We'll also see if we can find out where we're heading. If there is a specific destination then it may give us some clues as to what's going on here. T'Lan I want you and Crewman Tanner to start searching from the aft of the ship to see if you can find anything that could be causing this problem.”

“Yes captain.” T'Lan replied, reaching to her belt and unhooking her tricorder, “Crewman, with me.”

"I've lost the *Brilliant* on visual scanning." Nikki announced as the Intrepid-class ship continued to increase its lead over the *Nightfall*.

"What about long range scans?" West asked.

"The ship's still visible on subspace scanners but there's no ID being broadcast. If we lose her then we probably won't be able to find her again." Nikki said.

"Commander the *Brilliant*'s warp field is reading stronger than it ought to at this distance." the officer filling in for T'Lan at the science station said added.

"Can you offer an explanation for why?" Cole said.

"I think that the warp core is being pushed too hard. The ship appears to be moving at warp nine point nine nine eight."

"Intrepids are normally limited to nine point nine seven five." West pointed out and Cole nodded.

"Somebody's been making changes to the warp drive." he said.

"That may work for us commander." Hamilton pointed out, "If the warp drive is being pushed harder than it's designed for then the ship will have to drop to impulse eventually to prevent the drive burning out. Even running at anything over nine point seven five will limit an Intrepid-class to twelve hours of warp travel before it has to drop to impulse and that's with a full engineering crew running it."

"Will the extra power going into the warp drive be dangerous to the people on board?" Nikki asked.

"Only if they stand right next to the core for a prolonged period." Hamilton told her.

"I'm sure they'll be fine. They all have space suits and they're shielded against radiation." Cole said, "Now do we have any information on where the *Brilliant* is heading to?"

"Her heading is one-one-five mark seventeen." Nikki said.

"That takes them into the neutral zone." Nayal commented.

"Home." The Controller said.

"Iconia." West muttered.

"What was that lieutenant?" Cole asked.

"What?" West replied.

"You said something."

"Something about Iconia." Shry commented from behind the two officers.

"What heading would take us to Iconia?" Cole said, looking at Nikki.

"Err." Nikki replied as she access the *Nightfall*'s navigational database, "Ah here we are. One-one-five mark-" and then she paused before looking up and adding, "seventeen."

"So since we're following them that means we're heading there as well." Nayal said.

"That can't be a coincidence." Shry said.

"No it can't." Cole responded, "You can count the number of Federation ships to have visited Iconia on the fingers of one hand."

"Especially if your species has seventeen fingers on each hand." Hamilton commented.

"Whatever is controlling that ship doesn't care about leaving Iconia, just getting there." The Controller pointed out, "The crew are just wasting their time in trying to prevent that."

"The *Brilliant* is too fast." West said, "We'll never catch her before she reaches Iconia."

"What about another ship?" Hamilton said, "Maybe there's someone else that can intercept them."

"Moving at that speed it's not going to be easy." Cole replied, "But there's no harm in trying to find out. Nikki, what other ships are between us and the Neutral Zone?"

"The *Ek'Duv* is six light years away at one-two-zero mark twelve." Nikki said.

"Hail them." Cole ordered and moments later an image of the Vulcan Captain Sannel of the *USS Ek'Duv*, "Captain Sannel." he added.

"Lieutenant Commander Cole." Sannel replied, "The *Nightfall* appears to have undergone several changes in its senior staff that I was unaware of. Though I see you still have the Romulan aboard." and Nayal attempted to avoid looking straight at the view screen while Sannel glared in her direction, "Where is Captain Edwards?"

"He went aboard the *Brilliant* to try and use his security clearance code to reactivate its computer." Cole explained, "But something's gone wrong and the *Brilliant* has gone to warp, taking with it the captain, Lieutenant Commander Carr, T'Lan and Lieutenant Maximillian as well as two crewmen. The *Brilliant* is moving too fast for us to catch up with them but we were hoping that you might be able to cut them off."

"What is the vessel's speed and heading?" Sannel asked.

"They're moving at warp nine point nine eight on a heading directly towards Iconia on one-one-five mark seventeen. She's running without a transponder though." Cole told him and Sannel looked at one of his

officers that was not shown on the view screen.

"Yes, we have the *Brilliant's* warp signature on our sensors." he said, "Providing the vessel maintains its course and speed then we will be in a position to intercept them in nine point two hours. However, any significant deviation in heading or an increase in speed to warp nine point nine eight three or greater will prevent us from being able to intercept them."

"Understood." Cole said, "Thank you for your help."

"There is no need to thank me commander." Sannel replied, "Regulations require me to do so. *Ek'Duv* out." and then the image of the Vulcan captain vanished.

"Typical Vulcan." Shry commented, "They care about no-one."

"Maybe he would have been friendlier if Nayal hadn't tried to seduce him right in front of his wife at the *Ek'Duv's* launching ceremony." West added, peering around Cole to look at the Romulan.

Reaching the *Brilliant's* stern, T'Lan and Tanner stopped while she began to scan the area with her tricorder, looking for any signs of abnormal activity from the ship's systems. However, there appeared to be little activity at all, with almost all of the nearby equipment in stand by modes waiting to be activated and so T'Lan increased the range she was covering with her scan. But as soon as she did this her tricorder began to emit a strange whistling sound.

"What's that?" Tanner asked.

"I am getting feedback on the scan." T'Lan replied, "There is something refracting the energy of the scans and returning it in an abnormal manner." and then she tapped her combadge, "Captain this is T'Lan."

"Go ahead." Edwards replied.

"Captain there is something towards the stern of the *Brilliant* that is interfering with my tricorder. I believe it may be centred in the shuttle bay." T'Lan said.

"Do you need back up?" Edwards asked.

"No captain. I do not believe that there is any danger." T'Lan answered, "I will contact you when I have more information. T'Lan out." and then she shut off her combadge and started to walk in the direction of the entrance to the shuttle hangar, "Come with me Crewman Tanner." she called out.

"Yeah sure." he replied, drawing his phaser from its holster on his waist and checking its setting.

When they reached the *Brilliant's* shuttle bay T'Lan and Tanner found all of the shuttles lined up in the storage hangar, all apparently ready for use. The only indications of damage to any of them were where they had been struck by equipment not properly secured when the *Brilliant's* doors had all been opened together and the air had been blown out into space. T'Lan took out her tricorder again and activated it, causing both her and Tanner to flinch when it produced a sudden loud screeching sound.

"We are close." she said, folding the tricorder again and returning it to her belt, "The source of the interference is in the main shuttle bay itself." and she started to walk towards the larger compartment from where shuttles were launched and recovered. As soon as she passed through the large doorway separating the storage and maintenance hangar from the launch and recovery bay T'Lan found herself looking at a small vessel that was obviously not part of the *Brilliant's* complement of shuttlecraft.

T'Lan recognised the vessel as a type of courier ship about the same size as a Danube-class runabout that was built on a number of Federation worlds and popular with private operators for transporting small cargoes and limited numbers of passengers across interstellar distances. This particular ship had no visible markings, a clear violation of Federation shipping regulations and its hatch was wide open.

"What's that doing here?" Tanner said as he entered the launch bay behind T'Lan.

"I do not yet know." she replied, "I have not been able to examine the vessel more closely." and she walked closer.

"Wait, are you sure this is a good idea commander?" Tanner asked, "What if this ship is what's causing all the trouble here?"

"Then we will soon find out." T'Lan replied, "Though perhaps as an additional safety precaution we should put our helmets back on and engage our magnetic boots." and she paused to don her helmet again before activating her magnetic boots to clamp herself firmly to the deck. Tanner copied her actions and the pair then continued towards the small vessel. T'Lan simply walked towards it as fast as the magnets on the soles of her boots would allow while Tanner was more cautious, lagging behind her as he watched for any signs of activity from the ship or elsewhere in the launch bay.

As soon as she reached the ship T'Lan climbed through the hatch and found herself in the compact cockpit where as well as the flight controls and a pair of seats there was also a compact bunk and a basic replicator. With none of these looking out of the ordinary she turned towards the hatch in the rear wall of the cockpit and headed for that, opening it and looking through she saw that the cargo bay on the other side was empty apart from a single rectangular block of some black coloured material lay on the floor.

"Commander, what's that?" Tanner asked.

"I am unsure." T'Lan answered as she took out her tricorder, "However, I do have a suspicion." and then she opened her tricorder just long enough for it to start screeching before she shut it off again, "The captain

needs to be told." she said as she turned to leave the ship.

"Can't we just call him from here?" Tanner asked.

"No crewman. The contents of this ship's cargo hold will disrupt any communication system operating in close proximity." T'Lan replied as she exited the ship. Only once she had walked a few metres from the small transport ship did she activate her combadge again, "Captain Edwards." she said.

"Go ahead T'Lan." he replied.

"Captain, Crewman Tanner and I have located a small transport vessel that has been brought aboard the *Brilliant*. It's hold contains what I believe is a form of crystalline quartz with extremely strong energy refracting properties." T'Lan told him.

"Can you tell what it's for?" Edwards asked.

"No captain. I am aware of the substance and although it is rare and difficult to produce most of its uses are entirely theoretical, thus it has very little value. Its energy refracting nature prevents it from being replicated or moved via a transport since the feedback it would create would burn out any such device attempting to do so. It can only be mined and processed without modern equipment and must be physically moved from one place to another. While it could be used to confuse sensor systems it makes a poor stealth material since its presence is easily detectable from the feedback." T'Lan said.

"You said 'most' of its uses." Edwards said, "I know you T'Lan so that means you do know of at least one practical application for it. What is it?"

"I do not know exactly what purpose it serves captain, but my research has indicated that small quantities of the material have been found in Iconian gateways."

Edwards looked at Carr.

"Oh great." he said, "That's just what I needed to hear. Iconians."

"Captain, do you think that there could be Iconian agents aboard the *Brilliant*. Or some of those golems of theirs?" Carr replied.

"I'm not sure." Edwards said, "T'Lan, have you uncovered any evidence of an Iconian presence aboard the *Brilliant*?"

"No captain. Though so far Crewman Tanner and I have only carried out a brief inspection of the vessel and its contents."

"Okay T'Lan." Edwards said, "Look, if there's any chance that there could be Iconians aboard then we need to be careful. I want you to find out all you can from that ship and then head straight for the *Brilliant's* bridge. Carr and I are going to go there now and see what we can get from the ship's logs. Assuming they're accessible of course."

"Yes captain. But what about Crewman Mayer?"

"Find out how far he's got in sealing the ship's external hatches. Then get him to meet you in the shuttle bay. We'll worry about the rest of the hatches later once we can protect him."

"Understood captain. I will let you know of my findings. T'Lan out."

It took Mayer just a few minutes to seal each door and disable its motor, guaranteeing that it could not be opened without first physically repairing the damage. He was just finishing removing the power lines from a motor on an airlock on the *Brilliant's* port side when he heard the sound of heavy footsteps behind him. They did not sound like the footsteps of someone wearing a Starfleet issue spacesuit though and he paused, looking towards the nearby junction the sound was coming from. His first thoughts were that Max had recovered and was coming to assist him in his task.

"Lieutenant Maximillian?" he called out, "Is that you?" but there was no reply, only more footsteps. Cautiously Mayer got to his feet and moved towards the junction, leaving his helmet by the hatch he had just welded in place, "Hello? Who's there?" he said and his hand moved towards his phaser, resting on top of the weapon. When he reached the junction he looked around it and found himself staring straight at what had made the footprints.

"Good God!" he exclaimed as he drew his phaser. But he was too slow in getting the weapon ready for use and he just had time to scream before his blood sprayed across the wall behind him.

7.

In the small transport vessel's hold T'Lan examined the strange black block more closely. Unable to use her tricorder or any other electronic scanning or measuring device to study the block she was forced to rely on more primitive means, physically measuring each edge to get accurate information on its size before recording them on her PADD.

"Interesting." she said as she looked at the numbers she had recorded for the block's dimensions.

"What is?" Tanner asked as he appeared in the open hatchway of the transport.

"The physical dimensions of this block are twenty one point three centimetres by eighty five point two centimetres by one hundred and ninety-one point seven centimetres." T'Lan replied and Tanner frowned.

"What's so special about that?" he said, confused.

"The ratio of the dimensions is one by four by nine." T'Lan said, "The squares of one, two and three."

"Is that significant?" Tanner said.

"I do not think so. However, it is reminiscent of a movie that Lieutenant Hamilton once selected when it was his turn for movie night."

"Yeah, I think I remember it. Confused the hell out of me. I preferred the killer tribble movies myself." Tanner replied, "Anyway, I can't get hold of Mayer."

"When did you last speak with him?" T'Lan asked.

"Right after he'd picked up a welding torch from engineering. He said he was going to start with the port side hatches, then do the starboard ones."

"We should leave this vessel and try once more." T'Lan said before exiting the transport to get away from the block before activating her combadge, "Crewman Mayer, do you read me?" she transmitted but there was no response, "Crewman Mayer, come in please." she added. Then when there was no reply again she looked at Tanner, "We must inform the captain." she said and she tapped her combadge again, "Captain Edwards do you read me?"

"Right here T'Lan." Edwards answered.

"Captain have you had any contact with Crewman Mayer since our last conversation?" T'Lan asked.

"No I haven't, can't you raise him?"

"No captain. Both Crewman Tanner and I have attempted to make contact but he does not answer."

"I don't like the sound of that T'Lan. You and Tanner need to check it out. I doubt a search for combadges is going to be of any use given the number of them scattered around the ship so you'll have to do it the old fashioned way. But be careful, if you encounter any Iconians then don't try and deal with them yourselves unless you're sure you have the advantage. Pull back and contact me and Commander Carr. You may want to stop by security and pick up some more firepower."

"Yes captain. We will do that. T'Lan out." T'Lan replied before shutting off her combadge and drawing her phaser, "Crewman Tanner, with me. We are heading for security."

Entering the *Brilliant's* bridge, Edwards and Carr made their way to the operations station and Carr attempted to call up the ship's logs. However, the display did not remain stable and rather than a neat list of log entries being presented to the two officers the information was clearly incomplete with numerous files headings presented as strings of random text instead of detailed titles. Furthermore the screen itself flickered and changed colours randomly.

"I can't make head nor tail of this." Carr said, shaking her head.

"We need to get the information onto a closed system." Edwards said and he looked around until he spotted an isolinear chip resting on top of a nearby console, "Here, copy all you can to this and I'll go and get that PADD from Onaka's ready room."

"Thanks." Carr replied, taking the chip from Edwards and plugging it into the console in front of her while he headed for the ready room. Carr then began to copy as many of the log files as she could to the isolinear chip, starting with the most recent and working her way backwards, skipping over those that appeared corrupted just in case the damage was able to spread to other files stored on the same device. When Edwards returned with the PADD Carr had a dozen log files on the isolinear chip and she removed it from the console to pass back to him. Edwards then plugged the chip into the PADD and turned it on, moving to search the isolinear chip's contents immediately.

"Well the data looks intact." he said, "Whatever's affecting the main computer system obviously can't survive being powered down outside of the main core."

"So what can Captain Onaka's logs tell us captain?" Carr asked.

"There's a flagged entry." he answered as he looked through the files, "An encounter with another vessel."

"The transport down in the hangar perhaps?" Carr suggested.

"That would be my guess." Edwards said, "The ship appeared to be operating in violation of Federation shipping laws and scans of the ship produced random feedback that looked like some sort of jamming so the *Brilliant* intercepted it and brought it aboard. A search revealed no contraband cargo, just a single pilot and a block of material that was the source of the sensor feedback in the hold."

"Does it say what happened to the pilot?" Carr asked as Edwards continued to search through the logs.

"It looks like that's as far as the log goes before the files were corrupted. He may have just done a disappearing act."

"But why leave his ship and cargo?" Carr said.

"True. Plus we don't know for certain that the pilot was an Iconian. If he was just one of their agents then maybe he died along with the crew. His body could be somewhere aboard this ship still."

When T'Lan and Tanner reached the *Brilliant's* security section they immediately bypassed the main office and made their way to the armoury where they found the racks of phaser weapons still in place.

"How many should we take?" Tanner asked as T'Lan removed a rifle from the nearest rack and passed the weapon to him.

"I do not understand your question." she replied, taking a second rifle for herself.

"I mean are we just taking weapons for ourselves? Or should we take a couple of extras for the captain and Lieutenant Commander Carr?" Tanner said, opening a box of power cells and removing one of them from the charging point inside with which to load his rifle. Then he began to take more power cells from the box and put them into pockets on his space suit.

"You make a valid point." T'Lan said, "Since there are plenty of weapons here I would suggest that we take additional ones for Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Carr." and then she slung the rifle she had just loaded over her shoulder and removed another from the rack, "Crewman Tanner, perhaps we should find something in which to carry these weapons." she said and he nodded.

"I'm sure there'll be something around here we can use. I'll be right back." he said before turning to leave the armoury.

Outside he headed for the main security office, hoping that there would be at least one suitably sized bag there for transporting evidence. However, as he approached the office he heard a humming sound from ahead and he paused and raised his rifle.

"Commander." he hissed, hoping that T'Lan would hear him but she did not reply, "Commander." he repeated but again there was no response and he briefly considered using his combadge to communicate with her. But then he decided that more information would be useful before he alerted T'Lan and so he started to creep forwards, looking down the sight of his rifle as he went. The humming sound became louder the closer Tanner got to the main security office until the room itself came into view and he gasped at what he saw.

"Commander!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

Hearing the shout, T'Lan hurried out of the armoury with a rifle in her hands and another still slung over her shoulder and she ran towards the source of the noise. T'Lan found Tanner standing at the entrance to the main security officer with his rifle still in his hands but lowered.

"Crewman, what is wrong?" she asked.

"Look." he replied, pointing across the office and T'Lan peered around him to where the *Brilliant's* holding cells were located. The force field across one of these was active, the source of the humming sound and inside the body of a man was slumped against the wall, his arm inserted into a hole in the wall where a panel had been removed while a severed hand lay on the floor beside him.

"Fascinating." T'Lan said as she unhooked her helmet from her belt and set it down on a nearby console before she walked up to the cell for a better look, "When the ship was decompressed the force field must have remained active, preventing the air from being drawn out of the cell."

"Well he still looks pretty dead to me." Tanner said. Then he frowned, "But how come there's no blood? Someone hacked off his hand and there's no blood."

"Perhaps because he was dead before it was removed crewman." T'Lan replied and she reached out to shut off the force field before entering the cell.

Despite the lifeless appearance of the body slumped by the wall T'Lan kept her rifle trained on it. The body remained motionless as T'Lan crouched down in front of it and then picked up the severed hand. The hand had been crudely removed from the body's arm at the wrist and the manner in which the flesh had been torn indicated that it had not been done with a blade. Instead it had the look of having simply being ripped away. T'Lan then set the hand down and reached out to take hold of the body's other hand, the one that was still attached. T'Lan focused on the nails of this hand and beneath them she saw chunks of flesh that could only have come from the wrist of the other arm. This meant only one thing; the dead man had ripped off his own hand.

"This wound is self inflicted." she said as Tanner watched her from just outside the cell.

"Self inflicted? But how could someone just rip off their own hand?" he replied, "Never mind how disgusting the idea is, how strong would you have to be to do it?"

Meanwhile T'Lan looked at the open wall panel. The walls of the cell were not designed to make dismantling them easy or they would have made poor barriers to a prisoner wanting to escape. But it was clear from the way that the panel that had been removed and then just dropped on the floor was bent it had been simply pulled away from the wall,

"About as strong as someone would have to be to rip off a wall panel." she said before she carefully reached into the hole in the wall and grabbed hold of the dead man's arm before slowly dragging it back out so that she could inspect the wound. But as the stump emerged from within the hole T'Lan found that there was a thick cluster of white fibres extending from it and still trailing back into the hole, "It is as I suspected." she said as she recognised the fibres for what they were, "This man was host to an Iconian. His body was dead before the Iconian removed the hand to allow it access to the data lines inside this wall. His body was probably only being preserved by the Iconian synthetic flesh which explains the lack of any blood." All of a sudden there was a flash of light and the humming sound started up again as the force field across the cell reactivated without warning.

"What the hell?" Tanner exclaimed as he stepped back from the energy barrier.

"Crewman Tanner, why have you locked me in?" T'Lan asked, standing up and turning around.

"Don't look at me." Tanner responded, "I didn't touch anything."

"Then please deactivate the force field." T'Lan ordered.

"Sure." he said and he was just reaching out for the control when all of a sudden the door to the security office opened.

Two figures entered through the open doorway. Both of them were obviously mechanical in their construction and vaguely humanoid, though they lacked a distinct head. The machines appeared to have been cobbled together out of spare parts and amongst their structure T'Lan spotted numerous common pieces of Starfleet issue equipment such as motors like those used on doors and hydraulic pistons used to position heavier pieces of equipment. Neither figure had a head in the truest sense of the word, but instead both had parts of Starfleet tricorders set into the tops of their torsos and T'Lan guessed that these were functioning as sensory gathering systems.

"Crewman Tanner. Quickly, release me." T'Lan said and he looked down at the control panel for the cell's force field. But before he could shut down the force field the closest of the machines lashed out at him with a mechanical arm and Tanner was sent flying across the room, his rifle clattering to the floor. His path took him over the console where T'Lan's helmet lay and he knocked it off, landing on top of it as he landed on the floor on the other side of the console.

Rather than move to finish off Tanner the machine instead turned towards where the phaser rifle had landed and despite it being well out of reach of the Starfleet crewman it walked up to the rifle and stomped on it several times, smashing it to pieces.

Meanwhile Tanner drew his sidearm and reset the phaser to a high level before firing it. The beam struck the machine that had attacked him and burned a hole right through, causing an explosion that created a shower of sparks as it toppled forwards and landed heavily on the floor as a pile of burning wreckage. But while Tanner was dealing with that machine the second one charged directly at him and reached down to grab him by the hand that he was holding the phaser in. The machine promptly tightened its grip and Tanner screamed as the bones in his hand were crushed. At this point the machine lashed out with its other arm and struck Tanner on the side of his head, knocking it sharp enough to snap his neck.

Unable to offer the unfortunate crewman any assistance, T'Lan could only watch from inside the cell as the machine killed him before turning to face in her direction. Instinctively T'Lan dropped to her knees and picked up her rifle from the floor, aiming it at the machine. With the cell's force field active she could not shoot at the machine without risking the energy being reflected back towards her but at the same time the machine could not reach her to attack her and so she waited for it to drop the force field and hoped that she could disable it before it managed to reach her.

The machine walked right up to the force field and then twisted as if it was inspecting the energy barrier. T'Lan saw its arm move and she prepared herself to fire, expecting the machine to shut down the force field at any moment. But instead it just reached forwards until its hand met the force field and could go no further. Then it simply turned around and exited the security office, leaving T'Lan still locked inside the cell.

As soon as the door slid shut behind the machine on its way out T'Lan reached for her combadge and was about to warn Edwards and Carr about the machine when she paused to consider exactly what had happened. The machines had begun by attacking Tanner but the first of them had delayed to destroy his phaser rifle even though he could not reach it and this had allowed Tanner the chance to destroy that machine before he was killed. Then for some reason T'Lan herself had been left alone and it occurred to her that the forcefield covering the entrance to the cell may have had something to do with this.

"It could not see me." she said to herself, looking around the edge of the cell door. Then she tapped her combadge, "Captain Edwards, do you read me?" she transmitted.

"Right here T'Lan, but your signal isn't very clear." Edwards replied.

"That may have something to do with the force field captain. I am currently locked inside a holding cell in

security." T'Lan told him.

"What are you doing in a cell?"

Edwards asked.

"Speaking with you via my combadge captain." T'Lan said.

"I mean how did you get to be locked inside the cell T'Lan?" Edwards said.

"Crewman Tanner discovered a corpse in here and I came in to investigate. It was then that the force field was activated from some remote source, at which point two bipedal mechanical constructions entered the security office. Crewman Tanner was able to destroy one but he has been killed by the other. Captain, I suspect that Crewman Mayer may have met a similar fate." T'Lan explained.

"T'Lan were these Iconian robots?" Carr asked, "Like the ones we encountered defending their outpost?"

"No lieutenant commander. Their appearance was of having been improvised from components available aboard the *Brilliant*. I suspect that the corpse in the cell is of the pilot of the transport ship in the *Brilliant's* hangar and it is clear that he was an Iconian agent. After being placed in this cell he interfaced his artificial systems with the ship's computer network and I believe that he has transferred his consciousness to the ship's computer. In effect he has total control over the ship. This consciousness will be stored in the main core but I believe that in order to function properly it needs to make use of the combined processing power of many of the ship's systems. Hence the disruption all across the ship."

"That would explain how come the atmosphere was vented." Edwards said, "With complete control over the computer the Iconian could easily open all the doors."

"Quite captain." T'Lan agreed, "But given that it has not already done so again, I would suggest that it is trying a different tactic this time."

"You mean killer robots." Edwards responded.

"To put it crudely, yes captain and you and Lieutenant Commander Carr should be aware that there is at least one further robot loose on the ship and it is likely to be heading for you. I have evaluated the machines' actions and it is my opinion that they are tracking the technology in our equipment. One of them favoured destroying a dropped phaser before Tanner was killed. On the other hand I was ignored behind this force field. I do not think that the machine on the other side was aware of my presence because of it. This also suggests that the Iconian is unable to make full use of the ship's internal sensors. I became trapped only when I disturbed the connection of the agent's body to the ship's computer network. However, after that the Iconian machine was not informed that I was still in here."

"Okay. So we'll watch out for them." Edwards said, "But what about you?"

"I should be perfectly safe in this cell captain. The only risk will come when I effect an escape."

"And you think you can manage that T'Lan?" Carr asked.

"Yes lieutenant commander. Though this cell was designed to be as escape proof as possible it was not designed with prisoners able to rip wall panels off with their bare hands or one that is equipped with a phaser and other equipment in mind."

"Very well T'Lan." Edwards said, "Get out of that cell as quickly as you can and then join us on the bridge."

"Yes captain. I will join you as soon as I can. T'Lan out." T'Lan replied before shutting off her combadge.

Then she started to look around the cell as she plotted how she would make her escape.

a.

"Come in." Cole said from behind the desk in Captain Edwards' ready room and the door opened to allow West to enter, "Ah West, what's our status?" he asked as she sat down.

"Max is a genius you know." she replied.

"Yes, it has something to do with all those implants in his skull. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well that combined with his ability to literally plug himself into the ship's warp cores gives him a far better understanding of them than the rest of his staff put together. I've been down to engineering to see how they're doing and they tell me that we won't be able to maintain warp nine point eight for much longer. We're not looking at a warp core breach or anything catastrophic like that but we will have to drop out of warp while engineering performs an overhaul. Plus apparently there's a room down there that only Max can get into. The specs say that it's just storage or an auxiliary workshop but no-one's been in there since the ship launched. Rumour is that Max is storing the captain's stash of Romulan ale in there."

"What if we reduce our speed?" Cole said, ignoring the comment about the sealed room.

"Yes, I asked them that. If we reduce to warp eight then they can take one warp core off line at a time and perform maintenance on it. That'll give us about a day extra but we'll be falling even further behind the *Brilliant*." West answered and Cole sighed.

"Damned if we do and damned if we don't." he said, "Well warp eight is still better than nothing and the *Ek'Duv* is still on course to intercept the *Brilliant* anyway."

"It doesn't feel right letting them do the work though." West replied.

"No it doesn't. But this time I don't see that we-" Cole began before the door to the ready room chimed again,

"Come in." he said and this time the door opened to reveal Doctor King.

"I need a word." he said sternly as he walked in, reaching out behind him to manually close the door rather than wait for it to happen automatically.

"I'll let you two get on." West said and she started to get to her feet before King placed a hand on her shoulder.

"No Jenna, I think you should stay." he replied.

"Jenna?" West commented as King sat down beside her, "I don't like the sound of this."

"Neither do I." Cole added.

"Well you shouldn't." King replied and he passed her a PADD, "Aside from having three more minor spinal injuries reported thanks to Lieutenant Commander T'Lan's online sex manual this came across my desk." he said, "If people would just have stuck to number three on that list then all I'd have to worry about is the odd bit of strawberry jam in someone's eye."

"What is it?" Cole asked, frowning at the way his wife had been spoken of, "And if I want someone to say 'a PADD' then I can get Hamilton in here to do it."

"Don't worry, I'm not in the mood for joking." King replied.

"It's a psychological report." West said, her eyes widening, "About me."

"That utter cretin Lieutenant Mackey has decided to recommend that Lieutenant West be pulled from active duty." King said.

"It says here I've been placed in a position I'm not qualified for." West said.

"Which technically you have." King pointed out, "You've failed the command officer's test several times."

"But she's performing perfectly adequately." Cole said.

"Not according to this I'm not." West said and she handed the PADD to Cole who took it from her.

"Oh this is nonsense!" he exclaimed, "What does 'commands no respect' mean?"

"It means our ship's counsellor is projecting." West said and King nodded.

"Apparently he heard that the first thing you two did was argue about Jenna's appointment as temporary first officer." King said and West winced.

"We did." she said.

"But how did Mackey find out about that?" Cole said, "It was in here with the door shut. There's no way anyone overheard us."

"I may have mentioned it to White in the officers' lounge when he congratulated me." West said, "There were plenty of people around to hear that."

"And our glorious counsellor decided to put together a report based on rumour and innuendo." King said, "If anyone should be removed from duty it's that little weasel."

"Lieutenant West, can you think of a reason why Mackey may want to remove you from duty?" Cole asked, looking straight at West.

"Beyond him being an ass hole?" she replied, "No."

"That would be my guess as well." King added, "The lieutenant is the only member of the crew that he sees

on a regular basis.”

“Twice a week.” West said, “He refuses to sign me off as fit even after more than two years. But there's never anything new in what we discuss. How do I feel about failing the command officer's test? Do I have any remaining feelings of anxiety following my captivity?”

Cole then looked at King.

“This report is a career killer.” he said.

“Fortunately it had to come through me before it could be sent on to Starfleet.” King replied.

“So what can we do to stop it?” Cole asked, “This is hardly the first time Lieutenant Mackey has caused trouble with one of his reports.”

“You mean Nikki's college reference?” West said, referring to a report Mackey had given based on out of date information to colleges Nikki had wished to attend. Her subsequent rejection by all the colleges had been the trigger for her becoming an intern with Starfleet instead.

“Yes I do.” Cole said, nodding.

“I can only override him so far.” King said, “But even if I rate Lieutenant West as fit for duty that report is going to stay on file and as you said it's a career killer. There's no way Starfleet would promote her after seeing that. No matter how well she does in the command officer's test. However, this time he's overlooked one slight problem.”

“What's that?” West asked and King smiled.

“You've been appointed temporary first officer by Captain Edwards himself.” he said, “That means questioning your authority without good reason amounts to insubordination.”

“We can bring him up on formal charges.” Cole said.

“At which point he and his report become discredited.” King added and a smile spread across his face,

“Sadly it's not enough to get him thrown off the ship but it is enough to protect Jenna.”

“I can't just report him without speaking to him first though.” Cole said.

“Yes, I realise that and we may be able to use that to our advantage as well.” King said, “Pull him in here and tell him what you intend to do. My guess is that he'll fold and withdraw the report. If not then we've got him.”

“Very well. Doctor King could you tell Lieutenant Mackey that I want to see him in here immediately?” Cole said.

“It would be my pleasure.” King said, “In fact I'll get right on it.”

“You should go as well.” Cole told West, “Leave me to deal with Mackey. You get some rest.”

“Yes sir.” West replied and she and King then left the ready room, making their way to the turbolift.

“So how are you finding command lieutenant?” King asked when the turbolift started to move.

“He doesn't think you're up to the job either.” The Controller said, “he's just using you to get to his enemy.”

“Worried that the counsellor is right?” West responded and King snorted.

“No, I'm worried that you're putting yourself under too much stress. How are you sleeping now?”

“Better.” West lied. She still often found herself tired during the day and sometimes could not account for periods of time, the only difference now was that she knew that this was because of the presence of the alien consciousness in her mind taking control of her body while she slept.

It was then that the turbolift doors slid open.

“This is my floor.” West said.

“Good night lieutenant.” King replied with a smile while West was exiting the turbolift, “If Cole doesn't let you know how Mackey takes his dressing down then come and see me. As that fool's superior I'll know soon enough.”

“Thanks. I will.” West replied before the turbolift doors slid shut behind her. Then she started to walk towards her quarters.

“You can't trust them.” The Controller said, “I'm your only ally.”

“Shut up.” West hissed just as a crewman came walking around the corner and she stopped and frowned at West, “Not you.” West added quickly before hurrying past the confused woman.

As T'Lan had explained the holding cells aboard an Intrepid-class starship, like those aboard any other class, were not designed with containing well equipped and armed prisoners in mind. There were however, some basic precautions taken to prevent escape that T'Lan had to consider before opting for a brute force method. Firstly there was the issue of the force field. If T'Lan used a phaser against this then most of the energy would be dissipated away by the barrier, while some could be reflected back towards her. On the other hand the side and rear walls as well as floor and ceiling were made of a refractive alloy that would take considerable time to burn through even with a phaser rifle unless it was set to a high setting and again there was the risk of some of the energy of a phaser blast being deflected back towards T'Lan.

Given that her rifle seemed to be of little to no use to her right now T'Lan slung the weapon over her shoulder and went to investigate the obvious weak point in the cell, the panel that had already been ripped out of the wall by the Iconian agent. Peering into the hole in the wall T'Lan could see several bundles of data lines running behind it but nothing thick enough to be able to carry the amount of power needed to operate a force

field, so the option of cutting off the power to the one blocking her escape seemed out of the question. Unhooking a palm beacon from her belt T'Lan turned it on and shone the light from the device into the hole, angling it towards the front of the cell. This illuminated the paths taken by the bundles of data lines, including one that ran into the back of the control panel for the force field. Slowly angling the palm beacon downwards, T'Lan followed this bundle of lines back towards the hole until she was able to reach out and grab it with her free hand. Then she pulled on the bundle to drag it through the hole into the cell. Breaking the individual data line open to expose the conducting elements inside required T'Lan to make use of the phaser holstered on her waist. With no blade available to her she instead set the phaser to inflict thermal damage and aimed it at the panel ripped from the cell wall and fired at it until it glowed red. Then she pressed the bundle of data lines to it so that the heat melted through them and the insulation around each line retracted back as the heat travelled up the lines. Now that she had access to the conductors T'Lan took out her tricorder and one by one she placed them against one of the device's sensing elements to determine what function each line performed until she found a command line that she could use her tricorder to inject a signal into and the force field promptly disappeared. With the command line broken T'Lan had no need to be concerned that the Iconian consciousness inhabiting the *Brilliant's* computer could not reactivate the force field and T'Lan was able to take her time in making sure that she had all of her equipment with her before leaving the cell. The first thing she did upon leaving it was check the area where Tanner's body still lay, specifically inspecting the two space suit helmets. Unfortunately both of them had been damaged when Tanner landed and their visors were cracked and broken, no longer able to maintain pressure inside a suit and T'Lan left them both where they were. Rather than head for the *Brilliant's* bridge where Edwards and Carr were waiting for her T'Lan then returned to the armoury, taking with her a holdall that she could carry over her shoulder. This bag was long enough to fit phaser rifles in and she placed two of the weapons, along with several spare power cells into it. But she was not done in the armoury yet and T'Lan walked over to where cases of photon grenades were stacked on a set of shelves. T'Lan took a bandolier from the wall beside these cases and one by one she filled it with grenades taken from the shelves, each one adjusted for a yield that T'Lan estimated was just short of what would blast through the *Brilliant's* internal walls. When the bandolier was full T'Lan slung it over her shoulder and carried the holdall to a nearby cabinet that when opened revealed the component parts of numerous spatial charges, stored in pieces for safety and she assembled as many of the powerful explosive devices as she could manage before placing them in the holdall with the two rifles. Now as heavily armed as she could be T'Lan left the armoury and started to make her way towards the *Brilliant's* bridge.

3.

As West drifted off to sleep her eyes opened sharply under the influence of The Controller and she smiled. "Sorry to disturb your sleep Jenna, but I need to inform my superiors of what's going on." and she climbed out of bed and made her way to the desk where there was a computer terminal. During her time inhabiting West's body The Controller had established numerous back doors into the *Nightfall's* systems, particularly the communication system. This enabled The Controller to send and receive messages without them being noticed by the rest of the crew or appearing in any record and now she had to send one.

The Controller was not certain where the message needed to be sent to but she had a list of likely locations for the intended recipient that she worked through until an image of a young female human appeared.

"What do you want?" The Girl asked, "I'm kind of busy here."

"We have an agent aboard another Starfleet vessel." The Controller said.

"If we did then I'd know about it." The Girl said.

"You didn't know about me at first," The Controller pointed out, "and this obviously wasn't intentional.

Someone's uploaded themselves into the main computer of the *USS Brilliant*."

"How do you know?"

"Because the *Brilliant* went dark and the *Nightfall* was sent to investigate. They found a ship full of dead people and a computer that's obviously home to one of us. They just don't know about that second part yet."

"This could explain a problem we've got." The Girl said, "We've lost a refractive silicon shipment. We can't produce that ourselves and we need all we can get. If the shipment was seized by the *Brilliant* then our courier could be the one responsible."

"Well in that case the shipment is still on its way to you now. The *Brilliant* went to warp with some of the *Nightfall's* crew aboard and is heading for Iconia faster than the *Nightfall* can manage." The Controller said, "But there's a problem. The *Ek'Duv* will still be able to intercept the *Brilliant* before it reaches you. Can you get a ship in position to deal with her?"

"No. We can't risk deploying a dreadnought and tipping off the Federation to just how important that silicon is to us. If they start looking into its sources too closely then they're going to uncover a lot of our people and our supply could be cut off entirely."

So you'll sacrifice the shipment then?" The Controller asked.

"One shipment to save our entire supply? Of course." The Girl replied, "But there is one thing that you need to be aware of."

"What?"

"Our agent. Make sure that his body isn't recovered intact by Starfleet. Do whatever you need to in order to destroy it short of exposing yourself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. But there's been a development." The Controller responded.

"Are you in danger?" The Girl said.

"Not yet. But it looks like Captain Edwards has decided to take active steps to end the isolation of Jenna West from the rest of the crew that I've managed to develop. He ordered Lieutenant Commander Cole to select her as his first officer while both he and Lieutenant Commander Carr were aboard the *Brilliant* and so far she's proven capable in the role. The only hitch has come from the ship's counsellor who wants her removed from duty entirely."

"You told me that he was isolated himself. Not liked or trusted by the rest of the crew." The Girl pointed out.

"He is." The Controller agreed, nodding, "But now the crew are acting to protect Jenna and that may only draw her closer to them. That will make it harder for me to operate."

"I see. Do what you can to keep things as they are but if you have to scale back your activities then so be it. Now I have to go. I need to warn the others that we probably won't be getting our shipment." The Girl said and then the screen went blank.

"I can't make any sense out of these." Carr commented as she attempted to make use of the *Brilliant's* internal sensors to find out whether any of the machines described by T'Lan were coming towards the bridge. "Navigation is dead as well." Edwards added from the helm position at the front of the bridge, "According to these instruments we fluctuate between being stationary and travelling at anything from one quarter impulse power up to warp nine point nine nine nine and our heading doesn't remain constant for more than about five seconds at a time."

"At least the *Nightfall* won't have much trouble keeping up with us if that's right." Carr replied.

"That's just it Grace. If the *Nightfall* was keeping up with us then why haven't they done anything to bring us out of warp or even just communicate. With the EMH's body over there there's nothing to stop them sending her over."

Carr then noticed a brief warning on the operations panel. She had attempted to shut down the Brilliant's turbolift functions but found herself unable to gain access to the system at all. Therefore, she had been forced to settle for setting an alarm that would alert her if a turbolift approached the bridge and that flashed for a few moments before the screen flickered and the warning vanished.

"Captain I think we've got incoming." she said.

"T'Lan?" Edwards asked.

"I don't know." Carr answered.

"Then we need to assume it's not." Edwards said, getting out of his seat and drawing his phaser.

Carr then stepped out from behind the operations console and drew her own weapon as she joined Edwards at the front of the bridge and the pair of them took cover behind the helm console facing the turbolifts at the rear of the bridge.

"I'm setting my phaser to level ten." Edwards said, adjusting his weapon, "We don't know how well protected the machines T'Lan warned us about may be." and Carr nodded as she too set her phaser to the same level.

It was then that the doors to one of the turbolifts opened to reveal a pair of crudely built robots that came striding out of the turbolift. Unable to see the two Starfleet officers directly and with every console on the bridge active the two machines struggled to detect Edwards or Carr, the presence of their own equipment overwhelmed by the consoles all around them. Or at least that was until Edwards gave the order to attack.

"Fire." he said simply and both he and Carr discharged their phasers simultaneously.

Both beams struck the closest machine and its torso glowed a dull red for a few moments before it exploded.

But the powerful energy blasts revealed the exact position of Edwards and Carr to the second machine and it charged towards them before leaping into the air to clear the helm console. Edwards and Carr dived apart as the machine came down between them and Edwards unleashed another blast from his phaser just as it was swinging an arm down towards him that severed the limb at the elbow. The machine staggered for a moment as if trying to determine what had happened to its arm and this was all the opportunity that Carr needed to take aim and shoot the machine in the back, placing the beam right between its shoulders and destroying the sensory cluster located there. This exploded in a flash of light and the blast also disabled the machine's core processor, causing it to topple forwards. Seeing the machine falling towards him, Edwards rolled out of the way and was just in time to avoid having the burning wreckage come down right on top of him.

"Not so tough after all." Carr commented before the doors to the second turbolift slid open and a further four of the machines came marching out.

"A lot tougher when there are four of them Grace." Edwards responded as he fired a quick shot from his phaser that clipped the shoulder of one of the machines that blew off the limb but did not slow it down at all. Then he looked around and saw the doorway leading to the captain's ready room, "Time for a gallant exit I think." he added.

"You mean run away?" Carr asked and Edwards nodded.

"Run away." he said and the two of them leapt to their feet and ran towards the open doorway. As they ran one of the machines raised an arm that had a small hand phaser built into it, the only ranged weapon that any of them possessed and fired a shot that passed narrowly by Carr and she flinched as she felt the heat of the beam. The machine had only the one chance to fire its weapon before the two Starfleet officers made it through the doorway and Edwards closed the door behind them. Then he fired his phaser at the control mechanism, destroying it and sealing the door shut.

"How long do you think that will hold them?" Carr asked.

"Probably not more than a few minutes." Edwards answered just as there was the sound of a mechanical arm striking the other side of the door and a dent appeared in it, "Even less if they decide to use the phaser on it. It'll take quite a lot of energy to put a hole in big enough for them to get through but once they do we've nowhere else to run to."

"We could try using the vents to access the Jefferies tubes." Edwards suggested before flinching as another dent appeared in the door.

"I'd hate to be stuck in a Jefferies tube if the Iconian builds anything it can send in after us." Carr replied.

"That just leaves the bathroom then." Edwards said and he looked towards the open doorway leading to the late Captain Onaka's private bathroom.

"And then what?" Carr asked and Edwards considered this.

"You're right. They'll easily figure out where we went." he said, "Unless those machines aren't looking for us."

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Because we're going to make them think that they've already killed us." Edwards told Carr and he reached for the seals on his space suit, "Now take off your suit. We need to ditch all of our technology."

"All of it? What about our phasers and combadges?" Carr replied.

"Them too. Everything needs to be right here when those things come through that door," Edwards said as he started to peel off his space suit and Carr sighed before copying him.

When both of them were out of their suits Edwards sealed them up again and put the helmets back on them.

Then using the environmental regulators built into the suits' arms he turned up the pressure and Carr smiled

as she watched the suits inflate.

"Decoys." she said and Edwards nodded.

"We prop them up by the desk facing away from the door. Hopefully when the machines break in they attack these and think we're dead."

"While we hide in the bathroom." Carr added.

"The bathroom closet to be exact." Edwards said, "They might try a visual inspection of the room and I want to leave the bathroom door open to make it appear empty."

With the two suits inflated to make them appear occupied, Edwards and Carr propped them up against the side of the ready room desk and left all of their technological devices with them while they hurried into the bathroom and opened the closet. Inside they found several shelves that they removed to create just enough room inside for the pair of them clad only in their under suits to squeeze into it.

"Are you okay?" Carr asked when she noticed Edwards wince as they stood face to face in the closet.

"There's a bracket sticking into my back." he said, "I'll be fine." and then he reached out of the closet for the button that operated the door, quickly pulling his hand back inside as the door slid shut and he and Carr were plunged into darkness.

The door was already badly dented when all of a sudden a mechanical hand burst through before tearing a larger section free to create a significant hole. The machines then all grabbed part of the edge of this and simply ripped the door free of its mounting before tossing it aside. To their sensors it then appeared that there were two figures standing on the other side of the ready room next to the desk, their electronic equipment registering clearly against the more limited presence of technology in the ready room compared with the bridge. The sole machine armed with a phaser then raised its arm and fired at the first of the suits, disintegrating it in an instant. Then it rapidly shifted its aim before destroying the second suit in the same way. Now all that remained of either were a handful of ashes and a few deformed pieces of metal from the more solid components of the equipment they had been carrying.

With its targets seemingly destroyed the armed robot then strode across the ready room towards the open bathroom door and looked inside. Oblivious to the discarded shelves and contents scattered on the floor it then turned to leave.

Meanwhile inside the darkened closet Edwards and Carr listened to the sound of the retreating machines footsteps.

"So how long do we stay here?" Carr whispered.

"Well since we can't open the door from inside this closet I'm going to say until T'Lan comes and let's us out."

Edwards said as he tried to get more comfortable, a difficult task given that his back was pressed up against the wall and all of its brackets behind him while in front of him he and Carr were pressed together, "Which hopefully won't take too long." he added.

Not knowing how many mechanical troops the Iconian intelligence had at its disposal or how easily they could detect the devices she carried T'Lan shut most of her equipment down, leaving only her phasers operational and stuck to making her way through the *Brilliant's* corridors and Jefferies tubes rather than risking a turbolift as she made her way towards the vessel's bridge. She had made it as far as the lower decks of the saucer section without seeing any signs of opposition before from up around a corner ahead of her she heard the sound of metal footfalls and she came to a sudden halt. The sound suggested that there was more than one of the machines but she could not determine an exact number. Knowing that she was outnumbered however, led T'Lan to decide that she would be better off not confronting them head on. But there was the added complication of not knowing how many other groups of robots were wandering the corridors of the *Brilliant*. Destroying this group would reveal her position to the Iconian and result in it sending more machines against her if it had them. Therefore, she not only needed to plan how to ambush this group but also how to convince the Iconian that she was heading in a different direction and in order to accomplish this she began to retreat back down the corridor.

T'Lan did not move so quickly that she could no longer hear the sound of the advancing machines, keeping them just within earshot until she reached what she decided was a suitable position for an ambush, a junction between corridors that led either back to the security section or to main engineering and she took cover and waited here.

Aiming her phaser rifle around the corner T'Lan watched four machines stride into view. One of these was missing an arm and it occurred to her that this damage was most likely to have been inflicted by Edwards and Carr. Though if these machines had survived to now be heading away from the bridge then that did not bode well for the *Nightfall's* captain or first officer. As a Vulcan T'Lan was able to suppress her feelings of unease at this thought, however and she fired her rifle at the already damaged machine. The powerful rifle blast burned a large hole through the centre of the machine and it suddenly dropped to its knees before collapsing in a heap. But before T'Lan could fire again one of the remaining three machines raised its arm to aim what T'Lan had just enough time to recognise as a hand phaser before it returned fire at her.

The beam narrowly missed T'Lan as she ducked back out of sight. From around the corner T'Lan could hear the machines advancing steadily towards her and knew that if she tried shooting at them again she would just be exposing herself to fire. But fortunately she had more than just her phaser to make use of and she plucked a grenade from the bandolier across her chest. Acting quickly T'Lan armed the grenade, pulled out the pin and then hurled it around the corner, bouncing it off the wall across from her to avoid exposing herself to the machines. Then she pressed herself up against the wall beside her and covered her ears just before the grenade exploded.

Despite having been configured to have a yield that would not penetrate the *Brilliant's* internal walls the photon grenade produced a significant blast that filled the corridor with flames that rushed past T'Lan. As soon as this cleared T'Lan raised her rifle again and paused to listen. She could still hear the sounds of machinery operating from around the corner but now there were none of the heavy metal footfalls that the robots produced when they walked and T'Lan leant around it again.

Two of the robots had been completely destroyed by the blast while the final one, the robot armed with a phaser had lost not only both its legs but also one of its arms while the phaser built into the other sparked and smoked. Now it used its final limb damaged to try and drag itself closer to the junction. T'Lan darted out from around the corner and began to run. But she did not charge at the crippled robot, instead she started to run in the opposite direction as if she was heading for engineering before she paused part way down the corridor and turned to aim her rifle at the robot that was still attempting to give chase and she fired. The beam struck the machine in the sensory cluster at the top of its torso and burned deep into its body before what little remained of the machine exploded and T'Lan lowered her rifle.

The machine would have detected her moving towards engineering before it was destroyed and T'Lan hoped that this meant the Iconian would believe that this was her intended destination, diverting any other forces it had at its disposal towards that location instead of towards the bridge.

T'Lan paused inside the Jefferies tube before she entered the *Brilliant's* bridge, listening for any movement. When she heard nothing she opened the hatch and peered out. Positioned at the rear of the bridge behind the engineering station, the hatchway offered T'Lan only a limited field of vision and the only thing of note that she could make out was a pile of wreckage outside one of the turbolifts that suggested Edwards and Carr had put up a fight when the bridge was attacked.

"Captain Edwards." she called out, "Lieutenant Commander Carr, are you there?"

T'Lan knew that drawing attention to her presence was a risk if there was another of the fighting machines

guarding the bridge but it would also be dangerous to exit the Jefferies tube without announcing her presence if Edwards or Carr were lying in wait for another wave of attackers. But when there was no response from T'Lan's superior officers the Vulcan crawled out of the Jefferies tube and stood up, lifting her phaser rifle to her shoulder as she looked around the bridge again.

Though Edwards and Carr remained unaccounted for, there were further clues as to what had happened when the machines had assaulted the bridge. Another wrecked fighting machine was located just in front of the helm console at the front of the bridge but more interestingly the door to the captain's ready room had been smashed down, indicating to T'Lan that Edwards and Carr had retreated into there to make a stand. "Captain Edwards. Lieutenant Commander Carr." she said again, creeping slowly towards the doorway leading to the ready room. Just in case the ready room was a trap, T'Lan kept her rifle at the ready as she neared the doorway and peered inside. Then she gasped when she saw what was inside.

Scorch marks left on the floor and desk indicated that someone had fired a phaser on a relatively high setting in here and the debris that had been left behind was proof that the targets had been two individuals wearing standard issue Starfleet space suits. The logical conclusion was that both Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Carr had been killed by phaser fire and the machines responsible had then withdrawn from the bridge to try and deal with T'Lan. Having worked closely with both officers for a number of years even T'Lan was disturbed by this and she steadied herself against the door frame as she tried to come to terms with their deaths.

Standing up straight again T'Lan lowered her rifle and raised her right hand in the traditional Vulcan salute. "Captain David Edwards. Lieutenant Commander Grace Carr. Your loss diminishes us all." she said simply. T'Lan then entered the ready room, still keeping the amount of noise she made as she moved to a minimum and since the bathroom door was open she made her way towards it. But when she was just half way across the ready room she heard the sound of one of the turbolifts in the bridge opening and she spun around, pointing her rifle towards the doorway she had entered the room through. Through the doorway she saw another of the crude machines created by the Iconian just as it was disappearing out of sight and she hurried back towards the doorway. Without hesitating T'Lan fired her rifle at the machine, a four armed creation that was bulkier than any of the other models she had seen before and it was obvious that one pair of its arms had been put together for combat. One of them served to mount an older model phaser rifle while the other ended in a set of hydraulic jaws more often used for cutting through metal beams or pipes but that could be employed as a weapon if wielded by someone strong enough.

She was just about to fire her own phaser rifle when the machine detected her and turned towards her. T'Lan then saw a brief flash emanating from it that she recognised as the tell tale sign of a force field engaging. The machine then took a step towards T'Lan and she fired her phaser rifle at it. The beam struck the machine's force field and it came to a halt as the energy spread over the field's surface, causing it to glow red. Seeing that her attack was having little effect T'Lan ceased firing at the machine at which point it took another step and lifted its own arm mounted phaser towards her. But before the fighting machine could return fire T'Lan fired again. Only this time she aimed at the floor at the machine's feet. The beam just clipped the edge of the force field protecting the machine and the energy was deflected down into the deck plates. T'Lan sustained the beam while the machine attempted to process what was happening, the powerful energy beam swamping its sensors and temporarily blinding it to T'Lan's exact location. Nevertheless the machine returned fire and a phaser beam struck the wall close to T'Lan's head. Only then did T'Lan cease fire and she rolled aside as the machine turned to track her. But T'Lan's phaser attack had critically weakened the deck beneath the fighting machine and as it turned the floor beneath it gave way and sent it plummeting downwards until it became jammed in the large hole created.

Trapped in the hole, the machine thrashed about while its force field flickered randomly as it tried to cope with the floor around the machine pressing up against it. This sustained operation served to weaken the force field and T'Lan reappeared in the doorway and fired again, this time aiming for the sensory cluster at the top of the fighting machine's torso and once again she was rewarded with a sudden explosion that disabled the machine and T'Lan ceased fire when it stopped moving.

Now that she had disabled this machine she was certain that the Iconian would be aware of her location and expected more such fighting machines to be on their way to attack her. Therefore, T'Lan decided that it was time to leave the bridge and she rushed up to the machine that was stuck in the hole in the floor and pointed her phaser downwards. Then she fired two more rapid blasts that widened the hole enough that the fighting machine's weight sent it crashing down to the level below, leaving a gaping hole that T'Lan could use to get directly to the next level down while bypassing the turbolifts and Jefferies tubes that the Iconian would know about.

In the darkness of the bathroom closet Edwards and Carr heard a crashing sound as the fighting machine fell through the floor.

"David, did you hear that?" Carr asked.

"I could hardly miss it Grace." he answered, "If there's fighting out there then T'Lan must have arrived. She'll

be along any minute to let us out.” and the pair waited.

“So how long will she be?” Carr said when the closet door failed to open and they did not hear T'Lan's voice calling out to them.

Edwards groaned.

“The suits.” he said, “T'Lan must have found them and assumed we were wearing them.”

“So you don't think she's coming then?”

“If she was then I think she'd already be here. Looks like we may be in here a while longer Grace.”

ii.

T'Lan made her way back to the Brilliant's sick bay where she found Max still laid out on an inactive biobed. Placing her holdall on the floor and slinging her phaser rifle over her shoulder she went over to the computer used to control the ship's emergency medical hologram and opened up the main inspection hatch. Behind this she found a collection of isolinear chips used for different aspects of the EMH's function. Though electronics were not her primary area of expertise T'Lan was still able to locate the particular isolinear chip that interfaced the EMH system to the Brilliant's main computer network and she removed this from its mounting.

"Activate emergency medical hologram." she said and the EMH materialised in front of her.

"Please state the nature of the-" he began before pausing, "Hang on, what happened to me? What's going on here?"

"An Iconian intelligence has seized control of the ship and is using a force of fighting robots it has constructed to hunt for me." T'Lan said, "We are at warp on an unknown heading and I need your help in taking control of the ship before we can reach wherever it is that the Iconian wishes us to get to."

"Take control of the ship? You can't be serious." the EMH said, "I'm programmed to be a doctor, not a commando. Besides which the only way I can leave sickbay is if my program is transferred to one of the holodecks."

"That will not be possible. It would appear that the Iconian is using up almost all of the ship's computing power just to maintain itself. That is why your program was terminated so abruptly earlier. In order to reactivate you I had to isolate you from the main computer network." T'Lan explained.

"Well won't the Iconian know about that? How will it react? Will it send some of these fighting machine you mentioned to find you?" the EMH said.

"I am hoping that the Iconian will not be aware of the loss of connection, just as you or I would not be aware of a light failing in a room beyond a closed door." T'Lan replied.

"That still doesn't explain what use I'm supposed to be able to be stuck in sick bay." the EMH said.

"I need Lieutenant Maximillian." T'Lan said and she looked at Max, "Is there anything you can do to speed up his recovery?"

"Your Borg companion is badly damaged. Only his own nanites can regenerate his implants and Unless I have access to the replicator system I can't even produce the elements they would need to replicate faster. What about the others you came aboard with? Can't one of them help you?"

"Unfortunately they have all been killed. That makes me the ranking officer aboard this vessel and I am ordering you to do whatever you can to accelerate Lieutenant Maximillian's healing." T'Lan told him.

"You don't need to order me lieutenant commander, I'm required to treat anyone who comes in through that door to the best of my ability. But what I'm trying to tell you is that you may just have to be patient and wait for his own self repair systems to fix him." the EMH said sternly.

"Very well. In that case I shall attempt to retake the ship on my own." T'Lan said and she walked back over to the holdall and opened it. From inside she took one of the phaser rifles and some of the power cells before loading the weapon, "Do you know how to use this?" she asked.

"Funnily enough my programmers never bothered to include any subroutines concerning the operation of small arms. Medical staff are not generally called upon to shoot their patients."

T'Lan held up the rifle in front of the EMH.

"This is the safety. Press it thus to disengage it." she said while walking back towards the EMH, "This slider adjusts the setting. I am leaving it set to level ten. This is a lethal setting, do not change it and be careful of what is behind anything you shoot at. The beam may cause collateral damage if maintained long enough to fully penetrate a target. Most importantly this is the trigger. Under no circumstances should this weapon be pointed in a direction that you are not prepared to discharge it. You will need to stand watch over the lieutenant and defend him if any of the Iconian's fighting machines should happen to come in here." and then she thrust the rifle into the startled looking EMH's hands before returning to the holdall and picking it up.

"Where are you going? Why don't you wait here?" the EMH added, still looking uncertain about being handed a phaser and being expected to use it.

"If I am to regain control of the ship then I must disable the main computer core." T'Lan replied, "I expect that this will be well guarded however, so I must act to cut off the Iconian's supply of troops and draw as many as I can away from the main computer. It is my intention to attack main engineering. I suspect that the Iconian is using the workshops and material replicators there to produce its force of fighting machines. It may also be possible to disable this vessel's warp drives so that the *Nightfall* will be able to catch up with us."

"But if everyone else is dead then why not just abandon ship?" the EMH suggested.

"Because there is an object aboard that I feel is of vital importance to the Iconians and it needs to be studied

to determine why. If I abandon ship with it then the Iconian may cease running and attack and I cannot defeat an Intrepid-class starship with the weapons of a shuttlecraft or an unarmed escape pod." T'Lan said, "The only logical solution is to defeat the Iconian aboard this vessel and turn the object over to Starfleet for a proper analysis."

Returning to the holdall again T'Lan picked up the bag and walked past the still bemused EMH to a Jefferies tube access point that she opened. Then she drew the phaser from her waist and pointed it into the Jefferies tube as she checked it to make sure that there was nothing waiting for her inside before she started to climb into it.

"Seal this when I am gone." she told the EMH, "If I return I will knock and announce myself first. Do you understand?" and the EMH nodded.

T'Lan then crawled into the Jefferies tube, disappearing from view and the EMH produced a simulated sigh. "I'm not programmed for any of this. If I'm not careful I'll end up talking to myself."

Inside the Jefferies tube T'Lan dragged the holdall along behind her, hooked to her space suit with its shoulder strap while she kept her hands free to aim her phaser rifle ahead of her. The sick bay aboard an Intrepid-class vessel was located on deck five, well above main engineering on deck eleven and this meant that T'Lan had to crawl down several decks to get to it and it was when she was climbing down a ladder shaft that she heard activity in the Jefferies tube with her.

Just as with the large bipedal fighting machines that T'Lan had faced up to this point the sounds were mechanical in nature but this time the pitch was significantly higher and the pace more rapid, suggesting to T'Lan that she was hearing something much smaller and with a greater number of limbs. But as the sound grew louder T'Lan realised that there was something more important to consider. She was not about to encounter one or two small machines, she was listening to an approaching swarm.

Looking down T'Lan could see all the way to the bottom of the shaft, a few levels below where she needed to get to and there she saw what appeared to be a mechanical spider constructed by crudely adding legs to a Starfleet tricorder scuttle into view. More of the machines followed this, all of them initially halting at the bottom of the shaft. But the reason for this became rapidly obvious as the number increased. Too small to make use of the hand holds to climb the shaft the machines instead began to climb onto of one another as they started to move up the shaft towards T'Lan, only grabbing hold of the hand holds when they needed to anchor themselves to something so that more of the swarm could climb over them.

It was obvious to T'Lan that her phaser rifle would be of little use in this situation. She could not tell how many machines were in the swarm but it was likely to be more than she could reasonably expect to destroy before they overwhelmed her. However, having the swarm climbing up from the bottom of the shaft offered her an alternative. T'Lan continued to descend the shaft until she reached a hatchway that could be used to close it off and she climbed into the adjacent horizontal Jefferies tube. Here she took one of her grenades from her bandolier and removed the pin. Then holding one hand over the controls to the hatch she dropped the explosive down the shaft and slammed her hand down on the control, closing the door before the grenade went off. Meanwhile the bizarre tricorder spiders ignored this and continued to climb towards the now sealed hatch, barely a metre below it when the grenade landed at the bottom of the shaft.

T'Lan felt the moment of detonation as a shudder running through the Jefferies tubes and a dull booming from below the hatch. Fortunately the hatch itself was strong enough to resist the blast from the grenade, even given the confined space that funnelled the blast. Drawing her phaser, T'Lan aimed the weapon at the hatch and waited to see if any of the machines were about to break through it. She remained still for less than a minute before she was satisfied that the machines were not on the point of breaking through the hatch and she opened it and peered downwards. Below her the shaft was dark thanks to the grenade blast having destroyed the lighting but it was possible to see the remains of many of the tricorder spiders piled up at the very bottom of the shaft, all of those that had been climbing up blasted away.

Cautiously T'Lan began to descend the shaft again. Though she did not need to go to the very bottom she did still need to go down another two levels and as she climbed she saw evidence in the form of the smashed remains of some of the tricorder spider machines that had been blown into the side Jefferies tubes. When she reached the Jefferies tubes that connected to deck eleven T'Lan climbed out of the shaft and began to crawl along the tube again, heading towards the engineering section before the Iconian could react to the destruction of the tricorder spider swarm and send more of the machines to investigate.

Once again it was sound that alerted T'Lan to something happening ahead of her as she approached engineering. From inside the Jefferies tube she could hear the sound of the *Brilliant's* machine shops working and she guessed that they were producing more of the machines that the Iconian was using to hunt for her. Rather than risk coming face to face with any guardian units put in place to protect this production line as soon as she exited the Jefferies tube she continued on to main engineering itself and opened the hatch that came out close to the base of the ship's warp core.

As she had expected T'Lan saw the warp core glowing brightly, indicating that the ship was drawing a significant quantity of power from it and thus was travelling faster than light. As soon as she was out of the

Jefferies tube T'Lan holstered her phaser and switched to the heavier rifle even though there was no sign of any machine activity in the room at present. T'Lan knew that the Iconian intelligence could not fail to notice if the ship dropped out of warp and would inevitably send forces to investigate. With this in mind she walked right past the warp core, crossing engineering to the main entrance and opening the large double door. T'Lan then peered out into the corridor to make sure that it was empty before she walked across it and knelt down, opening up the holdall and taking out three of the spatial charges she had taken from the *Brilliant's* armoury. She set each one in turn to a relatively low yield, below that even of the photon grenades she was carrying though it remained a potentially lethal yield if used against an organic humanoid target. She set each of these against the wall directly opposite the entrance to main engineering and configured them for remote command detonation before hurriedly retreating back into engineering and closing and locking the door behind her.

T'Lan then put down the hold all and slung her phaser rifle over her shoulder again as she turned her attention to the *Brilliant's* warp core. Though the weapons she carried with her would allow her to easily inflict catastrophic damage to the ship's warp drives that would inevitably force the ship to drop out of warp until the damage could be repaired there was a significant chance that the secondary effects of the damage would at the very least kill T'Lan herself and could potentially trigger an uncontrollable warp core breach that would destroy the *Brilliant*. However, given the complexity of even the most primitive warp drive there were many things that could be done to them that would cause them to fail temporarily and as an experienced Starfleet science officer with a good grounding in physics T'Lan knew how to do many of them.

The most obvious of these and the one that T'Lan decided to attempt first was to disrupt the flow of antimatter into the warp core. Like any engine the warp drive could not function if there was no fuel for it to make use of. An Intrepid-class starship made use of several antimatter injectors, all of them with their own independent control system that made tampering them all more difficult to achieve before the Iconian would notice that something was wrong. Fortunately they were located close together and sabotaging each one would be a relatively simple process, meaning that she could move rapidly from one to another.

As with any component intended to channel or store antimatter the antimatter injectors relied on magnetic fields to prevent the highly reactive antimatter fuel from coming into contact with the injector itself. This also enabled the rate of flow through the injector to be adjusted by altering the strength of the magnetic field. The more powerful the field, the more fuel would be drawn into the warp core. On the other hand if the field was shut off entirely then no fuel would be drawn out of the magnetic containment vessel into the core. This made shutting down each injector in turn nothing more than a matter of physically disconnecting the power supply to each one.

T'Lan quickly disconnected the first two injectors and she felt the ship shudder as it began to lose engine power. Then she glanced towards the entrance to engineering in anticipation of fighting machines attempting to break in. But when her actions went seemingly unnoticed for the time being she got to work in disconnecting more of the injectors.

It was when T'Lan reached the fourth injector that there was a sudden loud banging as a machine in the corridor outside engineering attempted to smash its way inside and T'Lan looked towards the door to see dents appearing in it at the machine continued to try an force its way inside. T'Lan quickly took out her tricorder and activated it, calling up the transmission function that she set to the frequency of the spatial charges she had set in the corridor. She did not trigger them just yet though, instead she waited until she saw two different dents appear in such rapid succession that they were likely to have been inflicted by two different fighting machines and then she took cover and pressed the button to trigger the charges.

Though T'Lan had limited the individual yields of the spatial charges she had set, the combined explosive force was still enough to rip apart all of the fighting machines gathering around the entrance to engineering as well as blow open the doors and send fragments of them flying across engineering into control consoles and rendering them useless. T'Lan peered around the warp core towards the remains of the door and saw that the charges had also managed to blast a hole through the wall she had set them on. But importantly there were no signs of any of the fighting machine and she could not hear any more of them approaching. Acting as quickly as she could T'Lan got to her feet and disconnected the last of the antimatter injectors, cutting off the fuel to the *Brilliant's* warp drive entirely.

Edwards yelled as the *Brilliant* suddenly lurched and he was pushed harder against the brackets already sticking uncomfortably into his back while Carr's body was pressed evenly more heavily against him.

"What happened?" she said.

"My guess would be that we just came out of warp rather suddenly." Edwards gasped, "Which means one of two things. Either T'Lan has been able to sabotage the warp drive or alternatively-

"We've arrived at wherever the Iconian wanted to get to." Carr interrupted.

"What is going on?" the EMH exclaimed as the *Brilliant* shuddered. Then he heard the door to sickbay open behind him and he turned to face it. There in the doorway he saw a pair of bipedal machines assembled from common spare parts and equipment from aboard the *Brilliant* and he knew instantly that these had to be some of the Iconian fighting machines that T'Lan had warned him about. Raising the phaser rifle she had left him the EMH fired at the closest machine and it exploded. The second machine then raised an arm that had a phaser built into it and returned fire. But the beam struck the EMH's hologram in the chest and it simply passed right through.

"You shot me." the EMH said in surprise, "Well two can play at that game." and he fired his rifle again, destroying the second fighting machine.

All of a sudden the hatch to the Jefferies tube that T'Lan had used to leave sick bay covertly opened and as the EMH turned again he saw a smaller machine constructed from a tricorder come scurrying out of the Jefferies tube. Firing his phaser rifle the EMH vaporised the smaller machine and smiled. But then his face fell as he heard the sound of more of the tricorder spider machines and they came scuttling out of the Jefferies tube.

Bracing the phaser rifle in his shoulder the EMH fired again and again, using short blasts to destroy each of the machines as they emerged but before they could spread out across the sickbay. Several dozen of the tricorder spiders appeared only to be destroyed by the EMH before they stopped coming and the EMH waited to see if there would be any more. But as he remained focused on the hatch he failed to notice being approached from behind until the mechanical footsteps were right behind him and he whirled around only for the barrel of his phaser rifle to be knocked aside.

Doctor King was sat in the captain's seat when Cole and West arrived to take command of the *Nightfall* once more. Looking around to see both officers exiting the turbolift together he smiled when he saw that they were now wearing uniforms with the red collars and bands on their sleeves of the command division rather than the gold colour of operations that they usually wore.

"You do both realise that it's just temporary, don't you?" he asked as he got up to allow Cole to take his place.

"Of course doctor." Cole replied, "But for now Lieutenant West and I are in command so we may as well dress the part."

"Just don't let it go to your head." King commented, "Remember that keel hauling was abolished some time ago."

"Even for idiot counsellors?" West asked.

"I won't tell if you won't." King responded as he made his way to the turbolift.

"What's our status?" Cole asked when he sat down.

"Still at warp eight." Hamilton replied, "The *Brilliant* is about a light year ahead of us now."

"Err, I've just lost it." Nikki added from operations, "The *Brilliant* isn't on our long range sensors any more."

"Let me see." West replied, getting out of the seat she had only just sat in to walk over to her usual console and inspect it, "Nikki's right." she added with a frown, "The *Brilliant's* gone."

"Destroyed?" Cole asked before realising that making this suggestion while Nikki was present was perhaps not the best idea.

"She's dropped to impulse." Hamilton said quickly, "We're just far away to be able to pick her up without a warp signature to track."

"She's nowhere near Iconia yet." West pointed out and Cole smiled.

"Which means our people aboard her must have done something to the ship to slow her down. Mister Hamilton, can we get back to warp nine yet?" he said.

"No, not yet. We're still running on just three warp cores." Hamilton replied.

"What about the *Ek'Duv*?" West suggested.

"No. Miss Carr I want you to contact the *Ek'Duv* and advise them of the situation. Tell them I want them to continue to their previously planned intercept point. We'll try and catch up with the *Brilliant* ourselves now that she's at impulse but if she gets back to warp it'll be up them."

Grabbing her phaser rifle again T'Lan ran towards the ruined door and out into the corridor. There she found the remains of numerous fighting machines of the basic bipedal type as well as the heavier four armed version and also several of the tiny tricorder spiders, all of which had been destroyed by the detonation of the three spatial charges. She also saw that when the charges had detonated the door to one of the *Brilliant's* workshops close to engineering had been open and the blast had also affected that room. T'Lan could still hear the sounds of machines in motion, however and she rushed forwards to check the room. Peering around the damaged door frame she saw a machine in the room that appeared to be little more than a cluster of mechanical arms that took hold of various components as they materialised in the replicators set into the far wall and assembled them into the Iconian's fighting machines. The explosion had damaged not only the multi-armed machine but also the replicators themselves and some of them were no longer producing components for more fighting machines. T'Lan pointed her phaser rifle at the multi-armed machine and fired. The machine exploded when the beam struck it where its arms joined together but T'Lan did not cease fire just yet. Instead she adjusted her aim towards the replicators and to prevent the Iconian from simply creating another of its construction machines she used her weapon to destroy the replicators themselves.

With the workshop no longer able to produce anything T'Lan turned and hurried further down the corridor towards the *Brilliant's* other workshops. At each one she paused by the door to take a grenade from her bandolier, prime it, open the door and toss the grenade through before closing the door again and leaving it to explode. T'Lan had enough time to attack all of the workshops before running out of grenades and then she paused to consider her next course of action and it was then that she heard the sound of heavy footfalls from close by. The sound was that of the bipedal fighting machines and T'Lan retreated back towards main engineering. Once there she returned to the Jefferies tube she had originally used to gain access to engineering and slung her phaser rifle over her shoulder before she crawled back inside. The main computer was on deck six so T'Lan had to crawl and climb back through the Jefferies tubes in order to reach it and she hoped that the damage she had inflicted to engineering would draw away enough of the Iconian's fighting machines to give her a clear run at the computer core. To make moving through the Jefferies tubes easier T'Lan chose to abandon the holdall just inside the hatch where it would be out of sight, taking just one of the spatial charges she had left and tucking it into a pouch on her suit before continuing on her way.

T'Lan made it as far as the computer core without encountering any more of the machines and she exited the Jefferies tube as quickly as she could before looking around the chamber. As far as she could tell it was in exactly the same condition as it had been when the computer had been reset and the Iconian did not appear to have made any alterations. T'Lan knew exactly what she needed to do and she hurried to where the main processor core was located. It would have been very easy to simply shut this down but T'Lan did not know how much autonomy had been given to the fighting machines employed by the Iconian. If they were capable of acting without the Iconian's direct control then it was possible that they could reactivate the computer and so she needed to take more serious action. Action that required the spatial charge she had brought with her. Taking the explosive from her suit pouch T'Lan checked its yield and then attached it to the side of the processing core. She knew that when this was triggered it would destroy all of the computer's functions, rendering the *Brilliant* dead in space, without even artificial gravity or life support. But this would make it impossible for the vessel to reach its destination no matter how much independence the fighting machines had been given and so T'Lan considered this her only logical course of action.

She hurried towards the exit from the computer core but as soon as the door slid open she found herself confronted by one of the bipedal fighting machines and she raised her phaser rifle. However, the machine reacted too quickly and with a single swing of an arm it knocked the rifle from T'Lan's hand and also sent her flying backwards across the room. T'Lan heard the sound of the machine striding towards her and reached for the phaser holstered on her hip as she looked up at her foe. But her hand found only an empty holster and looking at the floor at the fighting machine's feet she saw where the weapon had landed when it fell out of her holster just as it was crushed under a heavy metal foot.

"I love you Robert." she whispered to herself as the machine raised an arm with a built in phaser and she closed her eyes before she heard the shot.

But T'Lan did not feel the impact of the powerful energy beam. Instead she heard an explosion followed by a crashing sound and she opened her eyes again to see the fighting machine now reduced to a heap of burning metal while Max stood behind it holding the phaser rifle she had given to the *Brilliant's* EMH to his shoulder.

"Lieutenant commander, I take it you have put in motion a plan to destroy the main computer core." Max said.

"That is correct lieutenant." T'Lan replied as she got to her feet, "I have set a spatial charge beside the processing core."

"In that case I suggest we find somewhere safe to retreat to and detonate it before more of these machines can arrive. We may be able to deal with a small number, but against larger groups resistance is futile."

T'Lan hurried towards the doorway again, retrieving her phaser rifle along the way and as she and Max left the computer core she took out her tricorder. Behind her Max closed the door to the computer core, looked at her and nodded.

"Do it." he said and T'Lan triggered the spatial charge.

The blast tore through the computer's processing core and in an instant every function throughout the ship that depended on the computer ceased. This plunged the ship into total darkness and both Starfleet officers felt the gravity fail as well. Max was able to respond to this immediately by engaging the magnetic clamps built into his feet but T'Lan had to act quickly to activate her magnet boots to avoid floating off the deck.

"There should be enough air to last us several days." T'Lan said as she put her tricorder away and instead activated the light built into her phaser rifle.

"Agreed." Max replied, "However, most of the latent heat in the ship will be lost to space within a few hours. I suggest we make our way to the shuttle bay and take refuge in a shuttlecraft until the *Nightfall* arrives. Perhaps while we wait you can fill me in on what I have missed."

"Agreed." T'Lan said, "Please lead the way lieutenant."

"There she is." West said when the drifting *Brilliant* came into visual range.

"And she looks intact." Cole added, smiling.

"She's powered down but I'm still getting that odd scattering effect on sensors." Nikki said and Cole nodded.

"In that case we won't risk beaming anyone over. Tell Captain Heart to take over a platoon and secure that ship."

Cole was waiting in the *Nightfall's* hangar when the assault shuttle returned from the *Brilliant* with King and Nayal either side of him.

"Do you know how badly he's hurt doctor?" Nayal asked.

"No," King replied, "all I was told was that the captain was injured."

"Well here they are now." Cole said as the assault shuttle's hatch opened and he smiled as T'Lan emerged, still wearing her space suit, "T'Lan!" he called out and he ran to greet her, "I was worried."

"Your concern is appreciated." T'Lan replied as Nayal also walked up to her.

"So cousin, I hear you're a real bad ass now." she said, smiling.

"If that is so then perhaps you should consider the consequences of your efforts to annoy me by continuously referring to me as your cousin." T'Lan responded and Nayal frowned.

"Was that a joke or a threat?" she said.

"Vulcans do not joke." T'Lan commented.

"Not unless they've been peer reviewed first hey cousin?" Nayal said and then she saw a pair of MACOs in armoured space suits came out of the shuttle carrying a stretcher between them. Captain Edwards lay on this in his under suit while either side of him walked Carr and Rebecca and Cole noticed that Carr was also wearing her under suit.

"What happened to them?" she asked as King rushed up to examine Edwards.

"Captain Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Carr were forced to seek shelter in a closet." T'Lan explained, "After I disabled the computer core they were able to survive by sharing their body heat."

"But how did the captain get hurt?" Nayal said.

"I am uncertain. But I do know that it is merely back pain." T'Lan said and Cole and Nayal smirked at one another.

Just then Max emerged from the assault shuttle while more MACOs unloaded both the body of the Iconian agent and the strange black block.

"What's that?" Cole said.

"That is the body of the captured Iconian agent. It would seem that rather than make use of his ability to create a gateway to escape he chose to transfer his consciousness to the *Brilliant's* computer so that he could attempt to get his cargo to its destination." T'Lan said.

"Iconia." Nayal commented.

"So I understand." T'Lan said, "This is fortunate for us however, since Lieutenant Maximillian and I now have a fully intact body to examine, including the system used to form a gateway. We also have the crystalline silicon block that the Iconian agent was transporting. Lieutenant Maximillian and I thought it best to bring it aboard the *Nightfall* before it can be turned over to Starfleet."

"It looks familiar." Nayal said, frowning.

"Yes it does." Cole agreed.

"Perhaps because the proportions of its dimensions match the objects in a film Lieutenant Hamilton once selected for us to watch on movie night." T'Lan said and a smile spread across Nayal's face.,

"What?" Cole asked when he saw this.

"I just had the best idea of what to do with it before we give it to Starfleet." Nayal answered, "We just need to be able to sneak into Bradley's quarters while he's asleep and adjust his alarm clock. Oh we'll also need a

mannequin.”

When Hamilton's alarm went off to wake him it was not the usual tone he had programmed, instead it was a familiar fanfare that grew in volume as the lights came on automatically. Only then did he become aware of the presence at the end of his bed of a tall black monolith, in front of which was a motionless figure in a space suit.

Meanwhile in another room several members of the *Nightfall's* crew laughed as they watched the feed from the hidden camera left in his quarters as Hamilton sat suddenly upright in bed and screamed.